Literature and Moral Sense

by

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I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Contents

Fiction must not stroke the known but distress the undiscovered. A literature of fact, of knowingness… knows too much and speaks too much. But a literature that discovers, that dares to know less, is always on the verge of what is not sayable, rather than at the end of what has just been said.

- James Wood*

Value converges in the single richest and most interactive of all concepts, in the idea, itself non-representable, of the interdependence and interactivity of the whole of moral reality. The more we attend to all the other concepts (and only literature can finally attend to all of them) the richer this one gets. But it is not a source; it is the river.

- Simon Haines**

* *The Broken Estate*. New York: Picador, 2010. p.238

** 'Iris Murdoch, the Ethical Turn, and Literary Value', in *Iris Murdoch and Morality*. Eds. Rowe, Anne and Avril Horner. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. pp.98-99, emphasis suppressed

Introduction: *Caveat lector*

But I can only hope that any lack of deference to disciplinary boundaries perceived herein will be appreciated as apt, since the provision of 'literature' as the specific subject of this study is principally pragmatic, necessitated by the fact that this study's generic locus had to be situated *somewhere*; and since my titular reference to 'moral sense' is intended to connote both (a) the commonsensical attitude in moral matters which would, I submit, contentedly overlook any jerry-rigged theories of aesthetic amoralism (along with the hard-and-fast disciplinary distinctions upon which such theories turn), and (b) the proposal that there are various modalities of moral perception, modalities which surely cut across disciplinary lines and which (like the modalities of sensory perception) can be engaged in with greater or less attention or self-consciousness and manifest greater or less fidelity to reality; and since this sentence models exactly the sort of disregard for disciplinary boundaries that it set out to apologise for, what with its incongruous first word that concedes the belatedness of my concern for disciplinary boundaries, its earlier anxious alliteration (aimed at establishing an expectation of elongation, you see), its apparently interminable postponement of climax, its continuing accumulation of somewhat ham-fisted ironies, and now its shift into self-reflectivity, all of which marks it as a piece of (undoubtedly pretentious) *literary* discourse, which nonetheless works by means of a circuitous exercise of rhetoric to make a specific *philosophical* point (; *and* since this sentence confesses my willingness to contradict myself in order to make that point). And if I'm right in assuming that your attitude toward me now, having just read the previous sentence, is one of deep contempt or grudging admiration (or simply, as one reader has made plain to me, annoyance), then, either way, your apprehension of my point, which is both literary and philosophical, has an indispensable *moral* dimension too.

The elucidation of the above is, in a sense, the task of everything that follows.

My method throughout is mosaic rather than systematic. I have tried to make the separate pieces cohere firmly, tried to delineate a distinct pattern with the recurrence of certain key motifs. I have not set out to unfold a sequential argument, to construct a neatly proportioned expository edifice on the foundation of a single, easily formulated philosophical premise or set of such premises. Nevertheless, it should be that each chapter presents a coherent, consistent, and compelling account

that harmonises with the account given in each of the other chapters, and that when taken together these chapters present a unified response to a common and persistent confusion about the relationship between literature and morality (which includes also literature's relationship to moral philosophy).

The closest approximation of my 'thesis statement' would be this:

(a) Literature *qua* literature is not amoral.

(b) Literature's ability to engage with moral concerns is not confined to literary instances of didacticism or moralism.

(a+b: When considering the relationship of literature to morality, it is not a choice between amoralism and didacticism).

(c) Literature can disclose certain moral possibilities in the same way that living a life can disclose certain moral possibilities. Literature can be an essential part of living a life, as well as a means of reflecting on what is essential in the living of a life.

However, I do not mean to argue towards these conclusions. Points (a) and (b) are both negative – both are about what literature 'is not'. The only way to establish them would be to mount a critique, to pick fights with various intellectual antagonists, and this would likely only culminate in registering a firm opinion and accruing a large amount of ill-will.[1] Point (c) is only comprehensible when set against the background of a general understanding of what a human life (as opposed to, say, a dolphin life) is like: the shape that a human life has, the possibilities it can be expected to present, the patterns it might manifest, the distinctive and opposing reasons and purposes that might inflect it, and the significance it will inevitably hold simply by virtue of its being a human life. So there is no hope of building a case for it without circumventing the normal procedures of argument. (Indeed, the only

[1] This will sound like hopeless cynicism about the prospect of having productive philosophical arguments at all (one of the many *culs de sac*, it might be supposed, of apostatising from Reason), but it's meant only as a realistic reckoning of my own meagre skills in dialectical combat and, more importantly, of the elusive character of my subject which makes such combat futile or irrelevant (or unsatisfactory at best).

way an argument for (c) could be validated is by embracing a self-consciously literary mode of discourse. Its failure to do so would indict it).[2]

My undertaking here is better understood as a plea.[3] I am not guiding my reader through a ratiocinative procedure so much as cajoling her towards a particular judgement. Whether readers agree or disagree with the substance of my position, I maintain that in granting me their attention they are participating in the formation of a *literary* judgement. The literary success of what I have written will depend upon the reader arriving at the view that her judgement is also, simultaneously, a *moral* judgement.

If I have antagonists then they are those theorists who (to paraphrase Stephen Mulhall) 'tend to see in [novels] only further confirmation of the truth of the theoretical machinery to which the theorist is already committed' and who presume that 'the [novel] itself has no say in what we are to make of it, no voice in the history of its own reception and comprehension.'[4] My study, like Mulhall's, 'approaches questions about [literature] through a detailed reading of specific [novels]…precisely to put this tendency in question'.[5]

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[2] As (the philosopher) Martha Nussbaum puts it, 'even to be an ally of literature– not to negate the very view of the moral life for which it is arguing– the philosopher's prose may have to diverge from some traditional philosophical styles, toward greater suggestiveness.' ('Literature and the Moral Imagination' in *Love's Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. p.161).

[3] This is exactly how David Pellauer describes Paul Ricoeur's project in the multi-volume *Time and Narrative* (see Pellauer's *Ricoeur*, p.71). I suppose I am confessing here to an affinity with the sensibility of continental philosophy and indeed with the broadly phenomenological/hermeneutic approach typified by Ricoeur. Certainly I agree with the claim, and the methodological assumptions that lie behind the claim, that there 'can be no final theoretical answer' to (no definitive and incontestable statement of) the meaning of literature's engagement with time, or indeed with any aspect of human experience (ibid). I return to the concept of time in my conclusion. The heart of the aforementioned affinity is impassioned opposition to scientistic accounts of human experience, the kind that would treat time as an illusion and art as an extravagance.

[4] Mulhall. *On Film*. Second Edition. New York: Routledge, 2008, p.8.

[5] Ibid.

Mulhall is writing on film, so it is easier to imagine a theorist ignoring the possibilities of self-reflectivity inherent in the genre. The novel has been generally more imaginatively theorised, literary criticism less constrained than film criticism by scepticism of the genre's in-built critical resources. However, when Mulhall, with a certain amount of exasperation, addresses the persistent misreadings of his book, his concerns are much the same as those that shadow my work:

> It is as if, despite my explicit initial attempts to ward off the very idea of films as illustrating independently established philosophical theses, even sympathetic readers of my book find it all but impossible to see my readings of specific films as anything other than illustrations of a general method, and so as dependent for their interest upon my independently establishing some prior methodological theses about film and philosophy. But on my understanding of the matter, the only justification my more general introductory claims could receive is embodied in the readings that they introduce.[6]

[6]Mulhall, *On Film*, p.134. Mulhall earlier puts the point with equal clarity when he says 'the ultimate touchstone for the validity of my argument that certain films, by existing in the condition of philosophy and consequently engaging reflectively on just the issues reflected upon in the philosophy of film, might be thought of as themselves philosophizing is whether or not my claims to identify such moments in these films are convincing.' (ibid, p.133). Add 'moral' before the first instance of 'philosophy' (consequently perhaps strike out 'consequently') and substitute 'literature' for 'film' (and 'novels' for 'films') and you have a precise description of the structure of the argument of this dissertation. (I won't make explicit use of an equivalent of Mulhall's tripartite division of distinct but related ideas of relationship to philosophy, '[literature] as philosophizing, the philosophy of [literature], and [literature] in the condition of philosophy', but neither do I see that it would be difficult to fit this rubric over the claims that I will be making. One could say that the notion of literature in the condition of philosophy is what's addressed in the third essay of each of my triptychs. It's there that I focus upon the idea of literature 'reflecting upon a condition of its own possibility, and…thus internally related to the condition of philosophy' [Mulhall, *On Film*, pp.172-173]).

Note the force of Mulhall's 'only' and 'could' in the final sentence of the quotation. It would not be possible to offer any justification for the general claims about film that he makes without deferring to a detailed interpretation of specific films. Likewise, the only justification that my general claims about literature's nature as a moral resource could receive will be embodied in the readings that I will proceed to offer of specific works of literature. My claims about *literature* (must) stand or fall on the merits of my interpretations of *these novels*. So while it may appear attractive (and I assume it will appear that way to many) to throw oneself headlong into the theoretical machinery, to let oneself be processed by its processes, I will have to insist that there is a less damaging alternative.

One might be tempted to infer from this that I am disowning reason and throwing in my lot with wishy-washy obscurantism. The thought would be that if reason is to be active at all in our judgements of literature then it must intervene decisively, that to the extent that literature is not unreasonable, not mere fantasy, it must issue in propositions that can be assessed in a rigorous and systematic fashion from the standpoint of impersonal rationality. In the face of such a claim I might note, continuing to piggyback on Mulhall's lucidity, that:

> [W]hen Socrates faces judicial execution, and his friends urge him to flee from his captors, he tells them that it would be wrong to do so because disobeying the Athenian polis would be like disobeying his parents. He thereby reorients their thinking about Athens by comparing the polis to a family. But the degree of conviction this imaginative connection elicits is dependent upon the extent to which it can be followed out in detail, the way in which it makes sense of various aspects of political life, the further connections it allows us to draw in a range of related cases, and our willingness to rethink our own status and our own experience of life (in the family and in the polis, but not only there) in the terms it suggests. Socrates' imagination is thus not a faculty that is essentially other to that of rationality, or essentially unconstrained by it; it is accountable in a variety of ways, but none would straightforwardly fit the model of 'giving reasons for and against an opinion'. I would wish my readings of

> specific films to be understood as accountable, as answerable to the claims of reason, in just the ways described above.[7]

And I would profess the same wish for my readings of specific novels. I may not be giving reasons for and against, but I am certainly offering interpretations and inviting the reader to make reasonable judgements of them, inviting the reader to see my interpretations as making sense or failing to make sense of various aspects of literature and of the moral life, as allowing or failing to allow for the drawing in of a range of related cases.

Part of what I am claiming about works of literature is that they each invite their reader to inhabit a particular disposition towards the world, and in making that claim I am inviting my reader to inhabit a particular disposition towards the world. (I am also claiming that, in both cases, such a disposition is best understood as a moral disposition). The crucial corollary of that idea is that works of art (and of criticism, and of philosophy) have a disposition towards us. They offer us an invitation or present us with a challenge, plead with us or admonish us, condescend to our limitations or elevate our understanding, speak to us consolingly or discomfortingly, address us with gentle suggestions or bold declarations, or do several or all of these things. And understanding *that* they do this can't be separated from understanding *how* they do this. Understanding these dispositions means being subject to them and allowing them to contribute to the formation of corresponding dispositions in us.

This is another facet of what I will be saying (whether stating or, more often, implying): when moral insight accompanies the reading of literature it does not take the form of an independently assessable moral proposition or set of propositions but rather occurs *between* the reader and the work, occurs, that is, entirely within the interpretive space opened up by the reader's engagement with the

[7] Mulhall, *On Film*, pp.137-138.

work.[8] That space is a porous space. It permits the entry of guests and interlopers.[9] Its dimensions can be altered in a variety of ways. And it can be discovered to function as a thoroughfare to many adjacent spaces, or even as a launching pad to distant ones.

A novel exists upon a vast interpretive field populated by sympathetic and unsympathetic readers, where it can be excerpted or abridged or continued by those readers in a multitude of different ways, and can come into contact and interact dynamically with (the interpretations of) countless other cultural artefacts and human meanings. And understanding the life of a novel out on that field requires you to be one of those readers out there on the field with it, and to find creative ways to interact with the novel. And traversing that field and finding that creativity require and reveal and cultivate a stock of moral resources, moral attitudes and emotions and insights.

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[8] Linda Hutcheon makes basically the same point, with a slightly different emphasis, in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1990): 'the word creates a world through the co-operative activity of the sender and the receiver of the text' (ibid, p.140). Also see her references to 'a heterocosm that the reader and writer create together…[T]he heterocosm is constructed in and through language, and both author and reader share the responsibility for this work' (ibid, p.90). What I'd add to this is that the 'world' or 'heterocosm' to which Hutcheon refers, which is the sum of any literary text, is a world populated by moral meanings.

[9] Roughly, sympathetic readers (guests) and unsympathetic readers (interlopers). I don't mean to suggest that a sympathetic disposition is always the right disposition for a reader. Adam Roberts has written, '[I]f an artist paints a portrait in a Picasso style and is then judged by a critic whose taste is informed, consciously or otherwise, by the belief that a portrait ought to aim for photographic verisimilitude -- well, then, the artist might feel a little hard done by. But by the same token: the mere fact that you have painted your portrait in a Picasso style *does not mean that your portrait is necessarily good art*. A hostile critic may be working from aesthetic principles orthogonal to your own and yet be right to be hostile. I think it is good and worthwhile to produce experimental art, but I also think we ought to take seriously the idiom, imported as it is from science, where *most experiments fail*.' So it is not always right to be a guest, always wrong to be an interloper.

My plea, then, is a plea for creative reading as a route to understanding, including, most importantly, moral understanding. Creative reading[10] is native to literary criticism, but is not always made to feel welcome in philosophy. It is, though, indispensable to philosophy in some contexts, including the context of this thesis. Judged by commonly-applied standards of philosophical rigour, such philosophical practice can appear only as a falling-short. But in my view, the casualty here must be those standards themselves. This thesis enacts a case in support of this view.[11]

[10] Asked to define the term 'creative reading' I'd say that the preceding paragraphs give plenty of suggestive hints, but if pressed to elaborate I'd defer for one last time to Stephen Mulhall, who sums it up nicely when he describes 'a discourse which acknowledges (that is to say, recognizes and explores) the ways in which its words are interwoven with other words, responsive to the world and capable of being projected into new contexts…in ways that illuminate both words and world' which he glosses as philosophy 'meaning every word it says' and suggests is 'one unorthodox but nonetheless recognizable sense in which philosophy can meets its obligation to the claims of reason without regimenting its discourse in the terms provided by formal logic or the predicate calculus' (*On Film*, pp.139-140). What he's describing, really, is the premise of ordinary language philosophy, an idea that I'll return to in chapter 8. I don't think it's a coincidence that Mulhall operates as a kind of ordinary language philosopher and also devotes serious attention to cultural artefacts that other philosophers are unlikely to give a hearing (in *On Film* he offers detailed readings of all but the most recent entries of the *Alien* and *Mission: Impossible* franchises). A large part of what I mean by creative reading is simply the willingness to bring a book into dialogue with a multitude of other sources (and OLP appears to remove certain conventional obstacles to that willingness by recognising the conversational character of all meaning-making and displacing intention from its authoritative role, in other words by insisting that explicitly philosophical or literary discourses are only a tiny fraction of those discourses that are of philosophical or literary interest). Ian McEwan, Marilynne Robinson, Kazuo Ishiguro, Iris Murdoch, Cora Diamond, Raimond Gaita, Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, Terry Eagleton, Annie Proulx, S.L. Goldberg, Alan Jacobs, George Eliot, Stephen Mulhall, Jeffrey Stout, Rowan Williams, Niklas Forsberg, Stanley Cavell, Jonathan Lear, James Wood, and many other writers, are all brought into dialogue within my writing, which is, as I see it, what qualifies it as a piece of creative reading.

[11] I thank Christopher Cordner for suggesting the wording of this paragraph, which is a marked improvement on the hyperbolic original wording.

The structure of this dissertation is something of a salmagundi. It is organised around three collections of three self-contained but interrelated essays; a study of a contemporary novel (Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, respectively[12]) followed by an excursus outlining a philosophical argument for literature as a moral resource, and finally a brief aphoristic essay which returns to the novel studied in the first essay, resuming (and to some extent reiterating) the interpretive effort that is, as I've said, the meat of my thesis, and also exploring additional considerations that may have been made apparent by the intervening excursus. The relationship between each of the three essays, as between each of the three collections of essays, will be found to be akin to the relationship between different parties to a conversation. Each unit of the dissertation is engaged in dialogue with each of the others, though there are distinct groupings within which the dialogue coalesces more than it does outside those groupings. I present three overlapping conversations, each conducted between three interlocutors. The headings I provide for each of the three major parts (the collections, as I've called them) are organisational and approximate rather than proscriptive and precise. If they promise analyses that fail to be borne out then they are to be taken as flagging an expectation of how the discussion will proceed (from a concern with conventional philosophical subjects, and conventional philosophical method: identifying problems and surveying solutions), that the reader should (by now, at least) be prepared to distrust. I have aspired to 'a writing that develops more by exploration and interrogation than by the assertion of conclusive claims.'[13] I would have to take it as proof of having faithfully modelled my sources, in fact I could only be flattered, were I told that my work 'proceeds less as an argument than as an elaboration of a family of ideas,'[14] or even that I had produced 'a misshapen, undisciplined amalgam

[12] I have been asked why these novels and not others, but I honestly don't understand the question. Why other novels and not these? In a sense I could have picked any novels, and in a sense I did.

[13] Mahon. '"This is said on tiptoe: Stanley Cavell and the Writing of Philosophy.' *Irish Journal of American Studies*. Issue 3. http://ijas.iaas.ie/this-is-said-on-tiptoe-stanley-cavell-and-the-writing-of-philosophy-2/.

[14] Clarke. Review of *Language Lost and Found*. *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*. 26 March 2014 https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/language-lost-and-found-on-iris-murdoch-and-the-limits-of-philosophical-discourse/

of ill-assorted parts'.[15] At the risk of labouring the point, let me emphasise: this, all of this (the dependence on implication and suggestion and allusion and the lack of propositional economy), is a feature, not a bug. If one is writing under such conditions as this thesis was written under (conditions of accelerated intellectual development), then it's unsurprising that one should adopt a style that's tolerant of ambiguity, casually tangential, oblique rather than direct, and shaped to ironise the misconceptions of naïve rationalism.

I'd like to thank Craig Taylor for giving me a much-needed and much-treasured philosophical education as well as copious opportunities to think more and better about things that really matter, and Giselle Bastin for nurturing this project in its infancy and giving it a meticulous appraisal in what I hope can be called its adulthood, and both of them for giving me four years of attention and assistance and advice, and throughout it all being models of generosity and good humour and patience. And for allowing me to indulge in clever dick exhibitionism even when it means conditioning readers to expect that from me right from the outset.

[15] Kenny. Review of *The Claim of Reason*. *Times Literary Supplement*. 18 April, 1980. Though Cavell points out, in responding to Kenny, a certain obtuseness on Kenny's part. Kenny takes the long, reticulated, questioning first sentence of *The Claim of Reason* as an example of Cavell's lack of discipline, and Cavell observes that it is 'hard to imagine that one reading [this sentence] was unaware that its author had had some sense of its strangeness.' (Quoted in Eldridge. Review of *Contending with Stanley Cavell*. *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*. https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/contending-with-stanley-cavell/.) It's surely clear, Cavell suggests, that this sentence is deliberately eschewing conventional standards of lucid, economical expression. That Cavell should think of this as an answer to Kenny's complaints points to something important: only by its self-conscious strangeness is Cavell's philosophical style (the kind of style I've wanted to emulate) fitted to its task. And to be self-consciously strange is to hold what's 'normal' within sight. This style, like any ambitious literary style, really would be arbitrary, pretentious, and clumsy, were it not carefully positioned in relation to its more slavishly conventional counterpart. Part of this positioning is the unobtrusive presence of the kind of apparently conclusive claim that this style affects to be wary of. So I don't claim to be uncontaminated by claim-making.

It's customary, after making all the thankyous, to toss in a *mea culpa solus* as insurance against any really howling errors. But I can't help feeling that that would be somewhat disingenuous, since I'm expecting the reader to navigate by way of the errors I've recorded here to whatever that's truthful might be lurking between those errors. That understanding an argument requires feeling the force of the problems that necessitate making that argument is a methodological assumption I could not afford to renounce. My first premise is that my reader will be willing to position herself within the particular fraught discursive space that has been my residence throughout the writing of this dissertation. It would be no mere compromise, then, to hope that all one might gain from reading this is a knowledge of where my argument goes wrong, and that seeing my errors will clarify matters for the reader, will thereby, for the reader, bring some truth into focus not despite but because of that truth having eluded me. You will just have to trust that all of this is more than affectation, that it is said in a genuine spirit of Socratic humility, as a conscious piece of deflationary discourse. Whilst there is a danger of my fallibilism tipping over into obscurantism, writing (I hope it's not glib to observe) is naturally a dangerous business, and I can't see how any genuine fallibilism can fail to see that much in what's said might be obscure to the speaker.

And I'd like to add that the really howling errors are all mine.

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In the interest of conducting the reader through the initial apertures of my thinking on these subjects, I append the following (commendatory rather than probative) account of the anti-rationalist moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch. Written close to the beginning of my candidature, it details the outlook that informed all of my subsequent writing, and should suffice to identify my most egregious departures from the prevalent views among academic moral philosophers of what morality amounts to.

Murdoch's Moral Philosophy

Failing to be moral, failing to notice the moral claims to which one is subject, involves much more than simply failing to apprehend certain objective facts. Morality is not solely a matter of what one

knows, and moral problems are not merely a particular species of epistemological problem. This is the basis of the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch. Her approach was iconoclastic at the time she first articulated it, and it continues to be relegated to the margins of academic moral philosophy.

In the mid-1950s, Murdoch argued that the prevailing view of morality, which defined the area of moral concern by reference to the concepts of action and decision, was a severely truncated definition of the moral. 'When we apprehend and assess other people', Murdoch observed, 'we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems'[16]. We are also concerned, in our moral relations with others, with 'the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation'[17]. Character, in other words, is an essential feature of our sense of ourselves and others as moral beings. Any moral philosophy which reduces character to a person's articulated opinions and their deliberated responses to specific dilemmas misses out on the ways in which morality can be both a private phenomenon (one can experience a significant change in one's moral outlook without disclosing it in any way to anyone else) and an integral aspect of social discourse beyond the explicit avowal of moral judgements (one's moral outlook is generated by and contingent upon one's participation in a culture).

Murdoch characterised the spokesmen of the prevailing view in moral philosophy (she was responding specifically to R.M. Hare) as 'people whose fundamental moral belief is that we all live in the same empirical and rationally comprehensible world and that morality is the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct.'[18]The problem with this belief, or one of the problems, is that it contains an undisclosed individualist prejudice in its notions of rationality and universalizability. It presumes that individuals carry around with themselves a discreet faculty called 'rationality' which they employ whenever they encounter a problem in the world. An internal requirement of this rationality is consistency, so the individual must reason to the same conclusions in all relevantly

[16] Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality.' *Existentialists and Mystics*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1997. p.80.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid, p.88.

similar situations in order to remain rational: the individual must universalize his judgements. This last feature of the rationalist view of morality is presented by its advocates as not only a rational requirement but also, simultaneously, a *moral* requirement. To fail to universalize one's judgements is to surrender to sheer prejudice, or special pleading. But the universalizability of judgements can only be a moral imperative if one assumes that morality is fully apprehended in the conduct of rational individuals responding to a world of independent facts equally available to other rational individuals. 'The Liberal [individualist] wants all the time to draw attention to the *point of discontinuity* between the choosing agent and the world. He sees the agent as central, solitary, responsible, displaying his values in his selection of acts and attitudes.'[19] But if morality is about more than the conduct of individuals, if it is also about character, which is a quality that does not admit of quantification or simple comparison, if the agent is not solitary and his values are implicated in a social structure that supersedes him, if rationality is not the discreet faculty liberals make it out to be but something contingent upon the moral outlook out of which the commitment to rationality arises, then the universalizability of judgements is an imperative that can gain no purchase.[20]

'[Murdoch's] idea' as Cora Diamond puts it, '[is] that someone's understanding of a situation might be irreducibly evaluative (might be such that to withdraw the evaluation would not be to leave the same facts)'.[21] If evaluative understanding precedes rational understanding, if a moral outlook on the world precedes, and conditions, a rational appraisal of the world, then one's 'selection of acts and attitudes' can hardly provide a comprehensive representation of one's values. Insofar as that selection is judged in terms of its rationality it will inevitably fall short. And, in any case, the focus on 'acts and attitudes' is limiting in itself, as it is driven by the desire to single out qualities which are amenable to rational analysis at the expense of those more nebulous qualities which underpin the acts and attitudes

[19] Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', p.97, emphasis in original.

[20] Many of my claims in what follows could be considered arguments for this point.

[21] Diamond, '"We are Perpetually Moralists": Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value.' *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*. Eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. p.85.

at a more fundamental level of consciousness. Murdoch suggests that morality is not simply a matter of decision and action in the manner that a rationalist theory of morality requires it to be in order to pick out discreet objects for examination. It is also a matter of 'vision' and 'attention,' and those are concepts which mark qualities that are inextricably embedded in the structures of one's subjectivity. The entirety of one's consciousness is relevant to, but not reducible to, considerations about one's conduct (and the articulated reasons for that conduct).

The fact that individuals act in response to the actions of other individuals (and offer reasons for those actions), and that those actions and reasons are very often the subjects of our moral deliberations, does not mean that our *only* moral concern is how we act in response to and are acted upon by other individuals (and the reasons offered), or that the conceptual apparatus by which individuals regulate their conduct (their behaviour as rational actors) is localised in the individual in the form of specifiable rules; *or* that the regulation of conduct is the activity to which morality is directed or through which it is most clearly displayed. In fact, the experience of subjectivity and the relational nature of value-formation strongly suggest otherwise.

Transitivism and Transparency: What I Do Not Mean by 'Moral Sense'

In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant speaks in passing, and with unblunted disparagement, of moral sentimentalism. His judgement on the moral sense school – on the moral philosophy represented variously in the work of Francis Hutcheson, Lord Shaftesbury, David Hume, and Adam Smith – is compressed into the withering phrase 'those who cannot think believe they can help themselves out by feeling.'[22] It would be easy to adapt this and turn it on the claims of Iris Murdoch and her followers (myself included): 'those who cannot think believe they can help themselves out by seeing.' But talk of 'moral vision' is not just a reworking, with a different sensory analogy, of moral sentimentalism.

[22] Quoted in Eagleton. *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. p.106

For Terry Eagleton, speaking of a moral sense is about 'lend[ing] moral notions the apodictic certainty of touch or taste. A discourse of the senses rides to the rescue of moral value.'[23] There is, however, an ambiguity at play here, owing to the fact that 'it is also because of the unreliability of the senses that one must fall back on this sort of sensory intuition.'[24] When we can't believe our eyes we resort to the sense of touch, like the Apostle Thomas touching the wounds of the risen Christ. So the 'moral sense of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson…is in one sense a confession of philosophical defeat…To posit this sense, a kind of spectral shadowing of our grosser organs of perception, as the source of moral judgement is in one sense tantamount to claiming that such judgements cannot be justified at all.'[25] But the concession of defeat is at the same time a declaration of victory, for the moral sense is 'as irrefutable as it is undemonstrable.'[26] Although a Murdochian approach to moral philosophy entails a radical rethinking of the role that rational justification plays in moral judgement, although in pragmatist fashion it pulls the rug out from under any attempt (like Kant's) to give morality a secure foundation in reason, it does not, I would contend, fall into the kind of special pleading that Eagleton here identifies in the moral sense school, because it is not beset by any of the same difficulties stemming from an unrealistic moral psychology.

Central to the account of morality given by moral sentimentalism is the experience of sympathy, an experience that, as described by Adam Smith, bears a striking similarity to what is known in psychoanalytic circles as 'transitivism, in which, as in some primitive bond of sympathy, a small child may cry when another child takes a tumble, or claim to have been struck himself when he strikes a companion.' Eagleton says of transitivism that it is 'just a peculiarly graphic instance of

[23] Eagleton, op. cit., p.40

[24] ibid

[25] Ibid, p.22

[26] ibid

sympathetic mimicry as such.' He also calls it 'a kind of chiming or resonating of bodies.'[27] It is as a philosophy of embodiment that moral sentimentalism commits its major errors.

> The body for Smith and his ilk is in the first place a material object rather than a form of praxis, a centre from which a world is organised. They do not see it as that 'outside' of ourselves which we can never quite get a fix on, yet in whose expressive activity we are present rather as the meaning is present in a word.[28]... If Smith assumes that we can have access to others only by some special faculty, it is because he imagines that others' states of mind are naturally inaccessible to us, concealed as they are by the fleshly encasements of their bodies.[29]

Transitivism is a kind of pathological reflex, one which Smith and the other moral sentimentalists come close to advocating in their reification of sympathetic responses into a unitary and authoritative moral sense. They fall into this because they mistakenly assume that others ought to be transparent to us, that our inability to achieve certainty in our judgements of the feelings of others should lead us to a redoubled confidence in our ability to simply be moved by our apprehension of others, which suggests a special faculty suited to that end. This ignores the simple fact that '[w]e have access to ourselves in much the way that we have access to others. Sheer introspection will not serve here. It cannot be by simple introspection that I become aware that I am envious or afraid.'[30] Realising how much we are opaque to ourselves, which in large part involves realising that 'my own body can never

[27] Eagleton, op. cit., pp.3-4. Eagleton's study of ethics has a tripartite arrangement based on the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's categories of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. I briefly pick up the Lacanian thread in the chapter "Picturing and Mirroring" through a discussion of Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage. It's conceivable a more conscientious application of Lacan's thought to many of the issues under consideration in this book would have borne fruit.

[28] Ibid, p.41

[29] Ibid, p.43

[30] Ibid, p.44

be present to me simply in the way that my wrist watch is, [and] neither can yours be'[31], should remove any impetus to dream up nebulous mechanisms whereby what others are feeling becomes as transparent to us as what we ourselves are feeling.

This is not the space to pursue Eagleton's critique of moral sentimentalism further, or to assess recent attempts to recuperate the philosophy of the moral sense school.[32] Hopefully this will suffice to show why my title, and the rare occurrences in my text of the phrase 'moral sense', are not to be taken as references to the moral sense school, and do not indicate any ambition on my part to theorise a unitary faculty of moral perception.

[31] Eagleton, op. cit., p.42

[32] One intriguing application of Adam Smith's moral thought (and to a lesser extent the moral thought of other Scottish Enlightenment figures) that I recently encountered was in G.J. McAleer's open-source book *Veneration and Refinement: The Ethics of Fashion*, available at https://www.ethicsoffashion.com/

Subjectivity and the Problem of Moralism

Atonement, *Tragedy, and Moralism*

I

Atonement is a novel that stands out in Ian McEwan's oeuvre as a synthesis of his enduring concerns: childhood, contingency, clashing subjectivities, and the messiness of the moral life. Its protagonist, Briony Tallis, is, when we first encounter her, a precocious thirteen year old girl, but we are soon told that she will grow up to be a successful novelist. In an act of callow and self-righteous moralism Briony falsely accuses Robbie Turner of the rape of her teenage cousin Lola. Robbie has very recently consummated his long-concealed love for Briony's sister Cecilia, a consummation to which Briony was an appalled witness. Compounding Briony's crime is the fact that the actual rapist, Paul Marshall, escapes detection and is free to groom and eventually marry his young victim. Robbie and Cecilia are denied a happy life together as Robbie serves out his prison sentence. This is followed by the lovers' separation by the Second World War during which both ultimately perish. The thirteen-year-old Briony's naiveté and arrogance destroy Robbie and Cecilia's chance at happiness and it becomes the adult novelist Briony's mission to capture in a work of literature the magnitude of her crime and thereby to atone for it. The novel that we read is Briony's, the work of many decades and the final book of her career as dementia begins to erode her memory.

On one level *Atonement* reiterates the most persistent concern of McEwan's fiction: how the journey out of childhood innocence can be morally disastrous and do irreparable damage to relationships between family members. The novel dramatizes a child's encounter with the adult world and the tragic consequences of that inevitable encounter. And it elevates the theme of innocence lost by setting it against the historical backdrop of the Second World War. Unlike McEwan's other explorations of this theme (I'm thinking especially of *The Cement Garden* and *The Innocent*), the loss of innocence isn't portrayed as the opening of an existential wound. It remains an active possibility in *Atonement* that innocence lost translates to wisdom gained. Many critics deny this, seeing the novel as an essentially sceptical exercise. Rebecca L. Walkowitz sees *Atonement* as a rebuke of naïve

triumphalism, its chief task being to 'deflate heroic images of family, romance, and art.'[33] For Lynn Wells, *Atonement*'s 'true complexity… lies in discovering the ethical deficit of its main character, whose "at-one-ment" or reconciliation is with the self, but not the other.'[34] Briony thus remains, in Wells' reading, the same conceited and narcissistic character she was as a child. These two approaches – that which emphasises *Atonement*'s interest in critiquing the literary or cultural orthodoxy, and that which regards Briony's novel as an unsuccessful atonement and a recapitulation of her childhood sin – are linked insofar as one's stance on Briony's success or failure in atoning will carry significant implications for (or be significantly influenced by) whether one perceives McEwan's project to be predominantly one of restoration, celebration, and homage, or predominantly one of interrogation, disenchantment, and rebuke. I want to suggest that, morally speaking, the stakes are far higher for Briony, and for us as readers, than is acknowledged by those who read the novel as a subtle indictment of its protagonist and a paradigmatically postmodern exercise in unmasking ideology. If we are determined to condemn Briony then I think it becomes impossible to see *Atonement* as capable of offering any response to the moral questions it raises. Forgiveness needs to be a real possibility before the concept of atonement can admit of honest enquiry, and part of what I will be arguing is that *Atonement* is an exemplary instance of literature acting as moral enquiry and even delivering moral insights.

Walkowitz identifies the repudiation of triumphalism as the dominant theme not only of *Atonement* but of McEwan's entire oeuvre. One could justifiably point to the repudiation of literature as the dominant theme in McEwan criticism. There is a (thickly peopled) category of response to McEwan that sees his work as expressing a powerful anxiety about the practice of authoring fictions. Kiernan Ryan sees the earlier novel *Black Dogs* in this light, calling it 'a sinister portrait of the artist as vampire',[35] and Claire Colebrook, writing on *Saturday*, says that McEwan 'might appear to be the

[33] Walkowitz. 'Ian McEwan' in *Companion to the British and Irish Novel*. Ed. Brian W. Schaffer. Harmondsworth: Blackwell, 2005. p.512.

[34] Wells. *Ian McEwan*. Harmondsworth: Blackwell, 2010. p.110.

[35] Ryan. *Ian McEwan*. Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994. p.64.

most self-castrating of novelists: presenting art as a seductive deception that will ultimately preclude us from the recognition that poetry makes nothing happen.'[36] This is a commonplace of McEwan criticism: the idea that he is uncovering, or at least intimating that there could be, a dark void at the heart of fiction-makers and all of their fictions. In the eyes of these critics McEwan's achievement is exactly that of any postmodern novelist: to refuse to indulge in the vice of unselfconscious authorship.

If you were looking for a succinct statement of the philosophy undergirding postmodern literary criticism you could do no better than to invert Walkowitz's formula: the triumph of repudiation. Within this school of criticism it would make very little sense to look on *Atonement* as offering an affirmation of the value of literature as a redemptive and consoling art form. But redemption and consolation are precisely what *Atonement* offers to any reader alive to its complicatedly compassionate vision. Insofar as that vision can be attributed to an author, this reveals the author to be not uniquely vicious (as many critics are inclined to suggest) but uniquely virtuous. What that virtue consists of is the wisdom to resist moralism, to resist a simplistic or vacuous representation of the moral lives of human beings.

What is therefore precluded by most critics (who at least implicitly endorse the radical moral scepticism of postmodern literary criticism) is the possibility of *Atonement*, or indeed any piece of literature, contributing to morality in the same way that the living of a life does: as a vision of the world to be attended to with the same moral attention that all of life demands. Literature can provide moral experiences by creating an arresting theatre for reflection and offering extraordinary or exemplary instantiations of what we might encounter in everyday life. It can pick out objects or ideas for our attention and illuminate with the light of its artifice things which we were previously blind to. So literature, by, for instance, giving us an appreciation of the difficulty of the moral life and the value of attitudes like irony, can clear away the distortions which result from our blinkered reflections on morality, among them the predilection for self-righteous condemnation of others.

[36] Colebrook. '*The Innocent* as Anti-Oedipal Critique of Cultural Pornography.' *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Sebastian Groes. London: Continuum, 2009. p.56.

Moralism is the kind of irreducibly-moral error described by, among others, Raimond Gaita. Errors of this kind are errors in thinking which find no analogue in failures of rationality. These are not a species of factual error but rather faulty modes of thought irrespective of one's ability to reason to rational conclusions (they may or may not result in factual errors). One might say that the form of the thought is itself the error, not merely the source of some more exact error specifiable in factual terms. For instance, we may criticise someone for being sentimental and this sentimental attitude may be itself the error we criticise, not some particular false proposition that arises from the sentimentality.[37]

In creating this distinction between misprision in our moral sense and misprision in rational inquiry, Gaita is, like Diamond and Murdoch, suggesting that the language of moral discourse reflects in non-trivial ways the practice of morality, that the ambiguity of that language echoes the complexity of morality itself. Its ambiguity is not just a feature of the difficulty of taxonomic precision, something that we should attempt to surmount by refining our concepts through the filter of a rational criterion.

> Descriptions of actions and character through which we explore our sense of what we have done and what we are, of what is fine and what is tawdry, of what is shallow and what is deep, of what is noble and what is base, and so on, are not merely descriptions of convenience onto which we project a more formal sense, focused on imperatives, of what is it is for something to be of moral concern. [38]

A work of literature will ideally be a compendium of descriptions of exactly that kind.
A faulty moral attitude, one not simply constituted of a set of faulty beliefs but itself erroneous, is one that can only be amended by the acquisition of a more realistic attitude to what is morally possible.

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[37] Gaita's example is of someone lighting a candle every year on the anniversary of the death of their pet dog. One needn't appeal to any facts, say about canines as a species, to see that this person's thinking has gone wrong.

[38] Gaita. *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. p.40.

Literature, by describing the contours of moral possibility, is one way, an especially powerful way, of exploring the moral dimension of reality and thus mending our distorted vision.

Iris Murdoch considered art 'cognition in another mode',[39] and this is, broadly, the conception of literature demanded by the (for want of a better term) anti-rationalist[40] moral philosophy detailed above: literature conceived as a mode of thought about reality, a different way (from science) of appreciating what is true and what is possible. One of the ways literature accommodates moral insight is by expanding our stock of concepts and thereby enriching our cultural discourse. Literature (and all art), on this view, inasmuch as it contributes to a living cultural tradition must also contribute to our sense of what is permissible, decent, dignified, humane, beautiful, just, etc. This implies that such terms do not have fixed meanings but must be continually refined and supplemented by new ways of understanding and discussing their relations. The work of morality is the work of constantly evaluating and revising our conceptual engagement with the human world, and literature is one of the most powerful means we have of carrying out that evaluation and revision.

Atonement, I will argue, provides its reader with a picture of moral disaster (tragedy) that illuminates features of the moral life which may have otherwise been obscure. The story of Briony's moral failure and attempted atonement discloses a distinct region of moral possibility, and this disclosure should, on my reading, expose the fraudulence of moralistic condemnation.

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[39] Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p.11.

[40] Rationalist moral philosophy I would define broadly as any philosophy consistent with the following disjunction of features:

- regards moral reasons as necessarily impartial
- regards moral judgements as necessarily universalisable
- regards feeling/emotion as having no constitutive role to play in moral reasoning/argument

See Cora Diamond's 'Anything But Argument' (in her *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.), specifically the critique of Onora O'Neill contained therein, for a clear characterisation of and response to this kind of rationalism.

II

The horrors of the Second World War occupy a large part of *Atonement*, and various critics have seen Briony's story as illustrative of broader truths about the ideologies which brought about those horrors. Peter Mathews, for instance, observes that '[f]or a novel that draws from some of the key historical events of the twentieth century…there is surprisingly little discussion of the Nazis or the rise of fascism. McEwan implies, instead, that the fascist mindset has pervaded modern culture at a much deeper, unconscious level', going on to note that 'Briony's obsession with writing is tied to a fascistic obsession with order.'[41] This aspect of the novel is overstated by critics like Mathews:

> A…rupture occurs with Robbie's obscene letter. Having discovered the worm of negativity in the fruit of knowledge, Briony becomes convinced that her childish perspective was not wrong as such… The evil lies in knowledge which provides the possibility of contradiction… [T]he function of literature is to provide an artistic ideal, a glimpse of the beautiful symmetry of the world that existed before the blight of the negative and the impure intervened. This view of the world thus necessitates a scapegoat, a figure that can be blamed for the dissolution of symmetry. If that figure can be eliminated, purity will be restored to the world. For the Nazis, this ideal was encapsulated by racial and cultural purity, requiring the elimination of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the physically and mentally disabled, and so on.[42]

It stretches credulity to suggest that, as a novel partially set during World War II, *Atonement* must be drawing a connection between the sins of a conceited child and the worst sins of fascism. Mathews' reading elides certain important features of Briony's journey out of self-deception, as I hope to show in what follows.

Briony and her visiting cousins are rehearsing her new play, *The Trials of Arabella*, a melodramatic morality play intended to catch the conscience of her wayward brother Leon, but when

[41] Mathews. 'The Impression of a Deeper Darkness: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.' *ESC*, 32:1, March 2006. p.154.

[42] Ibid, p.155.

the rehearsals fall apart, Briony, abandoned by her cousins, wanders to the window and witnesses an exchange between Robbie and Cecilia around the algae-encrusted fountain in the grounds of the family estate. Unknown to Briony, Cecilia has gone to the fountain to fill a vase (a priceless family heirloom which survived the First World War in the possession of Briony and Cecilia's Uncle) and, in reaching to help her, Robbie has broken a piece off the vase and dropped it into the fountain. It is a sweltering summer's day. Briony sees her sister strip off her clothes and plunge into the fountain in her underwear as Robbie watches. Briony perceives, without understanding it, the powerful erotic energy passing between Cecilia and Robbie. She is mystified and profoundly altered by what she witnesses.

Before moving to the window Briony has been (in a justly celebrated passage) staring at her finger and willing it to twitch, marvelling at the gap between intention and action, and wondering about the extent of the subjective reality of other lives:

> She bent her finger and straightened it. The mystery was in the instant before it moved, the dividing moment between not moving and moving, when her intention took effect. It was like a wave breaking. If she could only find herself at the crest, she thought, she might find the secret of herself, that part of her that was really in charge…Was everyone as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face? Did everybody…? If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. One could drown in irrelevance. But if the answer was no, then Briony was surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private *inside* feeling she had. (pp.35-36)

Robbie, in a startling display of just such an intense 'claim on life,' writes a letter to Cecilia, and finds himself, in recalling the scene at the fountain, confessing his most intimate desires: 'In my dreams I

kiss your cunt, your sweet wet cunt. In my thoughts I make love to you all day long.' (p.84) This 'ruined' draft he accidentally slips into the envelope intended for the more restrained final version. He then hands the envelope to Briony to convey to Cecilia. But Briony, prompted by a 'savage and thoughtless curiosity' and feeling that 'it was right, it was essential, for her to know everything' (p.113), opens and reads the letter herself. 'The very complexity of her feelings *confirmed* Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit. What fairy tale ever held so much by way of contradiction?' (p.113, my emphasis).

To call Robbie's letter a contradiction to Briony's childish perspective is to fail to do justice to the way that Briony's consciousness is altered by her witnessing Robbie and Cecilia's moment at the fountain directly after her metaphysical musings on her own finger. It is not simply that Robbie's letter allows Briony to return to her previous childish myopia in moral matters. It is rather that Briony sees this encounter with an undreamt-of adult dimension of the world as an opportunity to exercise what she sees as a new maturity of vision. The mention of fairy tales in Briony's response to the letter explicitly refers back to her thoughts after witnessing the scene at the fountain:

> It was a temptation for her to be magical and dramatic, and to regard what she had witnessed as a tableau mounted for her alone, a special moral for her wrapped in a mystery. But she knew very well that if she had not stood when she did, the scene would still have happened, for it was not about her at all. Only chance had brought her to the window. This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent. (pp.39-40)

The scene at the fountain has thus primed Briony to respond to Robbie's letter as a call to responsibility of the kind her former self would not have been responsive to. The tragedy is not that Briony's 'narcissistic, totalitarian outlook'[43] prevails, it is that Briony's perceived awakening to the moral complexity of the world falls desperately short of what the world is about to demand of her. A

[43] Mathews, op. cit., p.155.

reader who looks with compassion on Briony's ordeal (and we can recognise her culpability without ignoring how she suffers from her actions) will not compare her tragic error to the atrocity of the death camps.[44]

What makes *Atonement* a tragedy is the gap between Briony's intentions and the actual consequences of her actions, the gap between what Briony thinks is demanded of her and what is actually demanded of her. We can recognise that that gap exists without having to know exactly what is demanded of her. We can recognise that she fails without ourselves being in possession of the correct solution to her moral dilemma. (In fact, one might say that it is only a tragedy if we don't know, if no one knows, if it is a mystery how Briony could possibly have handled the situation that confronted her without giving in to vice). What is tragic is that Briony was trapped into destroying the lives of people close to her, and that her own failings helped to create that trap. She could not have done differently, and yet she was still responsible. Only a moralist[45] would insist that they know how

[44] Brian Finney likewise seems to be reaching when he says that 'Robbie's fall is caused by another's lie, reminding readers that Europe's fall into war followed lies of a far more serious order made by Hitler.' ('Briony's Stand Against Oblivion.' *Journal of Modern Literature*. 27:3, Winter 2004). If we are trying to sound out the historical resonances in *Atonement*'s plot, we can surely do better than to observe how like Adolf Hitler young Briony was, behaving as she did.

[45] I don't mean moralist in the positive sense that it is sometimes meant (for instance in Lionel Trilling's criticism). So perhaps it would be better to say "moraliser" rather than "moralist". This is exactly the distinction that Gilbert Ryle makes in discussing Jane Austen (in his 'Jane Austen and the Moralists', *Critical Essays: Collected Papers, Volume I*. New York: Routledge, 2009.):

> Whether we like it or not, [Jane Austen] was also a moralist. In a thin sense of the word, of course, every novelist is a moralist who shows us the ways or *mores* of his characters and their society. But Jane Austen was a moralist in a thick sense, that she wrote what and as she wrote partly from a deep interest in some perfectly general, even theoretical questions about human nature and human conduct. To say this is not, however, to say that she was a moraliser.(p.286)

Briony should have acted and therefore that they are in a position to condemn her. And in doing so they would wish away the tragedy, content instead with the consoling fantasy of their own righteousness. Absent this sense of inevitability, and the source of the offence in a form of horribly misplaced benevolence rather than in malice, *Atonement* ceases to be a tragedy and becomes a morality tale of exactly the kind that forms the basis of Briony's crime.

It can be easy to miss just how cruel fate is to Briony. Through her own self-will and false righteousness she encounters the dark truth of human sexuality. Her childhood conception of evil is rendered obsolete, and she needs now to redraw her entire moral map. But before she can even begin this monumental task, before she has a chance to construct even an imperfect understanding of what she has encountered, real evil bursts into her world, an evil that uses sex as its weapon. Small wonder Briony connects an act of sexual violence with the graphic sexual imaginings to which she became an unwitting voyeur mere hours before. It is as though Eve, accosted by God for her original sin, reached down and picked up a lizard and shook this little reptile in the face of her Creator, saying 'Here is your culprit,' while the serpent slithered away in the background. The Fall remains a potent myth (there are still children in the postmodern world, innocence and maturity have not been abolished, sex still has the power to startle and terrify), something *Atonement* illustrates in its reimagining of the tale. Just as the serpent in Genesis creates the sense that the expulsion from Eden is a kind of cosmic injustice, Paul Marshall surely allows us to see Briony's sin as a tragedy for Briony. Real evil exists in the world, and if Briony has failed to face up to the challenge of that evil then that merely makes her human, as human as the first humans. That does not absolve her any more than the existence of Satan absolves humanity of all its sins. This is why her atonement is necessary.

I imagine the first section of *Atonement* could have served as the backstory to a murder mystery. Who killed Lord Marshall the chocolate tycoon? Why, it was Miss Arabella Cornet, a.k.a. Briony Tallis, who cunningly infiltrated Marshall Confectionary Co. precisely to get close enough to

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I would not want to endorse Ryle's definition of a moralist as someone with an interest in 'perfectly general, even theoretical questions about human nature and human conduct', or even to agree with his claim that such a person 'is not…[necessarily] a moraliser'. But the distinction itself is nonetheless an important one.

drown Lord Marshall in a chocolate fondue fountain. And why did she do it? To avenge those whose lives were destroyed one summer's day in 1935 when Marshall viciously assaulted her cousin Lola and, due to Briony's own callow moralism, her sister Cecilia's lover Robbie received the blame. Because *Atonement* is a novel for adults[46] this is not the story that we get. Just as any mature theology does not suggest that the path to redemption lies in waging war against the Devil, *Atonement* recognises that moral accountability demands much more than the unequivocal attribution of blame and a single-minded fixation on the cause of righteousness.

All of this is by way of suggesting that we fail to appreciate the moral complexity of *Atonement* if we read it determined to fix upon a culpable party and determined to discern in it a righteous repudiation of unacknowledged prejudices. Dominic Head epitomises this view when he claims that *Atonement* 'serves, if not to diminish the literary, then to hedge it in with many damaging reservations'.[47] The strangeness of this claim is a reminder that it is far from self-evident why literature itself should be susceptible to critique from within a work of literature. Which isn't to ignore the fact that *Atonement* concerns itself, very explicitly, with fiction's distorting tendencies. But we must recognise that we court paradox whenever we ponder such possibilities, as James Wood acknowledges in his review of the novel:

> *Atonement* is both a criticism of fiction and a defense of fiction; a criticism of its shaping and exclusive torque, and a defense of its ideal democratic generosity to all. A criticism of fiction's misuse; and a defense of an ideal. And this doubleness, of apologia and celebration, *could not be otherwise*, for art is always its own ombudsman, and thus healthier than its own

[46] This is not hyperbole. *Atonement* makes a case for distinguishing between stories fit for children and stories fit for adults, morally simplistic tales and morally complicated ones. I am here describing the novel in the terms that it offers up.

[47]Head. *Ian McEwan.* Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007. p.173.

> sickness. Art is the foundation of its own anti-foundationalism, and the anti-foundation of its own foundationalism.[48]

Once we recognise the ineluctable doubleness of any fictional critique of the fictional, the inherently paradoxical nature of literature which interrogates the literary, we should be wary of giving credence to other crude binarisms. A work of literature cannot celebrate the literary without itself exemplifying the qualities it seeks to celebrate, and a work of literature cannot critique the literary without itself exemplifying the qualities it seeks to critique and, in doing so, reaffirming exactly that which it seeks to deny. Similarly, an exhortation to moral maturity (which is one thing that I think *Atonement* is) cannot be rightly called that unless it exemplifies something of the moral maturity that it demands. I want to suggest that attributing blame cannot be the central task of a mature morality, and neither can seeing a confused child as a totalitarian monster. It is a form of moralism to look at a tragedy and see only a tyranny to be resisted.

If we recognise *Atonement* as an authentic literary achievement, if we can see in it what Wood calls its 'living, flaming presence'[49], then we are made to realise that Briony's personal vision of reality is as illuminating as any could be. Her vision is forever compromised by the failure of her past, but the same can be said for each and every one of us. Not only is it true, as Brian Finney points out, that 'we all are narrated'[50], it is also true that that narration is at once a gift and a curse. It is the means of our self-realisation as well as the means of our self-destruction.

Robbie's erotic imagination was essential to his love for Cecilia. It was also what doomed their love. Briony's narrativising impulse was what led her to have Robbie convicted of rape. It was also what allowed her to memorialise the lovers so powerfully. If there is a lesson here, it is that good and evil are inseparably intermingled. Each person's unique personal vision is such that it makes

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[48] Wood, 'The Trick of Truth'. Accessed online at: http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/atonement-ian-mcewan-fiction. My emphasis.

[49] Wood, 'The Trick of Truth.'

[50] Finney, op. cit.

visible the only good that one can know whilst never foreclosing the possibility of one's becoming an agent of evil. A righteous vision is no guarantee of right action, if only because moral perfection lies forever beyond our reach.

To suggest that moral absolutism is Briony's problem, that a dose of self-doubt would be an effective apotropaic, fails completely to do justice to the situation Briony is faced with. Sometimes the world demands complete conviction from us, and it is simply impossible to counter that with some abstract notion of fallibility. In the midst of our greatest challenges we do not have the freedom of equivocation.

Briony believes herself to be encountering absolute evil in Robbie, especially after what she has witnessed in the library (the tryst between Robbie and Cecilia that she assumes to be an assault). Perhaps only pragmatic considerations prevent her from seizing her knife and lunging at him across the dinner table with a shrill cry.[51] What's certain is that she believes she possesses incontrovertible evidence of Robbie's capacity and inclination for sexual violence. Indeed, her entire notion of what perversion consists of is informed by what she has witnessed of it in him. Briony does not know what a rapist is unless it is the villainous Robbie that circumstance and her imagination have contrived for her. Compared to Briony's former image of vice, her carefree brother Leon, whose waywardness she can know only from snatches of disapproving parental chatter, the man who wields the word "cunt" and can make her sister strip off her clothes as if by command must be an evil of a kind she had never before imagined, something entirely new and wholly shocking.

As soon as we presume to know what Briony should have thought and said and done then we have committed much the same error that she committed. We may say that she should not have condemned an innocent man and exonerated a guilty one, but what use is such a blithe banality? She should not have been unjust? One may as well say that justice should be easy. Our yearning for a simple moral equation condemns us as much as hers condemned Robbie.

But it is worse for us. We are readers, not characters, sitting with a text before us and delivering moral judgements from this godly vantage. In *Atonement*, the very act of readership is

[51] The dinner scene is not focalised through her perspective, so we don't have access to her thoughts at this time.

interrogated and exposed as at best morally compromised. It is not that 'the literary' is hedged in with damaging reservations, it is that our role as readers in the literary charade is made visible to us with all of its pig-headed presumption, its arrogance and hypocrisy. Who are we to judge? We are readers, and readers are to characters what the gods are to the mortals. Does the artifice of fiction gives us license to distort our moral vision with fantasies of simplicity and delusions of righteousness? We are ready to answer with an emphatic no when it is Briony justifying her moral myopia by resort to fiction, but are we not adopting the very same justification when we stand in self-righteous judgement of her?

Just as Briony is forced by an unprecedented moral challenge to learn to read reality responsibly, so too are we led, through our encounter with this original work of art, to read responsibly, with a moral vision magnified through McEwan's lens.

Life-morality

Annie Proulx's short story 'Job History' tells the life of Leeland Lee, from his birth in 1947 to the present day (the story was published in Proulx's collection *Close Range* in 1999). In eight pages it tells the story of a whole life. The account is structured around the details of Leeland's employment history (per the title), but it also includes details of family relations and many pieces of personal trivia, for example: 'On the news an announcer says that the average American eats 8.6 pounds of margarine a year but only 8.3 pounds of butter. [Leeland] never forgets this statistic.'[52] No scenes occur in real-time, though in the course of this biographical overview the reader is made to imagine many scenes that are given in outline. Any summary of the story will necessarily be an inferior paraphrase, because Proulx's story is itself a summary, but a summary enlivened by the kinds of details that we normally expect to find in a novel, precise thoughts or sensations or emotions that we expect to see in the midst of the novelistic action of characters exchanging dialogue with one another or moving about in space in a timeframe we can easily keep track of (crossing a room, for instance). Many novels and stories employ at intervals the kind of timeframe that characterises 'Job History'; what makes this story peculiar is that it sustains this timeframe throughout. The fact that it combines this synoptic timeframe with novelistic specificity (that it is both a biographical overview and a detailed picture of an inner-life) makes it a good illustration of a point that is often neglected whenever the moral merits of literature are considered. Contrasting trivial moments (learning the relative annual consumption of margarine to butter of the average American, for instance) with important life-events (bankruptcies, deaths, estrangements of children from their parents) brings out a distinctive feature of human life, namely the very fact that our lives are a combination of these wildly different experiences. A proper understanding of the moral character of our actions (or any fictional character's actions) can't ignore either of these facets of experience: it can't ignore the fact that these different kinds of experience are often intertwined and go to make up a larger picture of a life in the context of which all of a person's (or character's) actions take place. (The tendency to view literature as morally engaged only in so far

[52] Proulx. 'Job History' in *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. London: Fourth Estate, 1999. p.91.

as it pictures people making fraught decisions, or at least faced with such decisions, is the product of a specific philosophical prejudice).[53]

One can identify themes in 'Job History' and make generalisations about its characters and events, but the form of the story is bound to make these self-conscious activities; an alert reader can't ignore the striking fact of the story's form. But what 'Job History' foregrounds is anyway implicit in other works of realist fiction. Literature resists paraphrase exactly to the extent that it realistically depicts the range over which human experience occurs and the necessary relatedness of disparate experiences in a person's (any person's) life. To put it more simply, literature resists paraphrase exactly to the extent that it realistically depicts *what life is really like*. Life just is messy and mixed and filled with the irrelevant and the unresolved as much as (probably more than) with the profound and decisive, and all such moments are in a sense always already significant by virtue of being *part of a life*. To the extent that a work of literature captures this truth, it will be, like life itself, resistant to any attempt to painlessly extract and repackage its meaning, any attempt to make that meaning portable.

The critic and essayist Alan Jacobs provides a fine illustration of this point.

> A perfect example of [the unique ethical power of literature] may be found in the greatest of all English novels, George Eliot's *Middlemarch.* The moral agent here is the physician Lydgate, who is in charge of an infirmary that is in need of a chaplain. Lydgate is on the committee that will decide, by vote, who that chaplain will be. There are two candidates: one, Mr. Tyke, whom Lydgate does not know, but who is strongly supported by Mr. Bulstrode, the man who hired Lydgate and pays his salary; the other, Mr. Farebrother, whom Lydgate knows and likes, but about whose religious calling and moral seriousness Lydgate has some doubts. Now, when Lydgate arrives at the meeting during which the vote will be taken . . .[ellipsis in original] But clearly this is not going to work. In my description I have already had to leave

[53] A prejudice I'm inclined to call, with a cavalier disregard for nuance, 'rationalism'. A commodious definition of this prejudice, as it applies to moral thought, is provided by the quote from Goldberg in n44.

> out Lydgate's earlier conversation with Mr. Bulstrode on the subject, and though I have said that Lydgate likes Mr. Farebrother I have not explained how he came to know him, or what precisely his doubts about Farebrother consist of; nor have I said anything about what Mr. Farebrother's own attitude toward his candidacy is, or about his understanding of Lydgate's difficult position, or about what he has said to Lydgate on these subjects. And George Eliot's account of the meeting itself is quite carefully drawn and takes up about a dozen pages, and any mere summary of it would be an injustice too. In the end, I could only use this passage from *Middlemarch* to illustrate [an ethical critic's] argument about the ethical power of great novels if I could cite the whole section of the book relating to Lydgate's decision; but of course, my very inability to squeeze Eliot's deep and subtle moral analysis into a few paragraphs of an essay proves as well as anything could [the ethical critic's] point.[54]

The acknowledgement that 'any mere summary…would be an injustice' must follow from the thought that literature, like life (in fact, just in as much as it really is, more than superficially, like life), is entirely suffused with meaning.

I make no further attempt to summarise 'Job History' because the combination of the breadth and specificity of its details makes me conscious that any summary would be simply a list of a number of the story's events, perhaps clarified by some general remark about Proulx's laconic prose and the nuggets of lyricism that punctuate it. It is a story that seems to demand a recommendation ("Just read it for yourself") rather than a synopsis. But crafting a synopsis that does not distort or diminish the work, or rather at best minimises the distortion and diminishment of the work, is always a challenging exercise and often a necessary one, and a great many works of literature exhibit the combination of the broad-ranging and the specific that can be observed in 'Job History.' So perhaps

[54] Jacobs. 'To Read and to Live.' *First Things*. June, 1993. Accessed online at https://www.firstthings.com/article/1993/06/to-read-and-to-live. Jacobs is here specifically discussing the ethical criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin but for simplicity's sake I will avoid engaging with Bakhtin's criticism, which would inevitably involve roping in a lot of other critical concepts that aren't directly relevant to my discussion here.

the critic's task is very often one of minimising and coming to live with the injustice he perpetrates against works of literature. Narrative fiction, with its characteristic shaping and pattern-making, can often obscure or efface the incongruent and the plainly coincidental aspects of human life. The writer of fiction has the luxury, afforded by the astonishing imaginative resources of the literary tradition, of directly resisting that effacement by making those aspects of life vividly manifest. The best the critic can do here is to comment upon such manifestations, parrot their content in a quieter voice. This is what I have done, very perfunctorily, with 'Job History', and what Jacobs has done, more carefully, with the scene from *Middlemarch*.

The picture I've just painted of critical impotence may be an exaggeration, and certainly the work of ethical critics does much to inspire confidence in the powers of criticism. One literary critic who took up the challenge of articulating the moral-philosophical significance of literature's unique life-likeness[55] was S.L. Goldberg. In his *Agents and Lives*, Goldberg suggests a distinction between 'conduct-morality' and 'life-morality' as a way of understanding the limitations of certain moral-philosophical approaches and indeed of the conception of moral thought that dominates much cultural discourse, including literary criticism. Goldberg's title is a statement of this distinction: humans may be moral agents, but any moral understanding of human action has to acknowledge that we are also each possessed of a personal history and future trajectory, that we are possessed of *lives*. One of the important differences, Goldberg says, between conduct-morality and life-morality is 'the generality of the main objects of attention.'

> The main object of conduct-morality can be specified quite satisfactorily in very general terms: it is this or that kind of action or conduct, a kind for which we have a general name, as performed at any time in any place by any moral agent – keeping promises, for example, or malice. The main object of life-morality, on the other hand, can usually be specified satisfactorily only with some reference to the particular historical, social, and cultural

[55] Or what I should perhaps, following James Wood, call 'lifeness', the quality of manifesting life rather than simply mimicking it (therefore distinct from verisimilitude or mimesis). See Wood's *How Fiction Works* (New York: Picador, 2008), especially the concluding section.

> conditions that make it a unitary mode of life rather than a mere sequence of actions and events: it is such and such a life lived within these or those particular social institutions, practices, beliefs and attitudes, for example, and within these or those personal, sexual and familial relationships.[56]

Goldberg is challenging those philosophers, and other commentators on ethical matters, who place a disproportionate emphasis on 'mere sequence[s] of actions and events' and neglect to consider the particular contexts that might give meaning to those actions and events.[57] In fact, according to Goldberg, the question 'What place should conduct-morality have in a life?' is a life-moral question, along with questions such as 'How many various possibilities of life can this or that person realize without disintegrating; how few without withering? How is a moral self to be located among all its possibilities of life, those realized and those that remain partly or entirely unrealized?'[58] It is these sorts of questions, life-moral questions, which are routinely ignored in much moral discourse, and it is the more generally specifiable conduct-moral questions which come to dominate moral discourse. Goldberg does not argue in response to this that conduct-moral questions should be discarded in favour of life-moral questions. 'Any actual conduct-morality', he says 'is (to say the least) likely to have implications for life-morality, and vice versa…And it hardly needs saying that for most of us both kinds of morality are necessary.'[59] But it is also the case that conduct-moral questions can often

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[56] Goldberg. *Agents and Lives*. New York: Cambridge, 1993. pp.42-43.

[57] These are the people – professionals and laymen – who, according to Goldberg, 'try to reduce moral judgements – of situations, or people, or books, or whatever – as far as possible to some *other* kind of judging that makes them feel less uncomfortable. They try to turn judging moral issues into something like judging heights, for example, or (to take various other kinds of judging) something like judging horse-races, or gymnasts, or Persian cats, or washing-machines, or wines, or cricketers, or legal actions – that is, any other kind of judging that involves certain (either more or less) specifiable, 'objective' criteria and is capable of some (either more or less) definite and (either more or less) authoritative decision.' (*Agents and Lives*, p.8).

[58] Ibid, p.43.

[59] Ibid, p.44.

be better understood when reconfigured as life-moral questions or when understood in relation to the life-moral issues upon which they are dependent for their intelligible articulation. In such instances 'our basic problem,' Goldberg says, 'is to form a moral judgement that answers to the *inter-relatedness* of all the features and aspects of the object being judged.'[60]

> Many of the things we make moral judgements about are of this kind: not just states of affairs (like a lovers' morning after, or a family crisis, for example), but the state of a society, or a political system, or a religion, or a culture, or a moral code, or a philosophical 'stance' (like Bentham's [for instance]), or an individual's entire life, or his or her distinctive mode of life.[61]

Goldberg shares with Iris Murdoch, among other things, the view that it is sometimes necessary to (that life sometimes demands that we) adopt a holistic rather than an atomistic picture of moral thought, and, further, that the necessity of such a view is traceable to the pervasiveness of the moral, the tendency of our moral concerns to be implicated in any and every facet of our lives because morality is, although often intelligible in more general and abstract terms, ultimately and sometimes irreducibly the expression of the totality of lived particulars that constitutes each person's life. Hence the term 'life-morality.'

The upshot of Goldberg's analysis is that literary criticism that has tried to answer to the moral character of literary works has often failed to appreciate the life-moral. Indeed, novelists who have made a point of moralising[62] through their novels have also tended to focus on the conduct-moral at the expense of the life-moral. Even those philosophers and novelists who emphasise 'character' over moral problem-solving, and who therefore offer a broadly virtue ethicist account of morality, one which stresses the cultivation of personal excellences rather than the application of some form of moral calculus, remain confined to generalised conduct-moral questions, questions which necessarily avoid implicating the irreducibly particular features of a life or the moral shape of things in their inter-

[60] Goldberg, op. cit., p.50, emphasis in original.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Being *moralists* but not necessarily *moralisers*. See n45.

relatedness. A virtue ethical approach is often realised, Goldberg claims, through treating particular character traits of an individual as examples or exemplifications of a generally specifiable concept (say, courage). And the reliance on examples is as problematic in the discussion of events as it is in the discussion of persons.

> In examples, the essential features of a situation are pre-selected for us; these are taken to be fully described for all relevant purposes by a certain set of general terms; and everything else is brushed away with a *ceteris paribus*...One [difficulty with this] is the assumption that it is always possible, theoretically at least, to treat moral predicaments [for instance] in this way without their losing some of the essential features that make them predicaments at all.[63]

That which makes a situation (or a behaviour or an attitude or whatever) an object of moral significance may be beyond the reach of abstraction and generalisation. Herein lies the unique ethical power of literature. The concrete and the particular seem to be available to literature as they are not to other art forms or disciplines of enquiry.[64]

> [Literature] provides a form in which moral issues can be thought about more adequately because they can be thought about not only in general terms, but also concretely, in the given particulars. As well as conceiving, analysing, and judging human beings in terms of 'the universal', literature can also take their uniqueness as part of their essential nature as human beings. It does not merely tell us about them as complex cases or examples, even though the philosophic mind finds it difficult to see literature or talk about it in any other terms. But such literature does something else besides: it presents human beings immediately in the very activity and flow of life, 'renders' them dynamically, as specific moral lives. It's thinking about them therefore has to consist in particulars – particulars that make moral sense, not

[63] Goldberg, op. cit., p.173.

[64] A compelling argument could be made for cinema's access to the concrete and the particular, but I'd still want to insist that the conventions of the literary tradition, especially its strategies for rendering diverse forms of consciousness, afford a superior level of access.

> inasmuch as they merely instantiate 'the universal' by 'representing' it, as Aristotle supposed, but inasmuch as they *manifest*, in a unique 'history', a human life. [65]

If Goldberg's claim stopped there – if all he had to say was that literature *acts as a form of moral thinking*, one that is uniquely capable of acknowledging the essential particularity, even uniqueness, of human lives because (and this is what makes it a different *form* of moral thinking from moral philosophy) its exploration of moral thoughts *consists in particulars* – then he would still be making a radical, discipline-defining claim. But Goldberg goes further, following the thought to its conclusion:

> To see the particulars as manifesting a human life involves grasping their internal coherence, which means the range over which, and the depth at which, they cohere – it involves 'making sense' of them, that is, in relation to other possible ways of being alive. Doing that…is necessarily a process both of moral understanding and moral evaluation.[66]

Recognising literature as a form of moral thinking, and recognising the particular moral thoughts that a literary work advances, pursues, entertains, interrogates, or what have you, necessarily involves engaging our moral selves, discovering new moral truths or forming new moral convictions about oneself and the world. So reading is an inherently moral task, if we are doing it properly. Merely noticing the coherences of a fictional life involves employing moral faculties, faculties that include a sense of what is possible in a human life and of the variety of forms a life could take, as well as a sense of how those forms compare with and impinge upon each other and an (at least implicit) appreciation that individual uniqueness is an essential feature of the human. These moral faculties or sensibilities aren't reducible to the decision procedures that might inform moral conduct, and neither are they reducible to the rubric of virtue and vice by which moral flourishing (in the Aristotelian

[65] Goldberg, op. cit., pp.173-174, emphasis in original.

[66] Ibid, p.174.

sense) is judged.[67] But they are indispensable when it comes to reading fictional characters as manifestations of human lives.

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Goldberg's dichotomy presents richer possibilities than those dichotomies that haunt most foundational debates in literary criticism (or have done in recent decades). The institutional hegemony of critical theory – what the editors of one volume have called 'Theory's Empire' – has waned enough in the previous two decades for its opponents to establish the anti-Theory polemic as a cottage industry in its own right.[68] These polemics tend to follow a pattern: against the 'constructivist antihumanism'[69] of orthodox critical theory, a return to some version of liberal humanism is championed. The humanists often, quite rightly I think, point to the abandonment of any substantive notion of the individual subject as betraying the incoherence of the constructivists' avowed political project: How can any liberation be achieved if there is no intelligible sense of an individual who could be the subject of that liberation? How can slavery be lamented if the very possibility of meaningful individual agency is simultaneously denied? If all consciousness becomes false consciousness, then what is left to be restored by the revolutionary? No doubt there are compelling answers to these questions that involve various rationalisations and renovations of familiar utopianisms. Humanists, whether avowedly liberal or not, are surely right to challenge these enduringly fashionable dogmas. But too often the humanists rely upon simply restating the necessity of at least a small measure of individualism. The rational agent, morally claimed by the world in the choices it presents him with, is,

[67] In Goldberg's analysis, Aristotelian flourishing (or *Eudaimonia*) is another conduct-oriented notion, a feature of an exclusively conduct-moral picture of morality.

[68] Richard Eldridge offers an admirably restrained version of the increasingly common objection to Theory: 'close reading in appreciation of figuration, emotion, and emplotment…does not take place as often as it used to, and…this form of attention is discredited in many advanced journals and books not only as a private enthusiasm but also as a supposedly naive form of regression.' (Eldridge, Richard. Review of 'Contending with Stanley Cavell' *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*.https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/contending-with-stanley-cavell/).

[69] The term is Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller's.

as far as the humanists are concerned, the crucial feature which is absent from the constructivist account and whose absence renders that account incoherent, untenable. But this misses out on the fuller picture of human moral life that is necessary for the proper appreciation of works of literature in their ethical dimension. The humanist's view is a view that raises an important objection to the constructivist project but which also delineates the realm of moral concern far too narrowly to be capable of offering a viable alternative model of literature's ethical significance.

Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller remark that 'if the doctrinaire Marxists were right in their denial of the self as agent, they must be wrong in recommending and prescribing revolutionary struggle. Only individual agents can be expected to accept and enact such recommendations in the face of the massive pressures of the society into which they have been inducted.'[70] It would be very difficult to deny that in recent decades literary study was almost wholly colonised by proponents of either Marxist historico-cultural constructivism or (post-)Saussurean linguistic constructivism, or a hybrid of the two. It is satisfying to see critics determined to point out the contradictions inherent in these brands of liberationist anti-humanism. Elsewhere Freadman and Miller offer a more forceful version of their critique, and make clear that it is not only a denial of the individual but a denial of morality which lies at the heart of constructivist literary theory.

> The desire to transform society involves a further contradiction in the constructivist anti-humanist project, for the project entails a politics of emancipation directed at the achievement of freedom, equality, creative labour and so on – things that are in conflict with the official denial of moral discourse and the moral agent. Herein, indeed, lies one of the massive and so

[70] Freadman and Miller, 'The Power and Limits of Literary Theory' in *Theory's Empire*. Corrall, Wilfredo & Daphne Patai eds. New York: Columbia UP, 2009. p.89. One Marxist who grapples directly with this notion is Terry Eagleton. He argues at length in his excoriating book *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996) that postmodernism is completely incompatible with classical Marxism, and hilariously dismantles the central tenets of postmodern scholarship. One would like to think that one can benefit from his robust case for humanism without endorsing his socialism, however carefully reasoned and passionately held the latter may be.

> far insufficiently noted contradictions in the recent and widespread attempts to politicise the theory and practice of literary studies. It amounts to [a] kind of anti-humanism against itself, in which political change is required to achieve ends that correspond to values that, at another level of theorising, have been renounced.[71]

It is significant that even when emphasising the fact that critical theory has routinely denied the possibility of meaningful moral discourse, Freadman and Miller insist upon repeating that it is 'the moral agent' that critical theorists fail, at the cost of self-contradiction, to acknowledge. Freadman and Miller go on to offer assurances that their 'humanist conception…is a version neither of the atomistic bourgeois self nor of the socially constructed self of avant-garde theory.'[72] Even so, in repeatedly emphasising the importance of the moral agent they appear to remain committed to an exclusively conduct-moral picture of morality, while I would suggest that the constructivists they target are insufficiently alert to the conduct-moral and thereby fail also to appreciate more than a very narrow range of life-moral considerations. The constructivists have eyes only for those life-moral considerations that can be readily recognised as pertinent to radical politics (considerations relating to race, class, and gender, all broadly construed). Crucially, constructivists ignore the life-moral questions *about conduct-morality* that Goldberg considered so important.

Having been colleagues of Goldberg's, it seems likely that Freadman and Miller would be willing to admit that what they call 'reading for the ethical' is more complicated and more intrinsic to the task of reading than their study accounts for, indeed that a truly humanist literary criticism demands exactly the kind of rich ethical model of reading that Goldberg constructs.[73] Without the essential distinction between (a) morality as claiming moral agents in their actions and interactions and (b) morality as the medium in which each and every human life is always lived (a medium invariably tinged with the separate colours of whatever things it holds), any insistence on the reality of the morally responsible and responsive individual will be at best an incomplete picture of our human

[71] Freadman and Miller. *Re-Thinking Theory*. Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p.70.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Freadman and Miller's *Re-Thinking Theory* was published in 1992, Goldberg's *Agents and Lives* in 1993.

moral reality, an accurate but small snapshot of the manifest truth of particular, unique and multiplicitous modes of life.[74]

One of the things that Goldberg's distinction between conduct-morality and life-morality allows us to appreciate (something that seems only to be appreciated in the most politically charged and philosophically superficial terms[75] by constructivist literary theorists) is that the terms in which we describe the world are complicit in our evaluations of the world. This is another area in which Goldberg follows Iris Murdoch.[76] An interesting implication of this, brought out by both Goldberg and Murdoch, is that not only do our conceptions of things shape our moral understandings and judgements, they also simultaneously *express* a morality (in Goldberg's terms, a life-morality).

> [W]hat we choose as the salient characteristics of a mode of life, for example, or what we decide is its 'essence' or 'spirit' or 'soul', and how we describe it, are themselves major parts

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[74] It's easy to be derisive of individualism, and I have undoubtedly caricatured the issue in my treatment of it, so let John Dewey have the last word on individualism; what justice there is in scorning it as well as what truth there is in it:

> We can't help being individual selves, each one of us. If selfhood as such is a bad thing, the blame lies not with the self but with the universe, with providence. But in fact the distinction between a selfishness with which we find fault and an unselfishness which we esteem is found in the quality of the activities which proceed from and enter into the self, according as they are contractive, exclusive, or expansive, outreaching. Meaning exists for some self, but this truistic fact doesn't fix the quality of any particular meaning. It may be such as to make the self small, or such as to exalt and dignify the self. It is as impertinent to decry the worth of experience because it is connected with a self as it is fantastic to idealize personality just as personality aside from the question what sort of a person one is. (Dewey. 'Morals and Conduct' in Commins, Saxe and Robert N. Linscott eds. *Man and Man: The Social Philosophers*. New York: Random House, 1947. p.459).

Dewey, it seems to me, manages here to capture a sense of the essential distinction I mentioned.

[75] i.e. is only appreciated in vulgar Marxist terms...

[76] See especially Murdoch's 'Vision and Choice in Morality' and Cora Diamond's '"We are Perpetually Moralists": Iris Murdoch on Fact and Value.'

> of our judgement. The very terms of our description and analysis are often what are decisive in our thinking and judgement, and therefore most contestable. Nor can we decide in advance what considerations will or will not enter into our thinking and judgement. The process may well engage our psychological conceptions, and metaphysical ones, and social, cultural, anthropological, political, religious ones and so on; it will certainly engage our conduct-moral ones; and in addition to all these, it will quite directly engage our conceptions of how all these are inter-related. Our judgement, embracing (as it must) many if not all of these, and directed at an object conceived as also morally indivisible, cannot but express a life-morality.[77]

Encountering and judging a mode of life, which is what we always do when we read a piece of narrative fiction, is an ineluctably moral activity, both because it engages the very same capacities of judgement (or levels of understanding) that are always engaged in our moral transactions[78] and because it thereby reveals the personal structure of an individual's judgement, a structure which, if you follow Goldberg (and really Murdoch too), is most lucidly understood as constitutive of a life-morality.

[77] Goldberg, op. cit., pp.50-51.

[78] Obviously an inadequate term, given its mercenary connotations, but it at least captures the essentially relational character of morality.

Acting and Acting

Cecilia Tallis is no Connie Chatterley, and gardener Turner is no gamekeeper Mellors. Briony, then, is no Mervyn Griffith-Jones, representative of the prosecution and enemy of obscenity. We are not being invited to relive (and reassure ourselves of the vindication of) the lifting of the Chatterley ban. What I mean is: prudishness as a stifling social convention is not the devil Briony abets when she falsely accuses Robbie.

We might think lingering Edwardian sexual *mores* are being targeted for critique, since it's obvious that Cecilia and Robbie are forced to tip-toe around their sexual attraction to one another, even to the extent that they fail to be fully conscious of it themselves. Convention forces them both into certain roles, forces them to put on an act. But it would be easy to overstate how much this inhibits them. Their act is a barely sublimated expression of their attraction, and does more to provide opportunities to air the enticing possibility of transgression than to manifest any credible threat of stigma. Their act of respectability and restraint is effectively a prelude to the act of love.

If sex really is, for us moderns (us bourgeois Westerners), 'an object of great suspicion; the general and disquieting meaning that pervades our conduct and our existence, in spite of ourselves; the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us; the fragment of darkness that we each carry within us: a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends',[79] then how perfectly unsurprising is Briony's disastrous disorientation after encountering it consciously for the first time.

[79] Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, London: Penguin, 2008 [1976]. p.69. Foucault is voicing here a vision of sex, or at least of the societal significance of sex, that I for some reason suspect Ian McEwan would largely agree with.

Briony could still be an instrument of repressive convention despite failing to comprehend exactly how Robbie and Cecilia have violated conventional norms; it's enough that Briony acts in such a way as to reinforce those norms and credulously accepts the conventional account of virtue she encounters in her favourite stories. Likewise, she could still be an instrument of fascism despite presumably being completely ignorant of fascist politics; it's enough that she is motivated to act by vaguely the same kind of impulses that explain the appeal of that kind of politics. But what would be the point of noting such flimsy correspondences? It casts light neither on Briony's actions nor on the logic behind the cultural enactment of those dangerous ideas that her ideas incidentally resemble.

Briony is an embodiment neither of prudocracy nor autocracy. She is neither a patriarchal patsy nor a totalitarian tool. She is a girl determined to be good, and determined to honour her blossoming talents.

Briony's determination to be good and her determination to honour her blossoming talents are two moral impulses (that is, not immoral impulses) set upon a collision course. Robbie and Cecilia, and in a different way Lola, will be the collateral victims of that collision.

In the film adaptation of *Atonement*, there is no scene in which Briony watches her finger and wills it to twitch and marvels at the apparent gap between her willing it and its twitching. Instead we have Briony being drawn to the window by a bee buzzing against the pane. Briony's precocious and expanding powers of introspection are alluded to in this act of her regard falling squarely on a tiny, uncomprehending creature. She seems to consider with puzzlement the presence of will implied by the insect's capacity to be thwarted by something beyond its understanding. What is lost here, with the (understandable, given the limitations of film, and, on reflection, really quite ingenious) substitution of the bee for Briony's finger, is the directness and simplicity of the emergence of a key

theme, that of *action*, action as something that relates problematically to subjectivity and thus invites scepticism about the authenticity of any experience that isn't one's own, isn't experienced from the inside, as it were. One also, relatedly, loses the elegance of connecting action with the theme of acting, a theme which bookends this moment, being present both in the play that Briony is on a break from rehearsing, and in the scene between Robbie and Cecilia that she then sees play out, sees them act out, through the window.

Witnessing an indiscreet sexual liaison leads a brooding youngster to resolve upon decisive action, but a concatenation of circumstances renders that action destructive beyond all proportion, and reveals the feebleness of the moral understanding seen as sanctioning that action. I am talking about *Hamlet*.

Like the Prince of Denmark, Briony's dawning (but still radically unsatisfactory) understanding of the complex relationship between semblance and reality, and between fiction and truth, is bound up in the staging of a play. Her chronology doesn't quite match his. He requires the play to be staged before he can attain moral certainty. The staging of the play proves to him that a fiction can faithfully model reality, can precisely picture human perfidy and, by a cunning correspondence and careful presentation, reveal hidden sins. She only sees her play, *The Trials of Arabella*, staged at the very end of her moral journey, when the actions motivated by her naïve certainty have taken their full, irrevocable effect, and she has had to resort to deploying her talents, those same talents she deployed in embryonic form in the crafting of that play, as her last hope of atoning for the destruction she has wrought. She destroyed the possibility of a love flourishing, and cast two innocents upon the mercies of a hostile world. Hamlet, arguably, destroys one innocent life. A damsel drowns and he is not there, was never there, to save her. Briony first plays the drowning damsel herself (throwing herself into a river to prompt Robbie to dive in and save her [pp.229-231]), and she sees Robbie's act of rescuing her as vindication of her act and the chivalric logic behind it. Then she sees another damsel immerse herself before the poised hero, but this performance runs all out of order, with the wound-be hero

merely watching on, and this scrambles the chivalric logic in Briony's mind (just as Hamlet scrambles the revenge-play logic to which convention would expect he be bound). Briony learns then that the customs surrounding sexual interaction, customs that her culture has communicated to her with an authority she could not even have thought of questioning, are as affected as despair over Hecuba. But, more significantly, Briony sees, as Hamlet does, that that affectation is an indictment of her own responses, and sees that it calls her to a more authentic engagement with the reality of female vulnerability and male vice.

Both Briony and Hamlet recognise the intimate connection between the questions 'To be or not to be?' and 'To act or not to act?' And both come to see that the good of an action, and the truth in it, have to be judged by the distance between that action and its fictional semblance, but also, crucially, that sometimes proximity to fiction is not the indictment it otherwise would be. Briony learns to act out that ambiguity (through giving Robbie and Cecilia life – more life, a life together – in her fiction) as a way of reconciling her guilt about what she has done with the pivotal role her terrible actions played in making her the woman and the writer she has become.

Hamlet ends with a senseless bloodbath, a kind of cavalcade of murder. *Atonement*, by contrast, ends with a gentle resignation to the fact of mortality. This difference speaks to a larger divergence of purpose. *Hamlet* is, from one angle, about how the weighty stuff of convention, its violation or its misapprehension or both, can transform life into a headlong rush to extinction. *Atonement* is about how the slippery stuff of convention, which can propel us towards disastrous error, is also the only tool we have for wresting any meaning from our errors, the best resource for exploring the perilous terrain of morality and forging some tractable path. In *Hamlet* we end with a whole family lying slain. In *Atonement* we end with a whole family gathered to celebrate an elderly family member's birthday, and with young children literally acting out their likeness to the generation of their great-grandparents. In both, though, we see the structures that are habitually imposed upon our apprehension of morality

contextualised within, and in some sense subordinated to, the active sense of life that particular individuals carry with them and that constitutes them as moral beings. Whether human life is regarded unrelentingly in its alienated and destructive aspects or those aspects are instead contextualised within an ultimately celebratory picture of the powers of the imagination, whether the tragedy is truly consummated or mercifully adulterated, life emerges either way to challenge the complacent formulas we vainly concoct in the hope of making morality a simple matter.

Relationality and the Problem of Translation

Loneliness and Enunciation in Housekeeping

In *The Sovereignty of Good* Iris Murdoch asks her reader to imagine a moral transformation that is entirely private, a profound change of attitude which is not in any way publicly disclosed. She describes a mother who has judged her daughter-in-law to be 'lacking in dignity and refinement…brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile.' The mother-in-law (M) maintains an unfailingly polite demeanour towards her daughter-in-law (D), 'not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way.' Although D's behaviour does not change, M, after reflecting on her own capacity for prejudice, snobbery, and narrow-mindedness, reappraises D. Where first M saw vulgarity she now sees refreshing simplicity. She realises that D is 'not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful,' and, given M's previous impeccable demeanour, acting on this realisation produces no perceptible change in M's behaviour.[80]

With this example Murdoch is doing (on a far smaller scale and with much less creative exertion) just what she attempted to do in her novels: expanding her reader's conception of what is morally possible through an act of creative imagination. In aspiring to do this, Murdoch's novels simply aspire to be good literature, for all good literature (according to Murdoch's own philosophy) is by its nature engaged in this task of moral expansion. One of the central themes of Murdoch's moral philosophy is that literature has a unique power to explore the moral life. Art generally is 'a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*,'[81] and the good writer is 'the just, intelligent judge.'[82] There is a close connection between: the idea of seeing and judging justly and intelligently; the moral significance of each person's particular idiosyncratic conception of their world; and the ability of literature to bring to light new regions of moral possibility. If Murdoch's example of M and D is persuasive, then that is because the means of expressing the thought are in harmony with the thought itself. That we are capable of profound change entirely within the privacy of our own consciousness is

[80] Murdoch. *The Sovereignty of* Good. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970. pp.17-18.

[81] Ibid, pp.87-88, emphasis in original.

[82] Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p.28.

a notion that, while discomfiting for many philosophers (since they regard morality as solely about public acts), is surely perfectly unobjectionable to most novelists. For novelists (and other artists), judging justly and intelligently is a matter of imagining clearly, with an imagination unclouded by cliché, sentimentality, cynicism, and all other varieties of self-deception.

What's striking about the M and D example is what it implies about M's inner life. Anyone who has felt that there is a vast gap separating their true self from their public persona, anyone who believes that who they are in society is other (and less) than who they are in solitude, will likely find some powerful affinity with the situation Murdoch describes. Those same people will also likely be drawn instinctively towards novels as a natural source of affirmation and solace.

The engagement Murdoch prompts with her imaginative illustration is the very same kind of engagement upon which the unique power of the novelistic form rests. Properly judging a literary achievement often involves at least implicitly recognising the relationship between the particular merits of the novelistic form and the essential moral truth of (for want of a better phrase) the irreducible singularity of each person. This relationship is startlingly and sublimely realised in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.

Housekeeping is a kind of *Bildungsroman*, though a strange and subversive one. It begins looking like an eccentric family chronicle. It ends looking more like a dream journal. It contains passages of sublime lyricism, phantasmagorical imagery, and perceptive theological speculation (sometimes all at once).

Sisters Ruth and Lucille grow up in the wintry rural town of Fingerbone, Idaho, a town huddled on the shore of a huge and mysterious lake. Their grandfather, an amateur painter of gaudy Edenic landscapes, died (long before they were born) when the train on which he worked as 'a watchman, or perhaps a signalman' (p.5) derailed crossing the bridge over the lake. Ruth and Lucille were effectively orphaned when their mother (separated from their father, of whom the girls know almost nothing) drove her car into the lake from the top of a cliff, joining her father in silent sleep on the unreachable lake bed (or so Ruth thinks of her mother's suicide). The sisters are raised first by their grandmother, then, when one morning after five years of caring for them she 'eschewed awakening' (p.29), briefly by their grandmother's sisters-in-law, until their aunt Sylvie arrives to care

for them, bringing to this task the eccentric habits of her life as a drifter. The girls are, if not social outcasts, certainly misfits. They have no friends at school, and for a time they find themselves skipping school to spend long, dull, aimless days on the shore of the lake, afraid of the painful social scrutiny their misfit status and their aunt's eccentricities will call down on them. Sylvie never cleans the house, sleeps in her clothes, likes to serve dinner in darkness, collects tin cans and old newspapers, and distractedly wanders the streets of Fingerbone, attracting the attention of neighbourhood dogs. She doesn't even think to discipline the girls for their truancy when she learns of it. The sisters are upset by their aunt's strangeness, Lucille more so than Ruth. They find Sylvie sleeping on a park bench in the middle of town, a spectacle that leaves Lucille 'white with chagrin' (p.105) and soon sends her running home.

One day Ruth and Lucille are out by the lake too long, miles from home, and, as night falls, scared of travelling through the 'black woods' or along the 'difficult shore,' they construct a ramshackle shelter from stones and driftwood and settle into this 'ruined stronghold,…never accepting that all our human boundaries were overrun' (p.115). As dawn slowly breaks they make their way home, tired and disturbed by a night of tense wakefulness and (for Ruth at least) morbid contemplations. They find Sylvie waiting for them, but she is not anxious or angry and has not reported their absence to anyone. She makes a joke when Lucille asks if she knows where they spent the night. Following this incident, Lucille makes every effort to distance herself from Sylvie and her way of life. She immediately takes Ruth into town with her 'to buy setting gel and nail polish' (p.121) and to seek out conversations with normal people. When Ruth says she wants to return home, Lucille warns her against it, saying, "That's *Sylvie's* house now" (p.123). Lucille takes up sewing, fills her diary with lists of exercises and lessons in etiquette ('PASS TO THE LEFT. REMOVE FROM THE RIGHT'), and eventually moves in with her Home Economics teacher. 'In effect,' Ruth reflects, '[Lucille's teacher] adopted her, and I had no sister after that night' (p.140).

A day later Sylvie takes Ruth, in a stolen rowboat, across the lake to a secluded valley, site of a collapsed house and a stunted orchard. Sylvie believes children live wild in the woods nearby, though she has never seen them. Sylvie leaves Ruth alone in the valley as the sun comes out to make its every frosted surface gleam. Hours pass and Ruth finds herself alone and cold and confronting for

the first time her loneliness and her longing for her dead mother. Sylvie returns and rows them out onto the lake, under the railway bridge, where they spend the night waiting for the train to pass overhead, Ruth's thoughts turning to strange memories and dreams. In the morning they row ashore and hitch a ride into town on the next train. They wander back home through Fingerbone, attracting the notice of the townsfolk. In the following weeks the sheriff pays them several visits, as do a number of well-meaning women bearing cakes and casseroles and offers of help around the house. When the townspeople learn of the night spent on the lake, Sylvie is informed that she must appear before a custody hearing. It becomes clear that Ruth will be taken away from Sylvie. In a moment of desperation, Ruth and Sylvie set fire to the house and, despite the obvious peril, take flight across the railway bridge. They are presumed to have fallen to their deaths in the lake, and they take up together the life that Sylvie had before, drifting across America like ghosts.

Ruth narrates *Housekeeping* from an indeterminate point beyond the events of the narrative. 'It happened many years ago,' is the most Ruth tells us (p.213). Only in the novel's final pages do we learn that she is now living as a drifter, looking back on a life that she has since irrevocably renounced, a settled life of collusion (albeit reluctant) with society's expectations and demands. Though there is some question as to whether Ruth's brief and vague account of her life as a drifter is reliable. It has been suggested, quite plausibly, that she may be narrating from beyond the grave, she and Sylvie having fallen to their deaths in the lake just as reported in the Fingerbone newspaper. Whether Ruth and Sylvie's deaths are literal or merely 'social deaths,'[83] the narrative ends with both of them decisively expelled from the social world of Fingerbone and the conformist culture it represents. An end to their mortal lives, while possessed of other powerful narrative resonances, functions just the same as an end to their social lives where their separation from society is concerned. And Carolyn Allen is surely right when she comments that 'part of what gives the novel its lyrical

[83] As Christine Caver suggests: 'Nothing Left to Lose: *Housekeeping*'s Strange Freedoms.' *American Literature*. 68:1. (March, 1996). pp.111-137.

power is the introspective quality of Ruth's voice, not the "place" from which it comes.'[84] That introspective quality and its moral-philosophical implications are what I shall be attempting to elucidate.

Ruth's story is in many respects a story of loss, as she acknowledges in her numerous ruminations on deprivation and death. Her fascination with these subjects is a means of recognising her own separateness. Her imaginative and entirely private exploration of what these concepts mean for her comes to structure her identity in ways that protect her (though she does not seem to realise it) from the false consolations of society to which her sister eventually succumbs. Ruth's journey to adulthood is a journey into the depths of herself, because it is a journey that involves reconciling herself to the mysteries of her own past and to the ultimate mystery of death. Achieving that reconciliation involves confronting those mysteries, as Lucille, once fully converted to the cultural orthodoxy, undoubtedly cannot.

But *Housekeeping* does not simply contrast a free-spirited, authentic, radically feminine way of life, embodied by Sylvie and Ruth, against a conformist, confected, conservatively patriarchal way of life, embodied by Lucille (as she is at the close of the narrative) and the traditional authority figures to whom she submits – the matronly Home Economics teacher, the patronising sheriff, the cruelly condescending school principal. This contrast is certainly at play in the novel, and it highlights the political dimension of Ruth's recognition of her separateness from those around her. The few scenes in which Ruth and Lucille are shown interacting with other townspeople, or attempting to shield Sylvie from such interactions, or simply suffering through the embarrassment of Sylvie's contact with normal folk, undeniably establish the conventional culture of Fingerbone, and the various civic institutions that sustain it, as antagonistic towards Sylvie's distinctly unconventional lifestyle – an antagonism that is fully realised in the separate fates of Ruth and Lucille. Much of *Housekeeping*, however, is concerned less with this political dynamic than with describing the phenomenological dimension of Ruth's separateness.

[84] Allen. 'The Privilege of Loneliness, the Kindness of Home: "Felt Experience" in the Writing of Marilynne Robinson' in Stevens, Jason ed. *This Life, This* World. Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016. p.194, n6.

[85] Robinson has commented on the idea of loneliness, describing loneliness as 'a radical experience of self. Or soul. A great privilege, and a way to learn about humanity at the closest possible range.'[86] Loneliness is a major theme of all of Robinson's novels. But perhaps the meaning of the word stands in need of clarification, and to that end it seems helpful to contrast loneliness and solitude.[87] In ordinary usage, loneliness carries negative connotations. The first definition listed when I type 'define loneliness' into my search engine is 'A feeling of depression resulting from being alone.' The simple answer to the interviewer's question which prompted Robinson's reflections on loneliness – 'Why do you think that we have come to pathologize loneliness?' – is that the word 'loneliness', in ordinary usage, describes a pathological state, or at least a definitely undesirable state. Enter 'define solitude' and I get: 'The state or quality of being alone or remote from others.' It seems fair to say that what Robinson and many of her interpreters mean when they speak of loneliness is something closer to the idea of solitude. But I think there is good reason for Robinson's use of "loneliness." First of all, she and her interpreters are obviously concerned with revising a common conception of the experience of being alone, making their readers aware of the goods which might be involved in such experience where normally all that is considered is the psychological cost. Making use of a term the common construal of which runs counter to the conception one wishes to encourage is clearly a convenient way of presenting such a revision. In other words, saying "loneliness" rather

[85] This is only the fourth definition in the OED, but I'm appealing to popular usage so the more vulgar source seems the more reputable one on this score.

[86] Quoted in Stevens. 'An Interview with Marilynne Robinson.' *This World, This Life: New Essays on Marilynne Robinson's* Housekeeping, Gilead, *and* Home. Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016. p.255.

[87] It is interesting to note that in *Gilead*, Reverend John Ames at one point says, speaking of his time spent alone preparing sermons, 'I don't know why solitude would be a balm for loneliness, but that is how it always was for me' (p.21). He goes on to say, 'There was more to it, of course. For me writing has always felt like praying…You feel that you are with someone.' This analogy with prayer, and what it implies about loneliness, could provide an interesting contrast to the view I will develop in this chapter regarding Robinson's conception of loneliness and its role in how someone lives out their faith.

than "solitude" draws attention to the novelty involved in treating the experience of regularly being alone as a positive one. More importantly, the negative emotions inherent in the experience of loneliness are fully present in Robinson's depictions of characters removed from meaningful human contact. When Robinson speaks of loneliness as a 'great privilege' I don't believe she means to empty the concept of its usual cargo of melancholy and misery. In fact, judging from the way the concept is employed in her fiction, it is only because the experience of loneliness is one of travail that it is capable of offering the lessons about humanity that Robinson sees it as offering.

And we may (or at least I'm going to) assume that a 'radical experience of self' is something quite different from the self-expunging or purgative asceticism that is implied by 'solitude.' We can also safely assume that it is not simply radical selfishness. A radical experience of self is one which is not self-abnegation nor self-absorption. What both of those alternatives preclude is any possibility of meaningful self-revelation. The ascetic declares it unnecessary and prefers the erasure of the self; the narcissist is impervious to it, locked within the comforting carapace of his ego. With the notion of revelation in mind it becomes clearer why the knowledge to be gained from loneliness must exact an emotional toll. In Robinson's own words, 'true, serious revelation' is 'the kind that terrifies.'[88]

The element of terror in Ruth's experience is sometimes obscured by the focus on her preservation of individuality compared to Lucille's capitulation to the dominant culture. Whether Ruth's narrative trajectory is really something we ought to applaud as a moral triumph has been seen by Christine Caver as a question too often ignored. She has pointedly questioned the critical tendency to view Ruth as succeeding where Lucille fails.

> Judging from the novel's critical reception, Ruth's response [to the trauma of losing her mother] – because it seems to signify freedom and choice – appears more desirable [than Lucille's response] to most readers. And yet, it exacts a price. While Lucille's adoption of a traditional female role appears more stifling, Ruth moves into a realm virtually claustrophobic in its limitations: she loses the ability to communicate with those around her. Lucille

[88] Quoted in Ravits, op. cit., p.646.

> maintains the illusion of a self by uncritically adopting the identity and voice of her community; Ruthie escapes the forces of conventionality but at the cost of a silenced voice and a disappearing body. Only the reader has access to her thoughts[89]…[B]y the novel's end Ruth is obsessed with images of death, coldness, and darkness that make claims about her "social fulfilment" especially dubious.[90]

Certainly one can overstate (and a number of critics have) the positive nature of Ruth's experience (and the deliberate contrast with Lucille is undoubtedly to blame for this). The experience of reading *Housekeeping* is decidedly not one of revelling in a young woman's triumph over the forces of conformity. Much of the long section comprising Ruth and Sylvie's night on the lake, and Ruth's abandonment in the valley in the preceding section, is shockingly harrowing. Caver is right to remind us of Ruth's morbid preoccupations, and to wonder whether 'identification with refugees from bourgeois society may hinder [readers'] noticing the disturbing consequences, according to *Housekeeping*, of the flight from community.'[91]

However, one can sympathise with Caver's insistence that Ruth's experience is overwhelmingly traumatic, and effectively disabling where Ruth's capacity for meaningful public communication is concerned, without denying that Ruth has had the privilege of a radical experience of self and gained access to the lessons about humanity that are the fruits of such experience. Caver distinguishes between 'Ruthie's two voices…the all-but-absent public one and the lyrical private one.' She calls Ruth's private voice, the voice that narrates *Housekeeping*, 'a message in a bottle, tossed out from some timeless past.'[92] The point here is to emphasise Ruth's story as rooted in trauma and its telling as an act of desperation from someone who has been otherwise silenced by suffering. The danger in placing this emphasis is that of ignoring the staggering achievement that is Ruth's recorded

[89] Caver, op. cit., p.112.

[90] Ibid, p.113.

[91] Ibid, p.114.

[92] Ibid, p.115.

narrative, with all of its lyrical power and spiritual insight. Ruth's suffering has to be measured against what it has wrought, namely the astonishing book in the reader's hands. What's more, there is a confidence and self-awareness in Ruth's narrative voice that belies the claim that she is simply damaged by her trials in and exile from Fingerbone. Caver discusses the 'paradox' of 'the eloquent representation of speechlessness' which she says Ruth resolves 'through a dual voiced narrative: she *writes* her family history by recording sophisticated and lyrical interior monologues yet is barely able to speak to those around her.'[93] It bears remembering that the Ruth who is barely able to speak to those around her is the same Ruth who records sophisticated and lyrical interior monologues; the two voices belong to the one character. This makes talk of a narrative paradox and its resolution seem slightly off-target. If there is a paradox, it is the paradox of Ruth's unspeakable yet spoken self. That is to say, the challenge is not just (and not primarily) a challenge for the logic of the novel's literary style. The challenge is understanding Ruth, who seems in so many ways a contradiction of herself – traumatised and eloquent, forthcoming and reserved, alive to reality and yearning for oblivion. At home in her loneliness and reaching out to the reader. Reading *Housekeeping* with something like Robinson's revisionist conception of loneliness in mind could help to reconcile these seemingly contradictory currents in Ruth's character.

Of course, Robinson's idea of loneliness might easily be given more weight than it can carry. When many people experience loneliness it has very little in common with the introspective melancholy that characterises Ruth's experience. It is rather a state of protracted resentment, a simmering bitterness that only occasionally resolves into a clear apprehension of one's alienation from everyone else, an apprehension which leads not to insight and quietude but to despair and desperation. This is the loneliness of Holden Caulfield. Holden's frequent denunciations of 'phoniness' throughout *The Catcher in the Rye* mark not only a yearning for authenticity but a sense of betrayal by a world which denies him genuine fellowship, and his dream of being the 'catcher' in the rye is as much an illustration of his yearning for some beneficent social role to play as it is of his protective instincts. How does Ruth's loneliness compare to Holden's? What possible similarity can

[93] Caver, op. cit., p.116, emphasis in original.

there be between the two? What Holden wants is a truly wholesome relationship, one untainted by sentimentality or conceit (phoniness, basically) and oriented around a noble goal, namely the preservation of innocence (hence catching the children). Ruth's desires obviously aren't opposed to this, but they are far more abstract and far more obliquely conveyed to the reader. We might say she wants to discover a way to live that will not involve erasing the memory of her mother, or the pain she inflicted when she took her life, but that still remains committed to responding imaginatively to the world and open to the possibility of genuine consolation. The challenge Ruth faces in fulfilling her desire is of the kind that can conceivably be met through introspection and private acts of moral imagination. Holden's challenge is not of this kind. His dream of being the catcher in the rye is an expression of his peculiar loneliness; it is not a resource that he might use to extract a valuable insight from his loneliness, as Ruth's dreams and imaginings are to her.

Perhaps the difference between Ruth's loneliness (more generally Robinson's positive conception of loneliness) and Holden's loneliness (more generally the prevailing angst-inflected conception of loneliness) is that between the masculine and feminine forms of an experience. Robinson might be once again revealing the limitations or distortions of a masculine description of a human experience in the light of a feminised redescription of that experience.[94] I suspect that this explanation is far too easy, deferring to a dichotomy where a richer picture is required, though the example of Holden Caulfield undoubtedly lends some credence to the thought, resolutely masculine as he is. In any case, any account of loneliness that regards it as a positive experience, as a 'great privilege' no less, will have to contend with the resentful, alienated (if you insist, masculine) conception of loneliness. To say of people like Holden Caulfield, 'What he experiences is not loneliness, it is just bitterness and resentment' would be to fail to account for what actually constitutes his particular bitterness and resentment (like saying a widow is distraught but refusing to call her experience 'grief'), and to call it 'alienation' would, it seems to me, be a mere semantic quibble.

[94] As I take it Martha Ravits regards Robinson as doing with the subject matter of American Romantic literature. See her 'Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.' *American Literature*. 61:4 (December, 1989). p.645.

Though I think this comparison picks out something important that any elaboration of Robinson's remarks on loneliness would need to address, it doesn't quite do justice to the picture of loneliness presented in *Housekeeping*, which occasionally involves Ruth's explicit theorising on the subject. For example, Ruth tells the reader

> Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house. Those outside can watch you if they want, but you need not see them. You simply say, "Here are the perimeters of our attention. If you prowl around under the windows till the crickets go silent, we will pull the shades. If you wish us to suffer your envious curiosity, you must permit us not to notice it." Anyone with one solid human bond is that smug, and it is the smugness as much as the comfort and safety that lonely people covet and admire. I had been, so to speak, turned out of house now long enough to have observed this in myself. (p.154)

This is the more mundane aspect of *Housekeeping*'s engagement with the idea of loneliness, and the point at which its significance for Ruth is most transparently displayed. From another angle, *Housekeeping* presents a conception of loneliness as a kind of existential challenge, an analogue or spiritual equivalent to death. This comes out in what I earlier described as Ruth's yearning for oblivion:

> Darkness is the only solvent. While it was dark, despite Lucille's pacing and whistling, and despite what must have been dreams (since even Sylvie came to haunt me), it seemed to me that there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track, or trace, if only the darkness could be perfect and permanent. (p.116)

Ruth's nihilism here, her literal embrace of nothingness as she 'let[s] the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in [her] skull and bowels and bones' (p.116), is an extreme manifestation of her state of separation from the human world. This seclusion is the closest Ruth can

come to knowing what it means for her mother to be gone from the world – or what being gone from the world means for her mother, which is just nothing. The total loneliness of this moment gives Ruth a sense of pure loss; it allows her to inhabit death as nearly as any living person can. So it is because of this deathlike character of loneliness that Ruth is able to recover some measure of solace from the experience of her mother's suicide. In her loneliness Ruth is confronted with the terrifying reality of death, and this experience enables her to construct an imaginative understanding of her mother's death, one which situates her particular loss (as a daughter mourning a mother; as *Ruth* mourning *Helen*) within a nascent theological conception of the operations of grace. In privately confronting the loss of her mother, Ruth posits what might be called a law of spiritual economy, whereby every loss exacted will ultimately be redeemed and every wound inflicted will ultimately be healed[95]:

> Imagine a Carthage sown with salt, and all the sowers gone, and the seeds lain however long in the earth, till there rose finally in vegetable profusion leaves and trees of rime and brine. What flowering would there be in such a garden? Light would force each salt calyx to open in prisms, and to fruit heavily with bright globes of water – peaches and grapes are little more than that, and where the world was salt there would be greater need of slaking. For need can blossom into all the compensations it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savours of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know anything so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing – the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again. Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel, fosters us, smooths our hair, and brings us wild strawberries. (pp.152-53)

[95] This is not exactly a theodicy because it does not point to the possibility of ultimate redemption in order to *justify* the wounding or deprivation that makes such redemption necessary.

The intimately personal nature of this final line is brought home to us when we recall what we were told earlier in the novel, that moments before her death Ruth and Lucille's mother was seen 'sitting cross-legged on the roof of the car…gazing at the lake and eating wild strawberries' (p.23).

Anthony Domestico, in reflecting on the passage above and those like it, passages that begin with a direction to the reader (usually 'Say that…' rather than 'Imagine…') followed by a richly detailed hypothetical scenario (Domestico labels them 'imperative hypotheses'), has suggested that

> the most striking characteristic of these passages [is] their imperative nature. And it is precisely this feature that helps turn Ruthie's hypotheses into stable points within the novel, moments where Ruthie and the reader jointly proclaim a truth that far exceeds any factual detail or historical record. They create a ground, a set of core beliefs, from which the rest of the world can be imagined jointly. In other words, they function as creeds.[96]

On Domestico's account, Ruth's triumph over nihilism rests upon the fact that she has learnt to see her world as a context for creedal affirmation. She has learnt to envision the world *through* the affirmation of personal creeds, and (crucially, for my point) she invites the reader to join her in affirming those creeds. Of all Robinson's novels *Housekeeping* is the least explicitly concerned with the life of faith and the theory and practice of the Christian religion, but it is nevertheless a book animated by a deeply religious sensibility, combining Old Testament allusions (most significantly to the stories of Noah,[97] Cain and Abel, and of course Ruth), biblical literary style (as in the matrilineage that opens the novel[98] and the persistent use of repetition and antiquated diction as lyrical devices), and an undaunted engagement with metaphysical concerns. All of these can be witnessed in the passage quoted above ('Imagine a Carthage…').

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[96] Domestico. ''Imagine a Carthage Sown with Salt': Creeds, Memory, and Vision in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.' *Literature and Theology*. 28:1 (March 2014) p.98.

[97] See here Sarah D. Hartshorne's 'Lake Fingerbone and Walden Pond: A Commentary on Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.' *Modern Language Studies*. 20:3 (Summer 1990). Especially pp.50-51.

[98] This feature is pointed out by Martha Ravits in her 'Extending the American Range' (p.645).

Domestico's thesis – that Ruth's 'imperative hypotheses' are to be considered as creeds – represents the most substantial effort so far made towards elucidating the full religious character of *Housekeeping*. It would be difficult to quarrel with his characterisation of Ruth's remarks as imperative hypotheses – the frequency and consistency of the remarks in question obviously constitute a deliberate narrative device, and they clearly begin with an imperative verb ('Say' or 'Imagine') and proceed to elaborate a hypothetical scenario (e.g. Ruth's grandmother hanging washing after her husband's death and being affected by memories of him in a reverie brought on by a gust of wind).[99] What might not be so easy to assent to is the further thought that this amounts to a kind of creed. Any first-person narrative will likely include moments of conjecture or even flights of fantasy amongst the usual flow of empirical and psychological reportage, but Robinson's method of entering into Ruth's imaginings has a peculiar effect. We as readers are compelled to participate in Ruth's acts of imagination and at the same time are made aware that we are being so compelled. Ruth is openly imploring the reader to declare along with her a vision of reality which is conceived out of hope, out of nothing more than the conviction that the world be suffused with the meaning that that vision captures. This is the sense in which Ruth's words become a creed. She is not making an empirical report or engaged in idle fancy, and she wants her words to mean even more than they would in the rhetorically heightened context of a parable or fable. Her desire to imbue her words and the particular vision they describe with maximal significance issues from the deepest reaches of her self, or soul. It comes from her need to make some meaning out of the loss she has suffered. The way she seeks to make meaning out of her loss is by declaring as a truth its inevitable redemption, the truth

[99] Although a different view of these passages is advanced by Paul Tyndall and Fred Ribkoff in their 'Loss, Longing, and the Optative Mode in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*: On the Spiritual Value of Ruth's Wandering Narrative' (*Renascence*. 66:2. Spring 2014), where they treat Ruth's imperatives as utterances in the 'optative mode' which function as a method of "contrastive and counterfactual self-reflection" (quoting Andrew H. Miller, p.88). This characterisation is also hard to fault, but Domestico's thesis strikes me as doing justice to the form and content of Ruth's imaginings, and harmonising with the religious aspects of the novel, in a way that Tyndall and Ribkoff's thesis simply cannot match.

that 'need can blossom into all the compensations it requires.' She knows that she wants the deaths in her life not to be victories for oblivion, wants her absent loved ones not to be proof of ultimate annihilation. She wants this with an unassuageable want, the kind that makes us say, with all seriousness, that we *need* this or that to happen. So she states this profound desire as truth, she makes it into a statement of faith. As Domestico puts it, '[the] bleeding of desire into fact, volition into epistemology, is precisely what Ruthie allows us to see. Ruthie is, to use her own words, giving voice to 'an act of faith'. She is, to use Christian terms, proclaiming a creed.'[100]

Other critics have noticed that Ruth is '[s]uspicious of facts and data, [and] places her faith in memories and dreams',[101] though this formulation makes it easy to be unsympathetic towards Ruth and treat her 'faith' as mere whimsy, as do the claims that '[Ruth's] boldness resides in the active power of imagination', and that she is 'a protagonist who sees the world feelingly; for she is a dreamer, a visionary…'[102] One may well question the wisdom of applauding a fantasist for her 'boldness' in the face of what a great many human beings sensibly concede to be real, however much it frustrates their desires. Should Ruth's suspicion of fact really be credited as the corollary of exceptional insight? One would not necessarily have to be an obtuse or overly rationalistic reader of *Housekeeping* to register such concerns over these interpretations. One would only need to believe that the Ruth who narrates *Housekeeping*, the Ruth who has been through all of the events described and now describes them with all the embroidery of her visionary faith, remains as damaged and disoriented as the character called 'I' who inhabits her pages. For the record, I don't believe that this view is, in the end, tenable, because of the lucidity of Ruth's narration and the presence within it of what I take to be authentic consolations. But the reason I raise that view is so as to address the fact that what could look like suspect rhetoric from those critics (including Domestico) who are in raptures over Ruth's disconnection from reality (as it is conventionally parcelled out in empirical facts) is

[100] Domestico, op. cit., p.101

[101] Barrett. 'The Ungraspable Phantom of Life: Incompletion and Abjection in *Moby-Dick* and *Housekeeping.*' *South Atlantic Review*. 73:3 (Summer 2008) p.2

[102] Ravits, op. cit., p.674

actually not rhetoric, not hyperbole or misplaced critical enthusiasm, but commentary supported by the text and in agreement with ideas voiced in other of Robinson's writings. On the antepenultimate page of *Housekeeping*, Ruth, drawing near the end of her narration, says of what has come before, 'All this is fact. Fact explains nothing. On the contrary, it is fact that requires explanation' (p.217). Discussing an essay by Robinson, Domestico concludes that '[Robinson] argues that there is a discernible difference [between facts and figurative language], and that figurative language is the truer of the two.'[103]

For those who take this faith-over-fact view seriously, the central action of the novel essentially involves Ruth choosing between a life lived in submission to the way things are – in the spiritually denuded space of conventional society – and a life lived in heroic pursuit of a radically personal and freely imaginative ideal – whether that ideal involves proclaiming her faith in the form of creeds, like a Christian believer, or making her power of perception match the sublime wonders of perceptible reality, like a latter-day American Romantic. There are, however, other ways of inventorying Ruth's options. Laura Barrett sees that 'Ruth has three choices: a private life of the mind, furnished by recollections from the past; a public life in Fingerbone, where she, like Lucille, conforms, surrendering inchoate memories for tactile pleasures; or a social life with Sylvie in which her mind's eye is as vital as her optic nerve.'[104] This description of the choices facing Ruth has the benefit of underscoring the fact that her life is structured around two extraordinary relationships, her relationship with her sister and her relationship with her aunt, the only relationships of any significance between her and other individuals.

A biblical allusion bears great significance for Ruth and Lucille's relationship. The chapter after it becomes clear that the sisters are truly at odds with one another begins: 'Cain murdered Abel, and blood cried out from the earth…Cain killed Abel, and blood cried out from the ground – a story so sad that even God took notice of it' (p.192). This prompts the thought that either Lucille or Ruth are to be thought of as a sororicide, Ruth for allowing Lucille be claimed by the town or Lucille for

[103] Domestico, op. cit., p.105

[104] Barrett, op. cit., pp.2-3

allowing Ruth to be claimed by Sylvie and the lake (and though the latter seems to make more sense, Ruth is the one who, like Cain, is cursed to wander as a vagabond). Does God take any notice of either happening? *Housekeeping* does not directly ask that question, but an answer in the affirmative can plausibly be discerned in Ruth's faithful proclamation of the final, wholesale redemption of all things lost, an act of supernatural grace which presupposes a gracious God upon whom no broken bond is lost and by whose grace all such bonds are mended. There is nothing in the Bible about Cain and Abel meeting in the afterlife and letting bygones be bygones. This would, of course, involve a saintly act of forgiveness from Abel. Ruth and Lucille remain separated by their wildly divergent responses to an act of callous violence, though not committed by either on the other but by their mother on both of them, making their mother the one who both of them must bring themselves to forgive. Ruth seems to work her way, in the course of the novel, towards that forgiveness, but her means of reaching it creates an impasse between her and Lucille. And it is clear that Ruth longs for a reconciliation and that her wandering after fleeing Fingerbone is thus a kind of curse. But the loneliness of her separation from Lucille is also a kind of blessing. It is a blessing because it allows her to think of her life and Lucille's as falling under God's notice, or to hope that that is the case, with the kind of hope[105] that Christians call faith.

In *Gilead*, Robinson's second novel, Reverend John Ames relates the story that his grandfather, having lost an eye in the civil war, responded to his son's shock at first sighting this wound by saying 'I am confident that I will find great blessing in it' (p.41). Ames goes on to say that his grandfather 'told me once that being blessed meant being bloodied.' Ruth's estrangement from Lucille may be a bloodying ordeal, but it is also, and for that very reason, a blessing. Though the experience of loneliness might be wounding, it is not therefore devoid of moral and spiritual gifts.[106]

[105] With Ruth's words about having a sister or a friend in mind, we might call it a smug hope.

[106] Another moment in *Gilead* pertinent to my point here comes a few pages later (p.45) when Ames recalls the time, before he met his wife, when he 'read out of loneliness, and when bad company was much better than no company.' 'You can love a bad book,' he goes on, 'for its haplessness or pomposity or gall, if you have that starveling appetite for all things human, which I devoutly hope you never will have. "The full soul loatheth an

Raimond Gaita, in discussing the personal nature of moral thought, notes that

> Kierkegaard was mistaken, however, in thinking that an acknowledgment of the personal nature of thought about morality and life's meaning should lead to an idealisation of the solitary thinker. In fact, such idealisation distorts the personal character of such thought. It also distorts our understanding of one of the most important facts about its epistemic character, namely that we often learn by being moved by what others say and do.[107]

Viewing loneliness as a privilege, as a state in which morality and life's meaning are exceptionally visible, courts the danger of arriving at a Kierkegaardian idealisation of the solitary thinker. But *Housekeeping* is not the story of an individual facing life with nothing but the resources within herself, unmoved by those around her. Her relationship with Sylvie in particular makes trouble for any existentialist reading. It is possible Ruth's loneliness is, paradoxically, made meaningful to her through her relationship with Sylvie. Sylvie is in some ways a figure of awe for Ruth, a sublime object like the mountains and the lake, as when Ruth encounters her standing 'still as an effigy', not moving or speaking, in the total darkness of the house, and wonders at the inscrutable workings of her mind (p.72). A large part of Sylvie's mysterious power in Ruth's eyes is due to Sylvie's resemblance to Ruth's mother. But Ruth also recognises that Sylvie is someone else, and represents something entirely new in her life, the chance of a different attitude to things, one that pays closer attention to the unseen and the imagined.

Perhaps Ruth's knowledge of Sylvie's way of life – her character, her unique attitude towards the world, and her way of being alone even in company – gives Ruth the ability to find the goods in loneliness that would otherwise be out of reach. Might it be that the personal character of Ruth's

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honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet." There are pleasures to be found where you would never look for them.' Though he wishes his son, to whom his words are addressed, will be spared the loneliness he experienced, Ames nevertheless found goods in his loneliness that would not otherwise have been available to him.

[107] Gaita. *A Common Humanity*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999. p.279.

encounter with the world can only be fully appreciated in light of Sylvie's presence in her life? I maintain a note of uncertainty here because *Housekeeping* doesn't make these matters clear to us – as it cannot if it is to remain true to the horizons of Ruth's self-knowledge. Our view is necessarily confined within Ruth's own limited view. But there are intimations of Ruth's deep connection with Sylvie, as when Ruth says 'Sylvie, I knew, felt the life of perished things' (p.124). It is a sensitivity that Ruth surely covets. In her imaginative voyages into the realm of the dead, the realm inhabited by her mother and her grandmother and others, Ruth attempts, like Sylvie, to feel the life of the perished, to see that life must be restored to them. And because it must be, in a sense (the sense not of facts but of faith) it already is.

Only in the loneliness of her private thoughts does this faith make the slightest bit of sense, just as only through the prism of her past do Ruth's strange fantasies cast any light. Is there any way we can see through the essential opacity of this experience of loneliness? We might return to Robinson's remarks on loneliness, attending specifically to her description of what the experience has meant for her:

> Frankly, I cannot imagine that I could find the richness and pleasure I do find in loneliness if I were not religious. This is not to say religion is necessary if one is to enjoy loneliness, only that in my case my consciousness has formed itself around certain givens – that existence is profoundly meaningful, and that it endlessly rewards observation and reflection for this reason.[108]

I would suggest that a religious conception of the world, a view of reality as receptive to or ultimately shaped by the claims of faith, is much more amenable to a positive conception of loneliness, if not required to make such a conception coherent. *Housekeeping* shows how someone whose soul is afflicted and who seeks redemption through faith can come to uniquely value the experience of loneliness as a means of bringing into sharper focus the reality their faith illuminates for them.

Late in the novel Ruth wonders,

[108] Quoted in Stevens, op. cit., p.255.

> When did I become so unlike other people? Either it was when I followed Sylvie across the bridge, and the lake claimed us, or it was when my mother left me waiting for her, and established in me the habit of waiting and expectation which makes any present moment significant for what it does not contain. Or it was at my conception. (p.214)

We cannot appreciate how unlike other people Ruth is without entering into her mind, or becoming acquainted with her soul, as the narrative of *Housekeeping* alone is capable of facilitating, with its swirling currents of rhapsodic lyricism conveying the deepest hopes and dreams and longings of Ruth's being. Only as readers at least implicitly alive to the privilege of loneliness do we succeed in coming to know who Ruth is. She is someone who can only know what's true, can only understand her past, can only be fully alive, in the act of proclaiming her vision of things, the act of speaking the self.

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Murdoch's example of M and D not only alerts us to the possibility of such private moral transformation as M undergoes in her view of D but also suggests that a private transformation of that kind might be a fundamental part of someone's personal story. The narrative of a person's life, which connects and contextualises all of its events of richest moral significance, could easily be structured around entirely private moments of self-revelation. But the privacy of those moments, and their self-revelatory character, is importantly qualified by the role other people play in providing the background to, if not the very content of, every moral evaluation one makes. M's revelation of her own moral misprision carries no significance, means nothing, without the other half of the thought – that it was about D's character that she was morally misprised. So to focus on the moral exploration of the self by the solitary individual at the neglect of the way others facilitate or participate in that exploration is, as Gaita says, to distort the personal character of moral thought.

Housekeeping is a compelling fictional representation of the distinctly personal yet inherently relational nature of the moral life, presenting us with a woman's richly idiosyncratic narrative of her past and simultaneously conveying the profound impact of her relationships with others on her judgements of both their conduct and her own. It is also a testament to our need to measure the moral

dimensions of our lives in carefully wrought works of the imagination. It is a novel that takes full advantage of the power of the novelistic form to enunciate what would otherwise be unspeakable truths. And in enunciating those truths it links narrator and reader in something like the relationship of coreligionists, together proclaiming a vision of reality that reaches beyond the mundane.

I have tried to show in this chapter that we can approach a fuller understanding of the implications of the personal yet relational character of moral thought by considering how loneliness can be a privilege, an experience of self that clarifies the terms of one's moral and spiritual encounter with reality, and how faith can be an expression of the needs of the soul regarded both as individual essence and as deepest attachment to and care for others. And I have tried to do so without straying far from the spirit of rapturous contemplation and fearful mystery that *Housekeeping* so wonderfully exhibits.

Adventure, Friendship, Trust

In the booklet accompanying British composer Howard Skempton's album of short piano pieces *Well, well, Cornelius*, pianist John Tilbury writes

> Ultimately, however, it is to the *morality* of Skempton's compositional art that I respond: there are no hard-and fast prescriptions to keep the wayward performer in line, no control strategies; he knows that no interpreter worth his salt is content simply to do what he is told. Instead, through the subtlest of means, he elicits responses from the performer, inviting collaboration on the basis of understanding and trust.[109]

From the perspective of most contemporary moral philosophy (that which lies roughly in the analytic tradition) the use of 'morality' here would be considered inaccurate, a misnomer or a liberty taken with language. At best it would be an imprecise analogy. The matter under discussion – musical composition – is aesthetic rather than moral: it does not, in and of itself, bear on any intelligible matter of strictly *moral* significance, i.e. any matter in which moral obligations or the happiness or preferences of moral agents are directly at stake. If it bears on those matters at all it does so only extrinsically. So the understanding and trust between a composer and a performer cannot be the subject of moral-philosophical enquiry, not on the understanding of moral philosophy that informs the practice of most analytic moral philosophers.

But it is not merely an analogy with the anti-authoritarian attitude in politics or ethics that Tilbury is drawing here. He is pointing out the moral character of Skempton's music as it is creatively realised in composition and performance. And in doing so he is unwittingly showing up the profound limitations of much academic moral philosophy when it comes to making moral sense of the world we live in. Acknowledging that *style* can be intrinsically moral has radical implications in this philosophical context.[110]

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[109] Tilbury, 1996. Sony Classical, emphasis in original.

[110] Consequentialist thought experiments being the most glaring instance of the profoundly limited moral philosophy (I've several times crudely glossed it as analytic moral philosophy) that I'm talking about. Roger

Tilbury's description of Skempton's art gestures towards the description of moral practice offered by Martha Nussbaum (and later elaborated on by Cora Diamond) in discussing the fiction of Henry James. Nussbaum, picking up on one of James's own remarks about the notion of adventure, makes the suggestion that James's novels can be viewed as adventure stories. 'This may seem odd,' Diamond notes, 'because if someone asked you to recommend a good adventure story, it would be unlikely that you would say "Go read *The Princess Casamassima* or *The Golden Bowl*."'[111] Turning

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Scruton lampoons those thought-experiments in his *On Human Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2017) by referring to an example from Derek Parfit:

> "If we choose A Tom will live for 70 years, Dick will live for 50 years, and Harry will never exist. If we choose B Tom will live for 50 years, Dick will never exist, and Harry will live for 70 years." Should we choose A or B? With relentless determination Parfit conducts the reader through case after case of this kind…But the importation of precision does not hide the fact that the examples considered are entirely unlike real moral dilemmas and entirely shaped by the arithmetical obsession of their author. (pp.94-95)

(I am put in mind of Bernard Williams's quip in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* about William Godwin's 'ferociously rational refusal to respect any consideration than an ordinary human being would find compelling.') The famous "trolley problem" is another instance of a confabulated moral dilemma that is entirely unlike real moral dilemmas, and so is more an unseemly game than a brave reckoning with the subtler difficulties of the moral life (as philosophers like Parfit, and Peter Singer, and Jeff McMahan would have us believe). More generally, the philosophers who will be most reluctant, and theoretically ill-equipped, to endorse the claims I am making here are philosophers who conceive of morality as wholly a matter of right action, habitually construe the moral life as composed of a succession of discrete deployments of a rational faculty, and see morality parcelled out as conduct and so fail to see the overarching structure of moral personhood that is implied whenever we consider the moral dimension of a person's life. (My chapter on 'Life-morality' is essentially an elaboration of this last point).

[111] Diamond, 'Missing the Adventure: A Reply to Martha Nussbaum' in *The Realistic Spirit*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995. p.313.

from *The Golden Bowl*, the main object of Nussbaum's critical attention, to *The Portrait of a Lady*, Diamond observes that

> James intended his words…about adventure to make clear the link between such adventures as Jim Hawkins's exciting and terrifying discovery that Long John Silver is a pirate and Isabel Archer's suddenly *seeing* the conditions in which she has been living…What happens to [Isabel Archer] becomes adventure, becomes interesting, exciting, through the quality of her attention to it, the intensity of her awareness, her imaginative response. What happens, though, if we are *bad* readers? Two things joined together. We do not see what that is exciting happens to her. *That* passes for nothing with us; and we also do not see what is exciting, what is fine, what is secret and hidden in the book…The inattentive reader then misses out doubly: he misses the adventure of the characters…and he misses his own possible adventure in reading.[112]

This picture of reading rests upon a corresponding picture of morality which sees the clear-sighted apprehension of moral realities as necessarily informed by 'a sense of life lived in a world of wonderful possibilities, but possibilities to be found only by creative response.'[113] The world described by James in *The Golden Bowl* and *The Portrait of a Lady* is a world where, morally speaking, 'alarming and unprecedented possibilities [lurk], inviting, demanding, *improvisation*.'[114] Living a moral life is then an experience (really, of course, a myriad of experiences) that necessarily engages the imagination, and which calls on us to see 'the possibilities in things' by 'a kind of transforming perception of them.'[115] Hard-and-fast prescriptions are no more useful to each of us in our everyday moral practice than they are to an imaginative pianist in his interpretation of a

[112] Diamond, 'Missing the Adventure', pp.314-315.

[113] Ibid, p.313.

[114] Ibid, p.315, my emphasis.

[115] Ibid, p.313.

composition, and we can no more be content to do as we're told than the pianist can.[116] Such contentment requires sacrificing the creativity on which the art of living a moral life depends. It is a retreat into complacency when the inexhaustible mystery of the world (as Murdoch almost calls it) demands from us the courage of an adventurer.

Diamond quotes the mountain climber George Mallory on why mountaineers climb mountains:

> Our case is not unlike that of one who has, for instance, a gift for music. There may be inconvenience, and even damage, to be sustained in devoting time to music; but the greatest danger is in not devoting enough, for music is this man's adventure…To refuse the adventure is to run the risk of drying up like a pea in its shell. Mountaineers, then, take opportunities to climb mountains because they offer adventure necessary to them…A great mountain is always greater than we know: it has mysteries, surprises, hidden purposes; it holds always something in store for us.[117]

In this respect, what is true of great mountains is true also of the moral life. And it is true of art too, as John Tilbury evidently understands (and, if we believe Tilbury, as Howard Skempton also understands).

Implicit in this position is the notion that we cannot specify in advance everything that falls within the realm of morality, or every consideration of moral significance that bears on a particular

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[116] Steven Fesmire has recourse to a musical metaphor as well in his discussion of moral imagination in *John Dewey and Moral Imagination* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2003), in this case a jazz musician participating in an improvised set. A metaphor such as this is really necessary to do justice to the complex, temporally extended interplay of subjectivities that is moral thought, and the difficulty, noted by Fesmire, of any 'coordinated impromptu thinking'. 'A jazz musician…takes up the attitude of others by catching a cadence from the group's signals while anticipating the group's response to her own signals. Drawing on the resources of tradition, memory, and long exercise, she plays *into* the past tone to discover the possibilities for future tones in the way moral imagination enables us to see the old in terms of the possible.' (p.94)

[117] Quoted in Diamond, 'Missing the Adventure', p.313.

moral question, any more than a composer can specify every possibility for interpreting his works that could be present to a performer. The attempt to draw boundaries around the moral, to precisely specify what is morally salient in any human encounter and to fortify this specification against any transforming perception, betrays the same kind of obtuseness and lack of imagination as the composer who attempts to impose a particular narrow and rigid interpretation of his music as uniquely authoritative, or the mountaineer who is confident he knows just how great the mountain is, and that it holds nothing in store for him.

Faith permitting, let's set mountains to one side. The aptness of the analogy between music and moral life is itself an indication of the expansiveness of the realm of morality (in comparison with the narrow picture offered by contemporary analytic moral philosophy[118]). A piece of piano music, in manifesting and revealing the relationship between a composer and a pianist, can communicate trust and understanding (for instance) in a way that alters or enhances our moral perception, allowing us to see the world differently or more clearly in the light of the moral qualities it has displayed in its particular way. The idea that music is available to us as a moral resource in this way, the notion of imaginative perception as a faculty of fundamental moral importance, and this image of moral possibilities being disclosed in the interplay between persons and a work of art, are all, from the standpoint of academic moral philosophy, startlingly unorthodox. Apart from music, literature is another art form that can act as a moral resource by expanding our conception of morality and impressing upon us (that is, us readers) the significance of imagination both as a tool and a subject of moral enquiry.

The notion of the moral life as an adventure is one illuminating way of reconceiving the scope of moral questions. An adventure is importantly different from a quest. A quest has some clear objective which motivates and justifies it, whereas an adventure is embarked upon for its own sake. A quest may, like an adventure, lead to unexpected discoveries as the quester follows the uncertain route

[118] See n110 for a reminder of the worst offenders.

to their objective, but a true adventurer is motivated by nothing more than the discovery of the unexpected.[119]

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In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne Booth, in attempting to describe the ethical significance of literature, describes reading as analogous to forming friendships. Booth claims that the way we relate to narrative fiction is essentially the same as the way we relate to people – our judgments of fictions and of persons are formed in the same way.

> I suggest we arrive at our sense of value in narratives in precisely the way we arrive at our sense of value in persons: by *experiencing* them in an immeasurably rich context of others that are both like and unlike them. Even in my first intuition of "this new one," whether a story or a person, I see it against a backdrop of my long personal history of untraceably complex experiences of other stories and persons… [T]he logic we depend on as we arrive at our particular appraisals is neither deduction from clear premises, even of the most complex kind, nor induction from a series of precisely defined and isolated instances. Rather it is

[119] Mountaineers may have the summit as their objective, but to the extent that reaching the summit motivates their climb I would say that their endeavour is a quest rather than an adventure. And – I ask, at the risk of sounding like a novice lama from a monastery at mind-addling altitude – mightn't it be the case that true mountaineers stop their ascent at the summit only because there is no more mountain to climb? I don't think the question is as stupid as perhaps it sounds. Consider the idea of a pianist who stops interpreting only because he has run out of notes to play. He has more creative energy than he has material to shape it with. This can tell us something important about the pianist's disposition to his art and to the world at large. This kind of creative surplus could be either a good thing or a bad thing, but it surely cannot be insignificant. And I think it possible that a person could have a surplus of imagination in their moral life, not in the sense that they indulge in elaborate fantasies but rather that their wisdom outstrips the circumstances of their life, that they are consciously capable of greater moral understanding than life demands of them. But this isn't the place in which to pursue that thought further.

> always the result of a direct sense that something now before us has yielded an experience we find *comparatively* desirable, admirable, lovable or, on the other hand, comparatively repugnant, contemptible or hateful.[120]

Or, we should add, an experience that lies for us anywhere between those poles of admiration and repugnance. We may, for instance, find the experience to be (comparatively) ambiguous or mixed. I take it Booth means just to register that our appraisal of a work, or a person, tends to be reducible to the fact that we either welcome this presence in our life or we don't, with varying degrees of intensity in either direction. Even ambiguity strikes us as, ultimately, either dissatisfying or fruitful. The point is that, unlike logical deductions or inductions, what brings us to our particular appraisals, however nuanced they may be, is seeing the object of appraisal 'against a backdrop…of untraceably complex experiences of other [such objects]'. Fully appreciating that point, however, surely involves recognising that the finer distinctions we make, the nuances of comparative judgement, are what make such judgement possible in the first place. The refusal to limit our concepts sanctions the wealth of comparisons upon which original criticism depends.

Booth searches for a term that will adequately express the comparative process by which we evaluate fictions and people. He finds 'judging', 'weighing', and 'appraising' all wanting, although '[n]one of these terms is entirely misleading' and '[a]ll three terms rightly suggest that the judgement requires a community' (judges only have legitimacy within the legal system, scales must be calibrated with other scales, and a trustworthy real estate agent must be experienced in comparing his appraisals with those of other realtors). Booth wants a term that 'suggests even more strongly…the reliance…on the past experiences of many judges who do not have even a roughly codified set of precedents to guide them.' He is driven to 'resort to neologism' and the result is '*coduction*, from *co* ("together") and *ducere* ("to lead, draw out, bring, bring out").'

> Coduction will be what we do whenever we say to the world (or prepare ourselves to say): "Of the works of this general kind that I have experienced, *comparing my experience with*

[120] Booth, *The Company We Keep*. pp.70-71, emphasis in original.

> *other more or less qualified observers*, this one seems to me among the better (or weaker) ones, or the best (or worst). Here are my reasons."
>
> Every such statement implicitly calls for continuing conversation: "How does my coduction compare with yours?" Such a process is obviously about as different as possible from what logicians claim to do before offering to share a universally valid proof. Coduction can never be "demonstrative," apodeictic: it will not persuade those who lack the experience required to perform a similar coduction. And it can never be performed with confidence by one person alone. The validity of our coductions must always be corrected in conversations about the coductions of others whom we trust.[121]

So Booth's account of the "logic" (and the scare quotes are Booth's[122]) of evaluative criticism considers evaluative criticism to be fundamentally public (which isn't particularly contentious) and (which is potentially far more radical…) dependent upon *trust*. Adventure can also be understood as relying upon trust: the adventurer must trust that whatever unexpected discoveries the world holds in store will not overwhelm or annihilate him; the openness to adventure is an attitude of trust towards the world. If reading fiction is a way of responding to a world full of unexpected possibilities – if it is an adventure – then it too is based upon trust. If as readers we can form relationships with works of fiction in the same way we form friendships with people, then reading is, like friendship, based upon trust.

These may seem like highly dubious claims, but I think their truth can be brought out by considering that reading can go wrong for the same reasons and in the same ways that a friendship or an adventure can go wrong. A sceptic may ask, incredulously, "In what sense could a reader possibly be said to betray the trust of a work of fiction, or vice versa?" But I think there is a sense in which, if we keep one or both of these notions of adventure and friendship in mind, a work of fiction can betray the trust of a reader or a reader can betray the trust of a work of fiction. We have names for both of

[121] Booth, op. cit., pp.72-73, emphasis in original.

[122] See chapter 3 of *The Company We Keep* (p.49).

those kinds of betrayal. If reading is an adventure, then *cliché* is what we call it when a book fails to provide the encounter with the unexpected that we trusted it would provide. Books that are marred by cliché, books that don't do much more than rehearse familiar, conventional, predictable thoughts – these books betray their readers. The other kind of betrayal will be familiar to anyone who considers any particular book to be scandalously underrated. When another reader fails to respond to everything that is startling and arresting and original in a work of fiction, if they greet all of its unexpected disclosures and novel insights with a mere shrug, then they have betrayed that work by refusing to open themselves to adventure, by taking refuge in complacency rather than meeting the challenge of perceiving imaginatively and responding creatively. Responding creatively to a work of fiction doesn't just mean going and writing a piece of criticism. It means, first and fundamentally, bringing enough imagination to a work to be able to find what is original in it. Faulty judgements, whether aesthetic or moral, can often be understood as failures of imagination.

But with this kind of misreading we're not only talking about a diminished capacity, an impairment of the imaginative faculty (like a more debilitating variety of dyslexia), but also what I think we can call, with only a little hesitancy, a lack of virtue.[123] There is a risk involved in committing to an experience that can't be anticipated in advance and might prove to be challenging or disturbing. To decline to take that risk, or to take that risk only to be met by a routine experience that doesn't come close to repaying your courage: these are kinds of betrayal. It may make less sense in the first case to talk about *trust* being betrayed, but as long as you regard human existence as taking place within a realm of possibilities that are not all 'fixed and readily grasped'[124] then the denial of that fact (a denial implicit in the refusal of adventure) will present as a betrayal of what it is to be fully human, which is in part to have the capacity to trust. You fail to fully recognise your own humanity, fail to acknowledge the mystery and uncertainty that is essential to humanity, exactly insofar as you neglect or disable your own capacity to trust.

[123] Though not necessarily a vice.

[124] Diamond, 'Missing the Adventure' p.312.

I don't want to suggest that the only way one fails as a reader is by failing to recognise originality, or a lack of originality, when one sees it. If we turn to the notion of friendship we might get clearer on how various kinds of misreading can be viewed as betrayals of trust. A friendship can be betrayed (can be marred by distortions, disloyalties) not only through the atrophy of mutual interest, not only because one or both friends cease seeing the other as an opportunity for adventurous encounter, but also for the opposite reason: because one or both friends lose the critical engagement that allows them to distinguish genuine adventure from mere exhilaration and come to see the other as an entertainment, or as a worthwhile companion only in so far as they quench the thirst for novelty. There are a lot of other ways that friendships can go wrong, and I would suggest that all of them can serve as rough analogies for ways that our reading of fiction can go wrong. To say this is basically to offer an endorsement of Booth's claim that the same capacities of judgement are active in our judgements of people and our judgements of fictions. The same evaluative logic (what Booth calls coduction) is at play. The primary reason for this fact is that *fictions can be as complex as people*. As Booth says,

> Our reading friends can vary:
>
> 1. in the sheer *quantity* of invitations they offer us;
> 2. in the degree of *responsibility* they grant to us – what we might call the level of reciprocity or domination between author and reader;
> 3. in the degree of *intimacy* in the friendship
> 4. in the *intensity* of engagement that they expect or require – from total concentration to slack, comfortable, slowly-ripening acquaintance;
> 5. in the *coherence*, or consistency, of the proffered world;
> 6. in the *distance* between their worlds and ours, that is, in the familiarity or strangeness of the world we enter – the amount of rude challenge or "otherness," that they fling at our current norms;
> 7. in the kind , or *range of kinds*, of activities suggested, invited, or demanded – from a reassuring concentration on single-minded issues or formal patterns…to a reconstruction

and embrace of whole "worlds" that seem to include every topic that our "real" worlds include…

In our living friends, we find these same variables.[125]

I couldn't possibly improve on Booth's inventory, and I only hope that I will have, in other chapters, tracked a reasonable number of these variables in and between the novels that I've studied.

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I believe the three words that are this chapter's title provide powerful, illuminating metaphors for the moral significance of literature. Many philosophers and critics fail to appreciate these metaphors, as evidenced by the relative obscurity of the works of Booth, Nussbaum and Diamond. What accounts for this is, I think, a certain kind of obtuseness in the face of reality – in the face, that is, of reality's sublimity, the (literally) incredible fact of existence, with its inexhaustible reserve of mystery. A less heady formulation of the same idea might simply observe that other people are always capable of surprising us. There are some (unaccountably influential) people who would deny that this remarkable fact is at all important. This I call obtuseness. Diamond refers to this obtuseness as 'the refusal of life,' and she says it 'takes a particular shape in philosophy, where it is the principled attempt to conceive the moral faculty independently of what [Henry] James and, following him, Martha Nussbaum refer to as the active sense of life.'[126]

What does Booth's idea of coduction have to do with a conception of the moral faculty that acknowledges or accommodates 'the active sense of life'? If we are to avoid reductionism in moral philosophy – reductionism of the kind that might render a moral philosopher incapable of seeing the point of the remark by John Tilbury I quoted at the beginning of this chapter– then it seems that what is required is some acknowledgement that our moral understandings come about through a process of coduction. As Raimond Gaita has put it, '[o]ne way of responding is often judged in the light of

[125] Booth, op. cit., pp.179-180, emphasis in original.

[126] Diamond, 'Missing the Adventure', p.317.

another, and what needs more accurate description…is the critical grammar that determines our sense of the authority with which one thing shows up another as being, perhaps, sentimental or self-indulgent.'[127] In defining the notion of coduction and in giving an account of his own coductions and the coductions of other critics, I take it Booth is, essentially, attempting a description of the critical grammar to which Gaita refers, even if Booth is quite specifically concerned with coductions relating to works of narrative fiction.

The Company We Keep is evidently motivated, at least in part, by the fact that many critics, whether they are engaged in ethical criticism or opposed to the very notion of ethical criticism, fail to appreciate the way our literary judgements are formed and thus fail to notice the peculiar similarity between our interpersonal ethical judgements and our literary judgements. That is: the public and comparative character of literary criticism, its formal correspondence to the public and comparative character of friendship, and the shared ethical basis of the activities of criticism and friendship (what I have described by invoking the notion of trust), are, Booth believes, chronically underappreciated. Gaita devotes much of his *Good and Evil* to critiquing the chronic misconceptions that beset professional moral philosophy. The critique is clearly on display in remarks such as this one:

> Descriptions of actions and character through which we explore our sense of what we have done and what we are, of what is fine and what is tawdry, of what is shallow and what is deep, of what is noble and what is base, and so on, are not merely descriptions of convenience onto which we project a more formal sense, focused on imperatives, of what is it is for something to be of moral concern.[128]

Philosophers (the only people who are very likely to insist, rather than unthinkingly assume, that imperatives are where the real moral action is, so to speak) need to pay more attention to those descriptions, need to stop brushing aside the moral languages of ordinary life in favour of a formal vocabulary that nails things down with lexical precision. Jeffrey Stout observes that moral philosophy

[127] Gaita. *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. p.45.

[128] Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p.40.

> often takes as its subject matter what various critics have derisively called "Esperanto." The ground rules of this supposedly universal language, once displayed clearly in abstraction from the vagaries of particular traditions, are then said to be definitive of practical reason itself. Esperanto becomes *the* language of morals, its rules the deep structure of morality as such.[129]

Booth's ethics of fiction is an indirect challenge to the Esperantist project, the project to comprehensively define morality within the confines of a rationally constructed universal language. 'Every appraisal of a narrative,' Booth says, 'is implicitly a comparison between the always complex experience we have had in its presence and what we have known before.'[130] '[W]hat we have known before' may also be spoken of, more definitely, as 'the vagaries of particular traditions': that which the Esperantists would abstract away. An ethics that is dismissive of language as it emerges from and gives expression to particular histories and particular places could not be an ethics of fiction; it could not see the formation of literary judgements as truly public and comparative (could not accommodate a substantive notion of coduction) and so could not explain the content of literary criticism as anything other than arbitrary opinion.

Every piece of fiction and every human life is embedded within a culture, and cultures are enacted through public conversations (oral, literary, pictorial, or more complexly mediated) made up of countless comparative judgements (explicit or implicit, consciously deliberated or unconsciously inferred). Understanding literature means understanding the extent to which human life as lived in the world is inextricably intertwined with questions of culture as it is enacted in language, language that is always already morally inflected.

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[129] Stout, *Ethics After Babel*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001 [1988]. p.5.

[130] Booth, op. cit., p.71.

Fooling and Fooling

The shock of Ruth and Sylvie's pseudocide (or is it pseudopseudocide?) is enough to match that of some of the more momentous deaths in literature. "Auntee Sylvie, she dead!" Well, "Auntee Sylvie, she crazy!" would be the unalloyed (if pidginised) verdict of your typical Fingerbone native. But Sylvie's message is more accurately about "the terror" (in the Romantic sense) than "the horror", about the sublime rather than the grotesque. Sylvie's failure to conform to expectation is not, like Kurtz's, a disappointment of promises of grandiosity. There is a subtle grandiosity in Sylvie, something that we know through Ruth's momentary awe-filled recognitions of it (and something that is allegedly captured well by the actress playing Sylvie, Christine Lahti, in the 1987 film adaptation; Roger Ebert was led to observe, 'I had seen a film that could perhaps be described as being about a madwoman, but I had seen a character who seemed closer to a mystic, or a saint.'[131]).

The biblical Ruth was a Moabite, a foreigner (not of the chosen people), who not only became an Israelite but can count herself among the forebears of Israel's greatest King (and thereby also as an ancestor of Christ). Is *Housekeeping*'s Ruth ironically named, then, given her failure to find herself at home –to reconcile herself with a new people– and her increased estrangement from a community of belonging as her story progresses? (Unless she and Sylvie can be seen to constitute such a community). The biblical Ruth also volunteered to undertake punishing labour. *Housekeeping*'s Ruth must similarly work for her bread (unlike her sister Lucille, housewife-in-training, who does work, but in a different, more traditionally feminine way). But the other kind of labour, that exclusively undergone by women, seems a possibility denied our Ruth, so no great lineage can be expected to issue from her. Is this a deprivation for Ruth, or a strange and difficult gift? Has her mother's suicide been a twofold severance, cutting Ruth off from both ancestry and progeny, and is this wholly to be

[131] Ebert. Review of *Housekeeping* [film]. January 22, 1988.

https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/housekeeping-1988

regretted? How does this inflect Ruth's status as an exile and a nomad? Does it simply make it more poignant, or does it divulge a paradoxical effect of grace?

Lake Fingerbone is a presence that defines the horizon of the township of Fingerbone, and the horizon of civilisation as far as Fingerbone's residents are concerned. The bridge crossing it is a passage that has been known to malfunction and become a conduit to the supernatural realm of which the Lake is the bulging outer membrane.

Sylvie is responsible for Ruth's encounter with the fearsome magnitude of Lake Fingerbone and the wilds surrounding it. It is not just by her actions that Sylvie makes that encounter possible for Ruth. Or, better to say, it would be wrong to look at Sylvie and see merely a succession of bizarre and reckless actions (as the citizens of Fingerbone are inclined to).

Sylvie's eccentricity shading into recklessness is the mark of a fool. Few Fingerboneans would disagree. But I mean something different from what the typical well-behaved townsperson would mean in calling Sylvie a "fool." Sylvie is, I want to say, a Shakespearean fool, or at least rather like one particular Shakespearean fool. Like the fool in *King Lear*, she is 'unaccommodated' in a deep sense, an alien and a pilgrim in the world, but one who brings clarity out of a dark tumult. Sylvie makes evident, through her obviously pitiable shortfall from normality, the pity that is required to understand Ruth's suffering (just as *Lear*'s fool makes evident the pity that's required to understand Lear).

Ruth's cold night by the wrecked house, and with Sylvie floating upon Lake Fingerbone, the kind of night that would turn anyone to a fool and madman, or madwoman, is for her an experience of revelation, an amplification and extension of the encounter with oblivion that she experienced on her

first lonely night by the lake. Like Lear on the blasted heath, Ruth is taught by these experiences to respect, perhaps even to revere, the annihilating power of nature. Nature has it within her, so these two exiles believe, to 'Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!' or to black out creation, leaving '[no] relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track, or trace'.

The perception of saintliness in Sylvie depends upon recognising that her foolishness is the foolishness of a Holy Fool, that the appearance of disorder, neglect, and troublesome eccentricity are manifestations of something which is for her a deeper wisdom.

The formative experience of Ruthie and Lucille's lives was an act of deception. When their mother killed herself she bequeathed them an attitude of suspicion towards every claim that the adult world would make to them. Lucille's suspicion, which is grounded in a general fear of change, gives way to an unqualified détente. She finds she wants whatever solidity the conventional world has to offer, however temporary and subordinate to nature's caprices it may be. Ruth's suspicion, which might more accurately be characterised as a reserve, a withholding of trust from the world, leads her closer and closer to Sylvie, and to a life of gentle but uncompromising repudiation of the conventional world – a repudiation without bitterness.

Their mother's suicide has exposed for Ruthie and Lucille the threat of deception (or betrayal) that all relationships of intimacy, even (especially?) voluntary ones, pose. So friendships are, for the sisters, always already a daunting prospect, a gamble, a hazarding of that most precious commodity: trust.

It is Lucille, the one who '[sees] in everything its potential for invidious change' (p.93), who proves willing to risk herself. Risk herself? Doesn't she choose the easy way, the coward's way, by colluding with convention? Ruth is the one who exposes herself to real danger. So which sister truly embraces

adventure, and which misses the adventure? Lucille's conservatism, her resistance to invidious change, is no proof of cowardice. Her decision to leave Sylvie and Ruth and move in with Miss Royce is the biggest change of her life. Not long before this, Sylvie and Ruth were Lucille's 'chief problem' but also her 'only refuge' (p.109). Even if Lucille is in denial about their mother in a way that Ruth isn't ('Lucille's mother was…a widow…who was killed in an accident' – p.109) and even if Lucille is truly unfair to Sylvie (both claims we will only believe if we trust Ruth's account), Lucille's act in leaving Sylvie and Ruth, her disloyalty to them, is undoubtedly also an act of bravery. Lucille no less than Ruth responds to a crisis. She makes a change in order to prevent, for herself at least, the more violent changes that she knows will come. This can no more be considered cynical self-interest than can Sylvie and Ruth's arson and absconding.

As a representation of the social world, the world of convention, Lucille captures neatly the nature of Ruth's predicament. Ruth is faced not with a simple choice between loyalty to Sylvie and defection to society. She must reckon with the fact that her decision will position Lucille relative to herself as a representative of conformity-over-imagination. Her action in committing to Sylvie is revolutionary – a sweeping invalidation of the existing order. But the old order goes on existing. This is why Sylvie and Ruth's 'social deaths' require the deceptive semblance of real death (their pseudocide). Theirs is a revolution of the spirit. Lake Fingerbone is that revolution's emblem. Submerging themselves in the Lake, if only notionally, is the consummation of their revolution. Because conventional social life goes on, undisrupted by Sylvie and Ruth's revolution, they must bear the full cost of it themselves. They are the chief victims of their own lie.

I have observed that Ruth's sense of the ultimate recompense of every deprivation is not, strictly speaking, a theodicy. But perhaps this is just sophistic logic-chopping. Ruth doesn't offer her conviction that 'need can blossom in to all the compensations it requires' (p.152) as a proof of the ultimate infallibility of divine justice (nor would it perform well in that role if it maintained that

equivocal ‘can’). But, nevertheless, the fundamental impulse behind Ruth’s thought is exactly that of theodicy. Loss (which we’re well positioned to infer Ruth means when she speaks of ‘need’, especially given the reference to Ruth’s mother at this moment) is something that demands accounting for, but that is impossible to account for without faith. I don’t necessarily mean faith in God, but faith that what’s good in the world outweighs (even if it doesn’t outnumber) what’s bad, faith that human suffering isn’t, you know, sound and fury signifying nothing. Which really means faith that some authority stands empowered to give meaning to inexplicable pain, which is to assimilate that pain within some order, which is to see justice done. So I suppose I do mean faith in God.

In *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson manoeuvres us into a position from which we can see the wisdom in foolishness and the foolishness in wisdom. That reorienting of perspective is the essential activity of morality and religion.

The reorientation of our conventional perception of foolishness and wisdom is necessary precisely because we humans are by our nature held captive by pictures. Our vision – our comprehension of reality – is habitually distorted. One way of expressing this is to observe, as many Christians have from St. Augustine to Martin Luther to Karl Barth,[132] that we are by nature *homo incurvatus in se*, man turned in upon himself. *Housekeeping* provides a complicated depiction of a turning outwards in the character of Ruth, and in her story (her evolving roles as Helen’s daughter, Lucille’s sister, Sylvie’s niece/adoptive daughter). And it also provides an opportunity for the reader to enact, by an attentive and responsive reading, a complementary turning outward, a turning away from the conceited and presuming self and towards the world with all its spectacle and danger and mystery and tribulation and blessing.

[132] The latter is Reverend John Ames’s favourite theologian.

Only from a transcendent vantage point does Lucille's disloyalty look anything like foolishness. And only from a transcendent vantage point does Sylvie's parenting cease to look like a protracted exercise in deception. The transcendent vantage is that from which the world appears pregnant with strange and awesome possibilities. It is not easy but rather deceptively difficult to see exactly how Lucille rejects those possibilities and Sylvie embraces them.

Marilynne Robinson has said, 'I think it is past time to put aside other business and turn our energies to the remystification of virtually everything.'[133] *Housekeeping* can be regarded as a manual in mystagogy. Sylvie, I've suggested, is a kind of mystagogue. This is the same novelist who has complained that 'Truth itself is dissolving as a concept in an acid bath of idle cynicism'[134]. Is Lucille an idle cynic? For Robinson, the most profound truths are mysteries, and Lucille is emphatic in her rejection of mystery. The problem is that the temptation to see *Housekeeping* as an indictment of reactionary conservatism and an endorsement of contemplative mysticism (mysticism in the Murdochian sense) squeezes out the novel's central character; Ruth and all the difficult lessons of her maturity get reduced to a tick in the mystic's column. A really living story escapes even our most carefully constructed categories. It shows up the foolishness, and the deceptiveness, of even apparently wise distinctions.

[133] Quoted in Cunning. '"The Empty Mirror": Selfhood and the Utility of Language in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.' *Irish Journal of American Studies*. Issue 6. http://ijas.iaas.ie/issue-6-andrew-cunning/

[134] Quoted in Smith. 'Marilynne Robinson's *Apologia Gloriae*'. *Comment*. February 15, 2018. https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/5181/marilynne-robinsons-apologia-gloriae/

Representation and the Problem of Aestheticism

Never Let Me Go *and Creativity as Proof of Humanity*

I

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro imagines a world where human cloning is commonplace and conducted in accordance with a state-sanctioned programme which treats clones as a public health resource, as organ banks that relieve the general population of the ravages of serious illness and aging. The first page of the novel reads simply 'England, late 1990s', which further situates this science-fiction narrative in the subgenre of alternate history. The reason for this isn't entirely clear; little is made of the alternate timeline beyond a remark that the scientific advances that enabled the cloning programme occurred 'after the war', presumably identifying the period immediately following the Second World War as the point of departure from history as we know it. Ishiguro doesn't indulge in elaborate world-building. Only the vaguest outline of the history of the cloning programme is supplied, and much about the institutional functioning of the donor system remains unexplained. Unlike many works of science-fiction, exposition is kept to a minimum. The temptation is strong to understand the novel as a work that either elevates or surpasses (or, for those who deride the novel, falls victim to) the familiar structures of the science-fiction genre. But measuring all of the achievements of *Never Let Me Go* by that generic yardstick serves to bracket some of the most important aspects of the novel, directing the focus instead upon those aspects overtly engaged with questions that fall squarely within the remit of politics and applied ethics, or else encouraging the often trivial exercise of charting intertextual connections with other notable works of science-fiction.[135] Resisting the temptation to view the novel through this generic lens is an important step, I think, in the reader's discerning that subtly metafictional (or at least meta-aesthetic) current in *Never Let Me Go*. I'll later be concerned with getting a clear view of that current.

[135] I don't mean to deny that *Never Let Me Go* could profitably be considered a work of science-fiction, or to deride the entire genre. I only mean to indicate where the terms of criticism furnished by that genre, conventionally understood, become an obstacle to deepening engagement with the text.

If we are looking for a key to guide us in interpreting *Never Let Me Go*, a number of clear possibilities present themselves. First the notion (which strikes me as a slightly awkward imposition) that the novel can be considered a vague political allegory. The reality of the donor system – whereby a population of human clones are raised to adulthood and then forced, apparently by nothing more than powerful social conditioning, to surrender their vital organs in a series of 'donations' until their bodies fail and they 'complete' – is clearly the most important single political reality of the world of the novel, even if (perhaps especially since) many or most of the 'normals' (with whom the novel's central characters – all clones – have very little contact) are oblivious to the moral emergency that their culture systematically conceals. The only way really to appreciate the magnitude of the political monstrosity[136] Ishiguro imagines is by analogy with actual political monstrosities, namely slavery and genocide. This is perhaps how the apparent awkwardness of a political reading is surmounted: by treating the novel not as a commentary on real events, real moral emergencies, but rather as a horrific imagining whose horror can only be grasped by reference to those appalling realities. The degree of moral indolence, or else active distortion and denial, that would be necessary to maintain the donor system is surely impossible to attend to at all closely without it bringing to mind (for any historically literate reader) the institutionalised racism that existed prior to the cultural consciousness-raising of the civil rights movement. The efficiency and lack of public (or publicised) violence with which the donor system operates is chillingly reminiscent of how slavery, segregation, apartheid, and genocide have operated throughout history. Our knowledge of these practices surely conditions or even constitutes our sense of what is believable or authentic in fictional depictions of systematic inhumanity. So the similarity between the political horror described in *Never Let Me Go* and real-world political horrors is not incidental; failure to manifest such similarity would be failure to adequately present the kind of phenomenon Ishiguro plainly sets out to present. But this isn't to say that we ought to treat the novel as allegorical. It's rather an acknowledgement that the novel exists in necessary relationship to those historical realities which inform how readers judge its achievement and which also help to make its premise properly intelligible and morally potent.

[136] Not too strong a word, I think. The sense of injustice one feels on finishing the novel seems to warrant it.

There is a further difficulty with adopting an explicitly political approach to *Never Let Me Go*, as I read the novel. This has to do with the way Ishiguro presents two minor characters who are essentially representatives, in the world of the novel, of the organised activist response to the cloning programme. These are the ostensible founders of the Hailsham School for clones, its headmistress Miss Emily and her companion, a woman known as Madame. I will argue that these characters are, by the end of the novel, subtly exposed as hypocrites, their well-intended efforts on behalf of the clones revealed as a shallow political performance. Given this critique of the Hailsham founders, I contend that there is an inherent contradiction in any chiefly political reading of the novel. Ishiguro wants us to appreciate that a focus on the "issues" raised by *Never Let Me Go*, if not leavened with a keen awareness of the human particularities of the protagonist Kathy's story, will only perpetuate one of the profound indignities that the clones must endure. To read with a sharp focus on moral or political issues is to treat the central characters of the novel as vehicles for delivering a moral or political message, just as their so called 'guardians' at Hailsham treat them as instances of a social injustice that demands a political remedy.

Another possibility of interpretation is to regard *Never Let Me Go* as an oblique exploration of what for lack of a better term is called the human condition, which here refers more specifically to the experience of mortality, but also to the related travails that are missed opportunities and aborted hopes (and all the human interstices those dead-end roads might traverse). The strictly limited life-spans of the clones are an exaggeration of our own inevitably limited life-spans, and the mistakes and regrets we see played out in the novel (most movingly in Kathy's best friend Ruth's admission of having kept Kathy and their mutual friend Tommy apart and in the understated acknowledgement, of all three of them, of what a tragedy this is; their gentle submission to their terrible fate) are weightier instances of the mistakes and regrets that play out in our own lives, different only in carrying with them an urgency that most people are blessedly free from.[137] This novel seems to be about an alien class of

[137] Though not those who at a young age are diagnosed with terminal illness or suffer fatal injury. For anyone in this situation *Never Let Me Go* will be all the more powerful, and the existence of such people will always

people living in a strange alternate universe, but it is really about us. Theo Tait gives voice to this reading when, in his review of the novel, he calls it 'a parable about mortality,' and goes on to say that 'The horribly indoctrinated voices of the Hailsham students who tell each other pathetic little stories to ward off the grisly truth about the future - they belong to us; we've been told that we're all going to die, but we've not really understood.'[138] Wai-chew Sim also adopts this reading. He claims that '*Never Let Me Go* captures our attention because it places the fact of mortality squarely in our faces. It breaks down our myriad ways of denying, repressing or ignoring this eventuality. The inexorable, unalterable fate which awaits the clones as well as their lack of volition and agency works powerfully to foreground this issue.'[139]

Taken too zealously this approach might obscure much of importance in *Never Let Me Go*. For instance, James Wood offers this description of the clones' condition and its parallels to our own:

> Their lives have been written in advance, they are *prevented and followed*, in the words of *The Book of Common Prayer*. Their freedom is a tiny hemmed thing, their lives a vast stitch-up. We begin the novel horrified by their difference from us and end it thoughtful about their similarity to us. After all, heredity writes a great deal of our destiny for us; and death soon enough makes us orphans, even if we were fortunate enough, unlike the children of Hailsham, not to start life in such deprivation…To be assured of death at twenty-five or so, as the Hailsham children are, seems to rob life of all its savour and purpose. But why do we persist in the idea that to be assured of death at seventy or eighty or ninety returns to life all its savour and purpose? Why is sheer longevity, if it most certainly ends in the same way as sheer brevity, accorded meaning, while sheer brevity is thought to lack it?[140]

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feature as an important factor in 'applied ethics' approaches to the novel, given that the clones are exploited in order to rescue 'normals' from death due to such illness and injury.

[138] Tait. 'A Sinister Harvest'. *The Telegraph*. March 13, 2005.

[139] Sim. *Kazuo Ishiguro*. New York: Routledge, 2010. p.82.

[140] Wood, *The Fun Stuff*, p.37.

These thoughts are important to a proper appreciation of just how *Never Let Me Go* functions as a 'parable about mortality'; they describe something essential about the novel's allegorical power, its power to shock. But absent some important caveats, they also threaten to unmoor the reader from what is distinctly moving in the situation of *these* characters. Wood's thoughts need to be tempered by an acknowledgement that the situation of the Hailsham children really is an exceptional one, that allegory (or parable) may be illuminating, but only up to a point, and an exclusive focus on interpretation will mean losing sight of (Kathy's) story. To be born an orphan is worse than to be made one. And, beyond the antecedent conditions of one's existence, a human life has a certain distinctive shape. The prospect of a further fifty or sixty or seventy years of life, or the assurance of being denied that, is not to be shrugged at. Ishiguro is not merely exaggerating for effect, though we may sometimes find it helpful (insightful, challenging) to regard aspects of *Never Let Me Go* as exaggerations that affect us. Ishiguro is telling a story about certain lives that happen to be fictional, lives that don't happen to have been lived in the world (and even take place in a world that isn't recognisable as ours). If *Never Let Me Go* is a parable it is also more than a parable.

But, as with the political approach I described earlier, I think this avenue of interpretation needs to be preserved as a background to any competent reading of the novel.[141] To realise that the experience of the clones speaks directly to our experience is at least implicitly to realise that the clones are human, that they are our fellows in mortality and our fellows in living lives marred by error, regret, and remorse. And this essential fact must surely be kept in sight by any reader alive to the moral significance of this fiction: that its characters are human and claim our sympathy as fellow humans. If the novel's political dimension is also necessary to acknowledge, then it is necessary for

[141] And both can be preserved without contradiction. Our political lives are, obviously, bound up with our lives as humans and mortals. The atrocities and systematic injustices I mentioned earlier surely give us some perspective on our lives as finite beings vulnerable to moral error, and some acknowledgement of the fact that we necessarily live such lives must enter into any understanding we may attempt of those atrocities and injustices. It is not difficult to think of a novel meditating on human experience from both of these angles simultaneously. *Never Let Me Go* manages to do exactly that.

the very same reason. *Never Let Me Go* describes human beings experiencing vividly human joys and sorrows and longings and betrayals, and we cannot bring to our engagement with them anything less than what we bring to our most earnest engagement with those humans who live outside of that fictional world. The stakes are not the same, of course, in fiction as in life. How we behave (what attitudes we adopt, the temper of our thoughts) as readers hasn't the same significance as how we behave (in the same broad sense) as friends, parents, children, spouses, teachers, students, colleagues or in whatever other interpersonal roles we may fill in everyday life. But how we read can and does influence the rest of our lives. Reading is, after all, a part of our lives. This might sound platitudinous or trite, but it will be an important point to keep in mind when I later consider the significance of the deliberately banal style in which *Never Let Me Go* is written, and as I proceed to link this with the way Ishiguro explores the potential moral implications of our conceptions of creativity.

I also note as an interesting aside something that never seems to be remarked upon in readings of *Never Let Me Go*, something that is relevant to both of the interpretations outlined above, namely the condition of inhumanity that non-clones in the world of this novel are creating for themselves. By extending their lifetimes beyond their natural span through the organ donation system, humans are making themselves less human, losing touch with their finitude and denying the need to pass on the world to their progeny. Insanely, humans in this world are thoroughly dehumanising the clones in order to allow themselves to diminish their own humanity. I assume here that the function of the donation programme is not only remedial but also, as it were, prolongeval. One could assume the opposite, given that we are never explicitly told about donations being a means of life-extension, but this begs the question what could possibly have compelled people to exercise this sort of restraint. Why restrict the use of organ banks (i.e. clones) to the treatment of fatal illnesses? In a society accustomed to the notion that fatal illnesses can be cured, what would prevent the emergence of the view (which has anyway emerged in our own society, in the affluent West) that aging itself is a condition that must be cured? Undoubtedly there are medical practicalities that will bear on these issues and that I am unable to speak knowledgeably about (for instance, to do with the limits of a human body's tolerance to undergoing organ transplant operations), and there are obviously cases of illness or injury that would remain beyond the curative capabilities of the donor system (anything

affecting the brain, for instance). Death would not be eradicated in this world. Still, it would be a world populated by people living in drastically different conditions to those we live in, a world where death is a freakish accident that befalls the unlucky rather than a universal inevitability. Because *Never Let Me Go* is narrated by a clone (and to a clone, as I discuss later) and tells the story of a group of clones, we have very little sense of the way the world is for non-clones and of whatever implications this might have for the lives of clones which yet remain invisible to clones. For this reason I'm doubtful that there's much that can be said on this front without frequently departing from the text (this is perhaps where *Never Let Me Go* differs from paradigmatic works of science-fiction, in which much attention would be devoted to building a world detailed enough to facilitate the kind of discussion, focused on the mechanics of an imagined culture, that *Never Let Me Go* barely accommodates on the back of numerous assumptions and inferences). But it seems to me a thought worth keeping in the back of one's mind when reading *Never Let Me Go*, that it is a tragedy for Kathy and her friends and fellow clones, but that it is also a tragedy, in the strict classical sense of the term (a case of destructive hubris), for those who wilfully or unthinkingly victimise Kathy and her kind.

II

In a previous chapter I spoke of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* as a subversive *bildungsroman*. *Never Let Me Go* can be described in the same terms. The reader is essentially given Kathy H.'s life story, which is at the same time a narrative of uncovering (a few of) the secrets of the vast social programme of which Kathy is a product. Many of the key emotional moments in Kathy's story are intertwined with, if not directly concerned with, a discovery about or a dawning appreciation of some aspect of the donor system which she, along with every other clone, is apparently powerless to challenge. There is a kind of love triangle at the centre of the book, comprised of Kathy, her haughty and pretentious best friend Ruth, and the cheerful and winsomely childlike Tommy, who becomes Ruth's boyfriend but who has always had a special connection with Kathy. It is clear from Kathy's narration, from the emphases she places in telling her story and the manner in which she addresses the reader, that the book is not intended as a record of the donor system and the inhumanities it

perpetrates. If *Never Let Me Go* is dystopian then it is not because Kathy is, in her narration, knowingly setting herself to the task of unmasking a dystopia. She is not. She is rather concerned with detailing her relationships with Ruth and Tommy, and the dynamic that develops between the three of them, and the fates with which they are finally met. There is as much justification for calling *Never Let Me Go* a drama of relationships as there is for labelling it dystopian science-fiction. The title, taken from a (fictitious) romantic song, is obviously a clue to this.

Part 1 of the novel, in which Kathy relates life at Hailsham School, is loosely arranged around Kathy and Tommy's covert attempts to discover the purpose of 'the Gallery', a collection of the best of the students' artwork gathered by a mysterious woman the students call 'Madame.' Tommy's failure to produce creative works, the bullying that results from this, and the strange advice given to him by one of the 'guardians' (teachers), present another puzzle for Kathy and Tommy.

Here is how Kathy describes the Gallery.

> The gallery…was something we'd all grown up with. Everyone talked about it as though it existed, though in truth none of us knew for sure that it did. I'm sure I was pretty typical in not being able to remember how or when I'd first heard about it. Certainly, it hadn't been from the guardians: they never mentioned the Gallery, and there was an unspoken rule that we should never even raise the subject in their presence. I'd suppose now it was something passed down through the different generations of Hailsham students…If for us the Gallery remained in a hazy realm, what was solid enough fact was Madame's turning up usually twice – sometimes three or four times – each year to select from our best work. (pp.31-32).

Many years later, after Hailsham has been closed down, Kathy and Tommy speak to the former headmistress of Hailsham, Miss Emily, who reveals to them the truth about the Gallery.

> The Gallery? Well, that rumour *did* have some truth to it. There *was* a gallery. And after a fashion, there still is. These days it's here, in this house. I had to prune it down, which I regret. But there wasn't room for all of it in here (p.254)…We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all*. (p.255, emphasis in original)

In response to this, Kathy earnestly asks, "Why did you have to prove a thing like that, Miss Emily? Did someone think we didn't have souls?" (p.255). Let us pretend for a moment that this is not a question being asked by a clone. What might precipitate one human being denying that another has a soul? History furnishes an appalling wealth of examples. Let's ignore those as well. Does the context of this question offer any possibilities for answering it? Does the manner in which proof is attempted offer any clue as to why proof was called for in the first place? The architects of Hailsham believe they can prove to the world that cloned children have souls by exhibiting their artwork. So does the inability to produce artworks disqualify you from the possession of a soul? Does a lack of creativity make you less than human? There is at least the danger that this notion is implied, and encouraged, by the whole project of Hailsham, and Tommy's childhood persecution is evidence of this.

Early in the novel Kathy tells us that 'A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at "creating".' (p.16). Kathy offers this almost as an explanation as to why Tommy faces ridicule throughout his time at Hailsham. Kathy and Tommy both trace the campaign of bullying against Tommy to an art class where, as a joke, he painted 'this elephant, which was exactly the sort of picture a kid three years younger might have done' and which 'got a laugh, sure enough, though not quite the sort he'd expected.' (p.19). Kathy guesses that 'from some time before he did that elephant, Tommy had had the feeling that he wasn't keeping up – that his painting in particular was like that of students much younger than him' and after the deliberately childish elephant 'the whole thing had been brought into the open'. The other students' 'resentment' of Tommy's 'childish pictures' leads to 'persecution': 'For a while he'd only had to suffer during art lessons – though that was often enough, because we did

a lot of art in the Juniors. But then it grew bigger. He got left out of games, boys refused to sit next to him at dinner, or pretended not to hear if he said anything in his dorm after lights-out.' (p.20). Later, Kathy is incredulous, and 'genuinely angry' (p.23), to discover that in a private meeting with one of the guardians, Miss Lucy, Tommy was told that there was nothing wrong with his failure to be creative.

> If Tommy had genuinely tried, [Miss Lucy had said], but he just couldn't be very creative, then that was quite all right, he wasn't to worry about it. It was wrong for anyone, whether they were students or guardians, to punish him for it, or put pressure on him in any way. It simply wasn't his fault. And when Tommy had protested it was all very well Miss Lucy saying this, but everyone *did* think it was his fault, she'd given a sigh and looked out her window. Then she'd said: 'It may not help you much. But you just remember this. There's at least one person here at Hailsham who believes otherwise. At least one person who believes you're a very good student, as good, as any she's ever come across, never mind how creative you are.' (pp.27-28)

Tommy remarks that "when she said all this, she was *shaking*…With rage. I could see her. She was furious. But furious deep inside." (p.28). Miss Lucy's rage makes perfect sense to us once we realise that 'student' is also a euphemism – Miss Emily, describing the emergence of cloning technology to Kathy and Tommy, says "by the time people became concerned about …about *students*, by the time they came to consider just how you were reared, whether you should have been brought into existence at all, well by then it was too late." (p.257, emphasis in original). Miss Lucy's rage can be understood as rage at the idea, realised in the pedagogy of Hailsham and in the effect this has upon students' social relations, that the clones only have worth in so far as they are capable of creative expression. The idea that creativity (the ability to transform imaginings into artefacts) can be relied upon as proof of humanity moves Miss Lucy to a fury she can barely contain.[142] It is worth stressing that this idea is

[142] Of course, she also responds to the damage that idea has done to the living victim seated in front of her.

not something common to the experience of all clones. It is exclusive to Hailsham, with the possible inclusion of those other institutions Miss Emily mentions which were part of the small movement to humanise clones. So it is not simply what I have called the donor system but more specifically the project undertaken by Miss Emily, Madame, and their colleagues that is the source of the notion that enrages Miss Lucy.

The injustice of the students' condition, as Miss Lucy bravely realises, is twofold: they will live drastically foreshortened lives and be discarded like refuse once they have served their purpose, and additionally they are being subtly deceived about the terrible fate that awaits them. Those who run Hailsham are entirely responsible for that deception. It is apparently not something that they are ashamed of. It will be useful, in bringing this out, to recall a pivotal scene in the first section of the novel: Kathy finds herself alone in the dormitory and decides on an impulse to play her favourite cassette tape. It's an album by the (fictional) lounge singer Judy Bridgewater called *Songs after Dark*. 'What made the tape so special for me,' Kathy recalls, 'was this one particular song: track number three, 'Never Let Me Go'.' (p.69). Kathy, then only eleven years old, imagines that the refrain of the song, which provides the title, is a woman addressing the child she believed she would never be able to have. '[W]hat I'd imagine was a woman who'd been told she couldn't have babies, who'd really, really wanted them all her life. Then there's a sort of miracle and she has a baby, and she holds this baby very close to her and she walks around singing: 'Baby, never let me go…' partly because she's so happy, but also because she's so afraid something will happen, that the baby will get ill or be taken away from her.' (p.70). Alone in the dormitory, Kathy acts out her interpretation of the song, hugging a pillow to her breast and slowly dancing to the music. Then she realises she is being watched. Madame is standing near the open doorway and sobbing at the sight of Kathy's dance. Kathy has a specific interpretation of the song, which her dance is supposed to give expression to. Once Kathy realises how apt her interpretation is to her own condition as a sterile clone, she wonders about the possibility that Madame somehow knew what she was doing, knew what story it was Kathy's dance was acting out. To come upon that scene with full knowledge of what was happening, of the impossible longing that the juvenile Kathy was naively expressing, would surely reduce a person to tears. So Kathy comes to think that somehow Madame must have known.

When Kathy and Tommy meet Madame and Miss Emily again in the book's final section, Kathy asks Madame about this incident, actually describes her interpretation of the song and asks Madame whether she read her mind. Madame explains.

> I was weeping for an altogether different reason. When I watched you dancing that day, I saw something else. I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go. That is what I saw. It wasn't really you, what you were doing, I know that. But I saw you and it broke my heart. And I've never forgotten. (pp.266-267)

Some critics have complained about the slide into didacticism apparent here. Wood, for instance, laments the fact that 'the spirit of Wells or Huxley bests the spirit of Borges.'[143] I think what we see here is self-conscious didacticism. Or, to put it another way, it is Madame's didacticism rather than Ishiguro's. I don't believe we are supposed to accept Madame's words uncritically. This little speech is not meant as a validation of the conviction that most readers will (I think rightly) discern as implicit in the novel's premise, i.e. that human cloning is morally indefensible. What Madame's speech really implies at a deeper level is that the founders of Hailsham remain incapable, even in moments of apparent sympathy, of seeing the plight of the clones as anything other than a cultural or political crisis. Even Madame's tears seem to ignore the substance of the scene that elicits them. The real object of her sorrow is not Kathy but the future that she sees Kathy as portending, the story of imminent despoliation that she sees embodied in Kathy's dance. "It wasn't really you...But I saw you and it broke my heart." This sounds like an unashamed confession of sentimentality, as though the important thing for Madame was that she have the satisfying experience of having her heart broken, that she be able to identify in what she saw a neat encapsulation of her own feelings of sorrow and

[143] Wood, *The Fun Stuff*, p.36.

dread which would authorise her to weep cathartically. Her reason for weeping – the prospect of an increasingly inhuman future and the erasure of many things that made the past humane –is surely itself a very good reason for weeping. But it is tainted with sentimentality when Madame yokes it to the story she invents and imposes upon her sight of Kathy.

I am not questioning the sincerity of Madame's emotion. I am pointing out that that emotion does not really include Kathy. And the fact that Kathy herself is incidental to Madame's expression of sorrow is an indictment of that expression, shows it up as something shallow or self-indulgent. Madame's sorrow over cloning doesn't extend so far that she will actually include an individual clone in that sorrow. She does not treat Kathy as anything other than an instance of the practice she laments, a piece of evidence validating her own distress. And so Madame's emotion fails to connect with the world in the way it ought to were it to be authentic. The cruelty that breaks her heart fails to elicit from her anything but superficial sympathy for the most wounded victims of that cruelty. What breaks her heart then? I suppose it is some conscientious feeling that human cloning is a heartbreaking thing.

A scene from Part 1 might lend support to what I've just been claiming. Kathy and Ruth and some of their other friends decide to rush out of hiding and surround Madame to test Ruth's theory that Madame is afraid of the Hailsham students. When they put this plan in action Ruth's theory is confirmed, but they also get a nasty shock.

> I can still see it now, the shudder she seemed to be supressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her. And though we just kept on walking, we all felt it; it was like we'd walked from the sun right into chilly shade. Ruth had been right: Madame *was* afraid of us. But she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders. We hadn't been ready for that. It had never occurred to us to wonder how *we* would feel, being seen like that, being the spiders. (p.35, emphases in original)

Kathy refers to this incident years later when she is talking to Miss Emily. Miss Emily responds "Make no mistake about it, my child, Marie-Claude [Madame] is on your side and will always be on your side. Is she afraid of you? We're *all* afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you all

almost every day I was at Hailsham." (p.264). If Madame and Miss Emily have to "fight back" their "dread" ("revulsion" is another word Miss Emily uses) of the clones, how can their concern, and all of their political efforts, be much more than a sophisticated affectation?

Miss Emily admits that "it might look as though you [Kathy and Tommy, and Hailsham students generally] were simply pawns in a game. It can certainly be looked at like that." "But", she goes on, "think of it. You were lucky pawns. There was a certain climate and now it's gone. You have to accept that sometimes that's how things happen in this world. People's opinions, their feelings, they go one way, then the other." (p.261). Kathy's perfectly understandable (indeed, admirably restrained) response to this is "It might just be some trend that came and went…But for us, it's our life." Miss Emily brushes this aside and carries on with her lecture, before hastily apologising that she must leave and calling her manservant to take her out (she is confined to a wheelchair[144]). What gets lost here is the thought (which Kathy might, if given the chance, have gone on to voice) that the luck of being relatively better off compared to those clones brought up in abominable circumstances is no consolation for being fed egregious lies about what life would inevitably hold.[145]

When pressed by Tommy and Kathy, Miss Emily reveals the reason for Miss Lucy's dismissal from Hailsham.

> She was a nice enough girl, Lucy Wainright. But after she'd been with us for a while, she began to have these ideas. She thought you students had to be made more aware. More aware of what lay ahead of you, who you were, what you were for. She believed you should be given as full a picture as possible. That to do anything less would be somehow to cheat you. We considered her view and concluded she was mistaken. (p.262)

[144] Which is perhaps a hint that she has forgone receiving a "donated" organ to cure some crippling illness. We can only speculate about this. But if it were the case, the fact that she has made such a sacrifice for the cause wouldn't create any serious difficulties for my reading of Miss Emily and Madame.

[145] Kathy would of course have put the point differently.

Tommy and Kathy would beg to differ. Indeed, Tommy later says "I think Miss Lucy was right. Not Miss Emily." (p.268). He makes this remark moments before asking Kathy to pull their car over and then flying into a screaming rage on the roadside.

The subtle deception that the authorities at Hailsham perpetrate against the clones is also brought out in Miss Lucy's speech to Kathy's class in which she laments that they, the Hailsham students, have been "told and not told."

> If no one else will talk to you…then I will. The problem, as I see it, is that you've been told and not told. You've been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way. But I'm not. If you're going to have decent lives, then you've got to know and know properly…You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided. (pp.79-80)

Even the straight-talking from Miss Lucy is incapable of really impressing upon the students the fact of their terrible condition. Kathy reports it as a moment of awkwardness, not a moment of revelation. The students are far too comfortable in their state of knowing and not knowing to face unreservedly the knowledge Miss Lucy is presenting them with. Such is the magnitude of what she confronts them with that the only response available to them is embarrassment.

It is not all that surprising that a direct confrontation with the terrifying knowledge of their condition is unsuccessful in getting through to the clones – similar experiences are surely common among self-deceiving people. But even far subtler encounters with these truths don't seem to shock the clones into awareness. The clones are allowed to watch TV and movies, and are even encouraged to read and discuss literature. Kathy mentions people at the cottages discussing Joyce, Proust, and Kafka, to give a few telling names. How is it that they do not frequently encounter troubling knowledge of their extreme predicament compared to the rest of humanity? How can they ignore everything in the books they read and critique that reveals their own experience as alien and intolerable? Similar questions are raised by the mere fact that the clones are allowed to roam freely

amongst the general population. We are never told of any encounter between a clone and a child or an elderly person. Often the awareness of mortality strikes us in our everyday lives in just such encounters with the very young or very old.

There are a few possible responses to the problem these questions seem to raise. One is that the clones screen off the knowledge that would threaten their contentment *just as we do*. If we find anything puzzling in their dogged myopia then that shows the extent of our own dogged myopia. If we really heard what our culture spoke to us then we would not lead the bland and submissive lives we do lead.

Another possibility is that Kathy is a far less reliable narrator than we are inclined to take her to be. Indeed, she may be considerably more bland and submissive than her fellow clones, and we only think they are all like that because our account of them is filtered through Kathy, who also conscientiously omits any reference to the more overtly authoritarian methods used to keep the clones in line (and thus also obscures the necessity of such methods). Kathy may report on the reading of the other clones but she is merely parroting names and can't understand the content of the discussions that go on around her. Though it is difficult to imagine just what could count as decisive evidence of this thesis in the event that it were true, the best case for it would have to be built upon the mere fact that Kathy's narration is so cliché-riddled and lacking in stylistic flair. To adopt this view of the novel would require a formidable cynicism, and snobbery even, which it seems unlikely a remotely sympathetic reader could muster. This approach would also effectively destabilise any claims we can make about the events of the plot, so as to render interpretation beyond the simplest level of detail unworkable.

But the chief problem with both of these responses is that they seem too ready to disregard the notion that *Never Let Me Go* is suffused with a sense of dramatic irony. They want to say that we are as clueless as the clones, when any competent reading of the novel itself is evidence that we see more than the clones do. The tragic pathos of the novel lies entirely in that gap in comprehension, at least for the bulk of the novel, between the reader and Kathy (and by extension the rest of the clones).

It must also be remembered that Kathy is writing from a standpoint beyond all of the events narrated. Her account is penned after the meeting with Madame and Miss Emily, after Tommy's rage

in the dark on the roadside, after Ruth and Tommy have both "completed", after Kathy has learned everything she can about the horror of her condition as a clone. Should we really assume that, after experiencing all of that, Kathy is not as powerfully affected as we who have simply read it? If we reject that assumption then we are faced with something other than merely monotonous prose from a mind incapable of transcending cliché. We are faced either with someone whose attempts to give voice to her experience fall far short of the mark, or with someone who has anticipated that very difficulty and decided to write in prose that is deliberately undistinguished, prose that eschews creative exertion. In either case, creativity – that quality which makes us recognise something as a creative accomplishment or as something finely wrought – cannot be relied upon to validate the author of the prose. Kathy may be behaving in her narration as Tommy behaved in art class. She restrains her own creativity as a means of resisting the oppressive notion that her worth as a human being may be judged by her creative ability. And, paradoxically, Kathy's denial of creativity is itself a feat of remarkable creativity from Ishiguro – creativity purged of its authoritarian pretentions.

III

When Miss Emily describes the Hailsham students as "lucky pawns" she not only reveals some of her own subtle hypocrisy, she also captures something essential about the dual nature of Hailsham. It is a place blessedly free from the cruelties that prevail elsewhere, but it is also, partly because of this, a place that exercises its power on the students deceptively and insidiously. All of its gifts are tainted by its atmosphere of secret manipulations. This resonates with the sense many people in the modern world surely have that life is both brimming with undeserved bounties and secretly founded upon some poisonous lie. Despite all the disenchanting revelations, however, Hailsham never completely loses its Edenic aura. It is, after all, the site of Kathy's childhood (an overwhelmingly contented childhood), and the birthplace of her greatest loves and friendships. In fact, the dark secrets lurking about Hailsham are the pretence for some important moments of intimacy for the young Kathy and

Tommy, and look a great deal like the dark secrets of adulthood which all children at some point find themselves frighteningly and excitingly confronting.[146]

Even amongst other clones, those not raised at Hailsham, there is a sense that Hailsham is special. The rumour of deferrals is the clearest manifestation of that (and another idea that has parallels in naïve adolescent notions about the adult world). Chrissie, a clone who wasn't raised at Hailsham, explains the rumour as she's heard it.

> [I]f you were a boy and a girl, and you were in love with each other, really, properly in love, and if you could show it, then the people who run Hailsham, they sorted it out for you. They sorted it out so you could have a few years together before you began your donations. (p.151)

Tommy and Kathy take this rumour and build upon it, developing a theory as to how the authorities at Hailsham would assess the claims of those seeking a deferral. They decide that the key must be the Gallery. Tommy is responsible for devising the theory.

> Suppose two people come up and say they're in love. [Madame] can find the art they've done over years and years. She can see if they go. If they match. Don't forget, Kath, what she's got reveals our souls. She could decide for herself what's a good match and what's just a stupid crush. (pp.173-174)

[146] Joseph O'Neill comments insightfully on this point in his review of the novel: 'Ishiguro's imagining of the children's misshapen little world is profoundly thoughtful, and their hesitant progression into knowledge of their plight is an extreme and heartbreaking version of the exodus of all children from the innocence in which the benevolent but fraudulent adult world conspires to place them. We grow up—if we're lucky—in security and wonder, and afterward are delivered to the grotesque fact of our end.' (*The Atlantic*. May 2005. Accessed online at http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/05/new-fiction/303918/).

This is what leads Tommy and Kathy to seek out Madame. The narrative neatness of reintroducing Madame and Miss Emily, and having Miss Emily provide in a single speech all of the exposition that is needed to answer Tommy and Kathy's questions about Hailsham, is really appropriate to Kathy and Tommy's own sense of the significance of Hailsham and how it will reach into their futures. It reflects their own determination to make a narrative out of their lives (and we must remember that *Never Let Me Go* is narrated by Kathy and so its narrative is shaped by her in many ways that may not be apparent).

The mysteries that permeate life at Hailsham, and which most of the Hailsham students largely learn to regard as unremarkable facts of life, become fuel for a myth that Ruth and Kathy and Tommy stake all their hopes on being true. On the 'parable about mortality' reading, this can be understood as expressing the bewilderment characteristic of humans facing the bizarrely mundane fact of our mortality, and the religious narratives we turn to in search of solace. Kathy and Tommy come to believe that their story may be different from the story of everyone else they know. In believing that they may be granted a deferral from their donations, they see themselves as candidates for a special destiny. They put their faith in a very modest kind of earthly eschaton.

It apparently never occurs to Kathy that her long stint as a carer, considerably longer than is usual and still going at the close of the book (though apparently scheduled to end 'come the end of the year' – p.37), amounts to a kind of deferral. She has outlived most clones, but this is no salvation to her because she has outlived those she loves and whose continuing presence in her life is the real object of her yearnings. Unlike *Blade Runner*'s Roy Batty, it is not just more life that Kathy wants, it is more of *this* life with *these* people. And it is here that *Never Let Me Go* becomes profoundly life-affirming, in the acknowledgement that it is not just life itself but *your* life that you come to treasure. As readers we are able to be moved by the notion of someone who is denied a full life because we are given a distinct picture of a life against which we can measure that deprivation – it is *Kathy's* life that will, tragically, fall short of what it could be.

The narration works constantly to impress upon the reader the sense of encountering, in the narrator, a person with a history, someone with a complete life behind her, and a character that can at best be glimpsed in her explicit statements about herself. Consider the following sartorial aside: 'I don't

remember exactly what Tommy was wearing – probably one of the raggy football shirts he wore even when the weather was chilly – but I definitely had on the maroon track suit top that zipped up the front, which I'd got at a Sale in Senior 1.' (p.25). This is the last we hear of the maroon track suit top. The sharing of this kind of trivial detail is an essential part of Kathy's narrative voice, of the familiarity that invites the reader into intimacy with the characters. She tells us about '*the* maroon track suit top that zipped up the front' as though the description of this particular object will aid us in remembering it, as though she adds silently 'you know the one.' (A more overt example of the same technique can be seen in Kathy's repeatedly prefacing statements with 'I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham…' Kathy takes her reader to be like her, a 'student', a clone, and this surely lends credence to the notion of treating the novel as an allegory, a 'parable about mortality'). What this sentence also shows is the attention Kathy gave, even as a child, to Tommy, right down to noting his habits of dress. This is among the many simple, innocuous details that go to make up our picture of Kathy's enduring attachment to, and affection for, Tommy. The key to understanding how they came to love one another lies not in some veiled confessions of love they have made but in the simple facts of their shared experiences. There are no "romantic" moments between the two during their time at Hailsham, just moments spent together responding sincerely to one another. The combined weight of the numerous moments of gently expressed affinity between Kathy and Tommy is enough to impress upon us a sense of their importance to one another and ensure that we are not surprised (or are only momentarily surprised) when Ruth confesses to having kept Tommy and Kathy apart. Love, or theirs at least, is best revealed not in powerful eruptions of emotion but in the observed rhythms of a steady relationship.

This is an example of something which I see as essential to the novel's realism: that its allegorical power is operative even at the level of its prose style; that its message, for want of a better word, is fully integrated with its creation of a character (namely Kathy). Making the case for this reading calls for rebutting a few popular misconceptions, and here the notion of genre again becomes relevant. All literary genres are parasitic upon realism.[147] The conscious adoption of genre devices (in

[147] In this I follow the oft quoted (by me anyway) James Wood, who has said that realism 'funds its own defaulters' and 'schools its own truants.'

this case the science-fiction device of alternate history) is something that mediates the novel's realism. As readers we have to accept the premise that the narrated events of *Never Let Me Go* occur in a parallel version of late 1990s England. We have to waive any quarrel we might have with that notion if we're going to go on and engage with the human incidents that are narrated to us. In reading works that upset our expectations about genre (works, like *Never Let Me* Go, that put generic conventions to novel use) noticing some defect in that work very often (rightly or wrongly) points us to the genre as the source of (or an easy way of accounting for) that defect. When we read such novels, the question of plausibility and the identification of genre often go hand in hand. The misidentification of a work's genre can lead to the misjudgement of that work's narrative plausibility. This is exactly what has happened with some readers' responses to *Never Let Me Go*.

In an article on responses to *Never Let Me Go* by members of a reading group, John Mullan quotes several readers who expressed incredulity about how the world of the novel is presented, and ventured genre-based solutions to this problem.

> Here is one characteristic comment. "I was wondering what others thought of the characters' overwhelming passivity - they never once tried to escape or tried to actually live a normal life once out 'in the world'." Often the objection comes from readers who are otherwise moved and convinced by the novel. "I found the book overwhelmingly powerful, but I am bothered by the issue of passivity - given that it's clear that the 'students' could pass for non-clones in the society around them." The same reader points out that, in one episode, Ishiguro shows us that "normal" people cannot identify them as clones. Another reader argued that the novelist could have devised a sci-fi way out of the problem. "Why would the Hailsham donors read and discuss complex works of literature, poetry and philosophy and not question or rebel against their fate in any way? I did not understand how this annoyance was not addressed in

> the novel by a simple ploy of electronic chips/tagging or (more chillingly relevant) by sophisticated ID cards."[148]

These are perfectly sensible responses, but they do largely miss the point. *Never Let Me Go* is not a satire on the surveillance state. Though it has the appearance of dystopian fiction it is not in any substantial sense dystopian and it can't be more than superficially compared to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or, despite the fact that it also contains cloning, Huxley's *Brave New World*. Ishiguro's project is fundamentally different to that of Huxley and Orwell. It is even misleading to think of *Never Let Me Go* as a science-fiction novel. Another of Mullan's readers remarks that

> An England where human beings are bred and killed for their organs would not much resemble today's world, but Ishiguro's is almost identical. There is no serious political controversy surrounding 'donation', no indication that a single clone has ever fought against their fate, none of the propaganda, incarceration and perversion of a democratic society that would be necessary to make the system work.[149]

But *Never Let Me Go* isn't interested in exploring the ramifications of the technological advance of cloning, in building a detailed and internally coherent fictional world, or in speculating seriously about the impact of science on human experience. The cloning plotline is not a way of introducing a set of concerns for the reader to ponder, it's a way of *excluding* concerns that would otherwise interfere with the reader's pondering. The novel may accurately be described as a parable because, just like a parable, it marks very assiduously the boundaries of its fictional world by conveying its

[148] Mullan. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/apr/01/kazuoishiguro. Accessed online 18/08/2016.

[149] Ibid.

message with the minimum of superfluity. It need seek no justification for failing to add detail where such detail does nothing to clarify its "message."[150]

One critic has described *Never Let Me Go* as a horror story, and broadly speaking this too has the ring of truth about it. To my mind it is more successful as a horror story than most works that are conventionally classed within that genre. Its horror is of a kind that does not need to be cloaked in gaudy theatrics; there are no supernatural forces or clandestine cults. It is a story of existential horror, but all the more horrific, and much more authentic, thanks to the prosaic manner in which this horror is conveyed. Some of the most horrific things in life are those whose horror we actively conceal from ourselves, whose horror we refuse to face. Bringing this horror into focus is a matter of approaching it obliquely, showing that part of what is horrifying here is in fact our very inability to confront the horror of mortality. Too much creativity, too much invented detail, would be an unwelcome distraction, would obscure rather than expose the human dimension of Ishiguro's subject. And ultimately his subject is, like any good novelist, humans and their characteristically human modes of existence.

Wai-chew Sim doesn't see the extraordinary passivity of the clones as presenting any vexing difficulty for the reader. Yes, the clones 'unsettle and disconcert us because they lack volition and agency and because they completely accept the social order they find themselves in', but, Sim suggests, 'perhaps they remind us of ourselves, of the pressures that modern society puts on us.'[151] Sim also remarks that 'The novel doesn't say what might happen if one of them does decide to go on the run, and this becomes one of those questions that dogs us powerfully as we read. But *the point is* that this scenario would never occur to any of them. Even the wishes that they express…are workaday and pedestrian.'[152] Ishiguro elicits our incredulity precisely in order to impress upon us the incredible

[150] I don't believe that *Never Let Me Go* has an easily graspable message in the same way that a parable does. I place "message" in scare quotes to indicate that the novel's message will not be anything like as directly communicated or narrowly interpretable as that of a parable.

[151] Sim, op. cit., p.81.

[152] Ibid, p.82, my emphasis.

fact of the clones' carceral condition, imprisoned by their own measly imaginations. Some of Mullan's readers also provided 'critically eloquent explanations of why [the apparent implausibility of the clones' passivity] was an achievement of the novel.'

> As one of them put it: "You don't escape or rebel against your reality if it's part of who you are, and all you've ever known. And, most of all, it is this that makes the novel so tragic. The real theme of *Never Let Me Go* is a more universal one: lives that are never what they could be, something I think most people in real life experience."[153]

So what prevents lives being what they could be? Finitude would be one good answer. Many people really do just run out of time to make of their lives what they would. Another answer might be unrealistic expectations. People's lives are blighted by the delusions they have about their own capabilities and about how hospitable the world will be to their ambitions. This is one of the major concerns of *Never Let Me Go*. And it is interwoven with a subtle critique of the notion that our real achievements are all publically verifiable and indisputable once they do become visible. We all know creativity when we see it, and if you can't see it then it's not creativity. Kathy's whole story, with her distinctive (or distinctively undistinguished) style of narration, is a repudiation of this idea. In another way, Kathy's whole *life* (and the lives of each of the clones) is a repudiation of this idea of creativity. If we think we know how authentic human beings are created, we'd better think again.[154] An assemblage of clichés can be a work of art, and a genetic replica (you know, a clone) can be a human being. So the marriage of form and content in *Never Let Me Go* goes beyond the fact, noted by many critics, that Kathy's passive and unimaginative narrative voice reflects and is an instance of the passive and unimaginative attitude that renders the clones incapable of rebelling against their fate. We can also see a marriage of form and content in the fact that Kathy's narrative voice challenges the

[153] Mullan, op. cit.

[154] The link here is metaphorical, and making it depends upon parsing the word 'creativity' in, dare I say, a creative way. But I don't see that the reading is any less legitimate for that.

standards of creativity imposed upon students by the founders of Hailsham, and therefore also challenges the attitude to clones that sees them as needing to prove their humanity. This novel about people who are created in an unconventional way, copied from already existing material, shows in the style of its narration that creativity can come in many forms, even forms that may seem on the surface to be unimaginative and confected. This doesn't mean that the novel approves of human cloning, or that it approves of unapologetic philistinism. It endorses neither of these things, and it doesn't have to in order to picture for us a fully human clone and a work of art that eschews conspicuous stylistic artistry.

IV

In *The Oxford Companion to Music*, Percy Scholes draws an important distinction when discussing the notion of quality. He's talking about music, but what he says applies to all art. 'In any discussion of [quality in music] it seems well, at the outset, to clear the platform of the encumbrance of a common confusion. The categories "good" and "bad" are altogether independent of the categories "complex" and "simple": there is "good" simple music and "good" complex music, and "bad" simple and "bad" complex.'[155] The same confusion should not encumber our critical engagement with literature, and I don't mean to open the door to this confusion when I suggest that the "simple" prose style of *Never Let Me Go* can be seen as a conscious rejection of an accepted standard of literary quality. I am *not* claiming that *Never Let Me Go* goes out of its way to be "bad" as a strategy for challenging accepted notions of "good" and "bad" in literature, specifically those notions connected to the vague idea of "creativity." Neither am I claiming that most (or any) critics judge *Never Let Me Go* to be "bad" on the basis of its simple prose style, and fail to appreciate Ishiguro's deliberate subversion of the conservative standard of criticism on which they rely. I have not come across a single critic who considers the prose style of *Never Let Me Go* a serious defect. Readers understand why *this* story warrants *this* narrative voice. The way that Kathy narrates her story tells us something

[155] Scholes, Percy A. *The Oxford Companion to Music*, Ninth Edition. London: Oxford University Press, 1963 [1955]. p.854.

important about the lives of the Hailsham students and other clones. I agree with that commonplace reading, but I have wanted to add a further thought, a thought that brings a significant change to that reading.

Critics have failed to notice that Miss Emily and Madame, the founders of Hailsham, do not exhibit the care for the clones that they claim motivated the establishment of Hailsham. These characters are not as noble as they are often assumed to be. One of the driving ideas behind Hailsham is the idea that getting the clones to create (paintings and poems and essays and craftworks) will prove to outside observers that the clones 'have souls', that they are as human as people who are created by biological reproduction. This means that in the culture of Hailsham, a person's creativity becomes a standard for judging their humanity. How 'creative' someone is becomes the means of determining what dignity they possess and how much respect they are owed. 'A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at 'creating'.' (p.16). With creativity entrenched as a standard of human worth, a culture of persecution thrives as Hailsham. And the 'guardians' of Hailsham are powerless to combat that culture. They are trapped in the lie that sustains order at Hailsham, the lie that Miss Lucy tries vainly to speak out against.

Kathy's narrates her story as a person who has been changed by the events she is narrating. To deny that would be to insist that she is insensitive to the same things that powerfully affect us readers, and thereby to continue to withhold from her the humanity that she has always been unjustly denied. I suggest that the naiveté of her narrative voice is an affectation, intended as a rebuke against the governing myth of Hailsham: that creativity is proof of humanity. Kathy adopts a naïve, highly conventional, cliché-riddled style of narration in order to testify that creativity is more than what the culture of Hailsham declared it to be, and that human worth is not reducible to a narrow conception of human capacities. Kathy's narration shows us that the clones are passive and imaginatively stunted, but it also shows, through the deliberate imaginative restraint of its style, that they can be capable of careful reflection on that fact of their existence. With this counter-intuitive narrative strategy, Kathy turns an image of passivity and imaginative dearth into paradoxical proof of the rich and active

intelligence that she and every other clone can lay claim to if only they are freed from the dehumanising demands of an authoritarian ideal, an ideal misleadingly called 'creativity.'

Earlier I spoke of the 'subtly metafictional (or at least meta-aesthetic) current in *Never Let Me Go*.' This is what I have been attempting to bring out in discussing the notion of creativity as proof of humanity which I see presented and contested in *Never Let Me Go*. Contesting this notion involves declaring that there can be power in the unvarnished and prosaic that is entirely lacking in the burnished artifice of aesthetically honed artworks, that the simple facts of a life can become startlingly profound when delivered with earnestness and unselfconscious emotion. But of course, *Never Let Me Go* is not accurately described in these terms. Though it does not have the appearance of being aesthetically honed, the appearance of not being aesthetically honed is itself a mark of careful aesthetic honing. James Wood comments that

> So bland is this voice, so banal its daily disclosures, that the reader has a kind of amazed admiration for Ishiguro's freakish courage: one imagines him coming downstairs from a day of writing and triumphantly exclaiming to his wife: "I've done it! I've nailed the scene about the lost geometry set! Tomorrow, I'll write up the class quiz scene."[156]

So it is clear that at least one critic views the prose style of *Never Let Me Go* as, paradoxically, an amazing achievement.

Though *Never Let Me Go* is written in a thoroughly unostentatious style, this does not mean that it is not creative. However, its way of being creative is a riposte to a certain narrow conception of creativity that emphasises stylistic ostentation and imaginative excess, and that further insist that judging creativity with such standards in place is an effective means of judging the humanity of the creator.

As such, something of the strangeness and nonlinearity of the relationship between literary form and literary content is put on display in *Never Let Me Go*. I have wanted to emphasise the

[156] Wood, *The Fun Stuff*, p.33.

interconnectedness of form and content in literature, indeed their inseparability, but it's worth remembering that it is not always to be hoped that the one will fit into the other like a hand in a glove, that it is sometimes more satisfying to observe their relationship when it is held in a certain tension, when the character of that relationship is more like an uneasy truce than a harmonious embrace. And we need not be reading a work of literature to notice this feature of language, its ability to contain subtle self-subversions, to partake of a surprising doubleness, its potential to embody paradox without necessarily expressing it. We can say things with our silences, an affected inarticulacy can be richly expressive, and the careful deployment of cliché can expose its shallowness as a false bottom.

Picturing and Mirroring[157]

In her landmark essay 'Vision and Choice in Morality', Iris Murdoch describes, for the benefit of her philosophical antagonists (analytic meta-ethicist R.M. Hare being the most prominent figure in this category), two kinds of person who completely escape the concept of moral agency as conventionally (analytically) understood:

> A man may penetrate his life with reflection, seeing it as having a certain meaning and a certain kind of movement. Alternatively, and in fact the alternatives can shade into each other, a man may regard himself as set apart from others, by a superiority which brings special responsibilities, or by a curse, or some other unique destiny. Both of these fables may issue in practical judgements, possibly of great importance. Now, does the question whether these are moral decisions really depend on the answer to the question: would you wish anyone else so placed to act similarly? If faced with this somewhat surprising query the fable-makers might reply, 'Yes, I suppose so'; or possibly they might reply (in the first case), 'But nobody could be in *this* position without being *me*', or (in the second case), 'No, for nobody else has *my* destiny'. It will then also be so that, when asked for reasons for their actions, the first man will answer, 'You wouldn't understand', and the second man will give reasons which will only be cogent if one agrees that he is unique. My point is that here the 'universal rules' model simply no longer describes the situation. One can force the situation into the model if one pleases, but whatever is the point of doing so? To do so is to blur a real difference, the difference between moral attitudes which have this sort of personal background and those which do not.[158]

[157] My discussion here partakes not at all of M.H. Abrams' classic study of Romanticism *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971 [1953]). The mirroring described below is not, as mirroring is for Abrams, a metaphor for mimesis.

[158] Murdoch. *Existentialists and Mystics*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1997. p.86.

Murdoch aims to show here that the moral agent *qua* moral agent cannot be sufficiently described in terms of universalising standards of rationality, that there are exceptions to the rational-agent-centred account of morality that render it radically incomplete, if not incoherent. Rationalistic theories of morality 'blur a real difference,' and cannot avoid doing so. Rationalism in ethics is incompatible with a proper appreciation and acknowledgement of what Murdoch calls 'moral eccentricity.' The kinds of exceptions Murdoch describes in the quoted passage can only be written off as irrelevant superstition by the rationalist moral philosopher. But it is not only philosophy of a rationalistic kind that fails to do justice to these exceptions. All philosophy stands at a disadvantage where such subjective moral experiences are concerned, as becomes clear when philosophy is compared to literature. Unlike philosophy, literature is capable of conveying such a personal background as Murdoch describes, and conveying it in its particulars, imparting an appreciation of a person's unique vision of their own life in a way that discussion in terms of theoretical generalisations simply cannot.

But is it fair on philosophy to say that? Why regard philosophy as necessarily confined to the discussion of 'theoretical generalisations'? Aren't I, in making this claim, treating philosophy (despite my insistence that I'm talking 'not only [about] philosophy of a rationalistic kind') as nothing more than the objective, quasi-scientific discipline that rationalistic philosophers imagine it must be? Niklas Forsberg, a prominent contemporary interpreter of Murdoch, believes this to be a serious error that other interpreters of Murdoch consistently fall prey to. Forsberg avers that 'as long as one approaches certain philosophical problems in a, let us call it, "scientific and detached" manner, they will be thoroughly misrepresented and, hence, not properly confronted and attended to.'[159] This does not mean that addressing such problems requires abandoning philosophy and taking up literature instead. It means that our conception of philosophy needs to expand to meet the challenge of these problems. Forsberg '[does] not wish to claim that there can be only one type of philosophical activity.'[160] This cuts both ways: philosophy is neither *just* the bringing to bear of impersonal, abstract

[159] Forsberg, *Language Lost and Found*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. p.81

[160] Ibid.

theorising nor *just* the opposite of this.[161] Different philosophical problems, or subjects, will call for different styles of philosophy.

It seems to follow naturally from Murdoch's claims about literature and morality that philosophy (at least as practiced by most philosophers) may throw obstacles in the path of the modes of thought (such as what might be called literary modes of thought) that allow for moral clarity. Many have taken Murdoch as implying that philosophy may be essentially antagonistic towards these modes of thought. Cora Diamond speaks of the moral significance, ignored by conventional analytic philosophy, of 'the taking in of the visual world with a kind of wonder and freshness of perception, a visual attention which can simply marvel at a shade of blue or at the twistedness of a tree trunk, which can take in the goodness and beauty of the world.'[162] This is something that literature undoubtedly has the capacity to exhibit, and perhaps also even to inculcate. Witnessing the 'wonder and freshness of perception' that an author of fiction or a poet can manifest in their writing may make the reader more sensitive to what is wonderful and fresh in the world around them, may impart a capacity for simply marvelling at the world just as so much fiction and poetry does.

Of course, in the remark just quoted Diamond is doing the same thing in miniature. Diamond's words are not embedded in a narrative, and they don't take the form of a focused attention on particular things, they just give us a gloss on what that kind of focused attention can be like. But some of the more terse literary stylists give us little more description than the suggestive cues Diamond proffers, and such stylists may well impart a sense of wonder all the same. Diamond's words, when read by an appropriately receptive reader, will prepare the ground for a more definite revelation of the power of perceiving with wonder and encountering the goodness and beauty in things. And the audacity of the thought itself cannot be ignored. That the capacity to appreciate the beauty of the physical world might have anything to do with morality, let alone that it might be of

[161] What exactly 'the opposite' entails is hard to say. The point, I think, is that Forsberg does not want to reject theoretical approaches to philosophy *tout court*.

[162] Diamond, '"We are perpetually moralists": Iris Murdoch, Fact and Value' in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, p.108.

fundamental importance to living humanely, is a very rarely pondered notion. Diamond's point is that there is an important relationship between (1) being able to marvel at 'a shade of blue' or 'the twistedness of a tree trunk' or any precise (and beautiful!) detail of reality, and (2) the ability to clearly perceive moral realities like the complex moral demands that others may make on us. Merely communicating that thought goes some way towards infusing the world with a moral meaning that was absent before that thought was voiced for us. Murdoch, in the above excerpt, is also sketchily picturing distinct moral realities that literature is equipped to picture more vividly. So both Murdoch and Diamond, while both indisputably writing works of philosophy (and recall that Diamond is here directly engaging with Murdoch's philosophy), offer up images of the kind that are characteristically found in works of literature, thus inviting a more attentive engagement with those more detailed literary images (e.g. an evocative description of a twisted tree trunk) or with the world as it offers itself to us in such images in the course of our everyday lives (e.g. an actual twisted tree trunk).

But it may be difficult to see how, once philosophy has achieved the Murdochian task of directing us back to this kind of imaginative perception, philosophy can then offer anything more. Shouldn't philosophy then just get out of the way and let literature, perhaps in tandem with literary criticism, make sense of the complexities of our moral lives? The unique power of literature seems to be that it can *picture* life in ways that philosophy can't. If philosophy doesn't have the ability to present the kind of detailed, particular pictures that literature is able to present, doesn't this raise questions about the use of philosophy, or at least raise the possibility that philosophy has major blind-spots that many philosophers are oblivious to?

Forsberg is undaunted by these questions. His bravery in the face of such worries is in direct correlation to the boldness of his thesis as it is finally expressed. Forsberg tells us (having done the hard work of laying out a detailed argument to prepare his reader for this pithy little formula) that '[l]iterature *is* ordinary language philosophy'.[163] It is remarkable how neatly this clever thought resolves so much that is awkward or seemingly contradictory in Murdoch's writings on literature, morality, and philosophy. We must keep in mind, of course, that Forsberg is not claiming that

[163] Forsberg, op. cit., p.223, emphasis in original

literature *just is* ordinary language philosophy, or literature *is only* ordinary language philosophy. It can be much else besides. Much more, even, than we can confidently specify that it is.

Ordinary language philosophy is philosophy that takes up Ludwig Wittgenstein's mission of 'bring[ing] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use[s].'[164] The temptation to metaphysics, the temptation to abstract language away from the forms of life that give it meaning, is an expression of 'the all but unappeasable craving for unreality,'[165] in the words of Stanley Cavell, one of Wittgenstein's most accomplished and insightful interpreters.[166] Cavell also offers this short, lucid summary of the core idea of ordinary language philosophy and its implications for the way we view fiction:

> Words come to us from a distance; they were there before we were; we are born into them. Meaning them is accepting the fact of their condition. To discover what is being said to us, as to discover what we are saying, is to discover the precise location from which it is said; to understand why it is said from just there, and at that time. The art of fiction is to teach us

[164] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116.

[165] Cavell, Preface to *Must We Mean What We Say?*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002 [1969]. p.xx.

[166] The term "ordinary language philosophy" was coined not by Wittgenstein or any of his pupils at Cambridge but by Wittgenstein's contemporary J.L. Austin, founder, so to speak, of the Oxford branch of linguistic philosophy. Toril Moi (who takes Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell as the three central figures of ordinary language philosophy) notes that 'Cavell constantly expresses misgivings about the term, but nevertheless continues to use it' and that '[Richard] Fleming [noted interpreter of Cavell] also ends up sticking with "ordinary language philosophy"' despite its drawbacks. What are those drawbacks? Moi sees it as 'a huge disadvantage of the term…that it makes most people think that there are (at least) two kinds of language: ordinary and extraordinary; ordinary and literary; or ordinary and philosophical language', which isn't the point of ordinary language philosophy at all, as Moi argues at length (chapter 7 in her book). 'Yet,' she says, 'the term does have the advantage of emphasizing the importance of the ordinary.' Like Cavell and Fleming, Moi settles for "ordinary language philosophy" *faute de mieux*: 'Since I can't think of a better [term], I'll stick with it.' (*Revolution of the Ordinary*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. pp.6-7).

> distance – that the sources of what is said, the character of whomever says it, is for us to discover.[167]

Like the ability to marvel at the physical world, a sensitivity to the meanings of words may not immediately appear to be morally important. But the procedures of ordinary language philosophy carry a definite moral weight. They are by their nature ethically engaged. 'Returning words to their place in a life led,' Forsberg says, 'is not merely a matter of words, but also (importantly) of understanding one's life.'[168] Making fine distinctions within and between different forms of life,[169] which ordinary language philosophers do through a close scrutiny of linguistic habits, is exactly the skill demanded of any morally alert individual. Forsberg's parenthetical 'importantly' underscores the fact that a moral sensibility is not incidental to the astute study of ordinary language. Ordinary language philosophy is no more aridly scholastic, is no more the dry exposition of linguistic rules and structures, than literary criticism is. This makes them (OLP and lit. crit.) natural allies (and Cavell's work has frequently, brilliantly straddled the divide[170]). But literature is different from the other speech-acts which ordinary language philosophy is concerned with scrutinising. Literature itself incorporates the reflective stance towards language that ordinary language philosophy adopts towards all other uses of language (as well as towards literature). Literary criticism is necessary, then, in the

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[167] Quoted in Forsberg, op. cit., p.78

[168] Forsberg, op. cit., p.85.

[169] The phrase 'form of life' (*Lebensform*) is a technical term that can be traced back to Wittgenstein's use of it in *Philosophical Investigations*: '"So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" -- It is what human beings *say* that is true and false, and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.' (§241). My use of it here doesn't depend upon a familiarity with its more technical uses.

[170] See *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge UP, 1976), *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford UP, 1999), *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge UP, 2003), and for his film criticism/philosophy of film, *The World Viewed* (Harvard UP, 1979), *Pursuits of Happiness* (Harvard UP, 1984) and *Contesting Tears* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

same way that a continuing philosophical tradition is necessary. No insight is conclusive. There is always more to be said. And since it isn't immediately clear how (or that) literature is philosophy, we need additional reflective disciplines to show us this.

> By teaching us where words come from, novels are philosophy. That can only be seen, of course, by means of a form of reflection upon it. Alternatively, it requires (and I actually think that this is when literature displays its strongest philosophical thrust) that the literary presentation simply *jolts us out of a specific conceptual conviction* [my emphasis]. Neither of these forces of literature requires that a work must have a philosophical view put into it by its author if it is to be philosophically significant. These forces are not what we see when we recognize merely that a particular literary work *illustrates* an already attained and developed philosophical idea or position. One may say that if novels can be philosophy, in the sense developed here, a great deal of philosophical work is still to be done when we are done with a novel: it falls back on how we relate to what we read. Conceptual clarity requires conceptual responsiveness.[171]

Here, Forsberg draws an important distinction between the illustration of already developed philosophical ideas by a text and the more actively philosophical work a text does in 'teaching us where words come from'. The idea of literature as a theatre for the speculative exploration of ideas (a metaphor that trades on the recognition that the medium of theatre has very often been used in precisely this way) is rightly regarded with suspicion or condescension by many critics. Forsberg makes it clear that when he says literature is a certain kind of philosophy, this has nothing to do with the mere illustration in literary form of ideas that have been or could be conveyed just as well in non-literary form. Literature can be philosophy in that it can show how language is lived, and how people live in language, in different forms of life. 'A (good) piece of literature,' Forsberg says, 'brings into view how concepts are carried or not by people in specific contexts. In that sense, *it* philosophizes, but

[171] Forsberg, op. cit., pp.225-226

not my [*sic*] means of presenting theses.'[172] Literature is philosophy to the extent that it 'paints realistic pictures of what we look like today, *how we picture ourselves*, how our conceptual tissue looks.'[173]

This successfully addresses the most common objection to the idea that literature can contain any truth content, an objection that is often used to fend off any suggestion that literature can make a contribution to ethics. The objection involves pointing out that whenever literature concerns itself with asserting or establishing truths it effectively ceases to be literature, and so people who claim that literature can indeed convey truth largely do so on the basis of a category error. The point is whether literature *qua* literature can convey truth, and as long as one of the defining features of literature is that it is narrative fiction, this would appear to involve a contradiction in terms. Likewise, defining literature as mannered prose, or aesthetically dense prose, aesthetically charged prose (whatever your favoured euphemism for words that carry *special emphasis*), makes the idea of truth content a non sequitur. Peter Lamarque notes that 'it seems not just difficult but curiously irrelevant to try to *verify* certain literary reflections.'[174] Truth, indeed, seems curiously irrelevant to literature. Why curiously? As readers we instinctively approach works of literature with an expectation of something like truth, something we might express, if we're not too afraid of cliché, by saying that we expect a work of literature to be 'true to life.' This is what Chekhov gave voice to when he reportedly said of his Norwegian rival 'Ibsen just doesn't know life. In life it simply isn't like that.' Critics often damn works for the same basic reason that Chekhov damned Ibsen; authenticity remains a crucial measure of literary success. Genre will of course condition the appropriateness of judgements of this kind, but very rarely will they become altogether inapposite. I will have more to say later about the implications, for this kind of judgement, of different conceptions of realism, but for now it should be uncontroversial to observe that a concern with authenticity doesn't establish the relevance of *truth* to our appraisals of literature *qua* literature. It is curious, but not genuinely vexing, that we can disavow

[172] Forsberg, op. cit., p.224

[173] Ibid, p.225, my emphasis

[174] Lamarque. *The Philosophy of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009. p.234, emphasis in original

truth in our engagement with literature but remain wedded to, or indeed become committed with redoubled fervour to, an ideal of authenticity.

Forsberg's thesis ('literature is ordinary language philosophy') doesn't allow the apparent contradiction (of fiction and truth) to enter the picture. The truths that literature conveys are truths *about language*, and they reach into the realm of ethics because language reaches into the realm of ethics, as it reaches into all facets of our lives. And any reasonable definition of literature will give a central place to the concept of *language*, so the problem of irrelevance also disappears.[175]

However, this might still leave questions as to what the difference is between philosophy and literary criticism. I suspect that Forsberg's response would be that disciplinary overlap between philosophy and literary criticism is a non-issue. Why bother with a firm demarcation between the two? Certainly the best literary critics show no reticence when it comes to sliding into a philosophical register or pondering philosophical subjects, though the same liberality is harder to observe in philosophers. The most we can say in defence of a clear distinction between the two disciplines is that the concept of literature limits the scope of literary criticism in a way that philosophy, including ordinary language philosophy, must not be limited. There are certain linguistic artefacts that can't reasonably be considered works of literature but that can reasonably be (in fact must be) considered fit subjects for the ordinary language philosopher.

In my previous quotations from Forsberg I drew attention to the phrases 'jolts us out of a specific conceptual conviction' and 'how we picture ourselves' because these point to a significant feature of Forsberg's account of literature's philosophising capabilities. Drawing on Kierkegaard's notion of 'indirect communication', Forsberg argues that one of the most powerful ways literature can act as (moral) philosophy is by creating a *mirror*. Kierkegaard's practice of writing under a variety of

[175] If the mere fact of its being (self-reflective) language is enough to establish literature's concern with a form of truth (and therefore also its ethical dimension) then the claim of irrelevance - the claim that truth is (along with ethics) irrelevant to literature *qua* literature - is deprived of any standing ground. Literature is linguistic (and self-reflectively so) or it is nothing.

pseudonyms, which we should recognise as essentially a literary device, is one example of indirect communication.

Forsberg develops his concept of a mirror in response to these apparent, and admittedly 'peculiar', implications of the idea of indirect communication: that 'there is something (an "it," a specific thought) which exists that cannot be said, yet "it" can nevertheless be thought, perceived, cognized, embraced', and that 'that which cannot be said can nevertheless be communicated – transferred from the one to the other.'[176] The medium for this indirect communication is what Forsberg describes as a mirror. Here is how Forsberg draws the connection between the idea of a mirror and the necessity, where certain philosophical problems are concerned, of indirect communication:

> A characteristic feature of a mirror is that if I look into it, what I see is myself. If what I see in the frame is someone else, it is simply not a mirror. It is perfectly possible to recognize oneself framed and burst out 'That is not me! I do not recognize myself.' Now, this fact does not contradict the characteristic feature of the mirror, for if I feel inclined to say 'That's not me!' at this moment of estrangement, it is still the picture of me that I feel reluctant to identify myself with. No matter how horrific or alien (or, if it really happens, attractive) your own reflection is, it is only a reflection of you if you are reflected. Platitudinous? Yes, of course. But not without relevance – for it qualifies the question about what a philosophical problem might be if this (the mirror in which I see myself with all my deformities) is the adequate form for it to be dealt with and expressed in.[177]

We can be more precise about this idea of mirroring as it relates to literary fiction by returning to Kierkegaard and his conception of irony. Kierkegaard makes clear that irony, properly understood, does not exclude earnestness, as many mistakenly presume. Irony in Kierkegaard's conception is not saying one thing and meaning another. It is destabilising, but not because it reveals a lack of

[176] Forsberg, op. cit., p.80.

[177] Ibid, pp.80-81.

seriousness or a scepticism about the possibility of commitment to any ideal. It is destabilising because it shows, by questioning a commitment, the failure to live up to that commitment. The commitment which most concerns Kierkegaard is the commitment to being an authentic Christian, which he reveals to be problematic by radically questioning the notion of Christendom. He does this not through the modes of interrogation that Christendom itself allows for but in a way that reveals even the most astute self-criticisms of Christendom to fall far short of the standard of authenticity that must be satisfied if one is to live as an authentic Christian. Jonathan Lear offers this gloss on Kierkegaard's ironic critique of Christendom:

> It is as though Christianity has *come back* to show me that *everything* I have hitherto taken a Christian life to be is ersatz, a shadow. Even when I am pricked by conscience and experience myself falling short – that *entire package* I learned in Christendom bears at best a comical relation to what it would actually be to follow Jesus' teaching.[178]

Think then of how this idea might be extended by changing the ideal to which one is committed from 'being a true Christian' to 'being truly oneself.' There are many ways that one might question one's identity without departing from the core qualities of that identity. But then there is always the possibility of questioning your identity in a way that reveals it to be *fundamentally* problematic. This kind of self-revelation is like encountering one's image in a mirror and witnessing the ironic contrast this presents to the self-image one complacently entertains. This is something that cannot be communicated 'directly' – simply saying "You are not the person you see yourself as" will fail to dislodge the illusion.

The moment of self-revelation that a mirror offers is a moment of irony: a moment when an obscure truth breaks upon presumption and leaves the presumption derelict and undefended. The conceptual conviction out of which we are jolted, by the ironic intervention of a work of literature, is a conviction about ourselves. We picture ourselves a certain way, and because 'it is more or less

[178] Lear. *A Case for Irony.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2011. p.14, emphasis in original.

impossible to lead a life free from philosophical illusions',[179] when we are confronted with the reality of who we are, when we no longer see ourselves through the distorting lens of those illusions, we will be stopped in our tracks, unable any longer to take consolation from our fantasies (to put it in Murdochian terms). 'It is as though', as Lear describes it,

> an abyss opens between our previous understanding and our dawning sense of an ideal to which we take ourselves to be already committed. This is the strangeness of irony: we seem to be called to an ideal that transcends our ordinary understanding, but to which we now experience ourselves as already committed. The experience of irony thus seems to be a peculiar species of uncanniness – in the sense that something that has been familiar returns to me as strange and unfamiliar. And in its return it disrupts my world. For part of what it is to inhabit a world is to be able to locate familiar things in familiar places. Encountering strange things per se need not be world-disrupting, but coming to experience what has been familiar as utterly unfamiliar is a sign that one no longer knows one's way about. And the experience of uncanniness is enhanced dramatically when what is returning to me as unfamiliar is what, until now, I have taken to be my practical identity. This is what makes irony compelling.[180]

Ironic existence is 'a manifestation of a practical understanding of one aspect of the finiteness of human life: that the concepts with which we understand ourselves and live our lives have a certain vulnerability built into them. Ironic existence thus has a claim to be a human excellence because it is a form of truthfulness.' Lear goes on to add that '[irony] is also a form of self-knowledge: a practical acknowledgement of the kind of knowing that is available to creatures like us.'[181]

It is ironic truths that only literature and philosophy that strongly resembles literature are capable of communicating. This is not because ironic truths are off limits to philosophy but because the presentation of ironic truths is a constitutive trait of literature and so it simply makes sense to

[179]Forsberg, op. cit., p.85.

[180] Lear, op. cit., p.15.

[181] Ibid, p.31.

regard any effective presentation of an ironic truth as paradigmatically literary. Philosophy can be authentically ironic, ironic in the Kierkegaardian sense, but, whenever it is, it is undeniably behaving like a work of literature.

A work of fiction may act as a mirror by presenting a character who witnesses themselves mirrored in some way (i.e. experiences some ironic self-revelation) in the course of the narrative. This is the case in Forsberg's example of the film *Philadelphia Story*, in which, on Forsberg's reading (which follows a similar reading by Stanley Cavell), the protagonist sees herself mirrored in the varied appraisals of her by three male admirers. This is really just a presentation, framed by a fictional narrative, of the possibility of ironic mirroring in life. Alternatively, a work of fiction may act as a mirror by directly reflecting a true image of the reader – i.e. by serving as an occasion for (rather than just an example of) ironic self-revelation.

Forsberg quotes Georg Lichtenberg: 'We have no words for speaking of wisdom to the stupid. He who understands the wise is wise already.'[182] So how does one move from stupidity into wisdom? Rational argument shall not suffice, not if we are prone to the illusions of sense that render us incapable of recognising ourselves. We need to be made to face ourselves in a mirror. Literature can be that mirror. Self-knowledge is the key to transforming our perception and picturing more accurately the world we inhabit. Literary irony wakes us from illusion and confronts us with the truth of our condition.

*

It's tempting to contrast language that functions to mirror with language that functions to veil. Bureaucratic agencies, marketing campaigns, the news cycle, academic grievance studies, middle-brow art and punditry: all of these cultural institutions are mired in language that, in Jacob Phillips's words, 'serves as a mere tool or cog which can be slotted neatly into place' and 'express[es] pre-determined parameters', language that is 'flattened out by [a] homogenous impulse.' Such language forecloses the possibility of self-revelation. It is the antithesis of what Phillips calls 'poetic speech,'

[182] Lichtenberg, Georg Christoph. Quoted in Forsberg, p.78.

which is 'non-transferable speech, speech which cannot be fitted into [just] any context because it no longer merely serves unseen presuppositions… speech which discloses, rather than veils.' Phillips contends that poetic speech 'shows that the way people articulate things doesn't just reflect how they see things; it actually enables them to see.'[183] The latter contention is one that sits comfortably with the claims of this book. It's a milder form of what's sometimes known among linguists as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which states that language is determinative of the cognizable objects of human thought and perception; in the strong form of the hypothesis, the empirical data available to the senses will differ between different speech-communities.

A striking example of this, if true, is a scene described by Daniel Everett in his book *Don't Sleep, There are Snakes* (London: Profile, 2009), an account of his time as a missionary amongst the Pirahã tribe of the Amazon. Pirahã language is, Everett insists, *sui generis*; it is (to simplify) without tense and relies on subtleties of cadence in place of grammatical structures (a fact which has made Everett unpopular amongst Chomskyan linguists – if his account of Pirahã language were true it would refute Chomsky's theory of universal grammar),[184] and Everett relates a story of the Pirahã unanimously claiming to see a demonic spirit on the riverbank where Everett and his daughter saw only empty space.[185] Presumably this is not *quite* what Phillips has in mind. But take it as a *reductio ad absurdum* that indicates that non-absurd notion from which it has been reduced. We can understand and endorse what Phillips does have in mind, and even offer a qualified endorsement of

[183] Phillips, "Bards Reborn", *The Agonist*, Winter 2019. http://www.theagonist.org/essays/2019/01/26/essays-phillips-bards-reborn.html

[184] The debate between Everett and the Chomsky forms part of the late great Tom Wolfe's final, almost universally panned book *The Kingdom of Speech* (New York: Little, Brown, 2016).

[185] This kind of story, or at least the assumptions behind it about the far-reaching implications of radical cultural alterity, has appeal for sociologists who subscribe to the view that many of the findings of social science that were once thought to be universal are pertinent only to WEIRD cultures, that is Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic cultures. See on this Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine and Ara Norenzayan's 2009 paper "The Weirdest People in the World".

his preference for poetic over non-poetic speech, without committing fully to his dichotomizing approach to language; without, that is, supposing a hard-and-fast distinction between poetic and non-poetic speech, or literary and non-literary language. Why we should want to avoid the latter move may be made clear by subjecting the foregoing mirror metaphor to some scrutiny.

One would have to look to Gothic fiction, and the mirror from which the vampire's reflection is conspicuously absent, for another case of the mirror functioning as metaphorical truth-teller, exposing hidden secrets. Much more common is the notion of the mirror as a site of deception, a medium of illusion and purveyor of dishonest semblances. One notable philosophical discourse of the mirror is found in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, in Jacques Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage. As Lionel Bailly explains it,

> [a] human baby – immature, helpless, perceiving itself only in a fragmented way – is, at some point between the ages of six and eighteen months, going to see an image in the mirror, and realise that it is itself. This will be the first time the baby discovers itself as a unitary being, and this discovery is the source of an intense feeling of joy and excitement…While identifying itself in the mirror, the child also identifies with something from which it is separated: it is as an 'other' that the Subject identifies and experiences itself first. The founding act of identity is therefore not just emotional and intellectual, it is also schismatic, separating the Subject from itself into an object…At the Mirror Stage, the intellectual perception of oneself is an alienating experience and the beginning of a series of untruths…[186]

If you were searching for a sound scientific hypothesis about child development you may well have good reasons to be chary of this. As Terry Eagleton points out, 'if Lacan's essay 'The Mirror Stage' investigated…a myth, it rapidly became one in its own right'[187], and it is perhaps best regarded that way, as another highly suggestive and compelling myth about the strange power of the mirror. Certainly when thinking of mirrors the notion of narcissism is one that springs readily to mind,

[186] Bailly, L. *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009. pp.29-30.

[187] Eagleton, op. cit., p.1

deriving as it does from a myth that is probably our most prominent cultural figure of mirroring. Indeed for Lacanians, '[t]he Mirror Stage points up the fundamental place of narcissism in the creation of identity/Subject – the seeing oneself *as* an image, and the love of the image that *is* oneself.'[188] When we think of someone gazing into a mirror we are more likely to imagine them narcissistically captivated, or at least vainly preening, than startled by some unexpected detail about themselves. The appeal above to the mirror as a medium of clarification, as a vehicle for self-knowledge rather than self-deception, and of encountering one's reflection in a mirror as a moment of clear moral vision, depends, then, upon the reader overlooking more ready-to-hand associations and the rich philosophical discourses spun out of them (the stuff of both folk-psychology and professional psychology). Thinking of a mirror and the process of mirroring in this positive light is not necessarily at odds with a psychology like Lacan's that emphasises the opacity of the self, since a mirror is only necessary if one is otherwise incapable of seeing oneself.[189] The positive metaphor of the mirror simply states that the difficulty of self-knowledge can be overcome by a clever perspectival reordering; my human nature prevents me from fixing my vision clearly on myself, but by a certain artifice I can achieve this feat.

If the self-revealing mirror is a somewhat fraught metaphor, bedevilled by contradictory associations, even this is quite fitting. Literary language is the thing that really does the mirroring as I

[188] Bailly, op. cit., p.31, emphasis in original.

[189] Lacanian psychoanalytic theory provides a critical vocabulary that would be of much use to many of the philosophers in the amorphous tradition I have been drawing on. For instance, the term "captation", which combines the notions of being captivated (or seduced) and being taken captive (or imprisoned) and which is used in reference to the power of the specular image over the Subject, as in the Mirror Stage, might be seen as a neat encapsulation of Wittgenstein's oft-quoted reference in §115 of the *Tractatus* to a "picture" that "held us captive", at least as that phrase has been creatively riffed on by Iris Murdoch and her interpreters. And the French word *méconnaissance*, which denotes a failure of recognition or an act of perception that is oblivious to something (a kind of failed reconnaissance), and which plays a prominent role in Lacanian discourse, would fit comfortably into Murdoch's moral philosophy. One could say that for Murdoch moral failure is often a matter of *méconnaissance*, and even that *méconnaissance* is the default mode of our moral vision.

describe that process above. Language is the element that is crafted, using the tools of the literary tradition, into a reflective surface that can hold a true image of the self. And just as when we try to think of a mirror metaphorically as an aid to self-knowledge rather than a lure to narcissism we are likely to run up against certain prejudices that make this difficult, so when we come to think of literature as a means to self-revelation we are likely to fool ourselves into thinking that we know what kind of language will be capable of acting this way, that we can form a general picture of what 'literature' comes to in any talk of 'literature as a means to self-revelation'.

There is a danger, in other words, that we'll assume we are able to tell at a glance what mirroring language (self-revelatory language) looks like. This is the danger courted by Phillips in his distinction between poetic and non-poetic speech. My discussion of *Never Let Me Go* in the previous chapter was meant in part as a refutation of prejudicial notions about the kind of language that can be self-revelatory. Because, as I said there, '[w]e can say things with our silences, an affected inarticulacy can be richly expressive, and the careful deployment of cliché can expose its shallowness as a false bottom', it is wrong to assume, as we'll be inclined to if we have a too rigid conception of the literary, that literature is simply at its best, at its most revelatory, when it is voluble (but not prolix) and articulate (but not pedantic) and original (but not esoteric), that those are the fixed coordinates of literary accomplishment. *Never Let Me Go* is one text that puts the lie to that assumption, and thereby shows how labyrinthine the relationship between literary style and moral insight can be. Perhaps the metaphor that needs to be renovated is not just the mirror but the hall of mirrors.

Audition

A tale set in an English boarding school promises meaty helpings of institutional brutality and pedagogical cynicism; perhaps a snarling Gradgrindian bogeyman to menace the students with his callous and relentless utilitarian arithmetic. But one conspicuous thing about Kathy and Tommy and Ruth's story is that they didn't endure the hard times that others of their ilk did.

The sense of blessing presiding over the lives of the Hailsham students becomes one of the most unsettling influences upon the reader, an ironic source of dread. (Along with the more straightforward dread generated by the climate of secrecy and such occurrences as 'Madame' recoiling from a group of students as though they were spiders).

If horror is 'the perception of the precariousness of human identity,…the perception that it may be lost or invaded, that we may be, or may become, something other than we are, or take ourselves for',[190] then *Never Let Me Go* is undoubtedly a horror story.

When the three friends and two other donors go in search of Ruth's "possible", they are expecting to get what Othello calls 'the ocular proof'. If they can lay eyes on one of the "normal" and see there the lineaments of one of them, one of their own, then they will have proven something they have always suspected about themselves. They hope it will prove something they've always suspected about themselves, and it does, but not in the way they'd hoped. It proves, as Ruth says, that they're 'rubbish'. Meaning that their real possibles (their actuals?) are nobodies, social rejects. But also meaning that the donors themselves are human refuse, and not only because of their dubious parentage. They are, literally, not worth the flesh they're made of. Glorified organ banks. This is the

[190] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp.418-419.

great disappointment that is lurking in every small disappointment of their lives. This is the shattering of the illusion of normalcy that had comfortably enveloped them. They were looking for evidence that would exonerate them from the charge of being other, evidence that can only be sought by those convicted of otherness. So they were playing a game rigged against them. The woman suspected of being Ruth's possible works in an office – by all appearances living a typical, comfortable bourgeois life (Kathy remarks that the office looks like it's from a magazine ad). This is an object of fantasy for the donors. Normality is a fantasy for them. They must inhabit instead the false normality of the provisional stage set, scheduled to be struck any minute now. But in that aren't they just like the rest of us? Isn't it just that they know better than to be satisfied by the fantasy? They have the benefit of being no-longer naïve. But they *are* naïve, surely. Everything about Kathy's voice and her account of their lives screams naiveté. Well, yes, they appear pitiably naïve. But this is deceptive. Their naiveté is really a tacit recognition of the hopelessness of their condition, the inevitability of their terrible fate. They are entirely without political hope, and so free in a way that the rest of us aren't. Free to be as children, hopelessly dependent and reluctantly docile and (for the time being) wilfully blind to the passing of their innocence. What hope they have is invested in the possibility of miraculous intervention – which they have good grounds to believe in, since they themselves function in the lives of 'real' people as a miraculous intervention. This is, ultimately, what it means to be a 'donor'. They purchase for others an escape from mortality. ('Donation' is a euphemism; they buy, at the greatest expense, on behalf of others). This justifies their existence in the eyes of a society which knows above all else that death is a tyrant and medicine a liberator. By manifesting death's tyranny, the donors proclaim the imperative of medicine's liberation. Their suffering proves, by the prevailing political logic, the necessity of their sacrifice. Only by dying will they prove themselves worthy of life. But it is the imminence and inescapability of death which makes their lives an emergency, a pitched battle against rage and despair. The game is rigged. (Stanley Cavell's reading of *Othello* incorporates just this same dynamic of proof and guilt and pre-emptive punishment. He suggests that Othello's jealous suspicion of Desdemona functions the way an accusation of and trial for witchcraft would putatively

have functioned: if innocent, you die; if guilty, you survive and are put to death for your crime[191]). How but by writing, by language, can this regime be resisted. And what better resistance than the appearance of pitiable naiveté, an ironic (but not cynical) deployment of language which substitutes a real commitment to humanity for the false commitment to the therapeutic prolonging of (some) human life.

It's as a hope against hope that Kathy writes her audition for humanity.

No matter how well the donors perform, they will not be chosen to join the cast of the human race.

After a discussion of how hearing Tom Waits's song 'Ruby's Arms' laid the foundation for the character Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*: 'I have on a number of other occasions learned crucial lessons from the voices of singers. I refer here less to the lyrics being sung and more to the actual singing. As we know, a human voice in song is capable of expressing an unfathomably complex blend of feelings. Over the years, specific aspects of my writing have been influenced by, amongst others: Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, Emmylou Harris, Ray Charles, Bruce Springsteen, Gillian Welch, and my friend and collaborator Stacey Kent. Catching something in their voices, I have said to myself "Ah yes, that's it. That's what I need to capture in that scene. Something very close to that."'[192] What Ishiguro is doing here is not just name-dropping. The list gives you a determinate sense of the range across which human feeling can be expressed by the human voice in song, and an appreciation for the

[191] See *The Claim of Reason*, p.495.

[192] Kazuo Ishiguro. Nobel Lecture – 'My Twentieth Century Evening – and Other Small Breakthroughs'. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZW_5Y6ekUEw. Streamed live December 7, 2017. The text of this speech has been published by Knopf (December 12, 2017) as *My Twentieth Century Evening and Other Small Breakthroughs: The Nobel Lecture*.

diversity of ways in which a piece of song can be found appropriate to a particular literary expression. Ishiguro takes this notion seriously enough to have paid explicit homage to it in his fiction. (His short story collection *Nocturnes* [2009] is structured around the theme of music – it's subtitled 'Five Stories of Music and Nightfall'). We might well ask, what is the music of *Never Let Me Go*? The book's title is also the title of a song, and Judy Bridgewater's singing of that song is translated into Kathy's dance and from there to Madame's self-indulgent tears and the reader's comprehension of the real moral claim that Kathy and her kind make on the rest of the human race. The point here is not to establish a strict chain of narrative causation from a song to a sophisticated literary judgement. The point is just to notice that a song, a different modality of sensory perception than we're used to engaging in a literary context, can be part of the make-up of a sophisticated literary judgement, whether alluded to fictively or making an unseen contribution to the creative process of the author (and, given the above comments from Ishiguro, it seems likely both are true of *Never Let Me Go*).

Consider this strange diptych:

> All language is sibylline: it invokes—it foresees—a hearer. And every text is oracular: it evokes, anticipates, announces, and supplicates a reader, even one who, at the moment of writing, is immeasurably remote, unimaginable, hoped for at the extreme limit of possibility. All writing calls out for, anticipates, and longs for a reader. *Every text*, to one degree or another, embodies this prophetic saturation of language, which is language's very life; even across vast intervals of time, the author is the one promised, given over, to be received by another who has not yet appeared to view, who can be only prophesied, hoped for. Author and reader *eventuate* in the text, as promise and hope, a single surface composed from two ecstasies, in the third moment (which is also the first moment) of the text itself. A beautiful and terrible pledge is made—that we, author and reader, will one day meet there, in that place, upon that surface, in its final radiance, and will know, and will be known—but it is

made irrevocably. This illimitable attendance upon the mystery of a promise is the essence of prophecy, and the price of calling out longingly for the arrival of the one in whom the text will impress itself: for a flesh that will bear the marks of covenant.

But for this hope, no text would appear, none could be written, nor any read; I could not speak, I would not be I, if not for the economy of a promise. Simply said, there would be no text apart from this expectation, for every reading responds, however obscurely, to a promise, and every text is legible only in the light of hope. Every text comes, all exteriority appears, not only according to the reader's "intention," but as the embassy of one who is yet to come. For reading is impossible—no soul could bear the labor—but for the anticipation of fulfillment, but for the futurity of the written, the outward, word. To write is always to call to an unseen other expectantly; to read is always to await an unseen other, pledged in an intimacy found upon a single shared and indivisible surface.[193]

Tommy and I, we didn't do any big farewell number that day. When it was time, he came down the stairs with me, which he didn't usually do, and we walked across the Square together to the car. Because of the time of year, the sun was already setting behind the buildings. There were a few shadowy figures, as usual, under the overhanging roof, but the Square itself was empty. Tommy was silent all the way to the car. Then he did a little laugh and said: 'You know, Kath, when I used to play football back at Hailsham. I had this secret thing I did. When I scored a goal, I'd turn round like this' – he raised both arms up in triumph – 'and I'd run back to my mates. I never went mad or anything, just ran back with my arms up, like this.' He paused for a moment, his arms still in the air. Then he lowered them and smiled. 'In my head, Kath, when I was running back, I always imagined I was splashing

[193] Hart, David Bentley. 'The Writing of the Kingdom: Thirty-Three Aphorisms toward an Eschatology of the Text'. *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/flinders/detail.action?docID=4850949. Created from flinders on 2017-11-08 15:43:07.

> through water. Nothing deep, just up to the ankles at the most. That's what I used to imagine, every time. Splash, splash, splash.' He put his arms up again. 'It felt really good. You've just scored, you turn, and then, splash, splash, splash.' He looked at me and did another little laugh. 'All this time, I never told a single soul.' I laughed too and said: 'You crazy kid, Tommy.'
>
> After that, we kissed – just a small kiss – then I got into the car. Tommy kept standing there while I turned the thing round. Then as I pulled away, he smiled and waved. I watched him in my rear-view, and he was standing there almost till the last moment. Right at the end, I saw him raise his hand again vaguely and turn away towards the overhanging roof. Then the Square had gone from the mirror.[194]

I am drawing a contrast, of course. The first is as dense and rhapsodic as the second is spare and delicate. The first, baroque theology (or, if you're feeling particularly uncharitable, ludicrous rococo confection[195]); the second, austere literature. The first, an ecstatic epiphany, a lunge at transcendence; the second, an intimate conversation, a human moment. The first, meaning in a spectacular tumult, meant to exhilarate the intellect; the second, meaning so gentle and so ordinary that it slips into the soul and drops a painful sadness there. (We can see a gap very much like this one yawning between many works of criticism and the works of literature they take as their subjects). By throwing these two fragments together I mean to bring two divergent sensibilities into dialogue. I don't mean to mock Hart ('Look at the metaphysician, spouting his pretentious nonsense'). The allusions to Christ and Christian conceptions of God in Hart's fragment might be as mysterious and suggestive as the allusions in Ishiguro's fragment to an intimate relationship between Tommy and Kathy, and their history in a place called Hailsham, for a reader unfamiliar with *Never Let Me Go*. (Although a fragment overloaded with meaning is still only a fragment – this is the message of Tommy's elaborate animal drawings and his vain hope that their virtuosity will save him). The name 'Hailsham' suggests

[194] Ishiguro, *Never Let Me* Go, pp.279-280.

[195] I think this judgement will only be compelling for those who see every cathedral as a glorified opera house.

fraudulent worship, or the worship of fraudulence, and this, along with the shadowy figures under the overhanging roof, casts an unsettling pall upon the scene, a sense of some hidden perversity waiting to be scandalously disclosed. Hart makes the common misconception of reading as a private and introverted act seem like a scandal, a blasphemy. Ishiguro shows how another's entirely private imagination, once revealed and revealed with idiosyncratic charm ('splash, splash, splash'), disproves our suspicion of being alone in possessing humanity, and brings the tragedy of mortality poignantly into focus, though in a way that prevents maudlin self-indulgence, that makes us instead a firm enough surface for real grief to adhere to.

How is 'this secret thing' of Tommy's related to the Hartian prophet's 'illimitable attendance on the mystery of a promise'? How to reconcile 'the futurity of the written…word' with the tragic immediacy of 'the last moment' and the absence of any 'big farewell number'? Can any insight be mined from the fortuitous echo in Hart's peculiar reference to a 'hearer' and Kathy's characteristic musical metaphor?

The fulfilment of the prophetic promise of text to reader occurs when something is transacted between text and reader; a thing which is a secret constituted of both disclosure and recognition; a human thing that is human because it breaks upon our subjectivity with all the force of an unexpected disconfirmation of solipsism; an intimate detail (perhaps charming, perhaps frightening, perhaps funny, perhaps touching…) that brings us face to face with the iconoclastic particularity of another.

The text is not mortal as we are, and so we receive it as a problematic judgement upon us, knowing that it is something that reaches beyond our experience (spatially and temporally and perceptually and spiritually); but if we're humble enough, patient enough, generous enough with our attention, then we will realise that it's for this very reason that the text is capable of redeeming our mortality and of serving, where nothing else possibly could, as our notice of abdication from the throne of time, our letter of concession to the future.

If only because we can all speak before (if ever) we acquire the skill of writing, but probably also because we remain ever vulnerable to the visceral effect of being shouted at or whispered to,

there is a primitive power in the cliché that a piece of writing *speaks* to us (a sensory bias that is present also in the ordinary use of the word 'audience'), so it makes sense to think of language as directed at a *hearer*. Music, the most artful form in which language actually comes to us as hearers, is so often the source of the most fitting metaphors for life's decisive moments. The most arcane theologian can direct our attention to this, and exploit the power of this, but so too can the humblest storyteller.

What I find so appealing in Hart's breathless theological speculations is the same thing I find so appealing in *Never Let Me Go*'s humbly ambiguous allegory. That is, their lack of definition, their enigmatic allusiveness. To both Ishiguro and Hart one can imagine a critic exasperatedly saying, "Define your terms! Mark the boundaries of your world!" To Ishiguro: "Explain the social world of 'England, late 1990s.' How can it be so familiar and yet accommodate such glaring differences? How can the deceptions central to this inhuman regime be sustainable? What reader will tolerate such conspicuous lacunae?" To Hart: "Prophecy? What can you mean by that? If not a text composed of vatic propositions, what then? How can you possibly justify such bold claims about texts, and can you really mean *all* texts? Does a shopping list count as 'sibylline', as an ecstasy? What reader could be enlightened by these bewildering incantations?" The questions are all misplaced, as are the demands. 'Whereof one cannot speak' etc. These are works of love, so held in the grip of the unsayable. But silence is something actively perceived. It takes an effort to hear what is unsaid.

Conclusion: The Possibility of Realism

I want now to bring together a number of the separate claims I have been making (especially in my theoretical excursuses) and show that, when seen together, they amount to a coherent account of what is otherwise a deeply problematic notion, the notion of literary realism. Realism, whether regarded as a genre or as an ideal, has been much contested and much maligned. Damian Grant notes that realism 'is a critical term only by adoption from philosophy'[196] and that in responding to the question "What is truth?", a question central to any description of realism, 'philosophers give not just different answers but different kinds of answer, representing different approaches to the question.'[197] Clarity is not achieved, then, by mere analogy with a given philosophical stance. I will be endorsing a particular philosophical stance, but not in order to show that literary realism is best understood as having an attitude to the real analogous to this philosophical stance. My claim is rather that literary realism is best understood as identical to this philosophical stance – that what characterises realist literature is the very same thing that characterises this particular kind of philosophy.

I have already mentioned Niklas Forsberg's formula 'literature *is* ordinary language philosophy.' Unpacking this claim further should help to establish in what way realism in literature really does depend (in a way that literature in general perhaps need not depend) upon the account of language that ordinary language philosophy is the clearest articulation of.

The key to understanding this claim is the recognition that our words mean more than we intend them to mean. This would strike many Wittgensteinians, I'm sure, as a strange way to present Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. For instance, Toril Moi makes much of Wittgenstein's remark that 'Nothing is hidden.' She says that 'suspicious critics,' i.e. critics in the capital-t Theory tradition, practitioners of the "hermeneutics of suspicion", who have tended to be dismissive or derisive of Wittgenstein, operate on the assumption that

[196] Grant, *Realism*. London: Methuen, 1970. p.3.

[197] Ibid, p.8.

> the text is never what it seems, or never *only* what it seems…To read the text suspiciously is to see it as a symptom of something else. That "something else" usually turns out to be a theoretical or political insight possessed by the critic in advance of the reading. Instead of responding to the text's concerns, the critic forces it to submit to his or her own theoretical or political schemes. The result is often entirely predictable readings.[198]

One of the great virtues of a Wittgensteinian approach to literary criticism, in Moi's view, is that it dispenses at the outset with any notion of uncovering "hidden" meanings, that it makes it impossible to conceive of reading as a kind of gnostic ritual, a rescuing of esoteric truth from ideological illusion. I might be considered in danger of recapitulating the gnostic methodology of the hermeneutics of suspicion by giving pride of place to the idea of meaning that surpasses intention. This is not my intention. I mean only to indicate that the recognition of the power of words to claim us in unexpected ways provides the initial impetus of ordinary language philosophy.[199]

What every ordinary language philosopher would agree on is that disputes about language are not settled by appeal to metaphysical essences of which our words are mere representations. Understanding language means understanding how it is used – where and by whom and in what circumstances it is used. This is the core idea of ordinary language philosophy, summarised in

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[198] Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. p.175.

[199] I take the opportunity presented by my use of that vexing word "intention" to clear up how authorial intention is best understood Wittgensteinianly. Moi is, again, very clear on this:

> If we think of a text as something someone has wanted to be precisely the way it is,…there is no difference between "what is intended" and "what is there." What is there is what is intended. To ask "Why this?" – for example why the author wants *this* word *here*, in this specific position in the line, is not to ask about "something anterior" to the poem. It is to ask about what's *there*, on full display, in the poem, or painting, or film. Nothing is hidden. To ask "Why this?" or, if you prefer, "What did the author want from this?" about a textual feature is to ask what *work* this feature does in the text. It is simply not to ask about the contents of the author's brain at a specific point in the past. (p.203).

Wittgenstein's famous dicta "Language has no essence" and "Meaning is use." Analysing a concept, for ordinary language philosophers, means paying attention to the ways in which that concept is spoken (of), how people speak (about) it in everyday contexts. Confronting the "what" of meaning head-on will only lead to confusions (illusions of sense), so we must concentrate instead upon the "how." Meaning is not declared in carefully formulated abstractions but embodied in practice. Meaning is use.[200] We cannot expect our use of language to be validated, to be made sensible or

[200] Wittgenstein does substantially qualify the phrase: 'For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning'—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language' (*Philosophical Investigations*, §43, emphasis in original). So why insist on bowdlerizing Wittgenstein's carefully delineated point? I suppose all I really mean to achieve by repeating this familiar gloss on Wittgenstein is to identify my project as in line with the basic attitude to meaning of ordinary language philosophy; in line more specifically, since I am concerned with addressing literary study, with one of Moi's major themes in *Revolution of the Ordinary*, as summarised by V. Joshua Adams ('Out of the Quagmire of Words', *LA Review of Books*, November 22 2017, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/out-of-the-quagmire-of-words-ordinary-language-philosophy-and-literary-study/#!), to wit that of recommending 'that literary scholars….follow Wittgenstein's attentiveness to the ways in which questions about the meaning of words can be answered by attending to their use.' Probably no stronger expression of the point than this is warranted, but the appeal of "meaning is use" is nevertheless easy to grasp.

To further clarify what is at stake here it might help (might help more than appealing to use) to introduce the notion of grammar. And to explain the relationship between meaning and grammar, as understood by Wittgenstein, I'd defer to a highly illuminating discussion by Brad J. Kallenberg (*Ethics as Grammar*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001. p.218):

> Wittgenstein wrote that part of the grammar of "chair" is our sitting in them… [I]n this memorable illustration is hidden a wealth of philosophy of language. By the notion of "grammar" Wittgenstein intended us to realize that there is no way to extract the complicated matrix of all our behaviour (in short, *our world*) from our use of language. Thus the word "chair" does not correspond with some mind independent platform with four legs, or even with sense impressions such as "fourness," "platformness," "brownness," or "hardness." Rather, the word "chair" is put to use within the context of a community whose common life is constituted, in part, by actions such as chair-sitting, chair-

logically grounded, by appeal to something outside of language. It is not possible to specify any such something. Language has no essence.

It might be thought that appeals to use simply shift the work of justification onto new ground. But, as Toril Moi explains,

> Use is not a ground. Use is a practice grounded on nothing. Use is simply what we do. Nothing – no essences, no built-in referential power – obliges us to continue using language as we do now. In fact, we don't always continue: language is a constantly changing picture. But as long as we are willing to continue to speak to each other, use creates a semblance of ground...[201]

This semblance is as much as is necessary to maintain coherence through the dynamic activity of our lives in language. Metaphysical language, which is the language that ordinary language philosophers take no interest in (the language they do take an interest in – 'ordinary' language – is nothing more than *not*-metaphysical language, nothing less than all language that evades metaphysics' illusions of sense), is, more precisely, language that tries to step outside of the dynamic activity that language is, language that seeks a static ground, that denies its natural groundlessness and thus denies its status as

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> fetching, chair-imagining, chair-upholstering, and chair-counting. That linguistic behaviour is paired with nonverbal behaviour simply shows that all life can be described under the aspect of "behaviour." However, because descriptions cannot be given apart from language, human behaviour is also seen to be a function of language: "It is in language that it is all done." Recall that by "language" Wittgenstein did not mean merely natural languages such as English or French. Rather, by "language" Wittgenstein also meant the sorts of possibilities (vocable, behavioural, social, etc.) that enable natural languages. The matrix of these possibilities is expressed by the term "grammar," which connoted for Wittgenstein the world-permeating character of language, or better, the world-*constituting* character of language.

[201] Moi, op. cit., p.29.

language. Which is to say: it denies itself the opportunity, which all language must take up, of making sense (is nonsense).

Ordinary language is not nonsense. And ordinary language philosophy rests on the premise that we cannot confidently say the same for any other uses of language, that any legitimate attempt to do so would involve 'bring[ing] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,'[202] showing that what we thought was extraordinary is ordinary after all.

Literature is ordinary language in the sense that it is not consciously metaphysical, is not appealing to metaphysical essences in order to validate itself. But, more than this, there is a sense in which we may say that literature is indeed consciously anti-metaphysical. This is to say that literature characteristically resists abstraction, that literature is an exercise in delineating particularities and thereby achieving some sort of clarity in picturing the world. It does this, of course, in *language*, and is conscious in its use of language to this end. Literature is ordinary language philosophy. (When Stephen Mulhall says 'My use of the ordinary word 'real'…needs as much and as little justification as my use of any other ordinary word in this text, or indeed in any text'[203] he is implicitly stating the premise of ordinary language philosophy *and* implicitly defending literature's capability to philosophise). Literature is always at some level about what we are able to say in what circumstances; it is about precisely situating meaning (even if what that meaning comes to remains open to debate).

One might object to this description of literature by pointing out that a great deal of literature is premised on fabulation and concerns itself with deliberately disturbing linguistic conventions or attempting linguistic innovations. But this only means that it might be useful sometimes to add distinctions of genre to our account of any given literary work. A work does not, by the invention of words or concepts or the depiction of impossible events, escape the realities of linguistic experience or imply the presence of alien structures of meaning. It cannot escape the realities of linguistic experience as long as it is going to be language, and its structures of meaning can only be human if they are to be meaningful at all. Introducing distinctions of genre allows us to keep track of patterns of

[202] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116.

[203] Mulhall, *On Film*, p.139.

narrative and style. But there are many works of literature that do not manifest distinctive genre characteristics. These are works that eschew the extra layer of pretence, the extra armature of convention. Different genre patterns are essentially different routes of departure from this more pristine base. We would be wrong to think that works of literature that cleave to this base guarantee a closer contact with reality. Nevertheless, there is a space here that the concept of realism will neatly fill. And more: realism shows why genre distinctions are merely pragmatic, and in the process shows what other standards are in fact essential to the appreciation of literature's definitive achievements.

Realism is literature fulfilling its paradigmatically literary function, that of precisely situating meaning, without the encrustations of genre making additional demands on the reader's attention.

Time and Life

The relationship between the concepts of literature, realism, and genre may be better understood with the aid of an analogy. If literature is taken to be analogous to the concept of time, time as a rubric that allows us to name a general feature of human experience, then genre is like the many ways that we divide up time, the discrete units of clock-or-calendar time: mornings and afternoons and evenings and nights, seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, etc., etc. Generic distinctions are not quantitative but they are otherwise in a similar relation to the concept of literature as all of those units of time are to the concept of time itself: genre is how we talk in more detail about our lived experience of literature. Realism, in this analogy, is the concept of *life*, not in its biological sense but in the sense it has when we talk about a person's life or people's lives and we refer to the story or social conditions of that life or lives, or the sense it has in the phrase "the meaning of life." Although talk about genre is for practical reasons indispensable, talking the language of realism gets us closer to the felt significance of our experience of literature.

The date of an important life event is not important in itself; the importance lies in how the event fits within a life. The changing seasons and times of day may strongly condition our attitude to the world, and numerical coincidences or the influence of significant anniversaries may impact our feelings and actions, and in these ways units of time may take on a special meaning. Likewise, genre conventions may exert an influence on us that makes them impossible to ignore, makes their status *as*

genre conventions significant in itself. But in both cases the special meaning taken on by a primarily descriptive concept remains assimilable to a richer mode of discourse, namely that offered by *life* and *realism* respectively.

Although we would quickly lose our way without the concept of literature, the concept of realism more directly engages our sense of ourselves as readers, just as the concept of life does better than the concept of time in engaging our sense of ourselves as subjects. Though we never expect to be capable of discarding the concept of time or the concept of literature, and we are able to use both to express profound thoughts, 'life' and 'realism' serve more specialised functions and at the same time wear more explicitly their personal resonances.

The relationship between 'realism' and 'life' reaches beyond analogy. Literature is living language, so realism is language that knows it is alive, language in search of the right way to live as language. An accurate picture of what literature can be is not achievable without first having an accurate picture of what life is. Realism is an acknowledgement of this fact and at the same time a proof of this fact.

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Another crucial point to consider here, where we are concerned with describing the relationship of time to language, is that meaning is temporally extended.

> If…the relation between words and what we encounter or have to deal with were a 'stable' one, to repeat the same words would be to say the same thing; the fact that repetition does not guarantee understanding reinforces the point that there is a fluidity in the relation, and that the passage of *time* makes a difference. Saturday's performance of the school play is not the same as Friday's: the same words are said in the same order (with luck, if everyone has learned their lines), but there will be differences bound up with the fact that 24 hours have elapsed. When Tanya speaks her lines in Act 2, she is at some level aware of where she got a laugh last night, of the fact that her grandmother is in the audience tonight and will be shocked when she has to swear on stage, that she grasped for the first time last night why the other

> character on stage at this point reacts as he does so that she will tonight be expecting his reaction in a slightly different way. At a much more professional level, the conductor preparing to take the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields through a Mozart piano concerto will have digested a substantial discography as well as all the performances he or she has heard, and knows perfectly well that 'playing the same notes as last time' is no kind of account of what will be going on. What is said, performed, enacted becomes 'material' to the next utterance or performance, so that this latter cannot be in any very interesting sense the same. Now: put these observations together with the argument that 'understanding' an utterance or performance may be best understood as a matter of *knowing what to do or say next*. Rather than being a matter of gaining insight into a timeless mental content 'behind' or 'within' what is said, it is being able to exhibit the next step in a continuing pattern.[204]

Considerations of this kind constantly shape the production and reception of all works of fiction. No speech is spoken into a vacuum. Linguistic meaning, and so literary meaning too, is never static; it is always dependent upon the fact that speaking is a temporal activity, something that takes place throughout time and so cannot at any instant be understood without both an appreciation of the conditions from which it emerges and an idea as to how it can be carried forward. Williams captures this thought by referring to language as an 'unfinishable business.' Grasping the meaning of what is said just is knowing how to go on speaking meaningfully, so every meaningful utterance delivers the possibility of response. There never is a 'last word.'

But, as Frank Kermode argues at length in *The Sense of an Ending*, literature allows us to do justice to our instinctive sense that we can't go on being outlived by our discourses, that history and all its contents must have a terminus somewhere in the future. He illustrates this in part by describing the ancient distinction between two modalities of time, *chronos* and *kairos*: '*chronos* is "passing time" or "waiting time"…and *kairos* is the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged

[204] Williams, Rowan. *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*. London: Continuum, 2014. p.68.

with a meaning derived from its relation to the end.'[205] So there is a 'contrast between time which is simply "one damn thing after another" [*chronos*] and time as concentrated in *kairoi*.'[206] 'Normally', Kermode says, 'we associate "reality" with *chronos*, and a fiction which entirely ignored this association we might think unserious or silly or mad…Yet in every plot there is an escape from chronicity, and so, in some measure, a deviation from this norm of "reality."'[207] As another writer describes it, *chronos* is quantitative and homogenous while *kairos* is qualitative and heterogeneous. 'Chronic time is laid out on a grid upon which unremarkable change can be plotted… Kaironic time is full of potential, such that it beckons us to participate in special moments more pregnant than others.'[208] If my introduction of these terms seems arbitrary or unnecessary, that's not because the distinction is nonsense and deviation from the norm of chronicity simply a form of delusion, but because most of us get by perfectly well without these archaic and mystical-sounding labels for a common-sense distinction that we routinely observe (whether we realise it or not). But still, Kermode is right to think there is something 'very radical'[209] about this distinction. Radical in the sense that it cuts to the roots of our experience. The way we have of getting by without these terms is that we resort to literature to make sense of our experience of time. The common sense understanding of time, including the implicit distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*, is intelligible (and common) only because of the role that narrative art (including myth) plays in our lives. Literature thus both reflects and illuminates this aspect of life. Literature is both a mirror in which we can see the reality of our experience reflected from a perspective that isn't otherwise available to us, such as, for instance the perspective of *kairos*; and a lamp that makes visible to us the details of the world we inhabit, details such as the kaironic character of experiences we might default to regarding in exclusively chronic

[205] Kermode. *The Sense of an Ending*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967. p.47.

[206] Ibid, pp.47-48.

[207] Ibid, p.50.

[208] Segall, Matthew T. 'Minding Time: Chronos, Kairos, and Aion in an Archetypal Cosmos.' https://footnotes2plato.com/2015/05/15/minding-time-chronos-kairos-and-aion-in-an-archetypal-cosmos/

[209] Kermode, op. cit., p.47.

terms (Ian McEwan's fiction is particularly good at this; see e.g. the celebrated opening chapter of *Enduring Love*). The distinction between *chronos* and *kairos* is really another way of parsing the concerns about time and life that I discussed above. But I hope that referring to these terms also underscores another of my claims, namely that language is naturally a versatile tool for accessing reality. The charisma of ancient, exotic words, wrought in emphatic italics, is just a shortcut to this (a kind of cheat). Ordinary language can display the same power; it just needs to be ordered and inflected imaginatively and discerningly. Literature does this, and it also eschews the rubric of theory (which classifications like *chronos* and *kairos* unavoidably presage) in favour of the particular experiences of particular persons.

Convention's Morality

If language is, as Rowan Williams says, 'systematically indeterminate, incomplete, embodied, developed through paradox, metaphor and formal structure, and interwoven in a silence that opens up further possibilities of speech,' then this has far-reaching implications for our understanding of our lives in language, for the human experience of meaning-making. Language is then 'a reality which constantly indicates a 'hinterland'; as if always following on, or always responding, living in the wake of or in the shadow of intelligible relations whose full scale is still obscure to us.'[210] What these aspects of language reveal, in other words, is that 'we live in an environment where intelligible communication is ubiquitous – where there is 'sense' before we *make* sense.'[211] Which is another way of putting Stanley Cavell's point that words are something we are born into, that language is something that precedes and conditions us.

I'd suggest that the best way anybody has of understanding that point, or of *going on* (to use a classic Wittgensteinian turn of phrase) with that thought, the best or indeed only way of taking this fact about language and exploring it beyond self-conscious statements about language, is by analogy with the human bonds which precede and condition us, and all the moral claims that those human

[210] Williams, pp.170-171.

[211] Ibid, emphasis in original

bonds bring with them. Literature rarely escapes these concerns: ancestry and legacy; responsibility and rebellion; inheritance and originality; indebtedness, duty, and freedom. Any individual work of literature is more likely than not to traverse some part of this broad thematic terrain. But there is another important point to notice in this regard. The novel *as a genre* is characteristically engaged with these same concerns. As Stephen Mulhall explains,

> it is not simply that the novel has a cannibalistic relation to other literary genres; from the outset, its practitioners had a similarly Oedipal relation to prior examples within the genre of the novel, and so to the prior conventions within which they necessarily operated. The novel's association with originality is thus both external and internal: it endlessly renews its claim to be an unprecedentedly faithful representation of individual human experience of the world in comparison with other literary genres precisely by claiming to be more faithful to that task even than its novelistic predecessors.[212]

Or, we might add, its novelistic contemporaries. The negotiation of any particular novel with novelistic convention is no longer, if it ever was, confined to a backward-looking gaze. At least in its reception, each novel is now a competitor in a marketplace of aesthetic judgement where the reports come in live. (This, I take it, is the background to –the logical foundation of– the postmodern obsession with the obsolescence of realism. Realism was once possible, even necessary, but is no longer possible in the eternal postmodern present).[213] A comparison between two novelist-contemporaries might be instructive here.

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[212] Mulhall. *The Wounded Animal*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009. p.145.

[213] A proper reckoning with this idea would probably have to address the Derridean notion of *hauntology*, a critical concept that emerged out of *Spectres of Marx* (1994). Mark Fisher describes hauntology as an awareness of the way that the 'anxious insistence on the paraphernalia of the contemporary' in contemporary cultural forms really only 'obfuscates the fact that the formal features of what we are seeing and hearing are familiar to the point of being exhausted.' ('What Is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, 66:1, Fall 2012, p.18). Popular genres can be seen to have 'succumbed to [their] own inertia and retrospection' and now devote their efforts to

I began with a study of a novel by Ian McEwan, a writer who has been criticised for his 'addiction to secrecy'[214] and his tendency to construct novels around 'narrative secrets [that]…ultimately exist only to confess themselves'.[215] It is said that what results from McEwan's dependence on, and self-conscious foregrounding of, the convention of the plot twist, with its finely-tuned accumulations and discharges of narrative energy, is '[a]n extreme and bogus binarism…in which the reader is pushed between an absolute trust in fiction's form-making power and an absolute scepticism of it.'[216] I have argued that *Atonement* reaches beyond this addiction to secrecy towards an engagement with mystery, and that a morally serious reading of the novel will discover something other than the tug-of-war between the two poles of absolute trust and absolute scepticism. But it remains easy to see how this criticism applies across McEwan's oeuvre, and even to certain aspects of *Atonement*. McEwan is a writer for whom the careful interweaving of plot threads, often in subtly (or not so subtly) metafictional patterns, creates a clear path to thematic apotheosis, and this technique can indeed be awkward and cheapening.

No such criticism could possibly be levelled at Marilynne Robinson. All of her novels invest the bulk of their energies in conveying particulars of character, with the presentation of plot eschewing conventional structures and instead yielding to the eccentricities and introspections of the character who narrates each novel or through whom each novel's perspective is focalised. *Housekeeping* is resolutely Ruth's story, embodying in its oblique narrative disclosures and deferrals the haunted character of Ruth's subjectivity. *Gilead* is Reverend John Ames's letter to his young son,

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'[disguising] the disappearance of formal innovation' (ibid, p.16). This is in line, Fisher says, with Fredric Jameson's claim that postmodernism 'is characterized by a particular kind of anachronism'. What I have alluded to here, in talking of 'the eternal postmodern present', is a hauntological understanding of contemporary literature.

[214] James Wood. 'Containment: Trauma and Manipulation in Ian McEwan' in *The Fun Stuff*. New York: Picador, 2012. p.187.

[215] Wood, *The Fun Stuff*, p.188.

[216] Ibid, p.190.

complete with direct addresses from father to son as Ames reaches across time to share his hopes and fears and prayers with the man his son will become. *Home* is Glory Boughton's story (narrated in the third-person) of how her wayward brother Jack unknowingly leads her to commit herself, in an unacknowledged act of love, to remaining in the town of Gilead after their father passes away. And *Lila* is the story of Ames's wife, of her harrowing past as a drifter and her struggle to trust those who, without comprehending her old life, sincerely offer her a new one. It is also narrated in the third-person, but in Lila's idiom and with her internal monologue frequently bleeding into the flow of the narrative.

Each of Robinson's novels is, in a way, about people living courageously in the face of uncertainty, gracefully trying to reconcile themselves to the puzzle of their past and the mystery of their future. Ruth, Ames, and Lila have all experienced the unexpected deaths of loved ones and struggle with the task of making sense of that sudden and irrevocable loss, and *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, and *Lila* each ends with its protagonist on the cusp of an uncertain future. Jack Boughton's whole life is a painful enigma for himself and those around him. There is no room here for the uncanny confluence of improbable events that we find in McEwan. But, like McEwan, Robinson is persistently concerned with secrecy, with knowledge and the moral implications of its concealment or absence. McEwan self-consciously exploits the narrative capabilities of the novelistic form by presenting startling epistemological structures (the stealthy, chaotic migrations of carnal knowledge that power the first section of *Atonement*; the ironies that cluster around newlyweds Florence and Edward in *On Chesil Beach*) within which his characters stand imprisoned and exposed. Robinson, on the other hand, crafts her fiction with an emphasis on narrative voice, fostering a warm familiarity between reader and character, so that the encounter with alterity takes place on intimate grounds. But I hope to have made the case that, despite their very different novelistic sensibilities, McEwan and Robinson succeed, in *Atonement* and *Housekeeping* respectively, in exploiting the conventional architectures (or, if you will, the standing edifice of stylistic possibilities) of the novel form to stage a radically particular moral encounter.

If we're determined to pit these writers against one another then we can easily see them trampling all over each other's stylistic merits. But it's better to recognise simply that they each

achieve a similar task in their own distinctive ways. Acknowledging the moral significance of style doesn't mean that we imply moral relativism whenever we allow for a plurality of successful styles.

The other writer I have focused on, Kazuo Ishiguro, was described by the Nobel Committee, upon the conferral on him of the 2017 Nobel Prize for Literature, as a writer 'who, in novels of great emotional force, has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world.' "Uncovering an abyss beneath an illusion" is a good description of the *modus operandi* of postmodern literature. This strikes me as a bizarre way to describe Ishiguro's fiction. I don't see Ishiguro as a characteristically postmodern novelist, and if he is postmodern then his postmodernism is of an unconventional kind, something that reaches beyond repudiation, beyond the unmasking of illusions, and beyond the alternately fearless (because cynical) and fearful (because despairing) contemplation of the void that marks so much of the fiction that is called postmodern. I've suggested that, in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro subtly and powerfully depicts a certain kind of hypocrisy, an attitude of righteous resistance to social injustice that is informed by deeply felt emotion but that is nonetheless thoroughly compromised by sentimentality. Ishiguro presents us with an example of sincere moral concern that fails to meet its object. In other words, he presents us with a form of sentimental compassion, compassion that we might say, with apologies to Bernard Williams and Milan Kundera, sheds one tear too many.[217] But Ishiguro presents this in such a way that most readers have failed to notice it, which

[217] In Kundera's description of kitsch, we shed two tears, one that says, 'How lovely that children should be playing on the grass!', and another that says, 'How lovely that I should shed a tear at the sight of children playing on the grass!' Madame's compassion for Kathy is thus a form of kitsch. Bernard Williams described the reasoned conclusion that it is morally permissible to choose to save one's wife rather than a perfect stranger in a situation where both are in peril as '[providing] the agent with one thought too many' ('Persons, character and morality' in *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981. p.18), and saw this as a manifestation of moralism, an instance of superfluous deference to a rational decision procedure and so, as Williams sees it, a failure to recognise that 'the limitation of the moral is itself something morally important.' (Williams, 'Moral Luck' in *Moral Luck*, p.38). Madame, because she is providing herself with a reason to pity Kathy, is, on Williams's understanding of the term, guilty of moralism. The coincidence of Kundera's and Williams's concepts suggests

might lead us to conclude that in this case, *pace* Moi, something is hidden, and so the hermeneutics of suspicion appears to be vindicated.

Not so. First, this implies a too-liberal conception of what counts as 'hidden.' If one wanted to adhere to this conception and to avoid the superstitious pursuit of hidden meanings, then one would find oneself incapable of crediting any claim that appeared to overstep received ideas. Ordinary language philosophy doesn't underwrite the dismissal of any claims simply because they are not transparent to common sense, or not immediately recognisable as truisms. Not every clever generalisation is a metaphysical fiction, and not every counterintuitive or controversial conclusion is bravely won from the jaws of ideology.

Second, the architects of Hailsham are not the central characters of *Never Let Me Go*, and it would make little sense to treat the novel as primarily an excavation of their moral failing. Kathy, and Tommy and Ruth, and the other donors we meet, do not exist, narratively speaking, to reveal the hypocrisy of the Hailsham project. In fact, the revelation of that hypocrisy would not be possible if the donors, and Kathy and her intimates in particular, were present solely to serve that end. That they should reveal themselves to the reader as real people, as more than caricatures or archetypes or mouthpieces for a message, is not incidental to their revealing the failure of their patrons to see them fully as real people. Even if Ishiguro set out to write a novel about institutional hypocrisy based on sentimental compassion (which is doubtful), or even if the reader set out to read the novel as fundamentally *about* that, then the demands of depicting that or of recognising that, the demands of articulating and comprehending as complex a notion as sentimental (kitschy, moralistic[218]) compassion, would necessarily place before the reader something much larger and more interesting (though not necessarily more original and exciting). Picturing a failure of compassion (which is more complicated than a denial of compassion) requires one to provide an opportunity for compassion's

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another approach to identifying affinities between aesthetic and moral understanding, and not only because one is a novelist and the other a philosopher.

[218] See n217

success, to provide a genuine sense of connection with the world. This is what the reader gets in Kathy.

I can't speak to the whole of Ishiguro's oeuvre (though it seems obvious to me that *The Remains of the Day*, whose ending I read as defiantly sentimental or unapologetically platitudinous in the face of the obvious temptation to ironise, is another work that can't be reduced to an exercise in iconoclasm; and *A Pale View of Hills* too works its narrative magic to expose not an unmeaning abyss but a painful truth which is all-too-meaningful). But *Never Let Me Go*, as I have described it, draws all of its power from the humanity it reveals beneath the illusion of humane concern. Humanity is a painful condition, and Ishiguro would be one of the last writers to deny that. If you're going to see that condition, that pain, as meaningful, then you might be able to see it as bordering an abyss, but not as a mere veneer, not as a mirage superimposed on an abyss. *Never Let Me Go* actually amounts to a strong argument for the value of a life lived on the surface of things. (That surface that is evidently the place where most of our human encounters occur). The novel does this through its ability to make the reader attentive to what Richard Kearney has called 'the semaphore of the insignificant.'[219] Kathy's very ordinary language is nonetheless a language that endlessly and profoundly signals to the reader.

It's possible to signal too much, or too emphatically, and to become pedantic in one's focus upon what is normally considered insignificant. This might be one way of describing how literary postmodernism has itself (ironically, and so fittingly – but I'm getting ahead of myself) taken on the aspect of a genre, ossified into a convention. The insignificant fact that in reading you occupy the position of a reader in contrast to the writer who occupies the position of a writer becomes, in much postmodern fiction, a cause for frenzied flag waving. James Wood drolly captures the obnoxiousness of this feature of postmodern convention in a broadside against the fiction of Paul Auster: 'At the end of [any Auster] story, the hints that have been punctually scattered like mouse droppings lead us to the postmodern hole in the book where the rodent got in – the revelation that some or all of what we have

[219] Kearney. 'Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology' in Manoussakis, John Panteleimon ed. *After God*. New York: Fordham UP, 2006. p.3.

been reading has probably been imagined by the protagonist.'[220] Similar complaints were registered against *Atonement*'s metafictional twist. Ripping away the conceit of fictionality becomes just another surrender to cliché. But perhaps it only looks this way if we think of postmodernism as a form of the avant-garde, as an escape from convention. But postmodernism is distinct from avant-gardism. Postmodernism is not so much an escape from convention as a recognition that it is impossible to escape from convention. This accords with Linda Hutcheon's characterisation of postmodernism as 'complicit critique.'[221]

C.S. Lewis remarks in *A Grief Observed*,

> I once read the sentence 'I lay awake all night with toothache, thinking about toothache and about lying awake.' That's true to life. Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery's shadow or reflection: the fact that you don't merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief. Do these notes merely aggravate that side of it? Merely confirm the monotonous, tread-mill march of the mind round one subject? But what am I to do?...[222]

As commonplace an experience as bereavement exhibits the "postmodern" character of self-referentiality. We must realise that if there is anything strange in this turning of thought and feeling in on itself which thwarts understanding, then this is the essential strangeness of everyday life, a thoroughly quotidian strangeness. And nothing in this experience stands opposed to uncovering a profound depth of human feeling. If this is what is really meant by referring to an abyss, then yes, there is an abyss beneath our sense of connection with the world. Our sense of connection with the world, explored (impossible to explore other than) through language, most sophisticatedly explored through literature, reaches out towards an unfathomable mass of human meanings. All life is, in this

[220] Wood, *The Fun Stuff*, p.268.

[221] See her *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

[222] C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed: Reader's Edition*. London: Faber & Faber, 2015 [1961]. p.8.

sense, "postmodern." (Merely to speak is to presuppose uncountable – though not infinite – possibilities of meaning).[223]

There is a sense in which all philosophy too is "postmodern", since all philosophy is complicit critique.[224] As Jonathan Rée has put it

> The peculiarity of most of the activities which have claimed the name of philosophy, is that they have adopted integral histories which, in various ways, define philosophy's past as error. So philosophy has conceived of itself as a form of wisdom which is curiously intimate with folly: as a cure for error, but also as a source of it…It follows that those who deplore, lament, or deride philosophy for having a past which is a catalogue of errors, are blind to an irony. To be interested in putting an end to metaphysics, is simply to do pious homage to philosophy as a distinctive discipline; for, as Pascal noted, 'to ridicule philosophy is really to philosophize.'[225]

[223] Lewis goes on to say '[God] is the great iconoclast…All reality is iconoclastic. The earthly beloved, even in this life, incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her. And you want her to; you want her with all her resistances, all her faults, all her unexpectedness. That is, in her foursquare and independent reality.' (*A Grief Observed*, p.52). On my understanding Lewis is here being impeccably realist. One can easily see how this is also impeccably postmodern.

[224] I suppose by this 'too' I mean to say 'as well as life', implying that philosophy is something altogether removed from life. It's hard to shrug off this prejudice. In the same vein, Alasdair MacIntyre has commented upon the fact that 'the level at which academic philosophers treat…questions [of everyday relevance] often appears to outsiders – including some philosophers themselves in their off-duty moments – as disturbingly abstract and unrealistic,' so that laymen half the time tend to 'an irritated dismissal of philosophy as unworldly and irrelevant.'('Alasdair MacIntyre on the claims of philosophy'. *London Review of Books*. Vol.2, No.11: 5 June 1980. p.15).

[225] Rée, *Philosophical Tales*. London: Methuen, 1987. pp.54-55.

To ridicule realism is not exactly to realise it, but it is to recapitulate the category. Any critique of realism is necessarily a complicit critique. So the gap between realism and postmodernism, in this respect, is a kind of illusion. But seeing through that illusion should lead us to give realism the respect it's due and perhaps be more prepared to see postmodernism as a pretentious affectation: realism is postmodernism without the pretence of being something other than realism.

To put this more conventionally: realist literature is often derided as insufficiently attentive to its own artifice. It is contrasted unfavourably with postmodern literature which exhibits none of the supposed naiveté and bad faith of realism. It is said that postmodern literature is saved by its irony, an irony that is more truthful than realism's earnestness because it remains always ambivalent about the possibility of truth. Realism perpetuates the old lie that art can be a path to enlightenment. Postmodernism exposes enlightenment as a conspiracy of illusions.[226] But this view misconstrues the nature of irony; it sees irony as exclusively allied to disenchantment and destabilisation. It misses the more subtle kind of irony that animates all realist literature. Realism is inherently ironic in that it is naturally engaged in puncturing illusions and reorienting the reader, it is just that realism's way of doing this is much less theatrical and self-conscious than the postmodern method. Conventional postmodern literature is realism in fast-forward and with the brightness turned way up. Much less meaning is communicated but the experience is a novel and exciting one.

The irony of realism is Kierkegaardian irony. It is irony that breaks illusion by bringing reality into sharper focus. It is irony that reinforces a commitment by showing what that commitment truly entails, irony that inspires renewed devotion to the authentic by showing the difference between the fraudulent and the authentic. To the extent that realist literature is defined by the presence of this kind of irony, realist literature is literature that is devoted to its task of 'mirroring' reality, confronting the reader with an image of the real. That there is a real to be imaged is what postmodern literature can never quite bring itself to admit. Realism's only necessary concession to convention is to assume just this: that there is a real that it (realist literature) may image and that it must try to image clearly.

[226] In David Foster Wallace's phrase, it 'explodes hypocrisy.' See his 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.' *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2 (Summer 1993).

To acknowledge the possibility of literary realism, in the sense that I have articulated above, is to make available an account of morality that is both open-ended and holistic in a way that prevailing rationalistic accounts of morality decidedly are not. If the account I have given of literary realism is truly to make sense then it must also be accepted that life makes moral claims on us, or else coheres in morally significant ways, that cannot be apprehended simply by reference to choice and conduct. And it must be accepted as well that our experience of the world is undergirded in fundamentally moral ways by concepts such as adventure and friendship, concepts that shape our encounter with reality as a distinctively moral encounter (given their inseparability from more obviously moral concepts such as trust). These articulations of moral complexity and moral ubiquity give content to the notion of life that I invoked earlier, making clear some of the ways that literature can succeed or fail to be "true to life" or, better, "truly alive," and thus succeed or fail as literary realism.

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Recently I found myself again in that position of wearily describing my thesis to someone I'd just met. A friend of mine who was party to this conversation intervened with a well-timed joke.

'So it involves studying a few contemporary novels,' I was saying, 'and exploring how it might be possible to regard them as –'

'- as literature,' my friend finished for me.

I realised later that she was more right than she knew.

I have not been concerned to offer a definition of literature, though at least parts of this dissertation should have provided an ostensive definition. Alasdair MacIntyre criticises Stanley Cavell for 'nowhere' in *The Claim of Reason*, '[telling] us what he takes morality to be.'[227] Instead Cavell 'seem[s] to presuppose' that we 'all know what morality is, and all agree about it'. This, says MacIntyre 'is to close a crucial debate before it has even opened.'[228] But Cavell is quite clear about what morality is not. Morality is not, for instance, a game:

[227] MacIntyre, op. cit., p.16.

[228] Ibid.

> In games, what the other person is doing, the goal he aims for, his way, is clear; what it is you tell him to do is defined; what alternatives he can take are fixed; what it would mean to say, the grounds upon which you say, that one course is better than another are part of the game; whether he has done it is settled. In morality none of this is so. Our way is neither clear nor simple; we are often lost. What you are said to do can have the most various descriptions; under some you will know that you are doing it, under others you will not, under some your act will seem unjust to you, under others not. What alternatives we can and must take are not fixed, but chosen; and thereby fix us.[229]

And if MacIntyre can't see in this, and in the whole audacious effort of Cavell's style, a declaration of moral conviction, the conviction that the vexing pressure of morality is immediately knowable (and, implicitly, that literary style is an active element in any adequate unfolding of the significance and implications of morality throughout our lives), then we can only ask MacIntyre (brilliant reader though he is) to read more generously and more imaginatively.

What's required here is not just to see that something true is caught by this description, but also that the manner of catching that truth and the form in which it is found graspable are key determinants in the matter of what kind of truth is being sought. Not stating straightforwardly 'what he takes morality to be' is the best way of acknowledging that any such statement would be a pale shadow of the richly ambiguous description that is provided, an allusion diluted until it resembles argument.

I no more need to tell you flat out what I think literature is than Ian McEwan, Marilynne Robinson, and Kazuo Ishiguro need to do that before you'll grant them their credentials as bearers of human insight. (You wouldn't, unless you're beholden to a bogus disciplinary hierarchy, hold me to a higher standard than you do them). But I have implied that part of what it means for their books to be literature is that they are forms of realism, and that part of what it means for them to be forms of

[229] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p.324.

realism is for them to faithfully instantiate human life, and that part of what it means for them to faithfully instantiate human life is for them to acknowledge how pervasive and multifarious and immune to rational reduction are the claims that morality makes on us. And if there is a whole truth here that I have failed to encompass then it is something that adheres in all the interstices of these authors' diverse literary styles, those styles that I have been attempting simultaneously to honour and to scrutinise and to annex. And if that implication (or chain of implications) is at all compelling, if it answers to a latent or articulate understanding you have of reading as an exercise in moral perception and affirmation of moral truth, and augments that understanding in a propitious way, then I have done what little I can do to give sense to the claim that there exists a necessary relationship between literature and moral sense.

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