Fiction and the Moral Imagination

&

The Swing of the Sea
A Novel

Vol. 1
Exegesis

Eleanor Robin Throsby

BA, MA, M Res.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
Faculty of Arts
Macquarie University

June 2018

Table of Contents

Abstract

  This creative writing thesis examines the role of the moral imagination in the reading and writing of fiction through a theoretical investigation of its history and influence, both on literary criticism and on the practice of fiction writing. The creative part of the thesis consists of a novel that reflects the ideas explored in the theoretical part of the thesis. Moral imagination is defined as being the human capacity to enter imaginatively into the situations of others who may be very different from ourselves.

  The central proposition of the thesis is that fiction is peculiarly positioned to exercise a reader's moral imagination through its capacity to show the complexity and difficulty of ethical choice. Relevant literary and philosophical positions are evaluated, and it is argued that the moral imagination offers a conceptual framework embracing both the emotional and intellectual aspects of ethical dilemmas. It is further argued that an appreciation of alterity lies at the heart of morality and that the postmodern era of literary criticism, often seen as antithetical to the practice of ethical criticism, has been misinterpreted.

  The novel *The Swing of the Sea* forms the creative part of the thesis. It is set in Sydney between the years 1996 and 2007. The novel's main protagonist, Stephen, is a progressive thinker, critical of government ethics, while making some dubious choices of his own. Stephen and his family live in a period of conflict and violence in the world around them, while feeling safe in their comfortable suburb. One night, complacency is shattered by a terrible unpredictable event, after which everything changes for Stephen as he is forced to comprehend the nature of personal responsibility. The novel explores the parallels between the political and the personal and the way human behaviour is affected by the overarching cultural context in which it occurs.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)_____   Date: ____29th June 2018__

   Eleanor Robin Throsby

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Jane Messer for providing me with the opportunity to undertake this thesis and for her encouragement, guidance and expert academic advice along the way. Her final comments had a significant effect on the form of the thesis as submitted. My thanks also go to Dr. Rebecca Giggs who provided valuable scholarly comment and support.

Special thanks to Laura Billington and Corin Throsby for excellent proof reading and assistance with formatting, and to Jan Zwar, Vallie Rigg and Gai Scott for agreeing to be first readers of the novel.

I'm also grateful to my colleagues in the HDR room for their warmth and friendship during the past three years.

Throughout the time I have been working on the thesis my family has been wonderfully tolerant and supportive. Heartfelt thanks to David, Edwina and Corin for the love, encouragement and insightful comments they have so unstintingly provided.

FICTION AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION

The formal properties do not exhaust the worth and appeal of literature, but the moral properties, I suggest, are almost sheer distraction (Richard Posner)

I hold that, in so far as there is a role for imagination in helping us to see through a moral issue or to make a moral choice, that role is undertaken by the same mental mechanism that is deployed when we read or—if we have the right talents and inclinations—create fictional works (Gregory Currie)

The novel is a deeply moral form (Ian McEwan)

Chapter 1

A Beginning, an Invention, a Discovery[1]

Introduction

The recent resurgence of scholarly interest in the relationship between ethics and fiction raises interesting questions for all who read, write or study fiction. This thesis will investigate the reasons both for the turning away from ethical criticism that occurred during the twentieth century, and for its more recent return. It will do so specifically by examining the concept of the moral imagination; its meaning, its history and its place in the theory and practice of writing and reading fiction. The questions the thesis asks, and the territory it traverses in answering them, draws together the evidence needed to enable a fresh way of looking at the two sides of this debate, thus leading to the main proposition of the thesis which reconciles views that were, until now, seen as antagonistic. The thesis challenges the notion that the period in which postmodernist ideas were dominant resulted in writers and critics ignoring or opposing ethical considerations. The thesis will position the idea of the moral imagination as the most useful conceptual tool for approaching and developing an ethically valenced exploration of fiction, by demonstrating how it encompasses rather than resists the best of the legacy of previous literary theory.[2]

The question of whether ethical considerations are a valid part of the literary analysis of texts and a significant influence on writers and readers has been present as an issue in literary studies since Plato. From Plato's argument that art, being mimetic, was essentially immoral, to Aristotle's response that its mimetic nature assisted its role as a form of moral education, to Ludwig Wittgenstein's assertion that "Ethik und Ästhetik sind Eins" (ethics and aesthetics are one) (182), and beyond, philosophers have argued about how art and ethics connect. Many aspects of the original ancient arguments continue to be present in thinking about ethics and art. This thesis will confine itself to tracing the debates and trends relating to the role of ethical considerations in literary theory and practice, for the period from the

---

[1] From Ezra Pound's "How I Began" *Early Writings* (211).

[2] The evidence outlined in this introductory chapter will be developed with full citations in subsequent chapters of the thesis.

beginning of the twentieth century until the present.

By the end of the nineteenth century, ethics was core to the way literature was perceived and an ethical frame was accepted as the basis for almost all literary criticism. This approach began to change with the emergence of formalism and the New Criticism in the first half of the twentieth century and subsequently with the dominance of cultural theory and the rise of the movement that came to be known as postmodernism later in the century.

The relativistic and poststructuralist perspectives that became part of the literary critic's toolkit raised compelling arguments against previous critical frameworks that included ethical considerations. As Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack put it "many critics during the poststructuralist era have doggedly and determinedly sought to place as much distance as possible between themselves and any mention of an ethical or moral perspective of their work" (ix). However, in the latter part of the twentieth century there has been a resurgence of interest in the ethical analysis of texts, as well as in the role of literature in contributing to broader ethical questions in society. The renewed interest in the value of an ethical perspective when considering literary texts is a development now referred to as the ethical turn.

As this is a creative writing thesis, it also explores the implications of the moral imagination for writers of fiction. A novel titled *The Swing of the Sea* forms the second part of the thesis. The novel centres on a family living in a Sydney suburb and covers their lives between the years 1996 and 2007. The main character, the husband and father of the family, has strong views about actions taken by the Australian government and its allies. Both he and his wife are affected not only by what happens in their day-to-day private and professional lives, but also by the events that take place in national and international political arenas. Parallels exist between the decisions being made by politicians and leaders in the wider society and the more mundane, but emotionally intense, moral choices the two protagonists face in their quotidian existence at home and at work. The novel explores the implicit connection between the political and the private, the cultural and the personal. Like most fictional works, *The Swing of the Sea* attempts to conjure an imagined world into which the reader can become immersed. It invites the reader to reach a state of identification with the situations and the moral dilemmas the characters confront. In this way readers exercise their moral imagination as they mentally and emotionally participate in the choices the fictional characters find themselves making.

The issues under discussion in the theoretical part of the thesis have major relevance for the creative writing presented in the second part. The questions this thesis raises specifically for literary practice affect the conceptual and craft issues that need to be confronted by the contemporary writer who wishes to engage the moral imagination through a work of fiction. The study of the evolution of critical theory in relation to the moral imagination, and the analysis of the techniques employed in other novels to render moral choice in a subtle and nuanced manner, has been of significant practical use in influencing the way *The Swing of the Sea* has been written. The aim has been to find the most effective methods of engaging the reader's imagination, showing the complexity and difficulty of ethical decisions, while at the same time avoiding any hint of judgement or didacticism.

Definitions

In undertaking the research for this thesis I have encountered a number of issues of definition. For example, I have been struck by how many people when told of my thesis title *Fiction and the Moral Imagination* have asked if I'm religious. It seems that morality and religion have somehow become conflated in many people's minds and I have had to make it clear that when I use the word moral I am not meaning moralistic, judgemental or prescriptive. In fact, my usage reflects quite the opposite intention.

As definitional issues have been strongly present in the discussion of the relationship between ethics and literature, it is worthwhile at the outset to spend some time clarifying how the relevant terms will be used in this thesis. The term "the moral imagination" was first coined by the eighteenth-century conservative philosopher, statesman and political theorist, Edmund Burke, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* where, in describing his horror at the excesses of the revolutionaries, he referred to "the moral imagination which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature" (71). However, the term has been adopted in a much wider context since. When I come to define the concept of the moral imagination, I incline towards the definition favoured by Richard Bromwich, professor of English at Yale who, in his book the *Moral Imagination*, describes it thus: "This is the power that compels us to grant the highest possible reality and the largest conceivable claim to a thought action or person that is not our own and not close to us in any way." (xii)

As a definition, this one certainly encompasses a very broad notion, but in doing so it includes the whole issue of how it is that fiction, in engaging the imagination, leads the reader

to identify with unfamiliar characters and situations in a way that brings about an awareness of the complexities of the choices they make. It is based on the idea that the heart of human morality lies in our respect for the beliefs and actions of people very different from ourselves. The phrase "the moral imagination" suggests that imaginative engagement in fictional situations, with a variety of characters, deepens the possibilities of what we find acceptable and leads us away from rigid social prescription to a broader idea of what is tolerable in the behaviour of others.

The narrative form allows a layering of situation, action and reflection that renders the nuances and complexities of human existence more effectively than any other medium available. The thick description enabled by this layering, in blending together the expression of self, the influences of society, and the overarching cultural milieu of the period, stimulates the moral imagination of both writer and reader in ways rarely consciously noticed. The moral imagination is not overt; rather it is a subtle influence on our understandings, opinions and actions. My novel uses the possibilities afforded by the distinctive characteristics of the narrative form to focus the reader's attention on the judgements we make in the public and private spaces we inhabit and how these judgements are affected by the overarching cultural environment in which they are made.

When it comes to defining the difference between morality and ethics, some of those involved in the ethical turn in literary criticism have found it necessary to distance themselves from the word "morality" preferring to talk about "ethics", which they see as being more about cultural norms than individual experience. In the mid-twentieth century, it was the emphasis on the social and cultural context for all human choice, including ethical choice, which drove the objections to the ethical elements that formed an important part of traditional literary criticism. Cultural theorists and postmodernist literary critics focused attention away from individual moral choice and onto the construction of moral codes as part of the evolution of particular sub-cultures. Social constructionism and historicism became the preferred frameworks for understanding the meaning and purpose of ethical practices. A suspicion of the value—or even of the existence—of an individual morality became widespread, though many creative writers continued to make it the focus of their fictional work. As a consequence many began making a significant distinction between the two terms "ethical" and "moral", avoiding the latter and using the former as a way of emphasising the notion of ethics as essentially a cultural construct.

Even the proponents of ethical criticism, who were themselves instrumental in bringing about the ethical turn, shifted their vocabulary to replace "moral" with "ethical" in line with the ideas and theories of the cultural theorist and postmodernists. To take one prominent example, Wayne Booth, who is often seen as a key pioneer of the ethical turn in literary criticism, uses the words "morality" and "moral" as often as he uses "ethics" and "ethical" in his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction.* By the time he comes to write *The Company We Keep* in 1988 he is reflecting the wider philosophical and critical shift in usage that has occurred in the interim. No longer are chapters titled, for example, "The Morality of Impersonal Narration" as in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; instead he gives *The Company We Keep* the subheading of *An Ethics of Fiction.* But the troublesome problem of definition appears in a long section of the Introduction to the *Company We Keep* in which he discusses the terms "ethical", "virtue", "morality" and "immorality" and complains that both the terms "moral" and "virtue" have "in modern use been narrowed almost beyond recognition" (10).

When we consider that critics from Matthew Arnold through Henry James and Lionel Trilling and, in his own particular prescriptive way F. R. Leavis, have used the word "moral" very freely in their interpretations and evaluations of novels, the concern over the choice between two words with such close etymological connection is in itself quite telling about the change in societal and philosophical influences that have surrounded literary studies over the past century or so. These influences and the changes they triggered will be examined more closely in later chapters of this thesis.

I will be arguing that the distinction that seems now to have emerged in the contemporary understanding of what the words "ethics" and "morality" connote represents the ancient binary of society versus the individual. My contention is that this is a false dichotomy and does not reflect lived human experience where, at one level, the individual exists only in the context of social forces and surrounding cultural influences, but at another level lives through each situation he or she encounters in life in a subjective manner, experiencing each decision as personal. As Trilling put it: "This intense conviction of the existence of self apart from culture is as culture well knows its noblest and most generous achievement" (*Beyond Culture* 102). The novel's task has always been to bring these aspects of human existence together for the reader so that, in the imagined world thus created, the configured characters can be seen to act within the circumstances that shape their lives.

My contention is that if we wish to restore an ethical perspective to the study of fiction, the concept of the moral imagination provides a useful way forward. I see it as a valid

and effective pathway for moving the debate into an arena that better reflects what can readily be both observed and experienced in life as it is actually lived. By placing stress on the value of imagining the Other, the notion of the moral imagination automatically emphasises the social context in which all moral choice is situated. It lifts morality away from a focus on individual character and judgement and encourages a societal basis for decisions and actions that take place within an ethical frame. At the same time by including the word "imagination", the phrase recognises that moral decisions are cognitive processes occurring within a human individual in the context of cerebral influences both intellectual and emotional. It thus brings into the one space the cultural, intellectual and personal forces that operate within an individual when he or she is engaged in the process of making a moral choice. In the finest novels we can see this synthesis in action, as will be made clear in a later chapter when a selection of novels will be examined in some detail.

For the purposes of this thesis I will be using the words ethical and moral almost interchangeably but with a slight preference for ethical when a societal or subcultural code is being addressed, and for moral when we are talking about the process of making personal decisions.[3] However I do want to make it clear that, in my view, when we study the process by which a person decides to take action or to refrain from action in a situation involving another person, we find that the individual and the cultural forces surrounding that individual are inextricably bound. And when it comes to fictional situations and the figuration of characters within those situations, the interaction between the character, the context, and the choices they make is, if anything, more starkly evident than in life.

The Influence of Philosophy and Other Disciplines

Philosophers have been highly influential in framing the debates that have taken place in literary studies over the past century. In consequence the theoretical part of this thesis is transdisciplinary, its framework drawing heavily on the work of cultural theorists of the mid

---

[3] The OED definitions offer support for this usage. Moral**:** Of or relating to human character or behaviour considered as good or bad; of or relating to the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil, in relation to the actions, desires, or character of responsible human beings; ethical. Ethical**:** Of or relating to moral principles, esp. as forming a system, or the branch of knowledge or study dealing with these.

to late twentieth century, and moral and aesthetic philosophers from the 1980s onwards. These more recent thinkers have been to some extent instrumental in stimulating the contemporary revival of academic interest in the broader questions of the nature and value of fiction, as well as in the concept of the moral imagination. Philosophy imbricates nicely with literary scholarship in this space.

Moral and aesthetic philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Gregory Currie, who never seem to have had any hesitation in using the words "morality" or "moral", raise questions and propose theories that are examined closely later in this thesis. Nussbaum's seminal essay "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy" published in 1983 and later re-printed in *Love's Knowledge* in 1990 along with other essays relevant to the thesis topic, created a stir in the literary world of the time. Nussbaum asserted that attempting to remove the moral framework from an appreciation of a text fails to take into account how intimately the formal textual elements of any given work are connected to the socio-political circumstances they portray. By making this assertion Nussbaum was harking back to a position intrinsic to the writings of Lionel Trilling, who by now was seen as thoroughly discredited, thus triggering a growing re-assessment of Trilling by literary scholars. She further pointed out that those who wished to strip from the analysis of a text any element of moral value were taking a position that was not new and had been adopted in a different form by the New Critics and formalists of an earlier era.

Philosophers such as Nussbaum were reacting against the ideas of cultural theorists and the postmodernist movement, which had had a transformative effect on the humanities and social sciences, as well as on all art forms including literature from the 1960s onwards. Many literary scholars during this period were heavily influenced by the work of theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Luce Irigaray, and later Alain Badiou, and this influence is present still today. But the entry of the moral philosophers into the field of literary studies brought a different theoretical approach and led to a re-evaluation on the part of the literary theorists. An ethical perspective in the evaluation of texts, which had been part of literary criticism for centuries, began to reassert itself as a possibility.

The recent contribution of cognitive science to thinking in this area is considered briefly later in this thesis, specifically where its insights permeate the field of philosophy and shed further light on the whole question of the moral imagination and its role in our understanding of literature. It is not within the scope of this exegesis to explore the literary

influence of cognitive science in depth, but the interesting perspectives it brings to the topic in hand are acknowledged and incorporated.

Despite the interdisciplinary nature of the exegesis, my intention is to draw from philosophy those ideas that serve the purposes of my primary focus of interest, which is situated firmly within the field of literary studies. The period covered by the thesis is confined to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with only a nod at the long history of literary criticism that pre-dates it. This is partly to keep the subject manageable within the confines of a relatively short exegesis, but also because it was in the mid-twentieth century that the idea of an ethical hermeneutic in literary criticism became contentious.

The Origins of the Debate

The rise of Formalism and New Criticism in the 1930s and 40s, had a significant effect on traditional criticism. In many ways it was a necessary rejection of the highly subjective approach that had characterised much of nineteenth-century literary criticism. What these scholars were reacting against were passages like the following from Robert Buchanan's 1871 critique of Rossetti's poems in the prestigious *Contemporary Review*:

> Here is a full-grown man, presumably intelligent and cultivated, putting on record for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness … It is simply nasty.

Some theoretical base was clearly needed and this came about through the major theoretical movements of the twentieth century, first with formalism and later with cultural theory, leading to a situation where any kind of ethical framing or analysis virtually disappeared, at least from serious academic literary criticism. The formalists and adherents of the New Criticism were modernists very much focused on placing the study of literature on a scientific basis in line with twentieth-century preoccupations. Their emphasis on an analysis of the structure and techniques of the form, rather than on the author or the social or ethical context of the work, in some respects paved the way for the later emergence of structuralism. Form became the content until the cultural theorists through Barthes to Derrida and Foucault brought back into play the place of history and culture in the meaning of texts.

Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas

Two threads of argument can be seen in the various relativist and poststructuralist critiques of ethical criticism that dominated discourse after the 1960s. One is that the system of ethics employed by traditional literary critics has the effect of privileging the dominant white male culture and reinforcing the attitudes that support its continuing dominance; the other is that it elevates the role of individual thought, choice and responsibility over the influences of the surrounding culture.

However, I will be arguing that each of these schools of thought had an ethical principle at heart because, as I have said, I see ethics in terms of alterity. To give an example, later in this thesis I explore how ethicist Emmanuel Levinas's views on ethics and alterity influenced Derrida, and I argue that deconstruction is based partly on an ethical requirement. Postmodernist critical lenses such as feminism, postcolonialism, historicism and reader response have added immensely to the inclusion of the marginalised in cultural and literary consciousness, as well as allowing broader cultural realities their proper place in critical considerations. Despite postmodernist questioning of many of the ontological and epistemological paradigms associated with previous approaches, this thesis takes the somewhat unorthodox position that postmodernism's theories are not antithetical to the idea of the moral imagination, but actually supportive of it. It will show that although the concept of the moral imagination may have disappeared from much serious literary criticism, it did not cease to have relevance to creative practice.

Lionel Trilling

This thesis will pay particular attention to the rise Lionel Trilling's reputation in the 1940s and 1950s, his fall from favour in the 1960s and the resurgence of interest in his writing that has occurred more recently. The reason for selecting Trilling for special consideration is that the trajectory of his status in literary circles, as his prestige waxed and waned, follows the changes, already briefly outlined, that occurred in literary criticism over the period examined in this thesis. The shifts in Trilling's personal standing afford an pertinent case study of what was occurring in literary criticism more generally.

At the height of his influence in the 1950s, Trilling's literary essays and reviews as well as his cultural analysis, had a major effect on public discourse in the United States and other Anglophone countries. As Edward Mendelson puts it in a review published in *The New York Review of Books* in 2012:

It is hard to recall now the enormous prestige of Lionel Trilling as a literary and social critic during the postwar years. *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), his first collection of essays, is said to have sold more than 70,000 hardback copies. For the first and last time, a literature professor enjoyed the public eminence normally reserved for an economist like John Kenneth Galbraith….

When, under the influence of the postmodern movement, critics had a new theoretical base and new interpretative lenses with which to scrutinise texts, they turned on the old master and their condemnation was strong.

Current willingness to reconsider him shows the size of the shift in attitudes since the second half of last century when even Wayne Booth lumped Trilling together with F. R. Leavis as one of those "hectoring ... hanging judges" (*The Company We Keep* 49). What has now been acknowledged by a number of academics and literary scholars is that Trilling's position has been widely misrepresented and a reassessment of his seminal critical essays and their value to literary criticism is underway. Two such critics are John Rodden and Adam Kirsch who in their respective books *Lionel Trilling and the Critics: Opposing Selves* (1999*)* and *Why Trilling Matters* (2011) took a fresh look at Trilling's works. They reassessed postmodern thinking about Trilling and reviewed the broader question of the role of the individual imagination in human morality, society and politics.

The Ethical Turn[4]

A major transition in thinking about the place of literature in the contemporary world started to occur as the assumptions and preoccupations of the postmodernists began to lose traction. In the first decade of this current century, multiple books and articles appeared criticising the postmodernist movement. Literary scholars who came to be associated either with support or resistance to what is now referred to as "the ethical turn", and whose work will be evaluated in this thesis, include among others Booth, Bromwich, Rodden, Kirsch and Hale.

With the return of ethics into consideration as part of the appreciation of literature, a side issue re-asserted itself. This is an issue that has been controversially present since the

---

[4] Lawrence Buell (8) seems to be the first to use the term "the ethical turn" in 1999, giving name to a trend that had started in the 1980s. He sees the renewed interest in ethics as part of what he calls post-postmodernism.

form of the novel first emerged. It centres on the personal effect on the character of the reader in consequence of the act of reading fiction, and results in the question "Is literature good for you—can it make you into a better person?" Recently this idea is sometimes followed by another question: "Is the return of the suggestion that ethics is a relevant consideration in the evaluation of literary texts propelled by the belief that literature is good for you?"

Opinions are strong and evidence sparse. It seems to be a question that ultimately can only be settled by empirical research. A few psychologists have attempted to find an experimental basis with which to investigate this issue, however, although some work has been undertaken in this area, it is preliminary, simplistic and inconclusive. I will be looking at the evidence later in the thesis. I call it a side issue because it seems to me that the more interesting ethical issue is internal to the text and pertains to textual analysis.

In fact this thesis takes the position that the important question is not whether fiction will make you a better person or a worse one. My own view is that reading fiction does not have the power to transform a person's ethics, but I do contend that it will inform them. Social experience— experience gained through interaction with others—has been shown to be the mechanism by which moral awareness is developed, and modelling behaviour acquired through such interaction has been demonstrated to be the key way that children learn. The advertising industry depends on the power of modelling behaviour, still present in adults, for most of its more successful techniques.

It is argued in this thesis that fiction provides an analogue for real life and one that allows a particularly intimate connection to the text world and the characters that inhabit it. What is provided by a novel or story is not just an opportunity to exercise empathy, although that is an important element of most people's reading experience, but there are cognitive aspects as well in engagement with a fictional world. By such engagement the reader learns of possible modes of thought and action that they may not otherwise have encountered. Most people's lives provide a limited range of situations to learn from. The proxy experience of the real world, offered via a text world, furnishes information about possible behaviours as well as emotional reactions to them. Is fiction good or bad for you? The concept of the moral imagination bypasses this more superficial question to allow a deeper look at the way fiction works.

In a further contribution to the growing interest in what moral philosophers were contributing to literary studies, Mark Sanders introduced a special issue of *Diacritics* in 2002

by querying why his fellow literature scholars had drawn their philosophy from cultural theorists and paid little attention to moral philosophers past or present (3). He called for more interdisciplinarity, but in fact it was already happening.

Vera Nünning, a German scholar of English Literature, observed in 2003 that the novel was flourishing in Britain, primarily because of the return of ethical questions and the revival of narrative. She went on to suggest that "The return to ethics is probably the most widespread tendency in contemporary fiction" (236), and cites Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Graham Swift's *Last Orders* and Michael Frayn's *Headlong* as examples.

At a more popular and public level, the slow return of interest in ethics and literature that was occurring in academia was reflected in articles like Alan Kirby's "Death of Postmodernism and Beyond" published in *Philosophy Now* in 2006 and Edward Docx's "Postmodernism is Dead" in *Prospect Magazine* in 2011. Docx offers particular praise for Jonathan Franzen for eschewing "the evasions of genre or historical fiction or postmodern narratorial strategies and instead tries to say something complex and intelligent and authentic about his own time". Docx proposes calling the new age he says we are entering the Age of Authenticism. It is interesting to note that half a century earlier Trilling was called pompous for book titles such as *Sincerity and Authenticity*.

In the arena of non-academic book reviewing, Cynthia Ozick recently joined the many voices praising New York critic and academic, James Wood, labelling him a throwback to Trilling and calling for "a thicket of Woods". Wood's most recent book, published in 2015, is called *The Nearest Thing to Life*. In David Free's review of the book in the *The Australian* he quotes Wood as saying, "I have felt that an essentially novelistic understanding of motive has helped me to fathom what someone else really wants from me or from another person". However, *The Nearest Thing to Life* is a book that claims rather more for literature's moral value than Trilling ever did or than I do in this thesis.

Much as I find myself in full sympathy with the concept of the moral imagination and see it as an essential ingredient of any civilised culture, I nevertheless have a problem with the position taken by those such as Docx and Kirby who want to discard postmodern ideas. I tend to be suspicious of simple binaries. I do not believe it is necessary to pronounce postmodernism dead in order to view fiction through a moral lens. Postmodernism may be slipping from fashion, but in my view the various perspectives it offers should now be regarded as part of the rich history of literary thought from which both critics and

practitioners may draw. Just as it was a mistake to forget about some of the earlier critics such as Trilling, so it would be an error to forget how useful the various critical lenses that have been brought to bear on texts since the 1960s have been in extending our interpretation of alterity.

Although discussion and debate around the concept of the ethical turn in literature has constituted a relatively recent development in scholarly circles, it is a burgeoning field of international interest producing many recent papers and conferences. For example, The International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC) was formed primarily through a Chinese initiative in 2012. It has held several international conferences (Shanghai and Seoul 2015, Tartu 2016; London 2017; and one scheduled for Japan in July 2018). The Association has established *The Journal of Ethical Literary Criticism*, publishing articles mainly in Chinese. Those available in English are mostly survey articles drawing on the same Western works cited throughout this thesis, as well as those of Chinese scholars

Thesis Outline

In order to summarise how the thesis will proceed to examine in more detail the literature that already exists in this field, the content of each chapter is outlined below. Together these chapters will marshal and evaluate the evidence that leads towards the thesis's conclusions.

Chapter 2 traces the development of the idea of the moral imagination as understood within literary circles in the first half of the twentieth century. The ideas of Henry James are followed by a consideration of the New Criticism and of formalism, their causes and effects. After a brief look at the influence F. R. Leavis had on literary criticism in Great Britain and Australia in the mid-twentieth century, it examines closely the essays contained in Lionel Trilling's main works such as *The Liberal Imagination, Sincerity and Authenticity* and *The Opposing Self.* It investigates the way Trilling developed concepts such as the moral imagination, the liberal imagination and moral realism, and shows how he attempted to implement these ideas in his own fiction. By raising the question of why a critic of such influence came to be so thoroughly discredited, the way is paved for the next chapter.

In Chapter 3 the focus is on the rise of the cultural theorists and postmodernist developments in the approach to the understanding, analysis, and writing of fiction. It shows how the concept of the moral imagination disappeared from criticism, though not from creative practice. The study of the postmodernist period, and the various strands of enquiry it

gave rise to (such as for example feminism, postcolonialism, historicism etc.), will provide the foundation for my proposition that postmodern concerns aren't necessarily antithetical to the idea of the moral imagination and that postmodern theories actually inform it. The influence of the philosopher Levinas on Derrida is an important element of this chapter and is crucial to the argument mounted in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

Chapter 4 deals with the renewal of interest in the idea of the moral imagination that was triggered by the work of moral and aesthetic philosophers who in the 1990s began turning to literary texts as a basis for ethical analysis. Their most influential essays, books and articles are analysed and evaluated. This chapter discusses the way their ideas began to infiltrate into literary studies where the ethical turn was already beginning as a reaction against the dominant postmodernist paradigm. The literary critics who took up the idea of the moral imagination in the period from the 1990s to the present day are also scrutinised.

Chapter 5 explores the ways in which an appreciation of the workings of the moral imagination affects creative practice. Although many fictional works will be cited throughout the thesis, and craft issues addressed as they arise, this chapter will focus on the way in which a writer goes about constructing the atmosphere necessary to draw a reader into intimate connection with the situations and characters portrayed. To this end it will undertake a reading of two works, specifically documenting the ways in which these texts utilise or engage the moral imagination. The purpose is to analyse the methods used by the writer of each of the works in dealing in a convincing way with the craft issues any novelist contemplates when wishing to present the moral dilemmas encountered by the characters. I have chosen to focus scrutiny on one Australian novel, Jessica Anderson's *The Last Man's Head* and one non-Australian, Ian McEwen's *The Children's Act.*

Chapter 6 draws the thesis to a conclusion by summarising the answers that have been found for the main questions posed: Do ethical questions have a legitimate place in critical discourse on literary texts, specifically in relation to fictional works? Why did ethical analysis seem to disappear from literary criticism (though for the most part not from fictional works themselves) by the mid-twentieth century? What are the implications of the ethical turn and, more specifically, the concept of the moral imagination, for contemporary literary criticism and for the practice of writing fiction now?

***

The collective effect of the issues covered in the chapters outlined above is to support the key proposition of the thesis which is that each phase or school of literary criticism has added to and affected the context in which a consideration of the function of the literary imagination, specifically the moral imagination, is possible even though at the same time that school might have been engaged in criticising the very idea of ethical criticism. Even those who have rejected or ignored the concept of the moral imagination have nevertheless added dimensions to the tool kit available to the creative writer who wishes to engage a reader's imagination in the social, political and moral questions of contemporary life. This exegesis examines the questions posed by the exploration of this proposition and investigates possible craft issues that arise from it. I am arguing for making fiction with the critical equipment of the moral imaginary mobilised. I propose that the moral imagination can be reconciled productively with the relativism that is the legacy of poststructuralism. The creative work that follows the exegesis, although superficially presenting as a traditional work of social and psychological realism, situates itself in a contemporary literary space and has been influenced by all previous literary traditions including the preoccupations and practices of the postmodernist period. A bridging chapter between the two parts of the thesis will explain the way the theoretical and the creative processes have interacted.

Chapter 2

Realms of Gold [5]

The First Half of the Twentieth Century

The literary scholarship of the early twentieth century provided the basis for theories about the relationship between form and content that have had a profound effect on literary thinking right up until the present time. The focus of this chapter is on the way literary criticism re-positioned itself in the first few decades of last century and how this affected both the writing and analysis of fiction, especially in relation to the way in which the moral imagination functioned. Evidence will be assembled in support of the proposition that in the process of discarding interest in the literary theories of people such as Henry James and Lionel Trilling, who understood the value of the moral imagination, later theorists lost something valuable in their understanding of the possibilities of the novel. Gold had been discarded along with the dross. It will be argued that the bifurcation of form and content that began with the formalists was in some respects detrimental to the understanding of the novel in the academy and even to the place of literature in scholarly thought.

If we are to understand the current resurgence of interest in ethics and fiction, we need to see how ideas surrounding the notions of morality in fiction have been approached in the lead-up to the ethical turn of the last couple of decades. The story of the way ethical issues came to be treated by literary critics will begin with the critical writings of James, then go on to account for the ascendancy of Trilling, the controversial influence of F. R. Leavis and the emergence of the formalists and New Critics. These formalists in some ways were the harbingers of the changes in thinking that were to have such a revolutionary effect mid-century, and are the subject of analysis in the next chapter.

Much of the literary thinking that took place in the first few decades of the twentieth century reflected the scientific spirit of the period. Alongside the growing prestige of the scientific disciplines in the academy, there developed a serious desire to put the discipline of literary criticism on a sound theoretical footing. At the same time there persisted a strong

---

[5] From John Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (line 1).

parallel view that meaning mattered and some literary scholars expressed unease at the rise of the formalists. Despite a deep interest in formal experimentation, modernist novels continued to draw on ethical dilemmas for their subject matter. As Martin Halliwell, using compelling examples from writers including Franz Kafka Thomas Mann, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemmingway and Virginia Woolfe, has shown:

> the primary responsibility of modernists may have been to art itself, but this belies a continued and, in many ways, a more intense interest in moral values than their seemingly more earnest literary predecessors. It is precisely in the realm of experiential morality, rather than the abstract sphere of ethics, that modernists attempted to discover a passage between personal value and social action. (3)

Many critics, especially those reviewing books in magazines, newspapers and literary journals that were aimed at the general reader, continued to offer criticism sensitive to the ethical issues contained in the fictional works they were considering, even as they turned to the emerging language and thinking of a formal approach to fiction. At a time when respect for science and technology was growing, a theoretical approach with its accompanying special language was thought to lend a more authoritative technical edge both to academic analysis and to more widely available book reviews.

Henry James's Foundational Work

Henry James's seminal importance in shaping literary thought in the early decades of the twentieth century needs to be viewed against the highly subjective and often moralistic practices of Victorian literary criticism, practices James sought to replace with a more rigorous approach. An example of the kind of perspective that invited serious challenge by the emerging sensibilities of the new century are found in "The Literature of Fiction", an anonymous essay published in the prestigious *British Quarterly Review,* 1845-1886, Volume 2 in Nov.1845. The essay criticises the morality of Scott's Waverley novels and the tolerance it shows towards "debauched and intemperate habits". The writer also objects to the profane language and complains that the "crime of duelling is lightly dealt with; and ... is in one instance defended" (542).

James is widely credited with leading the move to a more structured approach to literary criticism and creating the basis for the development of literary theory, particularly in relation to fiction. He did so primarily through the Prefaces he wrote to the New York editions of his own works in which he discussed fiction in aesthetic terms. Some nineteenth

century criticism had expressed a vague unease about fictional works, rating them as vastly inferior to poetry, drama and the best of non-fictional writing. James shifted the perception that novels were written to entertain lesser minds and to appeal to women. He elevated the novel to a serious position in the literary hierarchy. More importantly he was valued for creating a system, a framework for analysing and evaluating fictional works, by providing what was seen as a theory of the novel.

James has proved a key figure in all the debates that have accompanied the shifts in literary theory from his lifetime to the present. He was a practitioner who had written extensively about his method, and who had elevated the status of the novel in literary circles. In consequence his work provided fertile ground for all the literary theorists who followed. As a foundational figure in the development of the theory of fiction, he has been lauded or attacked, quoted or misrepresented, by each school of literary theory. As James E. Miller Jr. put it:

> James was an imposing transitional figure, spanning the Victorian and the Modernist worlds, assessing the old, encouraging the new, and finally contributing definitively to the revolutionary innovations of the twentieth century—innovations, which he shaped but did not live to see. (330-331)

Two major twentieth-century collections of James's critical writings reflect these changing attitudes towards his ideas: *The Art of the Novel* (1934), which brought together all the prefaces James had written for the New York editions of his work, and *The Theory of Fiction* (1972), which was a collection of James's notebooks, letters and other critical writings edited by Miller. From the books' very titles we see a shift: in the 1930s, criticism was seen as an "art," and by the 1970s it had become "theory." The two collections also mirror the change of emphasis in the way James's writings were used and interpreted. James wrote about the functioning of the imagination, about the way artists worked, and from where they draw their ideas. He wrote about the relationship between life and art as expressed in the form of the novel. But the formalism that followed focused on his account of the mechanics of the novel rather than on what James himself valued most. In *The Method of Henry James* Joseph Warren Beach started a tradition of extracting from James "the master" what he unashamedly called a "mechanics" of fiction, to provide a handbook of instructions for writers, readers and literary critics. Jamesian disciple Percy Lubbock's influential *Craft of Fiction* reinforced this blinkered reading of James by declaring "how (novels) are made is the only question I shall ask". He expresses his mechanistic intention even more specifically by

averring "questions of intention of the novelist, his choice of subject, the manner of his imagination and so forth—these I shall follow no further than I can help" (14). The idea of fiction as a vehicle for meaningful content, especially meaning with any kind of moral force, was supplanted by a belief that the real meaning of a novel lay exclusively in the form itself.

The work of his early interpreters in reflecting James in this restricted way meant that James's emphasis on the aesthetics of the novel form has been seen by many literary scholars as the beginning of a formalistic approach that carried right through to influence the structuralist and deconstructionist theories of the latter part of the twentieth century (McWhirter 168). However, when we examine James's own account of how he viewed morality in fiction, we see that he was opposed to the idea that form and content could be separated, or that the morality of a work could be apprehended apart from its form and style. It is true that he set the modernist agenda for a shift away from the moralistic carpings of the Victorians. We can see this attitude clearly expressed in his admiration for the French literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve because his criticism showed that he approached literature not as "the narrow law- giver or the rigid censor", but as:

> the student, the inquirer, the observer, the interpreter, the active, indefatigable commentator, whose constant aim was to arrive at justness of characterization. Sainte-Beuve's own faculty of characterization was of the rarest and most remarkable; he held it himself in the highest esteem; he valued immensely his impression. (cited in Wellek 297)

It was the intense and accurate observation of human behaviour and the artist's capacity to render it in a compelling form that James admired and sought to achieve in his own fiction. What he strove for was the combination of accurate seeing and effective expression that he considered to be the true moral project of the novelist. He was not advocating simple realism, but rather realism refined and re-shaped by the imagination of the writer in a way that offered the reader a fresh vision—a re-shaped window on his or her world—and this window captured a view different from the reader's own. By framing characters and situations that were also possibly different from those experienced in actual life, the reader's general understanding and sympathy for others would be broadened and self-knowledge deepened. The marriage of form and substance is for James an almost mystical process that takes place in the consciousness of the artist. He is forceful in arguing against "the perpetual clumsy assumption that subject and style are—aesthetically speaking, or in the living work—different and separable things" (*The Future of the Novel* 229).

In his Preface to *The Lesson of the Master*, James elaborated on this idea with a metaphor for the functioning of the writer's imagination: "We can surely account for nothing in the novelist's work that hasn't passed through the crucible of his imagination, hasn't, in that perpetually simmering cauldron his intellectual pot-au-feu, been reduced to savoury fusion" And James sees what emerges, what appears on the page, as something very different from the reality that entered first into the novelist's mind. "Its final savour has been constituted, but its prime identity destroyed—which is what was to be demonstrated. Thus, it has become a different and, thanks to a rare alchemy, a better thing" (*The Art of the Novel* 230).

The "art for art's sake" position has at times been associated with James, but he saw it as too narrow a view of literature. He was firm in his rejection of the central tenet of those who believed that aesthetics was a novel's sole raison d'etre. It stood against his idea of fiction as an enlargement of life. He declared that their views reflected "a most injurious disbelief in the illimitable alchemy of art" (*Theory of Fiction* 304). For James, fiction took its breadth and power from the force of the author's vision; a vision that carried with it the writer's penetrating perceptions, including psychological, cultural and moral impressions. These novelistic impressions ("impressions" is one of James's most used words) filtered through his "consciousness" (another favourite word), fused with the form in which they were expressed and could not be separated from it. His views ran counter to those of his contemporary Oscar Wilde who famously said in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all" (5). However in a letter to *The St. James Gazette*, a magazine that had published a critical review of the novel, Wilde wrote this: "The public … will find that (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*) *is* a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment" (Wilde 248). It is not easy to keep the moral dimension entirely absent from consideration in the discussion of fiction.

In his 1876 essay on Charles Baudelaire, James made clear his own position in the debate: "the whole thinking man is one and … to count out the moral element in one's appreciation of an artistic total is exactly as sane as it would be (if the total were a poem) to eliminate all the words in three syllables" (*Theory of Fiction* 307). James also avers that "advocates of 'art for art'" allude to morality as "being put in and kept out of a work of art … as if it were a coloured fluid kept in a big-labelled bottle in some mysterious intellectual

closet. It is in reality simply a part of the essential richness of inspiration.… The more a work of art feels it at its source the richer it is" (Ibid 22).

James's idea was that morality in fiction comes not as an admonition or prescription for behaviour, but as a deeply felt perception of the human condition communicated with artistry by the novelist via his imagination to that of the reader's. As far as I'm aware James himself never used the phrase "the moral imagination" but all his work, both creative and critical, is a description or elaboration of the idea. In addition to his specific comments on morality in fiction he also expressed an irritation with the practice of writers who come between their work and their readers. He deplored the use of an intrusive authorial voice and looked with disapproval on any measure that reminds the reader that they are inhabiting an imaginary world. James felt that such intrusion prevents the kind of connection that allows the reader to be at one with the consciousness of the fictional characters and their predicaments. For example he was critical of Anthony Trollope for taking "a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only after all make-believe" (*Partial Portraits* 116), but praises Ivan Turgenev for being "superior to the strange and second-rate policy of explaining or presenting by reprobation or apology" (*The Future of the Novel* 332). In other words, James is opposed to any technique or practice that might inhibit the operation of the moral imagination and its essential alterity.

Lionel Trilling and Imagination

Lionel Trilling, an admirer and analyst of James, put the concept of the moral imagination firmly at the centre of his appreciation of fiction and its role in society at large. Among his most influential essays was his comprehensive analysis of *The Princess Casamassima* where he also looked at *The Bostonians* and *Wings of a Dove* (*Liberal Imagination* 58-93). His critical writings ranged over many themes but this thesis focuses on his advocacy of the concept of the moral imagination and the views he held on the place of literature in a wider cultural and political context.

Trilling believed that literature had the potent ability to affect readers and their attitudes and thus influence the culture of the society in which they lived. This belief is reflected in every essay of his most influential critical work, *The Liberal Imagination*. Irving Howe, a friend who knew him well, wrote:

> Trilling believed passionately—and taught a whole generation also to believe—in the power of literature, its power to transform, elevate and damage. … Trilling would

circle a work with his fond nervous wariness as if in the presence of some force, some living energy which could not always be kept under proper control—indeed as if he were approaching an elemental power. (30)

Adam Kirsch, whose 2011 book *Why Trilling Matters* argued for a reappraisal of Trilling's ideas, described his approach: "The drama of Trilling's essays comes from the reaction of a powerfully individual sensibility, not to emotions or human situations or the world as a whole, but to certain texts and ideas" (10).

Trilling thought fictional texts should illuminate our collective understanding of issues that mattered in the world around us. He saw the literary imagination as a potent tool for promoting awareness of the many facets and nuances of current social, political and ethical issues; for him the political and ethical were intimately entwined.

In the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling enunciated what was for him a core proposition, one that surfaces again and again in his critical writings. It is the idea that fiction has a unique capacity to convey the complicated subtleties of human existence:

> To the carrying out of the job of criticizing the liberal imagination, literature has a unique relevance, not merely because so much of modern literature has explicitly directed itself towards politics, but more importantly because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty. (x)

Evidence for this view can be found all through his work, but an early example comes from a little-cited 1946 essay, "The Life of the Novel", in which he reviewed Eleanor Clark's novel, *The Bitter Box*. In this piece, Trilling expressed many of the themes that can be detected in the rest of his work. He praised the novel for the fact that it draws on the most urgent of the socio-political issues confronting the intellectual life of the United States at the time, which was attitudes to the Communist Party:

> If we want to understand what has been going on in our moral culture to deteriorate our fiction, we could not do better than to begin with this fact: that although the Communist Party has been in existence in this country for more than a quarter-century, it has not appeared in our novels except as a figment. (658)

Trilling deplored the fact that some of his contemporaries had seen morality as "antithetical to politics" and he went on to define morality as to include:

… politics, but politics as it presents its choices to all elements of the individual, including his imagination and his sense of the quality of his own being, politics as an activity in which the individual stakes all the cherished elements of his being on the chance of securing their safety. (659)

These were themes that he was to explore in his own novel, *The Middle of the Journey*. The novel reflects Trilling's belief that the relationship between an individual's moral understanding—how much he or she is prepared to cede to the needs of others—is crucial to the formation of that individual's political position. Understanding that moral attitudes are at the heart of what shapes politics was, in his view, of central importance to the development of an effective democracy.

Trilling was a moral realist in the philosophical sense. He felt that certain moral propositions were objectively factual, and he believed in the concept of intrinsic value—that some things are important for their own sake. He felt compelled for these reasons to examine literature within a moral frame. Trilling urged that exercise of the moral imagination was necessary to achieve understanding of situations and viewpoints that may otherwise seem alien. The essays contained in *The Liberal Imagination* were primarily addressed to American intellectuals who, like Trilling, were political and cultural liberals. Through his analysis of literary texts, Trilling urged his readers to exercise their moral imagination in approaching politics and literature and to avoid rigid ideological positions.

Trilling elaborated on the concept of moral realism in his study of E. M. Forster. For Trilling, moral realism was not just "the awareness of morality itself but of the contradictions paradoxes and dangers of living the moral life" (*E. M. Forster* 11-12). He further asserted that the novelist has much more capacity to teach this than does the moralist. The novelist can demonstrate the ambiguity of human motivation and the underlying complexities of moral choice through his characters' actions, dialogue and thoughts.

Trilling saw literature's unique ability as playing an important role in extending human capacity to imagine solutions to complex human interactions and he described himself as operating at "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet" (*Liberal Imagination* 11). The fact that his views were very welcome at the time that he was writing—so soon after the Second World War in the shadow of the Holocaust and in the midst of the Cold War—is not surprising. Perhaps pressing world issues today are the reason for the return of interest in these ideas now. Finding some kind of common core moral principles to provide

a basis for negotiation in efforts to end international cross-cultural and inter-religious strife becomes more urgent when the world is in turmoil.

Trilling had the capacity to see all sides of a situation and then to produce an often aphoristic overview; a mode of proceeding that was condemned by some and praised by others. Louis Menand, in a major essay in the *New Yorker*, both complained about and admired this characteristic. Drawing heavily on Trilling's highly personal, self-critical journals in order to write a judgmental account of Trilling the man, he nevertheless acknowledges "I became a critic because I wanted to write sentences like 'This intense conviction of the existence of self apart from culture is as culture well knows its noblest and most generous achievement.' … I just liked the way Trilling could turn a thought".

Statements such as the one admired by Menand displayed much more than an ability to turn a thought. Trilling's characteristic style, in which he combined thoughts that seemed superficially oppositional and found a way to use the resulting ambiguity to produce a deeper insight, reflected a principle that runs like a bass note through all his thinking. This principle of negative capability was adopted from John Keats who wrote: "that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" (*Selected Letters* 26). and developed by Trilling in his Introduction to the edition of Keats's letters which he edited. Trilling adopted the concept to argue against uncompromising and simplistic ideological positions, and to argue for an appreciation of the complexity of motivation and behaviour. These explorations of the human condition were in his view essential to the nurturing of a proper understanding of the nature of morality.

We see this awareness of the value of paradox expressed, for example, in his much admired essay on James's *The Princess Casamassima*. Trilling describes the hero's mental state at the conclusion of the novel as having achieved "perfect equilibrium", for although he has acquired a new sense of the "glory of the world", he has also come to understand the nature of "social horror" (*Liberal Imagination* 58-93). These terms—"equilibrium", "social horror"—are much more specific in their meaning than the traditional "good and evil", and they carry with them the possibility of the kind of nuance and ambiguity characteristic of human experience. Ambiguity was Trilling's stock in trade; his method a kind of compressed dialectic.

I submit that the most fundamental binary that Trilling struggled to integrate, not only in his evaluation of literature, but also to a large extent in his own life, was the tension

between the Classical and the Romantic view of the world. He saw the merit in the Classical idea that reason should dominate over feeling, while at the same time he recognized the value of the reverse view held by the Romantics—one putting emphasis on obligations to society, order and peace, the other stressing the importance of the individual, disruption and revolution. This tension played out in Trilling's struggle to define himself as a disruptive, creative writer against the socially responsible academic and cultural critic he also was.

It was Trilling's willingness, even compulsion, to see the value in both sides of an argument that characterised almost everything he wrote and frustrated those who wanted to be able to assign his views to a pigeonhole. Richard Sennett, a sociologist who knew Trilling, paraphrased one of Trilling's stated views about the interaction between biology and culture:

> … culture can never wholly nurture human life. Even at the hands of the worst tyranny people have a natural source of resistance, which lies, however vague the terms, in the integrity of the human body and its desires. Once I pressed Trilling about this: 'You have no position you are always in between,' I said. 'Between,' he replied, 'is the only honest place to be.' (210)

Trilling was very much pre-occupied with the relationship between the individual self and society. He was deeply interested in the notion of culture: how it was developed within a particular society, how it affected politics and how it shaped the individual. Rodden has pointed out that Trilling spent the first few years of his life as a literary critic but "after mid-century he channelled his talents into cultural criticism" (*Lionel Trilling* 4). However, the cultural criticism was always inspired by literature. The experience of reading James, Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Keats, among many others, acted as launching pads for his reflections.

Trilling had an ability to question pre-determined positions—even his own. He had a willingness to offer serious criticism of his own liberal view of the world, as is demonstrated in all the essays collected in *The Liberal Imagination*. My contention is that, far from being irrelevant to the literary critics that followed him, Trilling was to some extent their precursor and that a reconsideration of some of his forgotten principles will expand the range of tools available both for the creation and the criticism of fictional texts. However, that was not the view held by most literary scholars from the 1960s until the 1990s.

At the time of Trilling's ascendancy in the field of literary criticism it would have been hard to foresee how thoroughly he was to recede from relevance during the two to three

decades after his death. Postmodernist thought arrived while he was still alive (he died in November 1975), and it introduced into the academic discipline of English literature a very different paradigm from the one that had been practised by Trilling and his contemporaries. The idea became accepted that his writings were no longer relevant or even that they were inimical to proper textual analysis. In addition, shifts in American politics resulted in attacks on Trilling's cultural and political writings from both the left and right of politics.

An analysis of what happened to Trilling's ideas, especially his concept of the moral imagination and its value in literary fiction, will be helpful in understanding the context in which these ideas are now being revived and what this will mean for the practice of creative writing as well as literary criticism in the twenty-first century. I propose that, rather than holding views that were antithetical to many of the principles on which postmodernist thought is based, Trilling's work was in some respects its precursor. The relationship between literary criticism and literary practice is not always an obvious one. However, I do contend that understanding the developments that occurred in literary criticism during the period when Trilling's approach gave way to that of his successors has implications for fiction writing today as later chapters in this thesis, especially chapters 4 and 5 will demonstrate.

Trilling was a cultural critic as well as a literary critic. He believed that literature was relevant to politics in that literature could assist in shaping the imagination to appreciate the complexity of socio-political situations. More importantly, via the moral imagination, literature could lead readers to a better appreciation of perspectives different from their own. Trilling's own political views were very much a response to the times in which he lived, a time when communism and fascism were the opposing ideologies dominating political thinking. His attitudes reflected his feeling that we should evaluate issues according to experience rather than via prescribed ideology. He was himself a liberal, but at the same time he criticised liberalism for its tendency to become narrow, smug, bureaucratic and dogmatic (*Liberal Imagination* xiv). *The Swing of the Sea*, the novel that forms the second part of this thesis, is also motivated by concern about the ideological conflicts that confront the world today, while at the same time expressing my own similar feelings about the liberal position and its potential for complacency and hypocrisy.

After the publication of the essay collections *The Opposing Self* (1955) and *A Gathering of Fugitives* (1956), many commentators started to suggest that Trilling's politics had moved to the right. For example, Joseph Frank titled his 1956 essay "Lionel Trilling and the Conservative Imagination" and judged Trilling as being guilty of a conservative form of

social passivity: "it is of the utmost importance … not to endow social passivity and quietism *as such* with the halo of aesthetic transcendence. Mr. Trilling regrettably does not always keep this boundary well defined" (298). Frank asserts throughout this essay (296-309), that Trilling's acceptance of a link between beauty and truth, between aesthetics and morality reveals a conservative turn of mind, but he advances no real argument as to why such a link should be associated with conservatism. This essay represented a relatively polite beginning to an increasingly confident rejection of the principles Trilling had always stood for.

In December 1965 the attack on Trilling grew more heated. In the newly established *New York Review of Books*, Robert Mazzocco, a poet and essayist who was beginning to emerge as an influential figure in the New Left in America, launched an unequivocal assault on Trilling's work and reputation in a review of *Beyond Culture*. He wrote "the usual impression is that of trudging uphill scanning hazy vistas martyred with abstractions, pestered by fuddy-duddy phrases" (20). Mazzocco's essay sparked an inter-generational conflict, with Trilling's contemporaries and admirers defending him vigorously. It marked the start of a steady decline in Trilling's influence and reputation.

Mazzocco's attack was primarily a response to the preface to *Beyond Culture* (1965) in which Trilling sets out what had been worrying him during the ten years since the publication of his previous book, *A Gathering of Fugitives*. In the preface, Trilling asserts that the task of literature is to react against the normative views of the dominant culture and that the role of the writer is to participate in "the adversary project" (xviii); a project involving opposition to, and exposure of, the assumptions and attitudes that underpin the power structures in the society in which the writer lives and works.

Trilling recognised that the adversary project presented painful choices for the writer. Several of the protagonists in his short stories, as well as those in both his published and unpublished novel, struggled with the choice of either pursuing the ideal of questioning the establishment as a writer, or partaking of its fruits as a compliant, successful citizen. Indeed, the struggle was one that Trilling himself was engaged in all his life. It is probably best demonstrated through the character of Irving Howe, the professor from whose point of view the short story "Of This Time, of That Place" is written. Throughout that story Howe is torn between his life as a poet and his respect for creativity and non-conformity on the one hand, and his obedience to the strictures of university bureaucracy, as well as his own guilty enjoyment of a position of power, on the other.

The choices presented by the adversary project are reflected in the preface to *Beyond Culture*. In this essay Trilling expresses the worry that the counter-cultural forces that he saw around him on university campuses were made up of activists wanting to take power and control. He saw this as blunting the role they should be occupying in the adversary project:

> Any historian of the literature of the modern age will take virtually for granted the adversary intention, the actually subversive intention, that characterizes modern writing—he will perceive its clear purpose of detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving him a ground and a vantage point from which to judge and condemn, and perhaps revise, the culture that produces him. (*Beyond Culture* xii-xiii)

Once Mazocco had pulled the great liberal from his pedestal, the floodgates of criticism from the left were open. After the publication of *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), despite a couple of admiring reviews from the United Kingdom (Shirley Robin Letwin in *The Spectator* and John Bayley in *The Listener*), Trilling was the target of censure and even derision. Roger Sale's response in the *Hudson Review* was typical: "The man it must be admitted just loves the sound of his own orotundity … Trilling treats himself as an institution and so he can never speak with anything less than full assurance" (240). Already in the 1970s Trilling's elegant, high patrician tone, his balanced sentences and elaborately contextualised arguments were out of date. For students prepared to come to grips with Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault, Trilling's style—heavily influenced as it was by Henry James and Matthew Arnold—perhaps made them think of their grandfathers. In consequence the insights he was conveying and the confronting ideas calling for fresh thinking about accepted standards seemed, in their ears, to be old-fashioned rather than the radical propositions they really were.

By 1986, Cornel West, a Marxist intellectual and activist at Yale declared Trilling to be "an intellectual dead-end" and "the godfather of the contemporary neo-conservatives" (233). West approved of Trilling's style and appreciated his advocacy of complexity, but in the end found that Trilling's failure to deal with racial issues or with the Holocaust in his essays disqualified him from being worthy of the level of admiration he had been accorded in the past (233-42). Like West, many thinkers on the left interpreted Trilling's call to see all sides of a question—and to avoid making judgements on the basis of a narrow ideological framework—as a sign of conservatism.

Both the right and the left of politics have fought over where Trilling's true allegiance lay. His far-left colleagues have criticised his moderation. The neo-conservatives have seen, in his opposition to rigid left-wing ideology, support for their views. Norman Podhoretz who, like Trilling, had been a left-liberal anti-communist had, unlike Trilling, moved to the right and become publicly active as part of the neo-conservative movement. After Trilling's death, Podhoretz claimed that Trilling's position had moved too, but that he had been too equivocal, too passive, too uncertain to go public (57-103). Trilling's widow was outraged and vigorously and cogently denied that her husband had in any way supported the neo-conservative agenda (D. Trilling 403-05).

Ultimately, however, the debate over Trilling's political leanings overlooks one of his most deeply held beliefs: he detested extreme ideology that pre-determined an individual's judgements and left no room for the moral imagination. He was concerned to combat this kind of thinking—whether it be of the left or of the right— and he believed that literature had a unique role to play in resisting its evils. He put his feelings neatly in his lecture "Manners, Morals, and the Novel":

> Some paradox of our nature leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption, the most ironic and tragic that man knows, that we stand in need of the moral realism, which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination. (*Liberal Imagination* 221-22)

Trilling's belief in the power of the moral imagination to help shape our culture, to forestall the worst excesses of the ideologues, to prevent us from being driven by zealotry to blind cruelty, was at the heart of his love of literature and the methods he used to evaluate it.

The criticism he received from the political forces in the US was directed at his role as a cultural critic, which he exercised via literary criticism. Different criticism came from some literary critics who noted his lack of theoretical interest in the use of language. At the same time that Trilling was pursuing his idea of literature as cultural criticism, the parallel movement of the New Criticism— the North American movement inspired by European formalism, also had a strong following. It had as its central tenet a close exegetical reading of the language of a text. By the time the new structuralism and poststructuralism had arrived in the US from Europe, Trilling's work began to look decidedly unsophisticated. In contrast to the new ideas, his analysis did not seem to have any consistent, structured theoretical base.

In addition, Trilling's later work on the self, heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud, was focused on an integrated self. Displayed in the essays collected in *The Opposing Self* (1955) and *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971) was his struggle to come to terms with, to explain and to use, that great binary—the natural biological self and the influence of culture and society in shaping an individual: "With such energy as contrives that the centre shall hold, that the circumference of the self keep unbroken, that the person be an integer, impenetrable, perdurable, and autonomous in being if not in action" (Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* 99). The idea of a crafted self, a life as a work of art governed by intention rather than impulse is developed further in the essays "Art, Will, and Necessity" and "The Uncertain Future of the Humanistic Educational Ideal", both published in *The Last Decade*. Set against such a view, central as it was to Trilling's later thought, it can be seen that the deconstructionist notion of a decentred self—a self fully determined by culture, that changes over time, fragments and re-groups—looked very different and more relevant to contemporary experience.

However, Trilling's arguments throughout all his work centred on the struggle to integrate opposites, whether it be in ideas or life. Reflected in everything he wrote was his dialectical mind, which always saw both sides of the question, and recognised the merits and difficulties of each. The tension between the needs of the individual and the effects and demands of the culture—which both shaped him and laid obligations on him—was his central preoccupation. In *Beyond Culture*, he wrote: "The intense conviction of the existence of the self apart from culture is, as culture knows, its noblest and most generous achievement" (102). As Menand put it, "Trilling saw everything under a double aspect: as a condition and a consequence, a trend and a backlash, a pathway to enlightenment and a dead end of self-deception."

Trilling argued for the vital role of fiction in communicating the complexities of the individual's relationship to society in his essay "Art and Fortune" (*Liberal Imagination* 255-80) in which he mounted a strong defence of the novel of ideas such as his own *The Middle of the Journey*. Trilling addressed the perennial issue of whether the novel has a future and mounted the argument that, to ensure a secure future, the novel would need to avoid the rigid thought patterns imposed by fixed ideologies, and open itself up to a wide range of different points of view. He felt a new way of writing, a less prescribed way—a more subversive way—was the only form in which the novel could survive.

Trilling never mentioned, in a theoretical sense, issues of gender or colonialism, although he did to some extent treat race and class in, for example, his short story "The Other

Margaret" (*Of this Time of that Place* 38). But his call for more politically aware novels, for the need to open up thinking beyond prescribed confines, to challenge the established view and let in light from perspectives other than the mainstream, was in tune with some of the ideas that later emerged as postmodernism. I would argue that Trilling's influence played at least a part in preparing the intellectual ground in which the movement towards the creation of the great American postmodern novels could take root. And the roll call of influential writers and literary thought leaders who were his students and eager disciples—from Allen Ginsberg to Podhoretz—meant that these ideas were spread throughout the US and elsewhere. Novels considered to be postmodern and that deal with ideas that have socio-political relevance—from Thomas Pynchon to Jonathan Franzen, Angela Carter to Salman Rushdie—seem to be in some way an answer to Trilling's plea for fresh ideas to be in play, for ancient shibboleths to be discarded.

As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, many of the literary developments of the second half of the twentieth century such as intertextuality, metafiction and magical realism are examples of the imagination engaged in free play. Feminist, postcolonial, reader response theory, queer theory and eco-fiction can all to some extent be seen as invitations to the exercise of the moral imagination and certainly give voice to the marginalized points of view and the non-mainstream ideas that Trilling felt were needed for the novel to have a future.

This chapter has examined some of the ideas that were prominent in the first part of last century and some of the debates that arose from them. James and Trilling, the former a major novelist the latter a minor one, were nevertheless both practitioners, acutely aware of the processes by which fictional writing took place. I have suggested that many of their insights, especially those relating to fiction and ethics can profitably be re-visited today. But, in the remaining chapters of this thesis, I will argue that in order to obtain maximum value from the work of these earlier thinkers, the contemporary critic and/or writer of fiction needs to view them through the prism of much that followed after them. This is particularly true in relation to the idea of the moral imagination, a concept that in my view is more relevant today than ever, having been strengthened and broadened by the developments dealt with in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Cat's Cradle[6]

The Moral Imagination and Postmodernism

Many literary critics have asserted that the realist novel of the nineteenth century and, in a different mode, the modernist novel of the early twentieth century were, as a part of their conventions, concerned with moral or ethical questions, whereas the postmodern novel was not.[7] The disruption of established norms by the French cultural theorists via their ideas of relativism, the uncertainty of meaning, and what Jacques Derrida termed the "undecidables"[8], could be interpreted as confounding any possibility of an ethical element in postmodern thinking or writing. Consequently, with the emergence of the postmodernist movement, the idea of engaging the moral imagination through fiction was no longer seen as a tenable prospect. Much academic literary research and analysis reflects these trends. This thesis challenges that position by mounting an argument that postmodernism and the postmodern novel are indeed concerned with ethical questions, but presents them within a philosophical frame different from those that preceded it. It will be argued that over time changes in literary theory have altered the interpretation of behaviour, particularly the unpredictable and transformative behaviour that has always been part of text worlds.

To this end the present chapter will offer a brief overview of the rise of the cultural theorists and the subsequent postmodernist movement, focusing particularly on its ethical dimension and how this affected the understanding, analysis and writing of fiction. It will show how the concept of the moral imagination disappeared from much serious literary criticism, though not from literary fiction itself. The study of the postmodernist period and the various strands of enquiry it gave rise to (such as postcolonialism, historicism, queer theory, etc.) will provide the foundation for my proposition that postmodern concerns aren't necessarily antithetical to the idea of the moral imagination and that postmodern theories actually inform it. The influence of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas on Derrida is a

---

[6] The title of a postmodern novel by Kurt Vonnegut.

[7] See Gregory, Booth, Parker, Davis and Womack among others.

[8] See Derrida "Force of Law*" Politics of Friendship* and many of his works.

significant element of this chapter and is crucial to the argument mounted in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

In examining the way in which French cultural theory affected critics and writers working in the sphere of English literature, I will pay particular attention to the ideas of Derrida. Of all the French theorists it was Derrida who had the greatest effect on the way in which English literature was analysed and written about in academic circles. His influence in the United States can be seen most strongly through the Yale School, which included scholars such as Joseph Hillis Miller and Paul de Man and, for a time, Geoffrey Hartmann and Harold Bloom, who both later became critical of the deconstructionist approach but who, in the meantime, had helped start a major critical trend. The revelation that Paul de Man had had previously undisclosed associations with Nazism during the Second World War had a negative effect on his own reputation as well as creating considerable disturbance among his fellow deconstructionists and academic colleagues. However, Hillis Miller has remained a prominent figure in literary criticism after moving from Yale University to University of California Irvine where Derrida joined him until Derrida's death in 2004. In turn, the American approach to postmodern literary criticism had an effect on English Departments worldwide. In Britain, Cultural Studies departments were formed in the 1960s and, in some universities, English departments were later absorbed into them.

Joseph Hillis Miller and the Ethics of Deconstruction

Miller was one of the first to attempt to deal with the question of whether ethics has a place in the deconstructionist view of the world and of literature. As someone who had studied Victorian fiction he had thought a good deal about traditional ethics and understood the moral rules that were often under challenge in the Victorian novel. His 1963 book *The Disappearance of God* dealt with the way in which the established moral order of the Victorian world was called into question in the works of the five writers he analysed.[9] Miller's point of view in this earlier book revealed a Kantian, rule-based, view of morality. The "categorical imperative" is never far from his thinking. This same notion of ethics as a code was reflected once more in the attempt to show the relationship between deconstruction and morality in his 1987 book *The Ethics of Reading*. In this book he argued for the importance of

_____

[9] Thomas De Quincey, Robert Browning, Emily Bronte, Matthew Arnold, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

distinguishing between the ethics and politics of deconstruction, but took the broad position that ethics is about a respect for an agreed moral law: "our respect for a text is like our respect for a person, that is, respect not for the text itself but respect for the law which the text exemplifies" (18).

In attempting to bring the epistemological concerns of deconstruction to bear on literary questions of morality, which in Victorian and modernist literature had been primarily ontological, we find him making contradictory assertions. In *Theory Now and Then* he provides an insight into the dilemmas he was facing:

> … the end of literary study is still elucidation of the intrinsic meanings of poems, plays, and novels. In the effort toward such elucidation the proper model for the relation of critics to the work they study is not that of the scientist to physical objects but that of one person to another in charity. (74-75)

It was probably inevitable that the transition period between the older topos of ethics in literature and the new one, opening up under the influence of cultural theory, would produce such contradictions. As Jonathan Loesberg has pointed out in an otherwise sympathetic account of Miller's position:

> … on the one hand, he affirms literature's most traditional value, its function as ethical illumination. On the other hand, the ethical basis he claims depends on the deconstruction of the rhetorical illusion that makes the ethical value possible. This is an ethical version of both claiming that language cannot refer to meaning and then claiming that that is the meaning of all great literature. (16)

Miller's position can be contrasted with that of Wayne C. Booth whose book *The Company We Keep* was published in 1992 soon after *The Ethics of Reading* appeared Wayne Booth was a seminal figure in what has come to be known as "the ethical turn", a trend that emerged in the 1990s and is the major subject of the next chapter. Admirers of Miller, such as Andrew Gibson, who subsequently developed further arguments in support of the ethics of postmodernity, attacked Booth and others of similar views (David Parker and Alasdair MacIntyre for example) as being wedded to an old-fashioned resistance to the new theories and an unwillingness to adapt to their implications for an ethical reading of literary works (5-10). In essence, the differences between these two prominent men of letters lies in the philosophical frame they brought to the subject of morality in literature. In Miller's case the philosophical influences can be seen to come from Immanuel Kant and the idea of a

categorical imperative, a universal moral law that can be applied to all humans and can direct behaviour in every circumstance. Booth on the other hand can be seen to be essentially an Aristotelian, where virtue is seen in actions displaying thoughtfulness and moderation that are tailored to each situation in a pragmatic way with no absolute law involved.

Miller was aware of the difficulties of his position in launching a deconstructionist view of ethics into the highly contested space that literary criticism had become. Like so many others he chose to turn to a study of Henry James 1904 novel *The Golden Bowl* in order to clarify his position. He opens the essay titled: "How to be 'In Tune with The Right' in *The Golden Bowl*" thus:

> Ethics, even ethics in its literary dimension, is a dangerous and slippery field, since it so tempts those who enter it to generalized speculation or prescription. Ethical prescription may claim to have a universal basis but is likely to be no more than the reassertion of unconscious ideological assumptions peculiar to a given society or person at a given time. (271)

Once again we see that, for Miller, the universal moral law was the recognised ethical authority. In my view it was this philosophical position, so core to his thinking, that led to the obvious contradictions evident in his efforts to interpret the significance of deconstruction and postmodernism for ethical interpretations of literature. It is difficult to see how he could reconcile these ideas with the relativism he had come to espouse. However, the sentiment that ethics is a dangerous and slippery field is one with which I can only concur.

Alterity and Hospitality: Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas

If we turn to the writings of Derrida himself, we find a very different philosophical frame and a significantly different philosophical influence. Derrida had a close personal and professional relationship with the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. His eulogy after Levinas's death draws attention to the great intellectual debt he owed to his friend and fellow theorist and serves as a linguistically sophisticated meditation on Levinas's ideas (Adieu). Together with his much longer contribution to a colloquium organised to mark the first anniversary of Levinas's death, which has been usefully joined in one volume with the eulogy, it forms an excellent first introduction to the complex web of ideas that constitutes Levinas's body of work.

The first part, the eulogy, shows the depth of his attachment and respect for Levinas, and constitutes an emotional public acknowledgement of the importance to his thought process of his life-long dialogue with the older man. Derrida's earlier writings, which formed part of that dialogue ("Violence and Metaphysics" and "At This Very Moment in This Work"), were testament to that influence, but in these two collected speeches Derrida offers overt tribute to his mentor in matters ethical and makes it clear that his own ethical position is in tune with Levinas's. Similarly in an interview with Andre Jacob in which Jacob pressed Derrida to put distance between his views and those of Levinas, Derrida replied: "Faced with a thinking like that of Levinas, I never have an objection. I am ready to subscribe to everything he says" (qtd. in Critchley 9). He went on to explain that though he may have a difference in the way he expresses himself in his use of language, any disagreement between them is not based on the substance of the idea or argument.

The second part of *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, titled "A Word of Welcome", offers a detailed interpretation of the main themes of Levinas's magnum opus *Totality and Infinity*. Here we are in familiar deconstructionist territory but in this case, the semantic analysis is used to illuminate ethical propositions. Derrida identifies the major theme of the book in this way:

> Has anyone ever noticed? Although the word is neither frequently used nor emphasized within it, *Totality and Infinity* bequeaths to us an immense treatise of hospitality. This is borne out less by the occurrences of the word "hospitality," which are, in fact, rather rare, than by the links and discursive logic that lead to this vocabulary of hospitality. In the concluding pages, for example, hospitality becomes the very name of what opens itself to the face, or, more precisely, of what "welcomes" it. (*Adieu* 21)

In Levinasian usage, "the face" is the face of the Other, the human face representing the living presence of the Other, a presence that has ethical and social significance rather than being merely a physical or intellectual object. Derrida goes on to present a series of virtuosic verbal variations on the theme of hospitality, finding meaning in the connections between host and hostage and ghost and guest. Drawing on some of Levinas's lesser known talmudic readings, as well as *Totality and Infinity*, Derrida explores the possibilities offered by an ethics of absolute hospitality, an idea that extends to the act of thinking itself. It constitutes an openness to the Other in every sense, personal, political and philosophical.

These two tributes to Levinas offer an insight into Derrida's ethical thinking, but a closer look at Levinas's work provides reinforcement for our understanding of how deconstruction might intersect with ethical ideas and how these ideas might be reflected in works of literature. Summarising the basic tenets of Levinas's ethics is not an easy task. His complex phenomenological formulations and linguistic invention defy ready synopsis. But I will attempt to provide sufficient basic background to enable an understanding of his influence on Derrida and consequently to the role of ethics in poststructuralism and deconstruction, and subsequently on postmodernist fiction.

In *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* Levinas draws together the ontological and the epistemological, showing that for him epistemology is also an ontology, in that what is exchanged during the actual process of an encounter with the Other is drawn into consciousness and becomes part of the ego—what Levinas refers to as the Same.

> The relation with the Other, or Discourse, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this discourse is a teaching. But teaching does not come down to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. (*Totality and Infinity* 51)

Levinas uses the metaphor of a hand grasping and taking hold of an object. The object is incorporated into the subject. The subject is unsettled. The subject must adjust. Levinas sees human interaction as "an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest". Levinas believes that "the essence of language is goodness" and at the same time he asserts "the essence of language is friendship and hospitality". (Ibid 305)

In *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* he develops further the idea of this relationship between the ontological and the epistemological through his concept of the Saying and the Said. The Saying is the word he uses to describe the activity of responding when coming face to face with the Other; it is an ethical act or movement, and results in an inter-connectedness with the Other that cannot be resisted and in an alteration of consciousness. On the other hand, the Said is a concrete testable assertion or statement; an object. The ethical aspect lies in the Saying that is in the action, the process, the movement of encountering. (5-11)

From this necessarily abbreviated description we see that for Levinas it is contact with the Other that modifies the Same, forcing a shift of consciousness to absorb and incorporate the difference thus experienced. It involves an accommodation of the alternative reality so

presented and is essentially an ethical act. What he describes seems very similar to, or at very least closely associated with, the idea of the moral imagination. Readers might recognise similarities between this process Levinas describes and their encounters with fictional characters who, once comprehended, alter their own attitudes.

Postmodernism and Ethics Developed and Debated: Simon Critchley and Andrew Gibson

In his book *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, written in 1992 before Derrida's eulogy drew wider attention to the connection between Levinas and Derrida, Simon Critchley builds a case for the profound influence Levinasian ethics had on Derrida's whole thought process. The interactions between the two men so surveyed include Derrida's reading of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* and his analysis of *Otherwise than Being*. On Levinas's side, Critchley shows that "Wholly Otherwise"*,* though short in length, demonstrates Levinas's profound understanding of Derrida's oeuvre. Critchley recognised the connection between the two philosophers at a time when ideas about Derrida's ethics were mostly inferred from his theories relating to the deconstruction of text and to other aspects of his philosophical thinking. This led the majority of critics to draw the conclusion that, in the postmodern world where God and the author were dead, in Derrida's view, ethics was also dead.

Except when engaging with Levinas's work, Derrida himself said little about ethics, creating a vacuum that critics at times filled questionably. The inferences went roughly along lines that asked: If meaning is so slippery and if "there is nothing outside of context" (*Limited Inc* 136), how is it possible for an agreed ethical code to exist? But when you read Levinas (*Alterity and Transcendence* as well as the books already mentioned), it becomes very clear that in Levinas's view ethical behaviour is based in relationships and that ethical choice is related to the obligation to privilege the other over the self, and cannot be based on absolute rules without regard to context.

One can also see that moral choice occurs within the context of the relationship between the self and the other, and I would argue that the efficacy of such choices depends on moral imagination. I am aware that Derrida talked and wrote about context in relation to the meaning of text, but in various interviews (for example with Mitchell Stephens in the *Los Angeles Times*) it is clear that he saw meaning in a wider sense, as also contextually based. I am also aware that neither Levinas nor Derrida ever (as far as I know) referred to the moral

imagination, but the concept of alterity is intrinsic to the concept of the moral imagination, and alterity is central to the ethics embraced by both these philosophers.

Taking a different line from that of Critchley, Andrew Gibson, whose perspective is literary as well as philosophical, also addresses the relationship between Levinas and deconstruction in *Postmodernity Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas.* Written in 1999, the book nevertheless does not include reference to Derrida's *Adieu* or to *Word of Welcome.* This omission may have to do with Gibson's fundamental alignment with the positions of the postmodernists such as J. Hillis Miller, who preceded him in writing about ethics. However, he is much more insistent than Miller in distancing himself from what he sees as the teleological ethics of Aristotle, the Enlightenment and the humanist agenda. He is suspicious of rationality as a basis for ethics and rejects the validity of criticism of a novel on the grounds of lack of cohesion or unity. He argues for the ethical value of disruption, interruption and a shifting point of view in creative writing.

Gibson begins his book by stating his reason for including F.R.Leavis in his title (an inclusion he admits seems perverse given his own theoretical allegiances), which is that, like Leavis, he believes in the ethical value of the novel, though he disagrees with Leavis on just about everything else. However he is quite explicit in that he wants "to sustain and argue for a sense of the ethical importance of novels in themselves, of reading novels, of valuing certain novels in certain ways, of the theory and criticism of the novel" (1). Gibson explains that, at least in part, his motivation for wanting to argue for a postmodernist literary ethic is because, as a result of a particular view of postmodernist theories, English Literature as a subject for academic study and wider public value has been diminished.

He goes on to make a distinction between ethics and morality, and he defines morality as being more or less synonymous with moralism. He believes a moral position is the same as a moralistic one. This is an unfortunate abandonment of a useful fine distinction—two similar words with significantly different meanings. For reasons explained in earlier chapters, it is a conflation that is rejected in this thesis.

When Gibson comes to a postmodernist evaluation of a number of fictional works, his analysis is supportive of the broader position I wish to argue. His exegesis of these texts could equally have been made by a humanist Aristotelian with a rational approach whose sensitivity had been awakened to a postmodernist consideration of previously marginalised viewpoints. Gibson's interpretations and conclusions demonstrate the exercise of a moral imagination, and

provide penetrating insights into the way the moral imagination can work effectively in what could be called a constructive deconstructive approach to fiction. He brings to the specific works he chooses a number of Levinas's positions which have relevance to point of view, to narratorial structure, and to our understanding of how a narrative will be received by the reader. His chapter examining the significance of the encounter with the Other or the "event" provides interesting insights into Samuel Beckett's work *Company* in particular, by drawing attention to the force of interruption. In this work Levinas's Said disappears and the work becomes a Saying:

> For why or? Why in another dark or in the same? And whose voice asking this? Who asks? Whose voice asking this? And answers. His soever who devises it all. In the same dark as his creature or in another. For company. Who asks in the end, Who asks? And in the end answers as above? And adds long after to himself unless another still. (C24)

Here the reader finds a presence, the voice of the Other. One might ask whether the Other can be drawn into the Same? And is it the Other singular or might it at some stage be Other plural?

Gibson's quoting of this passage and his insight linking these words to the idea of the Saying prompted me to turn to a reading of the work itself, to *Company*, Beckett's novella. Here we find the motif of the "upturned face" and the puzzling connection between the voice somewhere out there and the "devised deviser".

> The voice comes to him now from one quarter and now from another.… Thus for example clear from above his upturned face, You first saw the light at Easter and now. Then a murmur in his ear, You are on your back in the dark. (19)

The voice cannot be ignored. It challenges him. He strives to comprehend it, to know it. What we hear, as we read, is a continuous process of attempting, a striving, a working to take in and to identify the meaning of the voice. This brings to mind again the idea that, for Levinas, the primary experience of exteriority is affective rather than cognitive.

Gibson stimulates fresh thinking once again in his last chapter "Reception and Receptivity" where he includes, in a wide-ranging commentary on cultural variance and its ethical effects, an interpretation of the novels of two writers from migrant cultures. Drawing heavily on the work of Maurice Blanchot who was a close associate of Levinas and an anti-fascist activist, as well as upon Levinas himself, Gibson postulates the idea of the "split-

space" in the way a reader receives each of the novels, as the cultural perspectives within the text switch back and forth. (189-95). He extends Homi K Bhabha's concept of "the split-space of enunciation" to the notion of "a split-space of reception" and shows how this plays out, both in the writing and in the reading of Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* (*Postmodernity* 200-1). Mo's work, Gibson points out:

> Does not imply a singular reader whose stable position—whose certainty as to his or her site—permits reception as phenomenological reduction. It rather insistently raises the question of cultural identity and the latter's boundaries not only 'within the text' but as a question of reception. (*Postmodernity* 197)

He goes on to observe that although the appeal of the novel to the Western reader may be in showing how a Chinese community works, *Sour Sweet* "consistently and strategically" estranges the non-Chinese by describing the outlandish English creatures whom the Chinese waiters laugh at as they drink wine and beer with their Chinese meals" (*Sour Sweet* 29).

Alterity-related provocations are also evident in *A Pale View of the Hills.* This time the two cultures are Japanese and English and we see that the text may be received in different ways by Western or Japanese readers. The Japanese narrator tells us that the English have a fondness for "the idea that our race has an instinct for suicide" (*A Pale View* 10). And then right at the beginning of the novel the name Nikki is given to the daughter of the Englishman who, married to a Japanese woman, wants their daughter to have a Japanese name. His Japanese wife resists, insisting on an English one, and he finally agrees on the compromise of "Niki". He thinks it sounds oriental. Gibson comments:

> …we start the book only to encounter an uneasily but creatively resolved aporia. The 'paradox', here, the awkward (but also inventive) 'compromise' is a figure for the 'split-space' that Ishiguro's readers will necessarily have to inhabit, in which they must yield to the other. (*Postmodernity* 200)

Gibson also turns his attention to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses,* "a novel that is concerned with and is itself a plurality" (207). *The Satanic Verses* with its emphasis on cultural diversity fits well with Gibson's view of alterity's role in ethics.

Gibson confines his analysis to those parts of the novels that support his postmodernist convictions, and makes a good case for the power of each in promoting an awareness of attitudinal differences between cultures. However, Gibson paints a rather passive picture of what this cultural interaction may spark:

however equivocally, whatever the extent to which it recognizes the problems and paradoxes involved, a postmodern ethics will aspire to reticence, dubiety, critical modesty; not, that is, as 'virtues to be practised', but as they characterize a set of epistemological procedures. (*Postmodernity* 86)

In my view, alterity lies at the heart of morality and it is not a passive force. The accommodation of difference produces action. As Derrida indicates, Levinas's call was a call to hospitality. Morality and ethics relate not simply to awareness, but to behaviour. Unlike Critchley, whom Gibson quotes frequently and admiringly, Gibson leaves out a final step, a step he may have not missed so readily if he had been more steeped in the work of a long intellectual tradition—that of moral philosophy.

It is a step Critchley realises is needed. He sees in the philosophy of Levinas a way for deconstruction to interest itself and engage with politics from an ethical point of view, not simply by word play such as shifting the received definitions of morality and ethics, but by recognising that the deconstructive method has political ramifications. He joins with Levinas in seeing the need for justice "il faut la justice", asks "What is justice?" and answers by quoting from Levinas, who writes in *Otherwise than Being Or Beyond Essence*:

Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, co-existence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, the visibility of faces, and thus the intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a co-presence on an equal footing as before a court of justice. (157)

This general requirement applies to private space as well as a public one, though Critchley is focused here on the application of postmodernist principles to political behaviour. His view is that though Derrida did not make a proper transition of deconstruction to politics, a reading of Levinas provides it. Critchley shows how this approach prepares us for a continuous re-shaping of what constitutes a public space. "Social space is an infinite splintering or fragmentation of space into space in which there is consequently a multiplication of political possibilities." He argues for the value of a "discourse, which, through its activity of open, agnostic critique, ensures that the community remains an open community at the service of ethical difference" (238) But, like Gibson, Critchley hangs back from indicating what his argument would mean for the kind of decisions a person needs to make in everyday life.

Derrida and Personal Responsibility

More recent scholars such as Nicole Anderson have been bolder in filling the gap in moral practicalities that was left by those arguing for the ethical dimensions of postmodernism. In her 2012 book *Derrida: Ethics under Erasure* she contests the idea that the deconstructionist problematisation of meaning precludes a serious consideration of ethics. She demonstrates, through a systematic review of his works, that Derrida's approach was always connected with the ethical; that from his earliest writings he was clear that a response to the Other involved responsibility. She quotes from Derrida: "In both general and abstract terms, the absoluteness of duty, of responsibility and of obligation certainly demands that one progress ethical duty although in betraying it one belongs to it and at the same time recognizes it." (Derrida *Gift of Death* 66). She asserts convincingly that Derrida's work has been appropriated by philosophers who misquote it, take it out of context and misinterpret Derrida's words to support their own particular brand of postmodernism. Anderson cogently exposes the misrepresentations, particularly those promulgated by the philosopher Richard Rorty, to conclude that the idea that "Derrida's work is unethical and nihilistic" has arisen from a serious distortion of Derrida's writings.

Anderson particularly deplores the fact that the falsification of his true meaning has found wide acceptance "not only in Anglo-academic departments, but throughout the wider community" (5). Anderson is also critical of Critchley's analysis: "because he constructs an opposition between ethics and politics in Derrida's work" (19). She reads Critchley as suggesting that deconstruction can be used ethically but that this can "only be done via Levinas" (19), not Derrida.

My own interpretation of Critchley's position is a little different. He focuses on politics as an expression of ethics, and throughout his book shows clearly that between Levinas and Derrida a productive mutually modifying dialogue existed. His argument is that a reading of Levinas is a necessary aid in understanding the nuances of Derrida's work. Ethics—in so far as it relates to the everyday moral decisions of single individual—is not something that Critchley specifically deals with; one of the great strengths of Anderson's book is that she does.

Anderson deploys the phrase "under erasure" in the title of her book in the way Derrida uses it, taking the meaning from Heidegger, who does not use "erase" as in "entirely remove", (86) but instead refers to a striking out that leaves the original clearly visible. Such

an erasure creates a kind of literary palimpsest; a haunting of an alternative possibility. I find the ethical position that emerges from such an idea highly tenable. The notion is that honouring a term always includes a dishonouring of it and that within every positive lies a negative. These internal meanings complicate the matter and may even overwhelm the original. So, for an individual, ethical responsibility involves holding certain values while at the same time not allowing those values to negate or obscure the alternative possibilities inherent in the particular situation being confronted. It involves paying attention to context, exercising responsibility both to the singular Other and the plural Others within that context. The values you hold "inherited" from your culture should not automatically determine the choices you make in particular situations.

For literary scholars this means that the approach to the postmodern novel cannot end with an evaluation of how well alterity is described, but involves more. The novelist shows how fictional characters respond to the other characters in their text world. The text reveals how the characters exercise their rights and responsibilities. Both the reader and the literary critic observe, absorb and process the moral possibilities of what lies in the text. All the novels Gibson reviews provide rich material for such a reading, material that Gibson does not deal with in the analytical, theoretical sections of *Postmodernity Ethics and the Novel.*

As has already been pointed out, within the academy, the majority of postmodern critics, and those that opposed them, took the position that postmodern theory meant that moral and ethical considerations could no longer be seen as valid. It was not only scholars such as Critchley and Gibson who resisted this notion. The same novelists considered to be at the forefront of postmodern practice continued in the main to be interested in what novelists have always been interested in—human experience, the relationship people have to the cultures or sub-cultures in which they find themselves, and the choices they have to make in response. In other words, they are concerned with depicting situations that require an exercise of moral or ethical values. They work to make the reader identify with the process by which a character chooses one particular course of action rather than another.

Derrida and The Event

In a talk entitled "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event", Derrida makes the point "It is worth recalling that an event implies surprise, exposure, the unanticipatable" (441). Gibson takes up the idea of the event and its implication for ethics in his essay entitled "'Thankless Earth But Not Entirely': Event and Remainder in

Contemporary Fiction" and Derrida used the concept of the event as a way of describing a wide range of encounters, experiences and happenings, as well as in relation to literature. Gibson focuses particularly on literature. Gibson is a keen critic of Martha Nussbaum, but his position here offers some support to her idea that reaction to a totally unpredictable event is an important aspect of the presentation of moral reactions in fictional works.

Inspired by Alain Badiou (see *Being and Event*) Gibson sets out four characteristics, which in his view are essential to a literary event with ethical power. The event must be rare. It is "not an operation of difference, but rather what arrives to make a difference." (5). It involves the "setting aside of a given order of assumption, thought, knowledge or understanding" (5). It is crucially distinguished from the spiritual visionary experience, or the romantic epiphany. "The event is not marked as a moment of revelation but as a moment of radical loss, what Badiou calls subtraction." (5). Perhaps most importantly Gibson argues that such an event must be transformative in that it brings about new sequences, which he describes as "extravagantly undetermined" (5). Later in the essay he draws attention to novels that illustrate use of an event in this way, particularly J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron, Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man.* His analysis of how the unexpected works in fiction has important implications for practice, especially in the disruptive situations that seem to be a distinctive feature of contemporary experience. It is an approach I have used in the novel that forms the second part of this thesis.

Postmodernist Ethics in Literary Practice

In a demonstration of the way theory and practice can interact, it is clear that many novelists writing in the late twentieth century were influenced by the postmodern theories that surround them. As Adam Kelly points out in his article "Moments of Decision in Contemporary American Fiction: Roth, Auster, Eugenides", a trend that has emerged is the idea of an epochal transition precipitated by an event, a moment "when-it-all-changed". Kelly cites three postmodern novels from the 199os that bear out his observation—Philip Roth's *The Human Stain,* Paul Auster's *Leviathan* and Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides.* These "moments of decision" confront the narrator/observer in the novels he has selected, with multiple options for fathoming the motivation of the "hero" or "heroines" they are observing. In doing so they are obliged to confront the complexity of any attempt at moral judgement as they contemplate alternative explanations for the puzzling behaviour they observe. As Kelly puts it:

Despite an exhaustive exploration each time, in none of these novels can the observer-narrator decide on a final interpretation of the decision, on a privileged account that can satisfy him and the reader and provide a paradigm for a definitive and conclusive analysis, a final revelation of the truth of the event. Instead … each text enacts what Derrida has called a "determinate oscillation between possibilities," or, in shorthand, "undecidability" (326).

Kelly sees these literary characteristics as illustrative of a new paradigm in fiction writing that takes us to the brink of what he calls post-postmodern novels, though he holds back from describing them as such because he feels they do not surrender sufficiently to the principle of "undecidability" and he predicts a new wave of novels that will reflect an "enabling structural aporia"[10](328). Kelly looks forward to a future where the post-postmodern novel will enact this more committed possibility. However, I would argue that for each of the writers of these works and for those who read them, what is expressed in these texts offers an opportunity to exercise the moral imagination in a postmodernist context.

Kelly pays most attention to Roth's *The Human Stain*, a novel that focuses on the relationship between decision and moral judgement and the way these elements are dealt with in the construction of a postmodern work. The novel's observer/narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, also appears in Roth's previous novels where he operates as a kind of alter ego for Roth. Zuckerman's friend Coleman Silk presents Zuckerman with an unfolding story that challenges Zuckerman's whole idea of who his friend is and what he stands for. Silk's story begins with his expulsion from his job as a classics professor for referring to a student as a "spook", meaning ghost. He is unaware that the absent student is black, but his comment is taken as a racial slur. A complaint is lodged and Silk is forced to leave. Zuckerman sees this as an example of injustice; a "great man brought low" (18).

When Silk's full story comes to light and Zuckerman finds out from Silk's sister Ernestine that his friend was born a light-skinned African American who decided decades before to "pass" as a Jew, Zuckerman muses upon the multiple alternatives that might have motivated such a decision. His musings are essentially ethical and the variant possibilities his imagination entertains allow the complexities and ramifications of personal decision-making to be explored. A puzzled Zuckerman asks himself: "Was the idea he had of himself of lesser

---

[10] Kelly borrows this phrase from Paul Saint-Amour (69).

validity or greater validity than someone else's idea of what her brother was supposed to be?" (333). Coleman's sister Ernestine can throw no light on his motivation "Coleman never in his life chafed under being a negro … Mother would propose reasons but none was ever adequate" (324-25). Zuckerman is more puzzled by his friend's behaviour than ever:

> I couldn't imagine anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than this unmasking. Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing, and instead of what I'd learned from Ernestine unifying my idea of him, he became not just an unknown but an uncohesive person. (333)

Kelly argues that Coleman's character reflects a truly postmodern view "In which any kind of coherence is an imposition, and all action is understood as fragmented, irreducible to a monadic or expressive notion of the self" (322). However, there is another aspect of Coleman Silk's decisions which Kelly overlooks that has ethical ramifications. It reflects the Levinas/Derrida preoccupation with the centrality of alterity in shaping ethical choice.

The moving description of Silk's mother's reaction when he tells her of his decision shows how the consequences of the choice he makes ripple out to affect others.

> You tell me that the only way I can ever touch my grandchildren is for you to hire me to come over as Mrs Brown to babysit and put them to bed. I'll do it. Tell me to come over as Mrs Brown to clean your house. I'll do that. I have no choice. (Roth 137)

Coleman Silk suggests that his mother does have a choice. She could disown him. After his wife dies (he believes her death is caused by the scandal surrounding his dismissal) Silk begins an affair with a much younger woman, an illiterate janitor at the College. This affair parallels the other one dominating the news at the same time—that of President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. When his lover's jealous Vietnam vet and anti-Semite ex-husband Les Farley comes raging for blood, Zuckerman's behaviour demonstrates little regard for the effect his response will have on those around him, let alone himself. The great irony of Roth's novel is that Silk, who seems to have chosen to avoid the difficulties of living as a black, ends up being killed because he is believed to be a Jew.

Kelly argues that there are three possible ways of interpreting Silk's behaviour, each one situated within a frame provided by classical realism, modernism or postmodernism. And each of these perspectives is considered by Zuckerman as he ponders the meaning of Silk's decision. The first is that of the classic tragedy "in which the self disregards its determinate heritage in a doomed attempt to defy the gods" (Kelly 321). The second, modernist, approach

is represented by Zuckerman's own way of dealing with himself and his decisions. He is a man "who rather than raging against fate reconciles himself to his accidental place in the sphere of life and attempts to understand himself as fully as possible, particularly through an investigation of his own psychology". The third, postmodern, view of the decision is based on the idea that that "any kind of coherence is an imposition" and "all action is understood as fragmented, irreducible to a nomadic or expressive notion of self" (Kelly 322). The revelation of the uncohesiveness of Coleman's "apparent quest to control reality", the "event-like quality of his decision, unconnected to a clear and underlying self persisting through time" challenges the other two interpretations. In the end the reader is pointed "towards a space defined by the differences between readings", a space arrived at after "determinate oscillation between possibilities". (322)

Kelly's interpretation of the nature of decision in postmodern writing provides a useful conceptual framework, but it does not deal with a question that remains. The uncertainties relating to multiple alternative ways of interpreting human behaviour has always been a characteristic of fiction. It's a device that may have been expressed differently at different stages of its evolution, but the presentation of a range of possible explanations for behavioural choices has always been a crucial part of the novelist's arsenal of techniques. Sometimes it is presented through a shift in point of view, sometimes from a narrator, and sometimes from the individual characters' own musings as they pass through different experiences that evoke new and previously uncharacteristic responses. From Njal to Tom Jones to Jane Eyre to Becky Sharp to Swann to Orlando to Leopold Bloom to Dorrigo Evans—to name a scant handful of characters—novels have provided such shifts and alternatives in fragmented lives that seem incoherent. In precisely this way the moral imagination of the reader has always been stimulated. What has changed has been the way literary critics have interpreted them. The theory of the novel has altered approaches to the meaning of unpredictable and transformative behaviour in text worlds.

Reading Postmodern Novels

In Chapter 5 I present the results of my own more thorough reading of two selected novels, but before this current chapter concludes I will turn to a brief comment on a couple of the particular strands of postmodernist theory that have found expression in fiction. These novels are referred to in addition to those analysed by Kelly, in order to to add a further

illustration of the way in which postmodern novels in portraying moral uncertainty and confusion, nevertheless exercise the moral imagination of writer and reader.

The first I want to consider is K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams.* Seen primarily as a queer novel, it has several other postmodern facets. It is imbued with opportunities to reflect on the many aspects of the dislocation occurring in the rapidly changing environment of the twenty-first century. The theories of Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism and historicism can all be brought into play. Notably it allows us insight and deep connection with the many marginalised human beings who inhabit the fractured patchwork of cultural enclaves that sit uneasily side by side in post-apartheid Cape Town. We observe what happens when these "others" spill into the spaces of privilege they abut and the moral dilemmas they pose at both the personal and societal level. Sello Duiker's very choice of setting is conducive to an exploration of ethical issues and a requirement for the reader to engage imaginatively with the questions thus posed.

The interactions bring to mind the Derrida/Levinas notion of the thrust of the Other upon the ego and the requirement to respond in some way. In this novel the coherence and certainties of privilege are confronted and a transformation is taking place. Wealth begins to replace race as the defining division in the emerging twenty-first-century society. Tshepo begins his journey through the town's labyrinth of cultural diversity in a mental hospital, and in the course of the novel he moves through the bohemian parts of the city, the gay nightclubs, the university campus, the Rastafarian community and the mansions of the wealthy on Camps Bay.

After Tshepo drops out of university his work takes him from waiting tables to a massage parlour/brothel where he services mostly white clients. Sello Duiker deftly gives us access to his main character's inner reflections as Tshepo tries to come to grips with the implications of the ideology of consumerism that now surrounds him. Tshepo worries as to whether the forming of racial and sexual identities into shapes that serve the marketing enterprises on which consumerism depends helps or actually hinders the acceptance of marginalised groups. He discovers in practice that any acceptance he finds of his colour or his sexual identity cannot be relied upon.

The shifting world that Tshepo observes around him, as old barriers crumble and new ones appear, forces a mode of decision-making that is fraught with uncertainty. Tradition is no help, rebellion against it (in modernist mode) equally precarious. All that remains as any

kind of ethical guide is the possibility of imagining how the Other is experiencing him and his actions, and allowing that awareness to infiltrate his own behaviour. This imagining of the other which Duiker gives to Tshepos' inner voice is the core function of the moral imagination and by identifying with Tshepo the reader is drawn into a parallel imagining. It is an act that forces an understanding of the despised and downtrodden people Tshepo encounters and the broader socio-political situations that shape their lives.

The other postmodern novel that illustrates, in a different but equally eloquent way, the issues that preoccupy the postmodern novel is Coetzee's *Disgrace*. It is also set in South Africa and it is no accident that I have chosen two from a country where very many ethically challenging shifts and splits and confrontations are currently rife. It is certainly not the only country in the world undergoing massive cultural and social disruption, but it is one where a momentous decision occurred after which, to refer back to Kelly's words, "everything changed".

Disgrace gives sophisticated expression to themes that have preoccupied Coetzee since he began writing fiction and writing about writing fiction. The novel takes place five years after the end of apartheid and in writing about the transfer of power occurring at that time, in that place, Coetzee takes on the great theme of the postmodern world. As dominance moves out of the hands of the great white males of the West, and others begin to lay claim to power, how can those losing that control respond? The major challenge of the twenty-first century is to live with difference. What is the ethical approach to this challenge, especially for those who are experiencing loss?

The novel's protagonist, David Lurie, loses everything in the course of the novel. When it opens he is a mildly discontented English professor working in the Communications Department of a technical university in Cape Town teaching a class in Romantic literature to "post-Christian, post-historical, post-literate students." He feels that for "a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (1). He uses the weekly services of an "exotic" prostitute called Soraya, but that arrangement ends and he begins a relationship with a young student, Melanie. In an intertextual allusion that enriches our understanding of Lurie, Coetzee has him identify with Byron's love affair with Teresa in Italy. He contemplates writing an opera based on Byron's story. Lurie himself is Byronic in appearance and behaviour. He talks of the "rights of desire" but is aware, even as he self-justifies, that Melanie is very young, his student, and that he is behaving without proper duty of care. Lurie personifies the situation of the privileged exploiter. He is aware of the broader

inequities in his society, but does not restrain himself from enjoying the fruits of his dominant position. Coetzee creates in Lurie a character the reader can travel with from a place of arrogance to one of humiliation as he is compelled to comprehend the effect of his actions on others.

Melanie brings a case of sexual harassment against him, and he is forced to leave his job. He goes to live with his physically unattractive, lesbian daughter Lucy on her subsistence farm in Salem where she also runs kennels. The symbolism at play makes his experience on the farm a subtle one, as he reluctantly acquires the capacity to subordinate himself in the face of the needs of others. In particular, Coetzee uses the trope of dogs as symbols of the lowly the disregarded, the expendable. Petrus is a black farmer who has recently gained control of his farm, which is adjacent to Lucy's. When Lurie first meets Petrus, Petrus introduces himself as "the dog man" a sign of his humility, his low status. Later Petrus will not accept any such demeaning appellation and Lurie realises that he himself has become a dog man, a reversal of roles he struggles with: "A dog-man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog- man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a harijan." (146)

Coetzee ensures that the transformation of Lurie's attitude is not achieved lightly. When Lucy first suggests to him that he might help Bev Shaw at the clinic where unwanted dogs are euthanised, he initially resists. He objects that it sounds suspiciously like "someone trying to make reparation for past misdeeds" and agrees only on the condition that "I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself." (77) His struggle with the morality of his situation is made clear to the reader while at the same time his slow identification with the plight of the discarded dogs grows. Coetzee uses Lurie's inner voice, almost indistinguishable from that of the third person narrator, to unfold for us Lurie's developing awareness as he begins his grisly and confronting work with the dogs.

Coetzee has Lurie ponder his own motivation in doing the work: "For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway? For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing." (146). And later: "As for the dogs, he does not want to think about them. From Monday onward the dogs released from life within the walls of the clinic will be tossed into the fire unmarked, unmourned. For that betrayal, will he ever be forgiven?" (178). The symbol of the dog's helplessness provides for the reader a powerful parallel with the despised and rejected in the world, at the same time as Lurie's arrogance is reluctantly replaced with insight and understanding of his own disgrace.

However, to read this book in simple socially mimetic terms would be in my view a mistake. The allegory with the realities of post-apartheid South Africa are there but a broader philosophical agenda underlies its themes. The disruption and consequent moral uncertainty

experienced by individuals in periods of dramatic social upheaval seems to me to be the more fundamental intent of this novel. So when Coetzee has a group of three black men arrive at the farm, rape Lucy, assault David, set him alight, shoot the dogs and escape in his car, he is not simply reinforcing the old white fears of white women's vulnerability to black male sexuality. The focus instead is on Lurie's powerlessness to resist them or to protect his daughter. It concerns itself with his personal ethical dilemma as he attempts to work out how to operate in the new emerging power structure where all the institutions that formerly supported his privilege have disappeared. In fact, his relationships with young females has always been predatory rather than protective, but now he is filled with a futile desire to protect Lucy. He reaches out to her but she makes her own decisions. She does not press charges. She wonders if rape is "the price one has to pay for staying on?" (158). Her approach is one of ethical pragmatism.

Coetzee's use of contrasting characterisation with Lucy adopting her particular attitude to the times she has to deal with, Petrus slowly transforming in the opposite direction to Lurie as the social order swings to favour him, and Bev Shaw's commitment to the relief of suffering, all provide an effective backdrop to the Lurie's evolving moral character.

When Lucy discovers she is pregnant, she accepts an offer to become Petrus's third wife as a way of finding protection (a protection her now powerless father cannot give her) knowing that this will mean that Petrus will eventually take control of her land. She is resigned to her subjugated role. She tells her father: "I am determined to be a good mother, David. A good mother and a good person. You should try to be a good person too" (216).

"He has learned by now, from her (Bev Shaw), to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love" (218). For a while he keeps a resilient stray dog alive, but finally surrenders him to Bev Shaw to put down.

> Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. 'I thought you would save him for another week,' says Bev Shaw. 'Are you giving him up?'
> 'Yes, I am giving him up'. (220)

As I have already indicated such lines as this and many others throughout this spare, elegantly constructed novel have been interpreted as allegory. These allegorical readings have become a controversial issue among Coetzee scholars, just as the eschewing of traditional representational narrative conventions has been among other distinguished South African writers such as Nadine Gordimer.

In thinking about these controversies it is worth noting that in all Coetzee's work he has been deeply interested in questions of form and has used many different ways to call into question accepted narrative devices. His work carries many of the hallmarks of the postmodern writer such as false forewords, fake appendices and disruptive interventions by fate that change perspectives. Accommodation with the surrounding environment becomes transformative, not merely adaptive. In *Disgrace*, a very short novel, Coetzee incorporates a range of postmodern themes. Within its postcolonial setting the principles of historicism are in play. After her rape, his daughter asks, "But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them" to which Lurie replies: "It was history speaking through them. Think of it that way if it helps. It may have seemed personal but it wasn't. It comes down from the ancestors" (156). Feminist themes are also evident as agency starts to shift a little towards the used and abused females. He cannot impose his will on women anymore. Soraya can refuse to see him. His daughter does not take his advice, instead she starts offering it to him. Even the young and unformed Melanie, who is trapped in Lurie's power relationship, begins to resist. Her relationship with him has distracted her from preparing for an exam. He insists that she must sit it.

> She rises, slings her bag over her shoulder.
> 'Melanie, I have responsibilities. At least go through the motions. Don't make the situation more complicated than it need be.'
> Responsibilities: she does not dignify the word with a reply. (35)

David Lurie discovers that the stable order is in flux. The choice is to accept and adapt to the inevitable or to try to fight against history and reclaim ground and power that has gone forever.

Lurie's moral progress from arrogance to humility exemplifies the historical reality for privileged white men. Coetzee has chosen to document the destabilised power structures taking place in the contemporary world and so vividly in South Africa, through the focalisation of a protagonist drawn from his own subculture. In the same way, Duiker reflects on the experience from a very different perspective. By writing about what they know well from experience and observation, these two writers are able to create characters who take the reader inside the human dilemmas that arise in a rapidly changing environment. In doing so they demonstrate how the moral imagination operates in literary works set in times of political and social disruption.

***

I began this chapter by outlining the debate that occurred among literary scholars in the second half of the twentieth century as a reaction to the implications for literature of theories of structuralism, poststructuralism and deconstruction. The debate has centred on whether or not the ideas associated with postmodernist theories, and the cluster of literary movements arising from them, necessitate the abandonment of a consideration of a moral element in literature. Accepting the space limitations of this thesis, I chose to focus on the central figure of Derrida, examining his views on ethics with particular regard to the influence of Levinas, whose exposition of the concept of alterity and Derrida's development of it have had a major influence on the ideas at the core of this thesis. I also investigated the work of literary scholars who have already written on postmodern ethics. In addition I analysed several postmodern novels using an ethical frame. The conclusion emerged that ethical preoccupations have never left postmodern fiction.

Under the influence of postmodernism the notion of what is moral—what is ethical—has evolved. The incorporation of marginalised groups into the equation, and the questioning of established ethical codes, has disrupted old ethical certainties. The theoretical frame we place around a novel has altered. These developments have allowed alterity to emerge as the best guide to moral behaviour. My argument is that what might be referred to as post-postmodernist perspectives have the capacity to extend the way in which we now understand the moral imagination. As a result, the concept of the moral imagination can re-emerge as an influence in literary theory and practice, changed and strengthened by the ideas and debates that have influenced literary thinking in the second half of the twentieth century.

<center>**Chapter 4**</center>

<center>*A Leaf of Sage*[11]</center>

<center>**Fiction, Moral Philosophy and the Ethical Turn**</center>

The move away from consideration of the ethical dimension of literary fiction was not a universal phenomenon in the academy. As was shown in the previous chapter, even among those who embraced the ideas of the cultural theorists, there were some who still argued for an ethical element in literary criticism. But they were a minority and it was not until the early 1980s that those who saw a moral element in the reading, writing and criticism of works of fiction began to mount the case for what has come to be known as "the ethical turn". An analysis of the specific contributions made by a number of scholars to the thinking that formed the basis of the ethical turn is the subject of this chapter.

In this chapter I trace the development of the ethical turn from the 1980s to the present, and I discuss the restoration of the idea of the moral imagination in fiction among some literary scholars and critics. This history shows that the ethical turn has been a broadly based movement attracting the interest of philosophers, cognitive scientists, psychologists, mass media critics and journalists, as well as literary scholars. Issues of, for example, fiction's role in evoking empathy, and questions around whether reading is good for you or if it can make you into a more ethical person, have all been canvassed under the broad umbrella of the study of ethics and literature.

My focus is on the role of the moral imagination, which forms a relatively small part of the movement, but which in my view is the most promising way to approach the role of ethics in literature and its impact on readers and critics alike. As briefly outlined in the introductory chapter of this thesis, my argument is that the moral imagination has larger implications than simply empathy; it encompasses empathy, but is not limited to it.

To provide context for the case that the moral imagination is the most useful way to consider the relationship between ethics and fiction, this chapter focuses on how ideas about this connection evolved in the period from the 1980s to the present. The chapter begins by describing the way that moral philosophers, through demonstrating the effectiveness of fiction

---

[11] The title of a poem by James McAuley (93).

in conveying insights into moral problems, influenced literary scholarship. Particular consideration is given to philosopher Martha Nussbaum's work in formulating and proposing ideas that were last promulgated in literary circles by such people as Henry James and Lionel Trilling (as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis). In arguing for these approaches, Nussbaum triggered a renewed debate around the topic of the role of ethics in literary criticism. Other philosophers followed and their work interacted productively with thinking that was already occurring among some literary scholars. The chapter then shows how the pioneering work of English Literature academic, Wayne Booth, picked up many of Nussbaum's ideas. Booth's highly-cited *The Company We Keep* was published in 1989 and became something of a foundational text for the ethical turn. As such it is given particular attention in this chapter. The work of Nussbaum and Booth sparked a debate, with arguments mounted against them from the "art for art's sake" school of literary criticism. The debate resulted in a growing awareness of the limitations of the many varieties of theories that focus simply on the formal qualities of the text.

The chapter continues by showing how in the late 1990s until the present, interest in the ethical aspects of fiction has grown and developed, sometimes as a seeming reaction to the dominance of theory in previous decades, and sometimes because of the re-discovery of older discarded critics. The revival of interest in the writings of Lionel Trilling exemplifies this trend and is described here. As already noted, his unrivalled account of the moral imagination is particularly relevant to the central argument of this thesis. The notions that novels work by evoking empathy and that reading fiction can improve your morals are also considered. A brief look at the growing relevance of empirical work undertaken by psychologists and cognitive scientists raises the possibility of future insights that may lead to a better understanding of how the moral imagination actually works in human cognition. The chapter concludes by proposing that the moral imagination provides the most effective frame for further thinking about the relationship between fiction and ethics.

Moral Philosophers Re-ignite Interest in Ethics and Literature

A useful platform for the arguments of those who in the 1980s wished to re-emphasise the connection between literature and ethics was provided by the decision of the journal *New Literary History* to prepare a special issue "Literature and/as Moral Philosophy" (1983), edited by Ralph Cohen. This issue brought together the papers of a number of moral philosophers and a couple of English Literature specialists who focused primarily on poetry.

It was in this special issue that Martha Nussbaum's influential and controversial "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy" was first published. The heated debate subsequently provoked by the issue and by Nussbaum's essay in particular, brought the attention of many literary scholars to ethical issues in fiction. Nussbaum's was, in effect, a work of literary criticism by a philosopher and signalled the beginning of a cross-disciplinary trend.

As shown in her later book of essays *Love's Knowledge*, which included "Flawed Crystals", Nussbaum brought to her reading of fictional works perspectives drawn from the theoretical framework of moral and aesthetic philosophy. She applied her analysis to *The Princess Casamassima* and *The Ambassadors* as well as to other novels such as *David Copperfield, Molloy,* and *Remembrance of Things Past.* A committed Aristotelian, Nussbaum believes that philosophers such as Plato and Kant in their pursuit of prescriptive universal standards missed the point of true morality, which, as Aristotle argued, comes from "character". Aristotle believed that we learn how best to act by experience, interaction with others, and the development of 'virtue'. The vicarious experience of choice offered particularly by the long narrative form is, in Nussbaum's view, the most efficacious in extending the ability to choose well, though she does not entirely dismiss the value of other narrative forms. She argues for the "priority of perceptions (priority of the particular)" and "by this I mean the ability to discern acutely and responsively the salient features of one's particular situation". She further affirms her view that: "one point of the emphasis on perception is to show the ethical crudeness of moralities based exclusively on general rules and to demand for ethics a much finer responsiveness to the concrete" (*Love's Knowledge* 37).

Nussbaum has interesting things to say about the way narratology shapes meaning, the relationship between form and content, and the means by which a writer can convey experience to a reader and the reader's role in responding to those techniques. But these are well-worked paths for literary criticism and were so at the time Nussbaum's essays were written. The distinctive feature of Nussbaum's approach as a philosopher lies in her detailed interpretation of individual scenes, where she pays particular attention to the meanings conveyed from the implied author to the reader. This, she argues occurs via the reader's imaginative experience of the characters' actions and a corresponding participation in the situations in which they find themselves: "novels show us the worth and richness of plural qualitative thinking and engender in their readers a richly qualitative kind of seeing" (36).

Nussbaum argues for the ethical value of imagination and emotion, asserting that "there will be certain contexts in which the pursuit of intellectual reasoning apart from emotion will actually prevent a full rational judgement—for example by preventing an access to one's grief or one's love that is necessary for a full understanding of what has taken place when a loved one dies" (41). She is interested in the "ethical relevance of uncontrolled happenings" or the "significance for human life … of surprise, of reversal" (43), and points out that these are major novelistic techniques. She suggests that Proust's work "tells us that one of the primary aims of literary art is to show us moments in which habit is cut through by the unexpected and to engender in the reader a similar upsurge of true, surprised feeling." For Nussbaum, this is reinforcement of the Aristotelian idea that human aspirations to live well are tested by uncontrolled events, not the opposite, "as the Platonists would have it" (44).

The foundation of Nussbaum's position is that ethics is about answering the basic question: "How should a human being live?" To find the answer she suggests we need to pursue both an empirical and a practical investigation. The enquiry needs to be "empirical in that it is concerned with, takes its 'evidence' from the experience of life, practical in that its aim is to find a conception by which human beings can live and live together" (25). But the richness of Nussbaum's work lies in the way she applies these fundamental philosophical principles to the analysis of her chosen texts. She argues that there is an essential connection between "a distinctive ethical conception", which she sees as "Aristotelian", and the reading of novels.

> Thus if the enterprise of moral philosophy is understood as we have understood it, as a pursuit of truth in all its forms, requiring a deep and sympathetic investigation of all major ethical alternatives and the comparison of each with our active sense of life, then moral philosophy requires such literary texts and the experience of loving and attentive novel-reading for its own completion. (27)

Nussbaum's ideas about the value of fiction intersect with her broader philosophical position which rejects purely deontological or duty-based morality centred around the notion of fundamental obligations of a general nature that are seen by their advocates (such as Immanuel Kant and John Locke) to be applicable to all situations. Equally consequentialist moral theories or utilitarian approaches to moral decisions (espoused for example by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill) are criticised by Nussbaum and others who adhere to the Aristotelian tradition. Her Aristotelian virtue-based position emphasises, rather, the particularity and complexity of each situation.

The link she made between aesthetics and ethics was adopted and developed by other philosophers, including Gregory Currie, an aesthetic and moral philosopher who expanded on Nussbaum's theme. In 1995 he wrote:

> I hold that, in so far as there is a role for imagination in helping us to see through a moral issue or to make a moral choice, that role is undertaken by the same mental mechanism that is deployed when we read or—if we have the right talents and inclinations—create fictional works. (The Moral Psychology of Fiction 250)

Other philosophers such as Hilary Putnam held similar views, namely that it was the understanding of the particular, rather than the following of general precepts, that could be aided by narrative art. As Putnam put it:

> Sometimes it is said that literature describes 'the human predicament,' … I want to suggest that if moral reasoning, at the reflective level, is the conscious criticism of ways of life, then the sensitive appreciation in the imagination of predicaments and perplexities must be essential to sensitive moral reasoning. Novels and plays do not set moral reasoning before us, that is true. But they do (frequently) do something for us that must be done for us if we are to gain any moral knowledge. (486)

Margaret Urban Walker is another moral philosopher who has found relevance for her discipline in analysing fictional works. In her paper on "Moral Repair and Its Limits" she draws illuminating comparisons between the fictional situation portrayed in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and the moral repair being attempted by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She asserts:

> *Jazz* reminds us how little justice is ever done or even attempted where lives have been torn and scorched over generations of systemic oppression with its opportunistic cruelty its deliberately measured negligence and its tightly managed 'truths'. (124)

And Putnam goes on to point out the limitations of a purely legalistic approach to justice and moral repair, concluding that: "What serves better are detailed understandings—practical historical political and moral—of the many facets of moral repair as they apply to concrete situations."

Literary Scholarship and the beginning of the Ethical Turn

In the field of literary studies, consideration of ethics had abated by the last decade of the twentieth century, but had not disappeared and, with the extra encouragement that came

from the philosophers' encroachment on their critical territory, ethical considerations re-asserted themselves more forcefully in the work of some literary scholars. A leader in the field was Wayne C. Booth. In 1988 he published The Company We Keep, which, as its title suggests, uses the consistent metaphor of the book as a friend—a friend who can influence us. The Company We Keep became one of the key reference works for scholars interested in the restoration of an ethical perspective to literary criticism. It drew high praise from people such as Nussbaum and criticism from those who wished to retain a more theoretical approach to the aesthetics of literature. For example, Steven Connor in his 1990 review of the book deplored the "unnecessarily bristly treatment of his [Booth's] own literary-theoretical adversaries, especially deconstruction. His footnotes sniff and snipe at a deconstructive practice that is constantly named, but nowhere characterised let alone critically engaged with" (893).

Booth's highly-cited work is important in the development of ethical criticism because its bold and detailed advocacy is embedded in a deep, authoritative knowledge of literary texts. He points out in the book's Introduction that ethical criticism:

> is practised everywhere, often surreptitiously, often guiltily, often badly, partly because it is the most difficult of all critical modes but partly because we have so little serious talk about why it is important what purpose it serves and how it might be done well. (19)

Booth argues that the ideas expressed in a work of fiction will influence the way the reader thinks and the views and attitudes the reader might develop, in the same way as a friend might influence a person. Evaluating the ideas contained in a work is a process that will be engaged in as we read, whether we are reading for pleasure or as a critic or scholar. And, in the same way as a human personality is not static but changes over time or relationships with friends shift and alter, so our approach to a work of fiction will be affected by our discussions with others and by coming into contact with views different from our own. It will also be affected by, and made more valuable through, multiple exposures to the many narratives that can be drawn from literature and other media as well as from life. In order to describe what he means by a kind of collectively-tested ethical criticism that arrives at insights unavailable to the lone individual or to the individual with sparse knowledge of other narratives such as literary narratives, Booth invents the word "coduction", which is neither induction nor deduction but a communal exercise that includes other readers, other critics and theorists, and other books.

Booth's ideas as expressed in *The Company We Keep,* particularly in the section he calls "Consequences for Character", owe a strong debt to Mikhail Bakhtin (238). Bakhtin's philosophy has also influenced the approach of many people now involved in the turn to ethical criticism. These ideas are expressed in Bakhtin's four essays collected in *The Dialogic Imagination,* which introduce his now influential ideas of dialogism (the interplay of ideas and viewpoints across a text) heteroglossia (diversity of discourse within a text) and chronotope (literally time and space as a way of expressing the importance of the wider context for literary works). Fundamentally, Bhaktin argues that we are formed by the society in which we live, by the ideas we are exposed to and the realities we experience. The value systems we hold are constructed by that society and the language we use reflects the ethical base of our collective thinking. Interaction between us in life or through our stories is the way these values are communicated, held and evolved. Novels play an important part in this process and for them to be effective, and for them to be properly understood, it is necessary to look at context. The great ethical value of the novel lies in the interplay of the characters; in the way in which differing views are embodied and interact with each other. According to Bakhtin, the ethical core of the novel lies with the characters and not with the author. And this is where Booth parts company with him. For Booth, the author is the puppet master, who manipulates the characters in order to persuade the reader to the author's own ethical or ideological position.

We need to refer to Booth's earlier work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* to understand both his debt to Bakhtin and more importantly the basis of his disagreement over whether the ethical power of a work lies with the characters portrayed or with the author's own view. In this earlier work, Booth describes "the rhetorical resources available to the writer … as he tries consciously or unconsciously to impose his fictional world upon the reader" (xiii). He argues that the abandoning of the use of the author's own direct commentary represents a loss for the author in his rhetorical task of what he sees as the "imposing" of the writer's "monological ideology" on the reader. But even when the author avoids this useful device, as in most modern and contemporary novels, and uses indirect narration, "the author's voice is still dominant in a dialogue that is at the heart of all experience with fiction." (*Rhetoric* 272)

In *The Company We Keep*, Booth offers many examples of texts that raise ethical dilemmas and is generous in tracing his own altering attitudes. For example, he opens his introduction to the book with an account of an incident at the University of Chicago where he was a faculty member. The faculty was horrified when an African American member of staff,

Paul Moses (to whom Booth dedicates this book) resisted the inclusion of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, on the reading list for students. His reason was "The way Mark Twain portrays Jim is so offensive to me that I get angry in class" (Company 3). Moses's reaction, so troubling to Booth at the time set in train via "coduction" a series of re-evaluations of his own attitude fully explained in a later section of his book. (Company 457-78). However, it seems to me that if a collective conversation is the way good ethical criticism is arrived at, it would be important for Moses's anger to be expressed to the class, that it be explained and justified so that true coduction can operate. In my view, a book with an ethical viewpoint one finds doubtful can play a crucial part both in the formation of the reader's understanding and in the broader critical conversation.

Despite Booth's avowed pluralism and his embrace of some of Bakhtin's ideas, the strain of ethical criticism expressed in the *The Company We Keep* is, in one sense, that of a moralist. He may have railed against the "hanging judges"—those earlier critics whose criticism he rejected as being moralistic—but his elevation of the author's ideological or ethical purpose in writing the novel, and his contention that the characters created by the novelist are rhetorical devices to suit that writer's own ethical or ideological purposes, takes us in a problematic direction. In my view it constitutes a misunderstanding of what fiction is and how fiction works.

Although I am critical of some aspects of Booth's approach, *The Company We Keep* played a useful role at the time of its publication in refocusing literary criticism on the neglected area of the ethical aspects of literature. In advancing the metaphor of novels as friends, with stories to tell that inform, shape and modify our understanding of others and by incorporating and extending many of Bakhtin's ideas he helped prompt the revival of ideas that had for several decades been set aside. However, the new turn in literary and philosophical interest was not welcomed by all.

Aesthetics and Ethics: A Public Debate

Following publication of the works of Nussbaum and Booth, Richard A. Posner mounted a spirited attack on their arguments in an essay he titled "Against Ethical Criticism". In a way that Posner could not have intended, the effect of the attack was to draw a great deal of nourishing attention to the ideas that signalled the beginning of the ethical turn. Put briefly, Posner's position is that aesthetic judgement is the only valid way to approach the criticism of literary texts and that ethics should play no part in that criticism. This position, which I will

refer to as aestheticism but which philosopher Noël Carroll in his survey article "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research" has labelled "autonomism" is still held among those aesthetic philosophers and others, who have resisted the influence of the many postmodernist cultural theories that have placed literary criticism in political, social and historical context.

Even among literary scholars the core debate continues between formalistic approaches and those that emphasise the context and meaning of the content. Harold Bloom famously averred that his canon (1995) was based on aesthetic criteria, not on ethical political or cultural values, though some of his aesthetic criteria do seem to carry with them aspects of these values. But he was clear in regretting "the flight from the aesthetic among so many of my profession" (17). As late as 2003, John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas were writing a book titled *The New Aestheticism*, and although the stance examined in this book is different in many respects from Posner's, at its core the newly articulated position is subject to the same criticisms.

The argument of the aestheticists is based on a number of assumptions about the relationship between art and ethics. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use Posner's critique as representative of the many other theorists that express the formalist or "art for art's sake" position. The debate that took place between Posner on the one hand and Booth and Nussbaum on the other illustrates nicely the philosophical (and one could argue also the political) divide that is the foundation of the controversy that still surrounds elements of the ethical turn.

Nussbaum responded to Posner's criticism in a number of her subsequent works but notably and specifically in "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism." Wayne Booth's rejoinder was contained in "Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake". Posner responded once more with "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two". All three essays were published in the same 1998 issue of *Philosophy and Literature.*

Posner makes the common mistake of assuming that the argument for the ethical value of literature is based on the idea that reading literary fiction will teach you better moral principles on which to base your life and your ethical choices. It adopts the view of morality that is rule based. It is thus easy for him to point out that Nussbaum's choice of works to illustrate her argument is skewed towards those that impart moral propositions of which she approves, and he sees this as a reflection of her liberal politics—politics very different from

his own. However, Nussbaum has not chosen works such as James's *The Golden Bowl* or Richard Wright's *Native Son* for that reason. Rather, as she quotes from James at the opening of her essay "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible", "The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in the face of the constant force that makes for muddlement" (*Love's Knowledge* 148). Nussbaum's choice of exemplars is guided by a wish to draw attention to the duty of literary novelists to strive to represent life and its challenges and decisions as accurately as possible. Posner has adopted a use of the word "moral" to imply a set of fixed propositions or laws, a prescription or recipe for behaviour, rather than the characteristics embedded in a person who acts responsibly in issues of choice that involve other people. He is happy to admit that reading literature will expand our experience—both emotional and intellectual—and give us insights into the way others think, but his view of ethics precludes these elements from having anything to do with ethical behaviour. He asserts "empathy is amoral". (19 Against Ethical Criticism1997)

He is not an anti-consequentialist, as some aestheticists are, but although he concedes that "reading can have consequences, including moral and political ones", he insists that this has nothing to do with its value to the reader. He argues that the writer's morals have nothing to do with the effect of the text, a position all the evidence supports and against which I think few would argue. He posits that the various effects of literature on the reader are "psychological rather than moral". Reading "may make us stronger or prouder (or even humbler), though it is unlikely to make us better" (*Law and Literature* 490). Posner finds it as easy to separate the moral from the psychological as he does to separate form and content. He does not explain where he thinks morality resides, if not in the human psyche.

Noël Carroll points out that in responding to aestheticists like Posner: "…some ethical critics counter that there are more forms of knowledge than 'knowledge that' Ryle spoke of 'knowledge how' Ethical critics add to the list "knowledge of what it would be like", which itself is a form of knowledge by acquaintance."(361-362). Using the example of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Carroll suggests that if the moral purpose of the novel is to convey that slavery is evil, it could be argued that a pamphlet would have been more effective, as everybody is aware that a novel is made up. However, Carroll points out that the novel had a profound effect by "providing richly particularized episodes of cruelty and inhumanity … the novelist engages the reader's imagination and emotions, thereby giving the reader a "feel" for what it was like to live in slave times (362).

The Ethical Turn Gathers Momentum

The three-way debate between Nussbaum, Booth and Posner attracted much attention in the US in the early 1990s, and a trend back towards overt ethical criticism of texts and further development of ethical aspects of literary scholarship was begun. Several prominent literary scholars have contributed to the way in which this was to develop and we will now look briefly at their contributions.

Included among them is Marshall Gregory, a literary academic who has never been comfortable with the era of theory and postmodernism, and contributed enthusiastically to the turn from writing about character formation in the literary classroom in 1990 through to his major article in 2010 "Redefining Ethical Criticism". He concludes his wide-ranging overview of the ethical turn by listing all the reasons why the twenty-first century world confronts us with major moral dilemmas. It is a "world riven by polarities which often seem to be tearing society apart" and one in which we "are persistently confronted with a vast number of contradictory claims about ethical notions". He hopes for a better world achieved not by "telling people what they should believe but by helping them to learn how to make arguments rather than encouraging them merely to crush their opponents". He asserts that a new ethical criticism that helps us to "analyze productively the relationship between the development of selves and the invitations of literary art" can contribute to an "ongoing discussion about not only who we are but who we want to become" (298-299).

Tobin Siebers, in *The Ethics of Criticism*, expresses his disturbance at the arguments mounted by cultural theorists—particularly the poststructuralists—that question humanist tradition and the values of the Enlightenment. He writes a strong defence of these values and the importance of their role in the analysis of literature. Citing a broad-ranging assembly of philosophers and critics, he concludes that ethics of criticism is the only adequate response to the actual preoccupations of literary fiction. For Siebers ethical criticism arises

> … from the persistent cares and desires of people who write read and live together. They are human concerns focused on the eminence of human society and the forms of violence that threaten community, and they represent the only space from which people cannot free themselves and still exist. (239)

However, there are those who are still wedded to the notion that humanism is suspect. In an article entitled "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn" Heather Love argues for a distancing of the reader from the novel, to avoid the subjectivity that comes with

immersion and fellow feeling. She considers the humanist hermeneutic to be a persistent residuum of the religious exegesis of text. It worries her that the work done by the many branches of the postmodern movement (such as feminism, postcolonial studies, queer studies and diaspora studies) in promoting the close reading of texts to uncover their political implications may be overridden by this search for their deeper ethical implications. She relies particularly on the work of sociologists Bruno Latour and Erving Goffman to argue for a surface or distant reading of a text based on description in the sociological mode rather than interpretation—"close but not deep". She remains concerned that "the hermeneutics of recognition and empathy originally sacred and now grounded in an unacknowledged but powerful humanism" persist despite efforts to expunge them, and that "literary critics still tend to that part of the world that has been 'kept safe from sociology'". She suggests that: "A turn from interpretation to description might be one way to give up that ghost." (388)

If we move away from an anti-humanist ideology it becomes apparent that the most satisfying readings and critiques of literary texts involve both description and interpretation; fact and opinion. Both close and deep reading need to go hand in hand if the full impact of a work is to be appreciated.

David Parker is critical of those adherents of the postmodern movement such as cultural theorist Frederic Jameson (*The Political Unconscious*) who blames ethics and the idea of a literary canon for creating a binary approach to our understanding of human behaviour, with the dominant group labelled "good" and the Other labelled "evil". Whereas Parker resists the notion that ethics is inevitably "categorical" and "repressive", as some theorists would have it, he acknowledges that "poststructuralists, Marxists, feminists and race-theorists" have "changed the consciousness of most of us irreversibly on a whole range of matters including our views of which authors and works matter most and which ethical questions are most worthy of our attention" (29). But he echoes Tobin Siebers in the view that "the ethos of Foucault, de Man and Hillis Miller is essentially Romantic." The aspiration to be "purely formal, semiotic and linguistic amounts to a wish to be innocent of the entanglements of everyday life" (39). And that these theorists "attempt to secure a specious innocence by identifying with victims and outcasts, which depends on the Rousseauistic belief that the marginal—as opposed to those of us who are duped by belonging—have privileged insight." He concludes that "against the grain of its own assumptions" it reveals its "ethical unconscious" (40).

Parker's central point is that "our very identity, our sense of who we are, is a kind of 'orientation in moral space'" (7). The assumption about both human and literary activity implied in the phrase "orientation in morals space" (which Parker borrowed from Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*) is one that several other literary scholars reflected in their own contributions to the ethical turn as it established itself through the 1990s. These included Stephen Tanner ("The Moral and the Aesthetical: Literary Study and the Social Order") and Geoffrey Galt Harpham ("Ethics and Adaptation in Literary Study").

James Phelan, arguing as both Booth and Bakhtin do, that narrative is an act of rhetoric, draws together the perspectives of Levinas and Adam Zachary Newton (as well as Bakhtin and Booth) to formulate a much more comprehensive and satisfying theory of narrative and ethics. He proposes that the ethics of reading involves interaction from four sources: the characters within the story; the point of view of the narrator; the implied author; and finally the reader. In this way he is also able to embrace the ideas advanced in the theories relating to reader response, as well as those that are concerned with the location of ethical communication in any text or authorial intention. Phelan believes that "our values and those set forth by the implied author affect our judgement of character, our judgements affect our emotions and the trajectory of our feelings is linked to the psychological and thematic effects of the narrative" (319). He illustrates this position in a convincing way, with an analysis of all four elements as demonstrated in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which an ideal novel for showing the specificity of all moral judgements and the importance of cultural, political and historical context in making them. As Phelan puts it, in describing Morrison's provision of three different points of view, in the form of narrative accounts of Sethe's killing of her children:

> …the progression of the stories gives us a progression of possibilities for ethical judgement. Sethe has committed a sub-human action; Sethe has done the wrong thing but done it instinctively and understandably; Sethe has done something difficult but heroic because it is done for the best motives and it turns out to be a success. (326)

By this means Phelan demonstrates the way all four elements of his analysis of ethics and narrative work together in this novel to challenge the reader to understand not just the individual act, but also the conditions that produced it. In my view Phelan's analysis shows the novel's clear invitation for the reader's moral imagination to engage with the story, as well as being an illuminating example of a very effective author's moral imagination at work.

Dorothy Hale, another significant contributor to the ethical turn grappled with similar complexities. Struggling to find a way to connect the ideas of Henry James to the more political approaches of postmodernism, Hale coined the term "social formalism" and gave that name to a book published in 1998. For her, "social formalism" is a way of encompassing the more formal approaches of literary criticism, those aspects that can be seen as purely literary, with the postmodernist awareness and focus upon issues relating to social identity. Hale is not anti-humanist, but in this book she reflects the postmodern preoccupation with sociological concerns as opposed to questions of individual ethics. In consequence her concept of social formalism, though useful, omits a serious treatment of the ethical as distinct from the socio-political impact of the novel and the experience of the individual reader.

However, by 2009 Hale had moved her position in step with the evolution of the expanding field of ethical criticism and the plethora of work that had emerged since her first book was published. In a paper entitled "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorising the Novel in the Twenty-First Century" she extends her argument to include the ideas that have arisen, following the entry of Nussbaum, Booth and others into the field of ethical criticism. She deals effectively with those critics who have dismissed the Jamesian tradition and Nussbaum's support of it as what Gibson has called "pre-Barthesian" (*Postmodernity* 11). Hale suggests that what we have learned from the literary tradition that goes back to James and Trilling and the recent return to ethics "is not a logical confusion about the ontological status of literary form but an aesthetic effect of the novel as the genre has been developed through the twentieth century and into our own cultural moment" (904).

Derek Attridge, as someone who has been strongly influenced by the ideas of Derrida and Levinas, has made a powerful contribution to our understanding of the ethical value of fiction. He recognises the ethical force of Derrida's work (as does Nicole Anderson whose work was considered in Chapter 2) but, importantly for the arguments being mounted in this chapter, focuses as well on a key aspect of our understanding of the way literature works. In two books published in 2004 he attempts the task of uncovering what it is about literature that makes its effects so singular. He acknowledges in his Introduction to *The Singularity of Literature* the difficulty of this task, pointing out that "literature, or rather the experience of literary works, consistently exceeds the limits of rational accounting" (3), but he nevertheless goes on to attempt to find explanations for literature's "unsettling, intoxicating, moving, delighting powers." (1).

Attridge develops an approach in which notions of alterity deeply affect the unique experience involved in the creating and reading of literature. He proposes that interaction with literature is best seen as an event, both for the writer and the reader.

> That is what a literary work 'is': an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or act-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text never entirely insulated from the contingencies of history into which it is projected and within which it is read. (*Singularity* 59)

His purpose is to understand literature within the experience of how it is created and read, rather than imposing on it instrumentalist notions drawn from philosophical or political theories. He believes that that there is a specificity, a singularity to literature that is recognised when we create or consume it, but which is hard to define or describe. Whereas he rejects some aspects of the aesthetic tradition described earlier in this chapter, he nevertheless considers that:

> The writer's sense that a work is finished, that after a process of repeated revision it seems 'right' (at least for the moment), and the reader's sense of an integrity, a quiddity, a singular and strong identity, stem from the shaping of language and not from some set of ideas or emotions which the word encodes. (11)

In a chapter devoted to establishing the intimate relationship between form and content, Attridge suggests that "Instead of being opposed to content, then, form in the sense I am developing here incudes the mobilization of meanings". It is through this mobilisation of meanings that the work's "linguistic operations" are "staged" (109). Form and content thus cannot be separated but neither are they fixed in time. He suggests that "Responding responsibly to a work of art means attempting to do justice to it as a singular other; it involves a judgement that is not simply ethical or aesthetic … but operates as an affirmation of the work's inventiveness" (128). Attridge argues that "the *singularity* of the artwork" results from "the irruption of *otherness* or *alterity* into the cultural field" (*Singularity* 136).

In *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event,* Attridge uses Coetzee's work to extend and apply the ideas put forward in *The Singularity of Literature.* Looking to Wolfgang Iser and other proponents of reader response theory as well as to Derrida for the notions of responsive and responsible reading, he asserts:

> I do not treat the text as an object whose significance has to be divined; I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding

that I, an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through. (39)

Using the example of Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, Attridge shows how one might "resist the urge to apply preexisting norms and to make fixed moral judgements" (54), and points out that reflective passages in the novel often begin with "Perhaps" (54). He is disturbed by the tendency to allegorise Coetzee's works (as in for example purely political readings and sees them as failing to appreciate the singularity of the event that a literary work offers.

Attridge's most fundamental argument, forming a consistent thread throughout both these books is for the "responsive" and "responsible" approach that recognises the role of alterity in literature's impact. In a later published interview with Zahi Zalloua, he makes it clear that this is essentially an ethical position:

> The practice of reading a novel as I have described it … is valuable in a different sense: as an experience of openness to otherness, conveyed by staging in language of human needs, desires, emotions, acts, powers, weaknesses. It is thus an inherently ethical practice." (23)

For Attridge the relationship between reading a novel, the ability to imagine the Other, and morality is clear.

Scholars like Phelan, Anderson and Attridge have added to the understanding of a possible way forward, in what has often been described as the literary world post-theory. They do not abandon the valuable extension cultural theory has made to the way literature might be approached, but draw out the core ethical implications of theoretical positions, especially those of Derrida that have been ignored or misinterpreted. Their scholarship in this space has had a significant effect on the thinking contained in this thesis and the conclusions it reaches.

I cannot conclude an account of the changes in scholarship that have contributed to the ethical turn without turning briefly to the revival of interest in the ideas and writings of Lionel Trilling. This revival provides a telling illustration of what has been taking place in literary circles in the last couple of decades. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, which examines attitudes to morality and ethics in literature in the first half of the century, Trilling's prominence and his fall from favour is described. We left him at the end of that chapter thoroughly discredited as the postmodern era took hold. It is now time to pick up the story of this man and his ideas,

first revered, then reviled and now revived. Trilling's return to favour provides an interesting barometer of the changing critical climate currently evolving in the field of literary scholarship and I would argue that, so far, nobody has articulated the concept of the moral imagination as it operates in fiction better than he has done.

Trilling's body of work aligns strongly with the idea of the moral imagination that I propose in this thesis. Trilling's emphasis on nuance and complexity in human affairs and the importance of historical and cultural context in understanding human behaviour has proved to be highly valuable to those who have been re-discovering the importance of a coherent approach to ethical questions in our reading and writing of fiction.

Wayne Booth may have been one of those who misread Trilling (or perhaps did not read him at all), but he certainly dismissed him as among the "hanging judges" (*Company* 49) who wanted to impose their own assessments on others. However, Martha Nussbaum, though an admirer of Booth's work, was one of the first to re-discover Trilling and was part of the move to restore his reputation. Her general position that there is an intimate connection between form and content, and that the stylistic elements of the text and the socio–political context it conveys are intimately connected, was reminiscent of Trilling's own arguments. Both Trilling and Nussbaum saw attempts to remove all ethical considerations from a proper criticism of a text as dangerously omitting an element that is crucial to a true appreciation of the work. Nussbaum acknowledges her debt to Trilling in "The Narrative Imagination" (*Cultivating Humanity* 85-112) in which she once again argues that to see the aesthetic as something that can be appreciated in the abstract without social context is to fail to appreciate how inextricably these elements of our experience are bound together. She points out that the New Criticism of the mid-twentieth century in this respect exhibited the same flaws as some contemporary theories do:

> For this reason it [the New Criticism] was resisted by some of the finest minds in the field [of literary studies] …Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* made explicit his own commitment to liberalism and democracy, and argued brilliantly that the novel as genre is committed to liberalism in its very form, in the way in which it shows respect for the individuality and the privacy of each human mind. He connected his criticism of Henry James very closely with his general social criticism. The *Liberal Imagination* juxtaposes essays on James with essays on contemporary social issues. (*Cultivating Humanity* 104-05)

This was the beginning of Trilling's restoration. After more than forty years of neglect, a further sign that thinking had shifted appeared when in 1999 John Rodden published *Lionel Trilling and the Critics*: *Opposing Selves,* a collection of essays, book excerpts and reviews of Trilling's work from 1939 through to 1997. Rodden's book provides a fascinating insight into the way a reputation can rise and fall and rise again in concert with the times and the vicissitudes of intellectual trends.

Trilling's approach to his role as an academic is relevant, I believe, to those of us involved in literary studies to day. Throughout Rodden's collection, examples are provided of Trilling's willingness to engage in self-criticism. We see how he strove to comprehend new ideas as they evolved and to incorporate them into his own thinking. We are also shown how his interest in current events and cultural trends helped shape his literary criticism. Trilling's consistent resistance to extremism seems potently relevant in the contemporary world. It seems to me that extremism is a serious enemy of alterity and the ultimate sign of an absence of moral imagination.

The restoration of Trilling's reputation continued into the early years of this century. In 2011 Adam Kirsch published *Why Trilling Matters,* arguing that Trilling's approach was just what was needed to find a way forward post theory. *Why Trilling Matters* appeared in a literary and critical climate that was much more sympathetic than when Rodden's book was published just over a decade before. Kirsch's book is centred on the argument that Trilling's body of work serves to remind us that the reading and writing of literature is an individual experience for the author or reader. Kirsch is particularly interested in Trilling's ideas about the role of the reading experience in shaping the self. This shaping is directly relevant to the way a person interacts with others and to the way he or she engages with the surrounding culture. In other words, it has to do with moral behaviour. In order to sum up his argument as to why Trilling—the discredited critic from the middle of last century—still matters, Kirsch turns to a quote from the man himself:

> To assert what in our day will seem a difficult idea even to people of great moral sensitivity—that one may live a real life apart from the group, that one may exist as an actual person not only at the center of society but at its margins, that one's values may be none the less real and valuable because they do not prevail and are even rejected and submerged … That this needs to be said suggests the peculiar threat to the individual that our society offers. (Trilling, *A Gathering of Fugitives* 107)

Efforts to find a way of incorporating ethics back into literary consideration, whether motivated by a renewed respect for earlier thinkers or a reconsideration of the ethical significance of the cultural theories that had dominated literary analysis, are clearly well under way in the contemporary literary arena. Cultural theory has given rise to a plethora of critical pathways to offer new perspectives on literary texts and as discussed in the previous chapter, many of these distinct perspectives have an ethical element to them. The very questions they pose reminded the literary world that text has an influence beyond its formal structural and aesthetic properties. But, how are we to assess that influence? How to describe it accurately and evaluate it usefully? And is it simply useful for stimulating empathy?

Empathy and the Novel

The most important work so far on empathy has been undertaken by Suzanne Keen in her book *Empathy and the Novel*. Keen's key ideas are expressed succinctly in her journal article "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" from which I have adopted her definition of empathy for the purposes of this thesis: "*Empathy*, a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (208). In this article Keen takes a strong position advocating for more empirical evidence of the kind provided by psychologists and cognitive scientists before "any aspect of narrative technique earns the label 'empathetic'" (225).

Tammy Amiel-Hauser and Adia Mendelson-Maoz are among the recent scholars who have attempted to look more deeply at the role of empathy in ethical criticism. In line with the arguments put forward in Chapter 3 of this thesis, they "wish to turn attention to an issue that has thus far been largely ignored in this debate: the role of postmodern criticism in shaping the new face of ethical criticism". They challenge the assumption "that empathy is a fundamental element of ethical reading." (199). Their analysis of the inadequacy of empathy to encompass the force of the ethical possibilities encountered in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* is persuasive, pointing out that the novel evokes empathy "but also unsettles" it, and that "the invitation of the reader to undergo an empathetic shift in perspective towards Grace implies the removal of the disturbing aspects from her character". They conclude that: "postmodern notions of uncertainty and indeterminacy are not destructive to the fields of ethical criticism, even though they demand its rethinking" (211).

The position taken in this thesis is that such rethinking, which is certainly demanded by the influences that come from all the questions raised during the decades of

postmodernism, leads us to the idea of the moral imagination. The concept of the moral imagination includes strong cognitive elements as well as emotional ones that foster an intellectual understanding of the situations and dilemmas described in a novel, while evoking empathy with the characters involved. It includes an appreciation of the context in which a character operates, as well as of the feelings and thoughts with which readers can identify. It invites us, for example, to consider all the unsettling insights offered into Grace's character, to feel for her, but also to think about her situation and her actions within that situation.

Moreover, the moral imagination is an approach that allows us to set aside the simplistic, superficial and ultimately unanswerable question of whether a reader can acquire a better personal set of ethical rules by the act of reading. It focuses rather on the broad-ranging effects on a human mind's capacity to engage with the Other, the unknown and the different, that a close imaginative connection with fictional characters and fictional situations might promote.

Another strand of enquiry into the nature of contemporary ethical criticism attempts to address the question of whether reading novels could improve a person's moral behaviour. The argument as to whether reading can make you a better person will probably remain contentious until more hard evidence is found through the work of psychologists and cognitive scientists. Ever since 1980, when Peter Thorpe took revenge on all the fellow English Literature academics he had ever disliked by using stories of their bad behaviour and despicable morals to justify the title of his book *Why Literature is Bad for You*, the otherwise largely uncontested idea that reading great works of literature is in some way an improving exercise has had to find ways to justify itself.

There is a significant difference that is sometimes overlooked between the argument that reading fiction is the best way to teach a person a set of ethical principles, in much the same way as the Ten Commandments or a professional code of conduct might, and the observation that entering a text world offers an experience akin to engaging with the real world. If we accept that reading fiction provides an analogue to life experience, we see that such reading can greatly enlarge our exposure to a wider range of human behaviour. Through such gradually acquired awareness, readers of novels obtain insights that could then be brought to specific ethical decisions they may confront in their own lives.

The connection between the ethical and the aesthetical is a subtle one, and the crude notion that people who read are automatically good people and that bad people can be made

good by the act of reading, lacks hard empirical evidence to support it. What are the long-term effects on an individual's appreciation of alternative viewpoints? Whatever our personal experience gained through introspection, observation and anecdotal evidence, the definitive answer to that question will ultimately need to be found empirically.

At present there is not a great deal of relevant empirical work on which to draw. The little there is comes from psychological research in the standard empirical tradition and from cognitive science, and acts to support the proposition that a link exists between immersion in a text world and the broadening of understanding of human behaviour. Immersion in a text extends the reader's experience to include situations and characters that the reader would be unlikely to encounter otherwise. As I mentioned in the introduction, it is not within the scope of this thesis to examine in depth the perspectives coming from psychology and cognitive science, but they do deserve a brief coverage here because of their relevance to our understanding of the link between reading and ethics.

Some Insights from Psychology and Cognitive Science

As far back as 1988, psychologist Victor Nell published a book based on his empirical research into the mental processes involved in reading for pleasure. The style in which the opening passage is written betrays the author's own feelings about the "extraordinary activity" of reading for pleasure:

> The black squiggles on the white page are still as the grave, colorless as the moonlit desert; but they give the skilled reader a pleasure as acute as the touch of a loved body, as rousing, colorful and transfiguring as anything out there in the real world. (1)

Nell continues by extolling the power that "allows the book's fragile world, all air and thought, to maintain itself for a while, a bamboo and paper house among earthquakes; within it readers find peace, become more powerful feel braver and wiser in the ways of the world."

The book reports on his psychological research into the experiences, practices and psychological states of "ludic" readers (from Latin *ludo* to play). Nell also assembles an interesting collection of ideas and material relating to the history of narrative in human life, attitudes to different kinds of literary works, theories of dreams, daydreams fantasy and trances, and the societal setting in which reading operates. Ludic readers are committed, skilled readers who love to read and read a lot. The research Nell undertook was published as a scientific article in the *Reading Research Quarterly*. Although there are some small aspects

of his research methodology that warrant technical criticism, it confirms what might have been speculated from experience and observation. He found that some readers use narrative worlds primarily as a place to which they can escape, while others found them to be places where they could extend their understanding of life and to reflect on their own experience of the real world and their personal behaviour in it.

By 2008 experimental psychologists Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley published an article, "The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience" which provides s thorough overview of decades of research investigating the relationship between reading and behaviour it also offers positive suggestions for further psychological research in areas such as the function of mirror cells in the brain and the study of the effect of reading longer pieces of fiction than is usual in such research.

Mar and Oatley assert that, although there are still gaps in our knowledge of how narrative works in affecting human behaviour, a number of insights have already been achieved. For example, although reading is certainly a source of entertainment, it is much more than that: "Without the reader assuming the same (or similar) emotions, desires, and beliefs as the protagonist in the story, the phenomena of transportation, enjoyment, and ultimately understanding would remain elusive." They also find that "some empirical support has been gathered for the assertion that narrative has the potential to encourage empathy with often marginalized others" (181).

They conclude by drawing a link between the work of fiction writers and psychologists: "authors of fiction literature and research psychologists are both interested in the same thing: understanding human behavior and its underlying cognitions and emotions." Based on their research findings, Mar and Oatley determine that a story achieves its social effects in two ways: first by "abstraction", which "condenses complex information ... without substantial discarding of key elements while simultaneously revealing the principal underlying chords of the social world" and second by a "simulative experience evoked through various mechanisms that depend on imagery and literary language" (187). And finally:

> Just as the idea of simulations that run on computer has extended conceptual understandings of the cognitive psychology of vision and reasoning, we propose that the idea fiction as a kind of simulation that runs on minds will extend our understanding of selves in the social world. (187-8)

Since Mar and Oatley's work was published, questions relating to the effects of reading on the mind have attracted many other empirical researchers to the field. There is not space to explore all of them here, so I have selected for brief mention those that most closely relate to the arguments mounted in this thesis.

In 2013 *Science* published an article "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind" by David Kidd and Emanuele Castano. Theory of Mind (ToM) describes the way most humans come to recognise, at an early age, that other people have unobservable mental states and processes and that we can anticipate and explain their behaviour by ToM. ToM is sometimes referred to as "mental simulation". The authors report a series of rigorously constructed experiments comparing the effect of ToM when reading nonfiction, popular fiction, literary fiction or nothing at all. They conclude that it is the reading of literary fiction that enhances Theory of Mind. Kidd and Castano emphasise in their conclusion that the detailed reasons for this can only be speculative at this stage and that the results do not "fully capture the concept of literariness, which includes, among others, aesthetic and stylistic matters not addressed in this research" (380).

Work carried out on the role of narrative transportation (deep immersion in the text world to the exclusion of all else) and its effect on persuasiveness has found that the more readers surrender to the grip of the text, the more their beliefs and evaluations will align with those of the narrative (Green and Brock).

More relevant to those of us writing fiction is the research reported in *Diegesis*: "Difficult Empathy: The Effect of Narrative Perspective on Reader's Engagement with a First-Person Narrator" (van Lissa et al.). The authors expected that novels written in the first person would evoke more empathy, but when a novel (Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*) was manipulated so that the same text was presented with a first person narrator or with a third person internally focalised narrator, it was found that changing perspective did not affect empathy, but it did affect trust. The readers trusted a third person account significantly more than the first person.

The empirical research conducted into how transportation, empathy and self-reflection are evoked in fiction has tended to draw its hypotheses from the beliefs and practices that already exist in literary circles. In addition to the studies outlined above, Robin Nabl and Melanie Green in their article "The Role of a Narrative's Emotional Flow in Promoting Persuasive Outcomes" have shown that empathy and transportation are affected by emotional

flow—the shift in emotion and mood—as the story unfolds. This is engendered by contrast and surprise. David Miall, a literary scholar and one of the early advocates of empirical research on literature in his article "On the Necessity of Empirical Studies of Literary Reading" later conducted research with Don Kuiken "Foregrounding, Defamiliarization, and Affect: Response to Literary Stories", which attempts to show that literary techniques associated with foregrounding can slow reader response, deepen emotional reaction, and aid defamiliarisation.

All the empirical work available to date, though highly suggestive, needs replication and validation. In a recent paper entitled "Does Originality Evoke Understanding? The Relation Between Literary Reading and Empathy", Emi Koopman, who has over several years been undertaking psychological research into the effects of literature, concludes that although the connection is there, "we are still quite a long way from knowing when and how (literary) reading has an effect on empathy". The act of reading clearly transports us into a fascinating psychological space but, until incontestable evidence is found to support the beliefs and theories pertaining to the effects of literature, we continue to rely on observation, analysis, and experience for our understanding of how this very complex process works.

The Reading and Writing Experience of Morality in Fiction

In turning to observation, analysis and experience as a way of discovering how the moral imagination actually works, it is inevitable that we tend to rely on what we ourselves have observed and experienced. For my own part, as someone who reads a great deal of literary fiction as well as reviews and books of literary criticism and has engaged in countless discussions of literature, I have noticed that ethical questions play a dominant role in all of these writings and discussions. However, a question this very interest poses and to which, as we have already seen, there is no easy answer is "How does a writer achieve the engagement of the moral imagination and what are the best literary devices for doing so?"

As Noël Carroll reminds us in his introduction to the survey article referred to earlier:

> Nor have plain readers, viewers, and listeners of art been deterred by the absence of either philosophical acknowledgment or enfranchisement. Their assessments of artworks remain steadfastly linked to ethical considerations, as can be readily confirmed by listening to what ordinary folk talk about after seeing a film or a play or TV show, or when they trade opinions about the latest novels. (350)

This essentially Aristotelian notion of the nature of morality is in practice strikingly compatible with how readers report their experiences of novel reading and how writers report their experiences of writing them. For example, in a Radcliffe Dean's Lecture at Harvard University that she later turned into an article for *The Guardian*, Zadie Smith asserted: "It seems that if you put people on paper and move them through time, you cannot help but talk about ethics, because the ethical realm exists nowhere if not here". Also: "The truth is that every variety of literary style attempts to enact in us a way of seeing or reading, and that this is never less than an ethical strategy". She concludes:

> It's something we know as readers of novels and readers of our own lives: It is this deep, experiential understanding of the bond between the ethical realm and the narrative act that we find crystallized in that too-familiar homily, 'two sides to every story'. This is the good that novels do, and the good that they are.

And it seems Smith's belief in the link between ethics and narrative fiction is not just the experience of contemporary novelists. In his banquet speech when he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, Albert Camus stated: "That is why true artists scorn nothing: they are obliged to understand rather than to judge". He further warns that the writer cannot be a "preacher of virtue" but his role is to offer a "picture of common joys and sufferings". (92). John Updike in his interview for the *Paris Review* averred "My work is meditation not pontification…. I think of my books not as sermons or directives in a war of ideas but as objects with different shapes and textures and the mysteriousness of anything that exists". And Anthony Burgess, also in the *Paris Review*:

> I don't divorce morals and aesthetics. I merely believe that a man's literary greatness is no index of his personal ethics. I don't, true, think that the job of literature is to teach us how to behave, but I think it can make clearer the whole business of moral choice by showing what the nature of life's problems is.

In George Saunders's novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* published in 2017, the ghostly characters enter Lincoln's body to discover what he thinks. This experience of interaction, of entering the consciousness of the other, enlarges his morality. As the ghostly characters intermingle their extended understanding, their human comprehension seems to mirror what this thesis is claiming to be an attribute of fiction itself.

The importance of the moral imagination is clearly well appreciated by the best literary fiction writers but the question remains: How is this achieved? Is there some magic

formula, some universal prescription which, if put into action, would bring about the greatest possible reader engagement with the text? Much as all of us who write fiction would appreciate such certainty, the answer has to be no and this is likely to remain the case for the foreseeable future. For all literary effects, but perhaps especially for those responsible for reader engagement, the methods writers use are complex and and highly individual. The writer's choice of setting, situation, characterisation and style all contribute to the reader being drawn into the world of the text and the concerns of its characters. As has been shown in the novels analysed or referred to throughout this thesis, a range of different approaches have been used. The time honoured methods of reading widely to apprehend the various ways that novelists have enabled reader transportation in their work has not found an algorithmic substitute. Writers use techniques of defamiliarisation, choice of first second or third person, focalisation, imagery, symbolism, characterisation and all the other literary devices at their disposal in highly individual ways in order to engage the reader's imagination. The writer's instinct for how to achieve this most effectively guides every decision and every word that is put on the page. All the craft available may be used to this end, but there is an additional highly subjective factor that remains elusive and depends on the way the mind of the author engages with each individual reader.

As has always been the case, contemporary writers of fiction continue to depict characters in situations that demand moral choice and through the invention of action or reflection, they involve the reader in an identification with the characters' dilemmas. Novelists continue to experiment with form, striving to find better techniques for representing, as vividly as possible, the struggles and joys of human experience. Readers continue to engage with fiction in a way that demands the exercise of their moral imagination and a consideration of the choices the fictional characters need to make.

As this chapter has shown, at the same time as new thinking about literary theory has come into being, earlier critics such as Lionel Trilling and James are being revisited for insights. These re-discoveries are part of the effort now underway to find a path forward that is "post theory". For some the search has involved the vigorous rejection of the whole structuralist, poststructuralist or deconstructive theoretical agenda, for others a turning away from postmodernism. As literary scholars have begun to be influenced by other disciplines— by philosophers, psychologists and cognitive scientists—new ways of considering narrative and its effects are emerging. Within the framework provided by the turn to ethical criticism, a number of possible future pathways for literary exploration have emerged. They require

further investigation and development. My contention is that the most promising framework in which to undertake this necessary work lies with the moral imagination.

Chapter 5

Oddity and Light[12]

A Consideration of Two Novels

If one argues, as I do, that the novel is particularly well equipped to engage the moral imagination of the reader, the question arises as to how this engagement is achieved. As I have indicated in the conclusion to the previous chapter, despite efforts by critics and researchers to identify precisely the crucial techniques that will ensure success in this enterprise of reader enthralment, no certain formula has ever been found. We are left to do as writers, critics and researchers have always done: examine the methods used in works that have successfully engaged the moral imagination of readers and ask how they have achieved this goal. In previous chapters, novels have been referred to and examined principally as concrete evidence of the continuing role of ethical concerns in fiction through successive periods of change in literary theory. They have been used to assist in the positioning of the argument that the a key role of literature is to exercise the moral imagination of the reader.

In this chapter, I examine two novels in more detail each of which illustrates some of the craft practices used by fiction writers to capture the moral imagination: Ian McEwan's *The Children Act* and Jessica Anderson's *Last Man's Head*. I have chosen these two novels because they are both written in the modern realist tradition, which is the tradition with the strongest surface affinity with my own novel. As with my novel, they profit from the modernist novelist's discovery of the power of free indirect discourse and its capacity to give ready access to the thoughts of fictional characters. However, like mine, both novels are informed by a more contemporary awareness of other movements in fiction than is found in the traditional realist novel. Both authors have chosen to write in the third person, as I have in *The Swing of the Sea*. Each of the novels chosen provides ample illustration of the way all aspects of craft choices made by a writer need to work together to draw readers into the text world and stimulate them to engage with the moral questions confronting the novel's protagonists. From the choice of setting and situation, through the building of character, style of narration and dialogue, plotting of surprise and mood variation to the final resolution of the

---

[12] From Dylan Thomas's poem "Notes on the Art of Poetry" (line 10).

core themes of the novel, all the writer's decisions work to activate the moral imagination of the reader.

I am also conscious that the success of a novel in engaging a reader is very much dependent on that reader's individual response. Reading, writing and even judging the value of a novel is a highly subjective business. As shown in the work of psychologists especially that of Mar and Oatley covered in Chapter 4 of this thesis (75-78) we more easily immerse ourselves in fiction that speaks to experiences and ideas that mean something to us personally. Part of my reason for choosing the novels in this chapter is because of the positive connection I had to their themes from my first reading, a reaction that ensures there will be no personal barrier to my attempts to analyse how this connection was achieved.

My reading of the two novels will be directed at discovering what narrative approaches the writers have used to transport the reader into mental participation in their fabricated worlds. I intend to work through the narrative trajectory of each novel from beginning to end, examining on the way the techniques the novelists use to keep us engaged. I will be especially interested in how each of them deals with moral decision, when their characters choose one behavioural pathway rather than another, either through reason or emotional compulsion. I will also investigate how techniques such as selection of setting and situation, development of character, narrative perspective, stylistic mastery and elements of suspense and surprise are deployed to retain the reader's involvement.

The Children Act

The Children Act is the more overt of the two novels in setting up a situation that involves inevitable moral choice for its chief protagonist. This is hardly surprising as McEwan has been very public in expressing his views as to a novel's moral function. In an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald* to promote *The Children Act* he told Jason Steger that "the novel is a deeply moral form". He went on to describe what is essentially the moral imagination as defined in this thesis asserting that: "it doesn't tell us directly how to live, but it does give us a very strong understanding at its best of what it means to be someone other than ourselves." (Steger) In an article about the terrorist attacks in New York that McEwan wrote for *The Guardian* in September 2001, he expressed the same understanding of the nature of morality and its connection with the exercise of the imagination:

> The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes

was a failure of the imagination. … 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. ("Only Love")

In choosing a judge of the High Court Family Division, tasked with presiding over cases involving children, McEwan provides himself with an ideal vehicle for examining Fiona Maye's decision-making process and the question of whether legal judgements are essentially ethical. But by selecting such an eminently suitable setting, has he deprived himself of more subtle means of creating a fictional world in favour of one where all the complexity of moral decision-making becomes ordered, rational and possibly too predictable to invite emotional engagement on the part of the reader? Further, if this is the case, what measures does McEwan take to overcome such a possibility?

A court presiding over disputes within families provides rich material very much of the kind that has always fuelled novels. In particular, such litigation throws up the sorts of dilemmas that stretch the human ability to find ethical pathways to just conclusions. In an interview with Camilla Cavendish in *The Sunday Times*, McEwan himself makes this point eloquently:

But the Family Division seemed to be right in the heart of literature's territory: love and the end of love, the destinies of children and sharing of fortunes. The 19th-century novel was all there. The only difference is that the novelist has the luxury of not having to give a verdict. These courts are dealing with the most intractable issues, often choosing lesser evils, not greater goods, often with great tenderness, sometimes with great irritation at even having to be involved.

In analysing his novel, my interest is to see how this very suitability is handled and whether McEwan is able to exercise the reader's moral imagination by taking them into complex legal cases that have ramifications beyond the court room.

McEwan, in his hallmark manner, has presented the process of professional practice in detail. As with his neurosurgeon Henry Perowne in *Saturday* and his Nobel Prize-winning physicist Michael Beard in *Solar*, McEwan inhabits Fiona Maye's professional work and responsibilities fully. This kind of detailed account of the work itself is relatively unusual in novels. Personal conflict, particularly domestic conflict, is seen as more likely to grip the reader's attention. Whereas the personal aspects of workplaces, the love affairs, jealousies and conflicts are well-used fodder for fiction, the actual work that happens there is mostly not. In

the twenty-first century, almost all readers are workers and it seems important to reflect this major aspect of human life in fiction.

I have endeavoured in the novel that forms part of this thesis to show something of the work the characters engage in. The careers I have chosen for them are, as with Fiona's profession, a means for engaging with the dominant ethical—and in my novel's case, cultural and political—themes. In this section I am interested to analyse the devices McEwan uses to ensure that the account is not dry, didactic, formulaic or tedious. I investigate how the legal world provides him with a useful contrast between the structured ethical decisions Fiona faces in court and the more complex emotional issues of personal life.

Observe, now, the way in which McEwan establishes his themes and central character cogently and efficiently at the outset. The novel's opening words reference the beginning of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, signalling immediately that we are in legal territory. McEwan writes: "London. Trinity term one week old. Implacable June weather;" while *Bleak House*, begins: "London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather" (1). But Judge Fiona Maye, whom we first find at her home not very far from Lincoln's Inn Hall is very different from the sleepily indifferent and incompetent judges in *Bleak House*. She is fifty-nine years old and much admired in legal circles for her intelligence and for the forensic precision of her elegantly written judgements. However, with metonymic economy McEwan reminds us that she is an ordinary human with a private life and an informal, less than perfect, aspect to her as she is found lying "supine on a chaise longue staring past her stockinged feet" at a room that reflects privilege, good taste and recent neglect.

The arc of McEwan's story structure is spare, chronological and deceptively simple. McEwan has chosen to focalise largely through Fiona, so that even when the narrative avers that: "The Lord Chief Justice himself was heard to observe of her in a murmured aside at lunch, 'Godly distance, devilish understanding and still beautiful'" (13), we are left with the feeling that this comment has at some stage been repeated to her. If she has a fault it is that, even though she trusts her judgements, supports the basic tenets of family law, and believes in her capacity to bring "reasonableness to hopeless situations" (4), she is nevertheless at times irrationally troubled, even haunted, by her cases. In this way McEwan provides an early foreshadowing that her ordered mind and calm judgements may be overlooking some essential element. It is a pointer to the theme that will be developed as the story unfolds— the reasoning of the law may not be enough to reflect the humanity at the heart of morality. It is a

way of engaging our intellectual appreciation of Fiona's situation even as we begin to feel her emotional distress.

The two cases that trouble her dreams are ones in which her interpretation of the Children Act's injunction that "the child's welfare shall be the court's paramount consideration" has been both impeccable and admired. By introducing these troubling cases early in the narrative's trajectory, McEwan establishes the theme of a potential conflict between religious ethical codes and secular legal ones. One of the cases concerns a decision she has made with logical precision, that a parasitical Siamese twin with no prospect of sustaining life himself and who was slowly but surely killing his brother, should be surgically separated to preserve his brother's life: "Matthew was unlikely to live more than six months. When he died he would take his brother with him" (25-26). The judgement runs against the wishes of his devout Catholic parents who believe that only God can give and take life.

The other is the case whose written judgement she is finalising when we first find her on the chaise longue. Parents from the ultra-orthodox Jewish Haredi community of North London are at war with each other over the schooling of their two daughters. The mother has enrolled the children in a co-educational Jewish School of moderate leanings while her husband believes that females should be kept separate and educated to marry and keep house for their families. Fiona, following legal precept, is interested in privileging the welfare of the children over all other considerations and has decided in favour of preserving future alternatives for the girls. She upholds the mother's decision.

It is instructive to note McEwan's approach to his narrative architecture. The structure of a story line is an important contributor to the ability of a reader to remain intrigued and continuously alert to what is happening on the page—an involvement vital to the workings of the moral imagination. These two cases, woven into the opening scenes of the novel, pithily establish the professional and psychological setting for *The Children Act*. This introductory purpose is further aided by the personal narrative strand that McEwan interlaces with the professional situation. The elements that form the foundation for the arc of the plot are thus laid when Fiona's academic historian husband, Jack, on the same night that the story opens, announces that he wishes to have an affair. He wants Fiona to sanction his infidelity. He tells her "I love you but before I drop dead I want one big passionate affair … Ecstasy, almost blacking out with the thrill of it. Remember that?" (5). Jack does not want their companionate marriage to end but neither does he want to act deceitfully. In other words he would like to behave immorally in as ethical a way as possible.

Note here McEwan's usage and how it simultaneously indicates to the reader both mood and meaning. In this way he advances the novel's capacity to express the nuanced situation with which Fiona now must grapple and with which he wants us to identify. Words such as "passionate" and "ecstasy" immediately signal a significant shift towards the emotional and away from the rational. The theme of the balance between the transcendent and the real, the poetic and the prosaic is established. Fiona, who spends her life working calmly and dispassionately with problems of human relationships, finds herself reacting to the announcement from a place of emotional outrage and humiliation rather than cool reason. As readers, sharing her shock seeing the situation from her point of view we experience the situation in company with her. This personal argument with Jack is interrupted by a call from her clerk alerting her to the case that will dominate the rest of the book. A Jehovah's Witness family is refusing a blood transfusion for their son Adam Henry. The boy has leukaemia and will die very soon without the new blood. The doctors want Fiona to rule against the parents and allow them to proceed with the treatment.

Within a very short space McEwan has set up all the main themes that will be explored in the remaining narrative. By the end of the evening Fiona has thrown Jack out, finished writing her judgement on the Jewish girls, recalled other relevant cases that pit the ethical codes of religion against that of the law and gone to her lonely bed:

> Sleep was no deliverance for within an hour she was ringed by accusers … the baby twin Matthew, with the earless bloated head and heart that wouldn't squeeze, simply stared, as he had on other nights. The sisters Rachel and Nora were calling to her in regretful tones, listing faults that may have been hers or their own. Jack was coming closer, pushing his newly creased forehead into her shoulder, explaining in a whining voice that her duty was to expand his choices into the future." (40)

As readers we have been alerted to the fact that McEwan is interested in the complications and unpredictability of human choice and that this moment in Fiona's life exemplifies it. Her personal and professional lives are colliding. Our curiosity as to where the narrative will take us has been aroused by this uncertainty. McEwan has counterbalanced the structured processes of the law and the dogmatism of religious codes with the messy ambiguities of personal morality. He is demonstrating the limits of deontological ethics. He has, as a novelist, been able to manipulate the fundamental story by introducing elements of suspense and uncertainty that leave the reader pondering possible outcomes. He has already engaged our imagination and has led us to consider the choices that Fiona will make. An important

aspect of the moral imagination to bear in mind is that it encompasses both emotional and intellectual attributes of imaginative connection. McEwan has kept these two features of the reader's involvement working together from the earliest stages of his novel.

Let us turn now to look at some of the specific ways in which McEwan's style, his choice of each word in a sentence contributes to his intention. In this first section of the novel the writing is clean and precise. It reflects the description of Fiona's own writing, admired by fellow judges for its "crisp prose almost ironic, almost warm" and for the "compact terms in which she laid out a dispute" (13). McEwan is not a prolific user of imagery but when he does reach for a metaphor it is elegantly deployed, as in his description of the Siamese twins in their intensive care bed "their splayed legs at right angles to their spines, in resemblance of a many-pointed starfish" and "their four arms raised in surrender to the court's decision." (25). McEwan has publicly advocated for shorter novels "that can be read at one sitting" (Perry), and this one (at about 55,000 words) barely outstrips a novella. It has the intense focused arc of a novella and the concise elegant language enables him to offer setting, character and plot with spatial efficiency but no loss of impact.

McEwan has chosen to use free indirect style for his narrative and the perspective is Fiona's. Through it he conveys not only her appreciation of the finer aspects of her privileged life but a capacity for cool-eyed observation. Her living room contains "recessed bookshelves" a "Bokhara rug" a fireplace "not lit in a year" a "baby grand piano" and "a tiny Renoir lithograph … probably a fake" (1). She knows that her husband's prospective lover is a girl called Melanie: "Not so remote from the name of a fatal form of skin cancer" with a "taste for stilettos that could wreck an old oak floor" (5). By quietly incorporating these tiny specifics McEwan is able to evoke Fiona's situation and character with a parsimony that mimics the orderliness of her professional conduct. Cumulatively these choices of particular words and sentences add to our understanding of Fiona's character and her attitudes to what is happening around her. We are given access to her innermost thoughts, her warmth, her spleen and her guilt, and this intimacy that McEwan creates with his stylistic decisions enhances our identification with Fiona and her situation.

Both novels included in this chapter use free indirect style, and it is noteworthy that most contemporary novelists choose this or first person narration as their narrative means. Since Gustave Flaubert (*discours indirect libre*) developed the style that writers like Jane Austen had already turned towards, novelists have used it to enable an intimate entry into the thinking processes of their main character or characters with Virginia Woolf and James Joyce

taking it further into stream of consciousness. The intimacy enables the revelation not only of strengths and weaknesses but also of indecision, uncertainty, and complication. It is a narrative advantage not available, for example, to journalists using a case study approach in their reporting. A journalist can quote what the subject of their investigation has to say, and they can speculate. A documentary filmmaker can observe or interpret through a voice-over narration, and a feature film or television drama can use an oral thought track and actors' expressions to convey a process of decision underway. But of all the narrative forms, the novel has at its disposal a plethora of possibilities to convey nuance, as reflection is balanced with action, focalisation manipulated, and the peaks and troughs of life's events unfolded, all at a pace the novelist determines.

Part Two of the novel takes us to Fiona's workplace. Her walk to work, through rain-soaked streets, illustrates the technique by which a novelist can communicate a great deal to the reader through access to a character's mind, rather than through action. The description of the walk is accompanied by a thought track conveying a history of her life with Jack, her feelings of betrayal and bewilderment, and her regrets about her childlessness " a fugue in itself" (44). As she walks, the atmosphere of London's WC1 on a miserable rainy day that matches her mood is vividly evoked and the entire walk with its emotion and its memories takes place against the mental background of a Bach partita she has learned to play by heart. Again, the elegant succinctness of McEwan's style is in evidence along with his deft. "the city streets appeared swollen their crests enlarged" and "the Thames at high tide was also swollen and a darker brown sullen and rebellious as it rose against the piers of the bridges ready to take to the streets." (41-42). The streets, the river her familiar route to work are defamiliarised, personifying Fiona' own feelings of gloom and defiance. In just a few words of potent description we learn that Fiona is a lover of the arts, a gifted pianist and a giver of inspired presents to the husband who has now abandoned her. Nothing happens on the walk apart from her thoughts, but these engage the reader, conveying layers of information, feeling, and atmosphere.

At court she is her composed and accomplished self, listening to the key case the novel is to follow: that of the Jehovah's Witness boy, Adam Henry. By means of the dialogue that takes place between Adam's father and the lawyers, McEwan gives a fair account of the religion's position and shows the fundamental decency of the father. I found only one lapse in

McEwan's research into the Jehovah's Witness religion and that comes later in the story.[13] For the most part, McEwan's writing benefits from the verisimilitude achieved by meticulous research. Every legal case he creates is based on a real one. The judgements Fiona uses as precedent in her own are actual judgements from British courts. As readers we are thus led convincingly into the legal world. We feel ourselves to be in safe hands, confident that we can rely on the authenticity of the detail of Fiona's life. There is no factual quibble that might impede our immersion in the legal world McEwan has created.

Having decided that we need to know how Fiona spends her working days and to understand the nature of what she must read, hear and adjudicate, McEwan confronts the problem of the inevitable tedium of most work practice by elegant summary that nevertheless injects humanity. A woman whose child has been abducted to Morocco by her Moslem husband (maybe McEwan is being a bit too noticeably comprehensive in his coverage of a range religions here) is "an underweight university don who trembled while she sat in court, specialist in the sagas of Bhutan, devoted to her only child" (47). The scenes of cross-examination are kept pertinent and riveting and throughout her work days we return again and again to Fiona's personal dilemma as she reluctantly, but compulsively, checks for a message from Jack and imagines what he is up to with his young lover. She makes an emotional decision.

By this point in the novel, as a result of the way McEwan has rendered Fiona's character, the access we have had to her thoughts and McEwan's clean but evocative writing style, we have, as readers, become identified with the tension she is experiencing between her personal and professional selves. Our imaginative involvement has caused our feelings to merge with hers. Driven by the image of where Jack is and what he is doing, even as her lawyerly instincts warn her against it, she arranges for the locks to be changed on their apartment door. As readers, we have been positioned by everything that has come before to empathise with this impulse. We recognise that this is how decisions with important social and ethical implications are often made, even by those who pride themselves on their rationality. McEwan now reminds us that, for Fiona, making a decision based on emotion is a sign of failure: "A professional life spent above the affray, advising then judging loftily,

---

[13] Adam refers to "my wooden cross" (180). Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus was nailed to a stake and the cross is a later pagan invention.

commenting in private on the viciousness and absurdity of divorcing couples, and now she was down there with the rest, swimming with the desolate tide. (49)

In Part Three of the novel, the tone of the writing changes to reflect the quantum shift that occurs in Fiona's life. She makes the momentous, but not unprecedented, decision to visit the boy, Adam, in hospital. McEwan replaces the prosaic world of work, the fraught tensions of marriage break-up, by a very different atmosphere. The tone of the writing alters. Adam is beautiful, intelligent and imaginative. He writes poetry and has started learning to play the violin. The scene in his hospital room as dusk falls and the judge and the boy connect takes on the mystical feel of an allegory.

Fiona is still officially at work, but the more poetic language McEwan uses and the ambience he creates with the references to music and poetry, are the same as those he uses for all the personal scenes. It culminates in Fiona stepping out of judicial role when the boy demonstrates his newly acquired skill by playing Britten's setting of W. B. Yeats's poem "Down by the Salley Gardens" on the violin. He is not aware that the tune has lyrics and Fiona, deeply moved, suggests he play it again and she sings the words as the room darkens. A deep bond is forged. Their eyes meet, he plays more boldly, she sings more loudly, they forget the presence of the amazed social worker and "they swelled into the mournful spirit of the backward-looking lament." (117). Music and poetry have brought with them a profound human connection in Yeats's lyrics.[14]

McEwan's writing returns to a professional register, as the mood relocates once more. Fiona hurries back to the court where her verdict is awaited. Her judgement is succinct but comprehensive. Despite his parent's views and Adam's own adherence to them, Fiona believes that Adam has had a "monochrome exposure to a forceful view of the world and he cannot fail to have been conditioned by it" (123). It is her legal decision. Adam will have the transfusion.

The shifts in tone that McEwan employs have the effect of keeping our attention as the settings situations and accompanying emotional tone of the narrative never becomes static. This is an essential element of reader engagement as the circumstances in which Fiona makes her legal and ethical choices and the attitudes she brings to those choices change their shape

---

[14] Some have noted the similarities between aspects of McEwan's novel and James Joyce's short story "The Dead" in the collection *Dubliners*

throughout the novel. Our understanding of how and why she makes her decisions is dependent on our having accompanied her, not only intellectually but also emotionally, through the various experiences that affect both her legal and personal judgement.

Fiona's return to life as normal only holds while she is at work operating within the confines of rules and boundaries in which she is well practised. At home, the same night of her strange connection with Adam and the delivering of her judgement, she finds that Jack has returned, waiting impatiently outside the locked door. She retains her dignity and lets him in, but her emotional equilibrium is further challenged. She finds herself in inner conflict about how to react to Jack's declaration that he wants her to take him back. McEwan's arrangement of the relentless sequence of personal and professional events that have formed this pivotal day in the narrative has led the reader to appreciate that Fiona's moral confidence is beginning to unravel.

McEwan begins Part Four of the novel with a nearly three-page overview of the state of relationships and family stability in contemporary Britain through Fiona's sensitised eyes: "It was her impression, though the facts did not bear it out, that in the late summer of 2012, marital or partner break-down and distress in Great Britain had swelled like a freak spring tide" (131). This section presents an alternative technique to dialogue or argument with another character, as a way of canvassing more theoretical or philosophical ideas relating to the underlying themes of the novel. It is a somewhat risky decision on McEwan's part but it works well in this opening spot and in the way McEwan writes it. Fiona's voice is there in the prose, especially when McEwan then uses Fiona's own marital situation to swivel focus back to the narrative. In this "thought experiment" in which she gives rein to her "puritan contempt" for those men who "pulled their families apart" telling themselves they were acting "for the best." Her mental judgement does not spare the "childless or at least not Jack. A cleansing spell in the Scrubs for contaminating their marriage in the cause of novelty? Why not?" (133).

With the reappearance of Adam, the boy she saved, into her life McEwan explores in increasingly dramatic fashion the clash between professional codified ethics and personal responsibility. Adam believes that her interventions both judicial and personal have opened up a wider world to him and he writes her a letter. McEwan renders the letter in the confiding and emotional voice of the adolescent, addressing her with an assumption of intimacy based on their emotional hospital encounter rather than their official relationship. He wants to see

her. Fiona is confused by the personal element that has entered her life by this professional route. She does not reply.

Adam sends her another letter. She decides again not to acknowledge it. She is keeping a professional distance, even though the boy has touched her heart. She is due to go on circuit in the north of England. Just before she leaves, McEwan supplies a subtle scene that demonstrates the quiet way a novelist can convey a shift in a relationship. Ever since Jack has returned to the apartment they have been circling each other. She is "reluctant to be in a confined space with him" (143). On the morning of her departure, she enters the kitchen where he is making himself a cup of coffee:

> Still with his back to her, he poured milk into his coffee, then turned with his raised cup only slightly extended towards her. … Their eyes met briefly. Then he set the cup down on the deal table and pushed it an inch or so towards her. (144)

It is an ordinary action that may not have meant very much except that there are ways of setting a cup down and:

> ways of accepting a cup which she did smoothly in slow motion and after she had taken one sip she did not wander off, not immediately as she might have done any other morning. A few silent seconds passed, and then it seemed that this was as far as they were prepared to go, that the moment contained too much for them and to attempt more would be to set them back. (144)

The old injunction "show don't tell" is put into action here in an under-stated but effective way. We see how this ancient rule of good writing works in relation to reader engrossment when Fiona recalls the exchange while travelling north. It is through her indirect voice in narrating her recollection that the reader registers the scene's significance as a kind of olive branch given and received in the recovering marriage. We are signalled that things are changing for Fiona. We are lulled into feeling that all is recovering, becoming more settled, sorting itself out. McEwan is preparing us for the disturbance to come. He is aware of the value in a novel of contrast.

McEwan uses Fiona's dinner in the luxurious old mansion where touring judges stay as an uneventful, mundane prelude to a dramatic intervention. The dinner is interrupted by a drenched Adam who has followed Fiona from London and tracked her down in her secluded setting. The physical scene has already been set for this crucial encounter between the boy and the judge. They are in a Victorian house in huge grounds; the storm is wild, the house

chilly. The butler seems ominous "his face deadly pale, as though dusted in powder. As white as an aspirin she had once heard a French rural lady say" (151). The entire atmosphere McEwan has built in this storm-swept secluded house has Gothic undertones.

Adam gives an account of what has happened to him since her judicial intervention. In this way, McEwan gives us access to Adam's point of view briefly shifting perspective away from Fiona, but focalisation remains mostly with her. She listens and observes his face: "Everyone's notion of a Romantic poet, a cousin of Keats or Shelley" (157). As in all the crucial emotional scenes in the novel McEwan introduces art, music or poetry or some tangential reference to it. He thus subtly signals an elevation from quotidian reality into a place of imagination. Adam tells Fiona that he has realised that there is a world of life and art that he does not know. He senses that she does and that she could introduce him to it: "My parents' religion was a poison and you were the antidote" (163). She adopts the tone of a solicitous aunt urging him to contact his parents, asking about his arrangements. As a judge she knows she should avoid "Unnecessary involvement in a case that was closed" (156) but Adam begs to be allowed to live with her. McEwan adds an extra emotional weight to Fiona's conundrum by making it clear that Adam could be the child she never had: "She saw the spare room and its twin single beds, the teddies and other animals in the wicker basket" (167).

McEwan then materialises the conflict between the personal and the professional with an event that disrupts the trajectory of the story with telling subsequent consequences. Fiona sends Adam away but in doing so she bends to kiss him on the cheek and meets his lips in a kiss, which she knows she should draw back from, but instead she "lingered defenceless before the moment. The sensation of skin on skin obliterated any possibility of choice. If it was possible to kiss chastely full on the lips, this is what she did" (169). She knows that such a kiss, though fleeting, is "more than a mother might give her grown-up son" (169). Adam leaves in the waiting taxi and Fiona contemplates the incredible career risk she has taken with that farewell kiss. If anyone has observed her act she will be disgraced. But her ethical transgression is far more complicated than the danger to her career.

McEwan manages in the concluding scenes of the novel to bring together his dominant themes, his two major plot strands, and the contrasting moods he has created throughout the course of the book. The false contrast of the emotional and the rational, the difficulty of separating personal morality from professional ethics, and the necessity to understand as fully as possible alternative perspectives is made clear. A transcendent mood

filled with emotion takes over the narrative discourse. McEwan sets the scene for this final coda by showing a pre-occupied Fiona filled with self-recrimination for putting in jeopardy a reputation earned by a lifetime of judicial rectitude avoiding any further contact with the boy. Thus self-absorbed, when Adam sends her a poem she does not see its significance. Then, on the night of the concert for which she has been rehearsing, she hears that he has become ill again, refused treatment, and died. She performs brilliantly but is brought undone by the encore. She and her colleague play, as they often do, "Down by the Salley Gardens." She has now understood that Adam's poem was a suicide note, a final cry for help that she has ignored. Once again, McEwan uses music and poetry as an atmospheric motif to connect us with the spiritual affinity Fiona has found with this boy. She returns home through another bleak and rainy night where in a kind of moral epiphany she re-reads "The Ballad of Adam Henry" and perceives that the fish it describes as rising out of the waters and commanding him to "throw your cross in the water if you're wanting to be free" is herself:

> I knelt by the banks of that river in a wondrous state of bliss
>
> While she leaned upon my shoulder and gave the sweetest kiss
>
> But she dived to the icy bottom where she never will be found
>
> And I was full of tears until I heard the trumpets sound. (180)

In his typical style, McEwan creates a further mystery as the words at the poem's end are crossed and scribbled over, making it initially undecipherable. For the first time Fiona takes the trouble to unscramble them, thus confirming that this is indeed a suicide note: "Her kiss was the kiss of Judas, her kiss betrayed my name. May he who drowns my cross by his own hand be slain" (204).

The interaction between the personal and professional and Fiona's confusion when the one threatens to spill into the other allows McEwan to develop Fiona's character in a way that invites the reader to enter into her situation. We become absorbed in this intelligent, gifted woman's struggles as her certainties are undermined to the point where—even after the triumph of her superb musical performance—she finds herself collapsing into uncontrollable grief. As always in McEwan's novels, her redemption is part of his plan, as she finally lets go of her iron grip on self-control and reaches out to confide her intimate thoughts and fears to her husband: "And she began to weep at last, standing by the fire, her arms hanging hopelessly at her sides, while he watched shocked to see his wife, always so self-contained, at the furthest extremes of grief" (210-211). In revealing her vulnerability to Jack—like a child

she asks if he will still love her when she tells him the whole story—and receiving his comfort, Fiona's humanity can begin to flourish. The novel ends:

> They lay face to face in the semi-darkness, and while the great rain-cleansed city beyond the room settled to its softer nocturnal rhythms and their marriage uneasily resumed she told him in a steady quiet voice of her shame of the sweet boy's passion for life and her part in his death. (213)

By choosing a setting for his novel that offers fertile ground for the exploration of ethical issues, McEwan provides himself with a rich basis and wide choice for ways to engage our moral imagination. He counters the dangers of such easy pickings by complicating his plot with a personal strand that challenges all the ready assumptions a reader might make about the central character as a result of her professional behaviour. The conflict this plot sets up is not primarily about religion versus the law, or the strength and weaknesses of the British court system. It is about the conflict within an individual human as she travels towards the recognition that true morality is based in relationships and cannot ever be entirely captured by religious or legal codes.

It needs to be emphasised that each aspect of the writing of *The Children Act* discussed in this chapter has contributed to the engagement of the moral imagination of the reader and has drawn us into a deeper understanding of the themes McEwan is exploring. His initial establishment of situation and character, his narrative arc, his creation of contrast and suspense, his choice of language and imagery, the novel's focalisation and its dramatic conclusion, all work together to this end. No one element can be identified as the reason we are transported into Fiona's world. The structural and stylistic choices McEwan makes work together to create this effect in the same way that the instruments of an orchestra are conducted to work in harmony.

McEwan's research into the ways of law and religion lend verisimilitude to the story, but McEwan nevertheless understands that the business of the novel is, and always has been, the nature of human relationships. He knows that a novelist's central task is to create a literary construction that will take the reader into the workings of human relationships and thus inevitably into the mental mechanisms involved in moral choice.

The Last Man's Head

The second novel I want to examine closely is Jessica Anderson's *The Last Man's Head.* When I first read this novel some years ago, I was astonished to find myself identifying completely with the perspective of a person who was decidedly different from me: a man whom I would have assiduously avoided had I met him in real life. The fact that the novel had such an effect seemed to me to be an extraordinary achievement and one that deserved close investigation for clues as to how it had been accomplished. But I am also interested in this novel because it describes a very different kind of moral issue from the one portrayed in *The Children Act* and it is written by a novelist who is, in my view, every bit as accomplished as McEwan, but quite dissimilar in approach as well as in reputation.

There are two major moral issues that *The Last Man's Head* explores. One is based on the insight that often what a person most judges as wrong in the behaviour of others will sooner or later manifest itself, in some form or other, in his or her own actions. The second and more important moral issue Anderson explores is the self-protective behaviour of groups, where genuine ethical standards can be set aside in favour of a heavily enforced code of cover-up and ostracism of whistle-blowers.

It was remarkably prescient of Anderson to be writing about personal ethics and corruption in a book that was first published in 1970. She chose these themes years before all the more famous investigations of police corruption (such as the Fitzgerald Enquiry) took place in the 1980s. The academic research into the nature of corruption that followed the enquiries highlighted the dangers inherent in any group that holds the protection of its members, even its aberrant members, above all other values.

Anderson chooses as her protagonist, Alec Probyn who embodies the moral dilemmas that lie at the heart of the novel. He is a detective sergeant, currently suspended from the police force as a result of being framed by some of his colleagues, because he has objected to their violent methods. The selection of a person of Alec's character and circumstance provides ample opportunity for Anderson explore the ethical issues that interest her. As with *The Children Act* this choice of protagonist and situation is an important first step in the process of building a text world in which the reader can engage with a character whose actions might otherwise be difficult to comprehend. Alec's colleagues have nicknamed him, disparagingly, "Spotless." He is said not to be "solid." He has a very strong personal moral code, partly, as we come to see, because he senses the need to control his own strong impulses

towards violence. At the same time, he manifests that other strong value of classic masculinity—the responsibility to protect.

An important aspect of Anderson's project of reader engagement is her steady building of the reader's insight into Alec's complex motivation and the increasing sympathy with his predicament that is engendered as the story unfolds. For the reader this growing understanding seems to be effortlessly achieved, but Anderson has prepared for this central accomplishment of her novel with meticulous literary architecture through her choice of supporting characters, intertwining themes, parallel plots, and the sociological and psychological setting established at the outset.

Anderson's creation of a cast of supporting characters, who represent contrasting perspectives, provides her with an important tool for conveying the complexity of the multi-faceted issues Alec confronts. His encounters with these characters, and their differing views of the situation he is grappling with, provide the opportunity for the emotional confusion and rising tension Alec is experiencing to be shared by the reader. Anderson uses a series of emotional shifts in the narrative to engage the reader's own feelings and thus assist transportation into the text world she has created. The fact that Anderson does this through encounters with fully rounded characters, who are not stereotypes, aids the impact.

On the first page of her novel Anderson plunges us into the action. The view of Alec's character held and expressed by other actors in the story is a valuable mechanism by which the moral ambiguities of the plot are highlighted. Alec is investigating a break-in at the house of Agnes Maciver the head of a family Alec met some time before while investigating a case of malicious damage to a car. We learn immediately that Agnes considers Alec to be "almost comically low" and she thought him "thick-skinned as well and in fact he was now standing at her side patiently as if to prove it" (5). On his first visit to the house his powers of observation coupled with a certain kind of intuition led him to believe that a member of the family, Robbie, was the culprit, but the family did not want to press charges against one of its own. Anderson has placed one of her important moral questions right there in the introductory pages. We realise that Alec disapproves of the family's protection of their bad apple but that the family collectively, especially Agnes its de facto head, is unwavering in the appropriateness of a decision to protect one's own. Anderson unobtrusively weaves through the current visit to the family house the back story of how Alec has now become a member of that same extended family After meeting her on that first visit Alec has a passionate affair

with Sophie Maciver. The affair burns itself out, but through Sophie, Alec meets and marries the lovely, reasonable Esther, Sophie's sister.

In this initial section many of the stylistic methods that assist the reader to move into Alec's way of thinking and an identification with how he sees the world are in evidence. As an aside Agnes asks him "Have you much of this cudweed at your place?" "No. It grows in impoverished soil. Your soil's in poor shape." This metaphor for the state of the family, for Alec's knowledge and his appreciation of the necessity to take care of the fundamentals is subtly underscored. Despite the negative comments about him by family members a glimmer of sympathy for Alec is established here, with his patience and his concern to help. When old Aunt Trixie arrives Anderson offers us an instant miniature portrait of her dithering ditzy character with her clothes of "various boudoir colours muted by a patina of angora" and "the sparkling little evening bag that had taken her pottering fancy that day." Alec demonstrates his desire to aid and protect by going immediately to lend his support as she negotiates the path and "his appearance as he bore down on her evidently filled her with such delight and alarm that she began to coo and gasp and shriek. 'Why darling How do you do!'" (16)

Esther Alec's wife and Sophie her sister form one of several pairs of contrasting characters Anderson creates. Sophie is avowedly amoral. She holds that there is no such thing as right or wrong, that there are just winners and losers. Esther is loving and unselfish. Among the older generation of Macivers we find a rigid, indomitable Agnes and a daffy, vulnerable Trixie. Among his police colleagues, Alec is supported by his mate the decent Rupert Stock, who nevertheless believes in the police code of group-protection, and he is opposed and tormented by the sadistic Cruze. Anderson deftly parallels the self-protective practices of the police force with that of an extended family where this same kind of internal loyalty and cover-up can also be found. It is the outsider, Alec, who sees the perils of such collective attitudes.

Anderson ensures that Robbie, the target of Alec's suspicions, is the perpetrator of what could be interpreted as small-scale, somewhat malicious pranks, but that these same events could also be indicative of escalating and dangerous psychopathy. Anderson does this by choosing small things such as the disappearance of jewellery, the death of a dog, the arrival of an unknown woman who could be a man in to comprise the set of puzzling occurrences in the family circle. These incidents are key to the conflict between Alec's interpretation of what is happening and those of everybody in the family as well as those in the police force that he tries to interest in his view of the case. The destabilising effect of

shifting perspectives keeps the reader alert and involved. Alec becomes convinced that Robbie intends to kill his elderly aunt Agnes. By following Alec's efforts to use his skill and training to protect his wife's family, Anderson provokes a deeply engaging fluctuation of feeling and a mounting sense of urgency as obstacles arise.

Anderson uses Alec's encounters with those he visits in the course of his investigation to foreground the possibility that his suspicions could be wrong. In this way she establishes a pattern of emotional oscillation that keeps the reader engrossed. At the same time, she demonstrates the complications of moral choice and the dangers of moral certainty. Alec is repeatedly frustrated in his efforts by his lack of access to the normal forensic and other support systems of the police force because of his suspension. He believes that Robbie is the murderer of another old woman, Mrs. Clissold, and that he has already tried to use the same method to kill Agnes but was disturbed before he could carry out his intention. Mrs. Clissold's murder has been pinned on a criminal the police have been wanting for some time, and Alec's suspicions are dismissed as a personal obsession based on his dislike of Robbie. As he assembles evidence that Robbie is in fact behind a number of small nasty acts of vengefulness, he is constantly assailed by doubt and contradictory views. By this means Anderson reinforces the reader's uncertainty, showing how Alec's personal conviction is at odds with the collective view of the charming Robbie. He is isolated in his lonely case against his wife's half-brother. This isolation parallels the injustice of his suspension, occurring as it did because he acted on personal conscience against the code of loyalty that is the dominant ethic of the police force.

Anderson subtly reveals to us what has shaped Alec to be this outsider, but she holds the revelation in abeyance until the story is well advanced. This has the effect of deepening our connection with Alec at an important moment in the development of the narrative. The crucial scene shifts mood as Anderson foregrounds a vulnerable Alec forcefully suppressing tears as he contemplates his suspension:

> They must not fall. As a child and a boy he had seldom been known to cry for anything but rage. At school in Cooma in 1946, he was the boy, the red-headed, hard-faced, weeping clown who had backed away down the aisle, plucking from desks on either side any missile that came to his hands … and had hurled them at the baiting master on the dais. (50)

With this passage Anderson foreshadows that Alec's sense of justice was formed at an early age, that his emotions are strong but heavily suppressed, and that if pushed over the edge he is capable of blind violence. Note the way in which the series of adjectives Alec uses in his mental reconstruction of the scene echo some of the negatives used in the descriptors the family members proffer in earlier passages. He sees himself "the red-headed hard-faced weeping clown." This self-description underlines Alec's well hidden vulnerability and strengthens the reader's growing sympathy for him.

Like *The Children Act, The Last Man's Head* is written in the third person indirect style except for some scenes where Alec is absent and the story continues. These sections are useful vehicles for background factual information, to reveal the array of personalities Alec must deal with, and to carry indications of how Alec is perceived by others around him. In these domestic passages with the family the register is colloquial, conversational, even gossipy and they convey the general suspicion with which Alec, the outsider, is regarded. In all the scenes of significance, the point of view is Alec's but, unlike Fiona in *The Children Act*, Alec's character and attitudes are revealed more through his actions and through the dialogue involved in his encounters with others. In Gérard Genette's system, *The Last Man's Head* narrative would be placed "at a greater distance from what it tells" (162) than *The Children's Act*, reflecting Alec's masculinity. He presents as an archetypical non-disclosing Australian male. But Anderson's skill creates a layered portrait of masculinity, with deep complications below the impassive surface.

Throughout the novel, Anderson often places Alec in the role of an observer. From that first encounter with the family when he is called to the house as a policeman, he is outside with Sophie when he observes the family's "kangaroo court" through the glass of the French doors. This spectator role not only privileges Alec's point of view it also lends motivation to Anderson's way of throwing into relief unusual behaviour or significant conversations, by backgrounding them with descriptions of the ordinary details of the surroundings of everyday life. When Alec visits Miss Torpy, whose dog has been killed after she offended Robbie, the woman is described in detail, with Alec even noticing the hair on the back of her head: "She was in her sixties, a thick-bodied woman with flossy grey hair which, Alec observed as he followed her down the hall, was slightly matted at the back." Not only the description of her appearance but also her actions show Alec's attention to detail; he watches her as she "distractedly thumped the impress of her head from the sofa cushions" (73).

As a trained observer with a natural talent for detailed noticing, Alec sees more than the others see. But their collective unwillingness to acknowledge that what he sees is valid, leaves the reader unsure. By the introduction of this uncertainty Anderson not only heightens the suspense inherent in the dangers of Alec's pursuit of the truth about Robbie, it also draws the reader's attention to the ethical complications of the situation in which he is now embroiled. As his suspicions in relation to relatively minor offences are found to be justified, the question remains as to whether his belief that they are the harbinger of a much more serious crime is also well founded. From time to time when his reasoning is questioned by someone he respects, Alec even doubts himself: "his knowledge of Robbie's character now appeared to be faulty. Pride made him deeply regret having confided his suspicions to Rupert Stock" (126). But soon his observations of Robbie re-awaken his distrust. This emotional ebb and flow that Anderson skilfully navigates has the effect of keeping the reader, along with Alec himself, in a state of uncertainty, anticipation and tension.

One interpretation of Alec's personality, and what Anderson is asking us to consider, is that he is rigid unyielding—Agnes describes him as a "block of wood"—(11), fundamentally violent, overly masculinised and operating under an obsession that will ultimately lead to his well-deserved downfall. Like most of his colleagues and some members of his family, according to this view, we are not meant to like or approve of Alec.[15]

My argument is that these are the superficial elements of how others see him—his social persona. What Anderson achieves with the combination of suspenseful plotting, vivid descriptive writing and the slow reveal of Alec's complex character is to show us, through Alec's own eyes and thoughts, what is really motivating him — the sense that no matter how difficult and at what personal cost, he has a duty to use his knowledge, experience and strength to protect the vulnerable members of the family he is part of, even though they have never fully accepted him. Furthermore, whatever the mores of that group, however convenient it might be to go along with their inclination to delude themselves about the behaviour of one of their members, he must stand for what he believes to be right and protect them from the consequences of their refusal to recognise an internal threat. The complexity of Alec's hyper-

---

[15] In *Fabricating the Self: The Fictions of Jessica Anderson*, literature academic Elaine Barry takes a very negative view of Alec's character and reads the book as a study in obsession, one of the themes she notes in her analysis of Anderson's work in general. In my view this leads her to miss the more important theme of *The Last Man's Head,* which relates more to the issue of public and private ethics as outlined in this chapter.

masculine character, matched as it is with a personal moral rectitude that overrides the pressures of group loyalty, is depicted through accumulating detail as the story develops and the investigation turns into a pursuit. This accumulation of detail is important in the effective construction of any plot but it also plays a role in providing the best context in which the the reader can be stimulated to consider the complexities of the moral choices confronting the protagonist. It should not be forgotten that the moral imagination involves the apprehension of the entire circumstances in which the characters operate and not simply emotional empathy with the central player.

A close look at the way the narrative unfolds in the second half of the book reveals the method Anderson uses to build tension as Alec's investigative efforts meet small successes and larger frustrations. The reader begins to recognise and identify with the steady rise of suppressed emotion inside Alec, as Anderson slowly, subtly, introduces the stimuli that increase the pressures converging on his self-control. He is caught in the intersection of deeply distressing vectors pushing him forcefully in different directions. He is unfairly suspended from a job he loves and is good at; he is worried about Esther and her long-awaited pregnancy; Robbie, whom Alec sees as a possible murderer, arrives to stay in his house and the baby is due any day. In addition, as a result of her perilous pregnancy, Alec is once "again tormented by the sexual hungers of earlier days" (102).

As the tension builds Anderson elects to add a further dimension to the situation— a piece of action that further intensifies our concern for Alec's circumstances. In a chance encounter with his police force tormentor Cruze, Cruze twists a button from Alec's coat, and tosses it into the gutter. Observe the language used to take the reader into the heart of the action— Anderson's powerfully understated description of this act of spiteful aggression. It leaves Alec motionless "in a sort of galvanic immobility, like a shot man caught in the split second before he falls, with his eyebrows thrust far up his forehead and his eyes staring at the sky." At first, Alec is filled with an emotion that echoes the description of his combative childhood; his eyes are "suffused with tears" (57). Yet unlike his childhood self, Alec does not retaliate against Cruze's act of mockery. Anderson shows the difficulty with which he suppresses the intensity of his feeling; his face is held in "a grimace," a "tense mask." Yet once Alec is in the privacy of his car, he experiences a sense of serenity that, as his feelings of humiliation dissolve:

Then as if the soothing hand had passed over it his face yielded and became peaceful. He swung his legs from the car and bent to pick up the button from the gutter. He

looked at it for a moment with humour, with tenderness, before he drew his legs into

the car again and drove away. (57)

Without any direct reference, the reader knows that he is thinking of his wife, Esther, an insight confirmed when that night, he presents the button to her to be sewn back on, typically telling her that it got caught in the car door (103).

Anderson now escalates the pressures as we move towards the culminating "event" that encapsulates the central themes of the novel. As with the kiss in *The Children Act* it happens in a moment with almost no deliberation on the protagonist's part. Alec's already disturbed emotions become turbulent and start to mount towards rage when narcissistic Robbie—trying in vain to claim Esther's attention as she goes into labour—loses his temper with her. As she leaves with Alec for the hospital, Robbie shouts after them "I hope it dies" (139). By the time the final scenes are reached, even the thought of Esther which "tumbled like lights in the jets of water" (194) cannot allow him to give up his pursuit of Robbie and his protection of an obdurate Agnes from what Alec's instincts tell him is Robbie's murderous intent. Tired hungry and "badgered almost beyond endurance" he yet could not quite "give up, nor get rid of the conviction that if his task lay beyond endurance, it was beyond that point that he must go" (194).

In this frame of mind, Alec drives away from a frustrating visit to Agnes's house, stalled in his attempts to offer her protection, and is on his way to visit Esther in the hospital:

he automatically slowed down for a figure stepping off the footpath onto a pedestrian

crossing, and then seeing that it was Robbie, wearing his short overcoat with the collar

turned up and walking fast with his head bowed he pressed the accelerator and the car

sprang forward and as he did so, he heard a shout. (195)

He realises that it is not Robbie, but he himself who is shouting "a great prolonged shout that he felt, when the bump came, tearing away from his chest and throat" (195).

The shock to the reader that Alec, a man of such evident probity who has stood out against violence at great cost to himself, has committed such a violent act is quickly replaced by a sense of its inevitability. It is a dramatic, psychologically logical culmination to what has gone before: a hit and run murder by an honest cop who has been pushed over the edge by the force of emotion his iron control can no longer contain. Anderson's handling of this scene is crucial to her purpose. Everything about it, the build up of tension that has preceded it, the uninterrupted focus on what is going on inside Alec's mind, the sudden unexpectedness of

Robbie's appearance and the words Anderson uses to describe the final moments work together to make the scene absorbing and morally confronting. Anderson contrasts the violent action of "he pressed the accelerator" with a shout so involuntary that Alec hardly recognises it as his own. As he speeds away from the scene of the impact, the world outside blurs: "but he had controlled tears for so long and with such determination that even now of those that covered his eyeballs only one or two escaped from his lids" (195).

It is after the shock killing of Robbie that Anderson's imagination shows its real moral force. Alec becomes the beneficiary of everything he has been resisting and condemning up to that point. The scene in which Stock arrives at his house and finds a hoarse-voiced Alec cleaning his car is superbly calibrated. His cleaning, rubbing and polishing continues with metaphorical force as Stock tells Alec that he is now in the clear as the trumped-up charges against him have been exposed for what they were by a confession. As his enemy Cruze has suddenly died of a heart attack or stroke, the way is clear for Alec to return to the police force. As the car cleaning continues Stock makes it clear that he knows what has happened and how Alec lost his voice. Alec relates his plan to leave policing behind and go back to the high country, to the Snowy River, where he grew up. Stock talks him out of it. The police force is looking after one of its own. Anderson makes plain where Alec's suppressed emotions have led him, the corner into which his formerly rigid morality has placed him. The reader cannot avoid the implications, cannot escape the fundamental moral questions posed by the situation in which Alec, and the reader along with him, now find themselves.

Stock tells him that there are a number of leads that point to Alec as Robbie's killer that could be followed, but they all depend on his having been in the vicinity of Agnes's house on the night of the hit and run. The upright Agnes has lied, firmly denying that he visited her. The actions of the family mirror the actions of the police: the group protects one of its own. Thus surrounded by a determined cover-up Alec succumbs: "'Remember, I'm not'—Alec's whisper broke into a vehement croak—'solid' he said. Stock slightly raised his shoulders. 'You will be now' he said on a note of regret" (206).

Yet this cover-up is portrayed by Anderson not as a reprieve, but as moral humiliation. Barely able to speak as a result of his scream when he hit Robbie, Alec's formerly strong will is dominated by the determination of Stock to get him back into the force and the indomitable Agnes's protection of him, the symbolism of his lost voice provides powerful reinforcement of his situation. His only recourse, the emotional path to continuing with his life, is a defensive self-righteousness of the kind he has formerly condemned:

> Last night … he would have been relieved by discovery. After that short deep sleep, like a black space, he had thought of Esther, and had begun to cover his tracks, but it was not until he had sounded, and Robert Stock had endorsed, a note of self-righteousness, that the work of concealment had become wholehearted. (222)

In this mental armour—Robbie was "bad right down deep. He deserved to die" (207)—his personal voice both physical and metaphorical is now seriously compromised.

By combining the creation of Alec a vividly realised complicated personality with a cleverly labyrinthine plot Anderson has led her readers, along with Alec, to a moral precipice. By this time readers have become deeply immersed in Alec's point of view. The undulating emotions and growing tensions have been theirs as well as Alec's. They were with him as he accelerated his car. In the aftermath they ask themselves to what dark place have they been taken?

Once more Anderson shifts gear in a way that ensures that she never loses our full attention. Alec's visit to his newborn daughter in hospital offers the opportunity to show the complexity, both of Alec's character and of the themes that have preoccupied the novel. His routine encounter with the tiny infant "drops suddenly into engrossment" triggered by her miniature perfection. The passage in which Anderson describes a memory, that the sight of his tiny daughter evokes in him, reads like a prose poem and leaves no doubt in my mind as to the writer's desire for us to appreciate Alec's quality in all its intricacy. It's a long quote but shows Anderson's capacity to evoke an atmosphere with the kind of descriptive detail that takes the reader mentally into the heart of the experience conveyed. It is a passage crucial to our understanding of this man and how Anderson sees him:

> Riding with his father on Kosciusko, in the days when there had been summer grazing on that stark mountain, he had dismounted one hot day and had run to a stream tumbling from a protected basin of snow. Bending to drink, he had seen that the purplish-brown smear that covered the rock face and which he had taken for the colour in the rock itself was in fact composed of millions of minute wild flowers red, purple and yellow. One red cluster was inches from his face as he drank and from this cluster his eyes has isolated one flower. Incredulous that it should be so small and secret and yet so exactly and delicately made, he had stared and stared at that single flower until it had swum away from his consciousness and then crowded back like a star. (221-22)

For me *The Last Man's Head* is a neglected work of extraordinary power that raises many of the key troubling ethical questions of our time. Is loyalty a virtue? Do ends justify the means? Is beyond reasonable doubt an absolute when you need to protect the vulnerable? When does moral strength become self-righteousness? In the age-old tension between the rights and responsibilities of the group versus the rights and responsibilities of the individual, where does the balance lie? And it was by choosing a complex protagonist such as Alec Probyn, who is not immediately likeable, and drawing the reader into a deep engagement with his point of view, that Anderson greatly expanded the ability of her novel to explore such difficult questions.

The two novels I have considered in this chapter, though very different from each other, have in common their requirement for the reader to exercise moral imagination. Analysing the two novels through the prism of their effects on the moral imagination has assisted my understanding of what each writer is attempting and what methods they have elected to employ. Each has chosen a setting and situation conducive to the exploration of moral questions. As we have seen, this initial selection of place and circumstance is an important one for the writer and the way a novel is set up at the outset is vital to the capture of a reader's attention.

The two novels have themes that are partly associated with the law, though very different aspects of it, and each emphasises the complications associated with any ethical code and the difficulties an individual has in making moral choices. Both authors use free indirect style as their fundamental narrative device. They have used the access to the thought processes of their principal character that this method affords as a means to procuring the reader's identification with that character's point of view.

McEwan and Anderson are both masters of characterisation able with considerable verbal elegance to depict and develop flawed protagonists. These central characters make moral choices that can be seen as reprehensible. However, the writers make it clear how the circumstances in which their characters find themselves have affected their decision-making. More importantly the reader is led by both writers to see the psychological needs that lie behind the behaviour. Anderson in particular also uses her entire cast of characters to contribute to our understanding of the issues at stake.

The narrative arc is cleverly plotted to ensure that a series of surprise events varies the emotional flow and helps hold the reader's interest. They both create situations where the

professional and the personal intersect, in ways that challenge the protagonist; but in this respect Anderson's construction is, in my view, more complicated, bolder and therefore more satisfying.

Ordinary life is used to great effect by both novelists to provide a backdrop and some everyday relief from heavy themes. Here again Anderson's cast of characters are a richer asset than McEwan's in offering a beautifully observed social picture of Australian suburban life and some lovely comic moments. In the different social milieu of Fiona's upper middle London, music and art take the place of the cultural backdrop provided by Esther's extended family, to render contrast and relief from the serious events and issues that form the main plot lines.

McEwan finds a way to have an optimistic ending for his superbly imagined female protagonist and, as he often does in his novels, concludes with a redemptive accommodation to moral error. Anderson, by contrast, presents us with a continuing necessity for compromise, sacrifice and difficulty; in Alec, she has created a brilliantly complex, highly masculine individual for whom no easy solution is available.

Both novels are elegantly constructed and written in faultless and at times quite beautiful prose. Each narrative unfolds using a range of techniques, including suspense, surprise and ethically significant "events" to draw the reader into deep engagement with the characters and to invite reflection on the novel's underlying themes. As a result they are novels that successfully stimulate the reader's moral imagination. They both provide a rich source of ideas and inspiration for any aspiring novelist.

Chapter 6

Of what is past, or passing, or to come[16]

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine the concept of the moral imagination and to assess its significance for the reading, writing, and study of contemporary fiction. The theoretical exploration that forms the first part of the thesis led to the conclusion that the relevance of the moral imagination to the way fiction is read and analysed has been strengthened and enlarged by the developments in literary theory that have occurred since the concept was first formulated. It has been further shown that although changes in literary theory and criticism have affected the way in which writers of literary fiction approach their work, ethical issues and dilemmas have remained an important theme in novels. Research into possible literary techniques that might be instrumental in engaging readers' full involvement in text worlds, and thereby in the ethical issues depicted in those worlds, was found to offer interesting pointers but no completely reliable predictions as to which techniques would be most effective. The art of fiction remains a complex, unpredictable and, some would say, mysterious undertaking. Nevertheless, there is growing evidence to support the notion that the engagement of the moral imagination through the reading of fiction has a significant role to play in the expansion of ethical awareness.

The investigation in this thesis of the moral imagination began by tracing the development of the concept through the first half of the twentieth century and noting the controversies that arose in literary circles at that time. By this means it was possible to explore some of the foundational arguments in relation to ethics and fiction that, in different ways, remain with us to the present. Henry James's critical works, the rise of Formalism, and the work of Lionel Trilling were examined. Trilling was given particular attention because his rise and fall and rise again can be seen as reflecting the trajectory of the acceptance or rejection of the relevance of the moral imagination over the last many decades. I argue that those who rejected Trilling's ideas failed to appreciate his true intent, and that a reconsideration of his writings is a profitable project today, especially if undertaken in the

---

[16] From W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (line 32).

light of theoretical developments that have occurred since. Finding reasons for Trilling's loss of reputation provided a segue to a consideration of the period post the 1960s and the rise of cultural theory, which was followed by the emergence of the cluster of movements referred to as postmodernism.

During the period from the 1960s through to the 1990s attention was diverted away from ethics as an overt theoretical consideration in the analysis of literary texts. The new cultural theories and associated critical preoccupations created for many a difficulty in reconciling traditional notions of morality with these new intellectual positions. This thesis concentrates on an investigation of the influence of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas on Jacques Derrida, showing how an ethics based on the notion of alterity is central to Derrida's thinking. The work of literary scholars writing about postmodernism and ethics, including among others Joseph Hillis Miller, Wayne Booth, Simon Critchley, Andrew Gibson and Nicole Anderson, was evaluated and a picture emerged of a growing awareness of the ethical element in postmodernism. A reading of a number of postmodern novels confirmed the view that ethical considerations remained very much part of literary practice during the postmodern era. As a result of this enquiry into postmodernist literary theory and practice, I argue that alterity is the basis of all true morality, and the ability to imagine the thoughts and motives of the Other is fundamental to ethical behaviour. The moral imagination in action, either when writing or reading fiction, involves a means of entry into the psychology of characters acting in the text world. Postmodernist approaches that incorporate the marginalised, emphasise context, and try new ways of reaching the reader, provide important additions to the possibilities of the moral imagination.

The thesis has shown how the literary enquiry that is now called the ethical turn began in the late 1980s, grew in the 1990s, and continues to develop in the present time. The ethical turn has been, to some extent, a reaction to the decline of ethical criticism in the second half of the twentieth century. It was instigated by moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, who entered the arena of literary criticism, arguing that literature is the most effective means of conveying an understanding of morality. She approached the reading of fiction using an essentially Aristotelian view of ethics. Aristotle held that good ethical choices were made by those whose interactions with others and self-reflection had developed a morally evolved character. Nussbaum's cogent arguments and close reading of literary texts, framed with notions drawn from moral philosophy, galvanised literary critics such as Wayne Booth, who was also heavily influenced by the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin. In his book *The Company We*

Keep, Booth represented books as friends who influence our views and assist us to appreciate the behaviour of others. As one of the pioneers of the ethical turn Booth brought a readily understood metaphor to the value of engagement with fictional situations and characters.

Soon this burgeoning field of interest attracted other philosophers such as Gregory Currie, Hilary Putnam, Margaret Urban Walker and Cora Diamond. Amid considerable controversy, literary scholars joined the process of re-awakening interest in the ethics of literature. That ancient binary, aestheticism versus ethicism, was hotly and publicly debated; ultimately unanswerable questions such as "can literature make you a better person?" were raised. Some scholars, whose approach to literature had been profoundly affected by contact with the ideas of the cultural theorists and saw the ethical trend as something that was opposed to those attitudes, vigorously resisted it.

An appraisal of the work of literary scholars such as Marshall Gregory, Tobin Siebers, Heather Love, David Parker, James Phelan and Dorothy Hale revealed how their various contributions led to the steady building of a refreshed approach to the role of ethics in literature and literature in ethics. Included in this examination was the work of Derek Attridge, a scholar who, like Nicole Anderson, appreciates the ethical force of Derrida and Levinas and has offered insights that support the contention that our understanding of the moral imagination has been expanded as a result of the continuing theoretical developments I have discussed. Attridge's analysis of Derrida's complex idea of the *event*, as it applies to narrative fiction, has influenced the creative work included in this thesis. These various scholarly elaborations of the fundamental argument that engagement with literary texts offers complex experiences apposite to moral understanding have helped shape the new view of the moral imagination proposed in this thesis.

A short examination of the experimental work of psychologists and cognitive scientists yielded some interesting preliminary findings, supportive of the idea that reading fiction could, by means of transportation, promote empathy and mental simulation (Theory of Mind or ToM) and sensitise moral judgement. Research using empirical methods to examine the actual literary craft techniques also provided some early, inconclusive, but suggestive indicators by which this immersion in the text could be achieved. Techniques researched include the use of first person versus third person internally focalised narration, emotional flow (mood change and surprise), and various means of foregrounding. However, although empirical investigation of literary reading and writing is a promising field of enquiry, at this stage much more work needs to be done to replicate and extend existing research. New

questions regarding the complex multifactorial interaction between writer, reader and text will continue to provide a serious challenge to existing experimental methodology, and innovative methods of investigation will need to emerge.

In the meantime, we must return, as this thesis did, to the testimony of writers themselves, to the observations of literary analysts, and to our own experience of reading and writing, for confirmation of how narrative fiction affects the ability to appreciate the thoughts, emotions, and attitudes of people very different from ourselves. Many contemporary writers from McEwan through to Zadie Smith have put on record their consciousness of the moral dimension of what they write. A crucial part of this theoretical thesis has been the reading of various fictional works through the lens of the moral imagination. Whether the texts selected were realist, modernist, or postmodern, the ethical questions they raise are clear to the reader.

The process of following the relationship between ethics and fiction through each successive period of literary theory since the beginning of the twentieth century has convinced me that the moral imagination is a useful frame in which to consider literature and ethics. I contend that it is not simply a matter of reviving the concept as it was once used. I propose a revised form of the moral imagination, one that has evolved over time and is now more applicable to the reading and writing of fiction than ever before.

I also believe that in the current globalised world, often riven by rigid ideology, the capacity to imagine the mind and motivations of others and to be drawn into a deeper understanding of those we may find ourselves opposed to, is an increasingly necessary human capacity. There is growing evidence that literature can contribute to the development of the kind of human being Aristotle considered capable of making wise ethical choices. Such a person, in Aristotelian terms, has been shaped, by self-reflection and interaction with others, to develop an understanding of how to respond, with insight and humanity, to moral questions as they arise in specific situations. Derrida pointed out, soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, that we are now being confronted with the kind of global forces and unpredictable violence leading to unpredictable events that have not been encountered in quite the same form before (Rogues 154-55). Disruption of many kinds has become a distinguishing characteristic of the age that is unfolding. In this environment the difficulties and limitations of a deontic system of ethics emerges and the capacity to judge individual situations flexibly and imaginatively becomes vital.

Like Trilling and Nussbaum, I see literary fiction as playing a significant role in shaping minds to undertake more nuanced thinking about human behaviour. If literary fiction is to attempt to reflect the preoccupations and problems of the contemporary world, an awareness of the power of the moral imagination will be a valuable asset to both those who write novels and those who read and study them. But if we add to past notions of the moral imagination the idea of alterity, together with the detailed explication of it that Derrida provides, we will have an enhanced and extended concept that has considerable relevance to a world of environmental hazard, technological revolution, mass migration, conflict and terrorism. Narrative fiction offers the possibility for the abstract philosophical concept *alterity* to expand and be given flesh by such reading and imagining.

Let me now encapsulate the main proposition of this thesis. I propose a post-postmodern imaginary for fiction that is influenced by an awareness of ethical considerations. The wide range of research I have undertaken has allowed me to bring together several strands of thinking about literary theory and put forward a revised and extended conceptualisation of the moral imagination. This new way of thinking about the moral imagination holds at its centre the idea that literary fiction carries with it the capacity to draw readers into an emotional and cognitive understanding of a wide range of people unlike themselves. It further holds that alterity is the basis of true morality.

In order to understand how such a proposal might evolve and how it might be applied to the issues facing the world in the twenty-first century, further research is needed. There is still much to know about how a moral imagination of the kind described can work in practice, but we already have a few indications. Current available research points strongly to the idea that transportation of the reader into the text world of the novel is of key importance, not only for the pleasure of the reader, but also because of its capacity to challenge or shape the way the reader thinks and feels about human behaviour. The methods by which a person can be induced to become "lost in a book" are many, various and debated. There are multiple possible paths for future research. To make the work undertaken by psychologists and cognitive scientists more relevant to the theory and practice of literary fiction, literary scholars need to continue to monitor empirical research and interpret the findings for the literary context. Existing novels need to be subjected to analysis through the lens of the moral imagination. The individual nature of each literary text means that the kind of ethical perspective here proposed can be expected to provide a rich source of insights into the craft techniques that writers use to achieve deep engagement of the reader. From the perspective of

creative writers, the consciousness of an enlarged version of the moral imagination can profitably inform the way they approach their work.

I consider there are good grounds for predicting that imaginary characters and situations will continue to be created, studied, and read for pleasure, and that novels will continue to provide a crossroads where literature, philosophy and psychology meet. This will in turn generate many questions to be further researched by literary scholars. Ethical dilemmas will be presented in fresh ways and these new approaches and techniques will need to be studied and analysed. The cultural milieu will alter and produce as yet unknown theories, which in turn will change the characters and situations depicted in novels and the form and style with which they are presented. These too will require investigation. My intention in this thesis has been to draw together the various ideas and perspectives that have contributed to the appreciation of the relationship between ethics and literature, and thus to provide a rich and coherent conceptualisation to underpin the research that will further develop the idea of the moral imagination in the future.

A Reflection on the Creative Writing Thesis

A Bridge Between the Theoretical and the Creative

Then with Inviolate Curve[17]

The exegesis that forms the first volume of this thesis played a crucial role in the writing of the novel which follows. I wanted *The Swing of the Sea* to reflect, in the personal life of the main protagonist Stephen, the broader social and political ideas that shaped the particular period in which the novel is set. Even as he criticises what is happening in the political arena, he is mirroring the very values he deplores in his own behaviour. The study of the evolution of the moral imagination both in theory and practice has been a rich source of ideas in my creative writing. I was a little concerned that in undertaking such a far-reaching analysis of ethical issues in fiction and literary scholarship, spanning as it does the whole of last century up to the present, I had committed a considerable amount of my writing time to the theoretical aspects of the thesis. However, this theoretical work not only helped me solve many of the problems I encountered in writing the novel, but has also provided me with a legacy for future writing. This bridging essay is devoted to showing how these two parts of the thesis have worked together to influence each other.

As a reader of literary fiction, I have always been impressed by the way the best writers convey the interaction between context and character that shapes behaviour, and the fine rippling between thinking and feeling that determines a decision. This literary skill is particularly evident when the decision confronting a fictional character is a problematic ethical one. It was the search for answers to questions concerning the relationship between morality and fiction that led me to the investigation undertaken in the preceding exegesis and which informed the practice that produced the creative component that follows.

In my novel *The Swing of the Sea* I wanted to explore the complications and difficulties of personal ethical choices. I also wanted the work to reflect the ways in which the pressures and problems of the contemporary world affect such choices. I decided to set the novel in the period of recent Australian history, when John Howard was prime minister. The Howard years ran from 1996 to 2007, a time when many salient ethical questions arose.

---

[17] From Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge" (line 5).

Living through that era, I witnessed the increasing willingness of politicians in both the national and international arenas to lie to the public, if it was in some way advantageous to do so. This behaviour drew the ire of some intelligent and thoughtful people I knew well. But it was also evident that they themselves were not always honest in situations where deception suited their own personal purposes and betrayed the trust of those for whom they were responsible. Having noticed how important the protagonists setting anf broader circumstances were to the success of Anderson and McEwans' novels I felt that the period I had chosen and the character of Stephen would allow a similar exploration of moral conflict.

Soon after commencing my research I came across a quote from Lionel Trilling, which I have already used in the first part of this thesis, where he points out that "literature has a unique relevance" to the liberal imagination "because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty" (*Liberal Imagination* x).

I sought out Trilling's work and became strongly engaged by his ideas, which seemed in some ways familiar, but also fresh to me. One aspect of the cultural setting of my novel that was important to me found reflection in Trilling's lifelong stance against extremism. The shift in public debate that occurred under Howard's prime ministership had a polarising effect on Australian society, mirroring the increasing bifurcation of political ideology in the western world. The Cold War with which Trilling contended was now over. Fascism and communism were no longer the two political extremes afflicting global politics, but other divergent attitudes and ideologies, with their assumptions of moral superiority, had become equally problematic. Trilling went so far as to advance the intriguing idea that ideology would replace class as a major preoccupation of fiction writers (*Liberal Imagination* 275). As was pointed out in Chapter Two of this thesis, Trilling's own novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, demonstrates his view that literary novels should concern themselves with the preoccupations and problems of the surrounding society, including its politics. This echoed my own feeling that I wanted to capture in my novel some of the broader socio-political and cultural trends and debates that were current at the time in which the novel is set. They are issues that have remained significant to the present day.

My goal was to create a narrative that reflected symbolically and metaphorically the connection between global events and the individual. As a writer I was interested in the way the political culture, both national and international, was reflected in smaller social units such as workplaces and families. I did not find this task an easy one to execute but I was greatly

assisted by the examples I was reading for the exegesis. I needed to shape the story to capture the injustices, the violence and the betrayals of responsibility that occur in all these arenas, as well as the resilience, care and cooperation displayed, as people at all levels grapple both with their own weaknesses and with what fate imposes on them.

The effect of secrets and lies on our ability to maintain trust between people and within communities seems to me worth exploring in the world as it is now in 2018. People have always lied and probably always will, but in the period covered by my novel there appeared to be a broader cultural shift happening in the age-old balance that has to be struck between individual obligations and obligations to others. By the end of the 1980s, the idea that the individual was more important than the group had taken hold. As Howard's philosophical precursor, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, put it "There is no such thing as society." At the same time the notion that all values are relative had somehow become distorted and simplified into an "every man for himself" attitude and the social contract that has been the foundation of western democracies since the Enlightenment had fallen into disrepute, along with many other Enlightenment values. The go-getting businessman was given hero status—in Australia, Alan Bond and Christopher Skase— were publicly praised but later exposed for fraudulent and illegal business activities—and similar exploitative and dishonest attitudes in money markets were paving the way for the great financial crash that was to arrive in 2008.

At the same time we began living in an era of disruption, or what the economist John Kenneth Galbraith labelled *The Age of Uncertainty*. The postmodern idea of "the event" that changes everything seems very much to apply in a world post-September 11 and other terrorist attacks. It is not as if the twentieth century did not have its own major disruptive events, but unpredictability has been a hallmark of the terrorist attacks that have occurred in the twenty-first century. The idea of luck as a determinant in one's life does not fit so well with the notion that each individual is responsible for what happens to him or her and we are always the architects of our own misfortunes. But in a time when simultaneously technology is disrupting job security, mass migration of asylum seekers is disrupting borders, and democratic discontent is disrupting the stability of formerly stable political systems, the notion of blind fortune is returning.

In my novel, I was particularly interested in the notion of "the event" and its effect on moral choices. How an individual or a society deals with disruptive events is, according to Martha Nussbaum, writing as a moral philosopher, a true test of moral character. As outlined

in Chapter Four of this thesis, she points out that novels frequently use this moral test by introducing a totally unexpected happening into the plot. In her essay "Ethical Relevance of Uncontrolled Happenings," which is included in her book *Love's Knowledge* (36-44)*,* Nussbaum uses both Henry James and Marcel Proust as supporting evidence to maintain that novels have built into them "an emphasis on the significance, for human life, of what simply happens, of surprise, of reversal" (36). She refers to Proust's assertion that "one of the primary aims of literary art is to show us moments in which habit is cut through by the unexpected, and to engender in the reader a similar upsurge of true, surprised feeling" (43). She sees this as reflecting the Aristotelian view that moral character is tested by how an individual responds to the reversal entailed in a major uncontrolled event. "The event" is also an important concept in postmodern thinking. Jacques Derrida, along with Andrew Gibson and Derek Attridge in interpreting him, also drew my attention to the idea that an event of this kind has real potential to change the direction of a novel and the development of a character in a moral sense. This is an idea that I have used in my own novel when a terrible, unpredictable event occurs that transforms the life of Stephen, the chief protagonist.

In the process of my research I found that several scholars had also, very recently, been re-discovering Trilling's work. In this way I engaged with the theoretical trend now known as "the ethical turn." Researching this trend for Chapter 4, along with all the other work on theory and criticism, has been an important influence in my thinking about the nexus between praxis and theory in the writing of my novel. I had entered the process of working on the thesis unsure of how the theoretical part, with its intellectual parameters, would affect the imaginative enterprise of fiction writing. For me, the consideration of a century of literary criticism has had a strongly stimulating impact on my imaginative process. Equally, the act of writing creatively affected and, I believe, sharpened my critical faculties when it came to an evaluation of the reliability and relevance of some of the critics I was reading.

At this point, I really cannot say whether my research should be described as practice-led or theory-led as the two have been so interactive. I attribute the influence of the theory on the practice to the questions the theory raised about my broader cultural perspective in writing the novel. I attribute the influence of the act of writing the novel on the critical part of the thesis, to the craft decisions one needs to make when dealing with the reality of putting words on the page. The act of creating a text world—of constructing characters and events and shaping the necessary sentences—develops an awareness that can call into question some

critical and theoretical assertions. Through the process of writing this thesis I have become a convert to the idea that critical and creative practice can inform each other.

One of the most salient experiences during the entire endeavour has been the effect it has had on my reading of fiction. I found myself reading quite differently from my usual voracious, blissful engagement with a work, the full "immersion" I have frequently referred to in the theoretical part of this thesis as the key requirement for identification with the fictional characters, their situations and dilemmas. For this exercise I was reading analytically, and the heightened awareness spread from the novels I was reading for my thesis to other novels read for pleasure during the period that the thesis was underway.

I believe it was this shift in the way I was reading that had the most useful effect on my own fiction writing. The reading was reflexive as a result of the dual reader/creative writer roles I inhabited throughout the period. The theoretical material I was working with sensitised me to how narrative structure and technique could stimulate polysemic responses to the text via the individual reader's moral imagination. Allowing this space for interpretation was crucial to my intention. I was now more acutely aware of why a particular word had been chosen, why sentences suddenly changed rhythm as part of a dramatic shift in mood, or how scenes had been assembled in one order rather than another. I could see how these choices were made for the purpose of engaging or deepening the reader's imaginative involvement with the characters, their circumstances and problems, while still allowing space for individual reaction and interpretation. As I write essentially because of a love of working with words and their infinite possibilities, the detailed type of reading I have undertaken for this thesis has been a pleasure as well as being useful.

The first of my own decisions, shaped by this reading, related to genre. I began the novel that forms the second part of this thesis intending it to be a satirical work. As I wrote, I realised that for this particular narrative, its characters and themes, satire was placing a distance between the text world and the reader, which could affect the deep engagement I was striving for. I realised that social realism would suit my purposes more effectively. However, I was also influenced by reading postmodern criticism, as well as some impressive metafictional works, such as David Malouf's brilliant and overlooked novella *Child's Play* and McEwan's *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth*. I tried for a while to use my chief protagonist's profession as a documentary filmmaker to give the story a metafictional twist, a process that became increasingly contrived and somehow inappropriate for a documentarist who is

supposed to be dealing in reality. In the end I reverted to a more realist narrative, albeit containing a disruptive event, a notion associated with postmodernism.

I made a deliberate decision to choose a middle-class and relatively privileged socioeconomic setting for my characters. I could have drawn from the multiple marginalised situations I had filmed in my past work making documentaries. Many of these were designed to show the difficulties faced by people trapped in circumstances in which their choices were constrained. I could have drawn on my own experiences of growing up in a family with few material resources. But it seemed to me that it was just as important to look at the way well-resourced people, with many options, behave in relation to others. I lived through the period covered by the novel, experiencing and observing people like Stephen and Isobel, the characters from whose point of view the novel is told. My own professional background was useful in my rendering of Stephen's work life, and I have also had close associations with art galleries and with women in leadership roles that helped in the creation of Isobel, but the central account of Stephen and Isobel's relationship with each other is entirely fictional, though influenced by stories confided in me and by my own observations over time.

I had already opted to use a third person free indirect narrative style before reading the work of van Lissa et al., described in Chapter Four, in which they found that it had certain advantages over first person. I made my choice because I wanted the focalisation to alternate between Isobel and Stephen until it stays with Stephen, the principle protagonist, for the last part of the novel, the part that follows the momentous event that acts as an epiphany for Stephen transforming his life and many of his attitudes. Isobel's perspective was an important counterpoint to Stephen's as the story establishes its themes and those aspects of Stephen's behaviour that belie his self-image.

The event that instigates the dramatic change and diverts the course of the novel is unheralded and unforeseen as Nussbaum describes it, or in Derrida's words it involves "surprise, exposure, the unanticipatable" ("Certain Impossible" 441). I wanted to make sure that, like acts of terrorism, it was experienced by the victim as random and unmotivated, while at the same time for the perpetrator it was motivated by an irrational hatred and, like racism, targeted simply on the basis of inherited genetic attributes. And although it is not something that a privileged white middle-class family expects to experience, it is a reality that other groups who appear in the novel encounter as a corollary of living.

While working to place the story of a family inside the cultural and political ambience of a particular time in Australia's history I came across Adrienne Rich's poem "North American Time." It expressed well my feeling that the preoccupations and problems of the people and culture I was observing around me could not be ignored and it seemed to validate my compulsion to portray my cultural environment in written form:

> Try sitting at a typewriter
>
> one calm summer evening
>
> at a table by a window
>
> in the country, try pretending
>
> your time does not exist
>
> that you are simply you
>
> that the imagination simply strays
>
> like a great moth, unintentional
>
> try telling yourself
>
> you are not accountable
>
> to the life of your tribe
>
> the breath of your planet (lines 27-38)

The first part of this thesis has explored possible answers to the question of whether immersion in a fictional world can engender an imaginative appreciation of the problems and complexities of the choices confronting the characters depicted. It has argued that conflicting theories and ideas about ethics and literature are not always at odds and can enrich our awareness of a range of possible approaches and interpretations.

Having explored the questions posed at the outset of the theoretical part of the thesis and having arrived at a theoretical conclusion, this chapter forms a link between the two parts of an exploratory arc. We now move from thinking about the moral imagination to a novel that expresses it in narrative form.

Works Cited

Amiel-Houser, Tammy and Adia Mendelson-Maoz. "Against Empathy: Levinas and Ethical Criticism in the 21st Century." *Journal of Literary Theory* 8.1 (2014): 199-218. Web. 24 Aug. 2017.

Anderson, Jessica. *The Last Man's Head*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1989. Print.

Anderson, Nicole. *Derrida*: *Ethics under Erasure*. London: Continuum, 2012. Print.

Arizti, Bárbara, and Silvia Martínez-Falquina, eds. *On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English.* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007.Print.

Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004. Print.

---. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Atwood, Margaret. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 2009. Print.

Auster, Paul. *Leviathan.* London: Faber, 2001. Print.

Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Print.

Bakhtin Mikhail. Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. Print.

Barry, Elaine. *Fabricating the Self: The Fictions of Jessica Anderson.* St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1992. Print.

Bayley, John. "The Last Honest Souls." *The Listener*. The Listener Archive, 26 October 1972. Web. 3 Apr. 2016.

Beach, Joseph Warren. *The Method of Henry James.* Philadelphia: Saifer, 1954. Print.

Beckett, Samuel. *Company*. London: Calder, 1980. Print.

---. *Molloy: A Novel*. New York: Grove, 1955. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages.* New York: Harcourt, 1994. Print

Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep*: *An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988. Print.

---. Rev. of *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, by Martha C. Nussbaum. *Philosophy and Literature* 15.2 (1991): 302-10. *Project MUSE*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

---. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961. Print.

---. "Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake." *Philosophy and Literature* 22.2 (1998): 366-93. *Project MUSE*. Web. 7 June 2016.

Bromwich, David. *Moral Imagination: Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014. Print.

Buchanan, Robert, "The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti." *The Contemporary Review* 18 (1871): 335-51. *The Rossetti Archive*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

Buell, Lawrence. "Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics." *PMLA* 114.1 (1999): 7-19. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 Nov. 2016.

Burgess, Anthony. Interview by John Cullinan. "Anthony Burgess, The Art of Fiction No. 48." *Paris Review* 56 (1973): n. pag. Web. 25 Feb. 2017.

Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France: And on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to the Event*. Ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969. Print.

Camus, Albert. "Albert Camus." *Nobel Writers on Writing*. Ed. Ottar D. Draugsvold. Jefferson: McFarland, 2000. 89-94. Print.

Carroll, Noël. "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research." *Ethics* 110.2 (2000): 350-87. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 May 2016.

Cavendish, Camilla. "File Under Friction." *Sunday Times*. Times Newspapers, 31 Aug. 2014. Web. 10 June 2018.

Clark, Eleanor. *The Bitter Box*. New York: Doubleday, 1946. Print.

Coetzee, J. M. *Age of Iron*. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.

---. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage, 2000. Print.

---. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Viking, 2003. Print.

---. *Life and Times of Michael K*. London: Secker, 1983. Print.

---. *Slow Man*. London: Vintage, 2007. Print.

Cohen, Ralph, ed. *Literature and/as Moral Philosophy*. Spec. issue of *New Literary History* 15.1 (1983): 24-192. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Feb. 2017.

Connor, Steven. Rev. of *The Company We Keep*, by Wayne C. Booth. *Modern Language Review* 85.4 (1990): 891-94. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Mar. 2016.

Crane, Hart, "To Brooklyn Bridge." *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose*. Ed. Brom Weber. New York: Liveright, 1966. 45-46. Print.

Critchley, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. Print.

Currie, Gregory. "The Moral Psychology of Fiction." *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73.2 (1995): 250-59. *Taylor and Francis Online.* Web. 29 Aug. 2016.

---. "Narrative and the Psychology of Character." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009): 61-71. *Taylor and Francis Online.* Web. 30 Aug. 2016.

Davis, Todd F., and Kenneth Womack, eds. *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory.* Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2001. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. "At this Very Moment in This Work Here I Am." *Psyche: Inventions of the Other.* By Derrida. Ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. 143-90. Print.

---. "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event." *Critical Inquiry* 33.2 (2007): 441-61. *JSTOR.* Web. 19 Feb. 2017.

---. "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority." *Cardoza Law Review* 11.5-6 (1990): 920-1045. Print.

---. "From Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas." *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 20-36. *Brill Online.* Web. 1 Dec. 2016.

---. *The Gift of Death.* Trans. David Wills. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. Print.

---. *Limited Inc*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2007. Print.

---. *Politics of Friendship.* Trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 1997. Print.

---. *Rogues*: *Two Essays on Reason*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.

---. "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." *Writing and Difference.* Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1995. 79-153. Print.

Diamond, Cora. "Martha Nussbaum and the Need for Novels." *Philosophical Investigations* 16.2 (1993): 128-53. *Wiley Online Library.* Web. 10 Oct. 2017.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. London: Bradbury, 1953. Print.

---. *David Copperfield*. London: Dent, 1977. Print.

Docz, Edward. "Postmodernism is Dead." *Prospect*. Resolution Group, 20 July 2011. Web. 24 July 2016.

Duiker, K. Sello. *The Quiet Violence of Dreams: A Novel.* Cape Town: Kwela, 2014. Print.

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides: A Novel*. New York: Picador, 2015. Print.

Frank, Joseph. "Lionel Trilling and the Conservative Imagination." *The Sewanee Review* 64.2 (1956): 296-310. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 Aug. 2016.

Frayn, Michael. *Headlong*: *A Novel*. New York: Metropolitan, 1999. Print.

Free, David. "James Wood Hails Literature as 'The Nearest Thing to Life.'" *Australian*.
 Australian, 25 July 2015. Web. 11 June 2018.

Galbraith, John Kenneth. *The Age of Uncertainty*. Boston: Houghton, 1977. Print.

Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990. Print.

Gibson, Andrew. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*. London:
 Routledge, 1999. Print.

---. "'Thankless Earth But Not Entirely': Event and Remainder in Contemporary Fiction."
 Arizti and Martínez-Falquina 3-19.

Green, Melanie C., and Timothy C. Brock. "The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness
 of Public Narratives." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79.5 (2000): 701-
 21. *APA PsycNET*. Web. 24 Aug. 2017.

Gregory, Marshall W. "Redefining Ethical Criticism: The Old vs. the New." *Journal of
 Literary Theory* 4.2 (2010): 273-301. Web. 7 June 2016.

Hale, Dorothy J. "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First
 Century." *PMLA*, 124.3 (2009): 896-905. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 May 2017.

---. *Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present*. Stanford:
 Stanford UP, 2007. Print.

Halliwell, Martin. *Transatlantic Modernism: Moral Dilemmas in Modernist Fiction*.
 Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006. Print.

Hamsun, Knut. *Hunger*. Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. Edinburgh: Rebel, 1999. Print.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "Ethics and Adaptation in Literary Study." *Soundings: An
Interdisciplinary Journal* 94.1-2 (2011): 15-33. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

Howe, Irving. "On Lionel Trilling: Continuous Magical Confrontation." *The New Republic* 13
 Mar. 1976: 29-31. Print.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *A Pale View of the Hills*. London: Penguin, 1983. Print.

James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. London: Methuen, 1904. Print.

---. *The Art of the Novel*. New York: Scribner, 1962. Print.

---. *The Bostonians*. New York: Dial, 1945. Print

---. *The Golden Bowl*. 4th ed. London: Methuen, 1963. Print.

---. *Partial Portraits*. London: Macmillan, 1899. *HathiTrust*. Web. 5 June 2018.

---. *The Princess Casamassima*. New York: MacMillan, 1948. Print.

---.*The Wings of the Dove*. London: Macmillan, 1923. Print

---. *Theory of Fiction*. Ed. James E. Miller. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1972. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act.*Ithaca:
    Cornell UP, 1981. Print.

Joughin, John J., and Simon Malpas. *The New Aestheticism.* Manchester: Manchester UP,
    2003. Print.

Joyce, James. "The Dead." *Dubliners.* Ed Terence Brown, Penguin Books. London, 1992.
    175-224. Print

Keats, John. "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." *Selected Poetry.* Ed. Elizabeth
    Cook. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. 32. Print.

---. *The Selected Letters of John Keats*. Ed. Lionel Trilling. New York: Doubleday, 1950.
    Print.

Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

---. "A Theory of Narrative Empathy." *Narrative* 14.3 (2006): 207-236. *Project Muse*. Web.
    18 June 2016.

Kelly, Adam. "Moments of Decision in Contemporary American Fiction: Roth,

Auster, Eugenides." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 51.4 (2010): 313-32. *Taylor
    and Francis Online.* Web. 1 Sep. 2016.

Kidd, David Comer and Emanuele Castano. "Reading Literary Fiction Improves

Theory of Mind." *Science* 342.6156 (2013): 377-80. Web. 8 Mar. 2016.

Kirby, Alan. "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond." *Philosophy Now.* Nov./Dec.2006:
    34-37. Print.

Kirsch, Adam. *Why Trilling Matters*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2011. Print.

Koopman, Emy. "Does Originality Evoke Understanding?: The Relation Between Literary
    Reading and Empathy." *Review of General Psychology* 4 May 2017. *ResearchGate*.
    Web. 2 Feb. 2018.

Letwin, Shirley Robin. "On the Birth and Death of the Individual." *Spectator* 21 Oct. 1972:
    624-26. Print.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. New York:
    Columbia UP, 1999. Print.

---. *Otherwise than Being, Or, Beyond Essence.* Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh:
    Duquesne UP, 1969. Print.

---. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority.* Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh:
    Duquesne UP, 1969. Print.

---. "Wholly Otherwise." *Re-Reading Levinas*. Ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley.
    Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. 3-10. Print.

"The Literature of Fiction." *British Quarterly Review* Nov. 1845: 527-43. *HathiTrust.* Web. 7
        June 2018.

Loesberg, Jonathan. "From Victorian Consciousness to an Ethics of Reading: The Criticism
        of J. Hillis Miller." *Victorian Studies* 37.1 (1993): 99-121. *JSTOR.* Web. 7 June 2016.

Love, Heather. "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary
        History* 41.2 (2010): 371-91. *Project MUSE.* Web. 3 May 2016.

Lubbock, Percy. *The Craft of Fiction.* London: Cape, 1965. Print.

MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
        Print

Malouf, David. *Child's Play: With Eustace and the Prowler*. London: Chatto, 1982. Print.

Mar, Raymond A., and Keith Oatley. "The Function of Fiction Is the Abstraction and
        Simulation of Social Experience." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3.3 (2008):
        173-92. *SAGE Journals.* Web. 26 Apr. 2016.

Mazzocco, Robert. "Beyond Criticism." Rev. of *Beyond Culture* by Lionel Trilling. *New York
        Review of Books*. NYREV, 9 Dec. 1965: 20-25. Web. 14 May 2016.

McAuley, James. *Collected Poems, 1936-1970*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971. Print.

McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. London: Vintage, 2002. Print.

---. *The Children Act*. London: Cape, 2014. Print.

---. "Only Love and Then Oblivion: Love was All They Had to Set Against Their

Murderers." *Guardian.* Guardian, 9 Sep. 2001. Web. 6 June 2018.

---. *Saturday*. London: Vintage, 2007. Print.

---. *Solar.* London: Vintage, 2016. Print.

---. *Sweet Tooth*. London: Vintage, 2013. Print.

McWhirter, D. B. "Henry James, (Post)Modernist?." *The Henry James Review* 25.2 (2004):
        168-94. *Project MUSE*. Web. 17 May 2016.

Menand, Louis. "Regrets Only: Lionel Trilling and his Discontents." *New Yorker.* Condé
        Nast, 29 Sep. 2008. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

Mendelson, Edward. "The Demonic Trilling." Rev. of *Why Trilling Matters* by Adam Kirsch.
        New York Review of Books. NYREV, 7 Jun. 2012. Web. 8 Mar. 2016.

Miall, David. "On the Necessity of Empirical Studies of Literary Reading." *Frame:
Utrecht Journal of Literary Theory* 14.2-3 (2000): 43-59. Print.

---, and Don Kuiken. "Foregrounding, Defamiliarization, and Affect: Response to Literary
        Stories." *Poetics* 22.5 (1994): 389-407. *ResearchGate*. Web. 31 May 2018.

Miller, James E., Jr. "Henry James: A Theory of Fiction." *Prairie Schooner* 45.4 (1971): 330-56. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 May 2016.

Miller, Joseph Hillis. *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers.* Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1963. Print.

---. *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, De Man, Eliot, Trollope, James and Benjamin.* New York: Columbia UP, 1987. Print.

---. "How to Be 'In Tune with the Right' in *The Golden Bowl.*" Davis and Womack 271-85.

---. *Theory Now and Then.* London: Harvester, 1991. Print.

Mo, Timothy, *Sour Sweet.* London: Abacus, 1983. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved.* London: Vintage, 1997. Print.

---. *Jazz.* London: Picador, 1993. Print.

Nabl, Robin L., and Melanie C. Green. "The Role of a Narrative's Emotional Flow in Promoting Persuasive Outcomes." *Media Psychology* 18.2 (2014): 1-26. *Taylor and Francis Online.* Web. 31 May 2018.

Nell, Victor. *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1988. Print.

---. "The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure: Needs and Gratifications." *Reading Research Quarterly* 23.1 (1988): 6-50. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Sep. 2016.

Newton, Adam Zachary. *Narrative Ethics.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.

Nünning, Vera. "Beyond Indifference: New Departures in British Fiction at the Turn of the 21st Century." *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture.* Ed. Klaus Stierstorfer. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003. 235-54. Print.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.

---. "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defence of Ethical Criticism." *Philosophy and Literature* 22.2 (1998): 243-65. *Project MUSE.* Web. 5 June 2018.

---. "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy." *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 15.1 (Autumn 1983): 25-50. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Sep. 2016.

---. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature.* New York: Oxford UP, 1990. Print.

---. "Ralph Cohen and the Dialogue between Philosophy and Literature." *New Literary History* 40.4 (2009): 757-65. *Project MUSE.* Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

Ozick, Cynthia. "Literary Entrails." *Harper's Magazine* April 2007. Web. 29 Aug. 2015.

Parker, David. *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print.

Perry, Keith. "Author Ian McEwan: 'Very Few Novels Earn Their Length.'" *Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 1 Sep. 2014. Web. 7 June 2018.

Phelan, James. "Sethe's Choice: 'Beloved' and the Ethics of Reading." *Style* 32.2 (1998): 318-33. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Dec. 2017.

Podhoretz, Norman. *Ex-Friends: Falling out with Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt, and Norman Mailer*. New York: Free, 1999. Print.

Posner, Richard A. "Against Ethical Criticism." *Philosophy and Literature* 2.1 (1997): 1-27. *Project MUSE*. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

---. "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two." *Philosophy and Literature* 22.2 (1998): 394-412. *Project MUSE*. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

---. *Law and Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009. Print.

Pound, Ezra, *Early Writings: Poems and Prose*. Ed. Ira Nadel. New York: Penguin, 2005. Print.

Proust, Marcel. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983. Print.

Putnam, Hilary. *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.

Rich, Adrienne. "North American Time." *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New, 1950-1984*. New York: Norton, 1984. 325-26. Print.

Rodden, John, ed. *Lionel Trilling and the Critics: Opposing Selves*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999. Print.

Roth, Philip. *The Human Stain*. Boston: Houghton, 2000. Print.

Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*. New York: Viking, 1989. Print.

Ryle, Gilbert. "Jane Austen and the Moralists." *Oxford Review* 1 (1966): 5 –19. Print

Saint-Amour, Paul K. "Bombing and the Symptom: Traumatic Earliness and the Nuclear Uncanny." *Diacritics* 30.4 (2002): 59-82.   Print.

Sale, Roger. "Lionel Trilling." *Hudson Review* 26.1 (Spring 1973): 240-47. Web. 8 Oct. 2016.

Sanders, Mark. "Introduction: Ethics and Interdisciplinarity in Philosophy and Literary Theory." Spec. Issue of *Diacritics* 32.3 (2002): 3-16. *Project MUSE*. Web. 21 Apr. 2016.

Saunders, George. *Lincoln in the Bardo: A Novel*. New York: Random, 2017. Print.

Siebers, Tobin. *The Ethics of Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP. 1988. Print.

Smith, Zadie. "Love, Actually." *Guardian*. Guardian, 1 Nov. 2003. Web. 8 June 2018.

---. *White Teeth*: *A Novel*. New York: Random, 2000. Print.

Steger, Jason. "Ian McEwan Enters a Legal Minefield." *Sydney Morning Herald.* Fairfax
        Media, 19 Sep. 2014. Web. 9 June 2018.

Stephens, Mitchell. "Deconstructing Jacques Derrida: The Most Reviled Professor in
the World Defends His Diabolically Difficult Theory." *Los Angeles Times.* Los Angeles
        Times, 21 July 1991. Web. 24 Aug. 2016.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* New York: New American Library, 1966. Print.

Swift, Graham. *Last Orders.* London: Picador, 2012. Print.

Tanner, Stephen L. "The Moral and the Aesthetical: Literary Study and the Social Order."
        Ethics, Literature, and Theory: An Introductory Reader. Ed. Stephen K. George.
        Lanham: Rowman, 2005. 115-37. Print.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity.* Cambridge: Harvard
        UP, 1989. Print.

Thomas, Dylan. "Notes on the Art of Poetry." *Collected Poems, 1934-1952*. London: Dent,
        1964. Print.

Thorpe, Peter. *Why Literature Is Bad for You*. Chicago: Nelson, 1980. Print.

Trilling, Diana. *The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling.*
        New York: Harcourt, 1993. Print.

Trilling, Lionel. *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning*. New York: Viking,
        1965. Print.

---. *E. M. Forster*. 2nd ed. New York: New Directions, 1965. Print.

---. *A Gathering of Fugitives*. Boston: Beacon, 1956. Print.

---. Introduction. *The Selected Letters of John Keats*. By John Keats. Ed. Trilling. New York:
        Doubleday, 1950. 3-42. Print.

---. *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-1975*. New York: Harcourt, 1979. Print.

---. *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society.* New York: Viking, 1950.
        Print.

---. "The Life of the Novel." *The Kenyon Review* 8.4 (Oct. 1946): 658-67. *JSTOR.* Web. 20
        May 2017.

---. *The Middle of the Journey*. New York: Viking, 1947. Print.

---. *Of This Time, of That Place, and Other Stories*. New York: Harcourt, 1979. Print.

---. *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*. New York: Viking, 1955. Print.

---. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972. Print.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Heritage. 1940. Print.

Updike, John. Interview by Charles Thomas Samuels. "John Updike, the Art of Fiction No. 43." *Paris Review* 45 (1968): n. pag. Web. 25 Feb. 2017.

Van Lissa, Caspar J., Marco Caracciolo, Thom Van Duuren, and Bram Van Leuveren. "Difficult Empathy: The Effect of Narrative Perspective on Readers' Engagement with a First-Person Narrator." *Diegesis: Interdisziplinäres E-Journal Für Erzählforschun*g 5.1 (2016): 43-63. Web. 31 May 2018.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. 1963. New York: Dial, 2006. Print.

Walker, Margaret Urban. "Moral Repair and its Limits." Davis and Womack 110-27.

Wellek, René. "Henry James's Literary Theory and Criticism." *American Literature* 30.3 (1958): 293-321. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 April 2016.

West, Cornel. "Lionel Trilling: Godfather of Neo-Conservatism" in *Lionel Trilling and the Critics: Opposing Selves*. Ed. John Rodden. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999. 395-403. Print.

Wilde, Oscar. *Art and Morality: A Defence of "The Picture of Dorian Gray."* Ed. Stuart Mason. London: Jacobs, 1912. *Project Gutenberg*. Web. 10 Nov. 2017.

---. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ed. Andrew Elfenbein. New York: Pearson, 2007. Print.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: *The German Text of Logisch-Phiosophische Abhandlung.* Trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuiness. London: Routledge, 1962. Print.

Wood, James. *The Nearest Thing to Life*. Waltham: Brandeis UP, 2015.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son.* Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1940. Print.

Yeats, W. B. "Down by the Salley Gardens." *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Ware: Wordsworth, 1994. 16. Print.

---. "Sailing to Byzantium." *Collected Poems* 163.