Puritanism and Modernist Novels

Hinojosa, Lynne @.

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CHAPTER TWO

Theory
Puritanism, the Bible, the Novel, Modernism

TYPOLGY as a hermeneutical practice was the foundation of what seemed a unified worldview for the early modern Puritans.¹ It was a mode of reading applied to interpreting just about everything: the Bible, other written texts, history, the natural world, and the moral and spiritual character of the self. Puritan hermeneutics were dominantly shaped by John Calvin, who in turn was highly influenced by Augustine. According to Wesley Kort, Bible-reading for Calvin was central to the Christian life, such that doctrine and theology were meant to aid it, not be elevated above it (198). A seventeenth-century Puritan minister, Thomas Watson, in “How We May Read the Scriptures with the Most Spiritual Profit,”² described the centrality of the Bible to the Christian life:

The Scripture is the compass by which the rudder of our will is to be steered; it is the field in which Christ, the pearl of price, is hid; it is a rock of diamond; it is a sacred Collyrium, or eye-salve; it mends their eyes

¹. Some of the material in this chapter appeared previously in print as “Reading the Self, Reading the Bible (Or is it a Novel?): The Differing Typological Hermeneutics of Augustine’s Confessions and Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe,” Christianity and Literature 61:4 (2012): 641–65.
². This chapter uses Watson’s text as its primary example. Instructive guides for how to read the Bible could be found in any number of Puritan sermons and devotional texts. See also John Knott, The Sword of the Spirit: Puritan Responses to the Bible (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980).
who look upon it; it is a spiritual optic glass, in which the glory of God is resplendent; is it the panacea, or universal medicine for the soul. (28)

Reading the Bible healed and reformed the Christian’s will and soul. It was the reader’s guide to life and the vehicle by which he could recognize the glory of God. The text was so central to all aspects of life for Puritans that Watson argued: “Christians should be walking Bibles” (40).

Foundationally, St. Paul practices typological hermeneutics when he reads portions of the Old Testament as prefiguring the New, as containing clues or patterns that foreshadow the later events of the New Testament. Adam, for example, is a type that prefigures the antitype Christ, but the latter is the perfected fulfillment of what was the imperfect imprint of the prior. This mode of relating Old Testament to New acknowledges that both type and antitype are historical realities and rests on the assumption that God works in history and has a plan for it. God creates real things that prefiguratively signify other real things later on in time that fulfill the purposes of His providence. Typological interpretation is founded on the belief that, as Augustine said, “In the Old Testament the New lies hidden; in the New Testament the Old is laid open.” In the biblical narrative, then, one can identify as one reads a preordained historical pattern in which types point to their future spiritual fulfillment in Jesus, who enters history and transforms it.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English Puritans saw their historical moment as typologically related to biblical history and therefore as part of God’s providential plan. As Paul Korshin says, English Puritans “believed there were predictive connections between biblical times and their own and they searched constantly for signs to justify their beliefs” and their politics (3). Their present historical period was the postfigurative antitype to Old Testament types: England was typologically related to Israel and the Puritans to God’s chosen people. In the Puritan view, God created the larger historical pattern into which contemporary events fit, and He inserted himself into that pattern, leaving clues or types by which astute readers of history could see His presence and detect His actions.

Typological reading was also a means of understanding and ordering nature for the Puritans: they believed the material order reflected and pointed to a spiritual order. If one meditated on the objects of creation in which God placed signs and emblems to aid interpretation, one could become more conscious of spiritual matters and read the place of one’s self and of the natural world within the larger order of Providence. The ultimate significance of natural occurrences might be just as obscure to
the average human as the significance of historical events, but as William Cowper put it in a late-eighteenth-century poem, “God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.”³ In such a view, God is both creator and exegete.

This theology of reading nature had moral implications for human art. While some Puritans wrote novels, others were skeptical of fiction because the genre distorted the foundational idea that God both creates and interprets. In fiction, the human author creates the narrative and provides the clues for interpreting it, in essence usurping God’s roles of creator and exegete of both history and nature (Hunter 116). For the Puritans only God could reveal correct interpretation, whether through the Holy Spirit or through other scriptures. As Watson says, “The Scripture is to be its own interpreter, or rather the Spirit speaking in it; nothing can cut the diamond but the diamond; nothing can interpret the Scripture but Scripture” (Body 31).

Puritan hermeneutics also adhered to the classical notion that love follows knowledge. In other words, only through gaining self-knowledge could one increase in love for God. Accurate self-knowledge involves both the recognition of one’s sinful state in need of God’s grace and the recognition of one’s status as a creation of God for whom He has immeasurable love. For Calvin, according to Kort, “two bits of knowledge” are received while reading. The first is the “name of the one who has created everything,” and the second is that “the One who created everything also redeems” (195). The individual reader begins to recognize his own moral and spiritual state as he identifies with characters or types within the biblical narrative. As he reads, the reader can see himself in a typological pattern: the Bible can read the self or bring self-knowledge as one places one’s self into the narrative. One can identify with Adam in the garden, for example, or with the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, or with Jonah, too reluctant to do God’s bidding. Watson describes this identification process thus: “Compare yourselves with the Word. See how the Scripture and your hearts agree; how your dial goes with this Sun. Are your hearts, as it were, a transcript and counterpart of Scripture? Is the Word copied out into your hearts?” (“How” 35).

Understanding the self’s state through identification with a character type potentially could also lead to a reformation of the self as the reader then begins to identify with Christ, the antitype, sacrificing love of self in favor of love of God. Gaining self-knowledge occurs as the reader meets

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³. The poem/hymn by Cowper is titled “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”
God in the text, with His grace guiding the reader into the Word. Kort argues that for Calvin, “Knowledge of God, like the power of the Holy Spirit, is related to the act of reading Scripture and not to be located prior to or apart from it” (193). In the movement between Old Testament and New, between identification with type and then antitype, the reader, directed by the Holy Spirit, comes to understand through the experience of reading both her distorted and divided, sinful “false self” and her “true self” found only in Christ and His love. The text speaks to and opens the inner self to gain new knowledge, to reorient its direction in life and for eternity. Such a hermeneutics argues that Bible-reading can lead to real change—to conversion but also to subsequent further change over the course of one’s life—as God’s grace opens the heart to new knowledge and to possibilities for love and forgiveness.

Yet this process must occur over and over again. Bible-reading is a habitual practice cultivated by Puritan believers and seen to be crucial to continued spiritual development. In believing Bible-reading could reveal the “true self” in such a manner, the Puritans assumed the presence of an inner conscience or soul in the reader, an interior space of moral and spiritual truth. Created by God, this inner space of truth is fully known only by God. Humans are created to be epistemologically limited. And because they are sinful, they need reformation continually and to read the Bible habitually in order to access such inner truth about themselves.

The repeated reading process of gaining self-knowledge and opening the self to God through love is a dialectical one. The reader moves between the here and now, what one knows (or thinks she knows), and the not yet, a future perfection that is currently not known but for which one must continually hope. The turning of the false self to the true self is a “personal divestment if not self-abnegation” that has to be repeated over and over again. A “negative relation must be clarified between what a reader knows and is and what is about to be received” (Kort 194). Typological bible-reading is dialectical, then, as the reader must constantly negotiate through God’s guidance the old and new, the known and unknown. The time in which typological interpretation takes place is not linear but dialectical, moving back and forth between the now and not yet.

This dialectical movement of reading is a movement between reasoning about the present and envisioning a new future and a new self. Although Puritanism became stereotyped as both excessively rational and solely morally oriented, Puritan reading practices in actuality involved not only rational, moral evaluation but also aesthetic imagination and move-
ments of the heart. Richard Baxter, another seventeenth-century Puritan preacher and theologian, describes proper Bible-reading as both rational and passionate as well as dialectical:

In reading our understandings are oft illuminated with a heavenly light, and our hearts are touched with a special delightful relish of that truth, and they are secretly attracted and engaged unto God and are all the powers of our souls excited and animated to a holy obedient life.

Likewise, Watson’s descriptions are dialectical: “Reading brings a truth into our head; meditation brings it into our heart; reading and medita-
tion, like Castor and Pollux, must appear together” (“How” 24). Emotion and heart are just as crucial to the reading process as intellect and mind: “Leave not off reading the Bible till you find your hearts warmed. . . . Let it not only inform you, but inflame you,” says Watson. The dialectical nature of typological bible-reading not only shapes the novel but also later on Hegelian and Marxist dialectic.

One potential reason Puritanism has been linked to a strict rationalism may be the large typological handbooks Puritans produced, the most famous of which is likely Samuel Mather’s *Figures and Types of the Old Testament* (second edition, 1705). Puritan interpretation of the Bible at times focused obsessively on identifying the types and patterns embedded in the biblical narrative. Yet despite what seems to be an incredulous stretching at times of the possibilities of typological connection between Old Testament and New and a focus on the minutiae of the biblical text, reading was not considered an exact science or a completely rational activity by the Puritans. Knowledge of history, self, and God obtained through reading was often considered to remain epistemologically obscure and involved a nonscientific, poetic or aesthetic mode of reading led by the Holy Spirit.

Even Mather had much to say about the obscurity of the types and of the reading self: “There was and is a double use of Types and parables, and of that whole way of Argument by Similitude and Compari-
sions: They do both darken and illustrate; but if not explained, they are like a Riddle, they cast a dark mist and a cloud upon the thing” (9). For Mather, “the Apostle’s definition of the type”—“a shadow of good things to come”—has three parts: 1) “some outward or sensible Thing, that represents some other higher thing”; 2) “There is the thing represented thereby, which is good things to come, which we call the Antitype”; and 3) “There is the work of the Type, which is to shadow forth or represent
these future good things” (52). He likens the “general Nature of a Type” and its Antitype to: the shadow and its substance; the shell and its kernel; the letter and its Spirit or Mystery (52). Even though “it hath been the Goodness and Wisdom of God in all times and ages, to teach Mankind Heavenly things by Earthly; Spiritual and invisible things, by outward and visible,” these teachings are not perfectly clear: they require special insight and knowledge given by the Holy Spirit (52). Just as the Antitype “infinitely transcends” the type, such that “no type could reach it” (57), similarly, no human interpreter can decode without God’s aid the system of Types which He has created. In parallel, no human interpreter can decode his own inner self without God’s aid. Christ, the antitype, is both now and not yet; he entered history but will come again to fulfill history. This future is unknowable fully in earthly life, and thus the habitual process of identification through Bible-reading is more poetic and uncertain than scientific or certain. Most significantly for this book’s subsequent discussion, “identification” with a character in a text does not involve rationally equating two things, but rather is a much more loose and fluid connection. There is a constant dialectical movement between recognizing the limits of one’s self and opening up to what is new and beyond the self.

The self-recognition in light of God’s grace that occurred in Puritan reading was also to be interpreted within a comprehensive view of reality. Ideally, the four traditional levels of interpretation—literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical—seamlessly intersected with each other. Identifying with a type not only leads to a recognition of one’s individual moral and spiritual state, then, but also of one’s status as a human being within the teleological narrative of God’s providential history, the ontological structure of God’s creation, and the ethical order of God’s people (the church). Bible-reading is a constant reminder to the reader of one’s place in a narrative that moves in time (history) and has a context (creation) as well as a way to identify, reform, and instruct one’s particular self in one’s local context. For Puritans, then, there is a moral and spiritual order to the universe. This order manifests itself in creation, in history, and in the church. Bible-reading reminds the reader of his proper place within this order, and thus there is also a constant dialectical negotiation between one’s own self and the larger realities in which the self participates. Bible-reading has implications for one’s own particular story, but that story and the movement of the self ultimately only gain significance as they participate in the larger story of salvation history. The Puritan self formed through Bible-reading is simultaneously individual and communal.
Such hermeneutics and Bible-reading practices, among other forces, shaped greatly the form and content of early modern British novels as well as the expectations for moral and spiritual formation that readers had as they approached such texts. Korshin outlines how the genre of character books expanded in seventeenth-century England and became a staple of Protestant writing and a precursor to the modern novel (122). In such books characters represented virtues and vices and were to provide examples to readers of various moral states. As part of a whole “Christomimetic tradition” stemming from Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*, which was reprinted often and very popular among Puritans, good characters were ones whose individual lives imitated Christ (Korshin 197). Through such literature, readers could identify moral types that then became prefigurative or predictive in their own imaginations. If one recognized the type, one could predict the course the future plot might take. Similarly, in the experience of reading, identifying one’s self with a character type could illuminate one’s own true self and prefigure the trajectory of one’s own future. Tera H. Pettella in a recent study argues that early modern readers “read novels in much the same way they did their devotional texts” and that novel writers in turn used and modified the conventions of Puritan devotional texts in their novels (280).

The typological, dialectical process, in which the reader identifies with a character and thereby potentially gains self-knowledge and instruction, or even experiences reformation or conversion, shapes what early modern novels are and the moral and religious function they serve. In many ways, Puritan typology is the hermeneutics of the novel. Yet at this point, important qualifications need to be made to this claim, for obviously a novel is not the Bible.

The typological Bible-reading described above is certainly not a new thing that emerges with Puritanism in modernity. Typology is in fact an ancient way of reading the Bible that had existed for centuries and to which Puritans saw themselves returning. Augustine was a key influence as Puritan reformers reclaimed the Bible for the layperson. There are significant differences, however, in premodern and Puritan biblical typology compared to its novelistic variations. These differences manifest themselves in three interrelated ways. First, the nature of the individual self (reader) is ontologically different. For Puritans, the Bible-reader is an individual whose story is merely a part of a larger story of God’s providential history, creation, and the church. Meaning comes in relation to community. In turn, the individual reader did not have final interpretive authority. In the novel, on the other hand, the individual reader remains
solitary and is not necessarily connected to a larger sense of community or history. The reader is the sole interpretive authority. The second difference between biblical and novelistic typology has to do with the “religious” or “sacred” status of the text. The third difference has to do with the dialectical nature of the both the narrative and the reading process. Although interrelated, these three differences are discussed separately on a theoretical level next. After that, a brief comparison of Augustine’s Confessions and Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe shows the differences and similarities of typological Bible- and novel-reading. The final section of this chapter examines the parallels between Puritan hermeneutics and new ethical theory—a branch of current criticism of the modernist novel. All of these connections reveal how a study of the novel’s Puritan roots might alter how we interpret texts in both novel and modernist studies.

The first difference between Bible-reading and novel-reading has to do with the nature of the individual self, ontologically, epistemologically, and ethically. Literary historians have traditionally assumed that Puritans read their Bibles in the same way novels are read—in solitude. Andrew Cambers affirms that contrary to such interpretation, Puritan Bible-reading was often practiced communally in the context of the church. While it is true that “books were central to godly culture” and Puritan self-identity and that “the image of the Puritan was intrinsically linked to that of the book,” Cambers argues, the tradition of seeing Puritan reading practices as mostly individualized is simply not accurate (6). Instead, Cambers argues that “godly reading was a style of religious engagement with texts which was frequently oral and communal: to read among fellow believers was a key sign of evangelical religious identity” (9). “Belief,” then, was “primarily socially constructed and maintained,” and this fact casts “doubt on the common assumption that the Reformation ushered in an era of individualization and interiorization” (9). To Cambers, while recent historiography has expanded and refreshed our understanding of Puritan cultures, tying together ecclesiology, theology, and politics (13), scholars in literary studies, sociology, and cultural studies still tend to rely on Max Weber’s “claims about the connections between Puritanism and the ‘spirit of capitalism’ and the emergence of modern Western culture” (15). In Cambers’s view, this leads to an oversimplification of Puritan reading practices as “somehow crucial in the rise of silent reading and the development of interior religious belief and even of the self” (16). Puritans in some contexts practiced individualized reading, but it was neither the only mode of Bible-reading nor the dominant one. Reading one’s place and limitations in the universe was practiced in the communal context of
the church, and ideally the church congregation would interpret together God’s word and the truths found therein, deciphering their relation to history and creation. The individual reader was not the sole interpretive authority. As Kort suggests, Calvin placed scriptural interpretive authority somewhere in between the tradition-based “authority of the church” and the authority of the individual reader of scripture (193). The Puritans identified themselves primarily as God’s people, a group whose collective identity was ultimately more important than individual identity and whose history in fulfilling God’s providential plan was more important than anyone’s individual history.

In the end, then, much Puritan Bible-reading was more premodern (or Augustinian) and less individualistic than previously believed. Likely, it is the variation of Puritan hermeneutics involved in novel-reading, not in Bible-reading, which then engenders the modern mode of silent reading and interior self-examination that has for so long been attributed to Puritanism in general. The rise of individualized Bible-reading practices can be attributed not to the methods by which the Puritans read the Bible per se, but rather to what Stephen Prickett has called “the novelization of the Bible” or “biblical novelization” (Origins 267). That is, novel-reading practices, while emergent from and similar to Bible-reading practices, eventually in turn reshape Bible-reading practices in modernity. What becomes missing in novelistic typology are the very senses of communal identity that Cambers argues were foundationally constitutive of Puritan “godly” reading. In novelistic typology, the individual becomes the authoritative interpreter of spiritual and moral truth. The individual becomes sovereign. Over the course of the novel’s history, this notion of the individual becomes stereotyped as “Puritan,” yet this book argues that such a self is only one extreme of what might get produced in the dialectical movement of typological reading.

A second qualification to the claim that Puritan hermeneutics is the hermeneutics of the novel is to acknowledge that certainly not every novel or novelist consciously engages with the truth claims of Christianity or the biblical narrative and its consequent moral and spiritual categories. In this light I follow Korshin’s caution that one should not read a novel typologically unless the author has placed obvious clues in the text that the novel should be read in this way (268). All of the novels treated in this book are full of such clues. I also wager, however, that if one were to examine the tradition in this light, more novels than expected would contain such clues, and remnants of Puritan typology and reactions to it could be detected in many stages of the British tradition. Additionally,
there are novelists who employ aspects of Puritan hermeneutics while remaining ignorant they are doing so. Yet while typological elements in novels may become unhinged from their grounding in the biblical narrative, the text does not stop being “religious.”

Novelists who self-consciously engage Puritan hermeneutics are well-aware of the typological practices of novel-reading, of the relation of the novel to the biblical narrative, and of their own role as a novelist in creating a new narrative. In many ways, the Puritan fear about fiction—that it places the human author in the position of God as both creator and exegete of “history”—is true and shapes novelistic conventions. Each novelist has to come to terms with his or her role as “God,” either engaging the biblical narrative as “truth,” self-consciously going against it, somehow doing some of each, or self-reflexively highlighting the fact that novels create their own grand narratives. Puritan typology is the hermeneutics of the novel, then, without necessarily the accompanying assumption that the biblical narrative is the truth of history or that there is a God who creates and interprets human history. The novel—even the modernist novel—cannot escape dealing with the biblical narrative and Christianity at some level, however, because Puritan hermeneutics is bound up in its very form and content.

The convention of the “novel-reading within the novel” scene reflects this inescapable yet potentially infinitely complex relation of novelist and novel to Puritan hermeneutics. In such scenes, a character is depicted reading a text, sometimes the Bible and often another novel, usually a romance. The narrative goes on to show how this reading shapes the character, whether for better or worse. From Crusoe’s and Pamela’s Bible-reading, to Catherine Morland’s reading of gothic romance, to Emma Bovary’s or Edward Ashburnham’s reading of popular romance novels, to the intertextualities highlighted in many postmodern novels, such scenes are often used to ironize or satirize the typological effects of reading, calling into question Puritan concerns for the reader’s moral and spiritual formation and the view of history in which such formation takes place. At the same time, however, these scenes also reinforce the fact that novels do work typologically and that it might very well matter into what grand narrative they are drawing the reader. Each of the texts analyzed in this book employs such scenes, from Augustine and Defoe to Wilde, Forster, Joyce, and Ford.

The novel through this self-reflexive ironizing calls into question the truth claims of all narratives, whether biblical or novelistic, while at the
same time also allowing for the possibility that these narratives actually do contain truth that speaks to the inner soul or conscience. Within the confines of this project, then, the novel is “secular” in that it serves to fictionalize all forms of narrative, biblical and otherwise. It is also “religious,” however, because it cannot escape the Puritan modes of interpretation and the possibility for moral and spiritual truth to be found within the narrative by the reading self. As the novel offers another grand narrative in place of the biblical one, it shapes its readers morally and spiritually, a “religious” function.

It seems that a crux of much current debate on secularization and religion has to do with how one theorizes the relation between form and content, in this case, between biblical narrative form and literary content. My view, that the embeddedness of typological hermeneutics in the novel, even though altered, might entail some level of break with Christianity but not with religion, would be countered vehemently by someone like Fredric Jameson. For example, when writing on Defoe in a contribution to Moretti’s anthology, The Novel, Jameson states:

I think that the debate as to whether Defoe himself was a Christian is misplaced: we have here rather the template for the organization of experiences in a new way, in which religious influence is itself a mere external and enabling condition. . . . To be sure, it is not wrong to say that the bildungsroman is then a secularization of this earlier, already secular “spiritual autobiography” of Defoe; but neither stage retains the meaning of the preceding one, but only the form. Thus it would be wrong to say that the bildungsroman is still religious in its (now secular) concern for the state of the individual soul: no, what is deployed now is a mere form that organizes its new social material in an analogous way. (102)

The secularism–religion dichotomy and the Marxist dialectic depend on this view. They depend on there being a complete and unbridgeable separation between form and content, between biblical narrative form and the social content of novels. They depend on viewing narrative form as something whose content can change over time so that the form loses its religious truth value. While that is a compelling way to see the history of the novel and of secular modernity, this book argues that the form and content of novels are inseparable because of the Puritan hermeneutics embedded in the novel. In Puritan Bible-reading, the form cannot be separated from the content, for there is only one grand story to be told,
and it assumed to be both religiously true and capable of producing moral change in its readers. As Watson says, “The word written is not only a rule of knowledge, but a rule of obedience; it is not only to mend our sight but to mend our pace” (“How” 40). In the movement from Old Testament to New, the now and the not yet, the form is the content of the story and vice versa. In the dialectical process of reading a narrative, whether biblical or novelistic, “religious” truth and moral virtue are not separable; they are interpreted together in the act of reading. In novel-reading there is also one underlying “grand story” that potentially has analogous “religious” effects on the reader. This grand story of the novel also inspires change from an old self to a new, and even if “fictional,” it implies a system of truth. This grand story of the novel is what I call in this book the “novelistic narrative.”

In the end, despite the centrality of typology in the hermeneutics of novels, perhaps “secular” and “religious” are finally not the best terms for thinking about the novel. As Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman suggest in their introduction to Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700–2000, there is something about the novel that is both “Christian and secularized”: “The Protestant individualism of Crusoe and Pamela . . . is a religious as well as a secularized Protestantism” (2). Knight and Woodman highlight the paradox they see at the heart of the novel’s form: “the more the fictional world of the novel expresses and embodies its religious roots, the deeper its thrust towards secularity appears to be” (5). This truly does seem paradoxical, but I am in full agreement. The more the novelist understands the Puritan hermeneutics at the root of the novel’s form; the more he or she self-consciously explores, exploits, and reworks those principles; the more the fictionality of the author-made novelistic world is self-reflexively exposed in the novel’s form; the more self-consciously “secular” or unmoored from the Puritan worldview, the biblical narrative, and God’s authorship that text appears to be.

Better terms to encapsulate the nature of the novel may instead then be “belief” and “doubt”—belief and doubt regarding the “religious” truth of the grand narrative the novel presents, biblical, fictional, or otherwise; belief and doubt regarding the truth of the social-moral, ontological, and epistemological categories constructed in the novel; and belief and doubt regarding the self created in and by the reading process. A particular novel may lead the reader toward one end of the belief–doubt spectrum or the other, but within the tradition as a whole we can see novels that self-consciously respond with belief and doubt to the narratives
and categories created in the Bible, in other novels, and in various social discourses.

This leads to our third and most significant qualification of the idea that Puritan typology is the hermeneutics of the novel. The dialectical movement of the character and reader—the nature of “conversion” or the turning of the self—shifts slightly. While identification between reader and character seems to be an obvious function of modern novels whose roots we can locate in Puritan Bible-reading practices, there has also always existed in the novelistic tradition the tendency to dismantle such character types, moral categories, and hermeneutics of the self. In this regard modernism’s dismantling of the Puritan self is not necessarily a new thing. Indeed, a conventional form of irony within the novelistic tradition involves an inversion of Puritan hermeneutics. *Tristram Shandy*, for example, might be seen as a novel whose main motive is a dismantling of Puritan typology—the processes of typing, labeling, and identifying characters according to moral and spiritual clues, of reading the inner self, and of gaining certain knowledge about others.

Throughout the British tradition novelists have poked fun at Puritans. Interestingly, these negative treatments could come from other English Christians, especially the Anglicans and the Roman Catholics, or from doubters, agnostics, and atheists. Valentine Cunningham in *Everywhere Spoken Against* documents in great detail the overwhelmingly negative treatment of Nonconformity in nineteenth-century novels. James Munson argues many Victorian writers, including Trollope, Arnold, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Bennett, and Gissing, were “hostile” to Nonconformists, stereotyping them as “narrow, ignorant, and provincial” (208). Even as it derives from Puritanism, the novel helps to stereotype the Puritan. This book argues that various modernist writers self-consciously understand and experiment with this fact, recognizing the inseparable connection of form and content, Puritan hermeneutics and novels.

Just as much as some novels create moral and spiritual character types who move in plots in order to gain moral and spiritual knowledge of themselves in a Puritan-like fashion, so just as much, other novels ironically attack this process, revealing typology’s limitations and flaws. Just as Fielding’s *Shamela* did with Richardson’s *Pamela*, many novels become ironic or parodied commentary on earlier novels, the character typologies created therein by the “novelist-God,” and the moralities promoted in the process. Frank Kermode’s sentiment that “the history of the novel is the history of forms rejected or modified” (129), rings true, but I
would add the caveat that the forms are only seemingly rejected or modified because the essential form always remains. Iris Murdoch’s “the history of the novel is the history of anti-novels” also seems right (qtd. in Kermode 130).

Novelistic tradition, to sum up, is built on a dialectic of Puritan hermeneutics with its ironic dismantling, of belief and doubt. As Stephen Prickett has described modernity: “Whatever narratives of God might replace the medieval synthesis were henceforth to be either blindly fundamentalist . . . or fundamentally ironic” (Narrative 134).4 The ironic deconstruction of Puritanism in the novel, however, is dependent upon Puritan hermeneutics for its own existence. This dependent and mutually constitutive relation is the dialectic of the novel—the novelistic narrative. Puritanism shapes the novel’s form while a supposed escape from or dismantling of Puritanism shapes the novel’s content. These dialectical elements are mutually constitutive of each other. In Puritan Bible-reading, the dialectical movement goes back and forth between the self’s identification with a biblical type and what it thinks is self-knowledge and the giving up of self to God and the unknowable. In the novel, the dialectical movement goes back and forth between the social-moral categories of the novel that shape the self and the escape of the self into whatever it is that lies beyond and outside those categories.

One way to explain this dialectic of belief and doubt, “fundamentalism” and irony, confinement and escape, is to argue that the novelistic tradition records the separation of religion and morality in modernity. In Puritan Bible-reading, religion and morality are inseparable. Yet in modernity, as Alasdair MacIntyre argues, “morality” becomes its own unique category, separable from religion, in the period of roughly 1630 to 1850, in the wake of Enlightenment rejections of Christian and Aristotelian moral systems. When “morality” began to refer to “that particular sphere in which rules of conduct which are neither theological nor legal nor aesthetic are allowed a cultural space of their own,” the “project of an independent rational justification of morality” such as what one sees in Kant or Mill, became the central concern of Northern European culture (39). However, without a universal narrative that implied a teleology, a sense of the categorical (the divine origins of the moral order), or a shared view of the human subject, this project was bound to be impossible (60). According to MacIntyre, Enlightenment theorists of a universal, rationally

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4. For Prickett, “fundamentalism” can take many forms: Christian, Marxist, Freudian, and so on.
derived moral order ultimately failed because even though they rejected
the shared background and foundation for moral order provided by reli-
gion, they themselves failed to provide for their own moral philosophies
“any public, shared rationale or justification” (50). As a result, over time
“moral judgments los[t] any clear status” and authority and became mere
“linguistic survivals” from earlier times (60).

Following this logic, fragmented Puritan interpretative practices sur-
vive in the novelistic tradition and in social morality in modernity, but the
accompanying biblical narrative within which such practices and catego-
ries are seen to be true increasingly loses its legitimacy.5 As the assumed
context of the church, creation, historical providence, and eternity is seen
to be increasingly fictional, Puritan (among other) moralities separate
from notions of religious truth. One way to view the modern novel, then,
is that it depicts a world in which the Puritan typological methods still
operate socially and morally but without necessarily the firm biblical nar-
rative context in which they can be interpreted as representing the inner,
religious truth about who a human being is or the truth about history.
Puritan typology potentially becomes mere typecasting—a social and
moral interpretive practice that seems unmoored from a religious founda-
tion. Hence, Puritan typology also potentially becomes a set of social and
moral interpretive practices and categories whose foundation and truth
value can be constantly brought into question, ironized, dismantled. The
novel ironically stereotypes Puritans even as it works to escape and dis-
mantle typecasting processes. The conversion movement is not from false
self to true self found in Christ who is both now and not yet, but from
the false categories and narratives that society places on the self to the
true self found in individual escape and freedom.

Although I use them in a different fashion, Ruth Benedict’s anthro-
pological terms are also useful in describing this dialectical relation of
Puritan hermeneutics to its own ironizing in the novel.6 Puritan herme-
neutics and Bible-reading are practices of what Benedict calls a “guilt cul-
ture,” which is “a society that inculcates absolute standards of morality
and relies on men’s developing a conscience” (222). Guilt cultures rely
on “an internalized conviction of sin” as a sanction for good behavior
(223). Thus, as Puritan Bible-reading reveals the truth within the soul,
as it speaks to the conscience, the reader is shaped morally and spiritu-
ally and is reoriented toward becoming and doing good in the world and

5. For more on the breakdown of the biblical narrative, see Frei.
6. While Benedict’s conclusions about Japanese culture have since faced significant
criticism, her terms nonetheless remain useful to describe what is at work here.
loving God. For Benedict, guilt cultures are different than “shame cultures,” which rely on “external sanctions for good behavior” (223). In other words, “shame” or judgment by one’s society is the only impetus for good behavior. If “bad behavior does not ‘get out in the world,’” the individual “need not be troubled” (223). Shame “requires an audience or at least a man’s fantasy of an audience. Guilt does not” (223). In this light, the novel records the dialectic between what a Puritan guilt culture truly believes and the fragmentation of that guilt culture into a shame culture which is potentially seen as merely fictional. Put another way, novelistic tradition and form involves a dialectic of Puritan typology (religion conjoined with morality) and ironized social typecasting (mere modern morality), guilt and shame. As both the religious Puritan self with its conscience and social morality with its shame are discarded, some novelists promote the natural self—its passions, desires, and longings—in order to return the human to its body and away from both sets of moralizing abstractions. Escape to become an “ethical self” is one end of the dialectical movement of novels; adherence to the religious or social-moral or “Puritan” self is the other.

Not only did doubters, agnostics, and atheists attack and ironize Nonconformity in the novel, however, but so did Anglicans and Roman Catholics. This allies certain types of Christians with religious doubters and nonbelievers in helping to stereotype “Puritanism.” These attacks on the Puritan within other branches of Christianity often centered on the interpretive authority given to the individual Bible-reader. They held in common with non-Christian critics a disdain for what they saw as the Protestant individual who assumes epistemological sovereignty. Chapter 3 treats this branch of criticism more fully by looking at some of John Henry Newman’s ideas.

As mentioned, many Marxist theorists and historians of the novel focus on traits similar to those outlined here. Marxists are interested in how novels self-reflexively highlight the separability of the moral and spiritual categories and types used in a narrative from the actual material person or individual being depicted. 7 McKeon argues that the scientific revolution, the Protestant reformation, and the emergence of print culture all form a modern “condition of ‘categorial instability’” according to which “traditional epistemological and social categories are conceived by contemporaries with a self-conscious detachment whose consequences

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are far-reaching” (357). For him, the novel becomes uniquely suited to “mediate” the resulting questions of truth and virtue, “their separation from each other,” and the instability and shiftiness of epistemological and social categories in relation to human “reality” (419). So far, this book agrees with McKeon as it argues that the novel records the separation of Puritan religion and social morality in modernity. As William Warner argued when McKeon’s book first was published, however, the dialectical view of history to which McKeon adheres at times forces him to create a totalizing yet limited narrative about the novel’s prehistory and its dramatic emergence. This book argues for a simpler model: novels and novelists who struggle with the relation of their characters to grand narratives and moral and spiritual categories, and theorists and historians of the novel who see the genre as embodying this struggle (or “categorial instability”), are all attuned, if only unconsciously, not to Marxism and the dialectical nature of history, but to Puritan hermeneutics and the Puritan dialectic of the novel.

One of the things Warner criticized was McKeon’s idea that questions of truth and of virtue all manifest themselves dialectically. If this really was how history worked, these questions and answers would subsume each other while synthetically progressing toward something new, more complete, and unitary, “where difference arises out of simplicity within the womb of contradiction, undergoes a plural development to arrive as a simple unity at an ever more concrete totality” (Warner 71). According to Warner, even in McKeon’s account this does not happen. Not all social and epistemological categories emerge dialectically dependent on each other, and certainly McKeon’s theory does not cover all the historical possibilities for how to answer questions of truth. Warner agrees with McKeon’s assessment that the novel is built on an exploration of ideas about truth and virtue, but rather than seeing this as a “dialectic” in which contradictory forms and categories move toward a foreshadowed Marxist telos, Warner suggests using a more basic formulation: that the novel takes up a particular “historically conditioned problematic of truth and virtue” (78). Questions of truth and questions of virtue have always been problematized in history, says Warner; the novel simply deals with a particular historical manifestation of such a problematic. These topics can certainly be explored in the novel without forcing them into a Marxist dialectical framework of history. For Warner, history is more contingent and the novel more heterogeneous, embodying a “complex plurality,” than McKeon’s dialectical view allows. Even though I also argue later against the idea that the novel is pluralistic, Warner’s critique
of McKeon helps shape my view. Specifically, this book argues that the novel takes up the “problematic” of the *seeming* separability of Puritan notions of truth (religion) and virtue (morality), but at the same time, as in Puritan Bible-reading, truth and virtue, religion and morality, are never entirely separable in the novel’s form nor eliminated from its social contexts nor ever fully escaped. Although I do see the novel embodying a “dialectic,” it is a Puritan one, not Marxist. One could say I am like McKeon forcing the novel into a different, totalizing, limited dialectical view of history—Puritan, biblical, typological, teleological. Importantly, however, I argue that the Puritan dialectic of belief and doubt, religion (typology) and social morality (typecasting), guilt culture and shame culture, confinement and escape, embedded in the novel is historically prior to and thereby at least in part constitutive of the Hegelian-like and Marxist-like secular dialectics that the novel is so often interpreted as embodying. The former novelistic narrative influences the development of the latter secularization narratives.

To McKeon and others, the novel seems to embody “the philosophy of the limit,” the term Drucilla Cornell coined to replace the term “deconstruction.” This is partially true, but the novel is also always more than this, for it also often adheres to notions of religious truth, despite all its questioning and dismantling. It embodies a moral position, despite its awareness of the separability of moral categories from reality. In these ways, the Puritan aspects of its form and content are never lost. In Puritan Bible-reading, the true and the moral are inseparable aspects of the self and of the text. Form and content are one thing. These hermeneutical unions always carry over into the novel, whatever the final stance the novel comes to embody. Thus, while I agree with McKeon that the novel records the separability of truth and virtue, religion and morality in modernity, it depicts neither McKeon’s Marxist dialectical synthesis nor Warner’s pluralization that are thought to constitute the movement of history. For even while the novel highlights the limitations of categories and the grand narratives that produce them in the face of human reality, in its form and content the spiritual and the moral always remain inseparable.\(^8\) Every narrative created in a novel, however fictional, however self-consciously or skeptically ironizing, however believing or doubtful, nevertheless embodies connected notions of truth and morality that

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8. My account that the “moral” and the “religious” are ultimately inseparable categories in the form of the novel, even as the novel depicts a world in which they seem separable, counters several recent studies which see novels as treating ethics (or the quest for “perfection”) in purely secular terms. See for example, Stewart and also Andrew Miller.
exist in relation somehow to Puritan versions of those things. The novel records modernity’s lasting struggle with the Puritan narrative of history and self.

Augustine’s *Confessions* and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* exemplify the differences between biblical and novelistic typology, respectively. One significant difference is that Augustine narrates his conversion as a dialectical process that occurs while reading yet continues throughout one’s life as a Christian, while the narration of Crusoe’s trajectory after conversion is not. The result is that Augustine’s interpretive methods, while also involving the transformation of the individual reader, reinscribes the reading self into the larger community of the church, creation, and human history, as well as the not yet, the heavenly kingdom which is to come. The dialectical reading process moves back and forth between the individual life and what is known, and the larger entities of communal identity and the obscure unknown future for which one hopes. Crusoe, on the other hand, interprets himself and his scripture-reading on a literal level only. Any truths gained through reading pertain only to his immediate personal life story; he never sees himself as participating in the larger orders of the church, human history, or God’s creation. The Bible, it seems, has been written just for him.

Conversion for Augustine is a dialectical transformation. In the conversion scene, Augustine describes himself as entering the garden with contradictory wills. He longs to give himself up to Christ yet he also wants to cling to his physical desires: “This was the controversy raging in my heart, a controversy about myself against myself” (158). Augustine describes the contradictory human will as a dialectical entity:

> The will is commanding itself to be a will—commanding itself, not some other. But it does not in its fullness give the command, so that what it commands is not done. For if the will were so in its fullness, it would not command itself to will, for it would already will. It is therefore no monstrousness, partly to will, partly not to will, but a sickness of the soul to be so weighted down by custom that it cannot wholly rise even with the support of truth. Thus there are two wills in us, because neither of them is entire: and what is lacking in one is present in the other. (155)

Augustine’s contradictory wills are constitutionally dependent on each other yet antagonistic to each other. As Augustine reads the biblical text,
his contradictory wills are drawn up into God’s love and made into some-
thing new. He sees himself clearly, recognizes his false and true selves, as
Christ enters his heart through the text and resolves the contradictions,
bringing wholeness. Christ is the fullness of time that brings the “not yet”
into the “now,” the future into the present.

This process of submitting one’s conflicting wills is essentially what
occurs over and over again for Augustine while reading the Bible, for the
self in its earthly form is not yet the perfected self of paradise and needs
continual reorientation toward the imitation of Christ. The self in histori-
cal time, even after one’s initial conversion, is always in a state of contra-
diction, always between the now and not yet. The reader might occupy a
temporary identifiable state but is also always moving out of that iden-
tity, denying or refining that identity, moving toward Christlikeness and
a future but unknowable perfection and redemption. Dying to self to live
in Christ is a process of Becoming, as Nothingness moves more and more
toward Being, as the type is drawn closer to the antitype.

Intriguingly, Hegel recognized the dialectical nature of Christian con-
version and Bible-reading. When discussing the reconciliation toward
which Greek tragedy leads in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion,
Hegel suggests that the Christian idea of conversion is a similar process.
Christian conversion occurs “in the inner life, whereby that which is
done can be rendered undone” (327). In Christianity, “the man who is
‘converted’ gives up his one-sidedness” by which his own will contradicts
itself. This one-sidedness is drawn up into the God who takes favor on
him and “calls” him to himself (327). Inner dialectical contradiction is
resolved into something new. Hegel’s dialectical theory of world history
maintains the Augustinian and Puritan logic of Christian conversion and
typology. Yet instead of seeing his theory of history as merely secularizing
the Christian narrative form while inserting new secular content, I argue
that Hegel actually develops his own “religion.”

Crusoe also converts through typological reading. Crusoe identifies
his life as moving from Old Testament type needing deliverance from
physical affliction to New Testament type needing deliverance from spir-
itual sin (90). Unlike Augustine, however, he never extends his literal
interpretation to the higher levels of allegorical, moral, or anagogical lev-
els. There is no dialectical movement between self-knowledge and that
which is beyond the self; for Crusoe, the self is the object of all inter-
pretation. He therefore does not interpret fully his own ontological position
within the narrative of God’s history, God’s creation, or the church, and
the identification of his true self does not extend beyond his particular
story.
For example, Crusoe describes his Bible-reading as invoking “very serious Thoughts about my present Condition” (171) and as allowing him to apply “all the Comforts of it to my present State” (105). He never reflects on God literally forming Israel as a people in the Old Testament or the church in the New Testament, and as a consequence, he never sees himself as part of God’s larger people. He does reflect once on God the Creator right before his conversion (86), but he never sustains a constant reflection on himself as created by God, as Augustine does. In these ways, Crusoe’s interpretation of scripture never has ramifications beyond his own needs and situations as his life progresses.

With this limited understanding of the self’s place within the narrative, he reflects on his solitary state often and concludes that he actually prefers being alone instead of being back in the world. On his fourth anniversary of being on the island, Crusoe reflects on his comfortable solitary position:

I look’d now upon the World as a Thing remote, which I had nothing to do with, no Expectation from, and indeed no Desires about: In a Word, I had nothing indeed to do with it, nor was ever like to have; so I thought it look’d as we may perhaps look upon it hereafter, viz. as a Place I had liv’d in, but was come out of it; and well might I say, as Father Abraham to Dives, Between me and thee is a great Gulph fix’d. (119)

Crusoe displays no desire here to carry out the mission of the church or to be reunited with society in order to participate in God’s plan for human history. Crusoe likes being alone and believes that in spiritual matters this is sufficient, even preferable.

Although Confessions is also mostly the story of an individual life, Augustine establishes from the beginning a much different picture of the self. The constant theme of Confessions is the self’s submission and resubmission of itself to God, recognizing itself as made not for itself, but rather for praise and love of God. The text opens with a reflection on the individual’s created status and ends with a lengthy reflection on the Genesis creation account. This framework poetically links God’s creation of the “true self” in the individual to His creation of the cosmos and places the individual life within anagogical reality. The individual life is never the final end or reason for interpreting scripture or even for converting. Reading scripture should teach that the self’s identity extends beyond one’s own story.

For Augustine, the act of narrating one’s life story is confession. This involves not only confessing one’s sins, but also constant and continued
confessing of one’s own inadequacy before God, recognizing God as Creator, the self as created, and one’s literal position in creation and in history. The act of confessing is never over, however, and must be continually employed. In fact, confession is a necessary epistemological practice for Augustine—it is the central way one comes to know and recognize one’s true self and one’s false self, to know and relearn over and over again one’s ontological position, for the self is in this life ultimately unknowable and must constantly confess its inadequacy to know itself: “I will confess therefore what I know of myself and what I do not know; for what I know of myself I know through the shining of Your light; and what I do not know of myself, I continue not to know until my darkness shall be made as noonday in Your countenance” (193). Poignantly, Augustine describes reading the Bible at one point as a “slaying of the self that I had been” (170). Augustine’s method of interweaving continually his life story with direct biblical quotations literally performs and demonstrates the subsuming of the self’s story into the biblical story.\(^9\) Confession through Bible-reading is an essential dialectical practice as the contradictory wills are repeatedly drawn into God’s presence in the Word and made new.

Every time Augustine narrates himself reading scripture, the self-knowledge gained is experiential, known intuitively by the heart and not necessarily by the reasoning mind. Self-knowledge involves both not knowing and knowing. The not knowing is a powerful experience beyond the self’s rational capabilities. He describes the experience of reading the Apostle Paul at the end of book VII this way: “Marvellously these truths graved themselves in my heart when I read that least of your Apostles and looked upon Your works and trembled” (137). Bible-reading is also described as: “Wisdom striking the heart with terror and longing” (239); the text speaking “in the ear of my Spirit” (269, 271); and as “hearing with the heart” (263). The end of reading for Augustine is not to gain certain knowledge of himself, but rather to become one with the text, both literally and spiritually. David Jeffrey describes Augustine’s idea beautifully: “It is less the explication of texts that matters than the Text itself; the authentic reader is one in whom that text has entered to become a living Presence” (51). As Kort says of Calvin’s theory of reading, the texts “inscribe themselves on the reader’s body and soul” (190). In Watson’s terms the reader becomes a “walking Bible.” Crusoe’s failure to become

\(^9\) For particularly beautiful examples of this method see Confessions, 5, 136–37, and 297.
such a “living Word” in the end is disturbing. Rather than leading him to sacrifice himself to God and to evoke a desire to serve the church and creation, his conversion and Bible-reading seem only to bolster his own earthly authority and independence while helping him gain the strength to survive.¹⁰

Both Augustine and Crusoe participate in their transformative Bible-reading while alone. The individual life matters to God, but only Augustine also emphasizes that the “true self” is literally one with the church. Post-conversion, Augustine does something Crusoe never does—he acknowledges himself to be a part of God’s people who transcend time:

I confess not only before You, with inward exultation yet trembling, with inward sorrow yet with hope as well; but also in the ears of the believing sons of men, companions of my joy and sharers of my mortality, my fellow citizens, fellow pilgrims: those who have gone before, and those who are to come after, and those who walk the way of life with me. These are Your servants, my brethren, whom You have chosen that they should be Your sons, my masters whom You have commanded me to serve if I am to live with You and in You. (192)

Because the self is always insufficient, Augustine absolutely needs the church to pray for him, to encourage him, and to hear his confession. As with Puritan “godly reading,” the self is both an individual and a communal self, and the community serves to help the self recognize its own limitations. Such recognition involves a dialectical movement between rational knowing and aesthetic or ethical unknowing.

Crusoe’s errant and limited focus on the literal self involves the belief that the individual reader has the epistemological authority to interpret the truths of scripture and gain rational knowledge about the self. Because for Puritans spiritual meaning was plainly available in literal scripture, this potentially meant that, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, each reader had the ability to interpret accurately the spiritual truths of the Bible. As Crusoe says after Friday converts, all that is needed is the reader, the text, and the Holy Spirit: “the Word of God, and the Spirit of God promis’d for the Guide and Sanctifier of his People, are the absolutely necessary Instructors of the Souls of Men, in the saving Knowledge of God, and the Means of Salvation” (202). Believing that he and Friday do not need to be

¹⁰ Perhaps in a state of extreme suffering, in which arguably Crusoe is for the first part of the novel, focusing on the self is more justified. Of course, he is alone on the island for most of the novel as well.
in England to access the truth, Crusoe also implies that no other authority is needed. The individual Bible-reader, no matter how uneducated or untrained, is sufficient. Crusoe also explicitly rejects the need to read and understand the more complicated and obscure sections of scripture.

Augustine sees the rejection of the more difficult parts of scripture as immature. On the “open” level of “plain instruction,” Augustine and Crusoe (and Calvin) agree that what is needed for salvation is clearly stated. Augustine argues in *On Christian Doctrine* that “Among those things which are said openly in Scripture are . . . all those teachings which involve faith, the mores of living, and . . . hope and charity” (113). Here, Augustine implies that the goal of all scripture-reading, because it is plainly elucidated in the text, is to cultivate the virtues of faith, hope, and love, which provide an understanding of how to live. The virtues are never to be cultivated for the self alone, however, for the two great commands are to love God wholly and to love neighbors as ourselves (*Confessions* 280).

Augustine also says that “Hardly anything may be found in the obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere” (*Doctrine* 112). Those who want to grow in the faith, who need more intellectual assurance, or who want to deepen their faith, *should* turn to those obscure places:

> Having become familiar with the language of Divine Scriptures, we should turn to those obscure things which must be opened up and explained so that we may take examples of those things that are manifest to illuminate the things which are obscure, bringing principles which are certain to bear on our doubts concerning those things which are uncertain. (*Doctrine* 113)

A more mature faith for Augustine is actually in conversation with mystery, pitting uncertainties against certainties, the knowable against the unknowable. The mature Christian subject willingly places herself in the midst of a difficult text.

Exploring obscure passages may bring up disagreements, but it is necessary, for God teaches through obscurities as well as through what is plain. “Marvelous is their profundity,” says Augustine. The scriptures invoke a sense of awe for God, and exploring them is an act of humility and confession, for one has to recognize one’s own inadequacy before the text in a “shudder of love” (*Confessions* 268). After conversion, Christians should continue their dialectical reading, exploring the eternal mys-
teries of the scriptures, seeking an understanding that moves beyond their own stories while at the same time recognizing their own limits.

For Augustine the individual interpreter with the aid of the holy spirit is never sufficient, for the individual reader is trapped in sin and is always ontologically distant from perfect understanding. For this reason, and because mature Christians should not shy away from obscurity, Bible-reading should be done in the context of the church. When Augustine reflects in *Confessions* on trying to determine the “spirit” or intention of Moses in the creation account, he confesses his need to interpret within the church:

> May I be with those in You, Lord, and rejoice with them in you who are nourished by Your truth in the breadth of Your charity; and may they and I together approach the words of Your Book and in them seek Your meaning through the meaning of Your servant by whose pen You gave them to us. (278)

Truth is common property, and Christians become the “living Word” only by sharing in truth together:

> It belongs to all of us because publicly You call us to share it, warning us most terribly not to possess it as our private property, lest we be deprived of it. For whoever claims for himself what You have given for the enjoyment of all, and would have as his own what is meant for everyone, is driven forth from the wealth of all to his own poor wealth, that is from truth to a lie. (279)

The purpose of communal interpretation is not to celebrate diversity and plurality; the purpose is to draw closer to the truth together. Such communal “godly reading,” as Cambers shows, was also practiced by the Puritans.

It is true that Augustine structures his conversion plot with imitation in mind; he wants readers to place themselves into the narrative by identifying with the types much as Crusoe does. In fact, such narratives are the final impulse in his own conversion as he hears and typologically identifies with the “Prodigal Son” conversion stories told by Simplicianus and Ponticianus. The Life of St. Antony figures prominently in the second story Augustine is told in which some youth typologically identify with Antony’s literal faith story and convert.

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11. The *Life of St. Antony* figures prominently in the second story Augustine is told in which some youth typologically identify with Antony’s literal faith story and convert.
the Word” and interpreting scripture in community. In the final books of _Confessions_ typology moves beyond the individual life and its reading for self-identification and into a wider literal interpretation of the self as part of the church (ecclesial allegory), the “Living Word” which seeks to imitate Christ (moral) in order to bring about God’s Kingdom (eschatology/anagogy). This stage of maturity, in which one recognizes the limits of the self in the face of God, is one Crusoe never reaches. Crusoe’s Bible-reading practices restrict the reading of scripture to its application to individual particular lives and assume the individual reader is sufficiently authoritative to gain spiritual truths that are considered to be rationally knowable. This sort of individualized modern novelistic typology continues to shape the British novel as a genre. In fact, this aspect of novelistic typology helps lead to the formation of the stereotype about Protestants and Puritans as sovereign, liberal individuals; as rational and narrowly-mindedly moral; as authoritarian yet blind to their own limits; as concerned for their own status in another world as they are fearful in this one. Crusoe is all of these things. As the novel in modernity increasingly fictionalizes and ironizes this “Puritan” self, the “outer” Biblical narrative within which the self abides and in which it participates is also increasingly fictionalized. The Puritan self becomes the surface, fictional false self while the inner deep realm of desires, passions, and emotions are seen to be the natural, true self. While Augustine had to face the contradictions in his inner self and submit them to Christ’s resolution, the novelistic modern self now faces the contradiction of her “true” inner, natural, passionate self with her “false” outer, typological, social-moral “Puritan” self. No longer does the contradictory inner self need to be drawn up and made into something new through God’s grace. Instead, the modern novelistic self “converts” when the inner, natural, passionate self breaks away from and escapes the false self of social-moral categories in order to become its true self in freedom, accepting epistemological uncertainty. Yet the escaping self is only part of the dialectic, for the Puritan always remains. The modern novelistic dialectic, then, is one of necessity and freedom; fundamentalism and irony; belief and doubt; the moral and the ethical; the type and what is left out of the type. In Puritan reading, the true self finds freedom in necessity (Christ); this is biblical typology. In novels that ironize or dismantle Puritanism, the true self is found only in freedom from necessity. In modern novels, there is less and less a “religious” basis for necessity, less and less a need for a God who can save the self from its contradictions or a narrative beyond the novel by which interpretations make sense or have real purpose. Freedom
becomes the otherworldly goal, the ideal beyond. It is achievable by the autonomous individual, if only he can see through the Puritan fictions that restrict him. This novelistic narrative, with its modes of typological interpretation, becomes a new grand narrative of modernity.

MODERNIST novelists go further than previous novelists in their questioning of the validity of the Crusoe-esque Puritan self. Ontologically, modernist writers question whether there is a deep self or inner soul or conscience in the human subject that contains the “true self” and reflects one’s moral and spiritual state. Epistemologically, modernist writers question whether, how, and to what extent one’s moral and spiritual state can be read, identified, and interpreted. Ethically, modernists question whether human beings can learn morality or be formed or transformed morally through experience. They also react to the idea of moral judgment and moral categories, especially in matters of sexuality. All of these questions are joined to larger questions regarding the assumed context within which Puritan typology is practiced and believed, including whether there is a moral order or grand narrative that shapes the universe and human history; and whether there is a God that directs history, creates human beings, has full knowledge, and grounds a universal moral order. In contrast to the Puritan self, the ethical self is immanent or present in the world, unified in body and soul, autonomously free, and creative, yet to some degree ambiguous and unknowable.

Early modernists move away from the concept of moral character, then, by attempting to dismantle various aspects of it. The resultant ethical self, however, is dialectically dependent upon the Puritan self for its own existence. The authors examined in this book are to varying degrees self-consciously aware within their novels of this dependent relationship. While I have argued the attempted escape from the Puritan self has always been part of the novel’s dialectical ironizing form, the modernist dismantling of the Puritan self generally becomes more extreme and more complete in nature than in earlier texts, and hence has traditionally been seen as radical formal experimentation. While a novel like *Tristram Shandy* may have ironized the limits of the Puritan self, it did so in the service of an alternative version of morality within the Christian biblical view.  

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12. As Carol Stewart notes, Sterne makes “skepticism the grounding principle of his novel and embrac[es] its liberating possibilities, whilst still maintaining Anglican values” including “orthodox positions and attitudes” (139, 131).
macy of the biblical narrative, they are still very interested in maintaining an alternative moral system and hence some variation of moral character and social-moral life. The modernist ethical self, in contrast, seeks to extract itself entirely from the realm of “morality,” both its guilt culture (morality bound to religion) and its shame culture (morality bound to society) forms. The modernist ethical self sees itself as participating in a higher ethics, which is often associated with the “aesthetic” and with art. This higher ethical life is seen to be an escape from social morality, character typology, and the soul–body duality, while at the same time a restoration of the human subject to its immanent, bodily, and natural position of freedom.

The writers and characters studied here take various attitudes toward such an ethical self who is willingly exiled from society, religion, and morality. Some see this as entirely dangerous, others as necessary. Others fall somewhere in between. In any case, early modernist experimentation with characterization leads to an inversion and dismantling of Puritan hermeneutics that eventually becomes dominant and conventional in high modernism. Rather than seeing modernist experimentation as radically new, however, this study suggests something less dramatic. The weights of the typological balance simply shift in modernist novels from the previous tradition’s emphasis on moral character to an emphasis on the ethical self. Despite the best efforts of many of the high modernists, however, the moral and the ethical are not separable. Puritan hermeneutics cannot entirely be escaped in the novel. This sort of dialectical dependency of the modernist novel on the previous tradition, of the ethical on the moral, is the kind of thing of which McEwan’s Atone-

ment reminds us as it foregrounds questions about modernism and the novel. This sort of dialectic does not seem to be recognized or given full due, however, within several strands of current criticism that tend to see both the novel and modernism as secular phenomena, entities that have escaped the religious Puritan narrative.

Marxist novel theory has historically promoted the idea that the novel, beginning with Robinson Crusoe, is a secular genre of modern individualism. Recently, in her 2005 book, How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719–1900, Nancy Armstrong argues that “the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same” (3). To Armstrong, writers formulate in novels certain types of subjects and then reproduce in their readers these same kinds of subjects. For Armstrong, the individuals formed in novels and
through novel-reading are not individuals run rampant, out of control, or irrational, as might be depicted in competing genres such as the gothic romance. Rather, they are self-enclosed, self-governing liberal individuals who nonetheless are willing to subject themselves to civil morality through the larger institutions of the family and society, choosing to abide by the Lockean social contract and the moralities it demands (51). The novel’s perpetuation of the sovereign self and civil morality is for Armstrong generally a negative development (10).

Armstrong extends a discussion about the “origins” of the novel and modernity that began with Ian Watt’s 1957 The Rise of the Novel, which linked the development of the modern novel to the rise of individualism and middle-class interests.13 In this line of thought, the British novel is not only a genre for individuals who usually read while alone, but it is also about individuals, dramatizing and even glorifying the experience of individuals within society, and even more importantly for Armstrong, creating its readers to be similar sorts of individuals. In such an argument, novels matter because they shape how readers view themselves and their place in the world. Ironically, while one gets the sense that Armstrong is lamenting the influence of “Puritanism” in creating modern individualism, her view of the novel and its effects on readers is exactly how Puritans thought of the reading process. They, too, believed the goal of reading was the moral and spiritual formation of the reader so that he or she might live more fully into a narrative—the biblical narrative of salvation history. Significantly, Armstrong’s book ends in the late nineteenth century, implying that something new emerges with modernism, that an escape from “modern subjectivity” becomes more possible at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth.

This line of thought certainly is convincing in many ways, but it focuses on only one side of the Puritan dialectic of the novel. What is undertreated in Armstrong’s critique of novelistic morality (and was similarly undertreated by Watt) is the relation of novel-reading to Puritan Bible-reading, a gap occurring because she identifies the genre as secular. To her, the novel relies on religious forms evacuated of their religious content in order to serve secular ends. A footnote elucidates how Armstrong sees the novel replacing the Puritan religious concept of “work” with secular content:

I accept Max Weber’s claim that many of the elements of what he calls “the spirit of modern capitalism,” commonly known as the Protestant work ethic, “are the same as the content of the Puritan worldly asceticism, only without the religious basis.” But this similarity does not mean the secular ethic of industrial capitalist cultures “was born . . . from the spirit of Christian aestheticism.” . . . On the contrary, I argue, fiction rhetorically appropriated certain elements of Christian asceticism—specifically, the “sanctification of work as a calling,” which entails delayed gratification—for an entirely new purpose: the harnessing of desire to serve the material ends of an emergent middle class. . . . The secularization of morality, from this perspective, is not the mechanism or wish on the part of that class to exploit the labor of others so much as the symptom of a cultural hegemony inducing members of that class themselves to embrace that rhetoric as truth and live out its master narrative. (1611)

In this view, the novel “works” to perpetuate a new secular master narrative by which readers are to identify and reform themselves in order to conform to the world and function in it appropriately. This secular master narrative and its variations produce the modern, sovereign individual—the “Puritan” self with its emphases on moral character and moral development. Armstrong longs for a new kind of subjectivity, a self beyond the Puritan, and modernism is implicitly set up to be the force that can finally escape the limits the Puritan imposes. This line of thought emerges from within the “novelistic narrative.”

A second current branch of criticism termed “New Ethical Theory” also sees the “ethical self” as the unique contribution of modernism. Contemporary ethical critics of the novel might be placed generally into one of three camps: moral philosophy, “new humanism,” and “new ethical theory.” The first category consists of philosophers who have taken up novels as texts from which to derive and discuss moral philosophy. This group includes most famously thinkers as diverse as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, but many others as well. It is probably safe to say that most moral philosophers remain unaware of ethical studies performed within literary studies and vice versa, although clearly there would be points of connection, and some are now calling for more interdisciplinary overlap. The second group, new humanism, is considered to be more traditional in its approach to literature and moral values, adhering to what the new ethicists call the “liberal imagination” and the “pre-structuralist sense of the liberal individual” (Hale, “Aesthetics” 897). These critics might practice something more akin to New Criticism, or
they may take an Aristotelian approach to narrative and virtue. In short, they speak of the reader as a definable human subject and, as Charles Altieri describes, they focus on practical moral concepts such as sympathy, empathy, and judgment (34). Current critics in this group include Colin McGinn, Frank Palmer, S. L. Goldberg, and David Parker, among others. The third group, the new ethical theorists, derives its ideas about novels from postmodern Continental thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Levinas, and stresses a “deconstructive concern for an ethics of letting be” (Altieri 34). This group includes scholars like Judith Butler, D. A. Miller, Gayatri Spivak, J. Hillis Miller, Andrew Gibson, and Adam Zachary Newton. Of course, not everyone falls neatly into these camps. Wayne C. Booth’s lifelong work on novels and ethics, for example, along with all whom he has influenced, might constitute a Chicago School camp of its own. My theory of the novelistic narrative presents a general challenge to new ethical theory. Yet as Altieri argues, the new humanist position and the new ethical position are “mirror images” of each other (34), and so this book implicitly addresses both of these camps. In many ways, these “mirror images” of new humanism and new ethics are merely repetitions of the Puritan dialectic of the novel.

Dorothy J. Hale has recently argued that despite their variations, general tendencies tie together scholars in moral philosophy and new ethical theory. According to Hale, thinkers as diverse as Nussbaum, Butler, Spivak, J. Hillis Miller, and Booth, among others, all generally argue that the modernist novel brings the reader to encounter alterity—the “unknowability” of the Other—such that she is forced to recognize the limits of the self (“Aesthetics” 896). This reading experience of having one’s categories of interpretation and capacities for knowledge confounded, it is argued, is emotional and in itself ethical, for it forces the reader to acknowledge the Other that exceeds her own epistemological framework and to recognize the ways in which she herself participates in placing binding limitations on others. In other words, it helps the reader to learn how she assumes knowledge about others because she assumes sovereignty over interpretation. To give one example, Butler sees the experience of “literary difficulty” one feels at the end of Henry James’s Washington Square, in which neither character nor author provide an explanation for Catherine’s behavior, as an “estrangement from normative judgments” (Hale, “Fiction” 197). The novel “hails” the reader “to occupy the position made for [him] through narrative” but then “ejects” the reader from that position (197). Hitting the “limits of translation” in this way creates “the possibility for ethics” (Butler 208–9).
What is most intriguing about new ethical theory is that its proponents are not interested in the novelistic tradition in its entirety but rather only in texts of the modernist tradition and of twentieth-century novel theory, both fields seen to be inaugurated by Henry James. As Hale says, James is prominent in “theories of ethical value from Trilling to Booth and from [J. Hillis] Miller to Butler” as well as in the moral philosophy of Nussbaum (“Fiction” 201). Hale believes James is crucial for all these theorists because he inaugurates an “aesthetics of the novel that emerges from the ethical value of voluntary self-binding” (201). In other words, James’s novels self-consciously highlight the fact that the novelist is the inventor of the novel’s “laws of composition” and hence that the world and characters depicted therein are necessarily bound by those laws (201). In a James novel, the Puritan fear about fiction is self-reflexively highlighted—it is the human author who both creates and offers the means of interpretation. Yet James forces readers to see how characters are limited by the circumstances, situations, and perspectives created by the author, to realize how knowledge and truth are always partial. With a James novel, the reader has willingly to occupy a position of uncertainty because this is the only type of position there is.14

In focusing only on texts from James onward, new ethicists imply that the modernist novel initiates a shift in the novelistic tradition that leads to a “better” formation of the reading self than earlier novels were able to do. Generally, these theorists differentiate the “ethical self” formed in modernist novel-reading from the “autonomous liberal subject” (or Puritan self) they see constituted in and by earlier novels. They also view earlier ethical critics of the novel such as Lionel Trilling as well as current “new humanists” as relying upon a similar notion of the “liberal subject.” For example, Trilling saw encounters with otherness and diversity in the novel as evoking the “free play of the moral imagination” and the “identification” of reader with character through love or sympathy (Hale, “Aesthetics” 897). For some new ethicists such an idea is a form of “imperialism” because it assumes the reading subject can gain rational, objective, and complete knowledge of the characterological other. To the new ethical theorist, the typological process of identification maintains the sovereign autonomy of the reading self and is solely a rational process. The “ethical subject,” on the other hand, willingly engages in what Hale deems “self-restriction.” This means the reader is willing to read

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difficult novels, to occupy the position such novels create for her, to experience thereby the “estrangement” from certain knowledge that they bring, and to live with both the restrictions on her subjectivity and the “unverifiability” of the alterity she faces. In such reading, the new ethicists and modernist novels “bestow upon epistemological uncertainty a positive ethical content” (Hale, “Fiction” 190).

In the willingness of the reading self to recognize her lack of knowledge and certitude, she therein understands what it means to open herself to the Other. Such an experience, it is assumed, is absolutely necessary if the horrific implementations of limits, stereotypes, and false categories are to be overcome: those limits that serve sexist, racist, bigoted ends, that support typecasting attitudes and close-mindedness, and that lead to real harm and violence to human beings. While such ethical experience may indeed be necessary in order for ingrained social and historical attitudes to be overcome, and while modernist novels may in part provide this experience, this book, along with some of the novels it analyzes, nonetheless challenges the new ethical theorist’s tendency to glorify epistemological uncertainty as a final end. Without devaluing the experience of epistemological uncertainty, without devaluing the absolutely necessary work we must do to break open all detrimental forms of typecasting, I want to challenge and complicate the new ethical position regarding both the novelistic tradition and the modernist novel. While I do not deny the value of the ethical experience of difficult reading, then, the limitations of that experience must be taken into account. “Unknowability” cannot be all for which one wishes if human communities are to undergo real change for the better.

It is possible that earlier texts of the novelistic tradition more often than not emphasized modern and individualistic “moral” aspects of typology and thereby perpetuated the liberal subject. It may also be generally true that modernist texts from James onward emphasize the ethical escape from typological moral categories and the experience of epistemological uncertainty. Indeed, many modernist descriptions of the “aesthetic” experience sound “ethical” in Gibson’s sense as they extract art entirely from the realm of life and morality and indeed, expose the weaknesses, dangers, and flaws of typological limits. Frank Kermode describes Sartre’s struggle with the novel’s form, for example, as a struggle between the belief that life is contingent and the reality that novels are the “destroyer of contingency” (137). Novels have “beginnings, ends, and potentiality, even if the world has not,” and novels have to lie, embodying forms and patterns which are the “enemies of truth” (Kermode 138, 140).
Iris Murdoch spoke of something similar: “Literature must always represent a battle between real people and images” (qtd. in Kermode 130). A. S. Byatt suggests that even though Murdoch resigned herself, like Sartre, to the truth that novels must have form, this always filled her with “metaphysical regret” (Kermode 131).

In many senses, “morality” is the side of typology with its bases of identification, self-formation, positive knowledge, categories and principles. The “ethical” is what one gets when one dismantles Puritan hermeneutics, the remainder that is revealed and that exposes the limitations of typological reading. Yet even though some, like Gibson, acknowledge the dependent relation of the moral and the ethical, new ethical theory as a whole tends to emphasize the ethical to the detriment of the moral. It tends to see the modernist shift to the ethical as more radical and dramatic than the model I formulated earlier in which merely a shift in dialectical balance occurs.

By exaggerating the ethical shift in modernism, new ethical theory is problematic in at least two ways. First, it oversimplifies the history of the novel’s tradition. In the typological hermeneutics of the novel, the moral and the ethical—the type and its dismantling—are dependent upon each other, despite the best efforts of some novelists to escape. The ethical self and the narratives that generate it always imply a moral position in the world of life, whether recognized or not. On the flip side, the assumed moral emphases and modes of typological reading that are seen to dominate the earlier novelistic tradition often also involve ethical experience and hence should not be broadly superseded. The “ethical” and the “moral” always exist in dialectical tension in the novel’s tradition, and this is something new ethical theorists tend to ignore. As a consequence, they tend to promote problematic moral positions in their elevation of the “ethical,” including social detachment and what I see as an even more extreme version of sovereign individualism. They also tend to ignore the ways in which some modernists themselves warned about such positions.

The second problem in new ethical theory is that it seems to continue the modernist project uncritically. As the New Critics and others in the following decades did, new ethical theorists glorify modernist novelistic form in a manner that grants much spiritual and ethical power to that form but that also, in some cases, oversimplifies it. Indeed, because of its unique perceived ability to form the “ethical subject,” the modernist novel essentially becomes a Bible for some. Spivak calls the reader’s encounter with alterity a “sacred” experience for a secular world (qtd. in Hale, “Fiction” 201). “Sacred,” Hale delineates,
not just because of the act of gaining righteousness through the abdication of the self, but also because of the condition of this ethical revelation: the willingness to hold the belief that literary meaning can be divined, that it broods, visibly invisible, not on Milton’s vast abyss but in the concrete particularity of texts. (“Fiction” 201)

In keeping with this “sacred text” rhetoric, whether consciously or not, new ethicists evoke the rhetoric of Puritan hermeneutics. In many ways, the new ethicist deconstruction of identification is at heart a deconstruction of novelistic (and biblical) typology and Puritan hermeneutics. In the modernist novel, according to the new ethical theory, typological identification is rendered impossible because the epistemological limits of both reader and character are foregrounded and highlighted. The reader experiences an “ethical” moment because she recognizes the unknowability of the Other and the self and the processes by which limits are made. Not only do new ethical theorists laud this experience, however. Similar ideas were perpetuated by the New Critics, who often identified such an experience as “aesthetic.” This idea is also still promoted by many critics in their descriptions of modernism. The elevation of “ethical” or “aesthetic” experience furthers the myth that escape or full freedom of the self is possible and that Puritanism and Christianity are the root of all woes.

In many ways, new ethical theory, like the novel itself, is a remnant of modern morality: a product of the breakdown of the biblical narrative and its accompanying sense of universal order, a discourse whose terms are constituted by the “novelistic narrative.” In the end, I see recent new ethical theory’s relation to biblical hermeneutics in much the same way that Suzy Anger sees twentieth-century literary theory in relation to Victorian hermeneutics. A main argument of Anger’s book, *Victorian Interpretation*, is that “secular interpretation in both the Victorian age and today is far more indebted to the strategies and conceptual models of sacred hermeneutics than has been acknowledged. . . . Methods developed for biblical exegesis have left their mark on all current theoretical approaches to literature” (4). While Anger allows for contemporary literary theory to be labeled “secular,” I would say that new ethical theory is not “secular.” Its attention to the “ethical” itself becomes the “religious,” and its concerns are remarkably similar to the Puritan biblical hermeneutics from which it is descended.

Although their ideological bases are quite different, both Armstrong and the new ethical theorists seem to long for a hermeneutics of the self that is akin to Augustine’s in the *Confessions* and to Puritan biblical
typology rather than to the hermeneutics of the self in novelistic typology. When Armstrong says she has never believed that human beings are really individuals, she echoes the Augustinian, biblical idea that the Christian subject is part of something outside of itself, part of a larger reality that extends through past, present, and future, both individual and communal. The new ethical theorists laud the state of “unknowability” that they believe modernist novels lead the reader to experience. They believe this experience forces the reader to recognize the limits of the self and its interpretive capabilities. In other words, it helps one to overcome one’s false Puritan or Protestant self. This experience is “ethical” because it opens the self to the other and prepares one to think beyond or before the categories by which we judge and label the other, to recognize that the other exceeds our ability to know. Yet this too is Augustinian. He sees parts of the Bible as beyond human comprehension, and he encourages Christian subjects to dwell in the obscurity, ambiguity, and authority of God’s Word. This experience serves as a constant reminder of the limitations of human knowledge and of the self’s ontological position before God and within creation and history—it causes one to confess the limitations of the self. For Augustine, only in this experience of self-limitation can one truly learn to love as God loves, without prejudice or false judgment.

Just as the modernist novel, according to the new ethical theorists, leads the reader along with known categories of interpretation but then “ejects” the reader from that framework to face the unknowable Other and the limitations of the self, so Bible-reading leads the reader to insert himself into the position of a character in order to find a point of identification but then pulls that reader into the temporality of the “now and not yet,” into the process of knowing and unknowing himself as he ponders and tries to imitate Christ more fully. Augustinian biblical typology involves a dialectical movement between inseparable processes of identification, moral commands, and living in the “now,” and processes of self-restriction before God (Other), epistemological limitation, and ethical opening of the self to the unknowable “not yet.” The “moral” evaluation of the self and character is dialectically related to the “ethical,” then, as it properly reinscribes the reader within the larger order of the church, history, and creation, an order that extends beyond the self and is not yet fully discernable.

In both Augustinian typology and new ethical theory, the text holds authority over the reader. New ethicists suggest that the novel “hails” the reader, that the reader must “surrender” to the text and heed the text’s “calling” If the reader “successfully occup[ies] the position made for
[him] through narrative,” he undergoes both “avowal” and “disavowal” of his “social positionality” (Hale, “Aesthetics” 902). In other words, he acknowledges both the constructed limits of his identity and the ways in which he becomes blinded to those limits. Butler says this process of “conversion” has to occur repeatedly. Such rhetoric echoes Augustine, who sees Bible-reading as “confession,” as the repeated practice of revealing one’s own epistemological limits before God. For both Augustine and the new ethicists the encounter with alterity is an affective experience that exceeds rationality. Hale says modernist novel-reading gives “knowledge that is beyond reason, that is of the emotions, and that is so intuitive as to seem a bodily knowing. . . . Knowing is made possible by every felt failure to know and made new through every repetition” (Hale, “Aesthetics” 903). To echo Watson’s line about Christians and the Bible, for the new ethical theorist, the reader becomes a walking modernist novel.

Yet despite their similar accounts of the effects of reading on the reader, Augustine and new ethicists contrast tremendously when it comes to the assumed context of reading. For Augustine, there is a grand narrative within which interpretation makes sense and which is assumed to be true, beautiful, and good. In Bible-reading the four traditional levels of interpretation seamlessly intersect with each other. Unlike the new ethicist, the Bible-reader goes on faith and hope that God as Other acts in the world and in history, and that the reading subject has partial or temporary access to God through both the Holy Spirit and the sacred text. The “now” and the “not yet” are not completely separable, then, despite the limited attainability and knowability of the “not yet” within the “now.”

Interestingly, the new ethicists speak of the possibility that there is a “law” or moral order outside the self, but also argue that such a realm is entirely unverifiable, seemingly eternally “not yet.” As Gibson says, post-modern ethics does not “emerge on the basis of a concept of a ‘shared world.’” (85). Rather, it works “in the interests of a community to come whose values are still to be formulated, a solidarity that has yet to be created” (85). Augustinian Bible-reading subjects are ultimately made the same in their self-restriction before and within God’s Otherness and the church (all are types who are becoming Christlike), but God also attends to the historical particularity of each subject, leading it to the “not yet” though the context of the “now.” The “ethical subject,” on the other hand, seems to be constituted by difference and contingency. Meaning can brood in the everyday and particular, but it is never universal as it is for the Bible-reader. There is no larger narrative by which to make sense of
individual reading experiences, no verifiable “law” that can shape morality in ways upon which people can agree. As Gibson boldly says, literary theory has “stripped us of our faith in the constancy of moral structures,” in the “novel’s underpinning by those structures,” and in the belief that “ethics” involves a “totality” or “totalities” of value or perception (6, 10). This book argues that this theory of dismantling yet hoping, is also derived from within the novelistic narrative. Whereas Augustinian typology involves a dialectic of moral identification and self-restriction in the face of alterity (God), ethical theorists emphasize the ethical not yet to the detriment of the moral now, the exact inversion of what they perceive earlier novels to do.

This presents several more problems of which some modernist novelists are entirely aware. First, it seems the new ethicists do not admit how the “ethical subject” can itself become a limiting identity, a type, a normative category. The modernist novel may lead the reader to encounter Otherness, but when this becomes the norm for novels or elevated as a more ideal telos, it becomes just as much a type as the types it works to exceed. The ethical subject remains trapped in the novelistic narrative. Second, there tends to be no theory of how to translate ethical experience into moral judgment and action. In repeatedly being opened up to new possibilities, the reader may better himself somehow, but it is unclear how such experience translates into real life. Even more significant, the ethical subject seems in the end just as autonomous as the liberal subject. If ethical experience is to carry over into moral life, it is not a matter of discerning truth, making decisions, and taking actions in the corporate context of the church as it was for Augustine and the Puritans, but instead is left solely up to the individual. J. Hillis Miller, for example, as Hale outlines, says reading novels teaches the “meta-ethical lesson” that “you are on your own making any decision” (81). To Miller, ethical decisions are not verifiable by any outside source nor justifiable by rational explanation but are always “leaps in the dark” that are made alone (qtd. in Hale, “Fiction” 83). As Hale shows, Butler seems to discard moral judgment altogether, arguing the encounter with alterity causes us “to cease judging, paradoxically, in the name of ethics, to cease judging in a way that assumes we already know in advance what there is to be known” (208). The ethical subject, in the end, appears to be Sartrean: free and open to the “not yet,” but unconnected to any sense of community or shared narrative and solely responsible for moral decisions and actions. The individual remains the sole interpreter of her experience and self. Isn’t this an even more radical sovereign individualism than was
stereotyped as Puritanism? Without a larger narrative of truth and virtue, or any sense of shared values that might inspire action and change, even the recognition of the self’s limits is still a focus on the self.

Perhaps on these problematic points we simply come up against the differences between the novel and the Bible. Without the Bible’s ontological and teleological narrative (or any coherent narrative that adequately replaces it), maybe the novel can never truly shape any other type of subject than the sovereign one, whether on the moral or the ethical side of the dialectic. The new ethicists may be right that ethical experiences with alterity are necessary to any morality that is to overcome racism, sexism, hatred, oppression, and other negative limitations placed on humanity. In the end, however, if the new ethicist view of the modernist novel is our “prototype” for “ethical engagement” (Hale, “Fiction” 200), moral action in the “now” may not ever get undertaken. Escaping the typecasting identification processes involved in prejudice, violence, and oppression of others is one thing, absolutely necessary, but surely also there has to be some kind of moral vocabulary humans can use with each other to connect beyond the nebulous space of epistemological uncertainty. New ethical theory leaves us in a position of individuated tolerance and pluralism—a passive, static place. But this book asks a central question: Isn’t there something better than tolerance?

The shift from typological identification to epistemological uncertainty, from the moral to the ethical, is the exact shift Briony Tallis undergoes in the scene discussed at the beginning of this book. It is the exact shift accorded to modernist novels within McEwan’s Atonement. Briony experiences ethical moments when she recognizes she does not understand what she sees or who she is seeing at the fountain (as well as in the library and at the temple later that evening), and she supposedly comes to know something about the limits of her own self in the process. Yet McEwan’s novel asks us, just as the editors at Horizon ask Briony, to consider quite seriously the moral value of reducing narrative to such epistemological uncertainty. In requesting that Briony engage with more traditional elements of storytelling, such as character and plot, the editors and Atonement itself suggest that novels may need to recover elements of the premodernist tradition in order to serve the reader well. Of course, delineating exactly what kind of “service” this ought to be is something Atonement does not answer clearly. Even though it is not easy to discern what McEwan himself might believe, Atonement implicitly criticizes the elevation of “ethical experience” over real, moral life. Its readers are forced to consider whether the glorification of the modernist novel as a
conduit to recognizing one’s own epistemological uncertainty really is a sacred avenue of moral (de)formation. Its readers are at least forced to consider whether that end is sufficient. The early modernist novelists analyzed in this book had something to say about the relation of the moral to the ethical. Like *Atonement*, their novels challenge the new ethicist position, even while confirming its valid contributions.