MODERNISM in large part is a reaction against Puritanism. Modernist novelists reacted against both Puritan Christianity, which assumes the presence of an inner conscience in the human subject and the reality of a universal moral order governed by God; and Puritan social morality, by which the assumed religious truths are discarded and only an ungrounded surface morality remains. Historically literary critics have narrated the modernists as successfully escaping both forms of Puritanism to become a new type of self, one who is free at last. Such a trend is perpetuated by the new ethical theorists. This study has argued, in contrast, that in reality a complete escape is ultimately impossible, for the novel is still a novel, Christianity is still Christianity, and society is still society. To various degrees, some early modernist novelists knew this as they engaged with both sides of the Puritan dialectic that shapes the novel: the biblical hermeneutics that shape its typological narrative form as well as the ironizing of or rebellion against Puritan morality that often shapes its narrative content. Modernists lean hard into the freedom, doubt, and irony side of the dialectic as they question more thoroughly than any other era the necessity, belief, and fundamental side of it. Some such as Wilde and Ford highlight the impossibility of escape. They show how the ethical self, which is constitutionally dependent upon the Puritan self, is itself a limited type formed through asceticism. Joyce leaves us wondering ironically about the efficacy of the ethical self in Stephen Dedalus, while only Forster finds a way to marry some elements of both
sides of the dialectic in Mr. Emerson. Nietzsche attempts to bypass the dialectic entirely by theorizing the higher man who learns to master its lasting influences, but even his formulation of “redemption from redemption” cannot escape morality and the logic of the Christian and novelistic narratives.

Modernist novelists and their characters question and doubt the truth of the biblical narrative and its view of history, as well as the idea of a universal moral order. Wilde seems to believe such an order is possible, but finds the expressions of it in his present context—Puritan morality and aestheticism—unacceptable and contradictory. Forster’s characters have debates over what guides history, but in the end, only the “now” matters as Mr. Emerson promotes joy and bodily life in the present. Stephen Dedalus consciously removes himself from the Christian narrative, saying he both believes and disbelieves. Ford makes a theme of Protestantism’s historical emergence. Like Wilde’s, his novel reveals that the novelistic dialectic of Puritan morality and romantic escape has itself become a grand narrative that shapes how modern people think of themselves and their lives, especially regarding love and marriage. Many modernists and their critics view life through the novelistic narrative, by which escape from morality, religion, and rationality is achieved through art, the aesthetic, and the ethical. The novel emerges historically in the midst of early modern Puritan cultures, but it also goes on to shape history, influencing how people think of themselves in relation to what becomes a stereotyped Puritanism. The question Wilde was so fond of pointing out rings true throughout the novel’s history: does life imitate art, or does art imitate life? This study sees the novel’s retention of or dialectical dependence upon the Christian formulation of history and plot not as secular, but as still embodying a religion and a morality. The dialectic of belief and doubt, Puritanism and its dismantling, that forms the novel always leads the reader to believe in some sort of truth and to inhabit some form of morality, no matter how much a novel self-reflexively highlights its own fictionality.

Ironically, the ethical self who reacts against Puritanism in these texts because Puritanism is perceived to involve labeling, individualist interpretation, certainty, knowledge, otherworldliness, asceticism, and narrow one-sidedness, is itself individualist and autonomous. The ethical self is the sole interpreter of the self and society; the self is the sole source of the moral; the self is its own master. Yet the individual ethical self occupies a questionable moral position. Except for Mr. Emerson, the characters treated here have little regard or care for others, if any, as they pursue
their natural inner desires and think of themselves as outside the conventional categories of morality, the remainder that cannot be contained by them. Some die tragically while others live only in solitude. They withdraw from human community and detach themselves even from those closest to them. In many ways, as it seeks an elusive freedom, the ethical self becomes even more of a liberal, sovereign individual than the Puritan self was. In fact, in creating and perpetuating the stereotype of the Puritan, one could even say that some modernist characters, novelists, and critics are just as “Puritan” as the Puritans, for ironically they do what they condemn the Puritan of doing. They limit Puritanism through imposed categories and assumed knowledge in order to justify their own position. Pericles Lewis argues that many modernist novelists searched for a spiritual type of community that could replace the diminishing relevance of the churches. This seems right, but it may describe more a fictional longing than a reality, for many modernist writers and characters are unwilling to submit themselves to any sense of communal identity. They tend to see all cultural narratives, except for the ones based on art, as inadequate. Dowell, Stephen, Lord Henry, and Dorian are unwilling to meet even part way those whom they reject, and they egoistically see themselves to be superior. Dismantling dangerous categories and forms of judgment is needed, but rebellion, escape, and passive tolerance do not lead to community or to lasting societal change.

So where do these revelations get us? For one thing, this study points to the necessity of moving beyond the novelistic narrative as it shows how the ethical self is dialectically dependent on a stereotypical definition of Puritanism and a typological narrative that participates in that which it condemns. It calls for renewed attention to the moral side of human life within modernist studies. The ethical experience of epistemological uncertainty to which modernist novels are purported to lead their readers no doubt has some positive value, but if we really want to establish community, a shared life, and to overcome the limits of typecasting and its categories that lead to violence, racism, sexism, oppression, brutality, and hatred, we have to find a way to carry ethical experience into practice in ways that create community rather than reject it. This calls for literary critics to look at modernist novels anew, to be open to the modernists’ own attention to and concern for the moral and the religious, as well as to the novel’s embeddedness in Puritan hermeneutics, as this study has shown them to have. Some modernists warn about and mourn the escape into the ethical, seeing it as an excuse for an impossible position of “amorality” and autonomy. Others point out the limi-
tations of the position so many literary critics ever since, including the new ethical theorists, have glorified. In turn, literary critics could be willing to reexamine Puritanism, Protestantism, and Christianity anew and become more open to attending to their realities rather than to perpetuating the ways in which they have been stereotyped historically in novels, in criticism, and otherwise. In turn, as is happening in theology already, Christian believers might attend to what the modernists and the Catholics historically claimed about Puritanism and vice versa, which surely contains some truth, for it may help the church to develop more faithful, biblically derived practices, modes of reading scripture, and new relations with others. The individual must dialectically both submit to and critique the social-moral and religious discourses that compose the self, always striving for a better communal life and practice. Ideally such interpretation, submission, and critique would be practiced in community.

This study should make us also rethink the novel and its dialectical nature, seeing it not as a product of the religious–secular divide in modernity, but instead as perpetuating the narrative in which religion separates from morality, and in which the ethical (or aesthetic, in some cases) is thought to be an escape from morality. The novel’s dialectic is Puritan first, deriving from the dialectical, typological process of Puritan Bible-reading in which a contradictory inner self is repeatedly drawn into a larger anagogical reality and made new, such that the self recognizes its epistemological limits, over and over again, hoping for the not yet while also concerned for moral practice in the present. The novel throughout its English history both believes in and doubts that narrative, holding belief and disbelief in tension. Hegel alters the Puritan conversion dialectic and applies it to his concept of world history, which itself becomes a helpful model for thinking about the novel. As seen, some novels such as Wilde’s and Dowell’s explore the tragic collisions of one-sided, contradictory truth claims. Some novels lead the reader to believe the dialectic can be transcended by the individual self, just as Stephen Dedalus, Lord Henry, and Nietzsche strive to do. Wilde, Forster, and Ford, on the other hand, as interpreted here, see a need for dialectical engagement in which both moral categories that are knowable and an ethical “letting be” of what is unknowable are constantly negotiated.

Let us briefly return to *Atonement*, the novel discussed at the beginning of this book as one that brings into question the value of epistemological uncertainty and much of modernism. At the end of *Atonement*, the reader receives the revelation that the text she has been reading is actually written by Briony herself. It is the novel Briony has been trying
to write for fifty-nine years, ever since the rejection of her original draft which did not have enough plot and character development. Readers also learn that Briony, now an elderly woman, has just received a diagnosis of vascular dementia, which further brings her reliability into question. Briony admits to the reader she has altered the truth in her novel, not giving us the real historical ending but instead letting her characters, who are based on real people, live on to have a happy fictional ending. Readers are left with questions similar to those with which Dowell leaves them in *The Good Soldier*: How should readers judge the novelist, who is an imaginary character, on a moral level? Is the resultant novel a true struggle with conscience, or is it an attempt at self-justification through the fictionalizing of reality? Unlike Dowell, however, who seems to think the novelistic dialectic tells the truth about the human subject, that Puritan morality and law always hinder natural romantic desire, Briony willingly admits she has altered reality to fit a novelistic romance form. Does this difference lead to a different moral judgment of Briony than of Dowell?

At this ending point of the novel, readers are led to understand that Briony, who has become a famous novelist over the years, has continually struggled with how to tell her story. Presumably, her struggle to write has also been a struggle with her own conscience and guilt, and with her own moral position in the plot. Briony’s childhood “crime” involved making a false accusation against Robbie, the boy she had seen with her sister when her sister had undressed and submerged herself in a fountain. Later that night, based on Briony’s evidence, Robbie is accused, arrested, and jailed for his supposed attempted rape of Briony’s cousin, Lola. Yet this accusation was neither certain nor based on facts, but only on Briony’s imaginative piecing together of the things she thinks she saw and the placement of those impressions into a simple plot of good and evil.

Part I of her finished product is presumably the Woolf-like narrative upon which Cyril Connelly commented, in which Briony attempts to produce an amoral novel by telling the fountain scene from multiple perspectives. She tries to capture the way in which a child might imagine a false reality based upon the types of stories and morality tales a child knows. Briony as a child is a “Puritan,” interpreting everything according to knowable and rigid moral categories, even more so because a sexual act is at stake of which she knows little. Briony in this section both wants to attribute such Puritan interpretation to a child, who thus might not be fully culpable, and at the same time recognize that guilt and error should nevertheless be assigned. This first section depicts Briony’s accusation as immature, and her mode of storytelling in which facts are placed simply
into moral categories and received plots as similarly immature. Real life, morality, and human character are more complex than a child can envision. Briony seems to be confused about her actions and her lack of forthrightness, especially when she has the chance to retract her statements. Part I also reveals, then, the powerful position of the novelist or storyteller who has the ability to influence how others interpret reality. Such influence can even come from an immature child.

Briony’s “amoral” tale, in which the level of her moral culpability is uncertain or even ignored, was rejected for not having enough plot and character development. This means any sense of character or plot development in part I may be later fictionalizations, including Briony’s own sense of guilt. It also means parts II and III are probably attempts at writing a novel that would please a publisher as well as the reader who expects moral and spiritual development of a novel’s characters. Like Dowell, Briony tries to understand reality and the past by imagining its actions and people as if they were in a novel, but she admits she has created a fiction, whereas Dowell does not.

Part II moves out of Woolf-like epistemological uncertainty and is instead an intensely realistic yet fragmented portrayal of Robbie’s experiences in World War Two at the Battle of Dunkirk. In this section, Briony seems to justify herself in part by leading the reader to understand that all humans are guilty. Just as in the war all parties participate in evil such that individuals are morally culpable not only because of their own choices but also because they are trapped in larger societal circumstances, so Briony is a product of society and culture at large. She did not choose the childhood stories and their moral categories that led to false judgment—these were given to her by English literary history. Fiction and history have mutually shaped each other. This section also implicitly asks how a story with plot and character development could be written when human reality is so far removed from such simplicity, when war can smash all previous notions of what is right and wrong and render the human subject lost in a violent and overwhelming reality. Part III returns to typical narration and depicts Robbie reunited with her sister, Cecilia. It even depicts a scene in which Briony, now a war hospital nurse, goes to their apartment and takes some steps toward amendment of her childhood “crime.” Yet with Briony’s revelations at the end, readers learn that Robbie did not survive the war to be reunited with Cecilia. His death at Dunkirk means the war section of Briony’s novel is essentially historical fiction, rendered “realistic” through her research at the war museum and obviously not relayed to her directly by Robbie. Readers also learn that
Cecilia died in London during a bomb raid, and that Briony never went to her apartment, never met with the pair, never was reconciled to her sister, and never confessed her crime to anyone.

Her novel-writing, then, has simultaneously been her way of atoning for her crime and for achieving a justice for Robbie and her sister that was rendered impossible because of the war and their deaths. On the latter point, Briony sees the best justice for Robbie and Cecilia to be a fictional, romantic ending in which they are reunited. She justifies her fictionalization of Robbie’s and Cecilia’s lives by arguing that telling of their deaths would not have served any purpose:

How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? . . . When I am dead, . . . no one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. (351)

Briony claims that creating the romantic ending in which the lovers are reunited after the brutal war, which she has only in her last draft decided to do, serves a higher purpose for the reader by giving hope and satisfaction: “I like to think that it isn’t weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet” (351).

Here, Briony argues that readers want romantic endings in which love triumphs over false moral judgment, over war, and over history. Yet in this case, the reader also knows that even if she is establishing Robbie and Cecilia in an eternal happiness that is entirely fictional, Briony is somehow in that process giving a better outcome than were the actual consequences of her childhood misrepresentation of the facts. Her childhood storytelling, in which Robbie played the villain, had real moral consequences in real life, ruining Robbie’s life and prohibiting his love relationship with Cecilia. Further, what is one to think when Briony at the end admits she has returned purposively to where she began with her childhood playwriting—to romance and a fictionalization of the facts? Whereas the childhood plot-making had drastic moral consequences, she believes her current plot-making is a means of achieving justice for Robbie and Cecilia, to let them have a happier ending than their real lives did and to let the reader also have an idealistic escape experience. Robbie and Cecilia’s
imaginary love breaks free of the moral categories that led them to tragedy; their desires find satisfaction. In the childhood case, Briony does not know how she is fictionalizing reality while in the latter she does, and she has now decided that the fiction of romance is better than attempting to portray reality. She assumes romance is needed for readers in a world that is bleak and full of tragedy caused by the conflict of one-sided truth claims. For Briony, the novel with a happy ending provides hope for escape and a higher ethical experience and thereby plays a vital role in human life. If the novel ended only with this happy reunion, one could judge Briony in a way similar to Dowell, seeing her denying her moral culpability and justifying her own moral position by reworking reality into a novelistic form and into the ethical realm of letting the lovers simply “be.”

Yet unlike Dowell, Briony does not simply dismiss the moral questions raised in her story, and in fact, she confesses she has fabricated much of the story in order to serve Robbie, Cecilia, and the reader. She is unwilling to write a scene in which she is granted full forgiveness. She recognizes as a truth the Puritan notion that the novelist is both creator and exegete, and she highlights this fact explicitly. The reader begins to realize the limiting nature of the novelistic dialectic. Briony admits the novel cannot provide atonement:

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. (351)

Fulfilling what Puritans believed, Briony knows the novelist is the highest being with the most authority in a particular novel, but also that a novelist cannot provide atonement for herself because she is the creator of the narrative. It is not that she could not have written a story in which she was repentant and forgiven; that was a possibility all along. She could have created her own conversion and redemption, but she did not. Instead she highlights her own fictionalizing and does not let the reader romanticize her moral position or believe she has escaped it.

In the end, she says her attempt to seek atonement in the novel was enough. In fact, this seeking is all that is actually possible in a novel. She
carried her past with her throughout her life and never closed off the memory of it by creating a plot that resolved everything. She narrates herself as a child who could not recognize that simple Puritan morality was not adequate to tell complex human stories. Fifty-nine years later, Briony seems to recognize also that the human subject and human storytelling cannot escape completely the realm of the moral and the social, and she wants to remind both readers and herself of this. To complete this particular novel without this confession would be to deny her unresolved guilt and moral culpability in the story. Elements of the Puritan moral side of the dialectic remain and help explain the events and stories of human life, but they never, perhaps, tell the full story.

Her novel ends, then, with neither a Puritan conversion of the self nor a Hegelian resolution of the tragedy. But it also does not leave readers in a position of saying that epistemological uncertainty is of utmost ethical value or the final truth about human life. We are left both with the fictionalized romance plot and its satisfaction of desires for escape and letting be, and with the ongoing moral quest undertaken by Briony. Like so many postmodern novels, Briony’s novel self-reflexively brings into question the power and function of novels and storytelling in real life, continuing to play with the relation of art and life upon which Wilde was so focused. Briony denies the power of a novel or novelist to provide either final moral resolution or atonement for any human situation. Likewise, however—and this is key—she denies the power of a novel to provide a means of total escape from human moral situations. She retains a moral value for storytelling, as she sees the processes of trying to make sense of reality through storytelling to be a way of working out the moral complexities of life, even if those stories—and life itself—cannot provide complete redemption or resolution. One always has to recognize the limitations of the novelistic narrative.

All of this, of course, raises the question of whether atonement would be possible for Briony outside the novel. Perhaps, and perhaps Briony or McEwan leaves that as a possibility. But there is not much sign of religion in the novel, and Briony clearly believes the novel does not reflect a universal moral order. To her, no God but the novelist can intrude into the text. In the end, McEwan may be highlighting for us how the novel is trapped in the logic of the Puritan dialectic, finding itself unable to imagine anything different. On the one hand, this view could lead to pessimism and debunking, to the doubting side of the dialectic, to a modernist sort of rebellion and a longing to be outside the limits. It could also lead to seeing idealized romantic escape as the only life-giving function of the novel, as
so many postmodern novelists do. These views see the novelist as Briony does, as the only reigning sovereign over storytelling, the novelist as God. Perhaps McEwan’s novel opens the view a little wider, however, acknowledging there are moral realities that do not go away, that are beyond the power of the individual self to resolve, that nonetheless command communal attention, action, and effort. Perhaps the novel can only justify the sovereign self and its limitations while not leading to anything new, but perhaps there are more possibilities for it than modernism as a whole has led us to think.

Finally, then, this study is a call for new novels, ones that can incorporate more fully the dialectic of the moral and the ethical, just as Augustine’s Bible-reading did, giving us characters and narratives that might lead us out of the limitations of the sovereign ethical type and the sovereign moral type, and toward a more complex, communal, and active humanity, one that can negotiate both the now and not yet, the moral and the ethical. It is not enough to escape the present and its categories and to await passively a future atonement or redemption that may never come, as the new ethical theorists tend to do. We have to attend to the now, submitting to the valid truth claims of the Other while at the same time actively engaging with them in light of the valid portions of our own truth claims. Like Augustine and the early modern Puritans, we have to believe in change and be open to it—that we can change, that others can change. To believe that no moral truths or judgments can be spoken or that no moral reconciliation or resolution of seemingly contradictory positions can occur, to believe that tolerance and pluralism are the best ideals, puts one in a lonely, impoverished, and self-focused position, one that limits the path to human flourishing.

Like Dorian, Stephen, and Dowell, Briony is alone. Her dementia will trap her forever in this loneliness, no matter how famous she is. She has been limited by her own years of doubting and searching within the confines of the novelistic narrative. There is much more to life than being an ethical self who rebels against, attempts to escape, or merely sees the self above and outside Puritan morality, just as there is much more to life than being a Puritan self who assumes certainty and thereby potentially places limits and debilitating categories upon others. Each side of the dialectic is incomplete in itself, but if some form of dialectical reading can be achieved in community that is willing to negotiate repeatedly the realms of the moral and the ethical, and to sacrifice the self’s sovereignty, perhaps we can find new ways to serve each other well. The seventeenth-century
Puritan pastor, Thomas Watson, called on Christians to become “walking Bibles.” The modernist novelists analyzed here warn readers that the modern need for escape and “letting be,” as well as the practices of using labels and categories with assumed ultimate certainty, are both one-sided truth claims of the novelistic dialectic. In this light, becoming “walking novels” without a full sense of the dialectical relation of the moral to the ethical may be very dangerous indeed. This is one moral lesson some of the early modernist novelists were interested in pointing out.