

**David K. O'Hara**  
*Mimesis and the Imaginable Other: Metafictional Narrative Ethics in the  
Novels of Ian McEwan*

David K. O'Hara is a writer and a recent graduate of the English Literature and Creative Writing PhD program at Bath Spa University in the UK. His thesis, *Mimesis and the Imaginable Other: Metafictional Narrative Ethics in the Novels of Ian McEwan* examined the relationship between narrative and ethics in McEwan's work by relating it to the philosophies of Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney. More recently, he presented a paper, *From Mimesis to Ethics: The Case of Ian McEwan's Atonement*, for the 2009 Narrating the Human Subject Conference in Oxford.

Below is an excerpt from the thesis introduction provided courtesy of the author.

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## Introduction

The present study seeks to examine a peculiar style or mode of metafiction, of which the later works of Ian McEwan can offer a useful example. That is to say, the following will attempt to identify an unusual brand of self-conscious narrative by focussing on two of McEwan's novels—namely, *Black Dogs* (1992) and *Atonement* (2001). What makes this minority metafictional style especially unique, however, is not only its presence in the work of one of the late twentieth century's pre-eminent British novelists, but also its *ethical* character. For this reason, the kind of metafiction being discussed should not be conflated with more traditionally ideological forms which attest to their own fictionality in the name of undermining 'realist' illusions. Rather, it will be argued that self-conscious narrative, in the case of McEwan, is oftentimes utilised in order to reassert an *ethical* complex that lies between author and reader, text and world. The fundamental differentiation being made, then, is that between a properly postmodernist metafiction and what might be considered a *restorative* metafiction that works, in a self-justifying manner, towards an affirmation of mimetic claims. For this latter style of metafiction, storytelling does not mark the beginning of a free-play of signifiers or a dispersal of constituting fictions, but rather the beginning of a dialogical and ethical relationship between texts and readers; of stories not just being told from one *to* another, but by one *for* another.

I feel it important to stress that the following thesis seeks not to overturn postmodernist readings of British literature—nor, for that matter, of metafictional literature—but purely to set forth an opinion that other, less ideological modes of metafiction exist, and that one such mode, as utilised by Ian McEwan, can be seen to serve an exploration of narrative ethics rather than of postmodernist politics.

Let us, for the moment, approach the focus of this thesis via the work of another critic. Towards the end of Dominic Head's illuminating *Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction* (2002), he discusses the ambivalent place of postmodernism in the contemporary novel.

Certainly, some postmodern[ist] attributes have had a considerable influence. The questioning of metanarrative, the decentring of cultural authority, and the ironic disruption of the self-contained fictional world have all figured

prominently, making writers such as Peter Ackroyd, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, and Angela Carter sometimes representative postmodernists. But these are also writers whose works have also conveyed a conviction about the moral and emotional function of narrative, and its ability to make readers re-engage with the world they know. [Head 2002, 221]

Head, following critics like David Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury, and Marguerite Alexander, suggests that the contemporary British novel may in fact be a hybrid form; the postmodernist element, rather than ironising or repudiating the referential claims of 'realism,' in this case restricts itself to a mere 'reworking of the realist contract' in light of postmodernist critiques (221). He then qualifies his terminology in the hope that the two sides—'realist' and 'postmodernist', respectively—might be made to cohere. 'If postmodernist expression is conceived as a reworking of realism, rather than a rejection of it, and as a mode capable of generating an emotional response, beyond the distractions of self-conscious tricksiness, then it has a good deal of relevance to writers in Britain' (221).

However, in his later survey of McEwan's work, Head is forced to situate the work of Ian McEwan in far more delicate way than the category of 'postmodern realism' would seem to allow. He begins his study with the assertion that '[McEwan] is probably the most significant of a number of writers (including Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Graham Swift) who have resuscitated the link between morality and the novel for a whole generation, in ways that befit the historical pressures of their time... reconnect[ing] narrative fiction with moral sense' (2008 1,7). However, recognising such a restoration—of which it should be agreed that McEwan serves as an exemplary case—begs the question: who or what banished the 'moral sensibility' of the novel in the first place? Head is ambivalent, but comes teasingly close to pointing a critical finger when he explains:

There is [an] aspect of postmodern[ist] expression that cannot be found, unequivocally, in McEwan, and this may help to pin down his distinctiveness. I am thinking of Linda Hutcheon's classic account of postmodern[ist] narrative as a mode that [metafictionally] combines realist reference and modernist self-consciousness, deploying and questioning these features simultaneously. Where such a hybrid often develops a newly intensive form of

self-reflexiveness that emphasises textuality over reference, diluting the novel's capacity to illuminate the social world, McEwan, by contrast, is very much pre-occupied with ways of knowing. [Head 2007, 14]

But can this be the true extent of the disparity? Can this vague epistemological difference pinpoint, as Head claims it does, the divergent aims of a 'poetics of postmodernity' and the work of Ian McEwan—that he is 'preoccupied with ways of knowing' (14)?

Given that Head appreciates the way in which Hutcheon's concept of postmodern metafiction endorses textual solipsism, it is unfortunate that he stops short of exploring just how McEwan's own self-conscious narratives instead entrain a distinctly *ethical* momentum.<sup>1</sup> Head, in other words, refrains from holding postmodernist ideologies accountable. He leaves unexplored the ways postmodernist discourse has worked to restrict the very same moral imperatives he rightly discerns in McEwan's novels. Why does he hesitate? Perhaps, when it comes down to the metafictional elements in the work of McEwan and others, the hybrid form Head proposes is insufficient and unhelpful as it obscures the ethical drive behind this particular brand of self-conscious narrative.

The concept of a 'postmodern realism' is both a pervasive and persuasive one because it accommodates some of the stylistic complexities inherent in self-conscious British fiction. But it also maintains an inner tension: that between postmodernism and realism, an antagonism itself based upon distinctly postmodernist preconceptions. So, simply melding these two categories together into a split-personality or hybrid does little to overcome the already preconceived opposition of postmodernism versus realism. One side of the equation is active while the other remains passive. One is enacted, the other acted upon. Nor is there a truly democratic commingling of fictive techniques. The postmodernist side still monopolises metafictional practices, co-opting 'experiment,' while realism is yoked with anything that can be deemed stylistically 'conservative' or 'traditional'. Consequently, a hybridised 'postmodern realism' can only ever be *postmodernist* in its values.

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<sup>1</sup> This oversight is doubly unfortunate as Head is so keenly aware of the ethical engagement embodied in McEwan's novels. See below for his own acknowledgement of McEwan's relationship to narrative ethics.

So what, then, does one do about Ian McEwan when, as I hope to illustrate in the following study, it is often the *metafictional* thrust of his novels which serves both to disclose and reinforce their ethical structures, and thereby mark a divergence from postmodernist ideological tendencies? It is the contention of this thesis that the brand of metafiction found in the work of McEwan will be more usefully judged outside of a postmodernist rubric (or, for that matter, any ‘stock realist’ context) in order to be fully appreciated. The unique narrative ethics of these two novels is at stake, and that is no small matter.

To recapitulate, McEwan can sometimes be self-conscious *without being particularly postmodernist about it*. And in a field that categorises anything metafictional in the contemporary context as *necessarily* postmodernist, this poses a problem.

Thus far, in the critical discussion of how best to situate, or to characterise, metafiction in the ethically-engaged British novel, the role of mimesis has been conspicuously overlooked.<sup>2</sup> It will, however, be one of the key arguments of the present thesis that the valuation of mimesis is precisely where some key metafictional attributes of McEwan most decisively part ways with *postmodernist* metafiction.

Amy J. Elias has already noted something similar occurring at the metafictional level of other contemporary British novels. In her article ‘*Meta-mimesis?: The Problem of British Postmodern Realism*’ (1992), Elias examines those works that, for her, are ‘less a metafictional comment on Realistic narrative than a mirroring reflection of the postmodern condition’ (16). That such novels themselves appreciate the problems and shortcomings inherent in that supposed ‘mirroring’ is also part of Elias’s point; as in the case of McEwan, the metafictional element in such novels is *mimetic* in inclination.<sup>3</sup> The ‘baring of the works’ in such cases allows for a

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<sup>2</sup> Frustratingly, paradoxically, and somewhat anti-climatically, Head is, in fact, an exception. Near the end of *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern British Novel*, he writes:

I have chanced upon different brands of formal hybridity, where ‘innovation’ can embrace tradition, and where the reworking of realism can be just as insightful as its rejection... (As Paul Ricoeur’s theory of mimesis implies, the self-conscious text can emphasise the mimetic effect—conceived as ‘representation’ rather than ‘imitation’—especially well.) [259]

It may, rightly, be seen as the purpose of this thesis to expand this profound statement beyond the limits of Head’s parenthetical gesture.

<sup>3</sup> Though, it must be said, Elias’s language, here and elsewhere, does insinuate that ‘mimetic’ aims are those which treat reality merely as objective, empirical fact—in other words a misunderstanding of mimesis as representational transparency (or *naturalism*). Along with Head, I prefer to follow Aristotle,

dissection of distinctly mimetic processes—hence, meta-mimesis, a term which Elias coins in order to account for ‘the odd mixture of experiment and verisimilitude, metafiction and realism’ in some recent British fiction (28).<sup>4</sup> Citing Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, Martin Amis’s *Money*, and Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Elias explains how ‘each of these novels provides a realistic rationale for the action that takes place within its pages, and yet the world—either psychological or physical—each records is distinctly postmodern’ (14). Such novels are sensitive to what might loosely be called the ‘postmodern experience’ of the world, and they both approach and describe that experience through a mode of realism. In this way, Elias locates the ‘postmodern’ content of these particular novels both at the textual, or metafictional, level and in the worlds they *realistically* describe. Instead of a postmodernist critique of realist claims, here we are nearing something like a realism of postmodernity.

Elias importantly follows George Levine’s *The Realistic Imagination* (1981) in conceiving of realism as ‘a literary *mode* in flux,’ one that has changed along with contemporary world-views and socio-political shifts (Levine 11). According to Levine, the supposedly ‘naïve realism’ of the nineteenth century—one that took for granted a transparent correspondence between text and world—never existed. Instead realism, as a literary mode, was always self-reflexively aware of its own limitations, distrustful of cultivating conventions, and composed of multiple, competing forms. The attempt to represent life sincerely, to create a dialogue for and about contemporary life, was always in process so long as notions of what constituted human experience evolved.

Elias, however, goes on to build from Brian McHale’s classic description of the respective ontological and epistemological ‘dominants’ of postmodern and modernist literatures.<sup>5</sup> Where modernism, for McHale, foregrounded questions such as how the self can understand the world, postmodernism focuses on questions of how to construct or define a world as well as one’s *being* in that world. Postmodernist fiction, according to McHale, deploys various means of engaging with questions like ‘Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is doing it?’

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Paul Ricoeur, and Richard Kearney in thinking of that supposed ‘mirroring’ instead as creative re-description, in other words, entirely malleable but always referential. (See below.)

<sup>4</sup> One wonders if the implication, here, is that these terms—experiment/verisimilitude, metafiction/realism—are typically thought to be mutually exclusive or just sufficiently at odds.

<sup>5</sup> As is evident from his use of these terms, McHale bends slightly the natural definitions of ‘ontology’ (a philosophy of the nature of being) and ‘epistemology’ (a philosophy of the root and structures of knowledge). See McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987).

(McHale 10). Elias agrees, but also offers a further, 'realist' agenda for postmodern (as opposed to postmodernist) literature:

Traditional Realism attempts to duplicate the world and docket society in order to fathom it. On the other hand, postmodern Realism might be understood as *mimesis* with an ontological dominant. In postmodern Realism, the world has become textualized. Postmodern Realism records the multiple worlds/texts within contemporary culture and recognizes the *inability* to evaluate society's conflicting values; it mimics the multiple selves of characters (or more accurately, the self as a subject within textualized culture) and recognizes the problem of articulating an essential Self in this social context. Both of these goals and limitations are realistic; postmodern Realism is true to new definitions of self and society in a postmodern culture. [Elias 1992, 12]

Elias, then, offers us an alternative to the understanding of contemporary metafiction as, necessarily, a subversion of traditional realism.<sup>6</sup> And, like Head, she conceives of a hybridised conception of the British novel as a substitute: the metafictional elements in those novels she is concerned with offer less a parody of realist techniques than a *self-conscious working-through* of realist aims in light of postmodernity. This is a realism that is 'postmodern' chiefly for the sake of the milieu which it seeks to examine, as opposed to any talisman postmodernist ideology. And yet, Elias's use of McHale's ontological/epistemological opposition—something she herself admits is reductive—might, in practice, be said both to confuse and indeed to raise severe limitations for the application of her rather more evocative term, *meta-mimesis*. For instance, are we to take 'mimesis with an ontological dominant' to mean the same thing as meta-mimesis? And, if so, is meta-mimesis therefore only to be applied to fictions which pose ontologically *postmodern* questions about existence? More fundamentally, one is left wondering whether Elias has simply predefined *meta-* as

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<sup>6</sup> See below as well as Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative* (1984) and *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Alison Lee's *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (1990), and Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) for examples of a view that holds most, if not all, contemporary metafiction to be subversively postmodernist in motivation. See also Colin McCabe's *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1978, reprinted 2002) and Catherine Belsey's classic *Critical Practice* (1980, also reprinted 2002) for works that posit an insidiously hegemonic 'realism' in need of overthrowing.

postmodernist and *mimesis* as realist and fused the two together, *a la* ‘postmodern realism’.

Here we find that Elias gets confounded by the residual postmodernist rubric through which she interprets the metafictional techniques used within some contemporary British novels. We are ultimately offered new terminology, all of it heavily qualified and overly strained, as a means of grasping what is beyond the reach of the old postmodernism/realism dichotomy.

The present study will therefore argue that meta-mimesis as a term becomes more useful—indeed, more true to its name—when re-focussed by Paul Ricoeur’s Aristotelian understanding of mimesis as a creative *re-description* of human action (*praxis*). Mimesis in this reading is not geared towards Platonic verisimilitude, servile representation, or some naturalistic ideal of ‘mirroring’ reality. Instead, mimesis functions as “invention” in the original sense of that term: *invire* means both to discover *and* to create, that is, to disclose what is already there in light of what is not yet (but is potentially). It is the power, in short, to recreate actual worlds as possible worlds’ (132, Kearney 2004). It should therefore be clear that, in this sense, mimesis is as equally applicable to any ‘postmodernist’ fictions as to ‘realist’ ones. It is true that both postmodernist and realist literary modes seek to say something about the world and human experience—so to imply that the postmodernist novel is absolutely self-reflexive is overstating the case. Mimesis is not a realist trope any more than metafiction is postmodernist one.<sup>7</sup>

Taken in this way, a term like *meta-mimesis* can further account for tendencies in novels like McEwan’s which ultimately provide self-conscious illustrations of mimetic processes. These are novels which reinforce, rather than undercut, a threefold relationship between narrative, reader, and world, by describing that dynamism *self-consciously* within their storylines. This is not to say that mimesis itself can not (or should not) be sensitive to postmodern/post-structural critiques, but to take this sensitivity as a sufficient definition for the meta-mimetic is to lose track of what distinguishes meta-mimesis from *postmodernist* metafiction in the first place.

At this point, one might still argue whether a term like meta-mimesis is necessary. One might even ask if meta-mimesis is a redundancy given what has

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<sup>7</sup> The difference is that postmodernist fictions tend to obscure or delimit the mimetic nature of narrative in order to turn self-reflexively inwards, whereas, in the case of realism, mimetic aims have always been taken for granted.



already been covered by flexible notions of the postmodernist novel *per se*. Indeed, many have already dealt with a latent mimetic impulse in otherwise ‘experimental’ novels. Discussing Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Larry McCaffery explains that such a novel ‘has become a kind of model for the contemporary writer, being self-conscious about its literary heritage and about *the limits* of mimesis...yet managing to reconnect its readers to the world outside the page’ (264, emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup> There may, however, be something terribly short-sighted about such an undervaluing of mimesis within the context of larger, less inclusive categories such as ‘historiographic metafiction,’ ‘fabulation,’ ‘crossover fiction’ or the ‘writerly’ novel. As we have already seen, such convenient generalisations run the risk of reasserting the predominance of an anti-conventionalist, postmodernist rubric for interpreting mimetic goals. In other words, such terminology misconstrues mimesis as being quintessentially ‘realist’ in a context where realism can only ever be approached—in the ‘experimental,’ metafictional novel—through postmodernist means (rather than vice-versa). Instead of an affirmation of mimesis, therefore, we can only have an affirmation of its limits. Instead of reinforcing the dialogical and *ethical* relationships between selves-and-others that are inherent both in Ricoeur’s concept of a ‘circle of mimesis’ *and* in the novels of Ian McEwan, we are stuck with self-reflexive irony.

For it is purely the *deconstructive* aims of metafiction which, according to critic Patricia Waugh, ‘offer extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems’ (9). Metafiction, in this sense, offers up a means to disclose the preconceived illusions of a supposedly hegemonic ‘realism’:

Metafiction sets up an opposition, not to ostensibly ‘objective’ facts in the ‘real’ world, but to the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality...[It] thus converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism. [Waugh, 11]

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<sup>8</sup> I have lifted this quote whole-sale from Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988).

Postmodernist metafiction undercuts the matter-of-fact language of a stock 'realism' in order to both reveal the unacknowledged gap between the world and our representation of it, and to underscore the written-ness, the fictionality, of that world as well. This 'metafictional deconstruction' is parodic in that it both installs the very 'outworn literary conventions' it seeks to criticise, then subverts them from within (Waugh, 9, 11). Yet as Alison Lee points out, while metafictional texts do subvert the 'language of realism,' they do so 'from within precisely those conventions which they are clearly trying to undermine' (36).<sup>9</sup>

This anti-conventionalist, or postmodernist, strain of self-conscious narrative is what Linda Hutcheon has defined under the more general heading of historiographic metafiction. Outlining her thesis in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* she writes, 'postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical and ironic re-reading of the art of the past' (23). The metafictional element in 'historiographic metafiction' therefore functions as a stylistic tool to help subvert 'conventional' discourses like that of 'realism.'<sup>10</sup>

But does all metafictional self-consciousness have to be read as necessarily deconstructive? Must contemporary metafiction be wholly *postmodernist*, that is to say, subversive and anti-conventionalist in its convictions? Can self-reflexive irony and the free play of fictionality really be the sole motives of all self-conscious narrators? Does the very ground of a narrative's ethical engagement with the world not become untenable, given post-structural critiques? The present study will argue

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<sup>9</sup> The 'language of realism' here implying a naïve language that was supposedly more than self-assured in its 'transparent' relationship to the real. Lee, however, is quick to point out the manner in which many postmodernist subversions of traditional realism are based in large part on a misrepresentation of that tradition. According to her, 'postmodern texts are both the inheritors and the perpetrators of this radical undermining [of realism's attendant humanist values]. Like linguistic theorists, they posit a straw man of Realism, while at the same time, they unravel the fabric of their own language...' (27-8).

<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon, however, makes sure to qualify this metafictional demystification/provocation as necessarily neither 'revolutionary or even progressive' (183).

It is perhaps liberal to believe that any undermining of a system of thought is healthy and good, but it would also be naïve to ignore that art can just as easily confirm as trouble received codes, no matter how radical its surface transgressions...*Nevertheless, it has become almost a truism of postmodern criticism today that the deconstruction effected by metafictional self-consciousness is indeed revolutionary...*[Hutcheon, 183. Emphasis mine.]

that each of these questions may be answered in the negative by acknowledging the prevalence of meta-mimesis in the work of Ian McEwan and, by implication, the contemporary British novel.

Having introduced the role of meta-mimesis as it will later relate to the work of McEwan, the primary question left to consider is how such a focus might attend to the ethical concerns in his novels—in other words, how to bridge the gap between the mimetic inclination of the metafiction and the ethics?

As has already been mentioned, Dominic Head is keenly aware of the ethical import in the novels of Ian McEwan.<sup>11</sup> Throughout his survey of McEwan's work for the *Contemporary British Novelists* series, he argues for a deeper appreciation of the ethical exploration that the novels of McEwan embody, particularly as they relate to storytelling. Having noted a burgeoning trend in literary criticism which has approached the ethical character of narrative in light of—and in response to—post-structural arguments, he further proposes that 'this is a critical climate which now lends credibility to McEwan's project' (13). Indeed, Head goes so far as to say that the work of Ian McEwan may be seen as *analogous* to the critical work of those attempting to frame an ethics of narrativity. McEwan's novels, argues Head, are 'the creative equivalent or counterpart of narrative ethics, making explicit an intellectual journey that [has governed] McEwan's career' (24). Needless to say, it will be the purpose of this thesis to explore the nature of this ethical structure as it functions in self-conscious narratives like McEwan's. Most importantly, this study will argue *that it is precisely within the metafictional, meta-mimetic framing of McEwan's novels that the author codifies his narrative ethics.*

Claudia Schemberg has also noted a correspondence between the field of narrative ethics and the work of McEwan, and she pays particular attention to the way this engagement with ethics functions at the level of McEwan's plots. In her thesis,<sup>12</sup> Schemberg relates this ethical engagement to the various quests for selfhood that are dramatised in McEwan's novels. She is struck by the way many of McEwan's protagonists 'aspire to a unity and wholeness in their lives,' establishing a search that

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<sup>11</sup> The predominant place he holds in the present thesis is largely because of this ethical focus. Furthermore, it would seem that Head is aware of all the work that the present study builds from—Paul Ricoeur and Claudia Schemberg, *Metafiction and Narrative Ethics*—yet, he never finds an organising principle through which to synthesise these points of view.

<sup>12</sup> *Achieving 'At-One-Ment': Storytelling and the Concept of the Self in Ian McEwan's The Child in Time, Black Dogs, Enduring Love and Atonement* (2002).

both ‘presupposes some kind of *telos* or aim...[and] a positioning of the *self* in moral space’ (39). And that moral space, she finds, is largely rendered by McEwan’s characters via narrative, through their telling of a story: ‘narrative serves as a tool wielded by the protagonists to invest their lives with meaning, to connect the *self* with the world, in fact, to (re)create themselves by constructing their personal story from the abundant material on offer’ (33).

An equivalent understanding of the primary roles of narrative and imagination is to be found in the hermeneutic philosophies of both Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney (philosophies that will be referred to in greater depth throughout this thesis). Like Schemberg, Head, and McEwan himself, both Ricoeur and Kearney are interested in the way narrative both orders our experience of the world and establishes an ethical framework for our selfhood. Not only does narrative help to configure our being-in-the-world—providing a sense of self that perdures over time—it is also that which puts the self into meaningful and moral contact with the world:

Finally, Ricoeur powerfully demonstrates how narrative serves ethical *phronesis* in its power to *empathize*. In addition to its capacity to envision a new project, evaluate its motivations, and initiate a viable course of action, narrative enables us to identify with others. There is neither love nor hate, care nor concern, without [narrative]. It could be said that this last point challenges a certain postmodern assumption that poetics has no truck with ethics. What Ricoeur claims is that narrative understanding provides us *both* with a poetics *and* an ethics of responsibility in that it propels us beyond self-reference to relation with others (via analogy/empathy/apperception). This extension of the circle of selfhood involves an ‘enlarged mentality’ capable of imagining the self in the place of the other. [Kearney 2004, 173]

And it is precisely this same ethical propensity of narrative that McEwan’s novels not only dramatise in their plots, but self-consciously *illustrate* at the level of their metafiction. They self-consciously express George Eliot’s belief that the function of art is to ‘amplify experience and extend our contact with our fellow men beyond the

bounds of our personal lot' (270).<sup>13</sup> Art, for Eliot, engages the 'sympathetic imagination,' and McEwan's novels can be said to wear this same engagement on their narrative sleeves, revealing it in-process. By showing how the configuration of narrative is necessary to the formation of selfhood and, further, by offering the novel form itself as an embodiment of that necessity, McEwan's work may be seen as ethically engaged; through his self-conscious narratives, he follows mimesis through to its ethical destination. Both *Black Dogs* and *Atonement* highlight the capacity of narrative to bring us imaginatively nearer to others, and how essential this capacity is to ethical awareness. Indeed, McEwan explores this matter himself (in an article that, much like his recent fictions, displays an attempt to make sense of traumatic events): 'imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality' ('Only Love and Then Oblivion').<sup>14</sup> And it is also an effort, a moral imperative, that his novels have seen fit to reproduce both fictionally *and* metafictionally. Indeed, it is the metafictional framing of both *Black Dogs* and *Atonement* that ultimately details for us not only what narrative *can do* but, in a self-justifying manoeuvre, what it might also be used *for*.

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<sup>13</sup> For Eliot, as with McEwan, novel-writing is fundamentally about exercising our sympathetic imaginations. In a letter to Charles Bray in 1859, she explains that, 'the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures' (*Letters* 3, 111).

<sup>14</sup> Published in *The Guardian* on the one month anniversary of 11 September, 2001, an event which happened to closely coincide with the publication of *Atonement*.

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