"MORAL ILLUMINATION": ON MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM'S LITERARY ETHICS

Parker Tilbury[1]

There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have.[2]

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Here is how the story goes. If we are affected by the literary worlds we enter (and there is good reason to believe we are),[3] then literature has the capacity to affect our thoughts, views and even actions. Ethical and moral implications therefore arise for both reader and writer. Whether these implications and their possible consequences should hold any bearing on the way we *value* literature is another thing entirely. Proponents of the purely aesthetic – the "art for art's sake" crowd – equate the extraction of moral lessons from literature to the veritable butchering of the literary form itself, as "there are kinds of beauty before which the moral imagination ought to withdraw".[4] We can hardly blame them, when so much of the past discourse dominating ethical criticism has centred on its use to censor and condemn the kinds of literature that were deemed to be morally flawed.[5] Martha C. Nussbaum, on the contrary, promises a more pragmatic approach in her exploration of how ethical meaning is infused into the very *essence* of the literary construction itself, transcending the mere actions and situations of the characters.[6] Literature is, on Nussbaum's account, unique in its exploration of ethics and

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1 A nom-de-plume.

2 Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2002), 38.

3 Contemporary neuroscience techniques have been used to investigate changes in mirror neuron activity after exposure to narrative literature, see: Suzanne Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," *Narrative (Columbus, Ohio)* 14, no. 3 (2006): 208-216, https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2006.0015.

4 Originally from Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Secker & Wargburg, 1982), 337; quoted in Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two," *Philosophy and Literature* 22, no. 2 (1998): 394, https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1998.0048.

5 For an overview of these arguments, see E. M. Dadlez, "Hume, Halos, and Rough Heroes: Moral and Aesthetic Defects in Works of Fiction," *Philosophy and Literature* 41, no. 1 (2017): 91-93, https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2017.0006.

6 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Reading for Life," in *Love's Knowledge* (United States: Oxford University Press, 1992), 237-240, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195074857.003.0009.

irreplaceable in the realm of moral philosophy because of its ability to provide practical, yet nuanced, wisdom on how we ought to live our lives.[7]

This essay explores Nussbaum's literary-ethical theory in three parts. The first examines her view that a kind of equilibrium can be reached between the somewhat conflicting ideals of literary theory and moral philosophy. The second is an aesthetic reading of Ian McEwan's 2001 British metafictional novel, *Atonement*, through which the moral concepts of truth, blame and forgiveness are discussed. The third, and final section, provides a look into the limitations of empathy as a means of moral learning through literature. Ultimately, what I aim to show is that some of the concerns with Nussbaum's account can be resolved by reconceptualising literature as a means of 'moral illumination', rather than as works of moral philosophy themselves.

[7] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's The Golden Bowl and Literature as Moral Philosophy," *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (1983): 39-42, https://doi.org/10.2307/468992.

I LITERATURE AS MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge* (1992) proposes a marriage of literary and ethical theory through a detailed look into a collection of texts, ranging from Homer, Dickens, Beckett and Proust, to, most notably, Henry James. In times of ever-increasing moral difficulty, it is Nussbaum's view that what is missing from ethical discourse is *literature*, and its ability to draw out the complex interactions between human choice, circumstance and relationships; aspects that are often overlooked in traditional moral philosophy.[8] In turn, without ethical theory, literature loses what Nussbaum claims makes it *moving* for us as readers: its ability to relate to and speak deeply about the "totality of our connections".[9] Beyond this mere symbiosis, Nussbaum goes a step further to claim that some literary pieces are *themselves* works of moral philosophy, in that they are independently capable of making an epistemic stand in articulating the particulars of how we should live our lives.[10] Not every literary text can be placed on such a pedestal, however – only a "very specific type", James' later creations, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*, for instance. Such works, according to Nussbaum, yield something intrinsic that allow them to capture the unique complexity of morality and through their aesthetic construction, provide the sensitivity and emotional depth that the moral situation calls for."[11]

Central to the literary-ethical thinking Nussbaum proposes lies the question "*How should we live?*". This stems from the Aristotelian concept that *eudaimonia,* or "the good life", is attained through moral and intellectual virtues, personal relationships and the culmination of every aspect of a person's life.[12] This is to be distinguished from the Kantian question, "*What is my moral duty?*", which suggests that there is a separate realm of universal rules of conduct that apply to us irrespective of who we are, our circumstances and the particulars of our lives.[13] Our inquiry of the Aristotelian question purportedly yields results that are both *empirical* in that we are drawing "evidence" from literary texts, and *practical* as our aim is to seek

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8 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 244, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444315592.ch13.

9 Nussbaum, "Perceptive Equilibrium," 242-243.

10 This claim was first made in reference to Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* (1904), and discussed extensively in Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals".

11 Martha C. Nussbaum, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature," *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 10 (1985): 163-164, https://doi.org/10.2307/2026358.

12 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4.4.15-30.

13 Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals," 40.

instruction on how we ought to lead morally flourishing lives.[14] Nussbaum invites us to start the empirical process by collecting descriptions of characters, their contexts, ideals, interactions, the trials they encounter and the intersection between their actions and desires. These descriptions ought to be rich in detail, comprehensive and accurate, in order for us to have all the facts before we consider which aspects are conducive to developing moral knowledge. The "sense of life" that is captured throughout this process is what Nussbaum refers to as "perceptions", which guide us towards making our own judgements of *what* we value, *how* and *why* we value them, and *where* we can seek this value in our lives.[15] During the reading process, the author is key to fine-tuning our perceptions, using language to draw out our moral imagination and sensibilities. Emotions hold cognitive benefit on Nussbaum's account and provide the link between purely just a knowledge of ethical concepts, and their practical manifestations – "practical reasoning unaccompanied by emotion is not sufficient for practical wisdom."[16] It is through this act of perceiving, intuition and the development of "fine awareness" that we are shown not only how to make moral judgements, but to tailor our thoughts and actions towards our circumstances, even down to the nuances of speaking in the right tone of voice.[17] This is something that Nussbaum claims to be wholly unique to the reading process.

Two main criticisms have since arisen. The first is that the literary works put forth by Nussbaum cannot themselves be works of "moral philosophy", because any moral benefit that we do glean is instead through the commentary she provides.[18] The beauty and purported strength of literature lies in its ability to provoke a vast array of interpretations; whether Hamlet's descent into madness was genuine, who or what Godot represents in *Waiting for Godot*, how we feel about the love triangle in *Twilight*, so on and so forth. Just as we expect different aesthetic interpretations to exist, so too do ethical interpretations.[19] It is only through

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[14] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," in *Love's Knowledge* (United States: Oxford University Press, 1992), 38-40, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195074857.001.0001.

[15] Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible," 163-165.

[16] Nussbaum, "Introduction," 40.

[17] Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible," 156.

[18] This objection has been raised in various forms by several critics, notably Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 21, no. 1 (1997): https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1997.0010, Katie Ebner-Landy, "A Critique of Martha Nussbaum's Liberal Aesthetics." *Political Theory* 52, no. 3 (2024): https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917231194734 and Paul Voice, "Why Literature Cannot Be Moral Philosophy," *Theoria (Pietermaritzburg)* 83, no. 83/84 (1994).

[19] Welcoming the differences in ethical responses to literature is "part of the ethics of ethical criticism", according to James Phelan, "Rhetorical Literary Ethics and Lyric Narrative: Robert Frost's 'Home Burial'," *Poetics Today* 25, no. 4 (2004): 630-632, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-25-4-627.

a careful deliberation of the literary text that we can draw connections between the style in which it is composed, and the moral truths it contains. If we are to accept Nussbaum's thesis that a work of literature just *is* moral philosophy, the criticism goes that she may as well claim that "the supreme text of moral philosophy is life itself".[20] The second (and more pressing) concern is that despite claims that we can derive practical, moral lessons from literature, Nussbaum falls short of articulating how this process can be actualised.[21] In the absence of rules and universal decision-making, we run the risk of entering a state of moral limbo – an overloading of so many different perceptions and considerations that we no longer have any clear directive on how to live. A case has been made that interactions on a close or personal level may require the intricacy of a more tailored "fine sensibility", but rules can help govern our decision-making in situations where our sentiments and our moral interests conflict.[22] In restricting her discussion solely to Aristotelian concepts of the moral good, Nussbaum may be systematically eliminating rather useful facets of moral thinking on the grounds that they are incompatible with literary theory. The Kantian view need not be discounted so readily – the idea that we as moral agents are free to seek a way to live that receives recognition and is supported by the natural and physical world around us,[23] is not wholly incompatible with Nussbaum's view, and can provide a path towards a more universal and pragmatic view of moral concepts.

Nussbaum's "perceptive equilibrium" theory may be a fitting response to this concern. John Rawls' "reflective equilibrium" from *A Theory of Justice*, on which its foundation is built, suggests that ethical judgements should only be accepted when certain constraints are met. According to Rawls, ethical principles should have a *general* form, be *universal* in application, be public and non-exclusive in nature, provide a deliberation when conflicting claims arise, and be regarded as *conclusive* and unimpeachable.[24] To reconcile the need for moral claims to be universal on some level with the often-unpredictable nature of the reading experience, Nussbaum's "perceptive equilibrium" theory posits that, through the reader's various

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[20] Richard Wollheim, "Flawed Crystals: James's The Golden Bowl and the Plausibility of Literature as Moral Philosophy," *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (1983): 190, https://doi.org/10.2307/469001.

[21] Hilary Putnam, "Taking Rules Seriously: A Response to Martha Nussbaum," *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (1983): 193-195, https://doi.org/10.2307/469002.

[22] Richard Thomas Eldridge, "'Reading For Life': Martha C. Nussbaum On Philosophy And Literature," *Arion* 2, no.1 (1992): 1195-197.

[23] For a more detailed look into how Nussbaum's view can be revised to encompass Kantian concepts of morality, see Putnam, "Taking Rules Seriously," 193-195.

[24] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 96-101.

perceptions of the emotions, situations and interactions faced in literary works, an equilibrium can still be formed. This equilibrium is, however, neither fixed nor universal. Rather, it should have the capacity to "reconstitute itself in response to the new".[25] Such an approach would need a thorough appreciation of the multiple layers of literary construction and strike a "perceptive" balance between the *pathos* of which morally salient truths are represented to the audience and the *ethos* of how the writer has chosen to represent them.

[25] Nussbaum, "*Perceptive Equilibrium*," 254.

II *ATONEMENT*, A READING

In this section, I aim to show that despite the aforementioned concerns, Nussbaum's overall claim that moral benefit can be gained through an appreciation of a literary text's aesthetic values (and not at its expense), still has merit. The scope of her work has largely been limited to the realist novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prompting criticisms on the basis that they are too "elitist", traditional and esoteric for *accessible* moral learning to be derived. As such, I put forth Ian McEwan's contemporary novel *Atonement*, its use of postmodern techniques (including metafiction and unreliable narration), among other aspects, offering what I believe to be a "novel" platform for discussing the intersection between literary and ethical theory.

At its heart, *Atonement* is a piece of writing about writing itself, as McEwan himself illustrates: "I sometimes feel that every sentence contains a ghostly commentary on its own processes".[26] It has a three-part construction. Part I is set on a sultry summer's day in 1935 England and follows a series of misinterpretations made by thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis of the interactions she witnesses between her sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, the housekeeper's son. This culminates in Briony falsely identifying Robbie as the rapist of her cousin, Lola, leading to his imprisonment and indefinite separation from Cecilia. In Parts II and III, both of which are set later during World War II and narrated from all three perspectives, Briony comes to realise her guilt, seeking penance by becoming a war nurse, and making plans with the apparently-reunited Robbie and Cecilia to clear his name in the eyes of her family and the law. A final address from author to reader in the epilogue – *London, 1999*, however, reveals Briony as the narrator from the very start. Substantial aspects of the plot are shown to be mere figments of her imagination: a fictional attempt to atone for both her initial crime, and the resulting fates of Cecilia and Robbie who were never, in fact, reunited.

Briony's Blameless Crime

A sense of "literary self-consciousness" makes its presence known from the opening of *Atonement*, as our first introduction to Briony is not really of her, but of the play she has written

[26] Ian McEwan, "The Art of Fiction No.173," interview by Adam Begley, *Paris Review*, Issue 162, Summer 2002. https://theparisreview.org/interviews/393/the-art-of-fiction-no-173-ian-mcewan.

to welcome her brother, Leon, home.[27] The aim of this play, *The Trials of Arabella*, is to provide Leon with moral instruction, to "provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife"[28] – and with it comes our first foray into the aesthetic form being valued for both its frivolity and practicality. McEwan's choice to present us first with Briony's literary imagination before we get to know her personality, suggests its precedence in how she navigates the uncertainties of life. We learn soon after that Briony harbours an obsession for orderliness and a disdain for chaos. Initially, this manifests itself physically in her need for cleanliness, her room a "shrine to her controlling demon",[29] in stark contrast to Cecelia's "stew of unclosed books and unfolded clothes".[30] From Briony's love of tidiness stems a passion for story-writing, through which "an unruly world could be made just so".[31] In her first conceptions of fiction, we see a methodical understanding of morality with clear-cut rules and principles of justice set for how humans are to live. In her books, death is the punishment for "morally dubious" characters, whilst marriages are used as a "reward withheld until the final page".[32] Those grey areas in between that predominate the real world, such as the divorce of her cousins' parents, are deemed to be "unglamorous", "mundane", and belonging to the "realm of disorder", [33] hence unworthy of her literary-minded attention. We are painted a picture that for young Briony, being morally good is synonymous with living an orderly life – "her wish for a harmonious, organised world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing"[34] – so she cannot possibly be at risk of acting immorally.

In Briony's transition between the child and adult worlds she inhabits, a subtle tension arises in the divergence between how she *perceives* the actions of those around her and how she *expects* them to act. When Briony watches Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain, her romantic imaginings that he must be proposing marriage are rudely fragmented when Cecilia starts to remove her clothes, seemingly at his command. Life no longer imitating art, Briony begins to confuse the two, wondering "what fairy tale ever held so much by way of contradiction?",[35] when unbeknownst to her, Cecelia has disrobed of her own accord to retrieve the broken pieces

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27 Brian Finney, "Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement'," *Journal of Modern Literature* 27, no. 3 (2004): 70, https://doi.org/10.1353/jml.2004.0073.
28 McEwan, *Atonement*, 4.
29 McEwan, *Atonement*, 5.
30 McEwan, *Atonement*, 4.
31 McEwan, *Atonement*, 7.
32 McEwan, *Atonement*, 7.
33 McEwan, *Atonement*, 8.
34 McEwan, *Atonement*, 5.
35 McEwan, *Atonement*, 106.

of a vase from the fountain. Robbie cements himself as the lecherous villain in Briony's story when she intercepts the love letter he unintentionally sends to Cecilia. Whilst the sexually explicit term, "cunt", is unfamiliar to Briony, she recognises that "the smooth-hollowed, partly enclosed forms of its first three letters were as clear as a set of anatomical drawings. Three figures huddling at the foot of the cross".[36] When thrust into an adult world that she cannot yet comprehend, we see Briony first instinctively make sense of it in the way she knows best: through an aesthetic appreciation of its literary form. This outlook is what subsequently gives rise to Briony's deliberation on the *moral* implications of the word – an instantiation of the phenomenon at the core of this essay: how an appreciation of the aesthetics of literature can play a role in the moral life.

McEwan's choice not to present a pivotal moment of moral wrongdoing in Briony's retrospective narration of the crime can perhaps be interpreted as a way of challenging our preconceived notions of guilt and blame.[37] As the audience, we perceive Briony's testimony to be a blatant lie, as she herself admits that it was too dark to see the assailant.[38] Yet throughout her narrative perspective, we are struck with the sense that the crime is almost something that *happens* to her rather than being under her control, with the deterministic foregrounding of the metafictional[39] in "[w]ithin the half hour Briony would commit her crime".[40] We are taken so artfully through her misreading of the sexual encounters between Cecilia and Robbie and all her various thought processes such that we, too, can see how such a misinformed conclusion may have willed itself into existence. Robbie's role as the attacker is what makes most narrative sense to Briony, who is horrified that she did not identify him sooner, as "the affair was too consistent, too symmetrical" and "the truth was in the symmetry".[41] When the events are distilled down to facts laid out in a rough synopsis (much like what I gave at the beginning of

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36 McEwan, *Atonement*, 107.

37 One interpretation of our uncertainty when casting blame as readers aligns with Aristotle's concept of culpability: "to what extent a man must deviate before he becomes blameworthy is not easy to determine by reasoning, any more than anything else that is perceived by the senses…the decision rests with perception." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.9.20-25.

38 As seen in, "[i]t was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that. Even Lola's face at eighteen inches was an empty oval, and this figure was many feet away, and turned from her as it moved back around the clearing." McEwan, *Atonement*, 158.

39 Richard Robinson, "The Modernism of Ian McEwan's 'Atonement'," *Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 3 (2010): 486-487, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2010.0015.

40 McEwan, *Atonement*, 146.

41 McEwan, *Atonement*, 159. Here, we can also appreciate how differently Briony portrays herself compared to her sister, Cecilia, who despises the symmetry in which the flowers arrange themselves when dropped into a vase, so much so that she spends minutes rearranging them to achieve a "natural chaotic look." McEwan, *Atonement*, 22.

this section), the simple route to take would be the interpretation that Briony has committed an act of moral wrongdoing in breaking the universal rule of not telling lies. But this does little to capture the rich complexity and intermingling of various factors: her pre-instilled notions of romance, an unfamiliarity with sexuality, protectiveness over her sister,[42] an inherent class prejudice,[43] and even the possible harbouring of a childhood crush on Robbie.[44] So while thought experiments in moral philosophy (such as the infamous trolley problem) may help draw out our intuitions and more simplified moral truths, we can appreciate here how literature may prompt a reflective and perhaps equally valuable conception of the nuances of morality.

The Broken Vase

When the Tallis family's Meissen vase is first introduced, the narrator takes great care to inform us of its immense historical value, tracing back to its origin in 1726 when it was painted by the "great artist Höroldt", became the property of King August and eventually gifted to Uncle Clem during World War I by the French villagers he rescued.[45] The cracking of this vase during Cecilia and Robbie's struggle at the fountain can therefore be seen as a moment of great significance:

> *"With a sound like a dry twig snapping, a section of the lip of the vase came away in his hand, and split into two triangular pieces, which dropped into the water and tumbled to the bottom in a synchronous, seesawing motion, and lay there, several inches apart, writhing in the broken light".*[46]

The breaking of an apparently indestructible vase, ("[i]f it had survived the war, the reasoning went, then it could survive the Tallises"),[47] can be interpreted as an act of the "refinement of

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[42] Briony makes several remarks on Cecilia's helplessness and her desire to protect her from Robbie: "Cecilia might have been ten years older, but there really was something quite hopeless and helpless about her," and "[i]n matters of selfless love, nothing needed to be said, and she would protect her sister, even if Cecilia failed to acknowledge her debt." McEwan, *Atonement*, 166 and 147, respectively.

[43] For further discussion on the subtle navigations of class prejudice in *Atonement*, see: Vasko Talevski, "Class and Social Inequality in Ian Mcewan's Atonement," *Journal of Contemporary Philology (Skopje.Online)* 3, no. 1 (2020): 156-157 https://doi.org/10.37834/JCP2030151t.

[44] From Briony's perspective of Robbie: "He was startlingly handsome, and there came back to her from years ago, when she was ten or eleven, the memory of a passion she'd had for him, a real crush that had lasted days." McEwan, *Atonement*, 323.

[45] McEwan, *Atonement*, 23.

[46] McEwan, *Atonement*, 28.

[47] McEwan, *Atonement*, 23.

art surrendering to barbarity".[48] We are invited to appreciate the vulnerability and "writhing" pain of its beauty and the imagery of a symmetrical separation of two parts that came from one; a possible foreshadowing through Briony's retrospective narration of the later separation of the two lovers, in which she plays a part.

Our perceptions of the vase become morally salient through its use to frame connections between the pivotal point of its initial fragmentation at the fountain and the subsequent allusions to *wider fractures* throughout the narrative.[49] We can draw parallels with the vase after Cecilia glues the pieces back together so that only "three fine meandering lines in the glaze"[50] remain, with the fragile conviction of Briony's testimony on the identity of Lola's rapist; "the glazed surface of conviction was not without its blemishes and hairline cracks".[51] Briony's initial determination, much like the superficial integrity of the vase, belies a deeper and more structural uncertainty. Such a crack, though hardly visible, can be likened to a wound or a scar in its permanence and ability to reopen,[52] as we later learn through a passing comment made in Cecilia's letter to Robbie during the war, of the vase being "shattered on the steps", the pieces having simply "come away"[53] in the housekeeper's hand.

The vase ultimately serves as a reminder of the dangers of misinterpretation not only for the characters in *Atonement,* but also for us as readers. In Part II, McEwan's first overt instance of metafiction comes when we learn that Briony has sent a draft of her fictional representation of Cecilia and Robbie, *Two Figures by a Fountain*, for submission to a magazine. The rejection letter she receives is a key instance of McEwan's use of intertextuality,[54] as Cyril Connolly (a notable English literary critic) questions whether the Ming vase that Briony has depicted in the scene might be "rather too priceless to take outdoors?".[55] Noting retrospectively that this suggestion has clearly been adopted (given that

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48 Georges Letissier, "'The Eternal Loop of Self-torture': Ethics and Trauma in Ian McEwan's *Atonement,*" *DQR Studies in Literature* 48 (2011): 214, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401200080_011.

49 Ilany Kogan, "Some Reflections on Ian Mcewan's Atonement: Enactment, Guilt and Reparation," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2014): 67-68, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2014.00076.x.

50 McEwan, *Atonement*, 40.

51 McEwan, *Atonement*, 158.

52 Jean-Michel Ganteau, "Of Wounds and Secrets: Ian McEwan's Atonement," *Etudes Anglaises* 70, no. 3 (2017): 340, https://doi.org/10.3917/etan.703.0339.

53 McEwan, *Atonement*, 262.

54 Ana Mitric, "Turning Points: Atonement, Horizon, and Late Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity (Baltimore, Md.)* 21, no. 3 (2014): 718, https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2014.0062.

55 McEwan, *Atonement*, 295.

the vase is of "genuine Meissen porcelain",[56] not Ming) is a proverbial slap on the wrist, as we are reminded that Briony is, as she herself claims, "under no obligation to the truth, she had promised no one a chronicle".[57] The reader may thus be obliged to question the existence of the vase at all, or the fountain, perhaps even Robbie and Cecilia themselves. Whilst the metaphor, a tool at the writer's disposal, can be a "prime instrument of ethical illumination"[58] in its ability to extract meaning from mundane observations, the changing function of the vase in *Atonement* warns us against drawing premature sentimental interpretations, encouraging us to be critical in what we perceive.

Fictional Forgiveness

To conclude this reading of *Atonement*, I explore how the overall construction of the text allows us to reconceive our understanding of forgiveness as a moral concept. Briony's lifelong journey to seek atonement is constructed in the first three parts through what presents itself as traditional realist narration, followed by her final reflections in the overtly metanarrative epilogue.[59] We see her initially grapple with her guilt as she likens it to "threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime.".[60] Whilst our first impression may perhaps be that she has come to terms with the magnitude of her wrongdoing, it later strikes the reader as an unproductive, perhaps even self-aggrandising response, showing a proclivity for resolutions through fantasy rather than active reparation.[61] The act of holding onto a lifelong guilt can also be seen as a reflection of an overly simplistic view of morality: that "wrongness" is a stable, immovable determination, and morality consists of fixed categories of "good" and "bad".[62] Despite it being rather tempting to hold Briony responsible for Robbie's death, our more rational self can surely acknowledge that he may have been separated from Cecilia and killed for any number of reasons, not solely as a result of her initial crime. As such, whilst a fixed, categorical approach to moral issues may be easier and even

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56 McEwan, *Atonement,* 23.
57 McEwan, *Atonement,* 264.
58 John Rethorst, "Moral Density: Why Teaching Art Is Teaching Ethics," *Philosophy and Literature* 43, no. 1 (2019): 167, https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2019.0009.
59 Stefanie Albers and Torsten Caeners. "The Poetics and Aesthetics of Ian McEwan's Atonement," *English Studies* 90, no. 6 (2009): 711, https://doi.org/10.1080/00138380903180892.
60 McEwan, *Atonement,* 162.
61 Elizabeth Weston, "Resisting Loss: Guilt and Consolation in Ian McEwan's Atonement," *Journal of Modern Literature* 42, no. 3 (2019): 96-97, https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.42.3.06.
62 Weston, "Resisting Loss," 100.

practical at first, the text encourages us to seek a more complex, open-ended and situational ethical inquiry.

When we finally learn that Briony is the narrator, we discover that the writing we have read up to that point is the final draft of "half a dozen" revisions since its first composition in January 1940 – a "fifty-nine year assignment".[63] This moment of revelation has come under some level of scrutiny, with several critics seeing the ending as an "unwarranted excursion into postmodernism", one that invalidates the truth, destroys any possible chance for Briony's atonement, and "cheapens" the resolutions we had already been provided.[64] A response, however, can be made that the postmodern element adds an additional ethical dimension to how we interpret the work. Unreliability and subjectivity, as Zerweck posits, are "accepted as realities, and reliability is regarded as an impossibility".[65] In exposing the epistemological limitations of a narrator, we are encouraged not to find the "answer" to some moral problem, but rather open our understanding to a plurality of different interpretations and pathways.[66] Just as in real life, we do not always have access to all of the facts at the time of a given situation, and may uncover further details throughout a more extended process, prompting a "rereading" and reflection of the past.

The ending is also morally valuable *because* it is a realistic one. With Robbie and Cecilia dead, and the looming uncertainty of whether she can publish her manuscript and clear his name posthumously, there is nobody remaining to forgive Briony but herself. The literary form can be seen here as "an attempt to bear witness to the searing persistence of the past in the present", [67] to make sense of the errors made in the past, revisit them and revise them repeatedly to see what we could think, say and do differently. The use of narratives as a process for forgiveness is a concept explored in moral philosophy. Griswold suggests that the way in which one's *current self* can both identify with their *past self* yet maintain a clear perspective

63 McEwan, *Atonement,* 349.

64 Criticisms of this kind are presented and discussed in detail in: David K. O'Hara, "Briony's Being-For: Metafictional Narrative Ethics in Ian McEwan's Atonement," *Critique - Bolingbroke Society* 52, no. 1 (2011): 84-85, https://doi.org/10.1080/00111610903380154.

65 Bruno Zerweck, "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction," *Style (University Park, PA)* 35, no. 1 (2001): 170.

66 Huw Marsh, "Narrative Unreliability and Metarepresentation in Ian McEwan's Atonement; or, Why Robbie Might Be Guilty and Why Nobody Seems to Notice," *Textual Practice* 32, no. 8 (2018): 1333-1334, https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1276955.

67 Letissier, "The Eternal Loop of Self-torture," 225.

of distance from their past transgressions, is what makes *self-forgiveness* possible.[68] This echoes Aristotle's concept of narrative ethics, which builds on the idea that our morality is connected to our capacity to produce a coherent narrative of ourselves and how we interact with the world.[69]

On a rereading of Part I of the novel through the lens of atonement, we gain a deeper appreciation of McEwan's choices in how he portrays the younger Briony (as written retrospectively by the adult Briony):

> *"I didn't want to write about a child's mind with the limitations of a child's vocabulary or a child's point of view. I wanted to be more like [Henry] James in* What Maisie Knew*: to use the full resources of an adult mentality remembering herself".*[70]

The decision to write about Briony's mind when she was a child through an "adult mentality" is significant because we are now at liberty to interpret some of her earlier perspectives as a form of self-derision at her younger self's self-centredness and obsession with order. Reinforcing, however, that forgiveness is centred on the *person* and not the *action*, we reach what is perhaps the most salient point: that Briony's ability to reach self-forgiveness hinges on whether she can *accept* this past identity as part of herself. McEwan presents this acceptance in a full-circle moment upon Briony's return to her family home, when the new generation of Tallis children perform *The Trials of Arabella* as a surprise:

> *"Suddenly, she was right there before me, that busy, priggish, conceited little girl, and she was not dead either, for when people tittered appreciatively at "evanesce" my feeble heart—ridiculous vanity!—made a little leap".*[71]

We can see here in Briony's fond, yet self-aware chastising of her former self that the change required for self-forgiveness is not so drastic as what we might expect. Despite all the growth in empathy that we see through her experiences as a nurse, Briony is still, at her core, Briony.

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68 Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 126-127.

69 Elizabeth Belfiore, "Narratological Plots and Aristotle's Mythos," *Arethusa* 33, no. 1 (2000): 40-45, https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2000.0001.

70 Ian McEwan, "A Novelist on the Edge," interview by Dan Cryer, *Newsday,* April 2002: 6.

71 McEwan, *Atonement,* 346.

Having now been diagnosed with vascular dementia, she reaches a place of peace when she accepts that her quest for atonement through literature was "always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all."[72] Self-forgiveness does not necessarily entail the absence of self-reproach, or the reversal of wrongdoing.[73] A reflection on Briony's character throughout *Atonement* can lead to an array of interpretations, one of them hopefully being that forgiveness should not be conceived of as an all-or-nothing concept, but rather a more complicated process with a vast middle-ground that literature can help us explore.

[72] McEwan, *Atonement,* 351.

[73] John Lippitt, "Self-Forgiveness and the Moral Perspective of Humility: Ian McEwan's Atonement," *Philosophy and Literature* 43, no. 1 (2019): 132, https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2019.0007.

III Backseat Moralising and the Limits of Empathy

It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.[74]

Ian McEwan, *Only Love and then Oblivion*

The central concept of *Atonement* is that failure of the moral imagination is what leads us morally astray, rendering us unable to reflect on and atone for our wrongdoing. As a self-professed "solitary child", Nussbaum identifies herself in David Copperfield,[75] who, like her, found his best friends in novels. She construes a relationship of sorts between the book and its reader, positing that they form a significant part of the reader's moral learning both during the time of reading, and through post-reflection.[76] The act of identifying with the characters we encounter and empathising with them, can be seen as a form of *mimesis*, broadly understood as imitation, identification and immersion. On an Aristotelian account of moral education, imitation is a basic human impulse that serves the functional purpose of teaching and modelling the *virtues* through their fictional representations.[77] Through imitation, positive habits can also be instilled, eventually transforming into *motives* for acting "morally" and living well.[78] This empathetic process teaches us what we should feel and *why*, when we align ourselves emotionally with fictional characters.

The following views of empathy threaten its apparent role in developing our moral imagination:

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74 Taken from a piece published by McEwan days after the 9/11 attacks, tying the event to an inherent lack of moral empathy: "If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed." See: Ian McEwan, "Only Love and Then Oblivion. Love Was All They Had to Set against Their Murderers," *The Guardian (1959-2003)*, September 15, 2001, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/only-love-then-oblivion-was-all-they-had-set/docview/188798497/se-2.

75 The fictional protagonist of *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens.

76 Nussbaum, "Introduction," 11.

77 Thomas Pavel, "Fiction and Imitation," *Poetics Today* 21, no. 3 (2000): 526-528, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-21-3-521.

78 Plato, on the other hand, rejected literary mimesis in book 3 of *The Republic,* cautioning his followers against reciting certain lines from classic texts. His fear was that reading certain texts would cause people to embody the same emotions and attitudes (e.g. Achilles' self-pity and fear of death), making them hesitate before defending the Republic in battle.

1) Empathy as amoral: our ability to empathise does not necessarily discriminate between moral and immoral characters.[79] While identifying emotionally with characters we aspire towards may indeed be conducive to moral learning, we are also capable of working our way into the minds of fundamentally "evil" characters, allowing us to see from the perspective of a serial killer (*American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman), a manipulator (*Othello*'s Iago) and someone who would willingly exchange his siblings for sweets (*Narnia*'s Edmund).

2) Empathy as flawed: while we may care immensely for certain characters, our emotions do not align exactly with theirs, creating an asymmetry.[80] For instance, we may feel empathy for Gloucester when he is blinded in Act III of *King Lear*, but we do not share the same emotional response as him. We pity him, but we do not ourselves at that moment feel lost, frightened, in pain or betrayed by our loved ones, as he does.

The concern that empathy is amoral can be simply resolved. It is the process of learning and developing skills of empathy, rather than the specific situations or characters we are empathising with, that guide our moral learning. Although we may care for and recognise aspects of ourselves in fictional characters, we are not being encouraged to learn from them directly – to think, act and interact with the world the exact same way they do. The second concern (that our emotional state diverges from that of the characters) may, however, impinge on our moral imagination, and consequently, the moral perceptions we make. Despite having an interest in these characters, we are not truly in a position to benefit or be harmed by their fates. Making judgements is often a simpler enterprise from such a distant, protected perspective. As a result, different moral expectations may arise, whereby we uphold fictional characters to higher standards than ourselves and others in the real world – a phenomenon I term "backseat moralising". Does this negate the benefits of moral imagination in literature? Not necessarily. One response that we can make is that inhabiting an omniscient third-party perspective (as when we read literature) provides a greater exercise in how we would ideally *like* to live in each time and situation, when we have access to our full faculties to make balanced moral decisions.

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79 Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," 19-20.

80 Eileen John, "Caring about Characters," in *Fictional Characters, Real Problems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 32-35, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198715719.003.0003.

When the Story Ends

Now consider this. You have just finished reading a book, another literary masterpiece that you have thoroughly enjoyed. Being well-versed in Nussbaum's theory of literary ethics, you practise the "perceptive equilibrium" approach with every book you read, drawing various perceptions on morality through your appreciation of the way each text was crafted by its author. What happens when the story ends? Are you now ready to set forth into the world, armed with the knowledge that you have just gained, trusting that it will be sufficient to guide you in every aspect of your life? Your intuition may be that this is not the case. And if so, there is something missing from Nussbaum's account – the transition from literary knowledge to ethical knowledge needs to be articulated more clearly.

I offer three possible reasons for this practical misstep:

1) There is an inherent *knowledge asymmetry* between what we know in literature, compared to what we know in the real world. The intimate depth of awareness that Nussbaum suggests we are to attain about a character's every thought, mannerism and action is not a reflection of how we make moral judgements in our everyday lives. These are ultimately made on different grounds, based on the limited perceptions made of those around us with the restricted time, scope or access that we have, in contrast to the well-formed judgements that are made possible in our exploration of literature from the comfort of our armchairs.

2) Expecting the "ideal reader" to have the knowledge set to simultaneously do justice to a thorough aesthetic appraisal of a literary text, and have an understanding of moral philosophy concepts sufficient for construing any practical moral implications buried within it, may be asking *too much.* Unlike traditional works of moral philosophy, the "moral truths" in literature, if they are present, are purposely veiled under layers of meaning and open to be interpreted in different ways. As we have previously touched on, however, moral concepts are guided by the principles that they should be *accessible* to those who seek it, and *universal* in that, with all the information available, one should be able to make a "right" decision as to how to live.

3) Nussbaum claims that while some literary works have moral value, not all will "prove valuable in [her] imaginary curriculum for citizenship",[81] without providing clear directives to guide us towards making this distinction. Texts that do not pass what Posner terms this "ideological screening of literature"[82] are to be read for other purposes, namely "for historical … rhetorical or grammatical interest".[83] The arbitrary drawing of such a line poses a difficulty for how readers are to engage in practically rewarding ways with the moral realm of literature.

For the reasons presented above, I believe that Nussbaum goes a step too far in claiming that literary works can themselves be works of moral philosophy.[84] As Posner suggests, a more valid claim for Nussbaum to make would be that the "discussion of the moral dilemmas dramatized in *The Golden Bowl,* as distinct from the *dramatization itself*" is where we derive moral benefit, by "improving our skills in ethical analysis".[85] This line of thinking lays the foundation for what I term the "moral illumination" argument. The general idea is that literature acts as a *starting point*, providing the imagination, means of empathy and a clear framework for considering how we think, feel and act in a variety of situations. Literature is not, in and of itself, a means to an end of developing moral concepts, but rather a form of *illumination* to guide us towards fine-tuning our moral responses.

I argue that a 'moral illumination' approach resolves two of the difficulties encountered in Nussbaum's literary-ethical account. First, it helps resolve the inherent tension between the different interpretations and *subjectivity* characteristic of literature on the one hand, and the principles of *universality* and *acceptability* in moral philosophy on the other. Through reinforcing that certain deliberations of the concepts explored in literature are necessary *before* these concepts can be considered part of moral philosophy, the judgements that arise will ideally be more practical in their implementation. A second benefit is the "shifting away" of the moral burden from authors to other fields (perhaps literary criticism, or education), offering a further account for why it is a reductive and often digressive practice to reduce works to how

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81 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995).
82 Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism: Part 2," 398.
83 Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism: Part 2," 398; originally taken from Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice.*
84 With the exception of authors and/or texts that are known to traverse between these two dimensions, e.g. Sartre's *Nausea,* or Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus.*
85 Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," 12.

"moral" or "immoral" they are. Works of literature are not considered "maimed" or "marred"[86] solely on the account that they express moral views we deem unacceptable, just as poorly written works are not automatically elevated in their aesthetic valuations for expressing moral views we agree with. As such, I maintain that our ethical criticisms should be limited to whether certain readings and *interpretations* of text are problematic or have moral value, rather than the literary texts themselves. The 'moral illumination' approach, on my account, provides, in comparison to Nussbaum's original thesis, a more pragmatic conception of how literary theory and ethical theory can ally themselves with one another.

[86] Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," 2.

CONCLUSION

What I have endeavoured to show throughout this essay is that, in accordance with Nussbaum, literature can play a significant role in our moral development. In turn, an understanding of core principles in moral philosophy can also lend itself to a more enriched appreciation of the aesthetic choices made in literature. Where we diverge, however, is in Nussbaum's view that certain literary texts should be viewed as works of moral philosophy. I maintain that the 'moral illumination' approach (literature to *illuminate,* rather than *inform* moral ideas) addresses some of the concerns with Nussbaum's account. It proposes a more dialectic, less didactic, approach to moral learning, showing how conversations about moral philosophy should have a place in literary discussions (and vice versa). Literature is a starting point for us to learn more about our pre-existing beliefs and values and reflect on who we want to be. As Posner suggests, "[i]f you don't already sense that love is the most important thing in the world, you're not likely to be persuaded that it is by reading Donne's love poems, or Stendhal, or Galsworthy."[87] Whilst this may very well be true, reading these works of art can challenge you to ask yourself why, and prompt a deeper reflection on the aspects of life you do value and find important.

Word Count: 6083

[87] Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," 20.

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