Moral Education and Literature: On Cora Diamond and Eimear McBride

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I

In 2010 the philosopher Martha Nussbaum published a short yet significant manifesto, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. In the wake of global economic calamity and widespread financial distress, *Not for Profit* was a rallying cry for the necessity of the liberal arts in primary, secondary and university education. Indeed, Nussbaum identified at the heart of contemporary pedagogy a thoroughgoing crisis that threatened the very future of democratic self-government. Where science, business and technology had completely shouldered out the arts and humanities – where the goods of profit-making, competition, and economic gain had systematically eroded the values of life-long learning and narrative imagination – contemporary education had become increasingly and worryingly impoverished. In response to this perceived crisis Nussbaum’s book called for a due remembrance of liberal educational ideals, for a considered return to the literary and the philosophical, for the cultivation in her own words “of complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements” (Nussbaum 2010, 2).

Though extending and refining its central thesis for a post-2008 general audience, Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit* is in many ways a direct development of her earlier academic work on literature and the morally educative. Several of Nussbaum’s key publications, from *Love’s Knowledge and Poetic Justice* to *Cultivating Humanity* and *Upheavals of Thought*, have as their central theme the importance of the humanities – specifically, the importance of narrative fiction – in educating a learner’s moral sensibility (Nussbaum 1990; Nussbaum 1995; Nussbaum 1997; Nussbaum 2001). Nussbaum tells in this work a fairly straightforward story: in reading works of literature, we are introduced to a broad spectrum of fictional persons and fictional worlds and so, in reading works of literature, our emotional and cognitive repertoire expands. We acquire as readers a strong sense of complexity and difference and thus we become finely attuned as citizens to the experiences and necessities of those around us. This model of expansion and attunement is the basis for Nussbaum’s distinctive brand of cosmopolitan education.

In the conversation between moral education and literature it is striking that several of Nussbaum’s contemporaries have appealed in a similar vein to metaphors of expansion or growth. The philosopher Richard Rorty has argued that readers should turn to what he calls “middle-brow” fiction for the inspirational value it holds as the basis for a liberal democracy. Certain types of books, Rorty urges, can make us better persons than we already are by appealing to our innate sense of kindness and solidarity and by broadening our understanding of other people from “one of them” to “one of us”. Thus, in the Rortyan schema, novels like George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* educate their readers by sensitizing them to the pain and humiliation of other people (Rorty 1989; Rorty 1996). Similarly, for Bernard Williams and Irish Murdoch, in their experience of narrative fiction readers have their moral and emotional sensibilities distinctively deepened and finely tuned (Williams 1985; Murdoch 1970).

The shared contention of Nussbaum and Rorty is that literature for the moral imagination widens, deepens or expands. In the practice of reading we are gifted greater moral sensitivity precisely because of fiction’s expansionist role. We become acquainted with a broader range of fictional persons and we become familiar with a broader range of ethical scenarios. Certainly there is a distinction to be drawn between the cognitivist picture of Nussbaum (where the reading of fiction operates primarily on our understanding) and the sentimentalist picture of Rorty (where the reading of fiction operates primarily on our
emotions); still, both visions rely strongly on these recurring metaphors of expansion or enlargement. In the work of both philosophers, literature educates our moral capacities by widening or deepening what we already have.

I contend in this paper that these expansionist metaphors have to a certain extent ossified in the critical discussion and that they are characteristically appealed to in unreflective and imprecise ways. I contend also that they have dulled our appreciation for the very complex relationship between literature and the moral life. Yes, it might indeed be the case that in the practice of reading narrative fiction our emotional or cognitive repertoire enlarges but to focus solely on this expansionist process, I argue, is to limit our appreciation not only for the sphere of the literary but for the sphere of the moral more generally. In development of this position I turn to the work of the contemporary American philosopher, Cora Diamond. Diamond is another of Nussbaum’s philosophical contemporaries and one she has directly engaged with at several occasions in her career. She is perhaps best known for her radical re-reading of the early and the late Wittgenstein.

I am interested particularly in Diamond’s 2003 essay, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy”. Though taking as its central topic the dialogue between literature and ethics, the tenor of Diamond’s piece is strikingly different from that of her moral philosophical contemporaries. The very experience of reading Diamond is distinctive, indeed, as her essay is affective – performative, one might say – at the level of image and voice. Difficulty, at its simplest, testifies to an experience of pain. This experience is one where certain materials of reality are so difficult to contemplate, so inexplicable to our everyday frameworks of thought, that their careful contemplation can almost unhinge or destroy. What Diamond is describing is a kind of self-imposed blinderedness, one where we are astounded, overpowered, stuck dumb. In her own words: “What interests me there is the experience of the mind’s not being able to encompass something which it encounters. It is capable of making one go mad to try, to bring together in thought what cannot be thought” (Diamond 2003, 44).

Diamond takes the phrase “the difficulty of reality” from the American writer, John Updike, and her essay in general is structured in response to four literary moments or touchstones. The most striking and the most developed of these is J.M. Coetzee’s lecture series, The Lives of Animals. Diamond is interested particularly in Coetzee’s fictional character, Elizabeth Costello, who embodies for Diamond this trauma of the unspeakable. Costello is a woman haunted by our treatment of nonhuman animals and haunted more deeply by our failure or refusal to face this trauma in thought. This haunting translates in her everyday experience to “a terrible rawness of nerves” (Diamond 2003, 47), a “profound disturbance of the soul” (54), a sick yet striking sense “that this should not be” (60). Countenancing – or indeed failing to countenance – these difficulties of reality. Costello’s is an experience of wretchedness, of rawness, of nerviness, of exposure. She is for Diamond the central touchstone of her piece.

In its invitation to consider again the relationship between literature and moral education, Diamond’s essay is strikingly original. Her work offers us much more than that of Nussbaum or Rorty. In her engagement with the realm of the literary Diamond departs significantly from the mainstream of contemporary moral philosophy even as this tradition of thought was being substantially reworked via the so-called “literary turn” of the late nineteen eighties. Indeed, offered in her work is a profound challenge to the prevailing styles and standards of Anglo-American philosophy more generally. In developing this reading of Diamond, I bring her essay into conversation with a work of contemporary Irish fiction. Specifically, I read “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy” with A Girl is a Half-formed Thing. Highly distinctive for its unorthodoxies of character and language, Girl was published in 2013 as the debut novel of Eimear McBride.
It is a signature aspect of Diamond’s originality that she engages in her work with formally experimental literary works. Nussbaum and Rorty in their use of literary examples characteristically favour the realist novel (their favoured authors include Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Henry James) and there is a long tradition of moral philosophers more generally working within nineteenth-century realism. Diamond in her adventure with literature has consistently moved beyond these conventions. Among the literary texts invoked in her work are the novel *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, the short story “Little Brother” by Mary Mann, and the poem “Titmouse” by Walter de la Mare. My juxtaposition of Diamond’s essay with McBride’s novella is a gamble motivated at least in part by the philosopher’s own openness to this broad range of formally experimental creative works. Offering a way forward through the difficulty and the challenge of the literary text, Diamond’s work calls us to think again about the value of the liberal arts as they have been threatened and tested in recent years. Diamond’s work calls us to think again, and to think in ways much more challenging and much more unsettling than Nussbaum or Rorty, about the education of philosophy and the education of the novel.

II

For you. You’ll soon. You’ll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she’ll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I’d say. I’d say that’s what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day. (McBride 2013, 3)

Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* launches with a “you” and an “I” and the stop-start promise of a name. “I” is a girl, not fully a person but a person-thing on the way to full formation. We follow her from infancy to childhood through adolescence and just beyond. We see her finally in early adulthood when even at the age of twenty her form is ambiguous, indistinct. “You” is her brother. He is two years older and afflicted in early childhood with a cancerous tumour of the brain. This is the ever-present shadow of their growing-up together as they a are by turns shielded and scolded by a religiously devout mother. Indeed, Catholicism is conjured as yet another cancerous presence of the novella; the movement of McBride’s text is between salvation and sin as she works to interrogate both. The father is dead, we discover, and with the introduction in Part II of an aunt and an uncle, a girl is sexually assaulted in early adolescence and spends the remainder of her story in self-destruction and in pain. She moves away to a nameless city before returning to her nameless home. In the end, her brother dies and the promise of a name fades far away.

Turn. Look up. Bubble from my mouth drift high. Blue tinge lips. Floating hair. Air finished eyes. Brown water turning into light. There now. There now. That just was life. And now.

What?

My name is gone. (McBride 2013, 203)

Undoubtedly, what is most striking about *Girl* is its language and its grammar. At no point in this two-hundred page narrative does the staccato phrasing elongate or settle down. At no point are we given a comma or a colon or any grammatical relief from statement or question. Rather, what we are presented with throughout is relentless expression not in language but more accurately in the pre-linguistic – in the *pre-verbal*, to borrow a term from Anne Enright’s astonished review (Enright 2013). A girl is a communicator but in her half-formed condition she is at least partially excluded from the language community. She speaks definitely to “you” and possibly to the reader but the objective of this speaking is more for her purposes than ours. And so, in fractures of syntax and reversals of sense, the reader of
*Girl* is immersed and assaulted and we are barely allowed to breathe. Our abiding impression is of a splintering language that fractures and sunder as it desperately tracks reality. All the way through McBride’s text we are implicated as readers in this bloodied struggle, from the very first “For You” to the forlornly final “My name is gone”.

That first-person expression fails always to capture reality is of course a concern that is abidingly philosophical. It is evident in the twentieth century in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who can be read both in his earlier and in his later incarnations as broaching the twin possibilities of intersubjective communication and solipsistic dread. That I may be suffering, and my suffering still unknown or still uncommunicable, is a characteristically Wittgensteinian disquiet. In refutation of the “private language argument”, Wittgenstein had famously argued that the idea of a language understandable only by a single individual is illogical. Language, by necessity, is a public practice, and it makes no sense to suggest that “my pain” is uncommunicable to others. Indeed, the utterance “I have a pain” is not a descriptive or informative sentence at all; it is an *expressive cry* meant to elicit sympathy or help. Thus exposing the very idea of a private language as nonsensical, for Wittgenstein the pain of others is not a matter of knowledge (i.e. it is not something we can ever be fully certain of or something we can ever fully prove beyond doubt) but it is a matter of acknowledgment (i.e. when someone declares “I am in pain” they are in practice asking for our recognition, for our care). (Wittgenstein 1953, § 246).

It makes no sense to speak of a private language; “pain” is not a thing or an object that one can point at outside the rules and conventions of a language community. Still, in Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning as use, the solipsistic threat is not fully refuted but fully reconceived. True, we are bound together as users of language and we are called upon to communicate responsively and carefully in our everyday speech. Nevertheless, there is yet the possibility that our shared language can fail, that our agreed-upon words will not offer satisfactory expression or desired connection with the external world. There might still remain an immeasurable gap between you and I; I might never fully appreciate let alone speak your pain. If these are philosophical possibilities for Wittgenstein, I would contend that they are lived traumas for McBride. Indeed, the formative relationship of the latter’s book is that between a girl and her brother even though this same relationship is curiously one-sided, curiously spectatorial. At no point in the two hundred pages does a girl’s brother speak and at no point in the two hundred pages are we fully assured that his sister is heard. In place of assurance, rather, what we are given in this sibling relationship is distance, denial and consistently the failure to acknowledge. This is we might say the classic problem of philosophical scepticism, at least as it is transposed by Wittgenstein’s inheritors (Diamond as well as Cavell) as the central tragedy of the human (Cavell 1969, Cavell 1979). A girl and her brother live this tragedy not only in his death but in the daily lives of their separation. We are given longing, leaving, and always more pain: “But somehow I’ve left you behind and you’re just looking on” (McBride 2013, 61).

Venting female childhood and adolescence in all their vulnerability, *Girl* is not straightforwardly about growth or positive progression. The protagonist at twenty speaks similarly to the protagonist at two, holding to the fractured rhythms that are this text’s signature style. At least one reviewer has noted that this “raw unfiltered state” is “stereotypically gendered as female” (Hendrix 2014) and certainly it is characteristic of McBride’s narrative to equate girlhood with hurtful chaos. Following the assault in adolescence, a girl’s sexual awakening continues in violence and degradation. Language stretches to the breaking point and it is recomposed in shocking forms:

Scin. Stop heel. Tear my mouth. Garble lotof. Don’t I come all mouth of blood of choking of he there bitch there bithe there there strange me strangle how you like it how you think it is fun gouged breth
What is interesting about this passage is that despite its surface oddity – despite its fracture and re-arrangement of word and sentence – it is still fully understandable to users of the English language. McBride has revealed in interview that this gamble re sense and nonsense was in fact a deliberate strategy: “I was interested to see how far it was possible to push word order and structure while still remaining comprehensible and – more importantly – engaging” (Collard 2014). We are recalled again in this context to Wittgenstein and the incoherence of a “private language”. Even in the extremest of efforts to subjectivize or to privatize pain, a girl is condemned to be understood by others. She is condemned to be meaningful even as she leaves her reader in confusion and distress.

On the topic of pain and the female, there are striking parallels between McBride’s girl and Diamond’s Costello. Endeavouring to come to terms with her own “difficulties of reality”, the latter is ravaged and wounded. She is “the woman with the haunted mind and the raw nerves” (Diamond 2003, 48); she is barred from the full countenance of our treatment of nonhuman animals; she simply cannot get her head around what we do. In facing up to human practices of factory farming and systematic slaughter, Costello finds herself pushed out in the cold from all she can countenance and from all she can understand. She is isolated further by others’ “deflection” of this problem, by their refusal to take it on in all its messiness and all its gore. “The wound marks her and isolates her” (Diamond 2003, 46), in Diamond’s signature assessment.

Again, the difficulty Costello faces is taken by Diamond to be a difficulty of thought. These are experiences in Diamond’s words “in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability. We take things so” (Diamond 2003, 46). Costello, once more, is “someone immensely conscious of the limits of thinking, the limits of understanding, in the face of all that she is painfully aware of” (Diamond 2003, 52). It is characteristic of these limits that they are experienced by the subject singular and yet they are to be experienced by the subject universal; these limits are the inheritance of all users of language and all victims of thought. As we strain to bring into focus aspects of our private and disordered experience we withdraw from those loved ones around us, and in this same process we augment our pain as well as our isolation. So for Diamond’s Costello, and so for McBride’s girl.

One of the most striking aspects of Diamond’s essay is her willingness to linger with the bodily and the physical, her interest in staying with flesh and blood. She never states the point so directly but this willingness is undoubtedly an important aspect of her late work. Recall again that Diamond’s emphasis in Difficulty is on the wounded woman and her particular experience of reality as unyielding. I would read this emphasis as Diamond’s philosophical point that the peculiar character of human knowledge is embodied, not abstract, and moreover that this picture of human knowledge is one that moral philosophy has typically resisted. Indeed it is characteristic of moral philosophy, as Diamond has argued elsewhere and throughout her earlier oeuvre, to present moral concepts as straightforwardly given, as moving within a world that is “hard” and fully prior to moral thought and life (Diamond 1991, 367-83). The view in other words is that reality does in fact yield to our rational modes of understanding it, that moral thought goes on in a space of fixed possibilities. In place of this view, Diamond invites us to consider our moral concepts as “cloudy and shifting”, as brought into view only by the exercise of our own moral capacities. In Diamond’s assessment, the description or appreciation of facts is itself a moral task, an everyday undertaking “for which moral energy, discipline, imagination, creativity, wit, care,
patience, tact, delicacy [...] may be required” (Diamond 1991, 377). Getting our minds around reality might indeed be torturous and painful but this epistemological effort is a crucial aspect of the moral life.

There are important respects in which this view of moral philosophy is shaped by Diamond’s reading of Wittgenstein. More specifically, it is shaped by Wittgenstein’s very particular picture of language. In what is referred to in contemporary philosophy as the “resolute reading”, Diamond interprets Wittgenstein as having an anti-metaphysical agenda in both the early and the later work. In other words, Diamond reads Wittgenstein as arguing that language does not successfully hook up with reality, that there is no objective connection between words and the world. Meaning is not a function of what is but a function of what we do; meaning is determined by language games, by grammar, by criteria – by “forms of life”. This anti-metaphysical agenda of the early and late Wittgenstein is read by Diamond in terms of his “realistic spirit”. What Diamond is concerned to foreground here is the Wittgensteinian impetus that returns us to our everyday and existing methods, that encourages us all to stop worrying about some kind of transcendent or metaphysical perspective. On this picture, meaning is a matter of use but this is not tantamount to saying that meaning is only a matter of use. Human imperfection is the best we have, in other words, and making peace with this imperfection involves acknowledging it as both limiting and constitutive.

Now when Diamond turns to ethics it is interesting to note how this metaphysical picture plays out. When considering the moral life, Diamond following Wittgenstein urges us to be “realistic” – in her very particular understanding of that term. Given the disappointments of language, given the difficulties of reality, she urges us to appreciate the limits of what we can think, the limits of what we can know, and the limits of what we can capture in language. And interestingly, she draws a profound connection between these epistemological limits and our limited condition as human – as finite, as vulnerable, and as mortal beings. Though this connection in her work is more subterranean than surface, for Diamond there is a profound link between our exposure to scepticism and our exposure to mortality and to pain. That limits of thought and language are actually experienced as bodily wounds is one of the key insights of her piece, accounting to a large extent for its distinctively affective power. In the course of Difficulty Diamond builds towards the thought that it is not only characteristic but definitive of the human to be curtailed both by what we can know and what we can be. In her own words, “… that coming apart of thought and reality … belongs to flesh and blood” (Diamond 2003, 78, emphasis mine).

Diamond’s Difficulty and McBride’s Girl are texts that in very different ways defy and challenge, unsettle and unnerve. Both writers chart mental anguish and physical pain; both narrate first-person experience as isolated and fractured and always hard-won. That reality when difficult characteristically resists our thinking it is a recurring theme of Diamond’s essay and it is this same resistance – this same bodily battle – that is taken on by McBride in relentlessly experimental and uncompromising prose. If Diamond’s Costello simply cannot get her head around certain types of experience; if difficulties of reality constantly shoulder her out from her ordinary ways of thinking and speaking; McBride’s girl battles hardest to detain these difficulties – to pin them there in the half-formed moment before language coalesces from thought.
The imaginative activity of exploring another inner life, while not the whole of a healthy moral relationship to others, is at least one necessary ingredient of it. [...] It contains within itself an antidote to the self-protective fear that is so often connected to egocentric projects of control. (Nussbaum 2010, 109)

Returning to Nussbaum and her case for liberal education: the key idea once more is that the arts and humanities activate and expand our narrative imaginations – the arts and humanities activate and expand our capacity “to see the world through another person’s eyes” (Nussbaum 2010, 96) – and so the arts and humanities should be given a central role in the curriculum. Nussbaum is right to insist that the expansion of individual sympathy has always been a central component in the development of modern democracies and, concomitantly, that the ability of the arts to cultivate students’ perception has always been championed by theorists of democratic education. From Donald Winnicott and Bronson Alcott to Ralph Ellison and Rabindranath Tagore, writers on democratic education have consistently foregrounded the importance of the imagination in the nurturing of ethical concern (Nussbaum 2010, 95-121). Nussbaum joins particularly with Rorty, her moral philosophical contemporary, in his vision of the novel as a medium that offers “thick” (i.e. detailed and complex) descriptions of human concerns and loyalties. For Nussbaum and Rorty both, novels acquaint us with a broad range of fictional persons, persons we can carefully attend to and eventually come to understand.

Recalling this vision of literature and the morally educative, we might consider again the pedagogical possibility of A Girl is a Half-formed Thing. We might consider, particularly, the pedagogical possibility for a student reading this text for her undergraduate or postgraduate seminar. It is of course difficult to speculate on individual reading experiences or to generalize re the impact of this text on interpreters of varying tastes, varying abilities, and varying cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless it does not seem quite accurate (or quite enough) to suggest that in the process of reading Girl the student reader has her moral imagination broadened or expanded, or that in her acquaintance with McBride’s title character the sympathies and perceptions of the student reader are typically deepened and enlarged. It is in fact much more likely that in the process of reading Girl the student reader will be deeply disturbed. There is a resistance to McBride’s novel, a refusal of interpretation in the very restriction and repetition of its prose. The text defies its reader to recompose sense from nonsense and this defiance is unrelenting and uncompromising and frequently too much. McBride “stretches” her audience, in her own words and in her own assessment of the playwright Sarah Kane, “out to the very edges of their humanity to see what they can see” (Collard 2014). This isn’t so much imaginative expansion, we might suggest, as a very particular and very peculiar practice of imaginative testing.

If Diamond’s Difficulty is uncompromising, even stark, in a similar tenor there are no easy redemptions in Girl. Sifting McBride’s text for “the moral of the story”, her readers come up sadly short as one by one the failed Gods of contemporary Ireland – religion, community, education, and family – show themselves at best ineffective and at worst morally corrupt. A girl is abandoned by her father, ignored by her mother, abused by her uncle and degraded further by her own self. In increasingly brutal scenes she is assaulted and raped, masochistically debased and defiled. Indeed, the loss of innocence is cruelly comprehensive as in the narrative’s unfolding we are forced to concede that the love a girl protects for her brother is sadly more sentimental than saving. He cannot save his own life and he certainly cannot save hers. In John Boland’s blunt assessment: “There’s no reassurance here. There are no consolations. There are no redemptions” (Boland, cited in Collard 2014).
Though in different ways excluded from the community around her, we might say that McBride’s girl shares with Diamond’s Costello these wounding experiences of vulnerability and exposure. In the absence of external assurances or pieties, all the latter has to go on is her own fractured experience, her own life separated from others, her own making the best of it. Her experience of separation and finitude is deeply unhinging as she is continuously and painfully aware that attempts in language to distil and to communicate are forever sundered by bodily limitation. Wounded and isolated by her appreciation of our cruelty to nonhuman animals, she can never be fully sure that this pain is appreciated or acknowledged by those loved ones around her. This limitation, indeed, is the very condition of our humanity. As Diamond frames the challenge, one faced by all of us every day in the living of our scepticism: “we are thrown into finding something we can live with, and it may at best be a kind of bitter-tasting compromise” (Diamond 2003, 72).

If there is philosophical depth to McBride’s novella I want to suggest, in closing, that there is literary achievement to Diamond’s essay. What is interesting about “Difficulty” is that it is written for a philosophical audience but that it nonetheless exceeds the forms and features typically associated with philosophy in its existing Anglo-American moment. This essay is not presented as argument. It invokes but does not directly refute the work of philosophical contemporaries. It foregrounds its four literary touchstones and crucially these touchstones are not offered as illustrations to bolster an already-established theory. Paraphrasing or summarizing Diamond’s essay is a further challenge as it relies so heavily on its own original formulations. One can attempt an intelligent gloss at the central concepts of the essay – difficulty, deflection, woundedness, exposure – but always these concepts outstrip our efforts to halt or to fully understand.

But more than this, because none of these qualities on their own exclude Diamond from the richness and diversity that is mainstream moral philosophy, Difficulty strikes its reader as intensely affective. There is a viscerality to the piece – a distaste and a wince and a felt stomach-level discomfort – that is heightened even further by Diamond’s clarifying and lucid prose. Readers typically testify to the experience of the essay as provocative, instructive, and yet in its own peculiar way still somehow resistant. Strikingly comparable to McBride’s Girl, Diamond’s Difficulty refuses to fully yield and in this same refusal its readers are left queasy – physically, emotionally and intellectually thrown. For these reasons and no doubt more Difficulty has to date generated lengthy and considered responses from such eminent philosophical contemporaries as John McDowell, Stanley Cavell, Ian Hacking and Cary Wolfe. Commenting in 2008, Hacking described Diamond’s essay as “deeply perturbing”. “It gives cause to think, to stop;”, he wrote, “it gives cause not to speak while it is being taken in” (Hacking 2003, 139). It is a signature aspect of Diamond’s essay that this pitch of care and responsiveness is demanded of its reader. Comparable once more to the confounding experience of Girl, in taking in the full ethical consequence of Difficulty, it is a struggle for its reader to make complete sense, a struggle for its reader to breathe.

The education of Diamond’s essay is neither fully literary nor fully philosophical but a profound combination of both. As she extends the scope of moral thought from the argumentative to the affective she never loses track of philosophical rigour or insight. Diamond teaches Nussbaum and Rorty that there is more to the education of literature than the expansion of imaginative capacities and, just as importantly, that there is more to moral philosophy than the interweaving of fact with general principle. The fundamental insight here is a Wittgensteinian one: if meaning is not a matter of what is but a matter of what we do – if the language we struggle to speak never hooks us up with others or with an external world – then the moral life is not an objective reality to be easily matched by subjective speech. Rather, it is an ongoing task fully dependent on our modes of response.
The moral life is difficult. It is not fundamentally comprehensible and it is not straightforwardly describable. As McBride’s girl testifies in her raw and fractured state, saying exactly what and how things are is not easy. The first-person narrator can only struggle to express and she can never be sure that this private pain will be fully taken in let alone fully acknowledged by another. This same expressive struggle, this literary “unplainness” to borrow a final term from Diamond, is not a guarantee of moral insight but it is in fidelity to the realistic spirit that Diamond via Wittgenstein encourages. This is we might suggest a spirit of committed and keenly-felt exposure. It is a human – and dare we say it an educational – comportment to the world, one where we are aware of our limits, aware of our finitude, aware that we always inhabit a body and that we are never immune from pain.

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