

**BEYOND ‘THE LIMITS AND THE TERMS’: NARRATIVE  
TECHNIQUE AND ETHICAL READING IN THE FICTION  
OF IAN MCEWAN**

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Harris Neil Williamson

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**ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, I explore the link between narrative technique and ethical reading in the fiction of Ian McEwan. Specifically, I use narratological concepts to examine the way in which McEwan encourages an ethical approach to reading: one which does not seek to “interpret” via hermeneutic systems, but rather reads with an attitude of humility and openness. Furthermore, I explain how McEwan thematises the acts of reading and writing in order to investigate the ethical tensions present in the production and receipt of narratives, literary or otherwise. Finally, I discuss the moral dramas that McEwan stages throughout his fiction, suggesting a connection between his characters’ epistemic outlooks—the way they “read” the world—and their ethical conduct. I analyse these features of McEwan’s work through a number of close readings of his texts, including his first short story collection, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), and his novels *The Cement Garden* (1978); *Saturday* (2005); *Solar* (2010); *Enduring Love* (1997); and *Atonement* (2001). Ultimately, I argue that McEwan’s fiction advocates for, and lends itself to, ethical reading: a practice which, while potentially unsettling and destabilising, rejuvenates our old modes of thinking about literature, and, indeed, the world around us.

## INTRODUCTION

Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* opens with a startling account of a man falling to his death from a hot air balloon suspended hundreds of feet in the air. The narrator, Joe Rose, who had let go of one of the balloon's ropes during the preceding rescue attempt, tells the reader that he has 'never seen such a terrible thing as that falling man' (16). As is typical of McEwan, moral questions come into sharp focus almost immediately, lending the text its initial narrative momentum. Later, Joe recounts the thoughts he had when gazing at the man's dead body:

[t]he skeletal structure had collapsed internally to produce a head on a thickened stick. And seeing that, I became aware that what I had taken for calmness was *absence*. There was no one there. The quietness was that of the inanimate, and I understood again, because I had seen dead bodies before, why a pre-scientific age would have needed to invent the soul. (23, italics in original)

Joe, though seeing the body for the first time, finds the sight eerily familiar. He understands *again*, as though he had since forgotten, the explanatory power possessed by the concept of the soul. He "reads" the dead body with both his senses and an in-built cultural script, bearing witness to McEwan's statement that 'literature flourishes along the channels of [an] unspoken agreement between readers and writers, offering a mental map whose north and south are the specific and the general' ("Literature, Science, and Human Nature" 6). In other words, literature presents us with a range of novel phenomena—images; cultural contexts; moral dramas—that somehow also strike us as familiar. McEwan's vision calls to mind that supplied by Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature*. Attempting to account for the 'singular' experience of reading literature, Attridge proposes that

[s]ingularity exists, or rather occurs, in the experience of the reader... understood not as a psychological subject... but as the repository of what I have termed an idioculture, an individual version of the cultural ensemble by which he or she has been fashioned as a subject with assumptions, predispositions, and expectations. (*Singularity* 67).

Attridge envisions readers bringing their own cards to the table—consciously or otherwise—when reading literary works, generating an encounter that he properly calls 'singular' (*Singularity* 63). For both Attridge and McEwan, then, reading facilitates what David Foster Wallace calls 'an exchange between consciousnesses' ("David Foster Wallace" 00:04:30–00:04:40), and the effects of this exchange depend on the materials available to both reader

and writer. Though not identical, McEwan's "mental map" and Attridge's "cultural ensemble" capture the sense of interplay in the reader-writer relationship, where elements of mutual understanding blend with novel elements that are calculated to unseat or reframe the reader's presuppositions. McEwan's fiction displays an acute awareness of the way in which these elements operate: one which is particularly attuned to their ethical dimensions. Consequently, it calls upon the reader to engage in the process of ethical reading.

It is somewhat difficult to define the term "ethical reading", due both to its philosophical connotations and its many uses in critical literature. I employ the term broadly to invoke two distinct concepts: firstly, the type of reading which discerns and evaluates the ethical (or "moral") tensions at play in any given text; secondly, the type of reading that resists the temptation to use a pre-conceived hermeneutic lens, and thus shows a 'willingness to have the grounds of one's thinking recast and renewed' (Attridge *Singularity* 128). While these concepts differ in their emphases, I see them as equally fruitful approaches to McEwan's work, and, while it may be difficult to synthesise them, it seems perfectly acceptable to imagine them working simultaneously: along parallel lines of enquiry, so to speak. To simplify matters, we might refer to the first concept as "reading ethics" and the second as "ethical reading". McEwan's fiction provides fertile soil for each of these approaches, weaving in dense moral dramas with an unsettling tendency to '[play] havoc with the preconceived' (K. Ryan 5). He asks his readers to read in a way that 'hesitates and suspends judgement' (Walker 32), while *also* encouraging them to make an ethical commitment during the process of reading the text. In both cases, he calls for some form of ethical development or *response* from the reader, even if said response is, in Attridge's terms, entirely singular.

In addition to a focus on ethical reading, this thesis employs a narratological lens, which, as I will show, dovetails with the ethical aspects of literature. Indeed, Adam Zachary Newton goes so far as to argue that 'a narrative *is* ethics in the sense of the mediating and authorial role each take up towards another's story' (48). Further, as James Meffan and Kim Worthington note, '[narratology] enables... an informed discussion about [the] crucial relationship between the text and the effects that are claimed for it with some descriptive precision and force' (121). Following this line of thinking, my analysis uses narratological concepts to draw out the relationship between narrative and the dual senses of "ethical reading" described above. McEwan's fiction often interrogates the act of storytelling; it is no surprise that *Atonement*, arguably the apex of McEwan's literary career, centres on the effects of narrative on both the narrator and narrated. Narratives do not simply emerge from the

ether; they assume a relationship between the teller and the told, each of whom possess their own ‘partisan understandings and desires’ (Worthington *Self as Narrative* 15). Inevitably, this gives rise to questions of authorship, particularly in the case of first-person narrators, where the ‘disparity of understanding’ between author, narrator and audience becomes a central issue (Phelan et al. *Nature of Narrative* 240). This thesis is frequently concerned with the reliability of McEwan’s narrators, their methods of communication, and the degree to which they are aware of their own role *as narrator*. I aim to show how these questions inform our ethical judgements, and the way in which McEwan’s use of narrative techniques often complicate, rather than clarify, such judgements.

In order to demonstrate the connection between narrative and ethics in McEwan’s fiction, my approach favours close reading over theoretical analysis. My rationale for this approach emerges from McEwan’s aforementioned emphasis on the reader-writer relationship, particularly the ‘decoding process’ (Shen 82) employed by all readers, who use as their guide the ‘mental map’ described by McEwan (“Literature, Science and Human Nature” 6). Extensive theoretical discussions about applied ethics or structuralist narratology are beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, the crux of my argument rests on the interplay between narrative and ethics when considered in the context of the reading experience. The questions arising from this dynamic need not be restricted to academic discussion. We might even say they have universal relevance; McEwan, for instance, characterises the novel as ‘a rarefied version of what we all do all the time: reading each other’ (“Ian McEwan Interview” 00:01:30–00:01:45). In other words, we are always “decoding”, in a “singular” way, those around us. Seen in this light, narrative fiction takes on a certain ethical urgency, and the best way to demonstrate this is to take part in the reading process itself.

In Chapter One, I analyse how McEwan uses narrative techniques to facilitate ethical reading in his short story collection, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), and his debut novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978). Despite the apparently amoral tone of these texts, they show that McEwan engaged the ethical qualities of reading from the beginning of his career. Firstly, I outline the ways in which a narratological lens can contribute to an ethical reading of McEwan’s texts by giving us an understanding of how they operate. I then introduce and define some key narratological terms, including Wayne Booth’s concept of the implied author, or “IA”, and the related device of the unreliable narrator. This device, I argue, allows McEwan to employ narrators who are ethically and / or psychologically deficient. Furthermore, I argue that McEwan’s early texts subvert and satirise certain discursive practices. His narrators remain naïve to the fact that they are trapped within such practices,

and this produces another kind of unreliability on a meta-textual level. McEwan's ironic invocation of these discursive modes functions as a criticism of reductive hermeneutic tools and encourages an ethical reading that avoids such tools. Moreover, I argue that the characters themselves are, to an extent, "readers", whose devotion to certain modes of understanding the world affects their inter-personal ethics, often in a perverse or negative way. These strands of argument inform my close reading of three short stories—"Conversation With a Cupboard Man", "Homemade", and "Solid Geometry"—and *The Cement Garden*. These texts foreshadow features of McEwan's later fiction: the connection between epistemic beliefs and ethical conduct; the subversive nature of intertextual references; and the ethical qualities of the narrative act. I conclude the chapter by briefly examining McEwan's statements about his own reading habits, arguing that his early writing—which often refashions or responds to other writers he admires—evidences his own practice of ethical reading.

In my second chapter, I discuss McEwan's narrative approach to *Saturday* (2005) and *Solar* (2010): novels which address contemporary social and political concerns. Though McEwan abandons first-person narration in these novels, he experiments with narrative distance to affect the audience's reading of his two main characters, Henry Perowne and Michael Beard. Perowne and Beard do not resemble the misfits and psychopaths of McEwan's early fiction. Instead, they are gifted bourgeois professionals, both experts in their chosen fields (neurosurgery and physics, respectively). This does not insulate them against their own folly, however, and the first half of this chapter highlights their (often unsatisfactory) approaches to interpersonal ethics. In each case, their interpersonal encounters take place in tense socio-political contexts, and my analysis aims to show these contexts affect Perowne's and Beard's ethical responses. In the second half of the chapter, I examine the ways in which McEwan thematises ethical reading in each text. Specifically, I argue that Perowne's and Beard's epistemic prejudices affect how they read literature, and that their desire to "understand" literary texts forecloses any opportunity to read ethically. Furthermore, in the case of *Saturday*, I propose that two of the supporting characters—Daisy and Baxter—both display an ability to read ethically, albeit in very different contexts. Finally, I turn to the critical reception of the novels, particularly among those critics who believed McEwan did not live up to his ethical duties as an author. I conclude that McEwan challenges the reader to ponder the issues he raises, but also maintain that his use of flawed protagonists complicates any didactic intentions.

In my final chapter, I focus on *Enduring Love* (1997) and *Atonement* (2001), which employ metafictional narrative techniques. Specifically, I analyse how McEwan's metafictional techniques do not distance the reader but bring them in to closer ethical relationship with the novel's characters. Firstly, I examine the degree to which Briony (*Atonement*) and Joe (*Enduring Love*) constitute "surrogate authors" who are aware of their role in narrating events. I also inspect how their literary and epistemic outlooks—in other words, their modes of reading—influence their narrative approaches, and the ways in which they attempt to convey themselves to their readers. Secondly, I discuss how Briony and Joe, as surrogate authors, represent other key characters in the story: Robbie Turner (*Atonement*) and Jed Parry (*Enduring Love*). I explore how their attempts to (de)mythologise these characters constitute a kind of ethics of representation, driven in large part by their own relationships to the characters. Lastly, I interrogate the metafictional elements of the texts, examining how they draw readers towards ethical judgements. Furthermore, I argue that, while McEwan's narrative technique problematises any straightforward reading of the texts, he encourages a commitment to an "ethical realism". I conclude by arguing that *Enduring Love* and *Atonement* constitute McEwan's most explicit attempt to foster an ethical readership: one that does not abandon itself to relativism or overlay the text with hermeneutic systems, but instead reads with a deep humility, and an understanding of the complexities of the narrative process.

My concluding section, in addition to identifying opportunities for further research, aims to place McEwan's fiction in the context of our current cultural climate. I argue that McEwan's fiction, though not overtly didactic, guides us towards a way of reading that enhances our capacity for ethical growth.

## CHAPTER ONE: STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

### Introduction

For those writing critical studies of McEwan, it has become conventional to begin with a shopping list of broken taboos in his early fiction. To take one example, Jack Slay Jr. does not get beyond the first paragraph of the introduction to his full-length study before mentioning ‘incestuous siblings, heart-broken gorillas, sadomasochistic lovers [and] corpse dismemberers’ (1). Such catalogues are not limited to critics; McEwan himself, in his introduction to the fortieth anniversary edition of *First Love, Last Rites*, provides a more detailed version, attributing his early writing to a ‘savage, dark impulse’: ‘sibling incest, cross-dressing, a rat that torments young lovers... child abuse and murder, [and] a man who keeps a penis in a jar and uses esoteric geometry to obliterate his wife’ (x).<sup>1</sup> In a sense, McEwan’s naked desire to shock should not surprise us: young writers often feel the itch of sensationalism, and he was part of a literary generation who ‘[presented] mordant, even vicious, views of modern society’ (Slay 3). McEwan’s origins, however, become intriguing when viewed in light of his later career. Following his ‘ethical turn of the 1980’s’ (Wells *Ian McEwan* 15), McEwan forged a different path, and, with historical novels such as *The Innocent* (1990) and *Black Dogs* (1992), broke the shackles of his *enfant terrible* reputation. By the time he published *Atonement* in 2001, he was a firm fixture in the pantheon of British literary celebrities. Hence the second common factor in the critical literature on McEwan: an interrogation of ‘the extent to which the [early] stories foreshadow the achievements of his mature fiction’ (Head 31). The dominant view, first proffered by Kiernan Ryan and later echoed by Dominic Head (7) and Lynn Wells (*Ian McEwan* 12), ‘rejects the temptation to reduce [McEwan’s] development to an exemplary tale of moral maturation or artistic depletion’, while acknowledging his growth in social and political consciousness (K. Ryan 4). Given McEwan’s admiration for Darwin’s theory of evolution,<sup>2</sup> it is perhaps appropriate that this “theory” of his artistic development combines continuity and change.

Nevertheless, McEwan’s early texts present significant challenges to the critic, particularly the way in which they deal with questions of ethics. Stripped of their form and structure, the bare plots of *First Love, Last Rites* have little to recommend them. Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> Please note the *x* in parentheses here is a Roman Numeral, not a placeholder.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, McEwan’s essay “Literature, Science and Human Nature” (pp. 5-19) in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*.

Slay's list above seems more at home in the world of tabloid journalism than it does in literary fiction. Some critics, perhaps understandably, find the dispassionate moral stance of McEwan's early fiction troubling. David Malcolm, for example, asserts that many of McEwan's early stories 'lack any moral center at all' (44). Interestingly, in the case of the particularly disturbing "Butterflies", he adds that 'it is the reader who brings moral attitudes to the story, for they are absent in the text itself' (43). In essence, Malcolm is correct, but his tone betrays an assumption that an author should guide their reader to a single—and morally reassuring—understanding of the text. McEwan's choice to hand his stories over to the reader without giving them any moral signposts may in fact encourage what Derek Attridge calls a 'responsible response':

a responsible response to an inventive work of art... is one that brings it into being anew by allowing it, in a performance of its singularity for me, for my place and time, to refigure the ways in which I, and my culture, think and feel. This may mean being willing to take on trust that it has something valuable to say *when it appears obscure or objectionable*, at least until several readings—and perhaps conversations or research—make an informed and just response possible. (*Singularity* 125, my italics)

Though Attridge uses a dense critical vocabulary here, he captures an important point. What Malcolm describes as McEwan's 'extreme moral relativism' (15) may in fact serve a purpose: to invite the reader to "respond responsibly". Most readers, even critical readers, may not reach the high bar set by Attridge, but McEwan's early fiction invites them to defer judgement and conduct a closer inspection of the text. Kiernan Ryan echoes this point when he characterises McEwan's writing as 'adventures in the art of unease, the art of playing havoc with the preconceived' (5). Ryan wrote these words in 1994, but they could apply just as easily to McEwan's later work, which also aims to disabuse readers of their "preconceptions". Though the later novels engage with ethical questions in a more explicit manner, they possess a similarly complex narrative architecture, denying the reader the comfort of obvious conclusions.

This chapter will elaborate on how this dynamic works in McEwan's early fiction, particularly the way in which it invites—and rewards—responsible reading. I aim to explicate the narrative tactics that McEwan uses in order to complicate his narrators' reliability and show how these raise important ethical questions. When we concentrate on McEwan's aesthetic decisions, rather than recoil from the depravity we see on the page before us, the texts reveal their ethical complexity. The importance of this endeavour, I argue, is less about uncovering McEwan's "true" intentions—though they remain important—than participating

in the decoding process itself, for it is the process that precedes ethical development.

McEwan's texts call us to open ourselves up in this way and, by doing so, reject the typical stance of his narrators, whose passions trap them in recursive patterns of solipsism, grief, and fantasy. To read *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *The Cement Garden* is to engage in a series of strange encounters which, while confronting, encourage a habit of responsible reading.

### **The Value of Narratology and Questions of Reliability**

Narratological theory provides one useful path towards a responsible reading. Though Attridge warns us against stifling texts with rigid hermeneutics, he endorses careful readings, as well as 'conversations and research' as the means by which readers 'make an informed and just response possible' (*Singularity* 125). Furthermore, an analysis that centres on form rather than content may be particularly useful. In her essay *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag laments the focus on content at the expense of form, calling for 'a poetics of the novel' (12). While an overtly formalist narratology has the potential to "over-interpret" art, narratology can also bear witness to the formal machinery that lends narrative art its aesthetic weight. I do not intend to engage in a 'reactionary [and] stifling' (Sontag 7) reading of McEwan's texts, but rather show that the nerve-wracking nature of McEwan's writing lies less in the "what" than it does the "how". Taboo narratives possess little power on their own; indeed, given the popularity of tabloid journalism, they in some instances provide a perverse sort of comfort. The critical lens of narratology has the potential to make McEwan's art 'more, rather than less, real to us' (Sontag 14); his narrative's formal characteristics give them the 'capacity to make us nervous' (Sontag 8). In other words, a narratological analysis sharpens, rather than blunts, the texts. Such a reading does not attempt to mitigate the text's shock value; instead, it works towards an understanding of how these texts operate on readers.

One way that narratological theory can achieve this is to interrogate questions of authorship: how, as readers, do we stand in relation to the author, and they to us? This is a perennial concern in McEwan's fiction, though the way in which he deals with the issue varies. The distance between the third-person narrator and his characters becomes the main concern of *Saturday* and *Solar*, whereas *Atonement* and *Enduring Love* present characters who self-consciously author their texts. Accordingly, the nature of authorship will be an especially important point of discussion throughout this thesis. The texts I have chosen for this chapter all feature first-person narrators whose reliability remains in question. A few

theoretical concepts may help us here. The first is Wayne Booth's notion of the "implied author" (or "IA") as distinguished from the "flesh-and-blood person" (or "FBP"). Booth writes that our sense of the IA includes 'the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which [the] implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator [i.e. the FBP] belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form' (*Rhetoric* 75-76). The IA therefore changes from text to text, even when created by the same FBP. Booth's definition of the unreliable narrator—he was the first critic to formally define the term—leans heavily on the concept of the IA. Referring to his analyses of primary texts in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, he writes: 'I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms) and *unreliable* when he does not' (158-159, italics in original). While this provides a useful starting point, Booth's definition of the implied author—and, consequently, of the unreliable narrator—has come under attack. Angsar Nunning, for example, labels the concept 'elusive and opaque' and (34) and points to Booth's neglect of the role played by readers, who bring to the text their own 'referential frameworks', including, for example, their cultural and ethical presuppositions (47-48). Nevertheless, Nunning maintains we cannot dispense with the implied author's role because it is they who '[furnish] the text and the narrator with a wide range of explicit signals and inference invitations in order to draw readers' attention to a narrator's unreliability' (56). That is to say, the implied author does not simply "exist" in the text results from a collaboration between the reader and the flesh-and-blood author who writes the text. This collaboration forms the basis of unreliable narration, as the reader detects a gap between the rhetorical purposes of the agreed-upon implied author and those of the narrator. Greta Olson argues that Booth's and Nunning's definitions share many similarities but makes the following distinction: 'Booth's model gives authority to an implied author whose norms form the basis from which questions of reliability can be addressed, whereas Nunning's model assumes the limited validity of subjective reader response' (99). I do not wish here to unravel the question of how much "authority" we delegate to the readers in decoding the IA's "signals", only to establish the importance of a gap between the norms of the IA and the narrator when establishing any narrator's unreliability.

Yet we also need to acknowledge that different types of unreliability exist, and that Booth's definition, while a good starting point, does not fully explicate each of these types. Olson, for example, makes an explicit distinction between *fallible* and *untrustworthy* narrators. Fallible narrators, according to Olson, 'do not reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgements of perceptions or are biased [*sic*]' (101). In

contrast, untrustworthy narrators are ‘*dispositionally* unreliable... [t]he inconsistencies [they] demonstrate appear to be caused by ingrained behavioural traits or some current self-interest’ (102). William Riggan employs a more specific—albeit fluid—taxonomy, identifying four types of unreliable narrators: ‘the *pícaro*, the clown, the madman, and the naïf (16, italics in original). Though imperfect, the distinctions employed by Olson and Riggan are important, as they influence the types of judgements readers make about the narrator. It is also worth noting that, under Riggan’s taxonomy, the narrator is a ‘naïf... not fully aware of many of the implications in his narrative’ (179). In other words, being the IA’s creation, the narrator may remain unaware of the various discourses in which he is implicated; this variant of naïveté plays an important role in many of the following stories. The ironic gap between the implied author and the narrator unifies the above categories, and this gap gives authors the opportunity to ‘make effects of various kinds’ (Phelan et al. *Nature* 240). McEwan<sup>3</sup> employs a variety of unreliable narrators, prompting us to consider this ironic gap and arrive at an ethical response; or, in Attridge’s words, to ‘[bring the text] into being’ (*Singularity* 125).

### **‘I Have to Pretend’: “Conversation With a Cupboard Man”**

I begin my analysis with “Conversation With a Cupboard Man” because the gap between the unreliable narrator and McEwan seems reasonably straightforward. The story consists solely of a monologue in which an unnamed recluse recounts his life story to a social worker. Essentially, the narrative is a revolving door of traumatic experiences. The narrator’s widowed mother treats him as an infant up to the age of seventeen, going so far as to construct an adult-sized highchair and keep him on a perpetual diet of baby food. When she enters a relationship with a man, she starts mistreating the narrator, and eventually puts him into a remedial home. His subsequent attempts to adjust to adult life fail, partly due to an abusive employer who repeatedly locks him inside an industrial oven. After three months in prison for shoplifting, he takes up residence in an attic and conceals himself in a cupboard. In the story’s final lines, he expresses a desire to return to infancy, but acknowledges that this desire will never be fulfilled.

The (limited) critical literature on “Conversation With a Cupboard Man” offers various interpretations that aim to make sense of the narrative’s events. Kiernan Ryan calls

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the IA as ‘McEwan’ throughout this chapter unless otherwise indicated.

the story ‘the hidden emotional history of many men, grotesquely caricatured as the confession of a madman’ (8). Although the text can support such a conclusion, reducing the narrator to a caricature effaces his complexity. Jack Slay’s conclusion that the narrator falls victim to ‘the cruelty of... society’ (23) seems equally simplistic. In my view, McEwan steers us away from such hasty judgements: the narrator appears equal parts vicious and pathetic, and though we may impute some blame to him for his dire circumstances, his ugly background makes this stance somewhat uncomfortable. Indeed, the ethical value of the story emerges from this tension, as McEwan encourages his readers to suspend their judgement. McEwan frames the story as a close personal encounter: the first word uttered by the narrator is ‘[y]ou’ (106). The rest of the first sentence implies that the narratee has asked the narrator a question: ‘[y]ou ask me what I said when I saw this girl’ (106). By using this narrative tactic, McEwan thrusts the narratee into the role of the ‘social worker’ (106) charged (presumably) with the task of assessing the narrator. In a sense, this “assessment” consists of discerning the narrator’s reliability. McEwan offers no direct guidance to his readers: the task is theirs. He does, however, leave subtle clues. The narrator’s attitude towards his mother, for example, shifts frequently: so much so that it is difficult to deduce his true feelings towards her. He first describes her as ‘twisted up’ (107), and when we read his account of her conduct, it is easy to sympathise with this view. She feeds him with baby food, never takes him outside the house, and, when the narrator outgrows his cot, she ‘[buys him] a crib bed from a hospital auction’ (107). As the narrator recounts these events, his language sharpens to the point where he labels his mother ‘insane’ and a ‘bitch’ (107). Yet, in the very next paragraph, he concedes, ‘she was a good woman, really’ (108). Later in the story, McEwan creates more subtle inconsistencies to reinforce the point. The narrator describes his fellow employees in a hotel kitchen as ‘black and ugly’ (115), and when his boss locks him in the oven he abhors the ‘thick black scum on the walls’, which smells like ‘rotten cats’ (116). The darkness of his cupboard, however, soothes him and brings him a semblance of peace (125). McEwan, then, calls into question the narrator’s reliability, not because he [i.e. the narrator] sets out to deceive the narratee but because he appears unable to discern his own psychic conflicts. The narrator’s constant inconsistencies allow us to classify him as a madman under Riggan’s taxonomy; his account is ‘patently unreliable [and] his testimony and opinions can by no means be accepted at face value’ (Riggan 109). McEwan’s narrative decisions complicate the reader’s response, asking them to consider the extent to which naïveté or madness mitigate ethical responsibility.

Freudian theorists may render the text sensible by drawing connections between the narrator's subconscious ambivalence towards both his mother and the womblike darkness of the cupboard. The narrator, however, shows a degree of self-awareness with respect to this issue. He speculates that his 'problems started [because] his father died before he was born' (106). Furthermore, when his mother demands that he call her new boyfriend 'Father', he has a fit, and draws an explicit connection between the two events (111). As his monologue proceeds, the narrator shows an acute awareness of his desire for regression. His painful experience in the oven, he realises, concealed 'a deeper pleasure of feeling safe' (124). Eventually he admits, unabashed, that he envies the 'babies [he sees] in the street being bundled and carried about by their mothers' (125). He shows, therefore, a tacit awareness of Freudian discourse without identifying it as such. The narratee—cast in the role of a social worker, no less—may perceive that the narrator's malady fits the classic pattern of the Oedipal complex, desiring a return to his mother's breast and directing '[his] first murderous wish against [his] father' (Freud 262), or, in this case, his new paternal figure. The narrator therefore betrays the kind of naïveté described by Riggan; McEwan traps him inside a Freudian discourse, setting up a secret understanding between McEwan and his reader. By making this reading so obvious, however, McEwan also satirises it, thus mocking any attempts at a straightforward Freudian reading. Instead, McEwan demands that we engage in a deeper reading: one which does not reduce the narrator to a cog in the Oedipal machine but instead considers the other "complexities" of his character.

We see this attitude at work at other points in the story where McEwan elicits our sympathy for the narrator by weaving in ironies that he fails to perceive, establishing a kind of metafictional irony in which the narrator's speech functions as literary device for McEwan. These textual signals often feature wordplay or metaphor intended solely for the reader. As if we were in any doubt about the McEwan's intentions, he has the narrator tell us that he cannot 'read or write': skills he once had but has 'forgotten' (111). McEwan thus primes us to "read" where the narrator cannot. The scenes at the remedial home exemplify this narrative tactic particularly well. The supervisors at the home train the narrator 'to repair watches and clocks' (111) so that he can 'stand by himself and earn a living' (111). He confesses, however, that he has never been able to employ those skills (112). Metonymic resonances abound here: the narrator has no ability to turn back time, to "repair" his life. He never quite picks up on this symbolic connection, even though the final lines contain a strong echo (126). McEwan exposes the narrator's naïveté once again when the narrator recounts his relationship with Mr Smith who is 'in charge of the [remedial] home' (112). Mr Smith

attempts to compensate for the deficiencies in the narrator's education, leading the narrator to regard him as benevolent and 'special' (112). Dark ambiguities emerge, however, when Mr Smith 'make[s] [the narrator] dance for him' in his room: an occurrence that soon becomes a bi-weekly routine. Even Mr Smith's name, which the narrator dismisses as ordinary (112), carries rich associations with the activity of moulding or sculpting for one's own ends. McEwan's subtle wordplay occurs in other parts of the story, too, such as when the narrator fantasises about 'old times in Staines' (126), unintentionally conflating the name of his hometown with the mess and muck of infancy. These continual discrepancies between McEwan and his narrator reward an attentive reading, but they also garner an emotional response. The narrator's solipsism, which we might otherwise view as self-indulgent, instead evokes pity. Though the narrator's status as a literary creation gives McEwan the opportunity to toy with language, the metafictional elements do not erode the narrator's "human" aspect but combine with it in an attempt to elicit the reader's sympathy. Again, McEwan's aesthetic signals do not console us with easy answers but raise ethical ambiguities that we must confront ourselves.

McEwan also complicates the narrator's own ethical encounters, underscoring his tragic shortcomings in his relationships with others. Lynn Wells notes that the work of Emmanuel Levinas can function as a useful platform for assessing such encounters in McEwan's fiction (*Ian McEwan* 14-16). She does not, however, apply it to the texts written before McEwan's aforementioned 'ethical turn' (Wells *Ian McEwan* 15). Yet Levinas' insistence on the primacy of the face-to-face encounter as the 'ground of ethics' (Bergo, Section 2.3) bears closely on the narrator's experiences in "Conversation With a Cupboard Man". Firstly, as Kiernan Ryan points out, the narrator—along with many other narrators in *First Love, Last Rites*—shows a 'reluctance... to be named' (11). The narrator is literally "faceless", and though he repeatedly references his decaying body, which he regards as 'thin and bloodless' (110), he never offers a specific description of his face. Furthermore, he expresses a desire to avoid encounters with others, attributing the genesis of his problems to such encounters. As he puts it, he 'was not unhappy till [he] found out what other people thought about him' (108). This aversion to the scrutiny of others, however, sits in tension with a chronic desire to be acknowledged. After his mother's new partner moves in, both he and the narrator's (previously doting) mother starve him of eye contact: '[o]ne morning I came down[stairs] and found my mother's boyfriend having breakfast in his dressing-gown. He didn't even look at me when I came into the kitchen. When I looked at my mother she just pretended to be busy at the sink' (110). The narrator's attempts to establish reciprocal contact

are thus rebuffed twice, including by a person with whom he once shared a stifling intimacy. This denial of face-to-face contact, of ethical grounding, reverberates throughout his life in significant ways. McEwan laces the narrative with references to faces and looking, most notably when the narrator confers upon his employer a derisive sobriquet: ‘Pus-face’ (115). Rather than being ‘at peace with... absolute alterity’ (Levinas 197), the narrator finds Pus-face repulsive (115). Pus-face’s physical grotesquery colours the narrator’s perception of him to such a degree that an ethical encounter becomes impossible, and the narrator reacts to Pus-face’s sadistic treatment by pouring boiling cooking oil into his lap (117). Using this episode, McEwan both confirms the paucity of the narrator’s ethical grounding and issues a challenge to the reader to transcend the narrator’s ethical limits by remaining open to our own ethical encounter with the narrator *in spite of* his physical and moral deficiencies.

One character within the text who does fulfil this task is Deafy, a man who the narrator meets in prison while serving his three-month sentence for shoplifting. Deafy is both ‘deaf and dumb’ (123) and therefore has nothing to offer the narrator but his face, which he adjusts to produce an appropriate reaction to the expressions on the narrator’s own face (124). Free from the complications of language, the two men each experience ‘[the] absolute nakedness of a face (Levinas, quoted in Wells *Ian McEwan* 15); they simply ‘[smile] at each other, [doing] nothing else (123). This sustained face-to-face intimacy satisfies the narrator so much that he tells us—in yet another instance of unintentional irony—that he ‘didn’t speak to many people [in prison] apart from Deafy’ (124). His wish to eradicate the mediation of language carries with it a few potential meanings. Firstly, there is an obvious connection to the pre-linguistic state of infancy: earlier in the story he confesses he prefers ‘gurgling’ to talking (108). Yet it also exposes the need to look beyond language, or at least beyond the surface of language, to engage in a true ethical encounter with the Other, providing further proof that the form of any given narrative is as important as its content.

“Conversation with a Cupboard Man” derives its ethical value not by any guidance from the text itself, but by McEwan’s signals to the reader. Indeed, taken at face value, the story appears steeped in despair. The narrator’s trials offer him no redemption or even relief and, as noted above, the final lines show him resigned to his fate (126). The universe he inhabits seems chaotic and amoral, riddled with tragedy and trauma; the shop-worn narrative of triumph over adversity has no place here. Furthermore, McEwan’s aesthetic choice to satirise the standard Oedipal narrative forecloses a simple Freudian reading. While the text stages some encounters that display a hopeful vision of interpersonal ethics—such as the narrator’s encounter with Deafy—the narrator remains largely unmoored from any ethical

framework, hamstrung by both his madness and naïveté. Nevertheless, the narrator, in light of his experiences, is, to a degree, sympathetic. These unresolved tensions and ambiguities leave the reader to do the difficult work of generating their own ethical response.

### **By the Book: “Homemade”**

In “Homemade”, a perverse coming-of-age story, another unnamed character chronicles his relationship with an older adolescent, Raymond, who takes him through a series of initiations. Though Raymond introduces him to—among other things—drug use, masturbation, and shoplifting, the narrator proves more adept at each of these activities. As time goes on, he grows increasingly anxious to lose his virginity. Unwilling to wait until Raymond introduces him to a girl, he decides to rape his ten-year-old sister, Connie. At the end of the story, he reflects shamelessly on the significance of the rape, identifying it as the point he ‘made it into the adult world’ (52).

As one might assume upon reading the plot summary, “Homemade” eschews any sort of moral anchor. On the contrary, the narrator appears to delight in his transgressions, viewing the older generation’s values with amused contempt. This attitude manifests clearly when he uses Connie’s favourite game, ‘Mummies and Daddies’ (45) as a means to coerce her into sex. He tells us that it is ‘a game... which [he] would rather be burned at the stake for than have [his] friends see [him] play it’ (45). As he plays the game, he is ‘plunged into a microcosm of the dreary, everyday, ponderous banalities’ of the adult world: ‘I went to work and came back, I went to the shops and came back, I posted a letter and came back’ (46). The language signals the narrator’s disdain for any form of diligence or routine, evidenced early in the story when he mocks his father and uncles who, stuck in their menial jobs ‘[make] a virtue of this lifetime’s grovel, [and prize] themselves for never missing a day in the inferno’ (37). As Eluned Summers-Bremner observes, the narrator ‘regards [his older relatives] as hopelessly innocent and earnest, like the young’ (14). The four cardinal virtues of Catholic tradition—chastity, temperance, fortitude, and justice—are anathema to the narrator; he regards them as an outmoded moral schema maintained by deluded adults for their own peace of mind. Even if we forego the religious vocabulary, few readers would dispute that the narrator abandons moral norms in favour of self-gratification. David Malcolm’s aforementioned accusation that McEwan’s early stories ‘lack any moral center at all’ (44) was surely made with stories like “Homemade” in mind. Perhaps even more concerning is the apparent lack of distance between McEwan and the narrator in this story. The narrator lacks

the degree of ignorance or naïveté we might attribute to the narrator of “Conversation with a Cupboard Man”. Indeed, the whole story gains its momentum from his journey from naïve adolescent to inhabitant of the ‘adult world’ (52). Narrating in the past tense at a temporal distance from actual events—he implies he has completed ‘art college’ (36)—he shows an acute awareness of his debauchery coupled with a complete lack of remorse. Unlike the Cupboard Man, he uses a witty and complex diction. He describes, for example, the sexually suggestive bending and unbending of Raymond’s finger as a ‘bewildering digital allegory’ (28). Furthermore, McEwan blesses the narrator with a sense of irony that the Cupboard Man never possessed (27). In other words, McEwan does not play jokes behind the narrator’s back but appears to play the part of co-conspirator. With this in mind, “Homemade” does indeed begin to look like a case of lascivious indulgence on McEwan’s part.

Despite this, “Homemade” provides a vital critique of the ethics of reading. The narrator hardly constitutes a moral exemplar, but he does raise important ethical questions for the reader, the chief of which is: to what degree does his narrative style affect our contempt for him? McEwan uses this question to provoke his readers and force them to evaluate how they engage with the text as literature: a process which Attridge labels ‘performance’ (*Singularity* 95). In an interview, McEwan (the FBP), disclosed that, when writing “Homemade”, he emulated the narrative styles of Henry Miller and Norman Mailer (McEwan “Points of Departure” 14). Yet McEwan was no starstruck tributary; he ‘enjoyed’ Miller and Mailer but also regarded them as ‘totally bogus’ and ‘wanted to send them up’ (“Points of Departure” 14). We might therefore view “Homemade” as a parody of a certain literary discourse which seeks to employ language to obfuscate, or even celebrate, a first-person narrator’s depravity. Perhaps the archetypal example here would be Humbert Humbert, the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, who, though morally bankrupt, is ‘devastatingly eloquent’ (Choi). By incarnating his own version of this type of narrator, McEwan thematises this ethical dilemma, and asks readers how they will respond to it.

Objectively speaking, the narrator is a reprehensible character who shatters multiple taboos with unrepentant glee. Nevertheless, he writes with an almost irresistible wit and intelligence, which works to his advantage, for the story is ‘brought into being by [his] language’ (Attridge *Singularity* 96). The narrator’s sadism and dark humour often have a symbiotic effect. When he attends Raymond’s cross-country events, he enjoys the runners’ ‘racked, contorted faces’ (39), and nurses them to health at the finish line to indulge a ‘gay fascination’, calling himself ‘a real Florence Nightingale’ (40). Such humorous riffs pervade

the entire narrative. In one instance, he reminisces about his conversations with various workmen in his local café, unleashing a stream of lewd jokes:

we listened to who and how the dustmen fucked, how the Co-op milkmen fitted it in, what the coalmen could hump, what the carpet-fitter could lay, what the builders could erect, what the meter man could inspect, what the bread man could deliver, the gas man sniff out, the plumber plumb, the electrician connect, the doctor inject, the lawyer solicit, the furniture man install – and so on, in an unreal complex of timeworn puns and innuendo, formulas, slogans, folklore and bravado. I listened without understanding... (35)

The verbal gymnastics are entertaining, and the sheer number of one-liners indicates both the narrator's belief in their comic power and awareness of their absurdity. Yet the narrator understands nothing initially, apart from the fact that the workmen's bawdy humour constitutes a kind of language or mode of discourse. The conversations lead him to develop a kind of referential storehouse, taking the opportunity to 'file away anecdotes [to] use' in the future (35). It is only after his rape of Connie—his 'one fuck' (36)—that the language begins to acquire substantive meaning. Indeed, he informs the reader that, in retrospect, the conversations provided him with 'a complete education which... earned him the reputation of being the juvenile connoisseur of coitus to whom dozens of males—and fortunately females, too—came to seek advice' (35-36). He thus moves from student of the "unreal complex" to master of it, dispersing the coveted knowledge and strange shibboleths to others (36). Armed with his new vocabulary, he successfully hypnotises his sexually inexperienced peers through the art of storytelling and deploys a similar method of deceit when relating his story to the reader. His narrative becomes one of initiation and conquest, representing—to him at least—the moment when the workmen's language begins to acquire meaning. Indeed, when he rapes Connie, he views it as a moment of triumph, a *performance*:

I felt proud, proud to be fucking, even if it were only Connie, my ten-year-old sister, even if it had been a crippled mountain goat I would have been proud to be lying there in that manly position, proud in advance of being able to say 'I have fucked', of belonging intimately and irrevocably to that superior half of humanity who had known coitus, and fertilized the world with it. (51)

The narrator celebrates his transition from naïf to picaresque rogue, encouraging the reader to view him as a kind of depraved antihero. His linguistic style aims to efface the evil of the act through language, and therefore soften the reader's disgust. The irony, of course, springs

from the fact that he *himself* was dazzled by the language of the workmen; he merely recapitulates the process, continuing the cycle.

The extent to which the narrator's style works, however, will depend on the reader and whether they, in Wayne Booth's words, '[agree] to join the dance' (*The Company We Keep* 333). Indeed, the narrator's style may have the opposite effect; after enduring such a stark moral transgression, the reader might recoil from the idea that he has joined any such dance. Whatever the case may be, we need only consider our reaction to the story if it was narrated by Connie, or even Raymond, to realise the extent of the narrator's control. We read the story on the narrator's terms; as Adam Zachary Newton remarks, 'narrators dictate conditions and, in doing so, reify their authority' (58). The narrator's unreliability comes not from a lack of understanding but from an attempt to manipulate the reader. The ethical aspects of reading are at the forefront of McEwan's concerns here. The reader must decide how to relate to the narrator's vicious sense of humour and flagrant amorality, and reflect on whether he has fallen victim to the narrator's discourse in the same way he has fallen victim to the workmen's.

Furthering this point, the narrator's constant use of intertextual references critiques the supposed connection between reading and moral development. The narrator alludes to many texts we might characterise as "canonical" in order to substitute himself for some of literature's iconic figures. His relationship with Raymond is a particularly rich ground for such metaphors. He refers to Raymond as his 'Mephistopheles, a clumsy Virgil to [his] Dante, showing [him] the way to a Paradiso where [Raymond] himself could not tread' (32). This transgressive mix of the *Faustus* myth and *The Divine Comedy* shows that the narrator understands the depths of his own corruption but nonetheless regards his various initiations as steps on his path to a form of heavenly glory. Moreover, it depersonalises Raymond, transforming him into an archetype rather than an Other who deserves ethical consideration. The narrator's appropriation of these texts for his own narrative purpose casts doubt on any proposed link between "high art" and moral integrity. On the contrary, his reading habits seem only to provide him with a groundwork for his vices, such as when he supplements his lessons in the café with 'a quick reading of the more interesting parts of Havelock Ellis and Henry Miller' (35). The narrator does develop an ethic, but it is the ethic of the libertine, or even the sociopath. McEwan's rhetoric here seems to echo that of Harold Bloom, who concedes that it is 'probably true' that 'reading good books is bad for the character' (*The Western Canon* 16). Though we must take care with such broad generalisations, Bloom's statement is certainly true in the case of the narrator, who takes a solipsistic and utilitarian

approach to reading. He subjugates every canonical text for his own purpose, turning them into frivolous allegories. We might even read him as a parody of hermeneutic systems which, when employed to excess, can also appropriate texts in this way. “Homemade” argues that the act of reading does not consist solely of the transmission of information—moral or otherwise—from active writer to passive reader, but a process by which both writer and reader are vulnerable to manipulation by the other. McEwan calls us to notice the effects of reading, not so much to arm ourselves against influence but to convince us that reading is a dynamic, dialogic act.

### **Murder by Numbers: “Solid Geometry”**

“Solid Geometry” follows an unnamed narrator obsessed by his great-grandfather’s voluminous diaries, which appear detailed enough to compete with Samuel Pepys’ turgid musings. His obsession causes him to neglect his wife, Maisie, who has given up work and turned to New Age practices to assuage her psychological distress. The narrator discovers within the diaries some notes by his grandfather, an ‘amateur mathematician’ (20) who claims to have mastered geometric techniques which allow him to create ‘a plane without a surface’ (14). Meanwhile, Maisie grows so frustrated with the narrator’s curt manner and lack of compassion that she destroys his cherished heirloom: a penis kept in a jar of formaldehyde, which his great-grandfather won in an auction. In retaliation, the narrator masters the geometric techniques left behind by his great-grandfather to murder his wife by “folding” her into oblivion.

Though “Solid Geometry” functions best as a comic tale, the satire within still has something to say about ethics. Significantly, it is McEwan’s first attempt to thematise C.P. Snow’s theory of the ‘Two Cultures’, with

[l]iterary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes... hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. They have a curious distorted image of each other. Their attitudes are so different that, even on the level of emotion, they can't find much common ground.

(4)

It is fitting that the narrator of “Solid Geometry” favours a form of mathematical purity; Snow came of age during the birth of logical positivism, a philosophical approach best exemplified by a coterie of intellectuals known as the Vienna Circle. This group, which

included such pioneers as Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘found traditional logic an unsatisfactory tool for the rigorous construction of mathematics’ and developed systems that ‘[led] to a degree of clarity and rigor... unattainable within ordinary language’ (Kraft 13). “Solid Geometry” both honours and parodies this epistemic system, a pattern that lays the groundwork for more nuanced analyses in McEwan’s later fiction. The Two Cultures debate features prominently in McEwan’s novels, including *Saturday*, *Solar* and *Enduring Love*, each of which I will discuss during the next two chapters. McEwan often employs the debate to draw a connection between epistemology and ethics, highlighting how certain epistemic systems influence the way we “read” literary texts, the world and each other.<sup>4</sup>

Departing from the morbid realism that characterises the other stories in *First Love*, *Last Rites*, McEwan designs a world where recondite mathematical knowledge can achieve the impossible. In doing so, he both celebrates the elegance of advanced mathematics—geometry in particular—and condemns those who let such pursuits rule their lives. As in “Homemade”, we find that intellectual prowess, when detached from a moral compass, does not necessarily translate to ethical conduct. The narrator’s deep obsession with his great-grandfather’s diary leads him to forego interpersonal relationships. Maisie is the only other person he talks to, and he regards her as cloying and irritating. Though she frequently attempts to establish emotional and sexual intimacy with him, he brushes her off every time. At one point, he breaks off a conversation with her to contemplate his great-grandfather’s views on sex, telling the reader that ‘[his] great-grandfather produced mathematical evidence that the maximum number of [sexual] positions cannot exceed the prime number seventeen’ (5). His great-grandfather, however, had little sexual experience himself (5), and this once again demonstrates the narrator’s habit of privileging the abstract over the concrete. His impatience with Maisie’s interruptions is so severe that it manifests as domestic violence; after she assaults him with a shoe, he lies in wait outside the bedroom in order to retaliate, hitting her ‘neatly and squarely on the top of her head’ (6). In this case, the geometrical language with which he describes the blow shows that his worldview—as well as the language that accompanies it—is suffused with the principles of mathematics. Furthermore, the narrator shows little awareness of his own faults. Whereas the narrator of “Homemade” acknowledges—and celebrates—his own capacity for evil, the narrator of “Solid Geometry” has faith in the virtue of his obsession. He chooses to shift the blame to Maisie, telling the

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<sup>4</sup> This *modus operandi* develops organically from McEwan’s aforementioned critiques of literary hermeneutics, which, at base, aim to render any given text understandable.

reader ‘she [is] very jealous... of [his] great grandfather’s forty-five volume diary, and of [his] purpose and energy in editing it’ (4). The narrator’s view that Maisie cannot justify her jealousy shows the extent to which he has alienated himself from her. To use Riggan’s schema again, the narrator typifies the ‘madman’; his worldview ‘[reflects] his own twisted impressions... [and] neurotic obsessions’ (178), and this compromises his reliability. In light of this, McEwan presents the reader with the narrator’s idea that his dedication to his great-grandfather’s diary has some sort of noble purpose, prompting the reader to consider the consequences of the narrator’s fixation. McEwan once again interrogates the act of reading; the diaries influence the narrator to such a degree that he invests his own identity in that of his great-grandfather. Consequently, the narrator provides a mirror image of the narrator of “Homemade”. Each narrator operates within a popular mode of discourse—one literary, one mathematical—that McEwan satirises in order to expose their ethical shortcomings. Significantly, McEwan does not reject these modes of discourse outright, but merely exposes the dangers of extreme devotion to them.

The friction in the story comes not only from the narrator’s strange attachment to the diaries, but also from his constant derision of Maisie’s epistemological systems, which he views with naked contempt. We learn through the narrator’s dialogue with Maisie that she has given up work in order to indulge her interest in New Age philosophies (10). The narrator delivers his unvarnished opinion on her pursuits, dismissing them as ‘sentimental Buddhism... junk shop mysticism, hoss-stick therapy, [and] magazine astrology’ (10). Maisie, on the other hand, regards the narrator as ‘narrow [and] predictable’ (7). Using these exchanges, McEwan builds tension between the narrator and Maisie, as they ground themselves in two opposing epistemic systems: the elegant, detached world of theoretical mathematics and the muddy waters of esoteric philosophy. On the surface, McEwan seems to endorse the narrator’s views; some of the most humorous lines arise when the narrator needles Maisie about her beliefs. When she makes the astonishing claim that ‘a man locked in a cell with only Tarot cards would have access to all knowledge’, the narrator asks sardonically whether that same man could ‘work out the street plan of Valparaiso’ (6). Yet the eventual murder / disappearing act seems to vindicate Maisie’s views. In a way, she does her own “reading”, not just of tarot cards but also psychic phenomena. She recalls, for example, a nightmare in which she is ‘in a *plane* flying over a desert’ and cannot ‘find a *space*’ to land (4, my italics). The geometric vocabulary here is not accidental: the nightmare turns out to be prescient. Furthermore, during one of their arguments, she tells the narrator she can ‘feel [herself] being screwed up like a piece of paper’ (10). By the end of the story,

Maisie's studies in 'the occult' (4)—literally “hidden knowledge”—appear to have serviced her with premonitions, but the narrator remains oblivious to this (or does not wish to acknowledge it). These not-so-subtle hints indicate McEwan's desire to generate sympathy for Maisie, who, despite what the narrator may think, has her own access to privileged information.

McEwan also uses the narrator's hatred of Maisie's epistemological stance to ironic effect. The mathematical principles that the narrator discovers in his grandfather's diaries are just as murky and obscure as any of Maisie's interests. When reading the diaries, the narrator comes across a transcription of the words of “M”, one of his great-grandfather's close companions. M informs the narrator's great-grandfather that he has ‘[come] into the possession of certain documents which... undermine the whole canon of our physical laws’ (12). M also relates the story—supposedly apocryphal—of when the geometric principles contained in the documents were first proved. The story concerns a mathematician named David Hunter, who, at an academic conference, uses special folding techniques to make a piece of paper disappear from sight, thereby creating a ‘plane without a surface’ (14). Hunter's fellow academics regard it as a ‘worthless conjuror's trick’ (17), but Hunter goes on to repeat the process using a human person, with whom he achieves the same result (19). Though M writes off the story as a ‘fantastic [tale]’ (19), the narrator's great-grandfather demands the documents from M. This “fantastic tale” excites the narrator, a supposed rationalist, so much that he spends all day and night studying his great-grandfather's notebooks and annotations in order to master the process itself. One would think that, if the narrator were as rational as he thought he was, he too would have dismissed the notes as pseudoscience. Indeed, the language his great-grandfather uses throughout the notebooks has a distinctive New-Age edge to it; his first breakthrough comes when he discovers—or perhaps realises—that ‘[d]imensionality is a function of consciousness’ (20). Such imprecise musings would seem better suited to Maisie than the narrator, but within this particular context the narrator finds them profound. Indeed, his great-grandfather's notes on geometry form an apt analogue of Maisie's tarot cards: each of them function as “texts” which provide a source of coveted knowledge unattainable in empirical realm and, in doing so, obsess their reader. McEwan's careful parallel structure shows that both characters are guilty of indulging their own private fantasies, fleeing the harsh limitations of the observable world in search of an answer to their problems. McEwan privileges the narrator's point of view, and, in doing so, exposes his [i.e. the narrator's] hypocrisy.

The narrator's decision to murder Maisie highlights the extent to which his devotion to his great-grandfather has eroded his ethical awareness. Frustrated with the narrator's continual lack of affection, Maisie shatters the jar that contains an unusual relic once belonging to his great-grandfather: 'the penis of Captain Nicholls who died in Horsemonger jail in 1873' (1). After Maisie exits the room, the narrator mourns the penis with a bizarre mental eulogy, reflecting on 'all the places it had been' (16). This elegiac process continues when he provides the penis—which he now refers to as 'him'—with a ritual burial 'under the geraniums' (17). The episode has a humorous tone, but also signals explicitly the point at which the narrator's obsession becomes pathological; he forms a 'sudden resolution' (23) to kill Maisie using geometric techniques obtained from his great-grandfather's diaries. He exploits Maisie's residual affection for him by giving her the impression he wants to re-establish sexual intimacy (23-24) and goes on to provide a dispassionate account of the murder (25-26). Immersed fully in the language of geometry, he loses the ability to relate ethically to Maisie as an Other; instead, she becomes an object: an aggregate of angles, vectors, and surfaces. As he folds Maisie in on herself, he admires 'the positioning of her limbs' which to him express 'the nobility of the human form' (26). The narrator's flat affect shows that he has lost his ability to relate to the world in any language other than that of geometry. McEwan invites his readers to wonder what will come of the narrator after Maisie's disappearance. Trapped within the suffocating world of his great-grandfather's diaries, he may in fact "disappear" himself, fully assimilated within the image of his great-grandfather. The narrator may be a superb logician, but the rules of geometry—and an equally rigid sense of patrilineal destiny—render him ethically bankrupt. His approach to reading demonstrates Wayne Booth's point that '[e]very act of the imagination... can colonize the mind' (*The Company We Keep* 298). "Solid Geometry" warns us that, if we surrender our critical faculties when reading, our minds too are open to such "colonisation". This, in turn, has the potential to poison our capacity for ethical discernment.

### **Innocence and Experience: *The Cement Garden***

*The Cement Garden*, McEwan's first novel, tells the story of four children: Julie (aged seventeen); Jack (aged fourteen, then fifteen), who narrates the story; Sue (aged thirteen) and Tom (aged six) who are left to fend for themselves after the death of their parents. Their father dies in the first chapter during the process of covering the family garden with cement. Later, their mother dies of an unnamed illness. The children, afraid that social services will

separate them, use the remainder of the cement to bury her in a trunk, which they keep in the house's cellar. Each of the children react to the deaths in different ways: Jack becomes idle, moody, and obsessed with masturbation; Sue spends most of her time reading; Tom regresses into an infantile state; and Julie starts dating Derek, a snooker player a few years older than her. As the cement in the children's makeshift tomb starts to crack, Derek becomes increasingly suspicious. After catching Julie and Jack in an act of incest, Derek smashes their mother's makeshift tomb and calls the police, whose arrival McEwan suggests implicitly on the novel's final page.

In similar fashion to "Conversation With a Cupboard Man", McEwan imbues *The Cement Garden* with Freudian dynamics without necessarily endorsing Freud's theoretical vision. The text dramatises psychic conflicts, secrets, and dreams, and seems to invite a Freudian hermeneutic approach. The first chapter of *The Cement Garden*, for example, introduces us to the stern patriarch of the family—simply called 'Father'—and provides an account of his death. Jack confesses in the first line his sense that he contributed in some way to Father's heart attack (3). As in "Conversation with a Cupboard" man, McEwan evokes Oedipal dynamics, with the unnamed Father constituting a paternal archetype. Such Freudian elements resonate throughout the chapter—and the rest of the novel—and it is worth pausing briefly here to consider the significance of this theoretical framework. Once again McEwan employs aforementioned Oedipal dynamics in an overwrought—or, as David Malcolm would have it, 'parodic' (60)—fashion, but, in this instance, McEwan's point runs deeper. As Philip Armstrong notes, the Oedipal complex itself is 'a hypothesis requiring verification by art' (21); Freud turned to myth—not empiricism—to explain the phenomena he observed in his clinic. Arguably, this cross-pollination of art and medicine demonstrates a form of responsible reading: one which 'strives to convert the other into the same, [and] strives also to allow the same to be modified by the other' (Attridge *Singularity* 124). In this sense, it makes little sense to view Freud as 'a system-maker whose theories can be useful to an applied literary criticism' (Meisel 1). Instead, he is best understood as 'a theoretician and... practitioner of [literature] in exact and specific ways (Meisel 1). For example, Freud's reading of Hamlet, now so familiar to us, challenged the 'prevailing' critical orthodoxy among his literary contemporaries (Freud 265). Harold Bloom goes as far as to say '[t]here is no "true" or "correct" reading of Freud because Freud is so strong a writer that he *contains* every available mode of interpretation' ("Poetic Sublime" 212, italics in original). Thus, to read *The Cement Garden* with a Freudian "system" in mind is not only reductive but runs contrary to the spirit of Freud's theoretical approach, and may even suggest a shallow,

extractive reading of Freud's thinking itself. An ethical reading, while acknowledging the Freudian elements of the text, will not reduce it to an Oedipal drama.

With this in mind, let us turn to the first chapter of *The Cement Garden*, which focuses largely on the relationship between Father and the rest of the family, particularly Jack, and uses the titular image as a thematic lynch pin. The finer details of Jack's relationship with Father call for close examination. Jack resents Father, who he deems 'a frail, irascible, obsessive man' (3), though he also possesses a latent desire to emulate him; he delights in his Father's laconic interactions with the cement delivery men, for example (3-4). McEwan thus establishes Jack's point-of-view throughout the narrative: subversive and detached, but self-conscious and burdened by the fact he has not achieved full adulthood. The subversive element of Jack's point of view emerges once again when he exposes Father's obsession with the family garden. 'Constructed rather than cultivated' (9), the garden is an anti-Eden: a manmade attempt to create a 'special world' (10) complete with a 'dancing Pan' (9) as its central idol. Father thus becomes an artist-figure whose obsession with form warps his sense of ethics. Indeed, Father's admiration for his garden borders on deranged: he erects 'a lawn the size a of a card table... on a pile of rocks' and calls it 'the hanging garden' (9). The garden also seems more important to him than his family, whom he humiliates routinely with 'stage-managed' jokes (10). When Jack and Julie make their own joke about the garden at the dinner table, it stings Father so much that he stops working on it (11-12). Subsequently, Father decides to cover the garden with cement, laying the groundwork for the events that follow.

Though Attridge warns us not to lean too heavily on allegorical approaches to texts (*Ethics of Reading* 39), it is hard to disagree with Christina Byrnes' argument<sup>5</sup> that the cement 'is the ruling symbol of the father's stifling rigidity' (128) which hampers his children's growth. Yet the titular garden carries more than symbolic value; its paradoxical nature initiates the reader into the strange world of the story, which is simultaneously realistic and bizarre. A similar tension exists in the relationship between Jack and Father. Oedipal elements come to the fore, but McEwan does not present them in a straightforward manner. Jack torments Father, who he knows has a heart condition, by refusing to 'take the strain' while they lift the cement bags. While laying the cement, however, Jack feels that they have achieved a private father-and-son understanding: '[f]or once I felt at ease with him' (13). This

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<sup>5</sup> The view that the cement functions as symbol here is commonplace amongst critics, but Byrnes' articulation here is particularly elegant.

inconsistency becomes typical of Jack, and he soon changes course once again, abandoning his task in order to masturbate in the upstairs bathroom (13-14). When Father falls head first in the cement and dies, Jack does not grieve with his siblings but ‘[smoothes] away [Father’s] impression in the soft, fresh concrete’ (15). McEwan hardly references the garden—or, for that matter, Father—beyond the first chapter. Instead, Father haunts the narrative by his absence, lending credence to the argument that narrative is ‘most importantly about “expectation” and “memory”’: reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end’ (Cobley 19). These factors are particularly important for an ethical reading of *The Cement Garden*, whose main characters also grapple with expectation and memory as they adjust to their new circumstances.

After Father’s death, the family unit begins to splinter, and Jack becomes frustrated when the secret knowledge and intimacy he once shared with his sisters, particularly Julie, begins to evaporate. McEwan does not attribute this explicitly to Father’s death but, through Jack’s eyes, illustrates a subliminal grief process and a loss of innocence. In the first chapter, before Father’s death, Jack, Julie and Sue play a game in which Jack and Julie examine Sue’s naked body ‘like a specimen from outer space’ (6). As they do so, Jack and Julie ‘[look] at each other knowingly, knowing nothing’ (6). Again, McEwan formulates a paradox—this time explicit—to portray an uneasy mingling of intense intimacy and fundamental innocence, or at least naïveté. A few chapters later, however, the games have come to an end:

[they] ceased not long after Father died. Sue became reluctant. Perhaps she had learned something at school and was ashamed of herself for letting us do things to her. I was never certain because it was not something we could talk about. And Julie was more remote now. She... had all kinds of secrets. (27)

This passage reveals that the children have attained a new sense of self-consciousness. The incest taboo has been re-established and, much like Father’s death, becomes a narrative undercurrent which exists as ‘expectation’ and ‘memory’ (Cobley 19). Jack also experiences heightened self-consciousness on a more personal level. He spends a lot of his time looking at himself in the mirror, ‘[staring] at his own image till it [begins] to dissociate itself and paralyse [him] with its look (18). This individuation process ripples through the family, and as the children enter their own private worlds, McEwan exposes Jack’s limits as first-person narrator. The conspicuous silence referred to in the quote above forces him to speculate about Julie’s inner life. Julie chooses to distance herself from Jack and the other siblings. She refuses to walk with him to school and ‘[prefers] not be seen with him’ (18). Moreover, Julie tells her siblings that ‘her mind [is] empty’ even though she ‘often [appears] deep in thought’

(20). McEwan invites the reader to discern Julie's possible thoughts: they cannot know for sure whether she is experiencing hidden grief, the standard adolescent desire to set herself apart from the family, or a tangled combination of these two emotions. Once again, the reader must grapple with doubt, with uncertainty, even though they might believe the conclusion is obvious. Jack's narrative point of view limits our access to the rest of his family, complicating the reader's ethical stance towards these characters.

This leads to further questions about Jack as a narrator: how much does the reader know about *him*? Though McEwan conveys the whole novel through Jack's eyes, he allows little room for introspection. Whether we can conceive of him as a "real person" is debatable. David Malcolm argues—quite convincingly in my view—that Jack's reliability and mimetic integrity are questionable (46-51). Malcolm points to Jack's inconsistent style, with its unusual stylistic blend of simple and complex vocabulary (49), as well as his preference for the 'abstract and impersonal' (47) at the expense of 'revealed emotion' (48). These factors set him apart from the archetypal naïf as described by Riggan, whose account tends to be 'direct and simple in style', and 'ingenuous in language and phrasing' (179). Complicating matters further is the extent to which Jack involves himself in the narrative action. He often plays the role of the observer, and some scenes depict him doing nothing but watching. For example, instead of joining his family at the breakfast table he watches them eat while '[tossing] an apple in his hand' (18). Similarly, when his sisters cry following their mother's death, Jack watches, unable to 'abandon himself' (55). In other situations, however, he seems to abandon himself entirely, such as when he '[drifts] through the house, from one room to another' (77), losing all sense of spatial awareness. McEwan thus denies the reader 'the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views' (Booth *Rhetoric*, 378), instead opting for an impressionistic style that makes it difficult to find an anchor in Jack's consciousness.

Some aspects of Jack's character, however, do have a mimetic—and naïve—quality. Almost all of these aspects relate to his status as an adolescent male. As evidenced by his challenges to his father, the fact that Jack is on the cusp of adulthood—or, more accurately, manhood—informs his point of view when narrating. Most of the moments where Jack immerses himself fully in the narrative action involve a threat to, or assertion of, his masculinity. When Tom informs Jack that he has an 'enemy' at school' (44) Jack seizes on the opportunity to play the role of protector, physically assaulting the bully and threatening to 'rip his legs off' (45). In yet another ironic reversal, a friend of Tom's 'enemy' thrashes Tom at school the next day, nullifying Jack's actions (45). Furthermore, the assault leaves Tom curious about girlhood; he tells Sue 'you don't get hit when you're a girl' (47). Jack, who

often appears invested in Tom's masculine identity, becomes angry when Sue and Julie discuss the possibility of dressing Tom as a girl, and Julie presses him on the issue:

Julie spoke quietly. 'You think girls look, idiotic, daft, stupid...'

'No,' [Jack] said indignantly.

'You think it's humiliating to look like a girl, because you think it's humiliating to *be* a girl.' (48, italics in original)

Julie's diagnosis proves accurate late in the novel when Jack is bullied by Derek and his friends at the snooker hall. After Derek upstages him with taunts, Jack attempts to hold in his tears in order to 'show [Derek and his friends] that [crying] was the last thing [he is] going to do' (114). When he tries to stare Derek down, however, he finds himself emasculated as a single tear '[rolls] out' (114). Jack possesses a typically adolescent masculine identity: a brittle bravado masks an essential vulnerability. It is in this sense that Jack is naïve; he has not been initiated into the adult world. Whether these traits humanise him enough to generate 'sentimental empathy' (Malcolm 51) will depend largely on the reader, but the awkward friction between his detached, phantasmic, intermittently articulate narration and his acute adolescent insecurity complicates this judgement.<sup>6</sup>

By rendering Julie inscrutable to Jack, and Jack (mostly) inscrutable to the reader, McEwan underscores a broader point: the family is unknown by—and, accordingly, unknowable to—the outside world. McEwan structures the narrative in such a way that the family's physical and psychological worlds seem to shrink in on themselves: a process that culminates in the act of incest between Jack and Julie. As Dominic Head notes, the 'dysfunctional elements of the family are carefully traced' (47); McEwan weaves the children's isolation into their very genetics. Jack discloses that his father and mother had no siblings, nor 'any real friends outside the family' (19). The house itself forms something of a fortress; even Tom's friends, who play with him outside, cannot enter (19). Furthermore, the family are isolated geographically; the house '[stands] on empty land where stinging nettles [are] growing round torn corrugated tin' (19). The children's primary contact with the outside world comes through school, and it is significant that the 'the last day of summer term' coincides with their mother's death (52). The death, along with her burial (64-67), marks a new stage in the family's physical and social exile; the tomb becomes 'everyone's secret' (94). Yet when a 'hairline crack' appears in the tomb (93), the relationship between the

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<sup>6</sup> Compare, for example, Malcolm's reading in which *all* characters in *The Cement Garden* are 'not people but only simulacra' (51) with Jack Slay Jr's more straightforward psycho-social interpretation (35-50).

children starts to fracture too. When Julie starts to spend nights out with Derek, she only tells Sue—not Jack—about what happens, leading Jack to speculate—perhaps wishfully—that Sue might be diarising the conversations ‘without Julie knowing’ (107). Similarly, after Jack argues with Julie and Sue, they start to ‘[begin] a conversation... designed to exclude him’ (120). McEwan’s constant shifts between moods of unity and division create a narrative tension—a sense of expectation—which resolves itself only during the last two chapters, when Derek grows suspicious of the tomb. Bound by the secret of their mother’s death, the family refuses Derek entry to their community, telling half-baked, transparent lies about the tomb’s purpose (131). This fine balance between inclusion and exclusion also reflects the reading experience. Unlike Derek, we have privileged knowledge of the tomb, yet we still feel the constraints imposed by Jack’s narration—a deliberate aesthetic choice by McEwan—leaving us without ethical guidance, but instead inviting us to speculate about the other characters, drawing us towards the novel’s narrative terminus.

The children’s deception—and the novel itself—ends with an erotic episode fraught with Freudian overtones. Jack awakes from a recursive dream to the crying of Tom, who, having regressed to infancy, lies in a cot in Julie’s bedroom (140-142). Julie spots the naked Jack leaning over the cot and speaks to him in a mock-maternal parlance, calling him a ‘sweet little thing’ (145). Uninhibited, they engage in foreplay, and Julie ‘[pushes her breast] towards [Jack’s] lips’ (148); Derek bursts in on this scene and calls their behaviour ‘sick’ before leaving to call the police (149). The incest taboo erected by the children’s self-consciousness dissolves again, and the family unit turns inwards, now confined to the claustrophobic prism of Julie’s bedroom. Though the episode may seem like a straightforward recapitulation of the Oedipal drama, McEwan injects many ambiguities. Despite the play acting, Jack and Julie *are* brother and sister, and an alternate reading might see both Julie *and* Jack as parental surrogates, with the nuclear family structure not violated but re-established. Jack even complicates Tom’s return to infancy when he perceives Tom as ‘a tiny, wise old man’ who possesses secret knowledge of Julie (144). Furthermore, it is only after the Oedipal tensions dissolve that the children grieve their mother in earnest, sharing their memories (151-152). McEwan leaves the reader with the provocative suggestion that the restaging of the Oedipal drama was a necessary part of the grieving process. In a sense, the children stand redeemed, restored to a prelapsarian state of intimacy and understanding. If nothing else, this represents a singular response to Freudian discourse on McEwan’s part. Yet, almost as if he is acknowledging the transgressive nature of his response, McEwan

infringes on the children's newfound bliss with the 'revolving blue light' (152) of the police, who have come to restore another kind of order.

The abrupt arrival of the police, coupled with the novel's final words—'wasn't that a lovely sleep?' (152)—suggests the children have exited a dream state, and one of the most striking aspects of *The Cement Garden* is the way McEwan crafts an apparently fantastical world through the raw material of the ordinary. As David James, commenting on another McEwan novel, *The Child in Time*, notes, 'realism's sudden swerves into phantasmagoria' constitute a compelling narrative 'artifice' (194). In *The Cement Garden*, realist elements do not so much "swerve" into phantasmagoria as co-exist with it. Part of this synergy rests on McEwan's use of temporal ambiguity. David Malcolm observes the novel's relative lack of specific temporal markers (54-55) and Eluned Summers-Bremner argues that the presence or absence of certain cultural artefacts—the family's lack of a television, for example—makes it difficult to discern the decade in which the story takes place (23). The characters themselves acknowledge this sense of timelessness in the novel's climactic scene: Julie tells Jack that '[e]verything seems still and fixed' and Jack replies that '[w]hole weeks go by without [him] noticing' (148). Closely related to this motif of timelessness is that of sleep and dreams.<sup>7</sup> The word "sleep" and its derivatives appear thirty-nine times in *The Cement Garden*<sup>8</sup> and Jack in particular spends a lot of time sleeping. In one notable instance, Jack feels he has lost control of his centre of consciousness entirely: '[i]t was dark and cold when I woke up... I had a confused memory of lying in the prefab. Was I still there? I had no idea how I came to be lying naked on a bare mattress. Someone was crying. Was it me?' (140). Eventually, he comes to realise he had not in fact woken up but was in an intermediate dream state (141). By deploying the concept of recursive dreaming, McEwan casts a layer of doubt over the "real" events of the novel—or at least the way in which Jack perceives them—without abandoning completely the realist framework of the narrative. At other times, McEwan takes concrete objects and filters them through Jack's eyes in order to give them a supernatural or uncanny element. When he looks at his house from 'across the road', for example, he perceives it as the 'face of someone concentrating, trying to remember' (19). This pareidolic moment not only blends the realms of reality and fantasy but allows McEwan to generate imagery through the eyes of the narrator, whose child-like (mis)perception has both mimetic and thematic

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<sup>7</sup> So much so that the back cover Vintage Edition of *The Cement Garden* quotes only one word from John Updike's review in the *New Yorker*: 'Hypnotic'.

<sup>8</sup> By way of comparison, *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *The Comfort of Strangers*, each of which are of similar length to *The Cement Garden*, each contain only twenty-five uses of such words.

qualities. References to Jack's frequent masturbation (77) achieve a similar effect: it is a common, even banal, adolescent routine which involves an escape into fantasy. Ultimately, *The Cement Garden* straddles the border between the real and unreal, exploiting Jack's phenomenological dispositions to complicate the reader's interpretation of the novel's events.

Ambiguity such as this lies at the heart of *The Cement Garden*, reflecting McEwan's aim to generate a singular response from the reader. It is difficult to pin down what the novel is *about*: grief, adolescence, sexuality, masculinity, the nuclear family, urban decay, and self-perception all present themselves as possible answers. Yet the novel's strength lies in the fact that it is not *about* any of these themes but instead asks us to consider them when making an ethical response. Our task as ethical readers, Derek Attridge argues, is 'to respond to [the text's] singularity, to avoid reducing it to the familiar and the utilitarian even while attempting to comprehend it by relating it to these' (*Singularity* 130). Attridge's quote seems particularly applicable to the way McEwan parodies, subverts and re-imagines Freud's vision of the nuclear family. McEwan invokes no moral judgement or interpretive creed but instead draws our attention to the novel's aesthetics, the way they *work* on us and challenge our approach to the themes that he engages. Even the most fundamental aspects of the text, such as character and plot, remain shrouded in ambiguity. Consequently, McEwan discourages a systematic or allegorical reading of *The Cement Garden*: the text, in its singularity, calls for a singular response.

### **Voices on Loan: McEwan Behind the Text**

Having spent the majority of this chapter discussing McEwan's role as implied author, I wish to digress briefly to discuss McEwan-the-FBP (flesh-and-blood person) as he was at the time of writing the stories. As discussed above, the FBP is Booth's label for the author as they exist outside the text (as opposed to the implied author, who manifests within the text itself). In his early interviews, McEwan freely confesses to borrowing certain voices and narrative styles from other authors; he understood implicitly that it is important for writers to read widely and ethically. Both "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" and "Homemade" were attempts at 'pastiche' ("Points of Departure" 14). For "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" McEwan drew on the voice of Frederick Clegg, the narrator of John Fowles' *The Collector*, characterised by McEwan as a 'wheedling, self-pitying lower middle-class voice' ("Points of Departure" 15). Furthermore, as noted above, "Homemade" drew direct inspiration from the narrative styles of Henry Miller and Norman Mailer while also subverting them ("Points of

Departure” 14). McEwan’s early work, then, both acknowledges and subverts his literary forebears. Furthermore, McEwan draws on thematic elements of previous texts. He acknowledged that William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* was a thematic precursor to *The Cement Garden*, for example (Slay 37). McEwan fits Attridge’s model of an ethical reader: one who ‘[does] justice to [the previous texts]’ singularity and inventiveness by the creation of a text of equal singularity and inventiveness’ (*Ethics of Reading* 36). As a reader, McEwan holds himself to a high ethical standard, and expects his own readers to do the same. Consequently, he denies the reader any interpretive guidance, especially in the moral sphere. He confirms this in a 1979 interview with Christopher Ricks, where he says that ‘[he hopes] to avoid any programmatic moral manipulation’ (“Adolescence” 25). He uses the final scene of *The Cement Garden* as an example, pointing out that ‘there is no authorial voice that will tell you that incest is a bad show, don’t do it, but... neither does it recommend that everyone should try, and therefore liberate themselves (“Adolescence” 25). This is not to say that McEwan’s entire attitude is amoral; indeed, as we shall see, his later texts have a greater sense of moral urgency. Rather, his early texts place the moral burden squarely on the reader, who must decode the text to come to their own conclusions. The reader may well decide that the text has no moral value,<sup>9</sup> but McEwan the Flesh-and-Blood person takes the gamble regardless.

### Conclusion

McEwan’s early fiction calls for the reader to respond responsibly. Instead of providing us with didactic screeds or moral fables, McEwan instead invites a close reading of his work: one that focuses on its structural and aesthetic effects. By employing the convention of unreliable narration, McEwan complicates—and sometimes undercuts—the dominant “voice” of the text. In doing so, he gives some sense of the texts’ ‘total form’ (Booth *Rhetoric* 76). We can, however, only press toward this total form—which is never fully discoverable—if we read ethically, suspending any pre-conceived interpretive framework to allow the text to work on us: or, in Attridge’s terms, to focus not on what the texts ‘*mean* but what they *do*’ (*Ethics of Reading* 37, italics in original).<sup>10</sup> McEwan’s own history of ethical

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<sup>9</sup> This is not necessarily an unethical response, even according to Attridge’s model: it only becomes so when it is part of a kneejerk reaction to the lack of moral guidance in the text.

<sup>10</sup> In this passage Attridge is referencing metaphors rather than whole texts, but I think the point applies all the same.

reading provides us with an excellent example to follow. We cannot all respond by writing creative texts like McEwan; indeed, this may be far beyond our capability. Yet we can acknowledge the fluidity of the literature we read, and treat the texts as inexhaustible, always in motion, always reconfigured by cultural context. If McEwan's early work does contain some sort of moral warning, it is a caution against under- or over-reading, of careless or overzealous responses, neither of which does justice to the text—or, indeed, the person—before us. McEwan's narrators all “read” in some way, but their reading habits reveal flaws: the Cupboard Man, hampered by his traumatic upbringing, cannot comprehend the adult world; the narrator of “Homemade” reads in service of his debauchery; the narrator of “Solid Geometry” traps himself in the language of pure mathematics; Jack, trapped in a dreamlike haze, struggles to comprehend the changes taking place around him. We may not place ourselves on par with McEwan's narrators, but we too face our own limitations as readers, springing from interpretive biases, aesthetic tastes, political leanings, and so on. To read ethically is to acknowledge this, and respond to the ‘[the] call, the [challenge], the [obligation]’ (Attridge *Singularity* 131) presented by the literary work itself. The “call” of McEwan's early texts may be very challenging; nevertheless, they lie in wait, ready to reward those who delve beneath their shocking veneer in search of a strange encounter.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE LIMITS OF GENIUS

### Introduction

Speaking in general terms, we might call McEwan's *Saturday* and *Solar* "issue novels": novels which address contemporary socio-political concerns. Though McEwan's earlier writing engages with the political—*The Child in Time* (1987) took place in a Thatcherite dystopia, for example—*Saturday* and *Solar* evidence a new kind of political ambition in McEwan's writing, insofar as they deal with issues of global significance. Human frailty and fallibility remain McEwan's primary foci, but post-9/11 anxiety (*Saturday*) and climate change (*Solar*) linger, spectre-like, in the background. The claustrophobic settings of his early fiction give way to an equally threatening sense of late-capitalist disorientation; the 'art of unease' (K. Ryan 5) endures. He channels his narrative through the minds of two main characters who, unlike the outcasts of *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *The Cement Garden*, reside in the upper echelons of society. Both are successful—almost absurdly so—in their chosen careers: Henry Perowne (*Saturday*) is an experienced, highly-skilled consultant neurosurgeon; Michael Beard (*Solar*) is a Nobel-Prize winning physicist. Yet, like the characters in McEwan's early work, they remain prone to errors of perception and judgement. McEwan chooses to emphasise this with a different narrative approach. Rather than withholding authorial judgement, McEwan uses a fluid, free-indirect style in which the narrator's voice remains close to the main characters' minds but maintains enough distance to highlight their shortcomings to ironic effect. This style also allows McEwan to explore, through the eyes of the main characters, the topics at hand. McEwan devotes substantial portions of *Saturday* and *Solar* to social and political commentary. This should hardly surprise us; as Anne Rowe and Sara Upstone argue, McEwan, particularly since the turn of the millennium, has 'support[ed] the re-emergence of the author as public intellectual' (59). The extent to which his own views leak into those of his main characters, particularly in *Saturday*, is subject to much critical analysis, as are the ideological implications of these views. I hope to show that neither text fully endorses the views of either of their main characters, even though those characters express themselves in strident and (at times) convincing ways.

This move toward a quasi-didactic style generates difficult questions when in light of Attridge's model of ethical reading. Specifically, the idea of fiction as instructive seems to work against the grain of Attridge's model, by which to read responsibly 'is to read...

without placing over it a grid of possible uses, as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth, political inspiration, or personal encouragement' (*Singularity* 129). In a similar vein, Adam Zachary Newton, observes that '[traditional] [e]thical criticism... unproblematically translates literary discourse into moral recourse' (9). *Saturday* and *Solar* do concern themselves with applied ethics, i.e. the ethical sense that drives moral (or immoral) conduct. They also dive headlong into socio-political discourse. This need not, however, foreclose the type of ethical reading for which Attridge advocates. For one, the reader bears responsibility for '[bringing] the work into being... in a singular performance' (Attridge *Ethics of Reading* 9). More importantly, though—and this is the point I maintain throughout this thesis—McEwan's work provides a particularly fertile ground for ethical reading, and this is *especially* true of the texts which possess didactic characteristics. Underneath the didactic passages of *Saturday* and *Solar* runs a current of uncertainty: a dual sense that "solutions" to social, political, and environmental ills are at once possible and impossible. For, much like works of literature, the socio-political narratives that swirl around post-9/11 anxiety and climate change are ethically complex. They call for a response; they '[make] demands' (Attridge *Singularity* 123). And, as Perowne and Beard discover, neither can be understood through a single epistemological lens. Though *Saturday* and *Solar* contain didactic elements, to read them as political screeds would be to engage in the same kind of reductionism that both novels call into question.

This "questioning" differs from the type used in the texts discussed in Chapter One. McEwan employs a third-person narrative style in both *Saturday* and *Solar*. Consequently, the ironic gap between the implied author and the first-person narrator shrinks, though it is unwise to conflate entirely the implied author and the third-person narrators in these texts. Though they often overlap, the following discussion still holds to a difference between the implied author and the third-person narrator, even though such distinctions remain controversial even among experienced narrative theorists (Palmer 17). McEwan's narrative approach in *Saturday* and *Solar* consists, in large part, of tracking his main characters' thought processes, especially the way in which they respond to the various situations they encounter. This results in a synthesis of the cognitive and rhetorical approaches to narrative, which, as James Phelan remarks, 'are ultimately compatible because they share an interest in how authors use the tools of narrative representation *and* communication to provide audiences with rewarding reading experiences' ("Interpretive Disagreement" 320, my italics). The implied author, whom I will again refer to as 'McEwan' for the sake of simplicity, leaves it to the reader to decide where his sympathies lie. This provides a rich ground for ethical

reading as the reader, influenced by her own cultural ‘materials’ (Attridge *Singularity* 124), grapples with what the text, as Attridge would have it, ‘do[es]’ (*Ethics of Reading* 37, italics in original). Again, this chapter will consist of my attempt to read responsibly and do justice to the novels.

Finally, exploring the intricacies of his characters’ mental processes assists McEwan to achieve his rhetorical purposes which he links, once again, to questions of ethics. Perowne, overwhelmed by the chaos of cosmopolitan London, experiences a kind of ethical paralysis. He deliberates over ethical questions throughout *Saturday*—this, in large part, lends the novel its narrative momentum—but their complexity frustrates his attempts to resolve them. Beard, on the other hand, makes little attempt to relate ethically to the Other, instead leveraging circumstances to his advantage in any way possible. Furthermore, Beard’s moral bankruptcy runs parallel to his professional decline, as he lives off the largesse of government grants and lecture invitations rather than producing new work. Though Perowne and Beard subscribe to materialism,<sup>11</sup> McEwan shows, through a series of crucial interpersonal encounters, that while materialism can co-exist with, or even inform, ethical conduct, it does not provide sufficient ground for a complete interpersonal ethics. Additionally, McEwan once again thematises the process of reading—specifically, reading literature—to show that neither Beard nor Perowne are ethical readers under Attridge’s model. Both texts possess intertextual elements that subvert or reinforce their main characters’ attitudes. In Perowne’s case, he witnesses first hand literature’s singular power. Beard, on the other hand, rejects literary art entirely, and, in the end, stands condemned by this ignorance. McEwan, then, brings both interpersonal ethics and the ethics of reading into focus, and makes some tentative links between the two.

### Degrees of Separation

In the opening scene of *Saturday*, McEwan investigates the way in which Henry Perowne experiences consciousness. This, in turn, allows McEwan to establish the novel’s primary point of focalisation: Perowne’s mind. McEwan unwraps this focal point with meta-fictional phrasing: ‘standing there in the darkness, [it is as if Perowne] has materialised out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered’ (3). Perowne has “come into being” as McEwan’s narrative vehicle, and, almost as if aware of his own fictitiousness, ‘suspects at once he’s dreaming or

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<sup>11</sup> I use the word “materialism” here in the metaphysical, not economic, sense.

sleepwalking' (3). McEwan further emphasises the precarious, contingent nature of conscious experience when Henry looks out his bedroom window and witnesses a bright, flaming object floating through the London night sky (13). Placing some distance between himself and Perowne, McEwan tells the reader that '[Perowne] doesn't immediately understand what he sees, though he thinks he does' (13). First perceiving the object as a meteor, then, after reassessing its distance, a comet, Perowne remembers '[watching] Hale-Bopp with [his wife] Rosalind and [his] children from a grassy hillock in the Lake District' and considers waking the still-sleeping Rosalind so she may witness the momentous event (14). This rich conscious experience, however, takes place within 'three or four seconds' and dissipates quickly when Perowne realises that the object is a (dangerously) low-flying aircraft (14). The passage exemplifies what Hannah Courtney calls '*slowed scene*' (183, italics in original): a case in which 'clear and continuous action markers tell us that the character's thought processes... occur in a moving, timed scene, yet these thoughts are detailed in a very similar way to that of traditional, indeterminately timed character consciousness' (183). McEwan applies this technique in such a way that Perowne's consciousness becomes both the mechanism which translates external phenomena and a subject in its own right. Sebastian Groes acknowledges this complexity when he remarks that 'the attentive reader *should be unsure* of how to precisely interpret the relationship between Perowne and his narrator' (104, my italics). A concrete example of this complexity occurs in a subsequent passage where the narrator employs free indirect style: '[i]f Perowne were inclined to religious feeling... he could play with the idea that he's been summoned' by 'an external intelligence which wants to show or tell him something of significance' (17). It is hard to discern here where McEwan's voice ends and Perowne's thoughts begin. While Perowne "plays with the idea", McEwan also does so by pointing to the narrative contrivance of Perowne's serendipitous encounter with the flying object. McEwan's reference to an "external intelligence" may even be a sly declaration of his own narrative presence. Yet McEwan's use of present tense gives the passage—and indeed the whole novel—an immediacy that further complicates the level of distance between him and Perowne. The nature of consciousness preoccupies Perowne throughout the novel, and McEwan exploits this character trait to employ a fluid, ambiguous narrative style.

In *Solar*, McEwan takes a different stance. Though he still favours a free-indirect style, and thus retains strong links to the thoughts of the central character—Michael Beard in this case—he affords himself more licence to intrude upon the narrative and asserts a stronger narratorial presence. The opening lines of *Solar* offer a fine microcosm of McEwan's narrative technique throughout the novel. McEwan writes that Beard 'belonged to that class

of men—vaguely unprepossessing, often bald, short, fat, clever, who were unaccountably attractive to certain beautiful women. Or he believed he was, and thinking seemed to make it so' (3). In the first sentence, McEwan offers a vivid description of Beard that the reader—given McEwan has supplied no information to the contrary—has no clear reason to doubt. Yet the second sentence undercuts the final clause of the first, exposing Beard as somewhat self-deceiving. Beard's thoughts, unlike Perowne's, require a greater degree of commentary from McEwan because Beard lacks Perowne's facility—or perhaps his willingness—to analyse his thinking in a detached and sophisticated way; indeed, late in the novel the narrator describes Beard as 'a solipsist at heart' (169). Moreover, McEwan amplifies this effect by inserting the word 'seemed' into the last clause of the second sentence, and, by invoking Hamlet's contention that 'there is nothing / either good or bad, but thinking makes it so' (Shakespeare *Ham.* 2.2.257-258), adds an extra layer of artifice to remind us of his narrative presence. These sentences set the satirical tone that dominates *Solar*, suggesting implicitly that McEwan intends to operate on two different registers: one in which he conveys Beard's conscious thoughts, another in which he exposes their folly. This draws *Solar* closer to McEwan's early fiction; the narrative technique differs, but the main character still betrays his own faults frequently.

The primary difference between *Saturday* and *Solar*, then, is the way in which McEwan's narrator relates to his main character. Generally speaking, in the former, he sits within the main character's consciousness; in the latter, he stands above it. This dichotomy is somewhat reductive, and neither text functions exclusively in the way I have described. Nevertheless, I believe the rough distinction provides us with a good starting point from which to analyse the texts' narrative effects.

### Thinking Small

Early in *Saturday*'s narrative, Perowne converses with his son, Theo, about his experience at the window. Theo, whose 'worldview accommodates a hunch that somehow everything is connected', implies that the timing of Perowne's sudden waking was more than sheer 'coincidence' (29-30): the very interpretation Perowne had rejected while he stood at the window. Perowne rebuffs the idea. Theo, perhaps sensing Perowne's pattern of thought, asks, '[y]ou reckon it's terrorists?' (31). Soon after, his question becomes more specific: 'you think it's jihadists...?' (33). This question plunges Perowne into a long mental deliberation about the nature of Islam, particularly the 'Radical Islamists' desire for a 'perfect [i.e Islamic]

society on earth' (34). He struggles to commit to an answer: 'I don't know what to think... [i]t's too late to think. Let's wait for the news.' (34). He disappears into thought once more and recalls an 'aphorism' that Theo coined recently: 'the bigger you think, the crappier it gets' (34). Theo's rationale is simple:

When we go on about the big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible, with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think small, closer in – you know, a girl I've just met, or this song we're going to do with Chas [Theo's bandmate], or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto – think small. (34-35)

Commenting on this passage, Richard Rorty notes that, to an extent, "thinking small" is a 'temptation' that we all contend with in our current cultural moment, arguing that *Saturday* warns against succumbing to this temptation (92). Perowne also "thinks small", though not in the way Theo does. Instead, he "thinks small" in terms of physical scale, subscribing to the seductive tenets of biological materialism. Due in large part to his vocation, he is a 'professional reductionist' (272) whose understanding of himself and others starts at a 'molecular level' (5). Chemistry, not sociology, provides the epistemic framework by which he understands the world. Consequently, when Perowne turns to what Theo calls 'the big things' (34), he struggles to make sense of them, leading to ethical paralysis: a lack of conviction about how to relate to a fast-changing, politically fractious world.

A later passage captures these tendencies succinctly. As Perowne walks from his house to the garage that houses his brand-new Mercedes, he catches the eye of a street-sweeper, and briefly 'feels himself bound to the other man' (74). This encounter causes him to reflect on the cruel, seemingly random nature of the stratified social order:

[h]ow restful it must once have been... to be prosperous and believe that an all-knowing supernatural force had allotted people to their stations in life. And not see how the belief served your own prosperity – a form of anosognosia, a useful psychiatric term for a lack of awareness about one's own condition. Now we think we do see, how do things stand? After the ruinous experiments of the lately deceased century, after so much vile behaviour, so many deaths, a queasy agnosticism has settled around these matters of justice and redistributed wealth. *No more big ideas.* The world must improve, if at all, by tiny steps. People mostly take an existential view – having to sweep the streets for a living looks like simple bad luck. *It's not a visionary age.* The streets need to be clean. Let the unlucky enlist. (74, my italics)

Perowne begins by pointing to the religious beliefs of a bygone age and pathologising them, reducing a cultural phenomenon to a psychiatric condition. Next, he invokes the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century to foreclose the dreams of political reform, instead advocating piecemeal change: a Darwinian process. This leaves him with the aforementioned ethical paralysis, or “queasy agnosticism”. Thom Dancer argues that Perowne’s subscription to the grand narrative of Darwinian evolution—his desire to ‘think big’ in Dancer’s words—provides him with ‘a source of emotional comfort’ (215). Looked at another way, however, Perowne’s fondness for Darwinism functions as an excuse *not* to think big. Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace seems to echo this view, arguing that ‘Perowne’s rare moments of social awareness are less acknowledgements than rationalizations’ (472). While Wallace perceives ‘no obvious critical distance’ between Perowne and McEwan (470), the passage contains hints that this may not be the case. In Perowne’s view, social stratification is not the result of a complex cocktail of power structures but simply a case of “luck”: a strange choice of word for the self-described materialist. Furthermore, Perowne’s devotion to Darwin leads to a kind of quasi-fatalism: a view that acquires disturbing implications as *Saturday*’s narrative progresses. Perowne’s rationalisations, therefore, possess a certain ironic edge.

Perowne’s outlook is doubly fascinating when placed in the context of contemporary debates about free will, materialism, and moral responsibility. Modern understandings of neuroscience have cast much doubt on the concept of free will, primarily because those arguing against its existence ‘[assume] that free will... requires an immaterial soul or non-physical mind’ (Nahmias). Some neuroscientific experiments, such as those carried out by Benjamin Libet in the 1980s, have aimed to demonstrate the degree to which ‘[t]he brain decides to initiate... [certain actions] before there is any reportable subjective awareness that such a decision has taken place’ (quoted in Mele 84). Consequently, we end up with the idea that our decisions manifest our current brain chemistry, and are not, therefore, free (Mele 84). The view seems to appeal to Perowne, who believes that people’s circumstances in life come ‘down to invisible folds and kinks of character, written in code, at the level of molecules’, none of which can be rectified, he believes, by social interventions (272). As Nicholas Rescher points out, however, the ‘crux of free will is not the absence of causal determination but, rather, its presence *via the determinacy* of our self-managed thought’ (91, my italics). Perowne often embraces this compatibilism in practice—he attributes moral agency to Saddam Hussein’s regime, for example (72-73) — yet he remains obsessed by ‘biological determinism’, especially in its ‘purest form’: that is, at the level of neuropathology (93). This point is worth keeping in mind during Perowne’s key inter-personal encounters throughout

the novel. His belief in the equivalence between materialism and determinism often manifests in such encounters, leading him to relate to others—particularly those with diminished cognition—as ‘little biological engines’ (13), depersonalising them in the process.

In terms of Perowne’s *own* cognitive functioning, the extended passage quoted above demonstrates how the free indirect technique can frame conscious processes in what we might call an “artificial” way, as well as the consequences of doing so. The structure of Perowne’s thoughts is highly stylised: it is unlikely that his internal speech—to the extent that we can conceive of thought as a verbal process—would take this form. Indeed, in an ironic move from McEwan, Perowne *himself* doubts that his own thought processes could be rendered in an articulate fashion, instead characterising them as ‘mentalese... a matrix of shifting patterns, consolidating and compressing meaning in fractions of a second’ (81). With this in mind, the phrasing of the passage above seems too neat, the word choices too precise: the description of the preceding century as ‘lately deceased’ for example, seems intended to achieve a rhetorical effect rather than an accurate rendering of Perowne’s thought. As Alan Palmer observes, free indirect speech can ‘solve the formal problem of how to present latent states of mind in an immediate, forceful and active way’ (73). McEwan’s technique not only serves as a way to plunge into Perowne’s ‘latent states of mind’ but also establishes his authorial presence *outside* Perowne’s consciousness. Consequently, the passage gains a certain rhetorical currency, as McEwan laments over the problem of ethical exhaustion at a time where “visionary” ideas are viewed with suspicion.<sup>12</sup> These two ideas might seem contradictory, but only if we believe that Perowne and the narrator are fully bound to each other. Yet as I have argued above—with the support of Sebastian Groes—the relationship between the narrator and Perowne is more complicated than this. If anything, the passage prompts the reader to consider his relationship to Perowne: are Perowne’s “rationalisations” the mark of a selfish cynic, or a valid response to the problems facing liberal democracies? By operating on two narrative levels, McEwan interrogates the reader, calling for a response: one does not “escape” the passage without mulling over the questions that it raises. The ethical and rhetorical aspects of the passage above therefore share a symbiotic relationship and show the fruitfulness of free indirect speech as a narrative technique.

Just as McEwan gives us the privilege of observing Perowne’s deep reservoir of conscious *and* subconscious thought, Perowne’s training as a neurosurgeon grants him

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<sup>12</sup> Whether McEwan’s diagnosis still applies today is another matter. The looming climate crisis and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may provide fertile ground for so-called visionaries.

privileged understanding of the minds of others. There are, of course, limits to this mode of understanding, but Perowne's insistence on "thinking small"—his commitment to a bio-medical epistemology—holds firm regardless and provides him an unexpected advantage during his dispute with three urban thugs, one of whom, Baxter, acts as the leader. The confrontation occurs after a minor traffic accident, and McEwan prefaces the conflict with a passage which once more blends Perowne's voice with a wry authorial agency: '[the situation] is pure artifice. Here are the cars, and here are the owners... [s]omeone is going to have to impose his will and win, and the other is going to give way' (86). Perowne perceives the encounter as a zero-sum game; for him, a nuanced approach is impossible. After some pseudo-cordial dialogue, Baxter and his friends become physically aggressive. Perowne, however, observes in Baxter's right hand 'a fidgety restlessness implicating practically every muscle' (90). Turning to 'the intellectual game of diagnosis', Perowne mentally converts Baxter's symptoms to neurological parlance, noting that they are 'suggestive of reduced levels of GABA among the appropriate binding sites on striatal neurons' (91). This process forms only 'a portion' of Perowne's thoughts as Baxter prepares to strike him (91). Baxter lands a serious blow, but with one remark—'[your] father had it. Now you've got it too' (94)—Perowne delivers a brutal counterattack, implying his (correct) belief that Baxter has Huntington's disease (96).

During this passage of action, McEwan's narration deals almost exclusively with Perowne's diagnostic reasoning. Given the fraught nature of the situation, it seems unlikely that this "portion" of Perowne's thoughts would dominate his conscious mind. We might characterise these thoughts more plausibly as a substratum of the fight-or-flight response: an attempt to escape a violent situation at all costs. Yet McEwan gives narrative priority to this strand of thought instead of attempting a mimetic rendering of a mind stuck in a violent confrontation. Dominic Head (192) and James Wood (34-35), whose responses to *Saturday* are otherwise positive, regard this narrative method as somewhat clumsy; as Head remarks, 'Perowne's diagnostic habits seem to crowd out less rational thought processes' (192). The swathes of medical jargon do possess a certain jarring quality, but McEwan's narratorial choices here draw attention to the ethical issues at the heart of the encounter. The antimimetic narrative priority given to Perowne's "rational" thought processes rather forcefully underscores his preference for a materialist—and more, specifically, medical—epistemological framework, but it also shows the ethical limitations of such a framework. As he ponders Baxter's symptoms, Perowne laments the general sympathy towards social constructivism:

who will ever find a morality, an ethics down among the enzymes and amino acids when the general taste is for looking in the other direction? In her second year at Oxford, dazzled by some handsome fool of a teacher, Daisy [Perowne's daughter] tried to convince her father that madness was a social construct, a wheeze by which the rich – he may have got this wrong – squeezed the poor. (92)

Perowne fails to see the irony of this thought in light of his present situation. Huntington's disease is by no means a social construct, but Perowne does choose to weaponise Baxter's suffering to shift the power dynamics to his own advantage. Perowne's continual recourse to the language of the supernatural, which he otherwise despises, conveys his acute awareness of these dynamics. Perowne likens himself to 'a witch doctor delivering a curse' (94), and, as he observes Baxter's discomfort, reflects that '[w]hen you're diseased it is unwise to abuse the shaman' (95). His dismissal of Daisy's ethical standpoint, while understandable in this high-tension conflict, is self-(pre)serving. Yet his wish for what we might call a molecular ethics remains fraught with problems too. In Perowne's view, Baxter's case is 'beyond pity' (98); his nervous system is in irreversible decline, his fate is fixed, and '[n]o one can help' (98). "Thinking small" once more, Perowne essentially reduces Baxter to a possessor of a deficient brain, rather than a fully human subject.

Whether the scenario justifies this mode of thinking remains a difficult question to answer, but Perowne's visit to his mother, Lillian, who suffers from dementia, provides an interesting counterpoint. Like Baxter, Lillian suffers from a malfunctioning brain. Her condition leaves her unable to attach any meaning to Perowne's visits (125). For this reason, Perowne regards the visits as 'empty' and compares them to 'taking flowers to the graveyard – the business is with the past' (125). The reference to time here is crucial. Though Perowne regards Lillian as 'half [dead]' (165), his memories bind him to her. On his way to visiting Lillian, Perowne recalls a 'treasured memory' of his classmates watching in awe as Lillian swam lengths in the local pool with 'supernatural' speed and grace (157). During the visit, Perowne comes face-to-face with his mother's artefacts, including 'her remaining ornaments' and a photograph featuring Lillian alongside Perowne's father (161). The spectre of the past — a past Lillian cannot understand — haunts the entire visit. Yet the past holds no sway over Lillian; instead, '[e]verything belongs in the present' (164). This forces Perowne to take up the role of an empty signifier: a sounding board who '[c]himes in from time to time' (162). In his confrontation with Baxter, language—specifically, the language of diagnosis—provide Perowne with a preternatural sense of control. Despite his extensive knowledge of the neurological mechanisms that constitute his mother's condition (162), language cannot help

Perowne connect with his mother; or, at least, he can only reflect his mother's thoughts back to her in a vain attempt to steer her train of thought (165). This mirroring—an integral feature of empathy (Keen 4)—reveals that Perowne has assumed a different kind of ethical stance: one characterised by vulnerability rather than mastery. Lillian places a new set of ethical demands on Perowne, and he cannot meet, or mediate, these demands through language alone. Even his attempt to gift Lillian an orchid, itself a symbolic form of communication, makes no sense to her (161-162). These impediments frustrate and unsettle Perowne, not least because they remind him that he too will one day encounter 'death and decline he cannot control' (Simonsen 181). Nevertheless, Lillian disrupts Perowne's tendency to "think small"; his memories do not allow him to reduce his mother to a 'biological [engine]' (13). Even though Perowne realises that she, on a biological level, has no idea who he is, he cannot shake off the sense that 'he's betraying her' every time he leaves the nursing home (153). His bio-medical frame of reference does not suffice; instead, he must draw on the hazy, abstract concept of familial love—or, at the very least, duty—to relate to Lillian.

### **The Fallen Scientist**

Such love is in short supply for Michael Beard, the central character of *Solar*. Childless and in the throes of a disintegrating marriage—his fifth in total—Beard's personal life bears no resemblance to Perowne's. Nor do the contrasts end there; while Perowne wakes up in an 'inexplicably elated' state at the beginning of *Saturday* (3), McEwan describes 'the Michael Beard of this time' as 'a man of narrowed mental condition, anhedonic, monothematic, stricken' (3). Furthermore, while Perowne experiences an 'effortless' sexual intimacy with Rosalind (50), Beard's wife, Patrice, cuckolds him with insouciant glee (4-5). Beard and Perowne's professional lives also differ. Perowne dedicates long hours to his neurosurgical practice, approaching operations and paperwork with equal vigour (7-12). Beard, on the other hand, trades on his 'celebrity' status as a Nobel Laureate in order to generate an income (14), but 'lacks the will, the material, [and] the spark' to contribute anything new to his field (15). Despite these considerable differences, both men possess raw talent in the scientific domain. Ultimately, their contrasting fates derive from the way they harness this talent. While Perowne—at least in his professional life—cultivates his skills in the pursuit of healing the

sick,<sup>13</sup> Beard exploits science—or, perhaps more accurately, scientific *institutions*—to his own personal advantage. Over the course of *Solar*'s narrative, this gives rise to a comic irony: the more Beard capitalises on his reputation as a pre-eminent scientist, the more his *actual* scientific expertise declines. With this in mind, I wish to develop the idea of Beard as a “fallen” scientist in order to frame his ethical decline.

McEwan opens the final part of *Solar*'s three-part narrative with an account of Beard's early life, which includes an extended episode detailing Beard's seduction of Maisie, his first wife and fellow Oxford student. Unlike Beard, Maisie's interests lie in the humanities; she '[has] a special interest in John Milton' (199). In an attempt to impress her, Beard dedicates 'one long week' to reading Milton, during which he reads, among other texts, *Paradise Lost*, and finds 'like many before him, [he prefers] Satan's party to God's' (199). Though the narrator makes no further comment on Beard's choice, the reference to *Paradise Lost*, and particularly to Milton's Satan, provides an opportunity for intertextual analysis. I will return later to the question of Beard's reading of Milton—particularly the ways in which it falls short of an ethical reading—but for now I will focus on the significance of Beard's identification with Milton's Satan. I do not claim an exact parallel between the two characters. Indeed, Beard shares his first name, Michael, with the archangel who, in the Christian tradition, cast Satan out of heaven, and one could perhaps argue that Beard wages a similar, albeit unsuccessful, war with his own worst impulses. Yet it seems significant that *Paradise Lost* is one of the few literary texts Beard reads (and *enjoys*). McEwan thus encourages a 'staging of referentiality' (Attridge *Singularity* 96), drawing the reader to consider the extent to which the two characters share common ground. Other critics have appraised *Solar*'s intertextual flourishes; Katrin Berndt concludes her analysis of the text with reference to the Maisie-Milton episode, though she casts her net somewhat wider than I intend to, incorporating Milton's famous Sonnet 19 (97-99).<sup>14</sup> Such differing approaches show how McEwan's intertextual techniques provide rich potential for an ethical reading of *Solar*: one in which the reader may '[stage]... the fundamental processes whereby language works upon us and upon the world' (Attridge *Singularity* 130). *Paradise Lost* offers us not only the words within the text but the possibilities of literary, historical, and theological discourse. Furthermore, the contract of understanding remains between McEwan and the reader. In contrast to the narrator of “Homemade”, Beard does not comprehend the extent of

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<sup>13</sup> Perowne's conflict with Baxter perhaps challenges this view, but his actions are nowhere near as persistent, or cynical, as Beard's.

<sup>14</sup> Berndt erroneously cites the text as Sonnet 16.

his literary forebear, even if he views him as something of a kindred spirit. McEwan favours a multi-level narrative approach that allows him to play jokes behind Beard's back.

A few obvious links between Beard and Milton's Satan emerge early in the novel. Like Satan, Beard is 'great in Power, in favour, and pre-eminence' (Milton 153). A Nobel Laureate, Beard gained fame in the 1970s by developing the Beard-Einstein Conflation, a theory about 'the interaction of matter and electromagnetic radiation' (283). Consequently, Beard stands among the scientific elite, '[coasting] from year to year' on the back of guest lectures, media appearances, and other such engagements which require little of him (14). The new breed of physicists, however, threaten Beard's pre-eminence. When Beard accepts an offer to head the National Centre for Renewable Energy, a new initiative of Tony Blair's government, he finds he can no longer comprehend the scientific parlance used by his post-doctoral research assistants. Indeed, the latest concepts in theoretical physics seem less important to him than his bestial appetites; when he hears his assistants talking about BLG (an acronym for the Bagger-Lambert-Gustavsson action) he initially believes they are talking about a 'sandwich' (21). He no longer possesses the same level of mastery over his epistemic domain, which perhaps accounts for the fact that his Nobel Prize does not provide him with the cachet he desires amongst his assistants, who do not 'appear as much in awe of [him]... as he [thinks] they should' (20). While his status in the scientific "Old Guard" holds strong—he would not have been offered the position as head of the Centre otherwise—the younger generation of scientists poses an existential threat to his prestige, and the Luciferian pride that accompanies it.

This threat takes a distilled form in Tom Aldous, a post-doctoral researcher at the Centre who believes fervently in the potential of solar energy. Aldous thinks little of Beard's initial idea for an innovative renewable energy project—the 'Wind turbine for Urban Domestic Use' or 'WUDU' (23)—which becomes the focus of the Centre's efforts. Instead, he proclaims the merits of 'cutting edge artificial photosynthesis' incessantly, irritating Beard in the process (28). Nor is Aldous' advice to Beard restricted to the domain of science:

There were novels Aldous wanted him to read – novels! – and developments in contemporary music he thought Beard should be aware of, and movies that were of particular relevance, documentaries about climate change which Aldous had seen at least twice but would happily see again if there was a chance of making the Chief [Beard] sit through them too. Aldous had a mind that was designed, through the medium of a Norfolk accent, to offer tireless advice, make recommendations, urge

changes, or express enthusiasm for some journey or holiday or book or vitamin, which itself was a form of exhortation. (28-29)

Katrin Berndt uses this passage to assert that ‘the text ridicules Aldous’s [sic] evangelical sense of mission’ (93). While one may view the function of Beard’s focalisation in this way, the real target appears to be Beard’s resistance to Aldous’ innovative thinking. Crucially, Aldous does not endow theoretical physics with the same epistemic privilege that Beard does. He believes the arts are an integral part of tackling climate change, and the text implies that Aldous’ natural curiosity helps, not hinders, his ability as a scientist. Indeed, not long before the quoted passage, Beard admits to himself that Aldous is correct about the futility of WUDU but refuses to drop the project on the grounds it would constitute ‘a personal disaster’ (28). Beard’s Luciferian pride prevents him from employing an innovative approach to renewable energy, as it would constitute something of a submission; as Shou-Nan Hsu observes, he is ‘[obsessed] with his own reputation’ (331). To draw on Milton once again, Beard would rather ‘reign in hell, than serve in Heav’n’ (Milton 17), which becomes increasingly evident throughout the novel as Beard sinks further into decadence. Beard cannot, however, save himself from humiliation in his personal life for long, as he comes home from a conference in the Arctic to discover Aldous on the couch and quickly deduces that he has been sleeping with Patrice (83). Aldous thus takes the place of the “fallen” Beard, so much so that he even ‘[wears]... Beard’s dressing gown’ (83) after sleeping with Patrice.<sup>15</sup> Filled with envy, Beard attempts to intimidate Aldous by raising the spectre of Patrice’s other lover: a large, stocky builder named Rodney Tarpin who is responsible for renovating Beard’s house (86). Aldous, who has already succeeded in a physical altercation with Tarpin, calmly responds that Tarpin ‘doesn’t frighten [him]’ (86). Beard responds by threatening to fire Aldous from the Centre; in desperation, Aldous runs towards him and slips on a polar bear shaped rug, and the edge of the nearby coffee table ‘bluntly [penetrates] the nape of his neck’ (89). This accident provides the means for Beard to take revenge on Tarpin—he plants evidence from Tarpin’s toolbag at the scene of the crime (92)—but also to use the ideas on photosynthesis that Aldous had developed at the Centre. Thus, Beard acquires another aspect of the Luciferian archetype—the usurper<sup>16</sup>—and attempts to revive his career with ideas that are not his own. The narrator even provides an image of Beard ‘[w]rapped in scarlet robes,

<sup>15</sup> This makes for an interesting tableau in light of Aldous’ first name. Thomas derives from the Aramaic word for “twin”. Once again, whether intentionally or not, McEwan sets off a cascade of meaning with a minor detail.

<sup>16</sup> The theme of Satan attempting to usurp God’s throne runs throughout *Paradise Lost*, but is distilled nicely in Isaiah 14:12-13: ‘[Lucifer] said in [his] heart... “I will raise my throne above the stars of God”’ (*New Revised Standard Version*).

poised on his throne in the dead of night' (188) as he considers how he might best employ the ideas he has derived from Aldous' work.

Though Beard manages to develop Aldous' ideas, he remains a plagiarist, and McEwan emphasises this with two set pieces midway through the novel. While his plagiarism remains a secret to every other character until the novel's denouement (269-271), he finds himself (falsely) accused of intentional plagiarism much earlier. As Beard attempts to relax on the train before giving a speech at any energy conference, a fellow passenger eats from a crisps packet which Beard believes belongs to him (121-125). In a brazen attempt at one-upmanship, he retaliates by eating from the crisps packet himself before drinking his fellow passenger's bottled water (126), only to find later that his crisps packet is still in his pocket and that he had therefore been stealing crisps (127). After Beard uses the anecdote during his speech at an energy conference, a lecturer in 'urban studies and folklore' (147) refuses to believe the incident with the crisps occurred, insisting instead that Beard drew on a well-known stock narrative known as the 'Unwitting Thief' (157). Beard, offended by the suggestion, replies, 'my experience belongs to me, not the collective bloody unconscious' (158). His prickly manner in this exchange may reveal a latent guilty conscience. The most salient point here, however, is the irony that manifests in Beard's stubborn insistence that his experience "belongs" to him, for Beard does not afford Aldous the same rights. The irony sharpens in light of the fact that much of Beard's speech quotes Aldous almost verbatim, and without attribution, at various points (compare, for example, 27 and 154), and employs the same tropes and vernacular that Beard mocked and dismissed during his conversations with Aldous. During the speech, Beard extols the virtues of technological innovation, presenting it as key to fighting the effects of climate change (152-154). Reviewing *Solar* for the Guardian, Chris Tayler confessed he found the speech compelling ("Review"), and Rowe and Upstone suggest that the content of the speech reflects McEwan's own views (70). In the context of the novel, however, Beard plagiarises most of the speech and, like Satan speaking to Eve in the garden, 'gives a performance... which combines the arts of political oratory, theatre, and preaching' (Edwards 26). McEwan therefore creates friction between him and his main character, implying that sound ideas may be marshalled for cynical purposes.

Beard's somewhat parasitic use of Aldous' ideas is not the sole factor that renders him "fallen"; like Satan, he nurtures 'proud imaginations' (Milton 37) across both his personal and professional life. These fantastic escapes contrast with his imagined ideal scientist, who subscribes to a sober, rational epistemology; indeed, his love of theoretical physics springs from the notion that physics is 'free of human taint [and describes] a world that would still

exist if men and women and all their sorrows did not' (9). Similarly, during an expedition to the Arctic with a group of artists, he attacks a novelist's suggestion that the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle may have ethical applications insofar as it casts doubt on 'absolute judgements' (76). For Beard, physics deserves an immunity from human violation. Yet in his mental life, Beard is a near-compulsive fantasist, and thus betrays the futility of his own 'objective' principles. Two paragraphs after the narrator discloses Beard's love for the objective paradigm of theoretical physics, Beard '[enacts] a scheme to make [Patrice] jealous' (9) which involves an attempt to simulate a conversation by using a female voice on the television as his interlocutor. This futile attempt to capture Patrice's attention springs from desperation, not reason, and McEwan underscores the irony at play by commenting that Beard's plan 'is the kind of *logical* plan only a *madman* might embrace' (10, my italics).<sup>17</sup> The contrast between "logical" and "madman" indicates that Beard cannot separate his scientific practice from his passions. Furthermore, Beard himself believes that 'reason and fantasy irrationally [merge]' in the field of quantum mechanics (19). Traces of "human taint" contaminate the modern speculations of theoretical physics, and Beard, despite his belief to the contrary, seems aware of this fact. Beard's fantasies intrude again during a brief encounter with a female customs officer, when he, despite being in a new relationship, fantasises about seducing her and comes close to asking her out to dinner (116). Having missed his opportunity, he laments his proclivity for 'mental playlets, wholly infantile, that generally [lead] nowhere' and 'occasionally [bring] him trouble and only very rarely joy' (116). He also acknowledges, however, that 'similar daydreams... had long ago brought him to formulate his Conflation' (116). In doing so, he rejects—though not consciously—the 'traditional assumption that the scientist must be a detached and wholly rational observer of nature' (Haynes 6). We might even say that this ideal constitutes a more significant fantasy than Beard's near-constant erotic longings. Departing from this "objective" ideal does not explain his "fallenness", which springs instead from his habit of indulging his "proud imaginations" which spring in turn from his appetites for food and (especially) sex. The consequence is intellectual atrophy: he squanders his potential for fresh, original work. We might read Beard's appropriation of Aldous' work as an attempt to stave off this atrophy and once again dedicate himself to the working world of theoretical physics. Beard's fantasies do not *all* revolve around food and sex, but these concupiscible appetites sit

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<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, this comment may still constitute free-indirect discourse, but the point stands regardless; indeed, this may even add to the irony.

uneasily alongside Beard's desire to negate them. His fantasies of self-improvement emerge periodically throughout the novel and form a large part of his *embedded narrative*. This term, coined by Marie-Laure Ryan, refers to

the story-like constructs contained in the private worlds of characters. These constructs include not only the dreams, fictions, and fantasies conceived or told by characters, but any kind of representation concerning past or future states and events: plans, passive projections, desires, beliefs concerning the history of TAW [the actual world] and beliefs concerning the private representations of other characters. (156)

Beard reconfigures his embedded narrative perpetually, with McEwan often signalling these adjustments by the use of the word “would”. For example, after accepting that he will have to divorce Patrice—but before the death of Aldous—the narrator, using free-indirect style renders Beard's embedded narrative explicitly: ‘he would never go through this again... he would buy a small London flat, he would be responsible only for himself... and cure himself of [his] strange lifelong habit of marriage’ (52). These fantasies never materialise. By the end of the novel, he has attached himself to two women, one of whom has borne him a daughter whom he never intended to father. Furthermore, McEwan often uses Beard's embedded narratives to comic effect; despite Beard's ‘general resolutions and virtuous promises’ to avoid unhealthy food, his weight increases as the narrative progresses (cf. 73 and 118). In his attempts to diet, Beard is always ‘[defeated by] the present’; his projected future never arrives because he cannot forego instant gratification (118). The phrase echoes the plight of Lillian Perowne, for whom ‘everything belongs in the present’ (164). Unlike Lillian, however, Beard is responsible for his own suffering. The present “defeats” him because he wastes it recalibrating his visions of the future: a cycle which leads to ever-more elaborate fantasies. The dissonance between Beard's intentions and actions might be read as McEwan's satirical jab at first-world governments and institutions, who offer ‘supposedly good policy accompanied with caveats – talk of the need for transitional fuels such as gas or that a coalmine is fine’ (Jericho). Indeed, much like governments and multi-national institutions, Beard often incorporates the climate change narrative only when it becomes expedient to do so. Though not ‘wholly sceptical about climate change’ Beard loathes the ‘apocalyptic tendency’ of climate activists, whom he compares to ‘Christian millennial sects’, ‘Soviet Communists’, and ‘Nazis’ (15-16). At another point, he even refers to climate change as ‘a figment of the activist imagination’ (59). With the discovery of Aldous' notes, Beard rearranges his embedded narrative to incorporate—or, less charitably, exploit—the climate change narrative, telling himself that ‘[c]ivilisation needed a safe new energy source and he

could be of use. He would be redeemed. Let there be light!’ (144). The explicit quotation of Genesis 1:3 here reveals Beard’s desire to reverse his fall—or, in his own words, to “be redeemed”. Indeed, he comes very close to doing so, utilising Aldous’ work to develop an artificial photosynthesis mechanism in New Mexico (213). As his redemption draws near, however, he endures his own personal apocalypse. Before the unveiling for the project, the Centre for Renewable Energy serves him with a lawsuit for ‘[t]heft of intellectual property’ (268). Beard’s redemption becomes Aldous’, and the last lines of the novel confirm his irreparable fallenness. Upon seeing his now four-year old daughter ‘[run] towards him’, Beard ‘[feels] in his heart an unfamiliar, swelling sensation, but [doubts] as he [opens] his arms to her that anyone would ever believe him now if he tried to pass it off as love’ (283). Deceit is no longer an option—even his body betrays him—and his life comes to an end.

### Reading the Readers

*Saturday* and *Solar* interrogate the fragility of interpersonal ethics and their relationship with epistemological tensions or failures. As we have seen in Chapter One, both these domains bear on the ethics of reading. We must not, however, reduce ethical reading to the process of extracting moral lessons from the text. Literary texts *can* serve this function, but, as Adam Zachary Newton observes, ‘artworks... materially chasten a too hasty temptation to extract, or to be overwhelmed by, their “moral” value’ (66). Instead, it is best to understand ethical reading as a process of interplay in which the reader shows due respect to the text, thereby ‘allowing it...to refigure the ways in which [the reader] and [their culture] think[s] and feel[s]’ (Attridge *Singularity* 125). A reading which views the text as purely functional—one which seeks to “master” the text—shows a lack of ethical responsibility. Both Beard and Perowne prefer the latter approach, and McEwan draws a strong connection between their epistemic prejudices and their failure to read ethically. The previous sections of this chapter have touched on the difficulties which attend interpersonal ethics, whether self-inflicted (in the case of Beard) or arising from the exhausting demands of postmodernity (in the case of Perowne). While reading ethically cannot resolve these difficulties, it provides a way to practice—and practise—encounters with an Other based not on hermeneutic violence but on dialogic exchange: ‘a constant interplay across the borders of self and other’ (Newton 48). Thus, the connection between interpersonal ethics and the ethics of reading lies not so much in moral instruction as in an ethical praxis which refuses ready-made conclusions. While Beard’s failure to read ethically foreshadows his descent into near-total solipsism, Perowne

has a vital encounter with literature during a moment of crisis. In *Solar* and *Saturday*, much like in his early stories, McEwan explores the consequences of his characters' preferred "method" of reading.

As noted above, the final third of *Solar* begins with a brief narrative detour through Beard's childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Raised by an indulgent mother and emotionally distant father,<sup>18</sup> the teenage Beard devotes a lot of time to solitary pursuits, including reading. Though the narrator offers few details about the texts with which the teenage Beard spends his time, we learn that his father gifted him 'encyclopaedias... and books about military history, geology and the lives of great men' (194). These genres serve the readers' curiosity, but do not facilitate ethical reading. The reader extracts from, rather than interacts with, the text, performing a kind of '[r]eading that isn't reading' (Heddendorf 263). Consequently, Beard develops an extractive method of reading, viewing texts in terms of what they can offer him. Paired with this method for reading is a love for constructing and repairing material objects, as evidenced by his father's other gifts to him: '[m]eccano and chemistry sets, build-it-yourself wireless [and] model airplanes' (194). As will become apparent, Beard goes on to view literature in much the same way; inert material which he, with enough effort, can master. These twin strands—the exploitation of literature and the mastery of it—combine in Beard's seduction of Maisie.

Beard turns to literature only after his first attempt to seduce Maisie is unsuccessful. After he asks her for a drink, she '[says] no, and [says] it immediately, before... he [finishes] his sentence' (198). After '[researching] her' he finds out she has 'a special interest in John Milton (199). Beard uses literature as an instrument to pique Maisie's interest in him and, in the course of doing so, does not read ethically. Before he even starts reading Milton, a 'third year literature student... gives him an hour on Milton, what to read, *what to think*' (199, my italics). Such intellectual pre-conditioning forecloses the possibility of ethical reading, for it straitjackets the text into a familiar framework. To turn to Attridge again:

[c]reatively responding to the other, we have seen, involves the shifting of ingrained modes of understanding in order to take account of that which was systematically excluded by them. Attentiveness to what is outside the familiar requires effort, even if it is the effort of resisting effortful behavior, of emptying out the too full, excessively goal-oriented consciousness. (*Singularity* 123)

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<sup>18</sup> There are echoes of "Conversation With a Cupboard Man", particularly the connection between a doting mother and personal dysfunction later in life.

Beard does not depart from “ingrained modes of understanding” but seeks them out, reducing them to something akin to scientific formulae. After reading Milton’s seminal texts, he seeks authorities on the topic, reading ‘four essays he had been told were pivotal’ (199). When he finds the chance to speak to Maisie, he feigns a genuine interest in Milton and impresses Maisie with his range of knowledge, quoting famous lines and referring to well-known scholars on the subject (200). Consequently, he elicits ‘the first touch of warmth in her voice’ (200) and he later completes the seduction by gifting her a copy of ‘*Areopagitica*, bound in calf leather in 1738’ (201, italics in original), reducing literature to a kind of Romantic currency.<sup>19</sup> Having succeeded, Beard congratulates himself on ‘a relentless, highly organised pursuit’ (201). The pursuit, of course, based on his preferred epistemology; he predicates his study of Milton on well-worn axioms, and exploits them to full effect, employing his “goal-oriented consciousness”. He equates his understanding of Milton to a type of mastery: one that could fool any arts student: ‘[h]e suspected there was nothing that they talked about... that anyone with half a brain could fail to understand. He had read four of the best essays on Milton. He *knew*’ (202, italics in original). This assumption that literary texts can be “known” confers on them an essential nature, one with which readers can become familiar. As we have seen, to acknowledge the otherness of a text is part of what constitutes an ethical reading. Beard’s epistemology does not allow for this—indeed, he would probably find foreign the very concept of otherness—and he therefore falls short of an ethical reading.

Beard, however, is not McEwan’s sole target in this episode; after all, he could not pull off such a convincing fraud if there was not a pseudo-scientific framework for him to exploit. Beard suspects a certain intellectual laziness (and arrogance) in Maisie and her fellow English literature students, reflecting that ‘he encountered nothing [in his seduction of Maisie] that could remotely be construed as an intellectual challenge, nothing on the scale of difficulty he encountered daily in his course’ (201). Maisie’s name seems to imply aimless wandering or confusion, and may also function as a reference to “Solid Geometry”,<sup>20</sup> another text about the relationship between a socially maladjusted scientist who despises his wife’s epistemic framework. One gets the sense that Maisie and her colleagues are also the butt of McEwan’s joke, for they also anchor themselves in scholarly orthodoxies. This sardonic view of academics from the humanities and the social sciences—almost exclusively focalised through Beard—appears in other parts of the novel, such as when a social anthropologist

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<sup>19</sup> Beard’s choice here is ironic, given the fact that his responses to Milton were pre-programmed sound bites rather than genuine free expression.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that McEwan otherwise avoids nominal repetitions across his oeuvre.

sitting on a panel with Beard declares that ‘Huntington’s is... culturally inscribed’ (132). The satirical jabs imply that scholars from the humanities and social sciences are easily hoodwinked not because they possess no systematic knowledge, but because they misapply or overstretch such knowledge. Such a practice can prevent an ethical reading, for it prioritises hermeneutic frameworks which seek to render the text familiar to the reader. Ultimately, McEwan argues that ethical reading is difficult in an academic context due to the compulsion to twist texts into shape rather than to let them breathe, to respect their otherness, to ‘suspend all those carefully applied codes and conventions’ (Attridge *Singularity* 131). *Solar* shows that mastery of science or literary theory will not suffice for ethical reading; indeed, the more competent one becomes in these fields, the more difficult ethical reading becomes.

We have to turn to *Saturday* to find an example of ethical reading; or, at least, reading not hamstrung by pre-ordained hermeneutic tools. This reading takes place in a moment of crisis, taking Perowne, whose view of literature is almost as negative as Beard’s, by surprise. Before exploring the climax of *Saturday*—a home invasion by Baxter and one of his accomplices—I wish to briefly examine Perowne’s view of literature. Like Beard, Perowne’s interest in literature springs from his desire to connect with a woman: in this case, his daughter Daisy. Perowne’s motives are not quite so cynical, for he has a genuine desire to ‘understand’ literature, but this springs from intellectual pride (or shame); he fears his ambivalent attitude to literature indicates a ‘lack [of] seriousness’ (66). He hopes that Daisy will prove an effective conduit through which he might grasp literature’s appeal, and ‘[counts] on her to refine his sensibilities’ (58), as he seeks out ‘what’s meant... by literary genius’ (66). Yet this belief that literature possesses a certain essence that he will be able to grasp if he applies enough effort, is, ironically, what prevents him from reading ethically. As with Beard, literature’s value lies in what he can extract from the text. After finishing *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, Perowne reflects:

[w]hat did he grasp, after all? That adultery is understandable but wrong, that nineteenth-century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so. If, as Daisy said, the genius was in the detail, then he was unmoved. The details were apt and convincing enough, but surely not so very difficult to marshal... These books were the products of steady, workmanlike accumulation. (67)

Perowne falls into the trap of converting narratives into moral / educational lessons. He also draws literature back into his epistemological framework; writing becomes something which

depends on disciplined, intellectual labour. Literature therefore constitutes a basic exchange between the writer / labourer and the reader / consumer. Given Perowne's high regard for labour—he regards 'work [as] the ultimate badge of health' (24)—this should not surprise us. To see literature as capital forecloses the possibility of ethical reading, at least in the view of Attridge, who asserts that a responsible reading, 'inevitably strives to convert the other into the same, [and] *strives also* to allow the same to be modified by the other' (*Singularity* 124, my italics). Attridge's point bears even closer on Perowne's disdain for the magical realist authors; he asks, incredulously, '[w]hat were these authors of reputation doing—grown men and women of the twentieth century—granting supernatural powers to their characters?' (67). The literary instinct to defamiliarise baffles him; he does not want the world to be 'reinvented', but 'explained' (66). Ironically, Perowne soon finds himself on a collision course<sup>21</sup> with the unfamiliar and struggles to master it when it arrives.

Daisy, on the other hand, becomes familiar with the unfamiliar, albeit somewhat unwittingly, by undergoing a literary apprenticeship at the hands of her grandfather (and Perowne's father-in-law) John Grammaticus, a renowned poet. In an extended analepsis, Perowne recalls Daisy's maturation into a poet in her own right. Grammaticus '[believes] in children learning by rote and [is] prepared to pay up<sup>22</sup>... five pounds for every twenty lines memorised from the passages he [marks]' (134). Though Grammaticus employs a rigid and authoritarian pedagogy, Daisy's education provides her with a repository of literary reference points and contributes to her development as a poet. Much like McEwan himself, Daisy's ability to draw on a wide range of texts improves her writing. Inevitably, her literary reservoir spills over and she starts to form her own original work; she wins the Newdigate Prize during her first year at Oxford University. J.M. Coetzee, writing of himself, asserts that he needs to write before fully grasping his own response to a text; before, in his words, they enter 'the last twist of the burrow' (199). Similarly, Daisy's reading catalyses her writing: writing which enables an ethical response. Eventually, her success irks Grammaticus, who, in an unconscious tribute to the immense breadth of Daisy's reading experience, attacks Daisy's prize-winning poem on the grounds it is 'not original' (137). Even if Grammaticus' desperate accusation holds water—McEwan implies this is not the case—it confirms Daisy's ability to respond creatively and ethically. Perowne himself furthers the image of Daisy as an ethical reader by acknowledging tacitly the unique connection between poetry, with all its temporal

<sup>21</sup> We might say this "collision" is pre-figured with the flaming plane of the opening scene.

<sup>22</sup> This recapitulation of the literature-as-economic-exchange trope draws an unlikely connection between Grammaticus and Perowne; one might speculate that McEwan is hinting at a gendered phenomenon here.

intensity, and ethical reading: ‘to do its noticing and judging, poetry balances itself on the pinprick of the moment. Slowing down, stopping yourself completely, to read and understand a poem is like trying to acquire an old-fashioned skill like drystone walling or trout tickling’ (129). McEwan makes it clear that Daisy is an ethical reader, pregnant with creative potential.

Daisy’s pregnancy becomes more than a metaphor in *Saturday*’s climactic scene. As the entire Perowne family reunites, Baxter, and his accomplice Nigel, shatter the domestic comfort the Perownes took for granted. In a sense, the home invasion episode ties together both strands of my discussion, as Perowne’s growing unease in post 9/11, late-capitalist London reaches its apotheosis. After Baxter makes his entrance, McEwan—somewhat labouring the point—comments, ‘[n]early all the elements of [Perowne’s] day are assembled; it only needs his mother, and Jay Strauss [his anaesthetist colleague] to appear with his squash racket’ (206). While many readings of the home invasion have focused on its allegorical aspect, with Baxter functioning as a stand-in for international terrorism or a more general threat (Wells *Ian McEwan* 20), the scene also thematises ethical reading in a radical way. As the assault begins, Perowne attributes Baxter’s behaviour to his genetic defects (210). He goes so far as to recall Jesus’ words to Satan during his temptation in the desert: ‘*it is written*’ (210, italics in original). Baxter’s decline has a kind of divine fiat from Perowne’s god: the merciless machine of natural selection. Yet, during Baxter’s campaign of terror, something unforeseen occurs. Baxter, holding a knife to Rosalind’s throat, demands that Daisy strip naked (217-218). Daisy’s naked body reveals her pregnancy, catching Baxter and Nigel off guard (219). Searching for a new course of action, Baxter sees a copy Daisy’s debut poetry collection, *My Saucy Bark*, and asks her to recite one of her poems. Grammaticus, sensing an opportunity, tells Daisy to ‘[d]o one [she] used to say for [him]; and Daisy “reads” Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (220). At Baxter’s demand, she repeats the reading (221). These twin readings totally upend the dynamics of the confrontation.

Derek Attridge, writing of ‘responsibility for the other’ remarks that ‘it is not so much a feeling [the reader experiences] as a situation [in which the reader finds themselves]; it is what constitutes [the reader] as a literary reader’ (*Singularity* 126). In a moment of crisis, both Perowne and Baxter find themselves responsible for “Dover Beach”. The results are striking. Perowne has a different vision for each of Daisy’s readings. In the first, Daisy stands ‘on a terrace over-looking a beach in summer moonlight’ with the father of her child, making a firm but slightly melancholic pledge of love (220-221). In the second, Baxter stands alone, and the ‘long, withdrawing roar’ of the sea ‘rings like a music curse’ (222). For a moment,

Perowne lives up to the ‘ethical demand’ of literature, ‘its staging of fundamental processes whereby language works upon us and upon the world’ (Attridge *Singularity* 130). Indeed, he realises during the second reading that he experienced auditory illusions during the first (222): a dual indication of both the power and fragility of language. Furthermore, the poem floats on the borderline between the familiar and the Other; still under the impression it is Daisy’s poem, Perowne believes that he ‘only half remembers [it]’ (220). Because of McEwan’s narrative approach, we have little access to Baxter’s mental processes, and we have to deduce it through dialogue. Baxter says little about the poem itself, saying only that ‘[i]t’s beautiful’ and ‘[i]t makes [him] think about where he grew up’ (222). Instead, he becomes obsessed with the poem’s mere existence: ‘Baxter says eagerly, “How could you have thought of that? I mean, you just wrote it.” And then he says it again, several times over. “You wrote it!”’ (223). Though he is incorrect about its authorship, the poem mystifies Baxter, and stands testament to literature’s singularity. In other words, the poem’s ‘otherness [is]... uncannily familiar but prohibits appropriation and domestication’ (Attridge *Singularity* 125). To Nigel’s frustration, Baxter instructs Daisy to get dressed and declares that he only intends to steal *My Saucy Bark*: ‘it’s all [he wants]’ (224). Though Baxter’s reversal of intent may leave the reader incredulous, it ‘makes perfect sense’ when viewed as a transcendent ethical encounter with literature (Bradley 29). Baxter’s fate may indeed be inevitable, but it is not *written* in the same sense that literature is *written*, and this gets to the heart of Perowne’s misunderstanding of literature. Indeed, almost as soon as the threat of rape and murder dissipates, Perowne reverts to type, attributing Baxter’s reaction to a ‘mood swing’ brought on by his Huntington’s disease (224). As Peggy Knapp notes, Perowne’s diagnosis here is correct, ‘but the occasion for [Baxter’s] abrupt loss of intent is, nonetheless, the power of “Dover Beach”’ (139). McEwan even permits a touch of uncharacteristic sentimentality toward the novel’s end, when the narrator remarks that ‘Baxter heard what Perowne never has, and probably never will’ (278). Despite his brief lesson in ethical reading, Perowne remains a ‘professional reductionist’ (272), taking comfort in his mastery of the human brain.

Perowne finds himself in a position to employ these skills in response to an ethical dilemma. The home invasion comes to a violent end when Perowne, having lured Baxter upstairs with the promise of cutting-edge research on a cure for Huntington’s, joins forces with Theo to throw Baxter downstairs (227). The police attend the scene, and the paramedics take an unconscious Baxter away for treatment (228). Not long afterwards, Perowne receives a call from Jay Strauss, his anaesthetist, who has a patient awaiting surgery. When Strauss describes the patient, Perowne realises it is Baxter. (232). After a moment of hesitation,

Perowne agrees to perform the operation (233). On first view, Perowne's decision to operate on Baxter seems heroic; he is, after all, attempting to save the life of the man who was on the verge of raping his daughter and killing his wife. McEwan, however, suggests that there remains a certain ethical ambivalence behind Perowne's actions. He insists to Rosalind that he is 'responsible' (239), and McEwan reiterates this point near the novel's conclusion (278). Indeed, at the moment when Baxter tumbles down the stairs, Perowne perceives 'a sorrowful accusation of betrayal' in Baxter's eyes, and the narrator gives us a glimpse of Perowne's conscience:

[h]e, Henry Perowne, possesses so much...the handsome healthy son with the strong guitarist's hands come to rescue him, the beautiful poet for a daughter, unattainable even in her nakedness, the famous father-in-law, the gifted, loving wife; and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less. (227-228)

The passage distills the difference in Perowne and Baxter's fortunes with stark, haunting simplicity, and is perhaps the one place in the novel which treats Baxter as a wholly sympathetic figure. Perowne acknowledges that the successful surgery will provide no end to Baxter's suffering; indeed, it will only '[commit Baxter] to his torture' (278). Perowne, then, remains unsure whether he has forgiven Baxter, assuaged his own conscience, or committed a paradoxical moral transgression (278). This is to say nothing of the power dynamics at play; Tim Gauthier, for example, contends that Perowne engages in a cheap form of empathy where Baxter is a 'figure of evil... or pity' who '[Perowne] literally looks down and "operates" upon' (25). Whether we agree with Gauthier or not, we cannot assess Perowne's actions without taking these factors into account. Once again, Perowne finds himself haunted by the ethical complexity of his circumstances. Only at the very end of the novel does he get the chance to '[close] the shutters' on the outside world and return to his previous state of domestic bliss with Rosalind at his side (279). Yet the preceding events leave us with the sense that such bliss provides only temporary relief from the 'queasy agnosticism' he experienced earlier (74). The threat of Baxter may be quelled, but new ethical quandaries will emerge in his place.

### Critical Reception and Authorial Responsibility

Before concluding this chapter, I think it appropriate to briefly examine the critical reception of *Saturday* and *Solar* in light of the above discussion. Specifically, I wish to focus on the negative or ambivalent responses to the novels. Such responses raise some important questions about the ethical responsibilities of authors, particularly those who, like McEwan, engage regularly in public discourse. I do not intend to distinguish between “popular” and “scholarly” reactions to the two novels, but instead identify some common threads and respond to them.

Upon its release, *Saturday* irritated a few critics who saw the novel as a naked defence, or even celebration, of Western liberal democracy and its beneficiaries. John Banville went as far as to say that *Saturday* ‘has the feel of a neoliberal polemic gone badly wrong’ (“A Day in the Life”). Elaine Hadley, taking a related though somewhat different stance, believes that *Saturday* betrays inadvertently ‘the present day ineffectiveness of liberalism’ (100), arguing that McEwan’s use of “Dover Beach” in the final confrontation is akin to ‘[offering] up duct tape plastic sheeting as a response to the unknown agents and unpredictable consequences of the new world order’ (97). Furthering the critics’ unease was the sense that Perowne ‘luxuriates’ in his privilege throughout the novel (Gauthier 9), and—perhaps the most serious crime of all—that McEwan identifies with his protagonist a little closely; McEwan himself admitted in an interview that he ‘cannibalized his life for [*Saturday*]’ (“Zadie Smith” 121). None of these critiques completely lack validity, but each of them asserts implicitly that McEwan somehow abjured his ethical responsibility by valorising the status quo in the West, and that this tactic was at least partially motivated by self-interest. This charge assumes that the ethically and politically responsible artist will attack, not reinforce, bourgeois complacency. Perhaps anticipating this line of criticism, McEwan, through Perowne, offers a provocation: ‘for the professors in the academy... misery is more amenable to analysis: happiness is a harder nut to crack’ (78). Admittedly, the tone of *Saturday* sometimes slips into rhapsody; in the same passage, Perowne catalogues the commercial and technological marvels of the past century in scrupulous detail (77-78). As I have argued throughout the chapter, however, Perowne’s position is far from self-assured. His insecurity threatens to undermine his pro-Western chauvinism, and even the domestic security he cherishes is exposed as a convenient fiction. Moreover, McEwan has noted in interviews that the majority of his readers likely share Perowne’s unease about the collapse of this fiction (“Zadie Smith” 123). He offers his readers a mirror, challenging them to decide

whether *they too* luxuriate in their privilege. As James Wood notes, *Saturday* works best when it strikes a tone of ‘lyrical uncertainty’ (36); to dismiss the whole of the text as propaganda is to overlook this quality of the novel.

In *Solar*, on the other hand, McEwan seems quite certain about one thing: humanity is ill-equipped, morally or otherwise, to deal with the climate crisis. As Astrid Bracke notes, McEwan intended *Solar* as allegory (54): a broad ‘investigation of human nature with some of the latitude thrown in by comedy’ (quoted in Brown). Walter Kirn of the *New York Times* argued that this narrative architecture rendered *Solar* impotent; he described it as ‘impeccable yet numbing’ and considered its final moments ‘overbearing and schematic’ (“Human Orbits”). Eco-critics, some of whom had high hopes for *Solar*, thought the novel revealed a lack of ambition on McEwan’s part. Richard Kerridge, for example, criticised the ‘fatalism’ inherent in McEwan’s suggestion that ‘that the outcome will not be influenced by emotional struggle and the efforts of conscience’ (159); similarly, Greg Garrard felt that McEwan’s comic tone was ill-suited to a climate change novel (180). Again, one gets the sense that these critics had particular expectations of McEwan, hoping he might ‘shape the discourse about climate change’ (Bracke 56). Like *Saturday*, however, *Solar* describes rather than prescribes. McEwan does not rule out effective solutions to the climate crisis, but rather has little faith in our effort to pursue them. Does this “fatalism” constitute a ducking of ethical responsibility? Perhaps. But McEwan’s *modus operandi* has never been a ‘moralizing’ one (Bracke 54). Furthermore, a decade on from *Solar*, McEwan’s diagnosis seems eerily apt given humanity’s response to the climate crisis, where a surfeit of noise masks a dangerous inertia.

### Conclusion

In *Saturday* and *Solar*, McEwan engages with contemporary social and political issues while keeping ethics—both interpersonal ethics and the ethics of reading—in the foreground. As was the case in his early fiction, McEwan experiments with authorial distance to highlight his characters’ shortcomings, but also to capture the way in which the chaos present in their personal lives weighs on their psyches. Perowne, whose mental processes McEwan documents meticulously, attempts to comprehend the postmodern world through a materialist lens, but never quite wriggles free of his bourgeois guilt and unease. Beard’s fidelity to science falls victim to his appetites, and his identification with Milton’s Satan reveals his comic grandiosity while highlighting the depths to which he has plunged. McEwan places Perowne and Beard in a world thick with narratives both true and fictional, and they find

themselves unable to contain the threats that swirl around them. He thematises ethical reading in both texts, arguing against a purely functional reading of literature. Daisy's rendition of "Dover Beach" provides an opportunity for Perowne to read ethically, but he soon falls back into old habits. Baxter, on the other hand, finds himself transfixed by "Dover Beach", revealing literature's singular power to '[present] itself as simultaneously familiar and other' (Attridge *Singularity* 120). McEwan suggests that those who seek to master the world through a materialist lens may in fact impede ethical reading, and while critics may have expected a more strident social critique from *Saturday* and *Solar*, both novels show that such prescriptive attitudes can lead to intellectual hubris. The ethical import of the texts come not from grand solutions to political crises, but from McEwan's acute sense of human frailty. While some might view *Saturday* and *Solar* as defeatist and cynical, they call for self-examination from readers; they not only challenge the way in which we relate to others but challenge us to ask ourselves just what it is we are searching for in literature.

## CHAPTER THREE: TRUE LIES

### Introduction

I have reserved *Enduring Love* and *Atonement* for the final chapter of this thesis because both novels engage explicitly the relationship between reading, writing and ethics. As I have argued, this relationship has always been at the heart of McEwan's work; however, in the case of the aforementioned novels, McEwan embeds this relationship within their plots, and further explores the connection by employing metafictional narrative structures.<sup>23</sup> The novels' narrators, Joe Rose (*Enduring Love*) and Briony Tallis (*Atonement*) are both conscious of—and invested in—the way they craft their stories. Furthermore, they acknowledge that the process of storytelling involves many constraints, deconstructing the notion of an objective and omniscient narrative voice. This is particularly true of *Atonement*, in which Briony conceals her voice until the novel's final pages. Joe, in contrast, confesses his own biases from the beginning of *Enduring Love*, and deploys different points of view to construct his narrative (though his choices, as we shall see, are not innocent). McEwan demonstrates that their personal narratives, while indispensable, are cursed almost by their nature, and prove a significant burden, albeit for different reasons. Literary narrative, which almost always involves the collision of characters' personal narratives, proves even more fragile, and Briony's provocative questions at the end of *Atonement*—'[w]hat are novelists for?' (370) and 'what *really* happened[?]' (371, italics in original)—acknowledge this tacitly. McEwan, as is typical, does not offer easy answers, but uses these questions to investigate broader themes of truth, interpretation (by both characters *and* readers), and the role of narrative in ethical conduct. These themes, in turn, bear on the interplay between ethics and aesthetics, both of which serve as vital philosophical domains in McEwan's approach to literature.

Though McEwan emphasises the fragility of narrative as both a psychological phenomenon and art form, he is not an epistemological relativist. Indeed, Michael Beard's criticism of narrative theorists in *Solar*—that they 'have a squiffy view of reality, believing all versions of it to be of equal value' (147)—seems a fair reflection of McEwan's own views. *Enduring Love* and *Atonement* do not demonstrate that all versions of narrative have

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<sup>23</sup> McEwan's oeuvre includes other novels of this nature—most notably *Sweet Tooth* (2012)—however, for reasons of limited space, I restrict my focus to *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*.

“equal value”, but rather claim that human fallibility means we can only approach the truth, and some people come closer than others to identifying it. In the case of *Atonement*, fallibility is probably too generous a term, as Briony’s narrative actively *distorts* the truth; in *Enduring Love*, Joe’s interpretation of (most) events proves correct, but his dogged pursuit of truth renders him obsessive and paranoid. Much like he does in *Saturday* and *Solar*, McEwan targets hubris, rather than the concept of so-called “capital T Truth”, in *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*. Furthermore, when it comes to his literary narratives, McEwan invites his readers to speculate about what is true within the world of the novel. Commenting on *Enduring Love*, he confesses:

[t]here are all kinds of false trails in *Enduring Love*. I wanted the reader to toy with the idea that Joe might be going completely crazy, or maybe even that Joe was Jed. These are the games one plays... I wanted Clarissa to be wrong. I wanted the police to be wrong. I rather like these plots. (“Interview with Ian McEwan” [Noakes] 84).

Such “false trails” and “games” evince narrative art’s potential to produce tension and doubt, and, consequently, reveal readers’ capacity for self-deception. McEwan knows how to ‘[play] havoc with the preconceived’ (K. Ryan 5), and *Enduring Love* and *Atonement* best exemplify McEwan’s skill in this regard.

The following chapter aims to expand on these points, and to demonstrate that these novels synthesise many of the issues raised in Chapters One and Two, bringing together the precarious nature of knowledge, the tension between public and private narratives, the aesthetic power of intertextuality, and, most importantly, how these issues intertwine with ethics, both interpersonal ethics and the ethics of reading and writing. Most importantly, it details how McEwan addresses the notion of narrative responsibility, interrogating how we construct our own narratives (and the narratives of others), and what happens when we turn these narratives into “literature”. Through his narrators, Briony and Joe, he explores the ethical consequences of this process, arguing that a grave sense of responsibility accompanies the act of storytelling. Furthermore, he advocates the importance of taking on this responsibility, even when its weight proves nearly impossible to bear.

### **The Dilemma of Metafiction**

Employing a term like “metafiction” to describe both *Enduring Love* and *Atonement* carries risk. Like many literary terms, its denotative parameters are fuzzy at best, especially because, in a sense, ‘metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels’ (Waugh 5, italics in

original). Rather than running through a survey of “definitions”, I turn instead to Patricia Waugh’s exposition of the dilemma that faces the metafictionist, and contemporary novelists in general:

[t]he metafictionist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to ‘represent’ the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be ‘represented’. In literary fiction it is... possible only to ‘represent’ the *discourses* of that world. Yet, if one attempts to analyse a set of linguistic relationships using those same relationships as instruments of analysis, language soon becomes a ‘prisonhouse’ from which the possibility of escape is remote. (3-4, italics in original)

McEwan responds to this dilemma through an approach that David James labels ‘self-conscious traditionalism’ (182). Rather than trapping the reader in the stifling, recursive nightmare of a prisonhouse, McEwan, in James’ estimation, demonstrates that ‘[r]eflexivity cannot simply be dismissed or shed like a worn-out convention. It needs to be acknowledged and reincorporated... without compromising the novel’s solicitation and cultivation of the reader’s immersion’ (183). McEwan’s approach has ethical implications, as he encourages the reader to engage with the text without fleeing to an abstract world in which language reigns supreme. This, in turn, lends his metafictional texts a certain ‘moral intensity’ (Wells “Moral Dilemmas” 29) that they might not have if they relied solely on linguistic tricks and manipulation. As we shall see, *Enduring Love* and *Atonement* reflect McEwan’s pursuit of an ethical metafiction; he flaunts the texts’ fictionality without ever abandoning their realist framework, and thematises narrative while catering to readers’ ‘desire to be told a story’ (*Atonement* 314). Consequently, he creates his own brand of metafiction; one in which reflexive instincts enhance, not hamper, the story’s narrative momentum and ethical weight.

### **Surrogate Authors**

McEwan’s metafictional praxis complicates the role of the implied author in *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*. According to Wayne Booth’s formulation, outlined in Chapter One, we infer the implied author via our ‘intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which [the] implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator [i.e the FBP] belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form’ (*Rhetoric* 76). We encounter a problem when applying this definition to *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*, as McEwan asks us to read the texts two ways: one in which the implied author emerges from Briony’s / Joe’s rhetorical purposes, and another in which those same rhetorical purposes are subjected to

McEwan's critique. Though we might see this dissonance as a more sophisticated example of the unreliable narrator device, this approach seems insufficient. It is more appropriate to see the texts as something akin to a commentary on the concept of the implied author; or, more specifically, the *process* by which readers construct this figure. Briony and Joe are, after all, highly aware of how they convey events to the reader, and, unlike some of McEwan's other self-aware narrators—the narrator of "Homemade", for example—do so for reasons beyond mere flamboyance or notoriety. For this reason, I refer to Briony and Joe as "author-characters" in various parts of this chapter. This term at once acknowledges their "authorial" role while acknowledging that they also play a role in McEwan's broad rhetorical agenda.

*Atonement* is perhaps the best place to start considering the concept of authorship, as the novel opens with the thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis preparing to produce her seven-page play, *The Trials of Arabella*, with her visiting cousins as fellow cast members. McEwan uses this brief episode to expose Briony's high regard for narrative order, 'possessed', as she is 'by a desire to have the world just so' (4). The play's intended audience is her older brother Leon, who Briony hopes to 'guide... [toward] the right form of wife' (4). Her intentions are therefore primarily (and naïvely) didactic; fictional narrative becomes a means to impose order on the natural world. As David O'Hara notes, Briony believes that 'art will act as a corrective for the untidiness of life' (76). Yet, even before her cousins botch her dramatic vision, McEwan undercuts Briony's faith in narrative as an ordering force. Firstly, her grip on language is flawed, as her uncritical use of her dictionary and thesaurus '[makes] for constructions that are inept' (6). Hence the first lines of her play: 'This is the tale of *spontaneous Arabella*, who ran off with an *extrinsic* fellow' (16, my italics). Language here reveals its contingency, its resistance to order; Briony cannot schematise language the same way she does her bedroom (5). Furthermore, McEwan renders Briony's situation ironic by the fact that she herself is hostage to a narrative trope. *The Trials of Arabella* calls to mind Charlotte Lennox's eighteenth-century novel *The Female Quixote; or, The Adventures of Arabella*, which also features a heroine raised on a diet of Romances.<sup>24</sup> Surprisingly, Kathleen D'Angelo is the only critic (to my knowledge) who has so far observed the rather explicit parallels between the two texts and the resulting ironies (91-92). As D'Angelo notes, McEwan underscores the connection by creating parallel plot points. Lennox and Briony, for example, both use the intervention of a doctor as a period of moral education for the reader

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<sup>24</sup> The capital R here is meant to clarify that the word refers primarily to the literary genre / narrative form, not to any notions of "love", though a dual meaning might well be applied.

(D'Angelo 92). Like Lennox's Arabella, Briony finds herself 'trapped within the [R]omance paradigm' (Brantlinger 33), and unwittingly reveals this when she casts herself in the role of Arabella in the play. Briony's cousin, Lola, objects, and steals the part from her (14), signalling the collapse of her artistic vision, which, in turn, causes her to realise 'the chasm that [lies] between an idea and its execution' (17). Instead of abandoning her belief in the efficacy of narrative art, however, Briony merely switches to the medium of prose fiction, where, according to her, 'no intermediaries with... private ambition or incompetence' can distort the author / reader relationship (37). As D'Angelo observes, however, the remainder of *Atonement's* Part One consists of a series of misreadings on Briony's part, jeopardising the integrity of her new artistic vision (94). Briony's ethics of reading is, therefore, formed by a rigid and idealistic aesthetic doctrine of which she never truly wrestles free.

She does, however, *attempt* to do so. Indeed, this struggle defines Briony as author-character. The first challenge to her obsession with Romances occurs when she witnesses an encounter between Cecilia and Robbie from her bedroom window. The scene is narrated initially from a third person omniscient point of view, and the narrator—later revealed as the older Briony—conveys an underlying sexual tension between them, despite Cecilia's frustration with Robbie's 'trying... manner' (27). They spar over the respective virtues of Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, as well as Robbie's plan to study medicine with the patronage of Cecilia's father (25-27). The verbal duel comes to an end when Robbie insists on filling the vase that Cecilia is carrying—a precious family heirloom—and snaps off 'a section of the lip' accidentally (29). Cecilia, in a bold act of defiance, strips down to her underwear to fetch the vase's shattered fragments, before dressing and walking back towards the house (30-31). Only in the next chapter do we access the child-Briony's perception of events. At first, she attempts to overlay the encounter with her preconfigured Romantic narrative. Observing Robbie's 'formal' posture, Briony meditates:

[w]hat was presented here fitted well. Robbie Turner, only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father, Robbie who had been subsidised by Briony's father through school and university...had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia's hand. It made perfect sense. Such leaps across boundaries were the stuff of daily romance. (38)

Yet the events that follow do not "fit" well, as Briony sees Robbie raise his hand and misinterprets it as a demand for Cecilia to take off her clothes and plunge into the fountain (38). Indeed, the 'sequence' of the scene so offends Briony's self-made narrative laws that she deems it not only ill-fitting but 'illogical' (39). The shock causes her to re-evaluate her

approach to writing. She decides to free herself from ‘the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains’ in favour of ‘[showing] separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive’ (40). This ‘impartial psychological realism’ (41) becomes Briony’s new aesthetic approach. Yet what appears to be a release of the shackles leads Briony into a different type of bondage. As James Phelan notes, ethical and aesthetic judgements are always intertwined (“Narrative Judgements” 325). As I argue later in this chapter, Briony discovers this for herself many years down the line.

The scene between Cecilia and Robbie forms the basis of *Two Figures by a Fountain*, a novella Briony writes in young adulthood, years after her false accusation of Robbie (which I discuss in detail below). We learn that the novella narrates the story from three points of view: Briony’s own, Cecilia’s and Robbie’s. She sends it into *Horizon*, the influential literary journal which was edited by Cyril Connolly in the 1940’s. The fictionalised Connolly’s response is partly positive—he and his staff find it ‘arresting enough to read with dedicated attention’ (312)—but he rejects the piece, in large part due to its narrative stasis. Connolly points to what he suspects is a strong modernist influence, characterised by a focus on the ‘crystalline present moment’ (314). Striking though its imagery may be, *Two Figures by a Fountain* lacks what Connolly calls ‘the backbone of a story’ (314). This echoes McEwan’s own views as outlined above; the modernist aesthetic lacks a certain ethical integrity because it ‘[compromises] the novel’s solicitation and cultivation of the reader’s immersion’ (James 183). Indeed, the ethical ramifications of Briony’s approach reach into the realm of interpersonal ethics. Connolly’s words haunt Briony later on, as she realises her modernist style was not, in fact, motivated by the pure austerity of ‘impartial psychological realism’ (41), but was instead an attempt to conceal her sin against Robbie: ‘[e]verything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella – and was necessary to it’ (320). As Richard Robinson observes, Briony ‘evades the moral responsibility of telling stories’ (473). Ironically, Briony’s stylistic departure from the Romantic brand of storytelling in her youth serves not to correct her proclivity for escapism, but to exacerbate it; her “impartial” approach betrays her partiality. Herein lies the difficulty of establishing any grounds for reliability in *Atonement*; Briony is free to elide, conceal and embellish at will. As we shall see, she attempts to compensate for her evasions in *Two Figures by a Fountain* with the final draft of her novel, but this too raises further questions, which I shall address in a later section of this chapter. It will suffice to say for now that Briony’s discovery that ‘style... really does have ethical implications’ (Finney 72) causes her to re-evaluate her aesthetic practices once again; whether this causes her to arrive at an ethical equilibrium is another matter.

Even Briony's claim to have shifted to a position of impartiality becomes highly questionable in light of the events which follow the fountain scene. Indeed, after witnessing the events, she starts to attribute ill-intentions to Robbie, mentally constructing a fantasy that results in her falsely accusing Robbie of rape. Two chance occurrences act as antecedents to the accusation, leading Briony to construct her image of Robbie as a 'maniac' (119). Firstly, she opens a letter that Robbie had instructed her to pass on to Cecilia, in which he confesses his desire to 'kiss [Cecilia's] sweet wet cunt' (86). Though the letter is a discarded draft sent by mistake, Briony does not know; scandalised by the language, she ascribes sinister motives to Robbie. Her suspicions are "confirmed" when she walks in on Cecilia and Robbie having consensual sex, which she interprets as rape, in the library (123). Overwhelmed by these events, Briony relapses into her former ways of reading the world, one in which heroes and villains—dismissed by Briony earlier that same day as naïve literary constructs—very much exist. When her twin cousins go missing, Briony's entire family and their dinner guests search the Tallis estate in hopes of finding them. Wandering alone, Briony sees a 'vertical mass' fleeing toward the house and discovers Lola on the ground in a state of distress (164-165). Briony identifies the second figure as Robbie instantly, confident that 'everything fitted; the terrible present fulfilled the recent past' (168). This recapitulation of the word "fit" captures the tragedy of Briony's reversal; the events at the fountain, as noted above, did not initially "fit", but Briony builds them into her narrative retrospectively, returning Robbie and Cecilia's relationship to the safe territory of a morality tale, albeit a different kind. She is so confident in her narrative's integrity that even the sight of Robbie returning with the lost twins becomes not evidence of his virtue but 'a cynical attempt to win forgiveness for what could never be forgiven' (183). This confidence results in her testimony to the Police, which leads in turn to Robbie's arrest and conviction (185-187). The ghost of Arabella, therefore, lives on in Briony long after she believes she has discarded it, and her crime intensifies her internal struggle with authorial responsibility. This struggle finds its discursive terminus in the novel's epilogue, which I discuss towards the end of this chapter.

At this point it is worth turning to the other author-character analysed in this chapter: Joe Rose of *Enduring Love*. Joe provides an interesting contrast to Briony in terms of narrative approach; as in *Atonement*, McEwan uses the opening pages of the novel to establish his author-character's world view and narrative philosophy. In the vein of Henry Perowne and Michael Beard, Joe weds himself to the empirical methods of science, so much so that his wife, Clarissa, dubs him 'rational Joe' (83). He is also, however, a science *writer*, and therefore understands the power of compelling narratives. Furthermore, he shows a keen

awareness of his ability to mediate between the reader and the events which take place. The opening sentence announces Joe's role as storyteller: '[t]he beginning is simple to mark' (1). The "beginning" that Joe chooses turns out to be the moment he hears a cry for help and decides to intervene in a hot-air balloon accident (1). Yet, after offering a thrilling, extended account of this intervention, Joe concedes that his chosen beginning

is as notional as a point in Euclidean geometry, and though it seems right, I could have proposed the moment Clarissa and I had planned the picnic... [t]here are always antecedent causes. A beginning is an artifice, and what recommends one over another is how much sense it makes of what follows. (17-18)

Joe—and, by extension, McEwan—concedes that any narrative involves certain omissions and artificial constructs. As Susan Green notes, '[this] discourse provides a scaffold for the reader's interpretation of the text as a reconstructed personal narrative' (445); in other words, the role of "constructing" the story belongs to Joe. He acknowledges that narrative acts are always tainted with self-interest: not necessarily born out of malice but the need to interpret, to comprehend. For example, when Joe and Clarissa process the trauma of witnessing John Logan, the victim of the balloon accident, fall to his death, Joe views their discussion as a means to convert the apparently meaningless tragedy into narrative form: 'we backed away from that moment again and again, circling it, stalking it, until we had it cornered and began to tame it with words' (29). Another, more light-hearted example of Joe's insight is his analysis of an anecdote submitted to the journal *Nature* in 1904, where the author claims he saw a dog deploy, with full self-awareness, a strategy to cheat his friend out of the dog's favourite seat (41). The story fascinates Joe, who '[likes] how the power and attractions of narrative had clouded judgement' (41). He goes on to give an alternative account of the dog's actions that refutes the idea that the dog had any sort of plan or rational agency (41-42). The early stages of *Enduring Love* thus portray Joe as someone who, unlike the teenage Briony, fully comprehends the seductive, dangerous power of humans' narrative impulse. They also show him advocating the primacy of a "rational" approach that avoids the "clouded judgement" displayed by the author of the *Nature* article. For Joe, an ethical approach to storytelling will be as dispassionate as possible. His and Clarissa's reaction to the balloon accident, however, demonstrates that some events defy a "rational" framework and must instead be *rationalised* through narrative. As we shall see, the dramatic tension in *Enduring Love*'s originates from Joe's fervent attempts to communicate his narrative to others using a scientific discourse in which "evidence"—as opposed to "emotion"—reigns supreme. Yet McEwan undercuts Joe's proclaimed commitment to rationalism with a certain structural

irony; amongst the chaos, Joe possesses full authorial control in narrating his story, and therefore possesses the power to define what is “rational” and what is not. The way he frames events carries ethical consequences, for this framing contextualises our response as readers.

Aware of this dilemma, Joe goes to great lengths to show he understands the limits of his own perception. Joe’s psychological torment at the hands of his stalker, Jed Parry, is the main narrative thread of *Enduring Love*. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the “facts” of their relationship are thick with ambiguity from a reader’s perspective, and Joe, as author-character, has a vested interest in persuading the reader to trust him. Joe’s aforementioned admission of his own self-interest constitutes a rhetorical strategy on his part, the formula being: I’m untrustworthy, but I know I’m untrustworthy, therefore you should trust me. He does not spell this out in such stark terms in the text, though at times he comes close. For example, during a writing session at the library, he realises slowly that a figure is lurking in his periphery. Unable to resist a curious glance, he looks up and catches ‘a flash of a white shoe and something red’ (42), which he later associates with the ‘white shoes... with red laces’ (44) that Parry was wearing the day of the balloon accident (24). The reader has reason to doubt this association, as Joe mentions in passing that the library stairs are ‘red-carpeted’ (44). Yet, just as one gets ready to impute paranoia to Joe, he concedes that his perception of the shoes may have been a ‘visual [conflation]’ because [t]he library carpet... was red’ (46). Joe then makes a claim not dissimilar to the formula proposed above: ‘the habit of scepticism *was proof of my sanity*’ (47, my italics). Having made this concession, Joe reasserts his right to favour his own conclusion, telling the reader that ‘it was [Parry]’ (47). Whether Joe convinces the reader of his reliability is up for debate. The reader may intuit a hint of desperation when Joe insists his scepticism validates his sanity, particularly given the way he reverts suddenly to his initial conclusion. Joe’s success in convincing the reader, however, is not the crucial point here; what matters is the manner of his attempt, which reveals his desire to balance self-interest with “rational” detachment.

Clarissa, Joe’s wife, provides an external check on his perception; in a sense, she stands in for any scepticism the reader may have about Joe’s psyche. Amused by Parry’s obsession with Joe, which she perceives as harmless, she fails to understand Joe’s emerging anxiety. When he relays to her the events of the previous day, she is incredulous:

‘But you didn’t actually see him in the library.’

‘I saw his shoe as he went out the door. White trainers, with red laces. It had to be him.’

‘But you didn’t see his face.’

‘Clarissa, it was him!’

‘Don’t get angry with me, Joe. You didn’t see his face, and he wasn’t in the square.’

‘No. He’d gone.’ (57)

With no access to Joe’s consciousness, Clarissa regards Joe’s claims as baseless and bizarre. This dialogue emphasises fragile nature of Joe’s interpretation and, consequently, demonstrates the extent to which Joe, up until this point, has co-opted the reader’s confidence. Clarissa, of course, has no access to Joe’s experience beyond what he has told her, and this detached perspective casts fresh doubt on Joe’s claims. Joe, who had been seeking external validation, finds himself unsettled by Clarissa’s blithe dismissal of his concerns. The conversation wrong-foots him to such an extent that when Clarissa leaves for work, Joe ‘[feels] like a mental patient at the end of visiting hours’ (58). Fresh doubts about Joe’s reliability, therefore, arise once again.

His method of dealing with these doubts consists of yet another self-effacing act with a self-serving motive; he narrates an encounter with Clarissa from her point of view, or, in his own words ‘from that point as I later construed it’ (79). Ostensibly an empathetic gesture, Joe’s narrative choice seems more like a radical variation on the aforementioned “trust formula”. Not only does he wilfully expose his shortcomings: he also locates the sceptical voice *outside* of himself, freeing it from his own mental experience. Indeed, “Clarissa” subjects Joe’s psychological state to scrutiny from the beginning of their argument, intimating from the start that his demeanour indicates madness. She compares his manner to that of ‘a man who has seen no other human for a year’ and perceives him as ‘conversationally deaf and blind’ (81). In Clarissa’s eyes, Joe’s claims about Parry appear strange, and lack compelling evidence; Joe refers to the thirty messages Parry left on the answering machine and, when pressed about why they are no longer there, confesses that he deleted them (83). The conversation ends when Clarissa makes a pointed remark about getting Joe ‘the support and help [he] need[s]’ (87). Clarissa’s judgement of the situation makes sense with the evidence at her disposal, and Joe seems to have given due credit to her voice. In the preceding chapters, however, Joe has provided the reader with compelling evidence of the reality—and intensity—of Parry’s obsession; Parry has made a habit of loitering outside his house, insisting repeatedly that Joe loves him (63). Joe’s narrative decision thus has two objectives. Firstly, to prove he has insight into his own behaviour and a consequent ability to empathise with Clarissa, albeit retrospectively. He also, however, seeks to establish that Clarissa was wrong about Parry, and, instead of taking his claims on trust, chose to imply he was psychologically disturbed. His narrative parameters allow him to have

it both ways, and they demonstrate his desire to control the reader's judgements. The sting of Clarissa's rebuff also functions as the rationale for his decision to open her mail. He interprets her response as an 'exemplary case of unacknowledged self-persuasion' (104) and feels compelled to hunt for evidence of an affair, or at least something which is 'distorting [her] responses to Parry' and 'stopping her from being on his side' (105). Even here he hedges his bets with the reader, confessing that opening the letters violates his conscience but claiming that the act remains necessary in order to 'set [his suspicions] aside' (105). He finds nothing. It becomes clear to him in retrospect that *he* had fallen victim to 'the very self-persuasion he ascribed to Clarissa' (104). Once again, he acknowledges his own self-interest, but only after justifying his actions to the reader. McEwan gives Joe the luxury to indulge in wrongdoing, *and* pivot back to contrition to regain the readers' trust: a luxury denied to Clarissa. I reiterate here that I am not yet assessing the merits, ethical or otherwise, of Joe's storytelling, I am merely pointing to his *method* or, to put it another way, his narrative aesthetic.

Joe's account of Parry's attempt to assassinate him during Clarissa's birthday lunch evokes a similar kind of dissonance to the one demonstrated above. It confirms his conviction that he is correct about Parry's intentions, while highlighting his limits as a perceiving subject. While he narrates the episode in the past tense, Joe does his best to remain faithful to his memory. He also, however, acknowledges that memory itself is sometimes a fickle servant, particularly in cases of trauma. He compares remembering the moments preceding the attack to 'remembering an underwater event', but believes also that the attack lent these memories, which he otherwise may have forgotten, an enduring intensity (163). Furthermore, he admits to finding it 'difficult to disentangle what I discovered later to what I sensed at the time' (166). This is unsurprising when we learn that Joe "discovered" a considerable amount after the event, such as extensive biographical information about Colin Tapp (the man who Parry's hired assassin mistakenly shoots) and his family (166), and the fact that Parry and the assassin did not have 'prosthetic pink' skin but were in fact wearing 'latex masks' (171). Joe also learns that Clarissa and the other lunch guest, her godfather Jocelyn, gave conflicting accounts of the event during their police interviews (179-180). This causes Joe to reflect that 'pitiless objectivity, especially about ourselves is a doomed social strategy' (180-181), given that humans '[live] in a mist of half-shared, unreliable perception, and our sense data [comes] warped by a prism of desire and belief' (180). Thus, while he applauds the aspirations of science and metaphysics to establish '[d]isinterested truth' he regards it as an impossible goal (181). Joe's rhetoric is convincing, yet it is prudent here to recall once again Adam Zachary

Newton's assertion that 'narrators dictate conditions and, in so doing, reify their authority' (58). No matter how nuanced Joe's analysis of the subject/object dichotomy, an agenda necessarily lies behind his narrative. He may not believe in "disinterested truth", but the way he flaunts his sceptical approach to his own "sense data" reflects an ardent desire to achieve, if not objectivity, something very close to it. This allows him to take a certain pride in assessing Parry's intentions accurately, and place himself in contrast to Clarissa, who believes—according to Joe—'that her emotions [are] the appropriate guide' (150). There is, then, a paradox in Joe's stance as a narrator; he prides himself on self-effacement while also—to borrow a phrase from *Atonement*—'[setting] the limits and the terms' (371). Yet McEwan does not let Joe have everything his own way, and in the last section of this chapter I will examine the ethical issues raised by Joe's narrative approach, both within the world of the novel and on a metafictional level.

### Representing the Other

Briony's betrayal of Robbie in Part One of *Atonement* sets a fascinating platform for Part Two, an account of Robbie's efforts to reach the Dunkirk evacuation during the Second World War. Unlike the fractured, multi-perspectival structure of Part One, Part Two consists of an extended narrative focalised through Robbie, albeit in third person. As is the case throughout *Atonement*, Briony's authoring of the narrative raises important ethical questions. Firstly, she does not witness the events first-hand. As we learn later, she instead reconstructs them from archived material at the Imperial War Museum in London and letters from Corporal Nettle (Robbie's fellow soldier and a "character" in Part Two), and lends her transcript to 'an obliging old colonel of the Buffs', who makes sure she uses correct military parlance (359). Briony tells us this research enables her 'pointillist approach to verisimilitude' (359). This claim, however, may be a stretch too far. It not only ignores the fact that her research consists of a bricolage of evidence, but it seems to contradict her rhetorical approach in Part Two; as Lynn Wells argues, 'the Dunkirk section of the novel avoids historical realism [but instead] presents a world in which, despite visceral horror, all turns out for the best' (*Ian McEwan* 106). Mimesis and trauma do not harmonise because, in essence, trauma defies the grasp of language, or, at least, verbal language. Far from achieving "verisimilitude", Briony emphasises the 'oneiric confusion' of war (Wells *Ian McEwan* 103). She achieves this effect straight away with the thematic bridge between the closing line of Part One and the opening line of Part Two; the arrested Robbie '[vanishes] into whiteness'

(187) before rematerialising in the nightmarish war zone, where there are ‘horrors enough’ (191). Amongst the ubiquitous sights of desolation and dead bodies, the vocabulary of dreams permeates the chapter. Indeed, the deliberate blend of real and imagined phenomena becomes the means by which Briony attempts to capture Robbie’s sensory experience. When Robbie flees during an aerial attack, for example, the dreamworld is the only sufficient point of reference: ‘[t]he rich soil was clinging to his boots. Only in *nightmares* were feet so heavy’ (237, my italics). The language here echoes a poem, sent by Cecilia, that Robbie keeps in his jacket: W.H Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”. Not surprisingly, the two lines that lodge in Robbie’s psyche are ‘*In the nightmare of the dark, All the dogs of Europe bark*’ (203, italics in original). Even mundane images acquire a dreamlike quality and possess unlikely metonymic attributes, such as when ‘a haze of bluebells glimpsed through the woods [makes Robbie] feel the need for reconciliation and fresh beginnings’ (211). The phantasmagoric, therefore, becomes Briony’s main aesthetic channel; she cannot contain the chaos of war by claiming a fidelity to the truth.

Yet this gives rise to a second question: is Briony’s primary responsibility to the truth? Or does she, as part of her atonement, owe Robbie some form of redemption or rehabilitation after her act of betrayal? The questions bear asking because Part Two, such as it is, mythologises not only war but Robbie himself, transfiguring him into a near-heroic figure. Again, the final pages of Part One are significant, Robbie’s aforementioned rescue of the twins—notwithstanding its dismissal by the child-Briony—provides a typological image for Part Two. Unlike his fellow soldiers, Nettle and Mace, Robbie has the ability to read a map and follow the compass points, which to Nettle and Mace ‘mean nothing’ (193). This reference to Robbie’s map conjures images of a quest narrative, in this case Robbie’s single-minded drive to survive and reunite with Cecilia. Briony laces this narrative with extra pathos by portraying Robbie as an innocent man wronged by her betrayal. Attempting to capture Robbie’s state of mind, she writes,

[i]f Cecilia were to be reunited with her family... there would be no avoiding [Briony]. But could he accept her?... Here she was, offering a possibility of absolution. But it was not for him. He had done nothing wrong. It was for herself, for her own crime which her conscience could no longer bear. Was he supposed to feel grateful? (228)

Following this meditation, Robbie ruminates on the memory of the child-Briony throwing herself into a deep pool so that Robbie will rescue her from drowning (229-234). The memory serves to re-emphasise Briony’s obsession with Romantic narrative arcs, *and* the

negative consequences that result from such an obsession. After the rescue, Briony, in rather affected fashion, tells Robbie that she will ‘be eternally grateful to him’, prompting Robbie to speculate that this line was ripped straight from one of her books that ‘she had read [or written] lately’ (232). The memory is juxtaposed a short time later with Robbie’s brave attempt to save a Flemish woman and her son from a Stuka attack (235-238). Despite his best efforts, he cannot convince the woman, who is concerned only for her son, to flee from the bombs, and they are eventually killed, leaving only a hollow ‘crater’ (238). This passage, visceral and detailed, thoroughly de-romanticises the heroic act, and thus exposes the selfishness of Briony’s provocative actions as a child. At the same time, however, it authenticates Robbie’s fortitude by showcasing his bold action in the face of chaotic violence. Though there is no way of knowing whether this episode is invented by Briony or extracted from the details of Corporal Nettle’s letters, it nonetheless offers a near-hagiographical account of Robbie’s virtue, to the point where he feels pangs of guilt for not rescuing them successfully (263). Excessive allegiance to the truth compromises Briony’s ability to atone; after previously casting Robbie as a villain, she fashions him as a hero. The tension between Briony telling the truth—insofar as she knows it—and restoring Robbie’s reputation through a Romantic aesthetic of ‘imagination, desire, and myth-making’ (Hogle 1) forms a dialectic lens through which we can assess the ethical implications of her narrative. The self-reflexive conclusion to *Atonement* contains Briony’s attempt to justify her aesthetic decisions, and provides the best context in which to discuss them; accordingly, I reserve my analysis of these questions for the final substantive section of this chapter. For now, it will suffice to say that Briony’s narrative treatment of Robbie derives from her desire to atone.

In *Enduring Love*, we see a reverse formulation of Briony’s tactics: Joe tries to portray the “true” Parry in order to demythologise him. As we have seen, the conflict between Joe and Clarissa stems from her impression that Joe has mythologised Parry and thus driven himself to insanity (86). Joe, believing the reverse is true, finds this view particularly inflammatory (86). His dilemma, of course, lies in the fact that Parry defends his actions with a ‘private narrative’, driven by ‘private’ logic (144) alongside a ‘private God’ (153). Parry’s “public” behaviour, at least when filtered through Joe’s frantic verbal accounts, seems fairly innocuous to everyone apart from Joe. In a way, this is not surprising, for Joe’s courting of the reader depends on a calculated accumulation of well-ordered, aestheticized detail—something which the other characters cannot possibly access. Part of this narrative puzzle consists of Parry’s letters that Joe retains and inserts into the narrative. There is an interesting contrast with *Atonement* here. Like Briony, Joe has access to testamentary evidence; unlike

Briony, Joe's narrative purpose relies on denuding, not mythologising, his chosen subject. Indeed, Parry's letters appear to indicate that he wants to fashion a strange figure out of Joe, not the other way around. He writes:

You were waiting for me. That's why I had to phone you late that night, as soon as I realised what you had been telling me with your eyes. When you picked up the phone I heard the relief in your voice. You accepted my message in silence, but don't think I wasn't aware of your gratitude. (94)

By including Parry's letter in the narrative,<sup>25</sup> Joe lays bare the depths of Parry's obsession and thus makes a tacit appeal to the reader's sympathy. The text also implies that Joe engaged in a complex editorial process before including the letters; at one point, we learn Parry was 'sending three to four letters a week' (141). This perhaps accounts for the damning details in the selected letters, such as when Parry confesses to '[covering] five sheets of paper with [Joe's] name' (97). Aesthetic (and rhetorical) instincts, shaped by his experience of crafting compelling narratives, inform Joe's selection of the letters. Parry's private narrative becomes public property, and we as readers are left to judge who has the greater claim to truth.

Joe adds further weight to his claims by inferring a mental illness—de Clérambault's syndrome—from Parry's behaviour. In similar fashion to Henry Perowne's "reading" of Baxter in *Saturday*, Joe's medicalised view of Parry's actions provides him with an increased sense of control; as he puts it, the diagnosis offers 'a framework of prediction [and a] kind of comfort' (124). Parry acquires, in Joe's eyes, a kind of essential, even archetypal, quality: his illness manifests as a 'classic case' (157). While Joe's interpretation appears reductive, linking everything Parry says or does back to de Clérambault's symptomology, it is in keeping with his admiration for scientific discourse, which provides him with an epistemic context in which he can decode Parry's actions and render them understandable. As we have seen, this proclivity for '[stripping things] down' (71) to the cellular level in pursuit of the truth lies at the heart of the conflict between him and Clarissa. Indeed, it is significant that Clarissa's research involves a search for 'three or four unpublished letters of [John] Keats', at least one of which may have been sent to his muse, Fanny Brawne (6). The "three or four" echoes the number of letters Parry sends to Joe each week (141), and Clarissa possesses 'a conviction that love that [does] not find its expression in a letter [is] not perfect' (7). Accordingly, she interprets Parry's letters not as evidence of a pathology but as 'unfaked

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<sup>25</sup> Further confirming Joe's move as strategic, Joe inserts the letter almost immediately after his row with Clarissa.

narrative[s] of emotion' (101) from 'a pathetic and harmless crank' (216). Joe encounters the same problem when he lodges a complaint with the police. After he shows Parry's letters to the Duty Inspector in an effort to prove a pattern of harassment, the Inspector cannot comprehend why Joe would consider himself in any danger, telling Joe that 'as stalkers go... [Parry's] a pussycat' who 'loves his God [and] loves [Joe]' (157). In the eyes of other characters, Parry's love for Joe appears to cover a multitude of sins, while Joe's obsession with digging out the root causes of this "love", seems, ironically, to emanate from a paranoid mind. Joe cannot demythologise Parry's love until Parry puts Clarissa in danger, and he structures the narrative in such a way as to provide him with maximal grounds for vindication.

### **Ethical Judgements**

What, then, are we to make of Briony's and Joe's conduct in terms of ethics and its relation to narrative technique? Their narratives display radically different aesthetic approaches. Briony places faith in romance, myth, and allegory; Joe upholds the scientific method as the ideal means of reading others' behaviour. They do, however, share a belief that narrative can reframe trauma and, in a sense, redeem it; in other words, they 'employ the conventions of narrative as a means for seizing hold of the shapelessness of life and endowing it with a sense of structure and meaning' (Mathews 25). While only a cynic could view their narratives as *entirely* self-serving, McEwan encourages readers to scrutinise and evaluate the decisions made by Joe and Briony, as well as the motivations behind them. As we have seen, this is a perennial concern in McEwan's work, but *Atonement* and *Enduring Love* differ from his early fiction, for his narrators display a greater awareness of their status *as* narrators by explicitly defending their narrative decisions. These defences also imply that the narrators are conscious of the ethical weight of such decisions, and thereby acknowledge the tacit link between narrative technique and ethics. This primes us, as readers, to observe this link and keep it in mind when making our own judgements. Such judgements require us to engage with Briony and Joe on their own terms before untangling any knots that arise.

Yet this is a difficult task. *Atonement*'s closing section, in which Briony claims authorship of the rest of the novel, invites a radical re-evaluation of preceding events, all of which are narrated from a third-person point-of-view. My analysis has presupposed knowledge of Briony's disclosure, but those reading the novel for the first time may be inclined to balk at the jarring, perhaps even violent, switch of narrative perspective. Perhaps

most significantly, Briony reveals that her meeting with Cecilia and Robbie in Part Three, in which she agrees to retract her testimony against Robbie, and thus atone for her crime, never happened (345). Instead, the reader learns that ‘Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940 [and] Cecilia was killed in September that same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station’ (370). The gravity of Briony’s omission casts doubt on the rest of the novel, and, inevitably, the reader is left asking ‘what *really* happened?’ (371). Peter Mathews contends that the omission compromises Briony’s reliability to such an extent that even her betrayal of Robbie is subject to question (13-14). While doubting the authenticity of Briony’s crime may seem a bridge too far, Briony’s belief that ‘[n]o one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented’ (371) does leave the reader with the immensely difficult task of assessing the novel’s “truth”. Yet there exists a serious danger here of slipping into a hopeless relativism: the labyrinthine type of metafiction that McEwan consciously rejects. Doubt about what “really” happened does not dismantle the existence of “reality” per se. *Atonement*’s reality may ‘[exist] only within the pages of the novel’ (D’Angelo 89) but it exists nonetheless. As Alistair Cormack argues,

McEwan suggests that there is an overarching thing called the ‘real’ beyond the narratives we construct about our lives, and that we are morally obliged to know that ‘real’ so that we can distinguish it from our fantasies. If ‘we are all narrated’, there is no exterior reality which can be used to judge the inaccuracy of Briony’s literary imagination. (78)

In other words, *Atonement*’s—and Briony’s—concern with the nature of fiction remains impotent without reference to fiction’s opposite. Briony’s passionate defence of her aesthetic approach (371) would make little sense if she did not feel a nagging sense of responsibility to the truth. To respond to Briony in ethical terms, we must place at least *some* trust in her, not so much in terms of her mimetic accuracy but her purpose in writing the novel.

Briony desires, of course, to atone for her crime, and her success—or lack thereof—in doing so has received extensive treatment in the critical literature on *Atonement*. The question possesses ethical import precisely due to its difficulty. She seems to acknowledge that she will never achieve atonement because ‘there is... no entity or higher power that she can appeal to’; her authority as author forecloses any chance of forgiveness (371). Furthermore, she realises her aesthetic proclivities prevent her from telling the truth. By paving over Robbie and Cecilia’s deaths in favour of reuniting them, she regresses to her youthful desire for the sentimental (370). In a neat coincidence, *The Trials of Arabella* finally finds its ideal cast in the form of children from Briony’s extended family, and when she attends the

performance on her birthday, she realises her former self—‘that busy, priggish, conceited little girl’—lives on (367). Her play provides the framework for her revised denouement in which ‘[her] spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love’ (371). She argues that most readers retain similar tastes and would therefore not appreciate Briony serving them with ‘the bleakest realism’ (371). If we view allegiance to truth as an ethical obligation, Briony falls well short, instead retreating to the warm cocoon of Romantic aesthetics.

Perhaps, however, Briony’s embrace of Romantic narrative conventions possesses some ethical advantages. Certainly, her turn to Romanticism may well indicate cowardice on her part. If we give her the benefit of the doubt, however, we might view Robbie and Cecilia’s imagined reunion as her attempt to do them justice. In Briony’s view, their survival of the dual traumas of betrayal and war *deserve* reward, and anything less than this would constitute an ethical violation. Furthermore, they deserve Briony’s apology, and the right to withhold forgiveness. Briony acknowledges the impact of her crime when she has a fictionalised Robbie tell her ‘[he’s] torn between breaking [her] stupid neck... and taking [her] outside and throwing [her] down the stairs’ (341). Truth, for Briony, becomes a secondary factor, and even fades into complete irrelevance when the narrative takes the form of a novel. As Briony herself notes, once ‘the novel is finally published, [all the characters] will only exist as [her] inventions’; she has the power of ‘God’ and ‘set[s] the limits and the terms’ (371). While these God-like powers provide Briony with total control, they also carry a terrifying responsibility to the deceased Cecilia and Robbie. She refuses to write their deaths into the manuscript because she ‘couldn’t do it *to them*’ (371, my italics); she believes there is something essential in Robbie and Cecilia’s love that calls for fulfilment, and to omit the reunion would, in a sense, be akin to lying. To cross reference between the two texts once again, Clarissa’s words in *Enduring Love*—‘literature isn’t true, but it tells the truth’ (169)—resound in this context.

Should we, on these grounds, accept Briony’s plea that her revisionism ‘isn’t weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness’ (372)? At the risk of sounding evasive myself, the answer to this question will depend on the reader. I can only offer my own suggestion. When Briony betrays Robbie, she incurs an ethical debt, and when Robbie and Cecilia die before reuniting, that debt becomes impossible to discharge. While Briony creates a brilliant work of art, which explores, amongst other things, the nature of guilt, war and love, the severity of her ethical transgression forecloses the possibility of atonement. While the Romantic mythology that she builds around ‘[Cecilia] and her medical prince’ (371) makes

for a compelling narrative, it cannot restore what they lost. But nor could a narrative in which Briony disclosed their deaths. Briony's decades-long wrangling with numerous drafts (369) reflects the inadequacy of both options; neither Romanticism nor Realism provide a path to atonement. A pressing need to alleviate her guilt plagues her life; her conscience '[refines] the methods of self-torture', providing 'a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime' (173). The cyclic imagery here suggest that she cannot expiate her guilt, for it has no end. None of this is to suggest that Briony's novel lacks ethical value, or that she lacks sincerity. On the contrary, it is an incisive morality tale in which she shows her fictional persona little mercy and does her best to honour the memory of Cecilia and Robbie. As a standalone work of art, it succeeds; as atonement, however, it does not. As noted above, Briony realises that '[i]t was always an impossible task' (371). Perhaps this accounts for her decision to opt for a polished, Romantic ending: with atonement out of the equation, she can cater to her readers 'childlike desire to be told a story, to be held in suspense, to know what happens' (314). Through Briony, McEwan acknowledges the limits of art, arguing that some ethical failures cause damage that art, however profound, cannot repair. We encounter this on a macroscopic level when we consider cultural-historical moments like the Holocaust or apartheid. They provide fertile ground for narrative art, and perhaps even *demand* an artistic response, but even the most profound, humane response cannot restore the victims to their previous dignity; the failure of the response is 'ethically necessary' (Worthington "Creative Confession" 167). Cormack's point about the moral necessity of a commitment to the 'real' (78) once again becomes relevant here; we must realise that art, by its *artificial* nature, has its limits. Briony gains this reader's sympathy not because she atones for her crime but because she realises she cannot, but makes the 'attempt' regardless (371).

In *Enduring Love*, Joe faces a different kind of ethical problem. His preoccupation with Parry leads to an apparently irreparable rift in his relationship with Clarissa (149). Joe does not resolve but exacerbates the conflict when he rescues Clarissa from Parry, who has taken her hostage inside their apartment (208-213). His use of a gun, obtained the same day as a form of self-defence, shocks Clarissa, leading her to express 'revulsion and surprise' (214). The penultimate chapter consists solely of a letter from Clarissa in which she delivers an appraisal of Joe's conduct. Though she repeatedly concedes he was right about Parry, and also concedes that he 'saved [her] life' (218), she nevertheless calls Joe's conduct into question. She reiterates her view that Joe was 'manic, and driven, and very lonely' and attributes his behaviour to deep psychological conflicts: his frustration about his professional

life and residual guilt from the balloon accident (217). Initially, Joe presents Clarissa's letter unmediated, but in the following chapter he cannot resist offering his own commentary:

I disliked [the letter's] wounded, self-righteous tone, its clammy emotional logic, its knowingness that hid behind a highly selective memory. A madman paid to have me slaughtered in a restaurant. What was 'sharing' one's feelings compared to that? And driven, obsessed, undersexed? Who wouldn't be? Here was a diseased consciousness clamouring to batten itself to mine. I didn't ask to be lonely. No one would listen to me. She and the police forced my isolation. (222)

As narrator, Joe attempts to persuade the reader that Clarissa's "emotional logic" lacks ethical integrity, disregarding Joe's significant distress, which, in his "logical" framework, followed necessarily from Parry's behaviour. His appeal betrays a certain self-righteousness of its own; he remains burdened by a 'flat and narrow sense of grievance' and finds no solace in being right, for 'being right in this case was also to be contaminated by the truth' (214). This idea of truth as a "contaminant" has significant ethical implications, for it drags the concept of truth down from the realm of the abstract and mires it in the swamp of interpersonal relations. Joe's "correct" perception of the world holds no inherent ethical value in Clarissa's eyes; Instead, she believes Joe sacrificed all other ethical responsibilities on the altar of truth. Chief among these responsibilities was his responsibility to her, to whom he 'became a stranger' (218) during the course of his apparent obsession with Parry. In this sense, Clarissa mirrors Briony; she believes it is sometimes necessary to set truth aside in order to fulfil moral responsibilities. Yet Joe also has some overlap with Briony, in that he advocates a commitment to the "real", albeit in strident fashion. Joe and Clarissa, we might say, typify the two strands of Briony's moral dilemma; as is often the case in McEwan's work, characters tie their ethics to competing epistemic outlooks. As *Enduring Love* draws to a close, Joe and Clarissa remain deadlocked,<sup>26</sup> 'the matter of their differences', in Joe's words, '[are] unbroachable' (223). Neither of them wishes to concede the moral high ground.

Again, McEwan invites his readers to adjudicate, but not before complicating matters by weighing in on the narrative himself. Just as he made his authorial presence felt with the metafictional twist at *Atonement's* end, he intervenes explicitly in *Enduring Love*, this time by means of a fake academic article presented as an 'Appendix' to the novel (233-243). The article, titled 'A homoerotic obsession, with religious overtones: a clinical variant of de Clérambault's syndrome' [sic] (233), purports to be an extract from the *British Review of*

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<sup>26</sup> This recalls the extreme difficulty that Briony experiences in attempting to resolve her psychic conflicts.

*Psychiatry*. McEwan conceals his presence behind an anagram—the “authors” of the article are ‘Robert Wenn’ and ‘Antonio Camia’ (233, my italics)—and Joe’s narrative voice disappears. Instead, the authors discuss Joe’s experience from a medical perspective, utilising it as a case study in which ‘religious feeling, or a love of God, is... implicated’ (241). They claim that this “variant” of de Clérambault’s syndrome is novel, and therefore significant (241). The article seems to lend further support to Joe’s judgements in the main narrative. In the article’s introduction, the authors run through a list of symptoms that constitute de Clérambault’s proposed syndrome and conclude by its end that Parry’s behaviour shows a high ‘degree of diagnostic concurrence’ (241). Essentially, the case study briefly re-narrates the events of the novel with a focus on Parry’s pathological state, providing a kind of third-party support of Joe’s convictions. Even the author’s tangential remarks line up with Joe’s; they too believe that Parry’s religious beliefs are private but ill-defined (241 cf. 152-153). Furthermore, the article contains an impressive list of secondary material, boasting twenty separate references to literature on the subject of de Clérambault’s syndrome / erotomania. With its systematic structure (Introduction / Case History / Discussion / Conclusion) and extensive coverage of scholarly discourse, the article seems to endorse Joe’s view that the scientific method provides the best insight into human behaviour (70). It also appears to justify Joe’s reaction to Parry’s behaviour throughout the main narrative; the authors describe Parry, along with other de Clérambault sufferers, as dangerous, unstable and ‘violent’ (240). Moreover, they conclude that Parry’s delusion is so pervasive that the state must confine him to a ‘secure [psychiatric] hospital’ in order to ensure Joe’s safety (240). The article appears to lend weight not only to Joe’s conduct, but to the legitimacy of his narrative, and his preferred epistemic outlook.

Yet the very fact of the article’s fictitiousness complicates matters, especially given the real-world events happening at the time of the book’s publication. McEwan famously submitted the hoax article to the *British Review of Psychiatry*; though they did not accept it, the article managed to fool both a *New York Times* book reviewer and a consultant psychiatrist, both of whom believed that McEwan derived the main narrative of *Enduring Love* from the case study embedded within the article (Burkeman). Tempting as it is to see these readers as particularly gullible, McEwan’s article does use clinical vocabulary to great effect, drawing on concepts such as aetiology, pre-morbidity, and intrapsychic conflicts (239) to lend the article an air of legitimacy. Furthermore, the secondary material cited at the end of the article combines genuine and invented scholarly material. McEwan’s actions here bring to mind the Sokal affair, which took place in 1994, and was very much in the public

consciousness at the time McEwan was writing *Enduring Love*.<sup>27</sup> In an attempt to expose a perceived lack of scholarly rigour in the humanities, Alan Sokal submitted a parodic, non-sensical article—entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity”—to the journal *Social Text*, whose ‘editorial collective... failed to identify the article as a parody and published it’ (Hilgartner 506-507). Like McEwan, Sokal employed the fashionable argot of his targeted discipline—Cultural Studies—in order to deceive the editors (Hilgartner 506). Though the response to the affair was mixed, with Sokal’s ethical practice and intellectual honesty criticised (Horton 687), some saw it as a legitimate riposte to ‘those who would install cultural studies as the new queen of the sciences’ (Hirschkop 131). McEwan’s deliberate replication of Sokal’s methods seem to signify his interest in the cultural and intellectual debate that had sprung up around them.

This contextual knowledge gives rise to a range of questions regarding McEwan’s motivations for including the Appendix, but, perhaps more importantly, puts the reader in a vexed position. The article straddles the boundaries between the storyworld and the real world; between genuine scientific material and bogus counterfeit; between the sardonic voice of McEwan and an “objective” voice of scholarly authority. Perhaps most importantly, it invites a radical reappraisal of Joe’s epistemological standpoint, leading us to wonder whether the article supports Joe’s worldview or in fact undermines it. After all, if scientific discourse can indeed be “faked” convincingly, Clarissa’s concerns about ‘rationalism gone berserk’ (70) are worth careful consideration. Yet McEwan’s own comments on the article suggest another critical angle. He displays a certain scepticism about the origins of de Clérambault’s syndrome, arguing that ‘[basing] a psychiatric theory on what one person says she or he discovered of another person is *fantastically unscientific* and owes much to a certain kind of *literary interpolation*’ (quoted in Burkeman, my italics). In other words, the article calls into question the degree to which certain types of psychiatric discourse can claim to be “scientific” at all, even if they are buttressed with the discursive practices of science. Consequently, McEwan scrutinises the terms upon which Joe defends his “rational” analysis of events. For McEwan, psychiatry as a domain remains vulnerable to “literary” encroachment, and the Appendix provocatively blurs the line between “scientific” and “literary” discourse. He does not attack the materialist worldview, but instead highlights how

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Hilgartner notes that the hoax generated ‘a wave of media attention’ (507), during which it was covered in many major publications.

an engaging narrative can paper over the cracks in otherwise dubious “scientific” discourse. In other words, he once again stresses the importance of committing to some sort of “reality” while *also* acknowledging the seductive power of narrative.

Where does this leave the reader in evaluating Joe’s judgement of the novel’s events? Certainly, the grounds upon which Joe justified his judgement now appear quite shaky. The fact remains, however, that Joe’s assessment of Parry was essentially correct, at least in the sense that Parry was obsessive, mentally unstable, and posed a clear threat to him (and, eventually, Clarissa). Jennifer Fleissner, responding to critics who believed Joe’s obsessive behaviour ‘discredit[ed] [his] entire worldview’, argues that ‘if we are to take the book’s brief for rationality seriously, as McEwan seems to want us to do, what we may really need to consider is that the scientist here may be obsessive, deaf to interpersonal nuances, *and* mostly right about things *at the same time*’ (115, italics in original). To put a new spin on Fleissner’s words, I would argue that Joe’s assessment of Parry might indeed be “unscientific” and right about things at the same time. For all the psychiatric window-dressing, Joe essentially makes sense of Parry by applying a literary-historical narrative to his own life. Viewed in this context, Clarissa’s statement about the truth-telling potential of literature (169) seems incisive. McEwan therefore critiques the epistemic dichotomy that drives the wedge between Joe and Clarissa, exposing the dangers of reductive thinking. At the same time, he refuses a neat synthesis of the scientific and the literary. Instead, he treats each of them as necessary, but insufficient. McEwan encourages an ethical response; one in which the reader shows a ‘willingness to have the grounds of [their] thinking recast and renewed’ (Attridge 128). Indeed, the preceding analysis of McEwan’s Appendix refuses to endorse a specific side of the Two Cultures debate, instead revealing them as interdependent, but irreconcilable. Joe and Clarissa’s successful reconciliation and adoption of a child—briefly mentioned in the Appendix (242)—perhaps presents a challenge to this view. Rather than viewing this as some sort of epistemic synthesis, however, I believe it more appropriate to see their reconciliation as an ethical act—one of mutual humility—in which they at once hold fast to their epistemic frameworks and acknowledge their incompleteness.

### Conclusion

In *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*, McEwan addresses the ethics of narrative from multiple angles. Narrative, he suggests, has the potential to intoxicate both readers and writers; to uncover or obfuscate the truth; to reconcile us with others or to alienate us from them. Briony

and Joe have radically different aesthetic philosophies. Briony embraces Romanticism as a means for transfiguring tragic circumstances, while Joe prizes truth as the highest narrative virtue. Yet McEwan demonstrates that their respective approaches do not liberate, but entrap them in interpersonal conflicts which prove difficult, or even impossible, to resolve; aesthetic choices, in other words, have grave ethical repercussions. This leads us to consider Briony's questions: '[w]hat are novelists for?' (370). In light of the texts discussed throughout this thesis, 'bring[ing] down the fogs of imagination' (370) seems an insufficient answer, as does 'tell[ing] the truth' (*Enduring Love* 169). While McEwan views these functions as essential to his aims, I contend that his primary goal is to develop an ethical readership. Recalling his words in the introduction to this chapter, McEwan wants his readers to "toy" with ideas when reading his work. These ideas are not limited to plot, however, as his oeuvre touches on morality, politics, sociology, science, and myriad other issues relevant to our age. The strain of didacticism that runs through McEwan's work teaches us not *what* to think, but *how* to think, or, more precisely, how to read. Like Briony and Joe, we are all fallible readers, hostage to the tricks and techniques of narrative art. Furthermore, as readers—particularly if we are students of literature—we find ourselves tempted to pin down the "meaning" of literary texts. McEwan counters this instinct with a sustained focus on epistemic prejudices, which he subjects to close scrutiny in his novels. In doing so, he calls for a deep humility from his readers, encouraging an ethical approach similar to that described by Attridge (*Singularity* 125). This entails neither passivity nor paralysis; McEwan *does* encourage judgements, even passionate judgements, but not without discerning how the narratives operate on us as we read. The proceeding conclusion, after a review of my arguments throughout the three chapters of this thesis, will propose an explanation of why McEwan's desire to foster ethical reading is especially relevant in today's cultural climate.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to demonstrate the way in which Ian McEwan employs narrative technique to facilitate ethical reading. In addition to staging unsettling moral dramas, McEwan attends to the ethical questions raised by the very act of narration itself. His character-narrators, shackled by various limitations, strive to find an authoritative voice; to narrate on their own terms. Meanwhile, his third-person narrators focalise events through their protagonists while laying bare those same protagonists' shortcomings. Consequently, his fiction brings the reader-writer relationship into sharp focus. For McEwan, reading and writing are not merely means by which we receive and produce information, but creative acts, limned with ethical qualities. Not only does he ask readers to suspend, scrutinise and (re)evaluate their judgements of his texts and the characters within them, he thematises the process of reading consistently, connecting the way his characters read literature with the way they "read" the world around them. This connection bears closely on McEwan's ethical project. His habit of discomfiting readers, present throughout his career, reveals a desire to develop an ethical readership, consisting of readers 'willing to have the grounds of [their] thinking recast and renewed' (Attridge *Singularity* 128). While Derek Attridge's model of ethical reading plays down potential connections to interpersonal ethics (*Singularity* 130), McEwan's fiction provides a promising bridge between the two domains.

Such a declaration may have been surprising to those reading McEwan's early fiction at the time of its release. As discussed in Chapter One, however, *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *The Cement Garden* reward a reading which eschews knee-jerk responses to the taboo content in favour of a careful analysis of *how* the texts operate. The narrators of these texts often betray their self-interest and naïveté, but McEwan also employs their voices to satirise certain modes of discourse and (crucially) literary interpretation. "Conversation With a Cupboard Man" and *The Cement Garden* satirise and subvert Freud's Oedipal drama, while "Homemade" recapitulates the narrative trope of the hyper-articulate yet villainous narrator. "Solid Geometry" explores logical positivism within a fantastic context, setting the stage for McEwan's later texts, where the real and the romantic often collide. By destabilising these various discourses in the context of shocking narratives, McEwan encourages readers to look beyond existing modes of interpretation in favour of a responsible [i.e. ethical] response: one that 'refigure[s] the ways in which [they]... think and feel' (Attridge *Singularity* 125). As I noted at the conclusion of Chapter One, this process of "responding" gave rise to many of McEwan's early stories, as he grafted his literary influences into his own writing style.

Though McEwan has since secured a position as an heir to the Victorian novelists, characterised by a ‘lasting love for the heritage of literary realism’ (James 182), further research might explore McEwan’s earliest literary influences, both in terms of style and subject matter. Sustained intertextual analysis would be a fruitful way of assessing McEwan’s “response”, particularly the ways in which he both incorporated and repudiated his literary forebears in his early fiction.

In Chapter Two, I explored how McEwan’s later fiction, while engaged in social and political issues, still fosters a degree of discomfort and uncertainty in the reader. *Saturday* and *Solar* do not defend the status quo, but instead showcase the ethical challenges posed by our current cultural contexts. Through Henry Perowne and Michael Beard, McEwan reveals that a deep grasp of the mechanics of the material world does not provide a sufficient ground for ethical conduct. Employing third-person narrators in these novels, McEwan showcases his protagonists’ considerable intellect while maintaining a degree of ironic distance, echoing the narrative technique of his early fiction. Furthermore, McEwan dramatises the process of ethical reading itself: the very process he encouraged in his early texts. Both Perowne and Beard underestimate the value of literature, lamenting its lack of utility and the elitism of its interpreters. Yet, in both texts, literature plots its revenge. Beard aligns himself with Milton’s Satan, unwittingly forecasting his fall, while Perowne’s daughter, Daisy—despite being naked, pregnant, and defenceless—thwarts violent tragedy with a rendition of Matthew Arnold’s famous poem, “Dover Beach”. McEwan associates Perowne’s and Beard’s austere, extractive methods of reading with a certain lack in their approach to interpersonal ethics, and though Perowne—thanks to Daisy’s intervention—gets the chance to redeem himself, Beard’s obstinate solipsism carries him all the way to the grave. Though the critical literature on *Saturday* is extensive, scholars often limit their analyses of Daisy’s character to her role in the novel’s climactic episode. A sustained discussion of her literary apprenticeship at the hands of John Grammaticus, which I briefly touched on during Chapter Two, could generate new insights, particularly in light of Daisy’s ethical perspectives.<sup>28</sup> While *Solar* has generated much discussion among eco-critical scholars, intertextual analyses of the text alongside other climate change novels—such as that performed by Greg Garrard (“The Unbearable Lightness of Green”)—have so far been limited, and would be worth exploring further.

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<sup>28</sup> I have in mind especially her stance against the Iraq War, which leads to a heated discussion with her father late in the novel.

Chapter Three brought the relationship between narrative and ethics into sharper focus with an analysis of *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*. McEwan brings Joe Rose and Briony Tallis to life firstly by revealing to us how they “read” the world; Briony through the lens of Romantic fiction, Joe on empirical grounds. These modes of interpretation prove vital to their narrative strategies and ethics of representation. Briony mythologises Robbie to atone for her betrayal, while Joe attempts to legitimise his fear of Jed Parry by applying a psychiatric diagnosis to him. McEwan concludes both novels with a meta-fictional twist, forcing his readers to re-evaluate the texts in a new light, and challenging them to take up an ethical stance towards his author-narrators. Though McEwan destabilises both narratives in this way, he also encourages a commitment to “reality” by highlighting the artificial mechanics of narrative art and asking us to assess the way they operate in the context of the “real” world, and to notice the ethical consequences of this interplay. McEwan challenges the reader to go beyond the types of reading employed by Briony and Joe—to eschew prejudicial interpretive frameworks, acknowledge the limitations of our understanding, and make room for a truly ethical reading of the text, and, by extension, an ethical mode of “reading” each other (“Ian McEwan Interview” 00:01:30–00:01:45). The academic landscape is littered with analyses of *Enduring Love* and (especially) *Atonement*; in order to explore the ethical perspective developed here, researchers might want to depart from a focus on Briony and Joe to some of the more minor characters. An analysis which privileged *their* experience as subjects, speculative as it may be, could provide an interesting counterpoint to the copious commentaries on Joe and Briony. The internal world of Jed Parry would be a particularly fascinating subject of discussion, especially if placed in comparison to *Saturday*’s Baxter in a critique of McEwan’s representation of madness and the ethical questions raised by this feature of his fiction.

Indeed, in our schizoid world of image and hypertext, the mind of the madman may return to obsess McEwan once more. The narratives to which we subscribe are at once more fragmented and more entrenched. Emboldened by ever-more complex tools of communication, cynical parties can successfully mediate any evidence that challenges their favoured narrative. When we take an uncritical stance towards such confections, we run the risk of falling into apathy; McEwan highlights this risk in *Enduring Love* when Joe, watching the TV news, finds himself untouched by the tragedy and scandal before his eyes due to the ‘format’s familiarity’ (46). Perhaps the alternative really is a collapse into madness; after all, none of us has the stamina to fully scrutinise the grotesque mosaic of events with which we contend every day. McEwan’s fiction offers us a third way. By exposing the mechanics of the

medium itself, he draws our attention to the ethical risks inherent in the narrative act. Yet while McEwan's fiction shows us that narrative is artificial—and therefore prone to corruption—it also proves that narrative is indispensable, and we all have to contend with it. McEwan discomfits us in order to undercut our established modes of thinking, but he does not steer us towards nihilism or apathy. Instead, he calls for an ethical response, a new way of being in the world: one where we are weary of the dangers of narrative acts, but celebrate their capacity to delight, to transform, or renew. McEwan's work does not have salvific power, and it certainly does not subscribe to any dogma or orthodoxy. On the contrary, it paves the way for us to *change* our minds, and it is these private revolutions—terrifying as they may be—that form the basis of ethical growth.

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