

# “The Soul of Art”: Understanding Victorian Ethical Criticism

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## Introduction

In an 1845 article called “The Literature of Fiction,” an anonymous writer in the *British Quarterly Review* concludes a short history of the English novel with some reservations about the morality of Scott’s Waverley novels. In particular, he is concerned that the “crime of duelling is lightly dealt with; and ... is in one instance defended.” Further, he regretfully observes, “great indulgence is shown to debauched and intemperate habits. The profane language also ... is highly objectionable” (542). If, in their carping tone and prescriptive approach, these remarks typify the Victorian approach to the ethics of fiction, it is hardly surprising that participants in the much-discussed “turn to ethics” in contemporary literary theory have not turned back as far as the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> After all, as the editors of a recent collection remark, “if there is any single defining characteristic in the

1 Michael Eskin’s introduction to the special 2004 issue of *Poetics Today* dedicated to ethics and literature offers a thoughtful survey of the elements of this “turn” which, as he remarks, “recently celebrated its twentieth birthday”—with the pivotal 1983 issue of *New Literary History* on “Literature and/as Moral Philosophy” marking the original occasion (“Double ‘Turn’” 557). Although after so much time it may seem inappropriate to keep talking of a “turn,” there has certainly been no evidence of a *return*. On the contrary, as Eskin notes, the

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ethical turn that marks contemporary literary studies, it resides in the fact that few critics wish to return to a dogmatically prescriptive or doctrinaire form of reading" (Davis and Womack x). If modern ethical critics refer to the nineteenth century at all, it is only as the source of just such a rule-oriented, censorious "form of reading" that contrasts with their various but all allegedly flexible and undogmatic approaches. Tracing the origins of this rigid critical tradition to Matthew Arnold, both postmodern ethical critics such as Geoffrey Galt Harpham and humanist critics such as Wayne Booth explicitly distance themselves from Arnold's twentieth-century heirs—F. R. Leavis, Yvor Winters, and Lionel Trilling especially—whom Booth calls the "hanging judges" and against whose "hectoring" voices and ideological and theoretical commitments (real or perceived) today's ethical critics of all stripes define themselves (*Company* 49). No doubt this distancing is as much strategic as principled, for as David Latané remarks, "[m]any currents in contemporary Anglo-American criticism and theory have become energized by a dislike of the Arnoldian stance" (390), but it is this stance with which any overt interest in ethics, as Marshall Gregory observes, is promptly associated:

Inside the academy, ethical criticism seems immediately to conjure images of Plato packing the poets out of his republic, or the memory of Matthew Arnold talking about "the best that has been thought and said," or the mental image of F. R. Leavis intoning on and on about the "great tradition." ("Ethical Criticism" 195)

Whether or not this "contemporary critical prejudice associated with 'traditional humanism'" is justified, most contemporary ethical critics seem to agree with Kenneth Womack about the need to "effectively differentiate" themselves from it if ethical criticism is to succeed as "a viable interpretive paradigm" (114–15).

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study of ethics and literature has "consolidated into a burgeoning subdiscipline" (557). Other journals besides *Poetics Today* have recently put out special issues, including *Style* 32:2 (Summer 1998), on "Literature and Ethical Criticism"; *European Journal of English Studies* 7:2 (August 2003), on "Ethics and Literature"; and, again, *New Literary History* 34:1 (Winter 2003), on "Inquiries into Ethics and Narratives." The April 2006 issue of *Philosophy and Literature* includes a forum on "moral fiction." More generally, the number of critical monographs and articles with "ethics" in their title has dramatically expanded in the last twenty years, as has the number of studies seeking to integrate literary analysis and moral philosophy. "For most of the Theoretical Era (c. 1968–87) ethics ... had no respect," Harpham comments (*Shadows* 18). But now "[e]thics ... is all the rage" (Berman 941).

As a key strategy in aid of this project of differentiation, contemporary critics insist on a distinction between ethics and morality. As John Guillory notes, “the concepts of ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ ... are only tenuously distinct in common usage” (38), but in this more specialized context, “ethics” is used to refer to a broad domain of inquiry—as Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller explain, in a typical formulation, “an array of possible answers to the question, ‘how ought a human life to be lived?’” (52)—while “morality” and its variants refer to “more legalistic notions of duties and rights” (Freadman and Miller 52) or, in Guillory’s account, simply “the choice between right and wrong” (38). “The word ‘ethical’ may mistakenly suggest a project concentrating on quite limited moral standards,” Wayne Booth observes early in his landmark 1988 book *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, but he is quick to clarify that he is “interested in a much broader topic, the entire range of effects on the ‘character’ or ‘person’ or ‘self.’ ‘Moral judgments’ are only a small part of it” (8). As these explanations reveal, the anxiety is that the work of ethical criticism will be perceived or practised as a form of prescription or enforcement of specific values: “morality” or, worse, “moralizing,” holds literature and its readers to rigid standards.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, as Harpham puts it, “[a]rticulating perplexity, rather than guiding, is what ethics is all about” (*Shadows* 27). This distinction, with its attendant preference for undecidability, has become the touchstone for critics as divergent, Buell notes, as Harpham and Martha Nussbaum, who despite their substantial differences share

the goal of establishing the salience of an “oughtness” in the text without hypostasizing either what “oughtness” is or fixing the text in a single position with regard to the conjuncture or disjuncture of “ought” and “is.” Indeed, both quite clearly attach value to fiction’s refusal to stabilize that relation. (8)

- 2 The particular hostility to “moralizing” is striking. Harpham, for instance, remarks the “traditional repugnance on the part of readers to moralizing texts and critics” and adds that he “share[s] this contempt” (*Shadows* 1). The distinction between morality and moralism is a further refinement some offer: “Moral thinking can, and must, strive for objectivity, but this does not entail a mindless and insensitive application of a grid of rules and formulae to whatever situation arises. Such mechanical apriorism is what many contemporary literary theorists imagine morality to be, and, not surprisingly, they reject it. But what they are rejecting is moralism not morality.... Moralism is a distortion of morality, and it is a vice in politics as elsewhere” (Coady and Miller 213–14). In another variation, David Parker cautions against “judgmentalism, the powerful temptation in us to divide the world self-righteously into simple binaries” (6).

Thus is the project of ethical criticism liberated from its Arnoldian taint. In this climate of anxiety about the genealogy and tendency of ethical criticism, in which further association with anything Victorian can only seem unfortunate, it is little wonder that no attempt has been made to integrate current theories about the ethics of fiction with nineteenth-century inquiries into related questions. Certainly my anonymous reviewer, who shows no perplexity about the “oughtness” of dueling, seems unlikely company for any of today’s leading practitioners.

In this essay, however, I intend to challenge the reflexive exclusion of Victorian critical writing from contemporary deliberations about ethics and fiction. I will do so on the strength of two main contentions: first, that, because we have taken Victorian critical moralizing for granted, we have not bothered to look closely at it, to find out how Victorian critics actually went about assessing the moral qualities of novels; and second, that, in distancing ourselves from the Victorians, we lose as much as we gain in the ways we talk about fiction and ethics. Both of these claims require elaboration, of course. In support of the first, it is worth initially observing that the only nineteenth-century writers routinely considered in this context are Arnold, Wilde, and Henry James. Despite the frequency with which his name is invoked, Arnold took “practically no note of the novel” (Latané 391), so his relevance to the discussion is actually limited. And Wilde and James are typically considered not Victorian but modern, at least in their aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. Indeed, James becomes the touchstone in Martha Nussbaum’s influential work on literature as moral philosophy largely because of what she sees as his rejection of Victorian certainties.<sup>3</sup> This focus on prominent individual voices valued according to their supposed correspondence to—or offences against—modern(ist) prejudices has distorted our view of the potential relationship between Victorian critical practices and our own.

Further, though other less canonical nineteenth-century literary critics are often cited in discussions of literary-historical context, they are not usually considered as theorists themselves, because contemporary critics have largely accepted James’s judgement about the general state of novel criticism in the nineteenth century. In his famous 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction,” James remarks,

3 See especially “Flawed Crystals: James’s *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy,” in *Love’s Knowledge*. For Wilde, see for example Posner, “Against Ethical Criticism.”

Only a short time ago it might have been supposed that the English novel was not what the French call *discutable*. It had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it—of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison.... During the period I have alluded to there was a comfortable, good-humoured feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and our only business with it could be to swallow it. (186)

Although a handful of scholars have disputed it, this estimation of the insignificance and incoherence of Victorian novel criticism has been pervasive and influential enough to discourage sustained attention to nineteenth-century writing on fiction.<sup>4</sup> In his early study *The Literary Critics*, George Watson argues that the English novel “had to wait an extravagantly long time—well over a hundred years—for a body of criticism to match its own dignity.... No critical revolution can ever have been so total as that represented by [James’s] New York prefaces” (150). This view is supported by later writers such as Daniel R. Schwarz, who identifies James as “the father of novel criticism in English” (*Humanistic* 6), and Harry Blamires, who calls James’s work on theorising the novel a “crucial development in English literary criticism which to hindsight has looked long overdue” (304). This continued underestimation of the theoretical value of nineteenth-century critical work on the novel is also reflected in the popular online *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism* which addresses almost exclusively Victorian poetics under “British Theory and Criticism” (Shaw); under “Fiction Theory and Criticism”, the work of practicing nineteenth-century novelists, rather than critics, is considered (Caserio). Even the entry on “Literary Criticism” in the recent Blackwell *Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* devotes only one paragraph specifically to Victorian theories of fiction, skipping briefly over issues such as “the

4 The notable exceptions are Colby, Graham, Skilton, and Stang. Skilton aptly notes that the “low esteem in which critics of the 1890s and later held early and mid-Victorian criticism of prose fiction accompanies a turning away from social and political aspects of the novel” and towards “technical questions of structure and narrative point of view, and by theories of art as the production of a creator standing apart from society as a gifted individual, and pursuing art purely for the sake of art” (*Early* 9). The oddity is not that such a reversal of critical taste should have taken place but that this deliberate revolt against Victorianism should have been allowed to set the terms of the debate for so long, especially as the critical inquiries of the late twentieth century returned increasingly to what Skilton aptly characterizes, in his Victorian examples, as “sociological” concerns.

dominant theory of realism” and the “countervailing ... principle of amusement” (Latané 396); the article quotes James’s pudding theory without demurral and credits a “belated Victorian theoretical effort” with bringing “sophistication” to the novel (396). Working against this trend, this essay builds on the efforts of those few who have worked to get Victorian criticism understood on its own terms. Admittedly, the Victorian material is diffuse and inchoate, lacking any consistent terminology or articulated method. But the preoccupations of Victorian reviewers—including their preoccupation with morality—have enough common elements to support Robert Colby’s claim that “the novel was quite *discutable* long before Henry James” (“Rational Amusement” 59). My literary historical goal is to reconstruct some key terms of this discussion as it pertains to ethics, albeit in a necessarily brief and preliminary way.

That said, I do not intend this essay to be primarily a contribution to literary history, book history, or reception history: my fundamental questions are theoretical and methodological.<sup>5</sup> This qualification brings me to my second main contention, that we have sacrificed something important by persisting in the critical priorities initially set by modernism and refined by relativism and poststructuralism. Certainly none of us would want to use our critical practice to protest against dueling, or even debauchery. But specific moral standards of this kind (which have their counterparts today, after all) are only one aspect of a critical discourse that I will argue has much to recommend it. For one thing, the hostility to morality—the preference for perplexity over guidance—has eviscerated our ethical criticism as a genuine contribution to moral philosophy because, as Harpham himself allows, “without decision, ethics would be condemned to dithering” (*Shadows* 30). Judith Butler may cry “Bad air!” at the spectre of “a certain heightening of moralism” raised by the turn to ethics (15), but unless we brave the air up there, we will remain lost in the fog. Perhaps, as Booth once observed, “we have looked so long at foggy landscapes reflected in misty mirrors that we have come to *like* fog” (*Rhetoric* 372). But “modern theory urgently needs to regain the capacity to decide” (Siebers 41), particularly theory that purports to share the goals of moral philosophy, which cannot proceed without clarity—however provisional, however hard-won in the face of the intractable complexity and subtlety

5 My approach might also reasonably be characterized, within limits, as philosophical; as Catherine Gardner nicely describes it, the “philosophical model” is “the search for cogent and consistent arguments, the evaluation of the correctness of conclusions, and the construction of a systematic theory from these conclusions and arguments” (3).

of the choices that surround us. While, as I will show, Victorian critics are not as dedicated to prescriptive morality as is conventionally assumed, nonetheless they do persistently address the rightness or wrongness of human actions, and today's ethical critics, who must find ways to do the same without hyperventilating, may find their methods instructive.

Further, unaware that "Arnoldian" would become a pejorative epithet, the Victorians were free to approach fiction as a "criticism of life," to talk in their criticism, as in the fiction that motivated it, "of human lives and choices as if they matter to us all" (Nussbaum 171). They debated the merits of novels as if these books were part of their living world, not part of a separate aesthetic realm: "literature, including the novel," David Skilton observes, "*mattered* in a direct way to the educated Victorian public" (*Early* 7, original emphasis). Of course, this approach is precisely what discomfits modern critics who are, as Buell rightly suggests, reluctant "to allow the central disciplinary referent or value to be located in anything but language" (7). But that explanation indicates precisely the inadequacy of contemporary literary-critical priorities to a fully functioning ethical criticism. A ready assumption today, as Nussbaum notes, is that criticism inquiring into literature as "being in some sense about our lives" must be "hopelessly naïve, reactionary, and insensitive to the complexities of literary form and intertextual referentiality" (21). Of course, this can be true, but it is especially likely to be true if the effort to render literature as moral philosophy is left in the hands of those untrained in such "complexities."<sup>6</sup> Further, the alternative, if we stay within the self-serving parameters Buell describes, is an ethical criticism that is both incomprehensible and irrelevant to the large majority of readers. Nineteenth-century writers can be highly sophisticated and often playful about language and referentiality, but in their ethical analysis the moral crisis of duelling—or seduction, or adultery, or fraud, or infanticide, or blackmail—matters more than word play. Sometimes, as with my crotchety anonymous reviewer, the results

6 As I have argued elsewhere, in some respects Nussbaum's work itself exemplifies this problem ("Martha Nussbaum and the Moral Life of *Middlemarch*"). Or see Anthony Cunningham, *The Heart of What Matters: The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy*: "My use of literature may be very different from what those accustomed to contemporary literary studies might expect or desire. For instance, I am unconcerned with questions of meaning, intention, and how literary texts relate to each other. Instead, I treat works of literature essentially as character studies.... Some people may see this attempt as naïve, and they may worry about treating these characters as if they are real and ignoring the fact that they are creations of authors with designs and intentions all their own. My reaction to any such criticism is a simple, 'So what?...' This is an exercise in moral philosophy and not something else" (90–91).



can certainly be reductive and prescriptive. At their best, however, the Victorian critics respected novels as complex artefacts without losing the urgency that follows on recognizing the world of novels as in crucial ways our own. As Skilton says, “An age in which literary criticism is too often partitioned off from other intelligent concerns might well envy the vigour and commitment of a previous century” (*Early* 15).

In sum, then, I hope to show that while today we would not wish to become Victorian in our *morés*, we could do worse than become Victorian in our critical methods. In the discussion that follows, I use the terms “moral” and “ethical” (and their variants) interchangeably, reflecting our common understanding of the terms near synonymy, rather than relying on the current theoretical distinction between them which, as I have shown, reflects specific strategic needs and interests rather than a genuine and stable difference.

### The General Principle

The fundamental principle of Victorian ethical criticism is effectively summarized in another quotation, this one from a novelist who, in 1858, refused her publisher’s request for an outline of the plot of her current work:

I entertain what I think is a well-founded objection against telling you in a bare brief manner the course of my story. The soul of art lies in its treatment and not in its subject.... [T]he mere skeleton of my story would probably give rise in your mind to objections which would be suggested by the treatment *other* writers would have given to the same tragic incidents in the human lot—objections which would lie far away from my treatment. *The Heart of Midlothian* would probably have been thought highly objectionable if a skeleton of the story had been given by a writer whose reputation did not place him above question. And the same story told by a Balzacian French writer would probably have made a book that no young person could read without injury. Yet what girl of twelve was ever injured by *The Heart of Midlothian*?<sup>7</sup>

The novelist, of course, is George Eliot, and the story in question is her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede*, which, like the example she invokes, Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian*, involves a country girl’s seduction by an aristocratic youth, the birth and death (or, in Scott’s plot, the supposed death)

7 George Eliot, *Selected Letters* 187.



of her illegitimate child, and her trial for infanticide. In its skeletal form, the story does sound morally difficult, at least in the context of Victorian conventions of public decency, which as we know imposed much narrower boundaries on what subjects could be discussed openly, particularly in print, than our current ones. And yet, as we also know, such objectionable elements were common, not just in the pulp fiction of the period, but in the serious literature. Critics certainly objected to such material; indeed, as Stang observes, “every important novelist of the period ... was attacked ... for lowering the standard of ‘purity’ of the English novel” (217). But the majority of Victorian critics shared Eliot’s view that the subject of art did not (or not alone) determine its “purity.” Fraud, forgery, blackmail, robbery, seduction, prostitution, bigamy, infanticide, homicide, even duelling—or just simply bad manners, coarseness, and vulgarity: all could be and were recounted in Victorian fiction, and, our casual assumptions notwithstanding, Victorian critics rarely censured authors simply for incorporating them. Rather, they sought to measure a novel’s morality by looking at more than its “mere skeleton,” weighing the ethical implications, not of what is represented but of how it is represented, not of the subject but of its treatment, which, as Eliot reiterates elsewhere, “alone determines the moral quality of art” (“History of *Adam Bede*” 297).

The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s first citation for “treatment” in the sense of an “action or manner of dealing with something in literature or art” comes from an 1856 article in the *Saturday Review*, supporting this sense of the term’s new resonance in the mid-Victorian period. In fact, as early as 1853 Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton had asserted, in a pamphlet appended to his controversial novel *Lucretia*, that “it is the treatment that ennobles, not the subject”: “Art can, with Fielding, weave an epic from adventures with gamekeepers and barbers. Art can, with Goethe, convert into poetry, the most lofty, the homely image of the girl condemned for infanticide” (quoted in Stang 198). In her 1855 essay “The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*,” Marian Evans argues that despite his inclusion of superficially “shocking” incidents, Goethe’s “mode of treatment seems to us precisely that which is really moral in its influence” (309). Examples proliferate in the following years. For instance, in an 1860 review of *The Mill on the Floss*, a writer in the *Guardian* observes that “Passion is one of the legitimate materials of the novelist. But he incurs deep responsibility by the way in which he treats it” (130). Writing to Thackeray in defense of her poem “Lord Walter’s Wife” in 1861, Elizabeth Barrett Browning protests, “I don’t like coarse subjects, or the coarse treatment of any subject” (quoted in Leighton 476). In his 1866 essay “Immorality in Authorship,” Robert Buchanan argues that

[a]n immoral subject, treated insincerely, leaves an immoral effect on those natures weak enough to be influenced by it at all. The same subject, treated with the power of genius and the delicacy of art, delights and exalts us. (290)

Also in 1866, H. H. Lancaster admits that seduction, betrayal, and unhappy marriages, “like any of the other crimes or calamities of life, may be proper subjects of fiction. But to make them so, they must be treated with studious reserve and delicacy” (585). As late as 1891, in an essay on “Morality in Fiction,” Malcolm MacColl reiterates that morality “depends ... not on the subject, but on the artist’s treatment of it” (237–38). Even when the word “treatment” is not itself used, the distinction that it insists on between content and form is central to ethical assessments. Thus A. S. Kinnear, writing on Trollope in 1864, considers that “a painter or a novelist may depict as much as he pleases the lowest and vulgarest things in the world, provided only that in so doing, he can exercise our understanding like Hogarth, or make us laugh like Dickens” (204). Trollope himself, in his 1879 essay “Novel-Reading,” notes that “In speaking of good and bad we are not alluding to virtue and vice themselves, but to the representations made of them” (29), and Leslie Stephen restates this point in his 1881 essay “The Moral Element in Literature”: “a man may conceivably deal even with the disgusting without being therefore simply immoral; for he may deal with it so as to excite our disgust” (48).

Over and over, Victorian critics urge evaluation of the ethical qualities of works of fiction beyond their mere inclusion of morally objectionable incidents or characters. At the very least, this emphasis on treatment should complicate generalizations about the coercive effect of critical ethics in this period. Even David Skilton, a thoughtful advocate for Victorian criticism, remarks defensively that “a strong thread of moral judgement and social and moral control ... has tended to discredit the work of even the best critics of the period,” going on to argue that “the overt moralism of the age should not be allowed to obscure other things of interest, and the variety of critical postures involved” (*Early* 9, 13). He is wrong only in implying that the “overt moralism” is not itself “of interest,” not itself capable of incorporating a variety of critical strategies. As Robert Buchanan remarks, “it requires an occult judgment nowadays to find out immoral books” (297): insisting on the distinction between a subject and its representation requires a critical practice that arrives at overall moral conclusions by examining often subtle and complex questions of form and style. It also, as I address further below, calls for a particularly rigorous and attentive reading practice, a high degree of participation and respon-

sibility from the novel-reading public. Because Victorian critics lacked an established critical terminology or theoretical tradition for this analysis, initially their various methods, priorities, and vocabularies seem merely idiosyncratic, but in fact their discussions consistently address specific problems, aspects, or elements of treatment. In my next sections, I offer what George Eliot might consider a skeletal account of three of the most important or persistent of these, which I call “mode,” “tone,” and “characterization.” Along the way and particularly in my conclusion I return to the proposals made in the introduction about what Victorian ethical criticism has to offer us today.

### The Elements of “Treatment” I: Mode

The most important of the major categories of treatment is mode, which is close (but not, I think, identical) to what today we call “genre”: the kind of story the author undertakes to tell about his or her material. Nineteenth-century critics generally agree that this shaping decision is crucial to a novel’s moral effects or possibilities; subcategories they recognize include satire, humour or comedy, pathos or sentimentality, tragedy, realism, and sensationalism. Thus we find William Roscoe protesting, not against Thackeray’s focus on vice and degradation but against his comic treatment of them:

We don’t say that a vicious or even a degraded nature is not a fit subject for the artist,—no doubt it is; we do not say it is an unfit subject even for comedy; but we do say it ought not to be comically treated.... You sap the force of moral resentment when, by smiling raillery or farcical laughter, you make tolerable the stern realities of sin. (253)

Dickens, on the other hand, comes under frequent fire for sentimentalizing both vice and virtue, as in George Stott’s scathing 1869 attack on Dickens’s “gospel of geniality”: “the feelings and sympathies supposed to be evoked by the annual holiday are to be the ruling principles of life, the model keeper of Christmas, our guide and example” (224). Thackeray’s cynicism and Dickens’s sentimentality were, however, widely seen as different routes to the same end. As Theodore Martin puts it, “Dickens seeks to amend the heart by depicting virtue; Thackeray seeks to achieve the same end by exposing vice. Both are great moralists” (193). Especially given the tendency (as illustrated in the online *Johns Hopkins Guide*, for example) to look to the novelists rather than the reviewers for evidence of underlying critical precepts about fiction, these examples are notable for the way

their work—focusing analytically on method—differs from the work they describe the novelists doing—teaching specific moral lessons.

By far the most discussed fictional modes were sensationalism and realism. While a few critics dismissed sensation fiction as too artistically insignificant to have any moral effects worth considering, the consensus was that by pandering to readers' lower instincts and treating crime and vice as integral parts of everyday life, it was at once a cause and a symptom of widespread moral decline. For all its negative press, however, sensationalism was no more controversial than realism, and the two discussions often overlap. For instance, W. Fraser Rae objects to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novels not because they contain shocking incidents—so, he concedes, do Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* and Eliot's *Adam Bede*—but because Braddon treats them sensationally rather than realistically, introducing them gratuitously in order to shock and titillate. In contrast, Scott's and Eliot's novels "are truthful taken as wholes, and the startling occurrences are not at variance with experience and probability" (202).

But truthfulness was not a sure defense against moral objections, as the aim of depicting things as they *are* clearly counteracts another possible mandate, which is to represent things as they *ought* to be. "There are many things in life," William Roscoe protests,

the most repulsive and degrading, which we cannot avoid; but this is no argument for voluntarily reproducing them, and giving them that hold upon us which they derive from being seen through a vivid imagination. ("Sir E. B. Lytton" 431)

"[T]here is much which is barbarous and animal in reality that we could wish away," writes Walter Bagehot in an 1864 essay on Sterne and Thackeray:

...why we should put this coarse alloy, this dross of life, into the *optional* world of literature, which we can make as we please, it is impossible to say. The needless introduction of accessory ugliness is always a sin in art. (537)

Rather than being absolutely objectionable, the sordid, ugly, or even "disgusting" is intolerable only when it is "needless," serving no artistic or moral purpose. Bagehot is similarly disparaging of Dickens's fascination with the sordid side of life, finding portions of his novels "squalid from noisome trivialities, and horrid with terrifying crime" ("Charles Dickens" 479). Peter Bayne protests that "an author has no more right to obtrude foul descriptions on the public gaze, on the mere plea that they are true to

fact, than the keeper of a house of ill-fame has to thrust the too authentic arcana of her hateful den upon the public observation" (164).

Just as the "*mere plea*" that evil is true to life is insufficient justification for its artistic representation, that "such things are" is not good enough reason for depicting mundane realities, as A. S. Kinnear protests about the "dull veracity" of parts of Trollope's novels. "The very reality of the representation, in a book that after all we take up for amusement, makes us feel utterly ashamed, as we read, because that [sic] we are playing with human miseries," writes Kinnear of *Orley Farm* (206). An anonymous writer on "The Progress of Fiction as an Art" in the *Westminster Review* in 1853 finds the realism of Austen and Burney similarly "dull":

they show us too much of the littlenesses and trivialities of life, and limit themselves so scrupulously to the sayings and doings of dull, ignorant, and disagreeable people, that their very truthfulness makes us yawn. They fall short of fulfilling the objects, and satisfying the necessities of Fiction in its highest aspect ... (358)

If, as Gordon Haight speculates, this essay is by Marian Evans, it is striking to consider her later eloquent plea that her readers "tolerate, pity, and love" those "more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people" who make up our ordinary world (*Adam Bede* 176) and ironic to find one of her reviewers applying her earlier standards at her expense in reviewing *The Mill on the Floss*:

If George Eliot really finds human life, for the most part, as "narrow, ugly, and grovelling" as she has drawn it here, we neither envy her experiences nor care to see them detailed in print.... [E]ven if the mass of men had no more to recommend them than the Tullivers and Dodsons, through whose lives she coolly bids us wade, there would still remain the fact, that neither human art nor human morals can be refined or ennobled by examples taken exclusively or even frequently from the meanest, poorest, and grossest types of human character. (*Dublin University Magazine* 149)

The clear implication of these comments is that fiction should use its special powers to move us from the real to the ideal; dwelling on the grim, uninteresting, or vicious aspects of life mires us in the dirt rather than raising our eyes and minds towards heaven—or at least relieving us temporarily from care.

Yet Eliot's famous proclamations in *Adam Bede* turn out to be far from the only signs of resistance to this idealizing model. Like Eliot, its other opponents insist that we can learn moral lessons only from the truth, however unpalatable. "The horrible exists," exclaims Charles Kingsley, "and honour to it":

Yes, honour to the horrible; and to the man who has courage to give us a glimpse of it now and then. It is good for us to read horrible stories, just as we look at monkeys, to see what we too might become; what we are potentially even now, if the higher Power should desert us.... Who would wish *Oliver Twist* unwritten, except Mrs. Grundy? Reigns of terror, Lyons *glacieres*, Spanish *auto-da-fe*—there is a lesson in them all. They show us what stuff most of us are made of—when the paint is rubbed off. As the Yankee apologist for drunkenness said, "There's a deal of human natur' in man." Honour to the man who will tell us so. (99)

This "truth" defense is, of course, that made by Dickens himself in the preface he added to *Oliver Twist*: "It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE. Every man who has watched these melancholy shades of life, must know it to be so" (36). Here, as throughout the Victorian discussion, there is vigorous disagreement over specific moral positions or specific examples, but the debate takes place on common ground—not over what belongs among "the legitimate materials of the novelist" but over "the way in which he treats it" (review of *The Mill on the Floss*, *Guardian* 130).

## The Elements of "Treatment" II: Tone

Nearly as important as mode is the issue of tone: the sound of the voice speaking from the text. While at times these two elements clearly overlap, as with satire, humour, and pathos or sentimentality, the major distinct issue is that of didacticism, which seems to have meant to the Victorians about the same as "moralizing" or "judgementalism" means to current theorists—and to have inspired as much anxiety and mistrust. The overarching assumption about the relationship between moral lessons and novelistic practice is that art is never simply for "art's sake" but ought to have some higher purpose than distraction and entertainment. As Carlyle famously pronounced in his essay on Scott, "Literature *has* other aims than that of harmlessly amusing indolent languid men" (115, original emphasis); while his verdict that Scott himself failed to meet any higher

standard was not generally shared by later critics, his insistence that truly great literature did more than divert certainly was. “No great work,” as Richard Simpson wrote in 1863, “can be written without a purpose—religious, political, philosophical, or artistic” (227). A statement in Trollope’s essay “Novel-Reading” exemplifies the Victorian principle of combining purpose with pleasure:

Sermons in themselves are not thought to be agreeable; nor are disquisitions on moral philosophy supposed to be pleasant reading for our idle hours. But the novelist, if he have a conscience, must preach his sermons with the same purpose as the clergyman, and must have his own system of ethics. If he can do this efficiently, if he can make virtue alluring and vice ugly, while he charms his reader instead of wearying him, then we think that he should not be spoken of generally as being among those workers of iniquity who do evil in their generation. (40)

The direct comparison of the novelist with the clergyman speaks to the high moral importance the Victorians were ready to attach to fiction; the assumption that sermons are generally disagreeable, indeed, suggests that in the right hands fiction could quite properly be more influential than direct church teaching and the novelist a greater force for good than a conventional preacher.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this commitment to art for morality’s sake, however, overt didacticism is universally denounced. “The public,” R. H. Hutton writes, “has a well-grounded fear of didactic fiction” (“Ethical and Dogmatic Fiction” 213); “[i]t is a dangerous thing,” David Masson says of Dickens, “thus openly and professedly to blend the functions of the artist with those of the declaimer” (“Pendennis and Copperfield” 12). For one thing, critics argue, readers who actually get sermons rather than stories will be resentful and alienated. Feeling betrayed by the author, they will be disinclined to accept his or her moral teaching. “No talent,” said the *Saturday Review* of *Middlemarch*,

<sup>8</sup> Colby also notes that “apologists for fiction tended to promote it not for what it was uniquely able to do but for accomplishing better what competing nonfiction attempted” (61). He points out that “published sermons [accounted] for at least half of the product of the English presses” in the mid-nineteenth century, making the comparison of novelists to preachers particularly salient (“Rational Amusement” 64).



not genius itself, can quite overcome the inherent defect of a conspicuous, constantly prominent lesson, or bridge over the disparity between the storyteller with an ulterior aim ever before his own eyes and the reader's, and the ideal storyteller whose primary impulse is a story to tell, and human nature to portray—not human nature as supporting a theory, but human nature as he sees it. (314)

“Religious teaching directly conveyed under the guise of fiction,” agrees C. W. Russell, “is almost invariably tiresome, and, indeed, repulsive” (178). This fear and repulsion is justified, not just by dislike of being hectored when you expected to be amused but by the dismal effects of edifying intentions on prose style as well as plot: Dickens, for instance, complains Henry Mansel, “never sinks so nearly to the level of the ordinary sensation-novelist as when he is ‘writing with a purpose’” (488). Justin McCarthy agrees: “Dickens has always failed where he has set out to write a book expressly for some specially philanthropic object” (46). This context explains E. S. Dallas’s anxiety to distinguish *Silas Marner* from works by “religious or moralizing novelists who have rendered hateful the very idea of serious purpose in a novel”: “[Eliot’s] is a very spiritual nature,” he acknowledges, “and she cannot choose but regard life from a very lofty point of view. But her novels are true novels, not sermons done into dialogue” (185). John Morley agrees that *Silas Marner* is a rich source of moral education because “so richly has the writer appreciated the great neglected truth that *people want texts and not sermons*” (273, original emphasis). Once again, the touchstone is the sermon, but like Trollope these critics place a double burden on the novelist, to charm rather than weary while also pursuing her moral aims.

An important second objection to didacticism is that it usurps the reader’s role in ethical deliberation. “Didactic writing in novels,” Robert Buchanan declares in a representative statement, “at the best, is like a moral printed underneath a picture, describing the things which, it is supposed, the reader ought to infer from the picture” (298). As Buchanan’s analogy suggests, the reader is held to have a crucial role in interpreting and evaluating a work of art; overt didacticism preempts this opportunity and responsibility, ultimately treating readers like passive vessels rather than active participants. As J. C. Robertson writes, protesting against “the too didactic strain” into which he feels George Eliot “occasionally falls,” such an approach patronizes readers by “writing as if for the purpose of forcing lessons on children or the poor, rather than for grown-up and educated readers” (489). Readers derive maximum benefit from fiction

as a “repertory of vivid texts,” John Morley states, drawing on them to “work out for themselves notions of what is graceful and seemly, to teach themselves a more exquisite intellectual sensibility, and to enlarge their own scope of affection and intensity of passion” (273).

Within this model, fiction is most beneficial not when it holds out clear moral prescriptions but when it engages its readers most fully with complex human situations, because the goal is not to inculcate specific rules but rather to train the moral faculties. In this respect at least, the Victorians could lay an honest claim to being “ethical” critics according to the distinction laid out in my introduction. In his 1866 aesthetic treatise *The Gay Science*, E. S. Dallas explicitly argues that morality is about “example and sympathy” rather than a “code of rules and a system of teaching” (193), for instance, which seems entirely in harmony with Harpham’s insistence that ethics is not about “guiding.” “It is only through clear perceptions into the true quality of our common nature,” G. P. Lathrop writes,

excited by the artistically recounted history of certain beings possessed of that nature, that the *foundations* of morality are deepened and secured. When the artist succeeds in carrying us sympathetically through the history of these beings, so that we feel points of similarity between ourselves and them, and recognize how great are the possibilities of error and crime in us, as in them, he has quickened our morality by rousing a keener insight into ourselves; and, by questioning indirectly the stability of our virtue, he summons our reserve forces to their support. But in the beginning, he must renounce the purpose of actually reforming anybody for good and all, by what he writes. (695–96, original emphasis)

Moral teaching through literature, C. W. Russell similarly declares,

is to be done by insensibly producing good impressions, rather than by professedly inculcating good principles; by representing principles in their results rather than in themselves; by making virtue a thing to be felt and laid to the heart, rather than to be analyzed and appraised by the understanding. (202)

“To make a poet into a simple moralist—a teacher of a certain definite code of ethics,” says Leslie Stephen, “is to put him into a wrong place, and judge him implicitly by an inappropriate criterion” (49). Once again, didacticism—writing with a “purpose”—is set up as the enemy of genuine morality in fiction: the development of sympathy through realistic repre-

sensation is the truly ethical influence because it leaves the final power of judgement with the reader.

This is not to say, however, that authors should take no interest in or bear no responsibility for the outcome of the ethical exercise. As the next section will discuss in more detail, critics place great importance on the means by which authors direct their readers' sympathies, as well as on the ends towards which they perceive the novelists' efforts to be directed. But whatever their views on these questions of particulars, they persistently reject authors' attempts to drive home their arguments through blunt rhetorical force. Often, a writer's ability to generate morality without resorting to didacticism becomes the measure of true literary greatness. In the always crucial case of Scott's novels, for instance, one reviewer argues that "[m]oral conclusions are never thrust upon us in them, any more than they are in the world, but our sympathies are always on the side of right and goodness" ("Progress of Fiction" 360). George Stott claims that to

pure artists, such as Shakespeare ... and Goethe, as long as their work satisfied the conditions of artistic perfection, its moral influence seems to have been a thing wholly indifferent. Nothing of the kind was by them either sought after or avoided; it came, if it did come, as an accident, and had to be accepted as part of the nature of things. (204–05)

In contrast, Dickens, as we have already seen, was frequently targeted for attacks on the grounds that, as Stott says, "in all his novels Mr. Dickens has a distinct and conscious moral aim which inspires and dominates over the narrative" (205), while George Eliot's ability to balance her self-consciously moral ends with "the conditions of artistic perfection" was much debated. A novelist such as Trollope, who attracts very little attention in the current debates over ethics in fiction,<sup>9</sup> could be seen as coming into his own once these terms are accepted as the framework for discussion. His patient unfolding of lives over time, along with his deliberate policy of writing without the "glaring colours" of Dickens (*The Warden* 137), allows us to see, as Ruth apRoberts has argued, "the uniqueness of character in circumstances"; "the end [of his art] is moral perception" (52), not moral prescription—just as the Victorian critics (and their more recent counterparts) prefer.

<sup>9</sup> The exception is Jane Nardin's *Trollope and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, though, as her title indicates, her interest is in Trollope's place in his own historical and philosophical context. I have not found any contemporary theorists paying serious attention to the chronicler of Barset.

apRoberts proposes that Trollope is “like [Henry] James” in his efforts to dramatize morally complex problems in fiction that could not be adequately rendered through more abstract, philosophical forms (42). This unexpected linkage between Trollope and James brings out the similarity between this strand of the nineteenth-century discourse and one prominent voice in contemporary ethical criticism, that of Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum argues that James’s late fiction, like the moral theories of Aristotle, demands “an attention to particulars, a respect for the emotions, and a tentative and non-dogmatic attitude to the bewildering multiplicities of life” incompatible with conventional philosophical approaches to ethics (27). Both Aristotle and James, she suggests, prioritize perception, “the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one’s particular situation”; the result is “to show the ethical crudeness of moralities based exclusively on general rules, and to demand for ethics a much finer responsiveness to the concrete” (37). Like the other recent ethical critics who favour flexibility and fear dogmatism, Nussbaum champions an ethics that refuses rigid taxonomies of right and wrong. Because as a genre the novel is committed to particulars rather than generalizations or abstractions, to her it exemplifies an alternative moral philosophy—in the right hands, that is. Nussbaum is explicit that “[n]ot all novels are appropriate”: she accepts James’s view, for instance, that George Eliot’s omniscient narrator is “a falsification of our human position” (45).<sup>10</sup> The ambiguity and complexity of James’s prose, however, matches “the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer *difficulty* of moral choice” in real life (141, original emphasis) and thus becomes her ideal.

Because it is hard to imagine two novelists more superficially different than James and Trollope—Trollope’s novels, for one thing, are vulnerable to James’s famous charge of being “large loose baggy monsters” with little artistic meaning (“Preface” 515), while James in his turn falls afoul of Trollope’s decree that the novelist’s language “should be so pellucid that the meaning should be rendered without an effort to the reader” (*Autobiography* 151)—this unexpected convergence between the theoretical ends allegedly served by their novels is thought-provoking. How might the different aesthetic principles of Trollope and James, as well as their different literary-historical contexts, affect their shared commitment as moralists to perception rather than prescription? Nussbaum celebrates

<sup>10</sup> The oddity of excluding Eliot in this context is striking given Eliot’s own self-positioning at the intersection of literature and moral philosophy. Nussbaum’s assumption that Eliot stands in for rigid Victorian moralizing also overlooks the contentiousness of her godless fiction among contemporary readers.

the “bewilderment” generated by novels such as *The Ambassadors* or *The Golden Bowl*: what alternative view might arise from comparing their many ambiguities with those of *Orley Farm* or *The Last Chronicle of Barset*? How could Nussbaum’s theory accommodate Trollope’s panoramic approach, which rather than focusing moral perception into a single laser-sharp image demands that we pursue the ramifications of Josiah Crawley’s error across the entire diocese of Barchester? Does James offer his reader the same fellowship extended by Trollope when he takes him “affectionately by the arm” to say a final farewell to a country where “he and I together have wandered often through the country lanes, and have ridden together over the too well-wooded fields, ... or have sat together at good men’s tables, or have confronted the angry pride of men who were not good” (*Last Chronicle* 861)? Trollope’s cathedral close is not Maggie Verver’s pagoda, not a psychological, abstract, or theoretical space but a physical, historical, and, crucially, social space. Trollope’s fiction perhaps lacks the “the mystery and indeterminacy” Nussbaum finds in late James, but his stories still “confront all the complexities of the situation head on, in all their indeterminacy and particularity” (88); the difference is that his expansive plots insist that we understand morality as defined through action as much as reflection. As this example shows, bringing Victorian texts and ideas into our critical discussion can prompt fresh questions about the kind of ethical work that gets done by different kinds of fiction. The conventions of Victorian criticism, including the assumption that fiction is a kind of life writing, seem more helpful than the current theoretical preoccupation with indeterminacy for assessing the value of Trollope’s contribution to literary ethics.

### The Elements of Treatment III: Characterization

The last major concern of Victorian ethical critics that I will address here is characterization, a category which includes comments on issues we too consider under that heading, such as how characters are drawn and how we come to know them. Most important for ethical consideration, however, is novelists’ treatment of virtuous and vicious characters. Once again, the major concern is not whether they include unpleasant, evil, criminal, or immoral characters: there is no general expectation that novelists will depict a world artificially purged of gamblers, liars, thieves, or even murderers and adulterers. Rather, critics look closely at how sympathy is allocated—at where readers are encouraged to make their emotional investments. “The morality or immorality of the work,” MacColl argues, “depends on the bias which it is calculated to give to our sympathies. If

the bias is towards evil, the novel is immoral; if towards good, it is moral" (237). "Let the mind be induced to sympathise warmly with that which is good and true, or be moved to hatred against that which is vile," Trollope writes, "and then an impression will have been made, certainly serviceable, and probably ineradicable" ("Novel-Reading" 35).

As close affective attachments to characters are seen as directing readers towards the moral ends represented or endorsed by the characters, of greatest concern are cases in which authors are perceived as encouraging admiration or sympathy for bad characters. Writing about Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard*, for instance, Thomas Arnold protests that boys would derive from it

a spirit of adventurous daring, an admiration for intrepidity, coolness, nerve, self-reliance, and so on. That Mr. Ainsworth should invest a housebreaker with all these attractive qualities was no doubt a grave fault in morals and art. (547)

Similarly, Margaret Oliphant feels that *The Woman in White* arouses too much sympathy for Count Fosco, a choice which "it is necessary to protest against" ("Sensation Novels" 567). At the very least, most critics felt, authors ought to be clear about the distinctions between virtue and vice. "To banish confusion from a picture is the first duty of the artist," Walter Bagehot writes; artists' responsibility is to "give us light enough in their pictures to let it be clearly seen where the shadows are intended to lie" ("Novels of George Eliot" 489). "Let your rogues in novels act like rogues," concurs H. H. Lancaster, "and your honest men like honest men";

don't let us have any juggling and thimblerrigging with virtue and vice, so that, at the end of three volumes, the bewildered reader shall not know, which is which; don't let us find ourselves kindling at the generous qualities of thieves and sympathizing with the rascalities of noble hearts. (115)

At the root of these remarks is the concern that if readers are drawn sympathetically towards rogues and thieves, they will forgive where they ought to indict—generalizing Henry Mansel's concern about sensation novelists, namely that they "do their best to inculcate as a duty the first two of the three stages towards vice—'we first endure, then pity, then embrace'; and, in so doing, they [assist] in no small degree to prepare the way for the third" (494–95).<sup>11</sup>

11 Pope, *Essay on Man* II:217.

Of course, such concerns were only aroused because novelists so often did not sort their fictional characters neatly into “good” and “bad,” dwelling instead on the complexity and, often, ambiguity of sin and error. George Eliot provided her contemporary critics with some particularly troubling examples of characters who might be supposed to have sacrificed their claim on readers’ sympathy—Mrs Transome, for instance, whom one writer pairs with Braddon’s Lady Audley as a character placed in a “falsely tragical position because of [her] weakness, and [her] want of that will in which lies the very root of heroic action” (Japp 178). This writer’s protest is not motivated by Mrs Transome’s adultery but by Eliot’s treatment of it, in which she reverses “the grand old idea of what constitutes heroic behaviour, by cunningly eliciting our sympathy” for such a fallen figure (178). Similarly, when comparing *Adam Bede* and *The Heart of Midlothian*, J. C. Robertson does not simply reject unwed mothers and infanticide as unfit subjects for fiction. Rather, he objects to Eliot’s treatment of these subjects, particularly her efforts to “bespeak our interest” on Hetty Sorrel’s behalf: “[Hetty’s] conduct throughout is such as to offend and disgust.... Yet it is on this silly, heartless, and wicked little thing that the interest of the story is made to rest” (477–78). In Scott’s version, Robertson points out, “we see little of Effie”: “our attention is chiefly drawn to the simple heroism of her sister Jeanie. In the novel of the present day, everything about Hetty is most elaborately described” (475–76). Robertson’s comments illustrate both the possibility and the necessity of distinguishing judgements or standards that are historically specific (such as condemnation of extramarital sex) from the critical framework used to reach conclusions about literary treatments of acts contravening those standards.

Robertson concedes the “extraordinary force” of Eliot’s portrayal of Hetty as a technical accomplishment—“doubtless the partisans of ‘George Eliot’ would tell us that Scott could not have written the chapters in question”—but he counters that “in any case he *would* not have written them, because his healthy judgment would have rejected such matters as unfit for the novelist’s art” (476, original emphasis). Robertson’s terminology here is old-fashioned, but his interest in distinguishing aesthetic effect from overall artistic evaluation is not: indeed, the problem of whether or not there ought to be limits to the kind of artistic feats that invite admiration and support has always been central to both scholarly and public policy debates pitting advocates of “art for art’s sake” against those committed to a notion of the artist’s social responsibility. For the latter, technical excellence is only one part of overall evaluation; as George Orwell famously wrote,



The first thing we demand of a wall is that it shall stand up. If it stands up, it is a good wall, and the question of what purpose it serves is separable from that. And yet even the best wall in the world deserves to be pulled down if it surrounds a concentration camp. (quoted in Booth, *Company* 1)

Twentieth-century critics have not stopped asking questions about the ethical implications of fictional point of view. In his classic work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, for instance, Booth quotes from a review of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur* which remarks admiringly on the author's ability to bring us "inside the mind of Matthias—[making us] accomplices of a homicidal maniac." "Curious praise, this, once we think about it," Booth remarks:

The book is a brilliant culmination of more than a hundred years of experimentation with inside views and the sympathetic identification they can yield. It does, indeed, lead us to experience intensely the sensations and emotions of a homicidal maniac. But is this really what we go to literature for?... [I]s there no limit to what we will praise, provided it is done with skill? (384)

The hundred years of experimentation to which he refers begin with Eliot, the first novelist in the English tradition to develop detailed accounts of her characters' psychologies and motivations and to use the proximity thus created between our thinking and theirs to complicate our moral judgments. The difference in kind and magnitude between Hetty's crimes and those of Robbe-Grillet's homicidal Matthias points to significant shifts in moral priorities and cultural *morés*—in attitudes towards women's sexuality, for instance—but within their own historical frameworks, Robertson and Booth are tackling the same critical problem and refusing to take "skill" as the ultimate standard of artistic excellence. The persistent debates over such works as Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Wright's *Native Son* show that we still struggle to reconcile aesthetic and ethical responses—and that our inquiries often focus on how we believe the text positions us in relation to problematic characters.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Earlier in this essay I quoted Robert Colby's assertion that "the novel was quite *discutable* long before Henry James" ("Rational Amusement" 59). I

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, the contributions on these novels in Stephen K. George, ed., *Ethics, Literature, Theory: An Introductory Reader*.

hope that by now both the justice of this claim and the value of pursuing its implications are evident. Although in the nineteenth century, as today, there was wide disagreement on particulars, Victorian critics, reviewers, and novelists shared a framework for discussion—a common commitment to the general principle that the subject or content of a novel did not determine its morality, and a common interest in specific aspects of the novelist’s craft that constituted the treatment of that raw material, some of which I have detailed here. They knew what they were talking to each other about, and while their criticism lacks the specialized terminology and the abstract conceptualizations of later, more self-consciously developed critical approaches, it nonetheless follows an internal and sometimes explicit logic—and not, as has too often been casually assumed, simply the prescriptive logic that certain subjects or facets of human life were always objectionable. Further, there are ways in which their preoccupations made them particularly able to handle some of the characteristic features of Victorian fiction: its emphasis on plot and character; its preoccupation with the moral dilemmas generated by daily life and modern living; its concern with individual development and responsibility; the centrality it gives to the relationship between narrator and reader. Indeed, the outward-looking nature of so much Victorian fiction—not just its (in)famous direct addresses to its audience, or its authors’ responsiveness to reader and market demands, but its overt interest in generating personal and social reform—can make the more abstruse and speculative preoccupations of contemporary ethical criticism, with its incessant return to language and textuality, seem disconnected from the conversation in which the Victorian writers are manifestly taking part.<sup>13</sup> While much has been said in favour of distancing ourselves from precisely these individualistic, humanistic

13 While not explicitly intended as a work of ethical criticism, Deanna Kreisel’s 2003 essay “Incognito, Intervention, and Dismemberment in *Adam Bede*,” which focuses on the implications of Eliot’s intrusive narration to her “moral aims” (542) is a good example of this disparity in priorities: “The hidden dread of a secret birth becomes a botched and bifurcated ‘text,’ a baby whose body has perhaps even been dismembered by its mother. This dismembered body can be seen as the emblem of Eliot’s own disjointed text: the narrative strategy of intervention bifurcates the seamless fabric of the ideal realist text” (570). Arguments of this sort leave us with a lot of bathwater but no real baby. For a detailed commentary on the way some contemporary critical approaches refuse connections with the overt terms of the texts that are their subjects, see Miller and Freadman, *Re-Thinking Theory*, especially their analysis in Chapter 5 of Gayatri Spivak’s reading of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. Spivak, they argue, collapses Wordsworth’s own particular text into “what we would think of as a latent or sub-text” (141). This strategy of reading past the surface is apparent in much

models of fiction and criticism, at the very least there is literary-historical value in ensuring that we understand them and consider their benefits (as both critical and ethical strategies) before dismissing them.<sup>14</sup>

As I have argued repeatedly now, I also believe there are aspects of Victorian ethical criticism that have more than historical interest for us. Many contemporary critical schools, not only the explicitly ethical, have continued the post-Victorian trend of separating literature from life, and, even more importantly, separating literary criticism from popular discourse. In striking contrast, Victorian critics take for granted the relevance of both fiction and criticism as reflections and influences on society. In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum justifiably observes that literary criticism today generally does not communicate the "sense that we are social beings puzzling out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live":

[T]his sense of practical importance, which animates contemporary [philosophical] ethical theory and has always animated much of great literature, is absent from the writings of many of our leading literary theorists. (170–71)

The effect on her, she admits, is "a certain hunger for blood; for, that is, writing about literature that talks of human lives and choices as if they matter to us all" (171). There's no question but what Victorian novel after Victorian novel addresses "human lives and choices," and that Victorian critics respond as if these lives and choices matter intensely to them and to their readers. Like so many other twentieth- and twenty-first-century

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contemporary criticism, including ethical. A similar tendency to read from present-day angles rather than contemporary is apparent in discussions of nineteenth-century criticism, many of which resemble what Ian Small, drawing on Richard Rorty, calls "doxographies": "Most of these histories [of criticism] perceive the value of all critical enterprises from the privileged vantage-point of the present, and consequently the relationship of critical writing of the past to present concerns is taken to be the main, and sometimes the only, point of interest" (16–17).

- 14 As discussed in my introduction, the case against humanism is so taken for granted that Womack's contribution to the 2002 volume *Introducing Criticism at the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* simply states the necessity for ethical criticism to "differentiate itself from the contemporary critical prejudice" against it, an effort he insists succeeds only insofar as ethical critics form an "alliance" with Continental philosophers such as Levinas or Derrida (114). This view is not in fact universal; for defenses of humanist approaches, see Schwarz, *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics*, Altieri, *Canons and Consequences*, and Miller and Freadman, *Re-Thinking Theory*.

scholars, though, Nussbaum turns away from the Victorians, seeking her theoretical model in Aristotle and her chief literary inspiration in Henry James—oddly cerebral choices, given her proclaimed sanguinary appetite. The ethical criticism Nussbaum develops is in fact highly intellectual and rarified. The lesson she draws from *The Golden Bowl*, for instance, is

[s]ee clearly and with high intelligence. Respond with the vibrant sympathy of a vividly active imagination. If there are conflicts, face them squarely and with keen perception. Choose as well as you can for overt action, but at every moment remember the more comprehensive duties of the imagination and emotions. (134–35)

As I have argued elsewhere, Nussbaum is caught in the trap set by the Jamesian perception she admires so much: to borrow the philosophers' vocabulary, how can you move from his "ought" to any "is"?<sup>15</sup>

But Nussbaum is also driven into this corner by understandable anxieties about what can happen to literary criticism if its priorities move from the page to the public domain. Earlier I quoted her complaint that current theorists assume treating literature as "being in some sense about our lives" will lead to criticism that is "hopelessly naïve, reactionary, and insensitive to the complexities of literary form and intertextual referentiality" (21). How can talk about life and talk about literature be combined without succumbing to such naïvete?<sup>16</sup> How can attention to "the complexities of literary form" assist with rather than distract from attention to the novel's social role? The emphasis of Victorian ethical criticism on treatment shows one way that such difficulties can be negotiated: by asking not about the content of a novel in itself but about its handling, they direct their readers precisely to literary form, but form perceived as in itself communicative, a position in many ways identical to Nussbaum's insistence that the "telling itself ... expresses a sense of life and of value" (5). In turning to James as her exemplar, Nussbaum allies herself with a particular kind of "telling" that values above all else the life of the mind, a priority reflected in the intellectual refinement and subtlety of both James's prose and James's criticism. Ethics, in this version, remains highly subjective—and so too

<sup>15</sup> "Martha Nussbaum and the Moral Life of *Middlemarch*."

<sup>16</sup> One interesting example is Marshall Gregory's recent essay "Ethical Engagements over Time: Reading and Rereading *David Copperfield* and *Wuthering Heights*." Full of energetic commitment to the importance of the novels' "ethical vision" which would perhaps satisfy Nussbaum's "hunger for blood," Gregory nonetheless prioritizes autobiography and personal response to the content and characters of the novels over analysis of their literary methods.

the novelist's role is limited to enhancing individual perception, and the critic's to first deciphering then appreciating the novelist's discernment. Much recent ethical criticism, as I have shown, has embraced this preference for discernment over decision, for "articulating perplexity, rather than guiding" (Harpham *Shadows* 27). Ultimately, this strategy abandons the individual to his or her own conscience. The Victorian model, in contrast, treats novelist, critic, and reader as part of a common process of sharing, exploring, and establishing community values. It is precisely because when the Victorians talk about fiction and ethics they are all talking about each other's lives that what they say matters so much.

Such a social, rather than strictly aesthetic, scholarly, or theoretical, view of art and criticism also entails an important sense of responsibility on all sides. The novelist's responsibility comes first. "It would indeed be difficult," Wilkie Collins writes, "to overestimate the influence of fiction as a motive power for good or evil":

The standard of a nation's morality is seen in its literature; and in proportion as the effect of fiction is more vivid, and, as we have already shown, the circle of its readers is more extended, so will its responsibility be greater; and since its manifest object is to present under the form of a narrative the truths and realities that affect social life, the novelist becomes at once the exponent and investigator of public morality. (385–86)

"The novelist," writes another critic, "has a high and holy mission, for his words frequently reach ears which will hear no others, and may convey a lesson to them which the preacher would enforce in vain; he should therefore be careful that, in his selection of subjects, he chooses such as may benefit rather than deteriorate [sic] his readers" ("Progress of Fiction as an Art" 373). "The possession of such capabilities as [Bulwer's] involves a terrible and yet most blessed responsibility," declares Charles Kingsley (111). But by implication, when the ethical method is close reading, of the sort tacitly required by the Victorian emphasis on treatment, the responsibility extends perforce to readers, and this realization points to one further important consequence of this approach: especially because it is incompatible with censorship based on crude prescriptive indexes, the moral well-being of society depends on educating readers, equipping them to be critics themselves.<sup>17</sup> As Anthony Trollope puts it, "in regard to all

<sup>17</sup> Here a strong resemblance to Booth's idea of "co-duction" is apparent; both methods are implicitly pedagogical and both attempt to navigate a path between the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of censorship.

literature, the effort of reformers must be to teach the people to want good books rather than to teach authors to write them. The writers, let them be who they may, will write the books which the people demand" ("On English Prose Fiction" 107). Admittedly, many of his contemporaries feared to put their trust in the rapidly expanding reading public: Margaret Oliphant, for one, agreed to give "the masses all credit for their gift of reading," but, she adds, "before we glorify ourselves over the march of intelligence, let us pause first to look into their books" ("Byways of Literature" 202–03). And there is no need to document here the inhibiting anxieties about women's reading in the Victorian period, which have been widely discussed elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, by the principles most clearly espoused by Victorian critics, the public good is best served, not by restricting access to improper books but by encouraging readers to be active, well-informed participants in critical debates. Great thinkers, as Leslie Stephen declares, can "rouse, excite, and elevate our whole natures—"

set us thinking, and therefore enable us to escape from the fetters of ancient prejudice and worn-out platitude, or make us perceive beauty in external nature, or set before us new ideals of life, to which we should otherwise have been indifferent. But we have to co-operate in the result, if it is to be of any real value. We are not passive buckets to be pumped into, as Mr. Carlyle puts it, mere receptacles for ready-made ideas, but fellow-creatures capable of being roused into independent activity. (49)

This attractively mutual model of reading and criticism differs conspicuously from the erudite technicalities of most contemporary literary criticism, in which interest in the "independent activity" of the mass reading public—never imagined as the critic's own audience—is at most academic. Of course, there are both professional and theoretical justifications for this bifurcation of the world into those who read books and those who study them. As Harpham acknowledges, however, we live in a material world "in which choices must be made, actions taken, prescriptions ventured":

Well-trained disciplinary professionals, even in the field of ethics, are often reluctant to confront this fact ... since the responsibility it imposes is excessive and cannot always be met by writing more papers, attending more conferences ... Thus a

18 See, for instance, Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader*.

refusal of the rude closures of morality ... often takes the form of a retreat into disciplinarity, as into a cave. ("Hunger" 75)

However appealing this evasion, however risky the alternatives seem, "there is a limit to the value of open theorizing, and some circumstances cry out for intervention" (Harpham, "Hunger" 75). For better and for worse, the Victorians were certainly interventionists. But their critical principle of treatment demanded that readers too develop the "occult judgment" necessary for ethical criticism—surely their best defence against turning ethics into "judgmentalism" (Parker 6), or ethical critics into "hanging judges" (Booth 49)—and surely reason enough for taking our own ethical turn back to the nineteenth century.

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