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FROM NOVEL TO CRITICISM: NARRATIVE KNOWING
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

By

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A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Literatures in English

Written under the direction of

David Kurnick

And approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation argues that cross-disciplinary discord between literary, philosophical, and scientific writers was central to the formal and aesthetic developments of the British and American novel in the nineteenth century and to the evolution of modern literary criticism. While most scholars of nineteenth-century literature and science work within the “one culture” thesis, emphasizing the shared questions, themes, and techniques among different genres of intellectual writing, my project deviates from these accounts by emphasizing the claims to intellectual priority made, in particular, by novelists. I argue that the realist novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Henry James advance a nonscientific epistemology I call, following Stanley Cavell, “ordinary.” These novels resist the scientific imperatives of definition and generalization and instead focus on the ways that knowledge is created and shared in ordinary life. I suggest that literary realism obviates the potential violence of knowledge relations by shifting the criteria for what it means to know someone or something away from conceptual certainty and towards social responsiveness. Ultimately, I argue that this epistemological framework, which originates in nineteenth-century realism, comes to define modern literary criticism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was made possible by six years of funding at Rutgers University, where my teachers, colleagues, friends, and students all contributed, directly and indirectly, to its completion. I would particularly like to thank my director, David Kurnick, and my committee members, John Kucich, Carolyn Williams, and Nicholas Dames, for their support and guidance. The members of my writing group – Nick Allred, Emily Banta, Nani Durnan, Scott Harris, and Ariel Martino – have been a source of weekly inspiration. Along the way, I have received invaluable assistance from Courtney Borack, Amy Cooper, Billy Galperin, Sean Hughes, Cheryl Robinson, and Henry Turner.

Portions of Chapter 2 are forthcoming in *Studies in the Novel* 52.3 (Fall 2020) under the title “The Novel’s Promise: George Eliot’s Skepticism.”

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INTRODUCTION

From Novel to Criticism: Narrative Knowing in the Nineteenth Century

The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting.

Henry James, 1884

The writerly is the novelistic without the novel.

Roland Barthes, 1970

A measure of the quality of a new text is the quality of the texts it arouses.

Stanley Cavell, 1979.

This dissertation seeks to articulate the epistemological grounds of modern literary criticism.¹ What kinds of claim do literary critics make? To answer this question, I argue, it is necessary to revisit the nineteenth-century realist novel. The novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Henry James do serious epistemological work: they wonder about *how* we know, not what we know; about what it means to know something, or someone; about which types of knowledge are possible, which impossible; and about whether knowledge itself is desirable or harmful. These writers pursued such questions in ways that reveal the nonequivalence of their novelistic epistemologies with those informing contemporary science and philosophy. In other words, they develop a different mode of knowing. “From Novel to Criticism” describes

¹ Epigraphs: Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *Henry James: Major Stories and Essays*, ed. Leon Edel et. al. (New York: Library of America, 1999), 577; Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 5; Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

that mode of knowing, and it argues that there is an epistemological continuity between literary realism and literary criticism – that the realist novel incubates what I call a critical epistemology that continues to define the practice of literary criticism.

“From Novel to Criticism” also pursues a second set of questions about the relationship between the novel and narrative. It offers a new way to think about the development of the late-nineteenth-century novel, as it became less dependent upon conventional forms of narrative and plot. I argue that, over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, novelists moved away from an earlier commitment to the genre’s constitutive narrative mode – thus driving a wedge between novel and narrative, even to the point of becoming *anti*-narrative – as a consequence of their engagements with questions of knowing. That is, I contend that several of the most notable features of the development of the nineteenth-century novel are grounded in the production of a novelistic, and later critical, epistemology. Whereas, in the works of Elizabeth Gaskell, the novel’s epistemological function depends upon its narrativity (narrative is what produces knowledge), in the works of Henry James, the novel is imagined as something working against narrative insofar as narrative is imagined as something working toward a particular kind of knowledge. My chapters narrate the intermediate steps between these two extremes. The dissertation ends with James because he transforms the idea of narrative knowing into a critical epistemology.

In other words, this dissertation posits a causal relationship between these two stories: novelistic explorations of knowing (with all that implies) directly affect the increasing differentiation of narrative and the novel. Most importantly, in acknowledging that these are, in fact, the same story, I demonstrate that the realist novel – for so many,

the rearguard, reactionary, bourgeois genre *par excellence* – incubates the very tradition of thinking about literature that, during the twentieth century, was turned against realism. Like Barthes (or Lukács) with Balzac, I argue that there is a kind of intellectual radicalism – I might also say, modernism – in the nineteenth-century novel that is all too easy to miss.² Indeed, Barthes is exemplary of the critical epistemology I describe: his aphoristic assertion that “[t]he writerly is the novelistic without the novel” serves for me as a guiding insight.³ What happens to the novelistic when it is separated from the novel? It becomes the critical, but a version of criticism that, if saliently brought forth in Barthes’ idiosyncratic style, is more widely visible than that. “From Novel to Criticism” traces the history of the critical epistemology up to and including the moment when the novelistic is distinguished from the novel in the writing of Henry James.⁴

If Barthes’ “writerly” approach to criticism – according to which the critic “rewrite[es]” the text under consideration – emblemizes the critical epistemology, so too does the approach to criticism developed in the tradition of ordinary language philosophy, especially as it is practiced by Stanley Cavell.⁵ For Cavell, “[t]he work

² In an essay on Barthes, Susan Sontag writes, “[t]hat no venture is valuable unless it can be conceived as a species of radicalism, radicalism thereby unhinged from any distinctive content, is perhaps the essence of what we call modernism.” A radicalism of form, if not message: this distinction has led to some of the stranger instances of literary appreciation over the twentieth century: Lukács for Scott and Balzac, Lenin for Tolstoy, Philip Rahv and William Phillips, in the early *Partisan Review* years, for T.S. Eliot. This is one of the more puzzling elements of the literary critical tradition that I hope my dissertation to clarify. “Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes,” in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1997), xviii.

³ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

⁴ It is worth emphasizing at the outset what I am *not* doing: I am not engaging with Victorian criticism, from Carlyle to Mill to Arnold to Pater, or with Victorian literary journalism (except in a few cases), or any other version of that tradition; nor am I focusing on academic criticism, per se; nor do I frame criticism against its sometime counterparts, scholarship or theory. It is my contention that there are many possible ways to explain the practice of literary criticism. I am offering one that describes less a tradition than a habit of mind. It is not meant to be definitive or totalizing, for reasons I hope will become clearer over the course of this introduction and the dissertation as a whole.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

of...criticism is to reveal its object as having yet to achieve its due effect. Something there, despite being fully opened to the senses, has been missed.”⁶ The critic is responsible to the text – they cannot say whatever they like – but that responsibility involves more than fidelity: it involves revealing something new about it, something that is speakable (or writeable) only as a result of the critic’s interaction with the text. Andrew Miller calls this “implicative,” as opposed to “conclusive,” criticism, because its function is to “unfold” or “perfect” its object, rather than to make a definitive claim about it.⁷ In both Barthes and Cavell, there is an implication that the job of the critic is not to definitely interpret a text – or to definitively develop a method for interpreting texts – but to find something new in it. The job is not merely to say something true about the text, but to say something that has been left unsaid. “[T]he work with its received valuations already exists,” writes Susan Sontag, “[n]ow, what *else* can be said?”⁸ As we will see, criticism involves a different kind of epistemological demand than we tend to think. I will argue that, in developing a critical epistemology, the nineteenth-century realist novel articulates an ethically oriented, nonviolent mode of knowing: it searches for a way of knowing that is situated, contingent, skeptical, and ordinary; one that is meant not to define or classify its object within a system but to acknowledge its singularity and to make explicit its latent, immanent qualities. It is this epistemology that comes to define modern literary criticism.

⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 11.

⁷ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 26-32.

⁸ Susan Sontag, “Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes,” xi. It is worth distinguishing at the outset between this and what has been called “suspicious reading,” so often explained with reference to Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*. I hope it will be clear that Jameson articulates *one possible version* of this critical approach, but not the paradigmatic one.

The primary focus of “From Novel to Criticism” is the nineteenth-century realist novel rather than twentieth-century criticism, but it asks questions of the novel that render visible a kind of episteme or paradigm that extends from the 1850s until today. For example, one of its central concerns is methodological: in upgrading from questions of knowledge to questions of knowing, nineteenth-century novelists were doing methodological work. In what sense did they imagine narrative as a method for achieving knowledge? In what sense did they contest that idea? How do their methodological reflections relate to those happening concurrently in the sciences and philosophy? Ultimately, I demonstrate that these novels move farther away from anything like a method, developing a different relationship to truth than method, with its overtones of scientific replicability, implies. Similar questions have exercised literary critics for more than a decade (and much longer than that, depending on how you ask them), but I hope my dissertation will illustrate, as others have begun to do, the inadequacy of *method* as a concept for understanding literary critical work.⁹ I am sympathetic to Toril Moi’s claim that “literary criticism has no method other than reading,” but with the caveat that it is more possible than Moi admits to generalize the varieties of “attention, judgment, and knowledge we bring to the task” – it just isn’t a method, and it isn’t ascribable to individual texts (except those of certain exemplary critics like James, Barthes, and Cavell), so much as to the collective endeavor of literary criticism in both its academic

⁹ I am interested in developing a claim made by Stephen Toulmin, that philosophical modernity has “two distinct origins,” one literary-humanist (Montaigne, Shakespeare) and one scientific-rationalist (Descartes, Galileo, Kant). According to Toulmin, the literary-humanist origin of modernity *preceded* the scientific-rationalist one, which was, in fact, a conservative reaction to the radical openness of sixteenth-century literary-humanism. The realist novel and the critical epistemology it creates belong to Montaigne’s humanistic modernity, whereas the concept of method belongs to the scientific rationalist one. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 19-23.

and nonacademic manifestations.¹⁰ What most distinguishes criticism as a practice is an “implicative,” or essayistic, or skeptical epistemology where, as Garrett Stewart puts it in an essay about Cavell, “the true/false toggle is disengaged.”¹¹ I would only add, in endorsing Stewart’s expression, that disengaging the “true/false toggle” does not mean that critics do not make truth claims, but that the truth claims of criticism are evaluated on a different, less rigidly binaristic epistemological plane. Thus, through narrating a history of the nineteenth-century realist novel, I am also narrating a history of literary criticism – not a definitive institutional or political history, but one that can help make sense of its methodological, dispositional, and moral variegations and, most importantly, the epistemological grounds on which it stakes its claims.

I stress that criticism is a collective enterprise because no individual claim is made independently of the claims to which it responds – and each claim, in becoming public, serves as a further opportunity for response. I call James, Barthes, and Cavell emblematic because their criticism proceeds on these grounds, indexing and indeed achieving something of the public, social aspect of criticism itself.¹² Of course, most critics don’t write like James, Barthes, and Cavell: there are a great many examples of what Andrew Miller calls “conclusive” criticism, where we might say that the “true/false

¹⁰ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5. I am also inspired by the historian of science Paul Feyerabend, who writes that, in the sciences, “[s]uccessful research does not obey general standards; it relies now on one trick, now on another; the moves that advance it and the standards that define what counts as an advance are not always known to the movers.” I’ll withhold judgment about whether Feyerabend is right about science – it is a highly controversial idea – but I think his description fairly accounts for a humanistic research program. *Against Method*, 4th edition (London: Verso, 2010), xix.

¹¹ Garrett Stewart, “The World Viewed: Skepticism Degree Zero,” in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (New York: Continuum, 2011), 90.

¹² There are, of course, other critics we might call emblematic. I am interested in finding a language to describe a criticism that, in addition to the familiar faces (Empson, Leavis, Williams, Jameson, etc.), would take as emblematic Virginia Woolf, Edmund Wilson, Elizabeth Hardwick, Erich Auerbach, Susan Sontag, Toni Morrison, Edward Said, John Berger, D. A. Miller, Eve Sedgwick, Harry Shaw, Hilton Als, and Maggie Nelson (the list could go on).

toggle” is emphatically engaged.¹³ But, I argue, while the most empirically-minded, positivistic criticism has its own internal epistemology (these claims are *true*; they describe reality), that epistemology changes when we understand such work as part of a collective critical ecosystem, where empirical knowledge offers an opportunity for further (often generalizing) response.¹⁴

Throughout this dissertation I attempt both to describe how this epistemology derives from questions about narrative knowing in the nineteenth-century novel *and* to demonstrate it in practice. I engage with a variety of discourses that don’t often coexist in a single work, most notably by combining literature and science studies with ordinary language philosophy. The historical and critical frameworks of this dissertation – which reach back to the sixteenth century and forward to the twentieth and twenty-first, straining the conventions of Victorianist historicism, and which include literary, scientific, and philosophical texts – reflect the critical epistemology I describe: the heterogenous, catholic, dilettantish (in that word’s more positive valences, I hope) joining of discourses that aren’t traditionally joined, the endeavor thus to see literature *anew* – to say something that has been left unsaid – rather than to see something strictly *new*, is one quality of the emblematic criticism of James, Barthes, and Cavell. “A writer,” claims Barthes, “must have the persistence of the watcher who stands at the crossroads of all other discourses.”¹⁵ Of course, my dissertation stands at a much smaller crossroads than

¹³ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection*, 26; Garrett Stewart, “The World Viewed,” 90.

¹⁴ One rather striking example is the computational analysis of Franco Moretti. Each graph, map, and tree depends for its construction on the work of many other, more specialized, scholars. Moretti’s digital humanities work is itself highly empirical, and yet nowhere is it clearer that thoroughgoing empirical description can invite as many responses as any other variety of criticism. See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005).

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, “Inaugural Lecture: Collège de France,” in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Sontag, 397.

that, but Barthes's description does, I think, account for the collective endeavor of literary criticism of which "From Novel to Criticism" forms a small part.

The eclecticism of this dissertation renders visible the same quality – critical or writerly, as if a crossroads – in the novels under discussion. I describe relativism in Gaskell, skepticism in Eliot, acknowledgement in Hardy, and criticism in James (in the novels as well as the actual criticism). Gaskell and James are driven by questions of knowing in ways more idiosyncratic and expansive than have been recognized. And Eliot and Hardy, who are more explicitly interested in science and philosophy, have a more complex, and occasionally oppositional relation to knowledge than current accounts allow. In order to see these qualities of the nineteenth-century realist novel, it is necessary to read them from a variety of perspectives. For the remainder of this introduction, I discuss in greater detail two of the critical histories that are central to this dissertation, and which entail entirely different approaches to questions of knowing: literature and science (conceived broadly, as part of a tradition of thinking about literary realism) and ordinary language philosophy. Together, these critical paradigms make it possible to describe a tradition of thinking about narrative and knowing in the nineteenth-century novel that leads to a critical epistemology and that has, as yet, been left unsaid.

II

The scholarly subfield called "literature and science" is often understood quite narrowly as the analysis of the relation between literary and scientific practice in specific historical moments. Within Victorian studies, its modern instantiation is most often traced to the 1980s, when Gillian Beer and George Levine published a number of groundbreaking studies, the most notable of which read Charles Darwin as a literary

writer and as a major influence, in direct and indirect ways, on the Victorian realist novel.¹⁶ Levine in particular has done much to trace the epistemological and ethical overlap of the realist novel and Victorian science in the broadest sense, calling them “cultural twin[s].”¹⁷ “From Novel to Criticism” both builds on and expands this tradition of scholarship. In my view, there is much to be gained from understanding this narrowly defined – if ever expanding – subfield as part of a much longer tradition of thinking about realism. Levine’s own earlier work, which discusses literary realism as “a method consonant with empirical science,” is an obvious example, but we can push even further than this to understand literature and science as a recent variation of a more general problematic: what epistemological work does the novel do? One of the central insights of histories of Victorian science is that “science” was *in formation*, only partly differentiated from philosophy and literature.¹⁸ To speak of nineteenth-century science as a coherent set of practices is to overlook the ways in which what we now call science was in fact one part of a broader cultural preoccupation with epistemology, with *knowing*, that took shape in a variety of ways. I am simply recapitulating one of the central insights of Victorianist literature and science, but I take it to imply a longer tradition of thinking about knowing

¹⁶ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). There are different ways to tell this critical history, of course. For example, Devin Griffiths – in an essay exclusively on Darwin and literature – divides it into three phases, the first of which reaches back to the early twentieth century, and the last of which is represented by Levine and Beer. But Griffiths account is similarly narrow, insofar as it only includes those works which explicitly address science and literature as theme. “Darwin and Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Science*, ed. Steven Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 62-80.

¹⁷ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, vii.

¹⁸ Of course, this is also one of the central insights of histories of sixteenth-, seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and even twentieth-century science. While this claim is usually made in the name of historical specificity, its ubiquity suggests that we have not yet identified the grounds of difference between the sciences and humanities. It is my hope that my explication of the humanities’ critical epistemology will help clarify that relationship.

in the novel that includes texts we wouldn't ordinarily include in literature and science studies. In this section, I narrate this critical history, which is organized around two simple questions: is the realist novel true, and does it create knowledge?

Theories of realism began to emerge in France in the middle of nineteenth century, and in England only slightly after.¹⁹ In one of the earliest applications of the term to literature in the English speaking world, George Henry Lewes writes that “Realism is...the basis of all Art,” which “always aims at the representation of Reality, *i.e.* of Truth.”²⁰ Since Lewes's rather extravagant pronouncement in 1858, realism has become so central to our understanding of the Victorian novel that it is easy to lose sight of its strangeness. Lewes's claim is strange, not because it was an unlikely assertion in the 1850s – or even because it would be unlikely today, after several generations of prominent nonrepresentational art – but because of its equation of the “real” and the “true.” Those two words describe different categories of thing, after all: to call something “real” is to make a metaphysical assertion, but to call it “true” is epistemological. A novelist's subject, Lewes continues, narrowing his focus, “must always be real—true.”²¹ Just the look of that sentence, “real” and “true” so balanced on either side of the em dash, is striking. One might read it through quickly, “realtrue” a tempting portmanteau for the idea Lewes is describing. He adds, realism's “antithesis is not Idealism, but *Falsism*.”²² Literary realism, as Lewes claimed and as Ian Watt confirmed a century later, “is an

¹⁹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 10.

²⁰ George Henry Lewes, “Realism and Idealism,” in *Literary Criticism of George Henry Lewes*, ed. Alice R. Kaminsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 87.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²² *Ibid.*, 87.

essentially epistemological problem.”²³ But that recognition raises more questions than it answers. What is the “realtrue” of realism? In what sense can fiction be true?

Of course, this is a question that long predates Lewes and the Victorian novel – it predates the novel genre itself – but by most accounts it is during the nineteenth century that questions about the epistemological affordances of the novel are generalized into a theory and consolidated under the term “realism.”²⁴ It has been answered in a variety of ways since this time: a good novel “represents life,” for Henry James, or it contains characters who typify “the objective human tendencies of society,” according to Georg Lukács.²⁵ In accounts, defenses, and critiques of literary realism, a great deal of theoretical work happens in the verbs: novels *represent* or they *typify* or they *signify* or they *model* or they *resemble* the real. Or they don’t: during the early- to mid-twentieth century, as literary studies became a more linguistic and semiotic enterprise, claims like Lewes’s could be dismissed as the consequence of a naïve view of language.²⁶ Indeed, one of the more compelling answers to the question of realism is, fiction *can’t* be true. As Roman Jakobson bluntly puts it, “verisimilitude in a verbal expression or in a literary description obviously makes no sense whatever.”²⁷

²³ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 11.

²⁴ For the prehistory, see Michael McKeon, *Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, 15th anniversary edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). For nineteenth-century theory, see Nicholas Dames, “Realism and Theories of the Novel,” in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Vol. 3: The Nineteenth-Century Novel*, ed. John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 289-305.

²⁵ Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 574; Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in Theodor Adorno et. al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2007), 47.

²⁶ As Rosalind Coward and John Ellis would have it, “realism has as its basic philosophy of language not a production...but an identity: the signifier is treated as identical to a (pre-existent) signified.” *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject*, excerpted in *The Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 595.

²⁷ Roman Jakobson, “On Realism in Art,” in *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 21.

Insofar as it is concerned with truth claims, the semiotic approach to literature, I want to suggest, should be understood within a broader tradition of literature and science. Indeed, it is not a stretch to say that these critics view the nineteenth-century realist novel as *scientistic* – as borrowing the cultural authority of science in order to obfuscate its own ideological work. The best version of this argument comes from Roland Barthes. In his famous essay “The Reality Effect,” Barthes argues that realist texts have a “*referential illusion*”: they do not refer to any extratextual reality (its truth is not real), but rather signify the concept *reality*.²⁸ Two years later, in *S/Z*, he shifts the tone of this argument, expanding it into a more explicit ideological critique: “by a swivel characteristic of bourgeois ideology, which turns culture into nature,” realism “appear[s] to establish reality, ‘Life.’” Realism presents as real and natural what is in fact only “a smothering layer of received ideas.”²⁹ One of the more striking qualities of this last pronouncement is that it comes under a section headed “The Voice of Science.”³⁰ In Barthes, “science” always reads like a bad word, one aligned with stultifying, deadening readerliness and with bourgeois ideology. Insofar as “Sarrasine” is a readerly text, it draws on the “code” of science, which is what, after all, establishes “reality, ‘Life’”; insofar as it is writerly (or insofar as Barthes is able to “rewrite” the text), it banishes science. For Barthes and others like him, the realist novel does *not* create knowledge – it simply acts like it does.

It is in response to this idea that literature and science, in its narrow configuration, is formulated. The opening paragraph of Levine’s *The Realistic Imagination* groups Barthes with Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, and others, locating in their work an “anti-

²⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 148.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 206.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

referential bias” which leads to the “well established convention” – against which Levine argues – “that realism is at best a historically inevitable mistake.”³¹ For Levine, “whatever else [realism] means, it always implies an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some non-verbal truth out there.”³² But whatever the connection between fictional language and an antecedent reality, it is *not* one of naïve or transparent representation. He insists that the Victorians always understood how strange the “realtrue” of realism is. As Levine describes them, realist novels acknowledge the irreducible difference between language and reality at the same time that they strive to connect their language to that reality. Thus, realism becomes not a dishonest mistake but a productive paradox: the novels self-consciously insist upon the impossibility of their own epistemological project. Grounded in empiricism and closely related to Victorian science, “the novel,” Levine argues, “often attempted to become (sometimes willy-nilly became) an instrument of knowledge.”³³

It is worth focusing on Levine’s use of the word “instrument”: like Aristotle’s *Organon* and Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* (or *New Organon*), the novel as instrument does not contain or represent knowledge but is, rather, a method, a way to knowledge. For Levine, then, the realist novel is not true in any straightforward sense: it is not a question of transcription or documentation, but of experiment and exploration. Framing the field of literature and science in this expansive way renders visible a central irony: that the earliest studies that explicitly address literature and science in their historical interconnections actually *pull them apart*. Literature is *like* science in certain

³¹ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

ways, not scientific. Underlying this claim is the so-called “one culture” thesis: “the cultural traffic ran both ways,” between literature and science, as Beer famously puts it.³⁴ By delineating a shared cultural sphere, however, Levine and Beer were better able to distinguish literature from science, insofar as they understood literature and science as cultural formations pursuing the same questions in different ways. This originary act of differentiation has, in fact, continued to inform the development of literature and science studies: within Victorian studies, the most successful revision of the one culture thesis comes from Gowan Dawson, who argues that scholars have “been much too sanguine” in focusing on the interdisciplinary productivity of the relationship. The “actual interconnection,” he argues, was much less congenial.³⁵ Tita Chico has recently claimed – in reference to the eighteenth century – that “numerous [literary] writers used the topic [of science] to make the case for the epistemological superiority of literary knowledge.”³⁶ From the moment of its inception as a clearly defined scholarly subfield, literature and science has in a meaningful way continued to pry literature apart from science.³⁷

³⁴ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, xii.

³⁵ Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.

³⁶ Tita Chico, *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 1.

³⁷ There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Sally Shuttleworth, for example, straightforwardly claims that “*Middlemarch* is a work of experimental science.” And in two excellent studies of nineteenth-century literature and geology published this century, we find the following two sentences: “One of my central claims in this book is that science writing was an integral part of nineteenth-century literary culture—not that science writing and literature enjoyed a fruitful relationship, but that scientific writing *was* literature”; and, responding directly to this claim, “[i]f science *was* literature in the nineteenth century, it is the premise of this book that literature was science too.” Although these claims are prominent, the general direction of the field points in the other direction (which is one reason why these are still claims requiring defense, after thirty years). Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 143; Ralph O'Connor, *The Earth on Show: Fossils and the Poetics of Popular Science, 1802-1856* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 13; Adalene Buckland, *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 15.

This more expansive understanding of literature and science looks rather different from the narrow conventional account. Naturally, in many cases this process of differentiation has involved a continued reflection on literature as epistemology or method: for Chico, there is “a growing sense of literary knowledge as an independent, viable epistemology” that relies, in distinction from science, on “the imagination as a source of truth.”³⁸ In the light of this critical history, this dissertation both is and is not a literature and science study. While the relationship between literature and science (and philosophy) is important to these chapters, my focus is predominantly on literature’s relation with *itself* – its sense of its own epistemology. Like Chico, I understand these novelists to make a case for the “epistemological superiority” of the novel, but I also suggest that the engagements between literature and science led to a more profound self-awareness: “literary knowledge” is a concept about which nineteenth-century novelists grew deeply ambivalent.³⁹ In exploring questions of knowing, these writers increasingly challenged the fundamental premise of that exploration, that the novel *was* or *should be* “an instrument of knowledge.”⁴⁰

III

Insofar as nineteenth-century novelists grow leery of the idea that knowledge should be the function of literature, I argue, their attitude resembles (and, indeed, prefigures) twentieth-century ordinary language philosophy. “From Novel to Criticism” is particularly influenced by Stanley Cavell, whose work, as I discuss in each chapter,

³⁸ Tita Chico, *The Experimental Imagination*, 2. In Steven Meyer’s phrase, literature and science scholarship is committed to “the historical expansion of empiricism,” such that it can encompass without reducing a variety of (epistemological) approaches to the world. “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Science*, ed. Steven Meyer, 1.

³⁹ Tita Chico, *The Experimental Imagination*, 1.

⁴⁰ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, 13.

involves a general repudiation of epistemology. However, I suggest that Cavell's writing, in that repudiation, outlines (as it were, negatively, without filling in) a different model of knowing that operates meaningfully in the nineteenth-century novel and in the practice of literary criticism. For Cavell, there are (at least) two problems with knowing. The first is primarily concerned with knowledge of the world: knowledge is a criteria that cannot ever be satisfied and, therefore, assuming an epistemological relation to the world entails skepticism and solipsism.⁴¹ "The skeptic," he writes, "can be cloaked as the thinker wishing to bring assertion to its greatest fastidiousness, refusing our knowledge of the world, so refusing the world, because he cannot satisfy our apparently *pure* demand for certainty, or demand for pure certainty."⁴² On this model epistemology offers a bad framework for relating to the world because knowing is a relation that negates itself: in setting the bar too high, it becomes a nonrelation.

The second problem of epistemology concerns knowledge of other minds. In David Russell's succinct expression, "[t]here can be violence in an epistemological approach to others."⁴³ There are, in fact, two varieties of this violence: the first variety insists that knowledge is coercive: "The violence in masculine knowing...seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property" – knowing, in the biblical sense.⁴⁴ The "claim to knowledge" entails a claim to rightful possession, an interpersonal dynamic that is especially dangerous when the

⁴¹ For the sake of clarity, it is worth pointing out that for Cavell, epistemology and skepticism are virtually indistinguishable: "I do not, that is, confine the term [skeptical] to philosophers who wind up denying that we can ever know; I apply it to any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge." *The Claim of Reason*, 46.

⁴² Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

⁴³ David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3.

⁴⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 10.

knower is a white man and the known is an otherwise gendered or racialized person. The second variety is opposite of the first, but no less violent. The skeptic “refus[es] the world,” and so refuses, or dispossesses, any responsibility for others: “skepticism is not the discovery of an incapacity in human knowing but of an insufficiency in acknowledging what in my world I think of as beyond me.”⁴⁵ On one hand, then, an epistemological approach to other minds can stake a claim of ownership; on the other, it can *disown*, or disavow, the other.

Instead of trying to know other minds, Cavell suggests that we acknowledge them.⁴⁶ “Acknowledgement” is one of Cavell’s central concepts, and it is characteristically slippery. On the one hand, it moves us away from epistemology: it “changes the dimension in which we assess our understanding of others,” from an epistemological to an ethical/social framework.⁴⁷ The paradigmatic example is pain: one does not need certainty of another’s mind in order to know that their pain is real. To say that we require certainty is to mistake a “metaphysical finitude” for “an intellectual lack,” and this is to deny the possibility of responding to that pain.⁴⁸ In fact, Cavell argues, human “separation” and a shared state of ignorance is *necessary* for humane life. On the other hand, however, acknowledgement entails knowledge. The pun has genuine philosophical significance. “Acknowledgement” does not pull us back from knowledge, but “goes beyond” it “in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.”⁴⁹ In Cavell’s enigmatic conclusion, “to know you are in pain is

⁴⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 12.

⁴⁶ The argument is first, and most effectively, made in the consecutive essays, “Knowing and Acknowledging” and “The Avoidance of Love,” in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 238-353.

⁴⁷ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 208.

⁴⁸ Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” 263.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 257.

to acknowledge it, or to withhold the acknowledgement.—I know your pain the way you do.”⁵⁰ Acknowledgement both disavows and absorbs epistemology (it is “knowing *and* acknowledging”), but I don’t think this is a contradiction. Rather, Cavell reverses the terms of the relationship: he rejects knowledge as a criteria for responding to others, so that responding to others becomes a criteria for knowledge. If we move through the world looking for knowledge, we’ll never find it; but once we shift our expectations, knowledge simply becomes a component of ordinary life.

This complexity (or productive ambivalence) is not often addressed by philosophers and critics who have taken up Cavell’s ideas – and if it is addressed, it is quickly left behind.⁵¹ Even Cavell’s own later work moves away from this receptiveness to knowledge and toward a more explicit disavowal of epistemology. In my view, however, “Knowing and Acknowledging” opens up a possibility for a nonviolent epistemological mode, one that, while it may be “ordinary,” in Cavell’s sense of that word, is anything but simple or straightforward. It may happen all the time, but if anything, that makes it all the more pressing to understand. In other words, if we take seriously Cavell’s early contention that acknowledgement entails knowledge – that to acknowledge someone is to know them – then “knowledge” becomes a differently problematic category. Problematic not because it is violent, but because it is in need of further elaboration. My first chapter argues that Elizabeth Gaskell delineates something it

⁵⁰ Ibid., 265-66.

⁵¹ For example, Naomi Scheman writes, in a wonderful essay, “[o]ne way of thinking about the difference between knowing and acknowledging is the difference between the third and second person. I can, of course, know (about) you and acknowledge him or her, but in each case I’m moving away from the characteristic stance I have toward, on the one hand, an object of knowledge, and, on the other, another subject.” “Of course” we can know another, but for Scheman and Cavell and others, that’s beside the point and a source of potential violence. “A Storied World: On Meeting and Being Met,” in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, 98.

makes sense to call “ordinary knowledge,” which exists in the space opened up in Cavell’s early essays but has been largely ignored since. That ordinary epistemology is an important through line for this dissertation as a whole and it helps to clarify the critical epistemology I delineate. Over the course of the second half of the nineteenth-century, realist novelists negotiated the idea of knowing in a variety of ways that are explained by – and help to explain – Cavell’s distinctively enigmatic epistemological conclusions.

Which is to say, the nineteenth-century realist novel shares a set of concerns with Cavell. Although ordinary language philosophy has long had a foothold in literary studies through the work of J. L. Austin, and although the broader tradition has become increasingly present in recent years through critics who address Cavell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Cavell is still rarely incorporated into discussions of Victorian literature. The exception, of course, is Andrew Miller, whose *The Burdens of Perfection* argues that “Cavell’s work is of special pertinence to” the nineteenth century.⁵² I couldn’t agree more, and Miller’s work has been a consistent touchstone for me. It is probably best to describe the difference between my project and Miller’s as one of emphasis rather than substance, but our different emphases do lead us to rather different conclusions. Miller largely adopts Cavell’s sense of the “threat of skepticism,” which is to say, in Cavell’s words, the sense that an epistemological relation to the world and to the people in it leads to a skepticism that threatens our “ordinary lives.”⁵³ Miller argues, “[f]or the Victorians,

⁵² Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection*, 32. See also Daniel Wright’s recent review of Toril Moi’s book, “Revolutions of the Ordinary: Victorian Studies and the Turn to Ordinary Language,” in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47.2 (2019), 449-461.

⁵³ The longer passage from Cavell is instructive: “My interest in the pervasive threat of skepticism was elicited by the revolutionary philosophical practices...of J.L. Austin and of the later Wittgenstein, in whose appeals to the ordinary or everyday in our speech and conduct I seem to find a perception that what we call our ordinary lives, or the perspective from which we understand the everydayness of our lives—let us say, the extraordinariness of what we accept as the ordinary—is determined by a prior surmise of that life, and

our capacity to know and the possibility of conviction were massively important. Skepticism was felt throughout the culture.”⁵⁴ In response to that skepticism, he continues, Victorians deployed strategies of “moral perfectionism,” which “displace[] or supplant[]” skepticism, “translat[ing]...epistemological concerns into social dynamics.”⁵⁵ Miller thus describes a move away from epistemology toward ethical thinking.

Miller’s account of nineteenth-century skepticism skews toward one aspect of acknowledgment: the aspect that repudiates epistemology and seeks to replace it with a different mode of relation. In this, Miller is representative of Cavellian literary scholarship, which largely takes epistemology and skepticism as its primary targets.⁵⁶ In an important sense, “From Novel to Criticism” endeavors to explore the other side of acknowledgement. The nineteenth-century realist novel develops a taxonomy of knowing, so to speak, insisting upon its multivalence and its many ethical implications. You might say that I’m describing an alternative history of ordinary language philosophy, but one that actually played out in the nineteenth-century novel. I suggest that one way to understand the knowledge claims made by nineteenth-century realism is to say that they exist in the space opened up in Cavell’s “Knowing and Acknowledging”: a kind of knowing that is conscious of and resistant to the possibility of epistemological coercion and abandonment but that does not reduce all relations of knowing to acts of violence.

The claims made in literary criticism are of the same variety. Their epistemology is not violent but ordinary. In this sense, I agree up to a point with Toril Moi’s recent

its language, as vulnerable. Vulnerable, I would say, to skepticism, but with the understanding that skepticism wears as many guises as the devil.” Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 1-2.

⁵⁴ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection*, 5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁵⁶ Most prominently, see Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, eds., *Stanley Cavell and Literary Criticism*; and Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*.

argument that we should view “reading as a practice of acknowledgement” (as one of her chapters is titled). Taking up Cavell’s call “to let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it,” Moi argues that acknowledging a text means not “impos[ing] my own theories on” it; it means “accounting for the work’s concepts” *and* for “our own position in relation to the work’s concerns” so that “reading becomes a conversation between the work and the reader.” In my view – although I largely agree with Moi’s conclusions, which premise her assertion that “there is no method to be had here” – acknowledgement is not the name for what happens in the act of reading.⁵⁷ For better or worse, Cavell’s acknowledgement takes place between human minds; it is an explicitly social (i.e. exclusively human) phenomenon. In fact, Moi is describing what Cavell calls *criticism*. In his own terms, Cavell’s criticism is grounded in *intuitions*, as opposed to hypotheses, about what one is reading⁵⁸: an intuition that “places a demand upon us, namely for tuition...the willingness to subject oneself to words.” “Tuition so conceived,” he continues, “is what I understand criticism to be.” Like acknowledgement, criticism “goes beyond knowledge...in its requirement that I *do* something...on the basis of that knowledge”: here, a requirement “to make oneself intelligible,” to account for one’s experience.⁵⁹ There is, indeed, a striking continuity between acknowledgement and criticism in Cavell’s work. Cavell is claiming, you might say, to know the text better than

⁵⁷ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 216-17.

⁵⁸ The full quote, (characteristically) too long to include anywhere but a footnote, is helpful: “In calling my guiding theme an intuition I am distinguishing it from a hypothesis. Both intuitions and hypotheses require what may be called confirmation or continuation, but differently. A hypothesis requires evidence and it must say what constitutes its evidence. (I know what it means to say that lighter objects fall to the earth at the same rate of heavier objects, though it may be no easy matter to collect the evidence that determines this one way or the other.) An intuition, say that God is expressed in the world, does not require, or tolerate, evidence but rather, let us say, understanding of a particular sort (and it may be no easy matter to talk someone out of the idea that the only need for statements of such a sort is, or was, as hypotheses.)” *Disowning Knowledge*, 4.

⁵⁹ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 4-5; *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 11.

it knows itself. The fact remains, however, that claiming to know a text is a different kind of claim than claiming to know another mind. Criticism is less a “conversation” between text and reader – and less an act of violence – than it is a furthering or “perfecting” of the text, as Andrew Miller would say, or a rewriting of it, as Barthes would.⁶⁰ In other words, if, after its original articulation, “acknowledgement” increasingly repudiated relations of knowing as violent, then “criticism” came to name the knowledge in acknowledgement. There is a different kind of knowing available in criticism.

IV

In taking a step back, the rationale for joining literature and science studies with ordinary language philosophy should become clear. On the one hand, we have a critical paradigm that has increasingly understood literature to be separate from science, even to the point of having its own epistemology. On the other, we have a philosophical tradition that has disparaged epistemology almost entirely, but which has left open the possibility of knowing a text, so long as that knowing doesn’t mistake itself for absolute or scientific knowledge. “From Novel to Criticism” narrates the transition from one idea to the other in the nineteenth-century realist novel: from a literary knowing to a critical epistemology. It strives to show an epistemological continuity that underlies the obvious shifts of form and sensibility: it argues that the questions of knowing that motivate the realist novel “change without changing into something else,” even as they migrate from the novel to criticism.⁶¹

Over the course of the dissertation I measure that change by describing each writer’s understanding of the relationship between novel and narrative. Before briefly

⁶⁰ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection*, 29-30; Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

⁶¹ Michael McKeon, *Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, xiii.

summarizing this relationship – and its epistemological effects – as it changes from Gaskell to James, it is worth making explicit my own position, which is a condition of possibility for the argument as a whole: that the novel and narrative are irreducible to one another. One way to put it is to say that “novel” describes a genre and “narrative” a mode.⁶² The distinction between novel and narrative has been increasingly prominent in novel theory in recent years, especially since the publication of Fredric Jameson’s *The Antimonies of Realism*. Jameson defines the realist novel as the dialectical encounter of a “narrative impulse” (realism’s “genealogy”) and something called “affect” (its “dissolution”) which involves, at the very least, a nonnarrative and possibly an antinarrative form of representation.⁶³ This distinction is important to me for reasons other than Jameson’s: during the nineteenth century, narrative had a robust epistemological dimension.⁶⁴ It was understood in many cases to produce knowledge. Whether the knowledge it was understood to produce was ordinary or coercive, ethical or unethical, useful or not, is in many ways the topic of each of the following chapters. Pursuing these questions makes visible an epistemological continuity between literary realism and literary criticism.

My first chapter addresses the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, particularly *North and South* (1855) and *Wives and Daughters* (1865), in which novel, narrative, and knowing are tightly constellated. Gaskell’s novels are more epistemologically ambitious than has

⁶² McKeon explains, “[i]f genres are historical, modes are transhistorical. Genres change; modes do not. Whereas genres are contingent and conventional, modes are “necessary” or “natural,” an inescapable consequence of the discourse itself, models not for the solution but for the initial articulation of problems of form.” “Genre Theory,” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. McKeon (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 2.

⁶³ Fredric Jameson, *The Antimonies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 10-11.

⁶⁴ And it still does today. See Martin Kreiswirth’s discussion of “storied forms of knowledge.” “The Narrative Turn in the Humanities,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 377-382.

been generally asserted. They effect a broad-based critique of absolute knowledge from a relativistic epistemological perspective, insisting that all knowledge is situated, embodied, contingent, and partial. Importantly, Gaskell's critique of absolute knowledge is not a critique of knowledge *tout court*: she is concerned with articulating what knowledge looks like when absolute knowledge is out of reach. I argue that, in doing so, she develops a concept that anticipates the insights of ordinary language philosophy even as it locates the "ordinary" within an epistemological paradigm. She develops, in other words, what I call "ordinary knowledge." It is ordinary, first, because it is antithetical to generalization and conceptualization and, second, because it is an irreducibly social phenomenon. Ordinary knowledge is *narratively constructed*: it appears, most often, in the stories characters share with one another, in the "inset tales" that are so characteristic of Gaskell's fiction.⁶⁵ This has significant consequences for Gaskell's understanding of the novel, which becomes a relativistic genre that, in its narrativity, is an "instrument," you might say, for ordinary knowledge.⁶⁶

In chapter 2, which reads across George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859), *Adam Bede* (1859), and *Middlemarch* (1871-2), I suggest that Eliot remains committed to the novel and narrative but begins to problematize the very possibility of knowledge. Specifically, I argue that Eliot is a Pyrrhonian skeptic, and that her skepticism, which emphasizes ongoing investigation over conclusion, is formally consonant with a narrative whose "tendency," D. A. Miller explains, "would...be *to keep going*" rather than submit to closure.⁶⁷ Eliot has long enjoyed a reputation as the most intellectual Victorian

⁶⁵ Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 203.

⁶⁶ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, 13.

⁶⁷ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), xi.

novelist, but her novels and essays exhibit a notable caution about the philosophical dogmas of her culture. I attend to the ways that Eliot critiques the philosophy of empiricism – the dominant epistemology in nineteenth-century Britain, which often served as the foundation of dogmatic system building. Eliot’s novels are skeptical because they are fundamentally anti-dogmatic. And they, like Gaskell’s, both anticipate and complicate Cavell’s epistemological thinking: like Cavell, Eliot wants to find a nonviolent mode of relating to the world and other minds; unlike Cavell, Eliot offers skepticism – in which knowledge is always the goal, but always and definitively unattainable – as that mode of relation. For Eliot, skepticism *combines* epistemology with ethics, rather than displacing the one with the other as Cavell and Andrew Miller describe.

The story continues with Thomas Hardy, who, I show in readings of *The Woodlanders* (1887) and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), further problematizes the concept of knowledge by depicting the failures of narrative to achieve anything other than reductive (and hence violent) knowledge. In his famously engaged thematizations of evolutionary theory and ecology, Hardy takes as a central theme the incommensurability of different historical scales: his novels layer individual lives, family genealogies, and natural histories on top of one another, and their plots often revolve around the tragic effects of historical misinterpretation that result from scalar disjunction. Where contemporaneous naturalists like Charles Lyell, Robert Chambers, and Charles Darwin drew on the protocols of narrative representation to make the expansive timescales of geology and evolution comprehensible, Hardy develops, in direct contrast, a nonnarrative aesthetic strategy – a focus on static images that explicitly halt narrative progress – in

response to the representational and epistemological crises of natural history and science. I explain Hardy's nonnarrative aesthetic with reference to Cavell's acknowledgement, arguing that Hardy offers an expansive vision of acknowledgement that accounts for our relations, not only to other humans, but to nonhuman animals and plants, inanimate objects, and, most unusually, complex systems like history and ecology. Hardy suggests that, in acknowledging history and ecology, as opposed to seeking knowledge of them through narrative, we can avoid the violence of epistemological relations *and* forge a deeper relationship to history and ecology.

In chapter 4, I argue that Henry James entirely rejects the notion of narrative knowing, developing in its place a critical epistemology. James develops this epistemology in his criticism, of course, but also in his novels: in readings of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Ambassadors* (1903), I describe a critical mode of engagement, both thematically and formally instantiated, that is designed to recognize, acknowledge, and preserve the *potentiality* of persons, characters, and texts. Narrative, as Paul Ricoeur and others point out, converts the potential into the actual, which, James fears, makes the subject of narration *knowable* in its actuality.⁶⁸ For James, narrative and knowledge are determinative, actualizing things: criticism, by contrast, *reopens* what has been closed. In "rewriting" or "perfecting" texts (his own and others), James, as it were, keeps them alive, protects them against entropy and deadening finality. Like acknowledgement in Cavell's early writing, criticism entails a variety of knowing even as it disavows a

⁶⁸ "The end of the story is what equates the present with the past, the actual with the potential." Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 182.

coercive epistemology grounded in narrative. It is a way of bringing the text back into a living present.

Jamesian criticism – in all its consonance with Barthesian and Cavellian criticism – is emblematic of the collective undertaking of literary criticism and thus offers a heuristic for understanding what it is and the grounds on which it stakes its claims. There are several qualities that James, Barthes, and Cavell bring to light that are worth noting. Criticism is serious: it makes real claims, but its claims are epistemologically distinct from the claims made in other areas of study. It is specific: an act of criticism is a record of an encounter between a reader and a text. It is presentist, even when its presentism is not obvious: criticism involves “rewriting” a text, bringing it up to the present, giving it life. It is both academic and nonacademic: its institutionalization in the university is not a necessary or totalizing fact. It is collective: no single act of criticism is, or can be, definitive. Considered collectively, it is generalist, watching “at the crossroads of all discourses.”⁶⁹ The claims of criticism are posited not to be given a thumbs up or thumbs down, but to elicit response – again, “the true/false toggle is disengaged.”⁷⁰ It is a social enterprise, even when it doesn’t feel that way. Finally, criticism is various: there is no single method nor, as I see it, should there be.⁷¹

Method has been at the center of literary critical debate for longer than a decade, at this point. To take the most prominent recent example, Joseph North argues that we have been stuck in a broad “historicist/contextualist paradigm” since the 1970s, and that

⁶⁹ Roland Barthes, “Inaugural Lecture,” 397.

⁷⁰ Garrett Stewart, “The World Viewed,” 90.

⁷¹ It is worth noting that these qualities are similar to those that Stephen Toulmin attributes to 16th century literary humanism. That paradigm, he points out, focused on rhetoric, particularity, the local, and the “transitory. The 17th century scientific-rationalist *reaction* to this earlier humanism, Toulmin says, focused instead on logic, universality, abstraction, and the timeless. For Toulmin – and I agree – the scientific-rationalist paradigm is a reactionary backlash to the humanistic one. *Cosmopolis*, 30-5.

we need to develop new protocols of literary study in order break out of it. He calls for “new methods for cultivating subjectivities and collectivities,” for intervening in, to cite that most famous proclamation of Marx, rather than simply analyzing culture.⁷² For North, criticism without methodology is regressive: it is a “return,” a “retreat,” a “fall[ing] back.” It is “basic” and “inchoate,” lacking rigor. And it is reactionary, playing into the hands of the neoliberal atomization of all sectors of American life, including the university.⁷³ Acknowledging the significance of North’s study, I would like to make the opposite point: that the method debates that have characterized academic literary study over recent decades mistake the epistemological ground on which criticism makes its claims. Put simply, “method” is scientistic, sourced, as Wittgenstein wrote in a different context, from “our preoccupation with the method of science.”⁷⁴ To act as if literary criticism has a method is to contribute to the current crisis in the humanities, persistently defunded by universities demanding that we act more like the sciences, with their reproducibility, their falsifiability, and their measurables. In the novelistic tradition I address through both literature and science studies and ordinary language philosophy, we get a clear sense that method is something that belongs *over there*, in the sciences. It is

⁷² Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 20.

⁷³ These claims are made specifically about Eve Sedgwick, who, North argues, is symptomatically dissatisfied with the “historicist/contextualist paradigm” but ultimately unable to break out of it. He registers this inability by noting Sedgwick’s failure to propose a new method: “one wants to know whether it might be possible to do more than simply return to the fertile mulch of premethodological practice”; instead of developing a new paradigm, “the thinker retreats from making explicit methodological claims and falls back instead on the more basic, more heterogeneous, but also more inchoate level of practice”; most damningly, “one can observe that at certain moments, moves of this kind threaten to throw us back into the anti-institutionalism, the suspicion of any form of positive collectivity, even the bad libertarianism, anarcho-liberalism, or simple neoliberalism that many have detected in Foucault.” *Ibid.*, 162-3.

⁷⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the ‘Philosophical Investigations,’* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1958), 18.

not a literary phenomenon, nor a philosophical one. And it is not, I argue, a particularly useful tool for literary criticism.⁷⁵

In my view, understanding literary criticism as a serious, specific, presentist, collective, and pluralistic practice offers a promising paradigm with which to respond to Joseph North's recent call for "cultivating subjectivities and collectivities," to which I am entirely sympathetic.⁷⁶ I would like to close this introduction with reference to Raymond Williams, who, in response to the notion of criticism as "'authoritative' judgment," calls for "a rejection of the habit itself":

The point would then be, not to find some other term to replace it, while continuing the same kind of activity, but to get rid of the habit, which depends, fundamentally, on the abstraction of response from its real situation and circumstances: the elevation to 'judgment,' and to an apparently general process, when what always needs to be understood is the specificity of the response, which is not an abstract 'judgment' but even where including, as often necessarily, positive or negative responses, a definite practice, in active and complex relations with its whole situation and context.⁷⁷

I cannot help but hear in William's passage a prescient disavowal, not only of systematic judgment and some "general process" we might call theory, but of method, too. I want to suggest that viewing criticism as a product of the tradition I trace in this dissertation, as emblemized by James, Barthes, Cavell, and others, offers an adequate response to William's concern. Criticism, as I understand it, is what Williams calls a "constitutive human process" – an act that, in its sociality, can be seen as "cultivating subjectivities

⁷⁵ I am tempted to say, with David Kurnick, that calls for a method involve "a discipline-internal rhetoric of disregard for the work of literary criticism": "even when directed primarily to an academic audience, these texts register the pressure of a broader public by introjecting that public's anticipated indifference or hostility." "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and our Method Melodramas," in *ELH* 87.2 (2020), 350-1.

⁷⁶ Joseph North, *Literary Criticism*, 20.

⁷⁷ Raymond Williams, "Criticism," in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 86.

and collectivities.”⁷⁸ If we look at it in the terms I set out in this dissertation, we see that we have been critical all along.

⁷⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 20. Joseph North, *Literary Criticism*, 20.

Relativism and Ordinary Knowledge in Elizabeth Gaskell

I may know better than you how it is
with you.

– Stanley Cavell

I

In 1831, long before she published her first novel and gained the fame and notoriety that *Mary Barton* (1848) inspired, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote to her friend Harriet Carr asking for news. “Remember, every little, leetle, particular about yourself, and your concerns, and gossipry, and scandal, are most welcome to me,” she implores, “down to the uninteresting in general.”¹ Of all the Victorians, Gaskell is perhaps most famous (or infamous) for the generous inclusion of details in her novels, “every little, leetle” one receiving the glow of narrative attention. Thanks to this aesthetic in novels and novellas like *Cranford* (1853), *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863), *Cousin Phillis* (1864), and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), Gaskell has come to embody in the critical imagination a variety of domestic realism that is characteristically attentive to cozy household settings and objects, to local natural environments, and to the desires and frustrations of middle-class courtship.² Indeed, Gaskell may have had a higher tolerance for “the uninteresting in general” than her readers; though many delight in the quiet comforts of domestic stories, others find them troublingly conservative, or worse, boring. Henry James, for example, writes of *Wives and Daughters* that “[t]he book is very long and of an interest so quiet

¹ Qtd. in Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 3. Epigraph: Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 266.

² Of course, the quiet scenes and ordinary objects of domesticity populate her industrial fiction, too, and they are often not as cozy as they might appear at first glance. Elaine Freedgood reads the calico curtains in *Mary Barton* in a way that complicates our sense that domestic objects are entirely domestic. See *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 55-80.

that not a few of its readers will be sure to vote it dull. In the early portion especially the details are so numerous and so minute that even a very well-disposed reader will be tempted to lay down the book and ask himself of what possible concern to him are the clean frocks and the French lessons of little Molly Gibson.”³

In her own time and after, Gaskell’s readers have often focused on the detailed domesticity of her novels to evaluate her as a *woman* novelist. Before Gaskell’s feminist revival in the 1970s and 1980s (and, less frequently, after it), this evaluation was proffered in decided condescension. Henry Fothergill Chorley wrote in 1865, immediately after Gaskell’s death, that she was “if not the most popular,...the most powerful and finished female novelist of an epoch singularly rich in female novelists.” Decades later, David Cecil wrote in *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934) that “the outstanding fact about Mrs. Gaskell is her femininity,” suggesting, with striking disdain, that her “mental palate” was “fed always...on the fruit and frothing milk of her nursery days”: “she utters the most time-honoured reflections with the unselfconscious, unhesitating interest of one to whom they have never occurred before.”⁴ In recent decades, however, several critics have understood the intensity of detail in Gaskell’s novels more constructively, as part of a sophisticated political philosophy, or as a kind of

³ James himself was a “very well-disposed reader” who admired *Wives and Daughters*, despite its dullness: he ranks it among “those works of fiction...which will outlast the duration of their novelty and continue for years to come to be read and relished for a higher order of merits.” Henry James, “Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell,” in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1018-19.

⁴ Susan Hamilton observes that, “[m]ore than any one review, Cecil’s revaluation of Gaskell settled her in a vision of limpid domesticity that proved intractable for decades.” Both Chorley and Cecil are quoted in Susan Hamilton, “Gaskell then and now,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 179, 183.

reverence for the natural world derived from natural theology and natural history.⁵ In Amanda Anderson's more generous view, Gaskell's political novel *North and South* (1855) "stress[es] the complexity of life over the poverty of theory."⁶ The very qualities of Gaskell's fiction that have led readers to dismiss it are being reevaluated as important for reasons other than coziness.

It is in this spirit that I approach Gaskell's novels, which, I argue, cohere around an as yet unrecognized intellectual project. This chapter contends that Gaskell's novels – with their attention to ordinary, everyday details – anticipate the insights of ordinary language philosophy. Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose late work inaugurated what we now call ordinary language philosophy, is, like Gaskell, suspicious of theory: he castigates philosophy for its "craving for generality," which, he says, derives from "our preoccupation with the method of science."⁷ He wants philosophy to attend to the ordinary, or the specific instances of daily life that create meaning, rather than to the concepts which, in his view, serve rather to confuse than clarify. For Wittgenstein, "philosophy really *is* 'purely descriptive'"; he argues for the philosophical seriousness of "particular" or "concrete cases."⁸ Most generally, I argue that the nineteenth-century realist novel – of which genre Gaskell's are exemplary – belongs to an intellectual tradition that later finds expression in ordinary language philosophy, especially in the writing of Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell. Toril Moi has recently argued that literary scholars should adopt the insights of ordinary language philosophy to better understand

⁵ See, respectively, Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and Amy M. King, *The Divine in the Commonplace: Reverent Natural History and the Novel in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁶ Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 84.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1965), 17–18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17–19.

what it means to do literary criticism. The concept of the ordinary, Moi suggests, could constitute a welcome “revolution” in literary scholarship, because it would pull us away from the “craving for generality” that has characterized literary study for much of the twentieth century.⁹ Moi’s book is brilliantly insightful, but I agree with Daniel Wright, who skeptically wonders whether these “revolutionary” ideas “might actually have longer and more complex histories,” especially during the Victorian period and in Victorianist scholarship.¹⁰ This chapter – and this dissertation – proposes one such history.

Acknowledging the ways that Gaskell’s novels prefigure ordinary language philosophy, I argue, allows for a dialectical synthesis, rather than a simple application of later theory onto earlier literature. In other words, while Gaskell’s novelistic “ordinary” can be better understood if we read it with Wittgenstein and Cavell in mind, Wittgenstein and Cavell’s “ordinary” can similarly be revised and reframed if we understand it in productive dialogue with earlier thought. The long view renders visible a new idea. To that end, I emphasize the dense epistemological quality of Gaskell’s novels, an emphasis which isolates the most profound difference between nineteenth-century literary realism and ordinary language philosophy. Nineteenth-century realism is grounded in empiricism; which is to say, as George Levine puts it, realism “always implies an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some nonverbal truth out there.”¹¹ This holds true for Gaskell, whose realism is grounded in what Amy King calls a “reverent empiricism.”¹² Empiricism is an epistemology; it is concerned with how we

⁹ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Daniel Wright, “Review: Revolutions of the Ordinary: Victorian Studies and the Turn to Ordinary Language,” in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47.2 (2019), 451.

¹¹ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 6.

¹² Amy M. King, *The Divine in the Commonplace*, 215.

gain knowledge of the world. Ordinary language philosophy is articulated against this very idea: Wittgenstein's ambition, Moi explains, is "to make us *stop* believing that *the* problem of language is to figure out how words get connected to objects."¹³ The vision of language offered by ordinary language philosophy is in many ways anti-empirical, insofar as it abandons the notion that words necessarily refer to an extra-linguistic reality – they do not always, as it were, attempt to get beyond language.

In the tradition of ordinary language philosophy, the resistance to empiricism is part of an aversion to epistemology itself, which threatens, according to Stanley Cavell, the ordinariness of our lives. Throughout his career, Cavell contended with what he calls "the threat of skepticism," which, he explains in a moment of rare concision, entails "any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge."¹⁴ The threat, in his view, is that approaching the world epistemologically – approaching it as something which can and should be known – posits a criteria for relating to the world and to other minds that cannot be met, and thus isolates individuals in the solipsistic enclaves of their own minds. It is this expansive view of skepticism *as* epistemology – epistemology as skepticism – both of which engender solipsism, that leads Cavell to what is perhaps his most famous and enigmatic conclusion, that "skepticism concerning other minds is not skepticism but is tragedy."¹⁵ The tragedy is the notion that it is necessary to *know* someone in order to properly and humanely relate to them; its inadequacy lies in its foreclosure of other possible modes of relation. "Why," Moi wonders, invoking Cavell,

¹³ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 13.

¹⁴ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

“do we insist on turning human separation into an epistemological perspective?”¹⁶ While acknowledging with Cavell and Moi that “human separation” isn’t necessarily or exclusively an epistemological problem, I argue that Gaskell’s novels demonstrate the value of approaching the ordinary – including the problem of other minds – epistemologically.

Gaskell articulates an epistemological mode of relation that I call “ordinary knowledge.” It is universally agreed among Gaskell’s critics that she took the pursuit of truth very seriously, for better or worse. Her biographer Jenny Uglow traces this truth-telling impulse to her Unitarianism: “she believed that the witness to truth should be taken, if needs be, to the point of martyrdom.”¹⁷ But truth and knowledge are not straightforward affairs for Gaskell. I argue that in her fiction she evokes epistemological relativism, which, according to Christopher Herbert, pervaded Victorian intellectual culture.¹⁸ For Gaskell, truth is a good in itself; according to relativism, however, truth is contingent rather than absolute, plural rather than single, fleeting rather than permanent. As Herbert’s study vividly demonstrates, those for whom truth is a good in itself do not always react well to the idea of relativism, often framing in response a simplistic epistemological binary where truth is either entire and absolute, or it is meaningless – relativism, on this view, equals cynicism, nihilism, and anarchism.¹⁹ But Gaskell is more subtle: she understands that there is a great deal of middle ground between absolute truth

¹⁶ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 207.

¹⁷ Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 7.

¹⁸ Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹⁹ For example, Herbert discusses the naturalist St. George Mivart, for whom relativism leads to “utter scepticism and absurdity” and “an abyss of intellectual nihilism”; instead, truth must be understood as in “‘harmony with an eternal, absolute law’ that is ‘supreme and absolutely incumbent upon us without appeal.’” Passages are from Mivart’s *On Truth* (1889), qtd. in *Ibid.*, 15.

and nihilism, and it is that middle ground with which her novels are concerned. Gaskell endeavors to show what truth and knowledge look like when absolute truth and knowledge are out of reach, to picture their place in densely social worlds, to imagine truth and knowledge not as ideas or concepts but as things that take shape in situated, embodied minds continually negotiating with other situated, embodied minds. Throughout this chapter, I suggest that Gaskell's novels deconceptualize truth and knowledge, by which I mean, her novels remove those ideas from the realm of philosophical reflection and relocate them in the world of social interaction. She endeavors to depict, in other words, ordinary knowledge.

Crucially, Gaskell understands ordinary knowledge narratively, *as* narrative. Her novels depict social worlds continually threatened by misinterpretation and miscommunication, in which knowledge, always at a premium, is narratively constructed and shared, and in which the sharing of those narratives serves to hold the community together. Uglow rightly points out that *Mary Barton* is "filled...with inset tales": it is a story which narrates the telling of stories.²⁰ Hilary Schor makes a similar point about *Wives and Daughters*, observing just how aware that novel is of its own status as a story, and of how its thematizations of (implicitly masculine) natural science and (implicitly feminine) gossip suffuse the novel with different, often competing narratives designed to get at some version of the truth.²¹ *Wives and Daughters* is narrative all the way down and I think the same can be said in different degrees of each of Gaskell's fictions. If the problem is that truth can only be approached and knowledge achieved by means of

²⁰ Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 203.

²¹ See Hilary Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 183-4.

numerous, partial, competing narratives, then the solution is *narration*, the communal effort of witness and testimony and, simply, telling.

Narrative, or storytelling, suffuses our understanding of Gaskell as a person and a writer. In an 1853 letter to her friend Mary Green, Gaskell writes, “I can tell stories better than any other way of expressing myself.”²² Another friend, Susanna Winkworth, agreed: “No one ever came near her in the gift of telling a story. In her hands the simplest incident, – a meeting in the street, a talk with a factory girl, a country walk, an old family history, – became picturesque and vivid and interesting.”²³ Uglow – who subtitles her biography “A Habit of Stories” – observes that “stories were intrinsic to her cast of mind”: “Her letters are studded with swift character sketches and condensed narratives,” and Gaskell was renowned for her “spontaneous, spoken stories,” too.²⁴ Gaskell’s shorter fiction, more often narrated in the first-person, often presents the narrator “telling stories to a friend by the fire, or as part of a community of storytellers.”²⁵ Storytelling – the act of making and sharing narratives – takes on a particular importance throughout her work and its criticism. In a recent essay, for example, Adela Pinch understands the first-person narrator of Gaskell’s novella *Cousin Phillis* – who tells a story of his own social *faux pas* and its tragic consequences – as an act of “taking responsibility” for that action, or as an act of “compensation” for it.²⁶ What *Cousin Phillis*, as it is read by Pinch, demonstrates is that this penchant for storytelling can become deadly serious.

²² Qtd. in Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 236.

²³ Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 237, 239.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁶ Adela Pinch, “Reality Sensing in Elizabeth Gaskell; Or, Half-Mended Stockings,” in *ELH* 83.3 (2016), 834-5.

The many “inset narratives” of Gaskell’s fiction are at once a quality of her epistemological relativism and a response to it. Roland Barthes calls narrative a “hierarchy of instances: To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of a story, it is also to recognize its construction in ‘storeys.’”²⁷ The distinction between diegesis and discourse has long been the central heuristic for narrative theory. The inclusion of scenes of narration *within* narration in Gaskell’s fiction renders this distinction (the novels’ many “storeys”) especially visible, and it has a demonstrable effect on the relationship between narrative and truth. Each story is comprised of smaller stories which are never allowed to entirely cohere or sit still. Truth is accessible only through narratives, her novels suggest, and narratives can only ever offer partial versions of the truth. Because of the explicitness with which we are made aware that the larger narrative is different in degree but not kind from the smaller, “inset” narratives, the whole enterprise is shaded with this quality of contingency and partiality. There is no “official” narrative; nothing is absolute.

Gaskell understands narrative to be capable only of partial, contingent truth – but capable of truth, nonetheless. By way of articulating ordinary knowledge, Gaskell enacts a process of deconceptualization: the concepts “truth” and “knowledge” are subject to and reshaped by the pressures of relativistic plot. Gaskell is after something similar to what David Russell describes as “tact,” which, he says, “privileges encounters over knowledge, and an aesthetic of handling over more abstract conceptualization or observation.” Russell praises tact as a way of “feeling one’s way in society...which depend[s] less on knowing other people,” because “there can be violence in an

²⁷ Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang: New York, 1977), 87.

epistemological approach to others.”²⁸ And yet Gaskell’s relativism has qualities that Russell’s haptic, non-epistemological language does not quite capture: Gaskell’s novels do not nihilistically throw truth away, nor do they articulate a non-epistemological mode of relation in its stead; rather, they reframe what it means to know someone or something, incorporating elements of the contextual “handling” Russell describes without relinquishing the epistemological register. They strive to depict a kind of contingent, situated, ordinary knowing.

The argument of this chapter proceeds in two stages. First, it traces the relativism informing Gaskell’s novels, particularly in *North and South*, by emphasizing that novel’s persistent ocular theme. Gaskell describes characters’ eyes and their acts of vision and communication so regularly that reading *North and South* can generate a feeling of semantic satiation, where a word is repeated so many times that it transcends intelligibility. This theme renders visible the tenuous connection between seeing and knowing: any act of observation implies a particular relationship, and the relation between observer and observed is rarely straightforward. Gaskell’s focus on the embodied, situated visual perspectives that constitute knowledge undermines any claims to objective or absolute knowledge. Gaskell’s relativism thus demonstrates the need for ordinary knowledge. Second, with reference to both *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters*, I show that ordinary knowledge, articulated in response to the pressures of epistemological relativism, takes a specifically narrative form, and that it informs her novels.

²⁸ David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1-4.

Reading Gaskell's novels in these ways – first, as representations of the everyday implications of epistemological relativism and, second, as attempts to redefine knowledge as “ordinary” – brings to light the intellectual promise she saw in the form. Recently, several critics have addressed Gaskell's knowledge of and relation to the scientific cultures of mid-Victorian England. Danielle Coriale, Anne DeWitt, and Amy King have all, in different but related ways, attended to the figure of the naturalist and the practice of natural history throughout Gaskell's fiction.²⁹ As King argues, for example, the natural historian's habits of detailed observation – their attentiveness to the quotidian, the ordinary, and the local – provide intellectual support and justification for the modes of attention that characterize Gaskell's domestic realism.³⁰ By emphasizing the ways that Gaskell's novels evoke epistemological relativism and redefine knowledge narratively, however, we are able to see that, for Gaskell, the novel is not secondary to scientific (or theological) practice, but primary. Like Wittgenstein's philosophy, Gaskell's novels resist the “preoccupation with the method of science.”³¹ Unlike Wittgenstein, however, Gaskell demonstrates that the ordinary and epistemology are not mutually exclusive. What emerges from Gaskell's fiction is a vision of narrative as (ordinary) epistemology.

II

²⁹ Danielle Coriale, “Gaskell's Naturalist,” in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 63.3 (2008), 346-75; Anne DeWitt, *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Amy M. King, *The Divine in the Commonplace*.

³⁰ Amy M. King, *The Divine in the Commonplace*. Danielle Coriale complicates this in an interesting way. In a reading of *Mary Barton*'s Job Leigh, she calls the naturalist a “paradox” for Gaskell because, on one hand, natural history offers “liberation from class constraints,” a mode of self-cultivation superior to the violent politics of John Barton, while on the other hand, it is a recourse available only to “those who have access to the elaborate systems of classification that came to define natural history *as* science during the 1840s.” In other words, while natural history is demonstrably commendable for Gaskell, it is too restrictive. “Gaskell's Naturalist,” 348.

³¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 18.

North and South is a deeply epistemological novel, but it would be difficult to reach this conclusion based on its critical reception. For obvious reasons, most critics read *North and South* for its political content: its examination of the labor conditions and the class dynamics in Manchester during the 1850s and, depending on the reader, either its conservative reaffirmation of the (unjust) status quo or its (innovative) imagining of democratic avenues of gradual class reconciliation and political progress.³² While I agree with readings of *North and South* by Matthew Lewis, Amanda Anderson, and John Kucich that stress its creation of “strong new frameworks for political discourse,” as Kucich puts it, I reorient those frameworks around what I view as an epistemological project that is prior to its political consequences.³³ In other words, *North and South* constructs its democratic, anti-authoritarian politics on a relativistic epistemological foundation. *North and South* demonstrates the radical contingency and ephemerality of knowledge, but out of that relativistic pressure it delineates what I am calling ordinary knowledge. It suggests, further, that ordinary knowledge is only possible when the knower conceives of knowledge as something that is ordinary; characters who understand knowledge in absolute terms prove incapable of achieving it. In this way, *North and*

³² For the former, see Carolyn Lesjak, for whom industrial novels like *North and South* “participate in the ideological disenfranchisement of the working class.” *Working Fictions*, 27, qtd. in Matthew D. Lewis, “Democratic Networks and the Industrial Novel,” in *Victorian Studies* 55.2 (2013), 243. For the latter (a position which has gained traction in recent years) see Matthew D. Lewis, “Democratic Networks and the Industrial Novel”; Amanda Anderson, “Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell: Politics and its Limits,” in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, ed. Robert Caserio and Clement Hawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 341-56; Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*; and John Kucich, “Political Melodrama Meets Domestic Fiction: The Politics of Genre in *North and South*,” in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 52.1 (2019), 1-22.

³³ John Kucich, “Political Melodrama Meets Domestic Fiction,” 1.

South imagines ordinary knowledge to enable and sustain anti-authoritarian, democratic political frameworks.³⁴

Gaskell's epistemological relativism can be understood in terms set out more than a century later by Donna Haraway and other feminist philosophers of science. Haraway wants to critique scientific objectivity as it has been practiced, with its implicit and sometimes explicit masculinist and absolutist character, without doing away with the possibility of objective knowledge of the world. She proposes a "feminist objectivity" which acknowledges "the embodied nature of all vision," and which results in "*situated knowledges*."³⁵ In other words, Haraway wants to abolish a form of knowledge that understands itself to be absolute and to replace it, not with an absence of knowledge or with something else altogether, but with a kind of knowledge that understands itself to be partial and contingent. This is what Gaskell does in response to relativism: redefine knowledge as something that can happen in all kinds of places, including on the margins. Gaskell articulates this epistemology in a way that suggests that it is native to the novel form: she thematizes and emphasizes the ways that formal qualities of the novel contribute to this relativistic, democratic, ordinary epistemological paradigm.

³⁴ Christopher Herbert argues that nineteenth-century relativism was a fundamentally anti-authoritarian intellectual movement convinced, not only that absolute knowledge is epistemologically unattainable, but that the desire for absolute knowledge was both politically and morally abhorrent: he attributes relativism to "a deeply moralized scientific imagination" mobilized against what relativists viewed as an "establishmentarian science...imbued with a dangerously authoritarian creed...which was intimately allied in these respects with its supposed adversary, dogmatic religion." Relativists were united in their intellectual hostility toward The Absolute, in any of its guises. *Victorian Relativity*, xiv.

³⁵ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 188. See also Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, 10th anniversary edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). This is similar to the problem Bruno Latour describes, if from a different angle, in "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," in *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004), 225-248.

The fundamental axiom of relativism is that “human intelligence is incapable of absolute knowledge,” as Herbert Spencer puts it in *First Principles* (1862), the introductory volume of his synthetic philosophy.³⁶ In Plato’s *Theaetetus*, which is likely the earliest surviving exposition of relativism, Socrates explains that this epistemological conclusion follows from a metaphysical insight, that “there is nothing which in itself is just one thing.”³⁷ Relativists view the world as “rigorously bound up together,” everything existing in relation to everything else.³⁸ Crucially, that includes the observing, knowing mind. In his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy* (1865), John Stuart Mill distinguishes between two “acceptations” of relativism: the first, “that we only know anything, by knowing it as distinguished from something else...that all consciousness is of difference,” resembles and indeed prefigures, according to Christopher Herbert, Saussurean linguistics all the way down to Derridean *differance*: “a thing is only seen to be what it is, by contrast with what it is not,” Mill writes.³⁹ In the second “acceptation,” that knowledge depends on the relation “between the thing known and the mind knowing,” is to be heard a refusal of objectivity, that “view from nowhere” which, according to the historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, took shape as an aspirational epistemological paradigm in the nineteenth century – and which, according to Haraway and others, too often engenders a masculinist absolutism.⁴⁰ Both of Mill’s “acceptations” are evoked in *North and South*.

³⁶ Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1898), 70.

³⁷ Plato, *Theaetetus*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 169.

³⁸ Herbert draws out the central metaphysical tension of relativism: “Relativity means that all things are rigorously bound up together in a single indivisible world; it means also that this world is not one after all, but uncontrollably multiple.” Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity*, 50.

³⁹ John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1884), 14.

⁴⁰ John Stuart Mill, *An Examination*, 14. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

Gaskell's novel of industry and politics is structured by a range of binary relationships: north and south, the public and private spheres, masters and men, men and women: these relationships, often contentious, serve as primary movers of plot and as objects of contemplation for the novel and its characters. As these binaries push the plot forward, however, the plot responds in turn, breaking them down and revealing a far more complex relational structure, one that never quite sits still. For one thing, each component of a binary relationship is composed of yet more relationships, as we see in the union's hierarchical structure, or in the contentious relations between Thornton and other mill owners. More importantly, each individual belongs to more than one network that is defined in opposition to other networks. Sometimes characters even belong to mutually exclusive networks: Margaret represents the south in opposition to Thornton's north and, later, defends the north against Mr. Bell's southern criticisms. I emphasize this thematization of relationality, in part, because it is *so* explicit, so obvious that it would be easy to explain away. *North and South* is not the subtlest novel (Mr. Higgins: "God help 'em! North an' South have each gotten their own troubles [300]).⁴¹ But the explicitness of its relational structure is important for a couple of reasons. First, because it frames the novel's epistemology, rendering visible – maybe excessively so – that *relations* are what give shape to knowledge and truth. The emphasis on relationality, in other words, feeds directly into the novel's epistemological relativism. Second, because, by making everything about this novel so explicit, Gaskell thematizes some important formal

⁴¹ Earlier in the novel, Higgins says, "North and South has both met and made kind o' friends in this big smoky place." His repeated invocation of the novel's title makes him a kind of choral figure. Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1995), 73. All in text citations refer to this edition.

features of the nineteenth-century realist novel – features shared by each of the novels I discuss in this dissertation.

Gaskell's explicitness allows us to measure the epistemological effects of *North and South*'s relational structure. Those effects are most clearly felt in the novel's similarly blunt, almost obsessive preoccupation with characters' eyes. The protagonist, Margaret Hale, is variously described as having "large soft eyes," a "quick eye," eyes with "pure serenity," "startled eyes," "large grave eyes," "grave sweet eyes," "expressionless eyes," and eyes that "flashed fire."⁴² In the novel's climactic scene, she stares down the rioting factory workers, "her eyes smiting them with flaming arrows of reproach" (176). Her father, Mr. Hale, is said to have "the same large, soft eyes as his daughter – eyes which moved slowly and almost grandly round their orbits, and were well veiled by their transparent white eyelids" (18). How *do* eyes move "grandly round their orbits," and what do "transparent...eyelids" look like? I think what's most important about such descriptions – none of the above, by the way, describe the thing we think of eyes doing, that is, seeing – is their volume. As we will see over the course of this dissertation, strange descriptions of characters' eyes are a common feature of the nineteenth-century novel, especially in George Eliot's. Gaskell, in establishing the theme so explicitly – and with a willingness to strain it in such unimaginable ways – lays the groundwork for a major epistemological through-line of this novelistic tradition: that eyes have an epistemology all their own, as Haraway, emphasizing "the embodied nature of all vision," intimates.⁴³

⁴² Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, 14, 27, 31, 48, 54, 230, 267, 308.

⁴³ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 188.

North and South's plot is punctuated in its most important scenes with moments of silent, yet communicative eye contact. When Margaret's brother, Frederick – who has become a fugitive after joining the Navy and then participating in a mutiny against a tyrannical captain⁴⁴ – returns home, the narration follows the news of Frederick's arrival as it is reflected and shared, not through language, but between eyes. First, in the immediate moment of recognition, Frederick looks at Margaret, "as if even in that darkness he could see her face, and read in its expression a quicker answer to his question than words could give" (239). Curiously, even when they *can't* see each other's eyes, our attention is drawn to their mutual glance "as if" they could. When they enter the illuminated house, Margaret "caught the stealthy look of a pair of remarkably long-cut blue eyes": they share "an instant of sympathy in their reciprocal glances," even though "they did not exchange a word" (240). The "sympathy" is then transmitted from Margaret to their father: she goes to tell him of Frederick's homecoming, but doesn't have to speak the words. She "look[s] into his eyes, and let[s] them gain strength and assurance from hers"; "guess who is here!," she says, then "[h]e looked at her; she saw the idea of the truth glimmer into their filmy sadness" (240). This sentence shifts its referent from "he" to "their filmy sadness," as if the eyes were more substantive than the man. Finally, when Margaret serves Frederick dinner, "the brother and sister arranged the table together, saying little, but their hands touching, and their eyes speaking the natural language of expression" (241). This momentous scene is eerily quiet – the narrator repeatedly

⁴⁴ The way the novel treats Frederick's participation in the mutiny – against a captain exercising absolute and cruel power – serves as another critique of absolutism. The narrator and most of the characters believe that, under the circumstances, resistance to authority was the correct behavior.

emphasizes that few words are spoken – and the eyes are prominently on display, not only as organs of sight, but as relational nodes and as channels of communication.

If, on the one hand, the eyes offer opportunities for “sympathy,” on the other, they are also framed in an explicitly epistemological register, both in the “truth” Mr. Hale is able to glean from Margaret’s eyes and in the conceit that eyes speak a language. The linguistic capacity of eyes is reiterated throughout this novel. “So much was understood through the eyes that could not be put into words” (251), the narrator explains; and at the novel’s conclusion, just before Margaret and Thornton finally confess their mutual love, she “look[s] up straight into his face with her speaking eyes, and then drop[s] them under his eloquent glance” (421-22). This conceit is present in *Wives and Daughters*, too, where Gaskell writes that “the eyes speak solemnly and comprehensively.”⁴⁵ In Hilary Schor’s reading of *North and South*, “Margaret Hale’s adventure in Milton-Northern is largely linguistic.”⁴⁶ Schor explains that Margaret’s development as a protagonist depends upon her ability to learn the new (to her) language of industry and labor.⁴⁷ Schor’s insightful reading can be expanded, or complicated, by the epistemological register of Gaskell’s ocular theme. To be sure, learning the language of the industrial north is one of Margaret’s primary challenges, but if we focus on the language of the eyes we see a different set of affiliations – a different relational structure – that determines the kinds of knowledge that are and are not available. For example, although Bessy Higgins speaks the language that Margaret does not (yet), the two are able to communicate flawlessly,

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Penguin, 2003), 573. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

⁴⁶ Hilary Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, 129

⁴⁷ For example, Schor explains that “Margaret must learn what the word *strike* means to a wide range of characters before she can mediate between them, and before they can learn to speak to each other.” Ibid.

silently, using their eyes. When Margaret promises Bessy that she will come visit, Bessy skeptically “gave a quick glance at Margaret’s face, to see if the wish expressed was really felt. The sharpness in her eye turned to a wistful longing as she met Margaret’s soft and friendly gaze” (90). These scenes depict a different kind of knowledge, one dependent not on spoken language but on embodied contact, on a discrete and fleeting and entirely ordinary (which is to say, non-conceptual) interaction.

The ordinary knowledge shared through the eyes is contrasted with the epistemological paradigm voiced by Mr. Thornton – his absolutist, patriarchal, and paternalistic political philosophy entails a different variety of knowledge. During one of the many arguments staged between Margaret and Thornton, for example, he explains why he and the other masters will not raise the workers’ wages and will, instead, allow them to strike: “They think trade is flourishing as it was last year. We see the storm on the horizon and draw in our sails. But because we don’t explain our reasons, they won’t believe we’re acting reasonably” (117). Thornton stakes a claim to broader vision than the workers. He can see more, and therefore make clearer and more “reasonable” judgements about how best to act. His visual field grounds not only the judgement that trade is not quite flourishing like last year – one he *can* reasonably have the best claim to make – but more troublingly the judgement that the workers are not owed an explanation. Thornton’s visual-epistemological attitude underpins a paternalistic philosophy with regard to labor relations: “Give me a constitutional monarchy in our present state of morals and intelligence. In our infancy we require a wise despotism to govern us. Indeed, long past infancy, children and young people are the happiest under the unfailing laws of

a discreet, firm authority” (120).⁴⁸ The first-person plural in this passage is curious, because Thornton does not mean to include himself among the “children and young people” but as the “wise despot” ruling over them. Thornton uses this pronoun, rather, to generalize from the particular case: he suggests that his decision to exercise “discreet, firm authority” is based on general principles. In this formulation of labor relations, there is no relativistic contingency, no situational flexibility, but a general need for “despotism.”

The novel undercuts Thornton’s view by showing it to be contingent and only contextually applicable, even for Thornton himself. He exhibits a fierce resistance to parliamentary authority at odds with his absolutist paternalism. In one of their earliest conversations, Thornton tells Margaret that he altered his factory’s chimneys before parliament passed a law requiring him to do so: “I’m not sure whether I should have done it,” he explains, “if I had waited until the act was passed. At any rate, I should have waited to be informed against and fined, and given all the trouble in yielding that I legally could” (83). Later, he tells Mr. Bell: “We hate to have laws made for us at a distance. We wish people would allow us to right ourselves, instead of continually meddling, with their imperfect legislation. We stand up for self-government, and oppose centralization” (326). Thornton’s political judgment that “a constitutional monarchy” is the most appropriate form of government “in our present state of morals and intelligence” (120) only holds metaphorically: the *actual* constitutional monarchy, of Britain, with parliament as its law giver, is too “continually meddling” for his liking. His self-contradictoriness is less

⁴⁸ See Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 113-146, for a historical account of paternalism in the Victorian period, and for its relation to Gaskell’s *North and South*.

interesting as proof of hypocrisy than it is as an effective critique of absolutism, which the novel discredits by subsuming within a broader relativism.

III

North and South enacts its most compelling critique of absolute knowledge in the series of events that follow from Margaret and her brother Frederick's experience at the train station. Frederick returns to England covertly, despite the threat of prosecution and imprisonment, when their mother is on her death bed. He is discovered by a former acquaintance, Leonards, whom he knows will turn him in, given the chance. Margaret secretly conveys Frederick to the train station so he can leave England, but they are confronted by Leonards. They wrestle, and Frederick throws Leonards to the ground. Leonards sustains injuries that lead to his death a few days later, after Frederick has safely left England. There are witnesses to particular moments of this series of events: Thornton sees Margaret accompany Frederick to the station, and there are a number of unnamed witnesses to the scuffle between Frederick and Leonards. But nobody sees everything, and therefore no one can fully and correctly interpret the circumstances surrounding Leonards' death, or Margaret's involvement. When confronted by the inspector investigating Leonard's death – a witness placed her at the scene – Margaret lies to try to protect her brother. Later, Thornton learns of Margaret's lie.

In this episode, Thornton's pretensions to absolute knowledge prove fanciful and even dangerous. After observing Margaret walk by with her brother (unknown to him), he interprets their behavior to signify a secret romantic relationship, rather than one between brother and sister: "It took him a great moral effort to galvanize his trust – erewhile so perfect – in Margaret's pure and exquisite maidenliness, into life; as soon as

the effort ceased, his trust dropped down dead and powerless: and all sorts of wild fancies chased each other like dreams through his mind” (264). Margaret continually resists Thornton’s paternalism in both labor and gender relations. She refuses to settle into the relationship – sexualized and defined by gender difference – that Thornton perceives and projects. The possibility that Frederick is not Margaret’s lover does not cross Thornton’s mind because he views the scene from within the context of a different relational structure, the one within which he imagines interacting with Margaret. Thornton thus interprets Margaret’s behavior by universalizing the perspective from which he observes. He is incapable of interpreting her behavior outside the context of his own love and desire. It is a direct consequence of Thornton’s absolutism that he first conceives of Margaret’s “pure and exquisite maidenliness” and then, after a failure of interpretation, doubts of the artificial and sexualized valuation he had imposed on her. This scene reveals the danger of failing to recognize the situatedness and partiality of knowledge: for Thornton, knowledge is an all or nothing proposition; when it comes up short, “his trust drop[s] down dead and powerless” (264).

There are many people who, having witnessed a portion of the deadly incident, offer testimony as imperfect as Thornton’s. Inspector Watson reflects that “none of my witnesses seemed certain of anything” (275). Even Margaret, the character who along with Frederick has the best claim to know precisely what took place, proves to be only an imperfect witness: “In an instant – how, Margaret did not see, for everything danced before her eyes – but by some sleight of wrestling, Frederick had tripped him up, and he fell from the height of three or four feet” (259). The narrator focalizes the wrestling scene through Margaret’s perspective and, in so doing, foregrounds her *failure* to witness the

fight. When he interviews Margaret, Watson compounds this episode's many acts of failed witness by himself failing to correctly interpret Margaret's reaction to the knowledge that Leonards died as a result of the fight – failing, that is, to detect the lie: “A deep observer of human countenances might have seen the momentary agony shoot out of her great gloomy eyes...But the inspector though a very keen, was not a very deep observer” (269). The events leading up to the confrontation between Frederick and Leonards, the confrontation itself, and the characters' attempts to reconstruct it all serve to foreground the failure of any individual to observe and interpret the events correctly. What we have instead is a proliferation of perspectives, each of which is partial, contingent, and affected by the emotions, investments, and predispositions of the characters.

This series of scenes shows, further, that knowledge, if it *were* to be achieved, would come in the form of a narrative. One way to think of Inspector Watson is as a failed narrator. His job is to collect the witness's stories and to collate them into an overarching narrative that would make sense of the events. Each of the witnesses has shared a partial story, grounded in a unique perspective: “one of the porters...had seen a scuffle, at the other end of the platform, between Leonards and a gentleman...” (268). We can think of such testimony as an “inset” narrative, inset, that is, within a hypothetical, ultimately unachievable narration of the whole event existing at a higher discursive level. Inspector Watson's figuration as a narrator, tasked with constructing the “storeys” of this particular story, reveals something important about the narrator of *North and South*: that narration at a higher discursive level takes place within, and is

constrained by, the same epistemological paradigm.⁴⁹ Inspector Watson, like the witnesses he interviews, depends on his eyes to discover the truth, and, also like the witnesses, fails to do so.

Reading Inspector Watson as a narrator figure allows us to reframe how we understand the actual narrator, which, in this and other Gaskell novels, has frequently been described as documentary, or objective. Sometimes, the unmediated, documentary quality of Gaskell's fiction is celebrated: Raymond Williams praises *Mary Barton* for "the intensity of the effort to record...the feel of everyday life in the working-class homes": Gaskell "could hardly help coming to this life as an observer, a reporter," he writes.⁵⁰ More often, it is demystified: Nancy Armstrong classifies Gaskell's novels in "a second tier of fiction that more than occasionally strives for a documentary effect," and Catherine Gallagher places them in a tradition of industrial fiction that makes "excessively naïve mimetic claims."⁵¹ Reading Gaskell's novels as "documentary," or as attempting to offer an objective view of the plight of the working class, locates in the narrator an epistemological privilege unavailable to the characters – an epistemological difference in kind, rather than degree. If we understand *North and South* relativistically, however, we can reconceptualize the narrator's position with respect to the narrated world, as part of the same "field" as the characters.⁵² Scholars like Lorraine Daston, Peter

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, "Structural Analysis," 87.

⁵⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 87.

⁵¹ Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 10; Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of British Fiction*, xii.

⁵² N. Katherine Hayles's "field concept," which is consonant with epistemological relativism, is useful here. "[T]hings are *interconnected*," she writes: "In marked contrast to the atomistic Newtonian idea of reality...a field view of reality pictures objects, events and observer as belonging inextricably to the same field; the disposition of each, in this view, is influenced...by the disposition of the others." Gaskell's narrators are like Hayles's observer. N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 9-10.

Galison, and George Levine have argued that objectivity served for nineteenth-century writers as an ideal, which is to say they did not as a rule believe the view from nowhere to have been achieved or even to be achievable in practice. Many writers committed to objectivity did not actually believe in its possibility.

If we conceive of objectivity as an aspiration, we can see that relativism and objectivity are not as distinct as we might imagine, as John Stuart Mill would seem to suggest – their conceptual alignment is visible, for example, in Haraway’s call for a “feminist objectivity” grounded in “situated knowledges.”⁵³ Compare a description of relativism with one of objectivity: for Christopher Herbert, relativism means that “knowledge of any thing is a function both of the relations obtaining between it and the perceiver and of those between it and other things with which it is compared.”⁵⁴ These are the two “acceptations” of relativism Mill describes. For Thomas Nagel, the central difficulty of achieving objectivity is the question, “how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and the viewpoint included.”⁵⁵ There is an implicit relativism underlying these aspirations to objectivity. Relativism and objectivity confront the very same epistemological difficulty: the observer, perceiver, or knower is situated within a relationship with the observed, perceived, or known that affects or even determines the knowledge produced by such an interaction. I propose that we understand Gaskell’s narrator in a way that resembles Audrey Jaffe’s discussion of Dickens’: the narrative perspective is “not in

⁵³ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 188.

⁵⁴ Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity*, 36.

⁵⁵ Qtd. in George Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 9.

presence or absence, but in the tension between the two.”⁵⁶ If Gaskell’s narrator *is* objective, then we should understand that stance to be aspirational rather than assumed. The narrator is necessarily present, part of the “field” of relations that constitute novel form, but strives for absence in a way that recapitulates “the will to willessness,” as Daston and Galison describe objectivity.⁵⁷

In a way consistent with its diegetic critique of absolute knowledge, *North and South* denies its narrator a position of omniscient or objective knowledge. One way to measure these epistemological limitations is to note how the narration relies upon vision – specifically, on seeing characters’ eyes – just as the characters do. For example, when Inspector Watson interviews Margaret, and fails to see the signs of fear and guilt “shoot[ing] out of her great gloomy eyes” (269), the narrator relies more than ever on visual descriptions of Margaret’s face. When Watson announces Leonard’s death, Margaret’s

large dark eyes, gazing straight into the inspector’s face, dilated a little. Otherwise there was no motion perceptible to his experienced observation. Her lips swelled out into a richer curve than ordinary, owing to the enforced tension of the muscles, but he did not know what was their usual appearance, so as to recognize the unwonted sullen defiance of the firm sweeping lines. (267)

The juxtaposition of Inspector Watson’s perspective with the narrator’s in this passage foregrounds, to be sure, the narrator’s greater knowledge, but, more importantly, it demonstrates that it is a difference of degree, not kind. The first two sentences are focalized through Watson, who notices the dilation of Margaret’s eyes but nothing else. Then, the narrator perceives something imperceptible to the inspector – Margaret’s

⁵⁶ Audrey Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 4.

⁵⁷ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, 38

swelling lips – which are invisible to Watson because he is not familiar with their normal curve. Presumably, then, the inspector would recognize what the narrator recognizes if he had spent more time observing Margaret’s face – which is precisely what the narrator has done. Through many visual descriptions of Margaret, the narrator has over the course of the novel catalogued her facial behavior in a range of circumstances, noting her angry “flashing eye and dilating nostril” (49), “the short curled upper lip, the round, massive up-turned chin, the manner of carrying her head, her movements” adopted in moments of pride that “always gave strangers the impression of haughtiness” (63), and the way “the pupils of her eyes dilated into a black horror” (126) when she learns her mother is terminally ill. The narrator’s knowledge of Margaret’s internal state is framed as a result of visual familiarity.

The optical theme reaches into the narrative discourse. It is as if the narrator, too, has eyes capable of seeing and being seen, of communicating and shooting “flaming arrows of reproach” (176). The optical quality of *North and South*’s narrator is something Gaskell shares with many Victorian novelists, including each under discussion in this dissertation. I want to emphasize that – here and elsewhere – it is *optical*, rather than strictly *visual*, for a couple of reasons. First, because something happens in these texts that is not quite reducible to omniscience, or surveillance, or the male gaze, even if all of those critical paradigms for understanding realist narrators are valid in many cases. The narrator’s *knowledge* of the characters being narrated needn’t be understood to be totalizing or coercive. Gaskell gives us subtle clues that the variety of knowledge at work in that relationship is ordinary, which is to say, it is situated and aware of its situatedness. It is conducive, not to Truth and Knowledge, but truth and knowledge, not to knowing

another mind definitively or essentially, but to knowing what another mind means, as Cavell would put it. The second, related reason to call Gaskell's novelistic technique optical rather than visual is that it foregrounds the impossible strangeness of her project, and the project of the nineteenth-century realist novel more generally. Of course, narrators and novels don't have eyes. In writing them as if they did, Gaskell exhibits a profoundly utopian vision of their epistemological promise. Gaskell posits a discrete optical chain from character to novel to reader along which ordinary knowledge travels, as an action potential does along a series of neurons, each separated by a cleft of empty space in which the message *might* be lost, but is not.

Gaskell's relational, ocular theme and her extension of that theme into narrative discourse, though common to many nineteenth-century realist novelists, are here used in the service of a distinctive epistemological project: a relativistic critique of absolute knowledge, and, in its place, an articulation and formalization of ordinary knowledge. *North and South* would seem to suggest that the novel, as Gaskell understood it, is an implicitly relativistic genre. It is a space in which necessarily partial, mutually-implicated perspectives (each with its own story) are collected and juxtaposed, not synthesized, by a narrative voice that is different in degree rather than kind. For Gaskell, there is no space for absolute knowledge in the genre, and pretensions to absolutism are punished and corrected accordingly. If the novel relativistically rejects absolute knowledge, though, it begs the question: what *is* knowledge? How does it work? How can we redefine knowledge so that it becomes possible under such conditions?

IV

In answer to these questions, Gaskell deconceptualizes knowledge. She shifts the criteria for what it means to have knowledge, to know something or someone. Knowledge becomes ordinary, which is to say, it becomes a kind of specific, contextual, working knowledge. To know something, in these terms, is not to know something for all time, it is to get a “handle,” as David Russell might say, on a specific situation.⁵⁸ The same holds true for knowledge of other minds: it is not an essential kind of knowledge, as in “I know you,” but a contingent one, as in “I know what you mean.” In Gaskell’s novels, as I argue in the remainder of this chapter, such ordinary knowledge is inseparable from narrative: it *is* narrative. In both *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell depicts how narratives elicit ordinary knowledge in response to epistemological relativism.

The difference between “I know you” and “I know what you mean” is one of the central insights of ordinary language philosophy, especially as it is practiced by Cavell. As Wittgenstein puts it, in “a *large* class of cases...the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”⁵⁹ Wittgenstein thus suggests that a word’s meaning does not exist separately from the word itself, in some conceptual realm that it is necessary to know in order to know what the word means or how it is used. And in his essay “Knowing and Acknowledging,” Cavell explicates this idea in a way that foregrounds its similarity to the point I’m ascribing to Gaskell: one does not have to *know* another mind in order to know that someone is in pain. It is enough for the person in pain to act or speak in such a

⁵⁸ David Russell, *Tact*.

⁵⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 25^e

way, and for me to *acknowledge* that they are, in fact, in pain. The essay concludes remarkably:

in the case of some mental phenomena, when you have twisted or covered your expressions far or long enough, or haven't yet found the words which give the phenomenon expression, I may know better than you how it is with you. I may respond even to the fact of your separateness from me (not to mention mine from you) more immediately than you... To know you are in pain is to acknowledge it, or to withhold acknowledgement. —I know your pain the way you do.⁶⁰

Here, Cavell emphasizes the pun – the “knowledge” square in the middle of “acknowledgement.” Elsewhere, he is leery of adopting the epistemological register. This early essay – still one of Cavell’s most influential and, paired with the reading of *King Lear* that follows it, his most moving – represents, I think, a road not travelled in ordinary language philosophy, one which does not disavow epistemology but rather develops the claim, made in the same essay, that “[a]cknowledgement goes beyond knowledge,” which is to say, it *includes* and exceeds knowledge, “in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.”⁶¹ Cavell comes close to naming something like ordinary knowledge. But where Cavell forecloses the epistemological potential here, Gaskell pursues it.

Having conceived of the narrator as a thing with eyes, capable of achieving ordinary knowledge of characters, Gaskell, too, emphasizes that something must be done or revealed “on the basis of that knowledge.”⁶² The thing to be done is narration. And, like the optical theme, the idea that ordinary knowledge requires narration is evident both formally (in the narration of the novel itself) and thematically, in narratives constructed and shared by characters. But like Cavell’s acknowledgement, which both contains and

⁶⁰ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 266.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 266.

exceeds knowledge, Gaskell's sense of narrative stands in complex, almost paradoxical relation to ordinary knowledge: it is both its consequence and its condition of possibility. In other words, narrative both informs and is informed by ordinary knowledge.

Readers of *North and South* have long been attuned to its jarring changefulness: it proclaims itself a "continued series of oppositions" (195) and reminds readers, more than once, that "there [is] change everywhere; slight, yet pervading all" (384).⁶³ Margaret, as protagonist, must learn to accommodate the violence and rapidity of plot. Late in the novel, after she has been uprooted several times, after both her parents and her godfather have died, after her brother, nearly captured, has been banished from England for life, and as she is faced with the decision of what to do with her life, the novel depicts a series of events that demonstrate how narrative deconceptualizes knowledge and therefore how to make it available amid a depth of uncertainty. Away from it all, at the seashore, "gazing intently" at the waves' "perpetual motion," Margaret "pray[s] that she might have strength to speak and act the truth for evermore" (402): the Absolute comes in at the eyes and spurs a desire for absolute truth – some kind of truth that could last forever – but one that is in direct conflict with the kinds of negotiated, partial, contingent and situated truths that have characterized the novel. Ultimately, however, her decision about how "to speak and act" comes not from the place of "evermore" but from narrative: she spends her time at the sea "put[ting] events in their right places, as to origin and significance, both as regarded her past life and her future" (404). Margaret re-narrativizes to herself the events that have comprised *North and South*, seeking in that narrative a clue about how to

⁶³ Just a few pages later, the narrator points to a "slight, all-pervading instability" (390). In particular, see Rosemarie Bodenheimer, "North and South: A Permanent State of Change," in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 34.3 (1979), 281-301; and Hilary Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*.

act: to develop a practical, working knowledge about the situation at hand. We later learn that in this moment Margaret decides to purchase Thornton's mill, thereby allowing it to stay open and allowing his experiment in labor relations to move forward. This plan – her prudent negotiation of compromised circumstances and incomplete knowledge – immediately becomes visible, where else but in her eyes?: Henry Lennox observes, “[n]o mere bonnet would have made Miss Hale's eyes so lustrous and yet so soft” (405). An idea of absolute truth enters through the eyes, is deconceptualized through a process of narrativization and converted into a specific, practical plan of action whose trace can be felt, once again, in the eyes.

Margaret achieves ordinary knowledge – how to act in a complex, shifting situation – by narrativizing her circumstances, which is to say, by deconceptualizing the kind of truth she's looking for (from “act[ing]” “the truth for evermore” to her specific “seaside resolves” [404-6]) and by placing events in a temporal sequence with beginning, middle, and end (the “origin” of her “past life and her future”), one that emphasizes the meaning (“significance”) of that sequence. This narrative deconceptualization happens elsewhere, in some of the novel's most important moments. For example, on the novel's final page we learn that Thornton – that embodiment of absolutism and tragic misunderstanding – reveals to Margaret a rose from her native Helstone, where he had traveled “to see the place where Margaret grew to what she is” (425). This is an explicitly narrative understanding of Margaret, as the product of her life's story. In reconstructing the events of Margaret's story, just as Margaret herself does by the sea, Thornton understands her, sees where she is coming from, so to speak. He demonstrates an

awareness of her temporal process of becoming, rather than a misguided interpretation of her essence (e.g., “pure and exquisite maidenliness” [264]).

To deconceptualize knowledge means to remove it from a state of abstraction and relocate it in particular contexts. Gaskell shifts the criteria for what it means to have knowledge. Margaret and Thornton readjust their epistemological expectations – seeking not to know something absolutely or essentially or for all time, but to know it in its contingency and ephemerality. This is one way to take Amanda Anderson’s claim that *North and South* “stress[es] the complexity of life over the poverty of theory.”⁶⁴ Both Thornton and Margaret give voice to this viewpoint: Thornton proclaims, “I have no theory; I hate theories” (354) and Margaret, that “love for my species could never fill my heart to the utter exclusion of love for individuals” (390). Deconceptualization is, of course, one of the central tenets of ordinary language philosophy, designed as it is to reform philosophy’s “craving for generality.”⁶⁵ What Gaskell adds to these aesthetic and philosophical ideas is a sense that narrative *enacts* a process of deconceptualization. The act of putting concepts into narrative, Gaskell suggests, changes the paradigm in which we understand them. Narrative is “syntagmatic,” rather than paradigmatic, which, as D. A. Miller points out, means that it “intrinsically tends to subvert the categories of the whole...Narrative is thus a domain in which the absoluteness of value is risked, where nothing can be got whole or all at once.”⁶⁶ The wholeness and absoluteness of concepts are redirected and reduced in Gaskell’s novels. It is not just that narrative is particular,

⁶⁴ Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 84.

⁶⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 18.

⁶⁶ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 150-1.

but that it *particularizes*, actively downgrading abstract concepts to a more ordinary, embodied, situated kind of knowing.

Along similar lines, the reconciliation of masters and men, synecdochally represented by Thornton and Higgins, rests on a plan of “ongoing dialogue” and “continuing collective deliberation” between the classes.⁶⁷ This is not meant to resolve the class tension absolutely, but to provide a framework within which that tension can be slacked: “My utmost expectation,” explains Thornton, is that it “may render strikes not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred they have hitherto been” (421). That framework has been understood, by Anderson and others, politically, as a form of liberal proceduralism; I think it is equally important to understand it as *narrative*. The ongoingness of the “ongoing dialogue” corresponds to the narrativizing projects we see elsewhere in the novel: it is a way to *deconceptualize* the end goal of deliberation and the knowledge upon which it depends, not on an absolutist epistemological expectation, but rather in line with a relativistic, contextual, and flexible epistemology wherein “people find means and ways of seeing each other, and becoming acquainted with each other’s characters and persons” – “we should understand each other better,” Thornton concludes (421). Both marriage and class reconciliation – *North and South*’s two most prominent closures – are not collapsible into one another, as some readers have suggested; the marriage is not framed as a class resolution. Rather, both closures depend on a shared epistemological foundation: on anti-absolutist, democratic, narratively constructed ordinary knowledge.

⁶⁷ Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 92-3.

North and South is filled with instances of storytelling, oriented toward community building. Margaret tells her mother all about her time in London with the Lennoxes; Edith writes with stories about her life in Corfu; Mr. Hale tells the story of Thornton's upbringing; Margaret shares a "story of what happened in Nuremberg only three or four years ago" as a counterexample to Thornton's advocacy of "despotism" over his workers (120-1); when Bessy Higgins lies near-death, she asks Margaret to read to her from the bible, "not a sermon chapter, but a story chapter" (199). Late in the novel, Margaret tells Mr. Bell the "long story" of Frederick's return to England and his hair's-breadth escape from Leonards, and implores him to "tell [Thornton] the whole circumstances...that he may learn how I was tempted, and how I fell into the snare; why I told that falsehood, in short" (389). Just as, in Pinch's reading, Paul Manning narrates his encounter with his cousin Phillis as an act of recompense, so we can understand Margaret's request that Mr. Bell share her story as a kind of narrative compensation: in explaining the circumstances surrounding Margaret's lie, the story acknowledges the lie.⁶⁸

In a beautifully evocative phrase, Cavell describes ordinary language as "a thin net over the abyss."⁶⁹ What Cavell calls "ordinary life," which we might think of as our ability to share language and meaning with those around us, is in his estimation a fragile and vulnerable connective tissue that is nevertheless strong enough to guard against solipsism. There is something miraculous for Cavell and for Wittgenstein about our being able to communicate in the most basic ways. As Cavell asserts, "what motivates Wittgenstein to philosophize, what surprises him, is the plain fact that certain creatures

⁶⁸ Adela Pinch, "Reality Sensing in Elizabeth Gaskell."

⁶⁹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 178.

have speech at all, that they can say things at all.”⁷⁰ Wittgenstein’s philosophical sensibility (and Cavell’s) can seem either like a mundane statement of fact or like a revelation; its purpose and challenge is to point out that the mundane statement of fact *is* a revelation. Cavell’s style, with its repetitions and doublings back, conveys something of the attitude of wonder he and Wittgenstein bring to bear on otherwise ordinary things, as if one had to return to each idea twice – to the fact of speech and the fact of philosophy, each time with new language. We could say something similar about Andrew Miller’s Cavellian reading of nineteenth-century novels and nonfiction prose, which, he claims, address ethical questions in a uniquely fundamental way, “studying what it is to have a life: this one rather than that, only one, one at all.”⁷¹ Like Cavell, Miller reiterates this idea several times in several ways, picturing its dimensions, forcing us to sit with it just a little longer. To have speech at all; to have a life at all: these are thoughts which do not always inspire philosophy, art, criticism, or even curiosity. Miller is correct, however, that they do inspire the nineteenth-century realist novel, including Gaskell’s. In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly Gibson observes, “But we are ourselves, you know, and this is now, not some time to come a long, long way off” (136).

Just as for Wittgenstein and Cavell ordinary language somehow holds things together, so for Gaskell narrative acts as a kind of bonding agent. In *Mary Barton*, Mary’s aunt Esther, a sex worker worried about her niece following in her footsteps, is desperate to narrate her experience: “She must speak; to that she was soul-compelled...[but] to whom shall the outcast prostitute tell her tale!”⁷² It is in the telling of her tale that she is

⁷⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁷¹ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 2.

⁷² Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. Thomas Recchio (New York and London: Norton, 2008), 140.

able to convince Jem Wilson of Mary's danger. It is a theme in *North and South*, in *Cousin Phillis*, and in virtually all of Gaskell's fiction. We see it most of all in *Cranford*, which depicts a community of single women whose bonds are forged by the sharing of stories, from Matty Jenkyn's old love affair and Peter Jenkyn's banishment to the series of events that led Samuel Brown to take on the persona of the traveling magician, Signore Brunoni. In Gaskell's novels, more than in most, the stories people tell one another and about one another operate as the "thin net" holding things together.

V

But there is a more sinister quality of Cavell's acknowledgement. "I may know better than you how it is with you": David Russell's idea (itself Cavellian) that "there can be violence in an epistemological approach to others" is *there*, in Cavell's phrasing.⁷³ At the very least, there is a possibility of shame in being known without knowing oneself. In one respect, this is the topic of Cavell's highly original reading of *King Lear* in "The Avoidance of Love," which follows from and forms a pair with "Knowing and Acknowledging." Much longer than its predecessor, "The Avoidance of Love" explicates the concept of acknowledgement negatively, by arguing that Lear's tragedy lies in his effort "*to avoid being recognized.*" Lear does not want to be acknowledged by others because he cannot bear the knowledge it would entail. In a reading of the play's opening scene, Cavell explains that Lear does not want genuine love, which is what Cordelia offers him, but rather the false love voiced by Regan and Goneril. "It can be said that what Lear is ashamed of," writes Cavell, "is not his need for love and his inability to return it, but of the *nature* of his love for Cordelia. It is too far from the plain love of

⁷³ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 266; David Russell, *Tact*, 3.

father for daughter.” Lear’s “unacceptable love” is more *eros* than *philia*, and the shame that would come from being known *in that way* is generalized into a shame at the idea of being known, and acknowledged, at all.⁷⁴

“The Avoidance of Love” joins the drama of acknowledgement and avoidance to scenes of love and desire. The full complexities of knowing and being known are most visible and most deeply felt in such scenes. Such is the case in *North and South*, too, but for different reasons. Thornton’s misrecognition at the train station is important precisely because he desires Margaret and, later, because she desires him. The scene gives a different dynamic to Cavell’s materials: Margaret’s shame lies not in being known but rather in being known falsely, in being mistaken or misrecognized. She is ashamed, not at having lied to protect her brother, but at being thought to have lied to protect her lover. In this case, Margaret knows herself better than Thornton knows her, and wants most of all to be known by him. And, as we have seen, she seeks to make herself known to him through narrative, by asking Mr. Bell to share her story.

In Cavell’s reading of *Lear*, the avoidance of love (and acknowledgement and being known) is thematized in the play’s “obsessive sight imagery” – as the “avoidance of eyes.”⁷⁵ Here again, Gaskell’s greater epistemological tolerance redirects *North and South*’s similarly obsessive sight imagery. There are many eyes doing things other than seeing, and belonging to entities who shouldn’t be able to see. The problem at the train station is not that Thornton has eyes to see, but that he doesn’t have better (or more) eyes to see more clearly, and that he doesn’t understand that the situatedness of his perspective requires a different epistemological paradigm. Throughout Gaskell’s fiction there is a

⁷⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 274, 299, 296.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 274.

feeling of perspectival and social abundance, a centrifugal distribution of claims to knowledge that threatens to undermine knowledge itself, if not for the narratives that hold things together.

Gaskell continues to play on these themes, and to give them greater depth and complexity, in her final, posthumously published novel, *Wives and Daughters*. For one thing, *Wives and Daughters* shares the optical focus of *North and South*, and it similarly extends into the novel's form. Anne DeWitt and Amy King have rightly argued that an observational practice derived from natural science gives form to the novel's courtship plot and to its realist aesthetic.⁷⁶ For another, *Wives and Daughters* depicts the dangers of relativism in scenes of love and desire, and it locates ordinary knowledge in the process of narrative deconceptualization, in the sharing of stories. In doing so, Gaskell invokes the possibility, explored by Cavell a century later, that such knowledge can be coercive, violating. But in invoking that vision of knowledge, Gaskell rejects it in favor of an epistemological situation that is not violent, but ordinary.

Wives and Daughters is not shy about which characters readers are meant to admire. The protagonists of its central courtship plot, Molly Gibson and Roger Hamley, are obviously the novel's primary moral exemplars – they are earnest, hardworking, attentive, and thoughtful. Even Roger's temporary temptation – his ill-fated engagement to Molly's stepsister, Cynthia Kirkpatrick – does not in the end subtract from his laudable qualities and his suitability for marriage to Molly. As several scholars have observed, Roger's rectitude derives at least in part from his position as an amateur naturalist

⁷⁶ Anne DeWitt, *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel*; Amy M. King, *The Divine in the Commonplace*.

modeled on Charles Darwin.⁷⁷ About midway through the novel, Roger is selected by the local member of parliament, Lord Hollingford, to undertake “a scientific voyage, with a view to bringing back specimens of the fauna of distant lands” (360). In his letter of recommendation, Lord Hollingford praises Roger’s “great natural powers of comparison, and classifications of facts; he had shown himself to be an observer of a fine and accurate kind” (365). This language recalls an earlier exchange between Molly and Squire Hamley (Roger’s father): “his eyes are always wandering about, and see twenty things where I only see one,” the squire explains (73). Through Roger’s characterization, *Wives and Daughters* implicitly endorses the practice of natural history as morally upright: the loving attention Roger pays to the commonplace, ordinary objects of the natural world is a sign of his “moral excellence.”⁷⁸

In this and other ways, *Wives and Daughters* posits a fairly clear moral calculus: the observation of and attention to particular details is held up as an unqualified good. Molly shares Roger’s perceptiveness: she is “the first to discover the nature of Roger’s attraction” to Cynthia, for example: “the first time they saw him after the ball, it came out to her observant eyes” (310). Molly’s observational prowess is thematized less explicitly than Roger’s, but in her capacity as the novel’s primary center of focalization her attention to detail is continually on display. She is alive to the subtle, shifting dynamics that characterize social life in Hollingford, and she eagerly accepts Roger’s mentorship in natural history: “there are more than two hundred kinds of bees in England,” she diligently reports, “and he wanted me to notice the difference between them and flies”

⁷⁷ See, for example, Anne DeWitt, *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel*, 61-2.

⁷⁸ As Anne DeWitt argues, “*Wives and Daughters* privileges Roger’s natural history work – the activity of observing the natural world – over any theories that he formulates,” because that work signifies Roger’s “moral excellence.” *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel*, 62-3.

(149). The attention to detail that Molly and Roger share is explicitly contrasted to the obliviousness of Molly's stepmother, Mrs. Gibson, whom the narrator deems "not so fine an observer" (287). The novel derives some dismal humor from Mrs. Gibson's consistent inability to please Mr. Gibson, even when he tells her exactly what he wants.

Mrs. Gibson's observational deficiency is grounded in a particular mode of thought: she exhibits a tendency toward generalization, constantly invoking abstract principles. "You seem to forget than I cannot go against my principles," she explains to Molly (176); "constancy is everything," she proclaims, and then, as if to demonstrate the point, she repeats only moments later, "'Constancy above everything' is my motto, as you know" (355-6). Throughout *Wives and Daughters* Mrs. Gibson is the character most closely associated with abstractions inattentive to the context of their utterance: "her words," the narrator explains, "were like ready-made clothes, and never fitted individual thoughts" (307). The ridiculousness of this tendency toward free-floating abstraction is laid bare when she asserts, "I consider thought as everything...Thought is spiritual, while action is merely material" (307), a principle so at odds with her behavior that she even surprises herself by saying it. Contrast this with Roger's willingness to go against his principles, even in minor matters: "he was coming home to lunch, having always a fine midday appetite, though he pretended to despise the meal in theory. But he knew that his mother liked his companionship then" (114). Indeed, the ability to adjust principle to context is one of Roger's most notable qualities, all the more so because he is otherwise a fairly rigid moralist. What might in certain contexts seem like hypocrisy takes on a different tone: a willingness to adjust and to compromise. This juxtaposition between

Roger and Mrs. Gibson suggests that principles too rigidly followed are insensitive to context and therefore morally dubious.

In this tendency to eschew principle in favor of complex, particular situations, Gaskell's novels exemplify the tradition of Victorian realism. According to canonical accounts of the genre, its conscientious concern with the ordinary facts of life – its “very vitality of detail” – expresses an attitude of wonder at things otherwise deemed unworthy of attention.⁷⁹ “Realism presumes that the ‘ordinary’...has a value hitherto ascribed almost exclusively to the experience of the select few,” writes George Levine.⁸⁰ The relation between concepts and actually lived lives (real or fictional) – or between generals and particulars, precepts and examples, types and individuals – has long been a primary concern of scholars of the realist novel. As in Gaskell's critique of abstraction, realism is generally understood to favor the particular over the general, the instance over the class.⁸¹ In *Narrating Reality*, for example, Harry Shaw writes that nineteenth-century realist novels claim to be “doing work with respect to the real world that more abstract modes of thought can't do,” and he seeks to replicate this resistance to abstraction methodologically: he wants, first, to “clear the ground of obscuring theoretical underbrush” and, second, to “seek out examples to help define a realist habit of mind.”⁸² In proceeding by example rather than theory, his account of realism adopts the values and protocols of its subject. One way to understand nineteenth-century realist novels is as an intellectual response – and presumed corrective – to the types of generalization being

⁷⁹ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, 6.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Although it has been contested, Ian Watt's account of the empirical underpinnings of the realist novel remains an informative and foundational example of this line of thought. See *The Rise in the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁸² Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), ix.

made by contemporaneous philosophers and scientists. Gaskell's novels are perhaps the most attentive to detail and the most averse to abstraction in the Victorian realist tradition.

As we have seen, this insistence upon particularity is also a central quality of Wittgenstein's and Cavell's writing. The thematic overlap between ordinary language philosophy and literary realism is powerfully, if incidentally, evoked in Cora Diamond's description of Wittgenstein's "realistic spirit": his stubborn aversion to metaphysics and to concepts, and his insistence that we attend to the ordinary and everyday objects and situations out of which shared language and shared meaning are generated.⁸³ In Cavell, this becomes a resistance to epistemology itself. In *The Burdens of Perfection*, Andrew Miller adopts Cavell's engagement with the "threat of skepticism" to describe an epistemological conundrum specific to the Victorian period: he contends that "[s]kepticism was felt throughout the culture."⁸⁴ In response to that skepticism, Miller argues, Victorian novelists and writers of nonfiction prose created narratives of "moral perfectionism," whereby the subject is taken "from skepticism to second person relations" – "[d]oubt," he explains, "is not refuted in moral perfectionism—nor often left behind for good—but displaced or supplanted by a powerful attachment to someone who is found, in particular ways, to be exemplary."⁸⁵ In moral philosophy, those "second-person relations" come in the form of moral exemplars: one learns to live the good life through example, rather than precept – or, we might say, through specific instances, rather than concepts. In novels, however, the primary type of second-person relations is

⁸³ Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). See also Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*.

⁸⁴ Andrew H. Miller *The Burdens of Perfection*, 5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

marriage, which “generat[es] the reassuring effect of shared experiences” in response to the threat of skepticism.⁸⁶ The Victorian novel’s many courtship plots instantiate the epistemological drama he sees in the culture at large.

This is an apt suggestion, but it assumes different contours when applied to Gaskell’s fiction. Simply put, marriages in Gaskell’s novels are very explicitly *not* second-person relations. They involve more than two people, implicating whole families and communities, including children, siblings, parents, friends, rivals, governesses, servants, and in a variety of ways the entire cast of a given novel’s characters. Failed courtships, moreover, can be equally if not more important than the felicitous marriages that so often lend the novels their primary closure. In *Wives and Daughters*, both of these qualities of courtship and marriage are on display. In addition to Molly’s ultimate engagement to Roger, the novel depicts two marriages that are hugely important for its plot (Mr. Gibson’s to Mrs. Kirkpatrick and Osborne Hamley’s to Aimée) as well as two failed courtship plots (Cynthia’s to both Mr. Preston and Roger). Each of these courtships is *narratable* rather than closural.⁸⁷ Each of them has obvious and profound effects on the Hollingford community, measured most of all in their effects on Molly. By depicting courtships and marriages that so densely entangle whole social fields – that are, in many ways, more significant for those outside the marriage than inside it – and that create mystery and uncertainty rather than secure sociability, Gaskell lends to her novels a context in which judgements about how best to act become impossibly complex, dependent on a cascade of mutually-implicating factors. In his reading of the Victorian novel, Miller suggests that “[d]omestic ideology was fully interwoven with

⁸⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁷ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents*.

epistemological concerns.”⁸⁸ The epistemology of Gaskell’s domestic fiction – like her industrial fiction – is relativistic.

Wives and Daughters sketches the domestic effects of relativism in a chapter, early in the novel, called “A Crisis”: the chapter includes three successive scenes, each involving two people. In the first, Mr. Gibson proposes to Mrs. Kirkpatrick; in the second, Mr. Gibson informs Molly of the engagement; in the third, Molly discusses the engagement with Roger. I want to address each of these scenes in turn, because in sequence they dramatize to great effect the inadequacy of thinking of marriage as an instance of “second-person relations”; they make clear the confusion that can result from the necessity of making decisions in the absence of absolute knowledge; they demonstrate the small cruelties of miscommunication and misunderstanding that can result from those decisions; they invoke the possibility of narrative knowing becoming violent; and they depict, ultimately, how the novel serves as a source of ordinary knowledge. The chapter opens with Mrs. Kirkpatrick lazily daydreaming about remarriage – both she and Mr. Gibson have been previously married – and “rapidly investing this imaginary bread-winner in the form and features of the country surgeon,” when Mr. Gibson walks in, without having fully decided to propose. The narrative focalization shifts between these two characters as they discuss an unrelated matter – “one or two medical inquiries” – each working up into a state of expectation – Mrs. Kirkpatrick literally “tremble[s] in suspense” (106) – that leads ultimately to their engagement. What makes this conversation stand out is that the focalization shifts more rapidly than usual in this novel, even within a single sentence: “She was not aware that he

⁸⁸ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection*, xii.

finally made up his mind to propose, during the time that she was speaking – answering his questions in many words, but he was accustomed to winnow the chaff from the corn; and her voice was so soft, her accent so pleasant, that it struck him as particularly agreeable” (105). At the beginning, this sentence is focalized through Mrs. Kirkpatrick (“she was not aware”), but it shifts somewhere to Mr. Gibson’s perspective. It is difficult to pinpoint precisely where, though: who contributes the rather judgmental “finally”? By mid-sentence, however, we are firmly with Mr. Gibson (“he was accustomed”).

In a novel that is characterized by regular perspectival shifts, this scene stands out for the rapidity of those shifts and the confusion they generate. The novel thus instantiates the epistemological themes that run through Gaskell’s fiction. This quality reaches an apex in the immediate aftermath of Mr. Gibson’s proposal, when the narrative voice enters free-indirect discourse: “There! He had done it – whether it was wise or foolish – he had done it” (106). The trouble is that there is no way to be sure whose voice we are hearing. It could plausibly be either Mr. Gibson or Mrs. Kirkpatrick, but there is no specific clue with which to leverage a judgment. Such ambiguity is jarring in a novel that is otherwise so attuned to precise details. We might read this as a sort of vocal fusion, formally enacting the official engagement of two people who will soon share a name, but in my view such a reading would far too optimistically focus on the harmony of this engagement. After all, it does not result in a narrowing but a widening of perspective. Mr. Gibson’s proposal opens out onto a broader social field: “Could you love her [Molly] as your daughter?...Will you give me the right of introducing you to her as her future mother, as my wife?” (106). It is only after defining the relation she would bear to his daughter that he acknowledges the relation she would bear to him. This match

is not based in romantic love or erotic desire; we might think of it as what Talia Schaffer has called “familiar marriage,” one motivated by “a pragmatic advantage.”⁸⁹ If romantic love is solipsistic, “collapsing past and future into one intense, immediate contact,” familiar marriage takes the long view, looking forward to a future and “pann[ing] out to show the panorama of the social world.”⁹⁰ The calculus for both characters is, indeed, pragmatic and thoroughly social. Both have taken stock of their situation and made a practical judgment; both have children whose lives will be dramatically altered by this decision.

This chapter’s second scene heartbreakingly demonstrates the impossibility of foreseeing the consequences of such decisions. The conversation between Mr. Gibson and Molly is characterized by silence and miscommunication. As Mr. Gibson attempts to justify the engagement on practical grounds, Molly remains silent, a silence that is amplified by the narrator’s reiterated descriptions: “She did not answer”; “She could not tell what words to use”; “No remark from her”; “Still she was silent” (111-12). To this point in her life, Molly’s sense of self has been entirely bound up in her relationship with her father, and the news of his engagement unmoors her: “It was as if the piece of solid ground on which she stood had broken from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone” (111). Here, the narrative voice enters a mode of what Dorrit Cohn calls “psychonarration,” in which a character’s thoughts are given expression in the narrator’s voice: Molly is, as it were, doubly silent, in both diegesis and discourse.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Talia Schaffer, *Romance’s Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5-8.

⁹¹ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 11.

When she finally does speak, she accuses her father of duplicity (“So I was sent out of the house that all this might be quietly arranged in my absence?” [112]), and their conversation comes to an abrupt end. The shifting field of relationships has an immediate effect, changing the character of the relation between father and daughter so profoundly that communication fails. This is the abyss, absent even a thin net.

In the third scene, Molly rushes outside in a “passion of grief,” where she is observed by Roger, who wavers before approaching her, uncertain whether to intervene. At first, their encounter is characterized by silence, too: “he did not know exactly what to say”; “they remained in silence for a while”; “her poor wistful eyes were filling with tears...with a dumb appeal for sympathy”; “His thoughts did not come readily in the shape of words” (115-16). In his first attempt at pacification, Roger tries to convince Molly that the marriage may make her father happy, and that she should support it for his sake. Molly rejects this, responding, “you don’t know what we were to each other” (116). Roger tacitly consents to this admonishment with more silence. Then he changes tactics: “I want to tell you of a girl I know,” he says, launching into a story about a girl named Harriet who is, if anything, closer to her father than Molly is and who remains happy when her father remarries because “she thought of her father’s happiness before she thought of her own” (116-17).

There are several problems with Roger’s story. First of all, it simply recapitulates the abstract precept Molly has already rejected. His advice is moralistic, even scolding, and comes from up high, Thornton-like, as if he were absolute master of the situation. But it is made from a position of ignorance (as Molly has already reminded him): he doesn’t even know to whom Mr. Gibson is engaged. What’s more, the details of Roger’s

story are ill-suited to Molly's situation in several obvious ways: Harriet was "the eldest of a large family," where Molly is an only child; Harriet's "mother died when she was about sixteen" (116), where Molly's mother died when "she had been too young to be conscious of it" (6); Harriet's father remarries after "eight or ten years," when she is in her mid-twenties, where Molly is only seventeen (117); most importantly, Roger says that Harriet's stepmother "was as anxious for Harriet to be happy as Harriet was for her father" and predicts that Molly's stepmother may be, too. In response to this last point, Molly voices a dissenting view: "I don't think she is though," but, as the narrator reports, "Roger did not want to hear Molly's reasons for this doubting speech" (117). Roger's "severe," possibly cruel, "brevity" is made worse by the fact that he is so insensitive to the specifics of Molly's ordeal. He commits the sin of generalization, using words like "ready-made clothes" (307).

In addition to Roger's sinister insistence upon self-sacrificing femininity (one sign of Harriet's goodness is her willingness "to be silent" [117], he says) and his uncaring uninterest in Molly's actual circumstances, Roger's story leaves much to be desired as a story. It is sapped of any details. Although it includes death and marriage and work, those mainstays of Victorian fiction, Roger passes over them in a rush to the conclusion. One is left to wonder about Harriet's life, to doubt that she really was *that* affectionate toward her father and *that* self-denying. Her filial love, as Roger tells it, is more like Regan's and Goneril's than Cordelia's, but Roger seems unaware, as Lear is not, that such love is false. As a narrator, Roger is omniscient, at least in principle. His short story is entirely third person, with no shifts of perspective or voice. It is a story that claims knowledge absolutely without justifying that claim or thinking about its implications. How can

Roger be sure that Harriet remained so happy? It is, in other words, everything that *Wives and Daughters* is not.

Roger's story introduces a Cavellian threat into *Wives and Daughters*: he claims in that moment to know how it is with Molly (and with Harriet) better than she does. Why, then, does the novel shift so quickly away from this threat? Why does Molly respond so well to Roger's story? In the following chapter, when Molly goes to visit her future stepmother, she "brac[es] herself up" by repeating to herself, "I will be more like Harriet. I will think of others. I won't think of myself" (125). Why does she accept Roger's moralizing advice this time, even if it is the same advice she had rejected on the previous page? What Molly's mantra demonstrates is that she takes the story in a different spirit from that in which it is offered. "I will be more like Harriet": for Molly, the story is about Harriet. As she listens, the narrator explains that "she was interested in this little story of Harriet – a girl who had been so much to her father, more than Molly in this early youth of hers could have been to Mr. Gibson" (117). She is struck by the peculiarities of Harriet's situation – by how different they are from her own. By contrast, for Roger the story was never about Harriet. It was a mere demonstration of an abstract principle, most likely entirely made up. Once the story is told, Roger returns to a moralistic, gnomic voice: "It is right to hope for the best about everybody, and not to expect the worst...One has always to try to think more of others than of oneself, and it is best not to prejudge people on the bad side" (117). Roger's story is conceptual: it has a U shape, beginning with an abstraction, which is then illustrated with a short (and inadequate) story, and it ends with another abstraction. But Molly hears it differently. In Molly's version, Harriet's story offers her an *example* rather than a principle. It is the

storyness of the story that counts for Molly, which is the opposite of how Roger intends it.

I do not want to minimize the discomfiting paternalism of this scene. To be sure, *Wives and Daughters* exhibits and endorses a kind of stern masculinist Victorian morality in its depiction of Molly's relationships with both her father and Roger. But something subtler than that happens here: Roger's claim to moral superiority is revealed to be on shakier ground than we might think in reading criticism that highlights the novel's assured sense of his "moral excellence."⁹² He is not only an industrious naturalist, commendable for his patient observation of the natural world – he is also an inept storyteller, one who misunderstands the nature of stories. Roger's claim to knowledge is shown to be unwarranted here. *Wives and Daughters* would seem to suggest that narrative does not *convey* knowledge; the knowledge does not preexist the narrative. Narrative creates knowledge. But for whom? Roger lacks the knowledge that Molly gains. Roger remains ignorant of Molly's circumstances, but in thinking about Harriet Molly achieves ordinary knowledge about her own situation – she gets a handle on it, so to speak. In this case, the story's auditor gets much more out of it than its teller. Roger does not really know what he is saying. Which brings us to perhaps the greatest irony of all: it is, in fact, Molly who knows better than Roger what he is saying.

In reversing the terms of that relationship, Gaskell offers us a version of knowing another better than they know themselves that is *not* in fact violent. The same could be said for her novel's regular shifts of focalization. One does not get a sense in reading Gaskell's novels (as one does in reading, say, Henry James's) that, in entering into and

⁹² Anne DeWitt, *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel*, 63.

revealing a character's mind, the narrator violates their privacy and autonomy. For Gaskell, calling an epistemological approach to others violent is too much of a generalization: knowledge of the other is not the problem; the claim to *absolute* knowledge is. In her novels, knowledge is precisely the point. Like narrative, it is what holds communities together, and it is what novels are made of. Through Molly's interpretation and rectification – we might say, her criticism – Roger's story is incorporated into the larger story of *Wives and Daughters*. We, as readers, achieve knowledge of Molly's knowledge as a result of this nesting structure (the novel succeeds where, in *North and South*, Inspector Watson had failed). *Wives and Daughters* suggests that, so long as knowledge is deconceptualized (so long as we respect its embodied, social, contingent nature), knowledge, even of other minds, is neither magical thinking nor a violation of psychological privacy. It is entirely ordinary, but no less important for that.

George Eliot's Skepticism

There is no end to our inquiries: our end is
in the next world.

—Michel de Montaigne

I

After reading *Felix Holt* (1866), Frederick Harrison wrote to George Eliot in hopes that in her next work she might represent “the complete ideal of Comte” “with completeness.”¹ He urges Eliot to animate her next creation with the doctrines of positivism, the philosophical system formulated by Auguste Comte that gained a significant following in nineteenth-century Britain. Where *Felix Holt* “put[s] the subtle finish of a poem into the language of a prose narrative,” Harrison imagines a drama in verse which will realize Comte’s unattained ambition to epitomize the positivist “conception of society” in “a great comprehensive poem.” For a positivist like Harrison to use such dogmatic rhetoric is not unusual. Comte was a system builder: his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42) elaborates a “great fundamental law” of development, arguing that human life, and all its branches of knowledge, is continually progressing towards a “scientific or positive state” and that, once that state is universally achieved, “the philosophical system of the modern world will be founded at last in its entirety.”² “[W]e are fanatics,” Harrison tells Eliot, “we are people of one idea.”³

¹ Portions of this chapter will appear in *Studies in the Novel*, Volume 52, Issue 3, fall 2020, copyright © 2020 Johns Hopkins University Press and University of North Texas. Epigraph: Michel de Montaigne, “On Experience,” in *The Complete Essays*, trans. and ed. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 1211.

² August Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Frederick Ferré (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 1, 13.

³ All quotes from Harrison are included in George Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (London: Penguin, 1990), 241-3.

Eliot's response to Harrison pointedly, if politely, admonishes such dogmatism, especially in literature. Although she is sympathetic to the positivist program, she unequivocally asserts that art should never simply recapitulate philosophy: "aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity," she writes, "[b]ut if it ceases to be purely æsthetic – if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram – it becomes the most offensive of all teaching." This distinction between the picture and the diagram – between the embodied and the abstract, art and philosophy – is peculiar, given the densely philosophical quality of her novels: she describes to Harrison having "gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate."⁴ Eliot's exchange with Harrison thus offers a compelling outline for the intimate and contested relation her novels have to the world of ideas, tracing her sense that art can and maybe should achieve intellectual ends without sacrificing its "purely aesthetic" quality – and that, if it can do so, art has something more to offer than other systems of thought or modes of expression. Her distinction between the picture and the diagram is a valuable heuristic for our understanding of the sheer intellectual ambition of her novels. For Eliot, as we shall see, it is not possible to "treat" *anything* "with completeness." I argue that Eliot develops an anti-dogmatic skepticism – one that is distinctively novelistic, inseparable from the novel form – and that she asserts the authority of the novel by defining it against the philosophical dogmas populating the intellectual culture of nineteenth-century Britain.⁵

George Eliot's novels address several of the same questions as Elizabeth Gaskell's: what does knowledge look like in actually lived lives? How do we relate to

⁴ Ibid., 248.

⁵ Ibid., 243.

each other, given that other minds are inaccessible to us? What kinds of knowledge does vision offer? And what are the epistemological affordances of narrative? In the previous chapter, I argued that Elizabeth Gaskell articulates, in and through narrative, a kind of “ordinary knowledge” that responds to the conditions of epistemological relativism. In this chapter, I argue that Eliot conceptualizes the relationship between narrative and knowing in an altogether different way: Eliot’s novels are skeptical, or, to be more precise, they behave skeptically. Whereas Gaskell responded to epistemological relativism by redefining knowledge as something achievable in ordinary life, Eliot articulates a skeptical disposition according to which all knowledge is ultimately unachievable. But her skepticism is not a threat, as Andrew Miller and Stanley Cavell would frame it: it is a necessary condition, Eliot suggests, for ethical life.

Eliot has long enjoyed a reputation as the most philosophically and scientifically astute Victorian novelist, and yet in her correspondence with Harrison she is notably circumspect about the novel’s relation to philosophy and science. Indeed, the relation between Eliot’s novels and Victorian intellectual culture is more tense than has been generally asserted.⁶ Critics have long recognized that she pushes even the most cutting-edge ideas to their limits, but, beginning with the groundbreaking work of George Levine and Gillian Beer, they have maintained that Eliot’s relation to science and philosophy is productive and ultimately harmonious. Levine, for example, writes that *Middlemarch* (1871-2) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) “extend empiricism and literary realism” while “trying not to break them,” and Beer that Eliot “both registered and extended the

⁶ In this respect, I agree with Gowan Dawson, who argues that accounts of Victorian science and literature are often too optimistic in their celebrations of interdisciplinary productivity. See *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

imaginative and emotional implications that current scientific discovery and practice carried for her culture.”⁷ These readings and those they have inspired are highly instructive and often ingenious, but in my view they do not sufficiently acknowledge the extent to which Eliot claims for the novel a special intellectual privilege – not as part of or supplement to, but as actually *better than* philosophy and science. The novel provides Eliot with a space to anatomize her ambivalence about certain ideas and habits of thought, mediating between tradition and modernity, as Amanda Anderson argues, or between religious faith and secularism.⁸ Such arguments correctly identify the *nondogmatic* quality of Eliot’s fiction, but none have as yet described the ways in which it is *antidogmatic*, which is to say, skeptical.

Skepticism is a loose term, one that is used variously to denote a systematic commitment to epistemological indeterminacy, a situational disbelief of a specific proposition, and religious doubt, among other things. Partly because “skepticism” is so multivalent, scholars who address Eliot’s philosophical commitments often use the term to represent the slippery-slope, atheistic, radical indeterminacy that so many Victorians

⁷ George Levine, “George Eliot’s Hypothesis of Reality,” in *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 32; Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 144.

⁸ This is a familiar form of argument: Anderson claims that Eliot leverages modern practices of “detachment” “in the service of retrieving tradition”; D. A. Miller that *Middlemarch* “oscillates” between “a confident reenactment of traditional form” and “an uneasy subversion of its habitually assumed validity”; Graver describes Eliot’s complex and shifting relation to the different forms of community *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*; and During suggests that Eliot’s novels “involve what we can (clumsily) call a literary and secular de-secularization of the secular.” Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 20; D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 107; Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Simon During, “George Eliot and Secularism,” in *A Companion to George Eliot*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 430.

feared.⁹ By contrast, I describe a specific type of skepticism which explains the position Eliot's novels take regarding the relationship between narrative and knowing. Namely, Eliot's novels exhibit the assumptions and behaviors of Pyrrhonian skepticism, a philosophy with ancient roots, most iconically represented by Sextus Empiricus and Michel de Montaigne. For the Pyrrhonist, one cannot even know whether one knows; instead, the skeptic must suspend judgment on all matters concerning knowledge, including the fundamental question whether knowledge is possible or impossible. Pyrrhonian skepticism is anti-dogmatic and anti-systematic; it is not a philosophical system but a philosophical practice, way of life, and ethos, one which is mobilized against all dogmatisms – including the dogmatic skeptical position that the only thing one can know is that they know nothing.¹⁰ Because Pyrrhonists doubt even their own doubt, they can never rest assured; that is, their skepticism does not paralyze them into inactivity or justify their complacency, as so many anti-skeptics assume it will, but actually galvanizes them toward further investigation. It is a philosophy that emphasizes, and finds comfort (or tranquility, as the Greek *ataraxia* is often translated) in, ongoingness, process, uncertainty – the constitutive qualities of narrative.¹¹ As

⁹ For many critics, skepticism is something that needs to be avoided or overcome. For example, see Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005); Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008); and Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). One notable exception to this trend is Caroline Levine, *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003). But for Levine, skepticism works as part of the process of scientific hypothesis and experimentation on the road to knowledge of the world. This is a skepticism in the service of knowledge, and therefore it is categorically distinct from the skepticism I describe in this chapter.

¹⁰ This is the position taken by the other dominant school of skeptics, named “Academic” after Plato’s Academy. See Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, revised and expanded edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Here I am following D. A. Miller, who claims that “the tendency of a narrative would...be to keep going” if not for the always partial procedure of closure. *Narrative and Its Discontents*, xi. See also Nicholas Dames’s assertion that “the sense of the novel as a process rather than a structure was a fundamental part of

Montaigne puts it, “[t]here is no end to our inquiries: our end is in the next world.”¹²

Pyrrhonian skepticism emphasizes investigation over conclusion, and in this sense, it emphasizes process over stasis and narrative over closure.

The ongoingness common to both Eliot’s novels and Pyrrhonian skepticism can be understood as a variety of desire, a concept that has shaped our understanding of narrative for several decades thanks to prominent theorists like René Girard and Peter Brooks.¹³ In Eliot’s novels, the dynamics of erotic desire – which are, of course, a major thematic concern – take on a unique philosophical and formal seriousness, not as means to an end (knowledge, closure, catharsis) but as central components of a skeptical mode of relation that is, for Eliot, necessary for ethical life. Eliot’s novels demonstrate the discomfiting similarity between erotic desire (for the other) and epistemological desire (to know the other’s mind). Dorothea’s marriage to Casaubon is a result of this conflation, for example, and it is even more difficult to distinguish erotic from epistemological desire in the evolving relationship between Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth. And, as we will see, “The Lifted Veil” (1859) offers an important speculative reversal of this dynamic, where desire for the other is tied specifically to a desire *not* to know their mind. As we learn throughout Eliot’s fiction, the desire to know the other is a good only as long as it is unfulfilled. Eliot thus complicates the

Victorian novel theory.” *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

¹² Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 1211. Montaigne’s most substantive expression of Pyrrhonian skepticism comes in *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, where he writes, “there is no permanent existence either in our being or in that of objects. We ourselves, our faculty of judgement and all mortal things are flowing and rolling ceaselessly: nothing certain can be established about one from the other, since both judged and judging are ever shifting and changing.” In *The Complete Essays*, 680.

¹³ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

philosophical problem of the other by interpolating it in plots of erotic desire. Desire itself – a skeptical desire which never rests assured – becomes the condition of possibility for having ethical relationships with others.

In addition to the problem of other minds, this chapter interrogates a topic familiar to Eliot studies: her thematization of empiricism. The intellectual culture in nineteenth-century Britain focused a great deal of attention on empiricism, which asserts that all knowledge derives from sensory experience, and induction, which adds the crucial insight that knowledge of particulars, empirically gathered, can be methodically generalized. Eliot was as prominent in that culture as anyone, and her novels consistently thematize the problems and challenges that arise when a mind seeks knowledge of the world outside itself (a world that includes other minds). While several critics have recognized the ways Eliot troubles (or “extends,” as both Levine and Beer claim¹⁴) the empirical paradigm that surrounds her, no one has fully acknowledged the scope of her critique and the skepticism that informs it. Partly, this is because the brunt of Eliot’s critique is directed not toward empiricism itself, but the dogmatic commitment to a universal method. Empiricism is not inherently or necessarily dogmatic, but its proponents during the nineteenth century often rhetorically cast it as such, asserting a need for a single process to achieve knowledge, and grounding that process in the empirical idea that knowledge derives from observation of discrete phenomena. Even otherwise flexible and nondogmatic thinkers like John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin occasionally fall into such rhetoric. It is not that Eliot wants to get rid of empiricism altogether, but that she wants to incorporate it into a fuller “picture” of “life.”¹⁵ This

¹⁴ George Levine, “George Eliot’s Hypothesis of Reality,” 32; Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 144.

¹⁵ George Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 248.

process, whereby Eliot's fiction absorbs, critiques, and recombines the philosophical postulates of empiricism, is what I am calling Eliot's skepticism – it is not a destructive, but a creative process.

Although the fundamental insight of empiricism is that knowledge derives from sensory experience, its proponents have tended to favor vision as the primary conduit for experience and knowledge of the world. This deep historical association of vision and knowledge is written into our everyday language in familiar ways.¹⁶ As several critics and historians have detailed, vision has a history with shifting procedures and valences, and the nineteenth century occupies a crucial place in this discourse: art historians, historians of science, and literary critics have described major shifts in visual technologies, methods, and regimes during the century in which the realist novel, grounded in empiricism, reached what many consider to be its apotheosis in Eliot's *Middlemarch*.¹⁷ As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's study of scientific objectivity makes amply clear, during the nineteenth century, *that* vision and knowledge are connected was taken for granted, but the nature of that connection was undergoing a drastic reformulation: empirical scientists were developing a new "way[] of seeing that [was] at once social, epistemological, and ethical."¹⁸ As this chapter demonstrates, Eliot's

¹⁶ See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). When Eliot draws upon this entrenched vocabulary, she elicits its empirical logic. As Jay makes clear, the visual metaphors populating our language, as well as the more explicit connections between vision and knowledge in philosophical discourse, are related to a variety of philosophical and cultural traditions, not just empiricism. But there are important differences: the empirical tradition, as opposed to, say, rationalism or idealism, explicitly associates vision with experience, rather than a metaphorical insight or sight of the soul. That link with experience is crucial for Eliot.

¹⁷ See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1992); Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); and Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, 10.

novels are filled with a language of visuality that both literally and figuratively connects sight to knowledge in ways that evoke the history of empiricism; this language reveals a fundamental instability in that connection, one that Eliot mobilizes toward a skeptical critique of the basic insight of empiricism, that to see is to know.

To label Eliot's novels skeptical is to go against the grain of Eliot criticism, because for many of her most perceptive commentators it is to ignore her commitment to "an empirically shareable experience."¹⁹ But Eliot's skepticism is designed to enable shareable experiences, not to deny them: she reminds us that we can never truly know the world or other minds empirically, and yet her novels are not resigned to solipsism. They insist that people keep looking and seeking knowledge anyway – that they earnestly engage with the world on different terms. Observation and investigation are not means to an end, but an ethic, a way of life. In this, I argue that, like Gaskell's relativism, Eliot's skepticism anticipates in a striking fashion the philosophy and criticism of Stanley Cavell. When Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie write, summarizing Cavell, that "we are fated" to a life "bereft of absolute solutions, but with...some possibilities of mutual, sense-making life, woven through continuing difference," their statement aptly captures my view of Eliot's skepticism.²⁰ In particular, Eliot prefigures Cavell's concept of "acknowledgement," which reframes an epistemological problem as a social or ethical one: acknowledgement "go[es] beyond knowledge...in its requirement that I *do* something on the basis of that knowledge."²¹ Just as Eliot's novels understand the

¹⁹ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 18.

²⁰ Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, "Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Eldridge and Rhie (New York: Continuum 2011), 12.

²¹ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 257.

epistemological activity of looking as a way of life necessary for ethical engagement – just as they skeptically “picture” rather than dogmatically “diagram” empirical ideas – so Cavell finds epistemology inadequate to a complete conception of ordinary lives. In this chapter, however, as in the last, the joining together of Eliot and Cavell brings to view a productive disagreement: whereas Cavell writes *against* skepticism because it too-dogmatically adheres to epistemology, Eliot offers us a version of skepticism that folds narrative and ethical dimensions into an otherwise epistemological discourse. It is necessary to understand Eliot’s skepticism in relation to Cavell’s in order to appreciate the scope of her intellectual ambition. The novel’s capacity to skeptically critique the dogmatic, too-abstract discourses of philosophy and science and, by means of that skepticism, to create a new, more human and humane intellectual orientation is, for Eliot, its greatest promise.

II

Epistemological discourse in nineteenth-century Britain was of course characterized by a number of disagreements, but the desire for a single method was widely shared.²² For example, in *A System of Logic* (1843), John Stuart Mill attempts to outline “the science of science itself”; he writes that “all inference, consequently all proof, and all discovery of truths not self-evident consists of inductions, and the interpretations of inductions.”²³ Mill endorses a straightforwardly empirical method depending on the insight that discovery proceeds from the observation of facts from

²² See Jonathan Smith, *Fact and Fiction: Baconian Science and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); and Laura J. Snyder, *Reforming Philosophy: A Victorian Debate on Science and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

²³ John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 7, ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto: U of Toronto P; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 10, 281.

which more general truths can be derived: all knowledge, aside from what is self-evident, proceeds from experience. Comte, characteristically assured, writes that “[a]ll competent thinkers agree with Bacon that there can be no real knowledge except that which rests upon observed facts.”²⁴ Even Charles Darwin asserts (not entirely accurately) that the development of his theory of natural selection proceeded according to strict empirical methods: “I worked on true Baconian principles, and without any theory collected facts on a wholesale scale.”²⁵ Darwin and Comte, like so many others, invoke Francis Bacon, letting him stand metonymically for empiricism and induction.²⁶ For many nineteenth-century writers, it was necessary to regularize the process by which particular observations become general knowledge.

Eliot’s essay “The Natural History of German Life” (1856) adopts a visual vocabulary in order to query precisely this relationship between the particular and the general: “It is an interesting branch of psychological *observation* to note the *images* that are habitually associated with abstract or collective terms – what may be called *the picture-writing of the mind*.”²⁷ Fifteen years before the opening installments of *Middlemarch*, Eliot stages the question that will come to serve as one of that novel’s primary “narratable” conditions: what is the relation between vision and general knowledge?²⁸ The opening conceit of Eliot’s essay involves two people with different “images” of the word “*railways*,” one familiar only with the stretch of railway close to his home, but who has the capacity to imagine, based on that local knowledge, “the

²⁴ August Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy*, 4.

²⁵ Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809-1882*, ed. Nina Barlow (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1958), 98.

²⁶ Jonathan Smith, *Fact and Feeling*, 1-44.

²⁷ George Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 107. My emphasis.

²⁸ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents*.

multiplication of railways in the abstract”; the other, by contrast, is acquainted more broadly with the railroad system in its several capacities, as “successively...a ‘navvy,’ an engineer, a traveller,” and so on. “[I]t is evident,” she concludes, that the first person, “this man of wide views and narrow observation,” would not be the best choice to build or manage a railway.²⁹ Eliot’s distinction between two types of seeing, “views” and “observations,” evokes the language of empirical science, according to which visual sensory input, if properly codified, can lead to general, and here actionable, knowledge. Observations are scientifically viable; views are not.

On the face of it, “The Natural History of German Life” is an endorsement of empiricism. Eliot celebrates Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl, the German social scientist under review, not only for “his own gradually amassed observations,” but also for the generalized political philosophy he develops on their strength. “The views at which he has arrived by this inductive process,” Eliot explains, “he sums up in the term – *social-political-conservatism*; but his conservatism is, we conceive, of a thoroughly philosophical kind.”³⁰ Riehl begins from specific observations and builds an astonishingly general and abstract theory. But the insight that “observation” leads to general knowledge comes into conflict with the *ethical* dimensions of empiricism, which Eliot emphasizes in her discussion, and later practice, of literary realism. Eliot diagnoses the “unreality” of artistic representation, particularly in the English novel, and calls such mimetic failures “a grave evil,” for “[a]rt is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowmen.” Those experiences must be particular, for “[a]ppeals founded on generalizations and statistics

²⁹ George Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 107-8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

require a sympathy ready-made,” whereas confrontations with particular cases can actually generate sympathy.³¹ Epistemologically speaking those particulars are means to a greater end: they are the building blocks for secure inductive generalization. Cast in an ethical-moral vocabulary, however, the purpose of empiricism is to give particulars pride of place. In celebrating Riehl, Eliot’s essay doesn’t simply recapitulate the empirical notion that particulars are components of the articulation of theory and law by means of inductive generalization; it also argues that particulars are ends in themselves, crucial sites of ethical experience that are unassimilable to systematic thinking.

Eliot’s circumspect thinking about vision and knowledge partly aligns her with a rich tradition of empiricism, stretching back to Hume and including her partner G. H. Lewes, that insists upon the complex relation between observation and theory as well as the “profound instability” underwriting the pursuit of sensory knowledge.³² “Nothing can be more erroneous,” Lewes writes, “than the vulgar notion of the ‘Inductive Method,’ as one limited to the observation of facts,” because, as Comte explains, while “every positive theory must necessarily be founded on observations, it is...no less true that, in order to observe, our mind has need of some theory”³³; facts are “congeries of particulars partly sensational partly ideal.”³⁴ We are never *just seeing*, they suggest, and in any case to see is not necessarily enough to know. Although these philosophers acknowledge the difficulty, even impossibility of achieving perfect knowledge empirically, they stay in the epistemological register: “[t]he senses may be imperfect channels,” Lewes writes, “but at

³¹ Ibid., 110.

³² Peter Garratt, *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge, and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer, and George Eliot* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 15.

³³ George Henry Lewes, *The Biographical History of Philosophy* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1857), xxv; Auguste Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy*, 4-5.

³⁴ G. H. Lewes, *The Biographical History of Philosophy*, xx.

any rate they are in direct communication with their objects, and are true up to a certain point.”³⁵ For Lewes, observation is not in itself enough, but we can still achieve sensory knowledge if we formulate a systematic method: Comte occupies a position of central importance in Lewes’ *Biographical History of Philosophy* for precisely this reason, because he, like Bacon before him, develops a “comprehensive Method.”³⁶ It is this formulation of an epistemological method in response to sensory imperfection that marks the point of Eliot’s divergence. Eliot offers a more complete “picture,” we might say, of the problematic connection between vision and knowledge by novelizing it, thus acknowledging “life in its highest complexity.”³⁷

As Jonathan Smith has pointed out, many nineteenth-century philosophers – including Comte, Mill, and Lewes – celebrate and invoke Bacon as a founder of modern science because of his development of inductive method: Lewes explains, “[t]he real merit of Bacon’s conception was his accurate detection of [the] natural source of error, and his insistence on the wider and more circumspect Method of Verification.”³⁸ It seems to me that Eliot also engages with Bacon, but in a way that renders visible her difference from her philosophical contemporaries. Bacon’s methodological treatise, the *Novum Organum* (1620), seeks to systematize the process by which visual observation can lead to general knowledge. Among Bacon’s many discussions of the difficulties involved, and hence of our need for a method, one stands out for its striking affinity with one of Eliot’s own philosophical statements. Bacon writes,

³⁵ Ibid., xxxi.

³⁶ Ibid., 662.

³⁷ Moreover, Lewes describes Pyrrhonian skepticism as “a negative doctrine” that leaves philosophy a “heap of ruins”; the skeptics’ position leads them to “ludicrous dilemmas” and “follies,” he claims. I hope to demonstrate that Eliot has a more positive view of skepticism. Ibid., 228-9.

³⁸ Ibid., 344-5.

it is quite certain that, just as an uneven mirror alters the rays of things from their proper shape and figure, so also the mind, when it is affected by things through the senses, does not faithfully preserve them, but inserts and mingles its own nature with the nature of things as it forms and devises its own notions.³⁹

Given this fact of human experience, Bacon's "experiments," he says, are "assistants to the senses," designed to overcome this habitual cognitive bias.⁴⁰ In the seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede* (1859), Eliot echoes this conceit:

my strongest effort is to...give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.⁴¹

Although these figurations of mind as mirror are nearly identical, there are two differences with major implications for our understanding of Eliot's skepticism. First, Eliot's passage shifts immediately from a psychological to an ethical register: the response to cognitive bias is not, as it is for Bacon, Lewes, and Comte, to devise an epistemological method to overcome it, but to acknowledge the ethical obligation to hew as closely as possible to the truth. That conflation of the epistemological problem of knowing and the ethical imperative of "narrating" is characteristic of Eliot's engagements with empiricism.

The second difference involves precisely that word, "narrating." Here, as elsewhere, Eliot figures narration visually, as if a narrator had to see the characters in order to narrate their lives. Mirrors, lights, and perspective are integral to Eliot's idea of the novel: *Adam Bede* opens by imagining "a single drop of ink for a mirror" revealing

³⁹ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 159. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

“far-reaching visions of the past” (5); *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) with an anonymous observer on a bridge overlooking Dorlcote Mill; and many of *Middlemarch*’s most famous pronouncements incorporate this language of visuality: “all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web,” this sliver of all that is visible.⁴² Unlike in Bacon’s *Novum Organum* – or in Comte or Mill or Lewes – Eliot’s novels imagine how the empirical relation between seeing and knowing takes shape in, and gives shape to, lives in which that question is ineluctably coupled with questions of love and desire, marriage and death, wealth and poverty, reputation and ruin. Eliot’s interruption of *Adam Bede*, after all, is surrounded by an involved and at times shocking love plot. And the many visually figured narratorial interruptions in *Middlemarch* similarly set in relief a number of ordinary lives, with their desires and disappointments. The interpolation of such philosophical reflections within plot serves to demonstrate the shortcomings of a dogmatic empiricism that, in its quest for knowledge, overlooks the overwhelming, multivalent potentiality of seeing.⁴³

Of course, Bacon is not the only philosopher to recognize the double bind of the empirical paradigm: that the senses are both the source of all our knowledge and a hindrance to knowledge because of their imperfections. The critique of the senses is one of the most reliable arguments in the skeptic’s repertoire: Sextus, for example, distinguishes between what is apparent and “what is said about what is apparent”: the skeptic, he says, must accept the former and never cease to question the latter.⁴⁴

⁴² George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994), 141. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴³ Like George Levine, I am interested in “how philosophy behaves when it is embodied and its ideas take on the life of metaphor and mean something in the lived experience of people located in particular times and places.” *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 8.

⁴⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 8–9.

Montaigne, too, recognizes this dilemma, and wonders as a result whether it is “possible to imagine anything more laughable than that this pitiful, wretched creature – who is not even master of himself, but exposed to shocks on every side – should call himself Master and Emperor of a universe, the smallest particle of which he has no means of knowing, let alone swaying.”⁴⁵ Unlike Bacon, Montaigne does not respond to the critique of the senses by devising a method for overcoming it; instead, he responds by accepting the consequent ignorance as a given and undertaking an endless process of self-investigation and writing.⁴⁶ Montaigne’s uneven, distended, wonderfully rambling and associative collection of essays – a collection which he continued to work on for most of his life – constitutes the proper Pyrrhonian response to the conditions of uncertainty our faulty senses throw upon us: there can be “no end to our inquiries.”⁴⁷ Montaigne, in writing his essays, practices a continual return to the scene of investigation.

So too does Eliot. To think of Eliot as a novelist and intellectual is to think about the relationship between knowledge and goodness, epistemology and ethics. Her novels consistently focus this relationship as the singular challenge of modern life: how can we act morally with incomplete knowledge (of the world and, especially, of others), and what not-immoral actions can we take to gain knowledge? What types of knowledge lead to moral action, and what types do not? Like “The Natural History of German Life” and the philosophical reflection in *Adam Bede*, Eliot’s plots emphasize the inextricability of epistemological and ethical concerns within the broader framework of empiricism. Questions of knowledge are insufficient; they leave out, to invoke Cavell, what we do

⁴⁵ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 502.

⁴⁶ “I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics; that is my physics.” Ibid., 1217.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1211.

with knowledge once we have it, or what we do in its absence. Eliot takes this philosophical tension between epistemology and ethics as a serious problem in her fiction. How, she wonders, do we reconcile our desire for, even responsibility toward knowledge with the ethical obligations that accompany it, and that sometimes come into conflict with it?

III

At an early point in her career as a novelist, as she enjoyed the success of *Adam Bede* and looked forward to *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot addressed these questions in a uniquely direct way. In “The Lifted Veil,” she explores a familiar theme – the distance between two minds and the uncertainty that distance brings with it – but with a generic difference: it is Eliot’s only supernatural tale, a difference that permits the fantasy of one mind having direct access to other minds. Latimer, the tale’s first-person narrator, develops the clairvoyant ability to experience others’ experiences and to read, as it were, others’ minds. But that ability leads to horror and revulsion, depression and hopelessness, not mutual understanding, sympathetic engagement, or moral action.

Latimer also acquires the ability to see the future, and those “true prevision[s]” provide the impetus for his narration.⁴⁸ “The Lifted Veil” begins after he has foreseen his own death, and Latimer justifiably wants to record “the strange story of my experience” before that time should come (176). To his mind, clairvoyance and foresight are not so much “power[s]” as “disease[s]” (184), afflictions which prevent his living a happy life with privacy and purpose. He describes feeling intense relief upon realizing that, inexplicably, there is one person whose mind and future remain opaque to him:

⁴⁸ George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil*, in *Silas Marner and Two Short Stories*, ed. George Levine (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005), 175. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

About Bertha I was always in a state of uncertainty. I could watch the expression of her face, and speculate on its meaning; I could ask for her opinion with the real interest of ignorance; I could listen for her words and watch for her smile with hope and fear: she had for me the fascination of an unraveled destiny. (188)

In contrast with the “weariness and disgust” Latimer feels towards those whose minds are open to him, he develops a “passion” for Bertha, one which is “enormously stimulated, if not produced” by her mental opacity. “She was,” he continues, “my oasis of mystery in the dreary desert of knowledge” (191). His desire, in other words, is a desire *not* to know.

It is interesting to consider Latimer as the antithesis of Eliot’s other protagonists, like Adam, Dinah, Romola, Dorothea, Gwendolen, and Daniel, and to think of “The Lifted Veil” as a photo negative of the novels in which those characters appear. Whereas most of Eliot’s protagonists earnestly seek to understand their place in the world and the people in it, Latimer describes himself as an “unobservant” child who “hat[ed] inquiry” (182). He does not care to know, and so, in a fascinating thought experiment, Eliot curses him with the knowledge that he does not desire. The tale has several such reversals.

Latimer’s desire for Bertha, for example, is explicitly erotic in a way that distinguishes it from the more chaste kinds of desire elsewhere in Eliot’s work: every day is a “delicious torment,” Latimer says, and, the thought of his gift to her – an opal ring – hanging between her breasts is almost too much to handle : “for two days [I] shut myself up in my room...that I might intoxicate myself afresh” (190). And, unlike Dorothea and *Middlemarch*’s narrator, who listen vainly for the squirrel’s heartbeat, Latimer’s “preternaturally heightened sense of hearing...mak[es] audible...a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness” (191). Reading “The Lifted Veil” alongside Eliot’s novels forces us to consider the difference between inquiry without knowledge, and knowledge without inquiry.

But the inside-outness of “The Lifted Veil” serves to reaffirm the skepticism we see elsewhere in Eliot’s novels. It is anti-dogmatic, suggesting that an epistemological framework, if it is too rigidly adhered to, leaves out a great deal. Latimer’s mode of relating to other minds is entirely epistemological. He either knows another mind and so despises the person (his brother, for example), or doesn’t know it, and so desires them (like Bertha). In this way, Eliot’s novella is uncannily resonant with Cavell’s writing, which argues that epistemology is a poor way to relate to other minds. Indeed, Latimer precisely realizes the overly-epistemologized perspective that, in Toril Moi’s view, “forgets...that expressions and behavior *place a claim on others*”: “our finitude,” she writes, citing Cavell, “is the condition of possibility for, not an obstacle to, human knowledge.”⁴⁹ In other words, Latimer’s epistemological framework impoverishes the ethical and social dimensions of relating to others. Bertha’s mind is a mystery to Latimer, but clairvoyance, Eliot suggests, is not the only way to understand a person. Bertha, we come to learn, despises Latimer, putting on a show so she can receive the material benefits such a marriage would provide. But this is no mystery, because, as she explains, “the easiest way to deceive a poet” like Latimer “is to tell the truth,” which is exactly what she does, on several occasions: “your wisdom thinks I must love the man I’m going to marry?,” she asks him in disdain, insisting that mixing marriage and love would be “[t]he most unpleasant thing in the world.” “A little quiet contempt contributes greatly to the elegance of life,” she continues (198). Then, “are you really beginning to discern what a heartless girl I am?” (199). She tells him the truth, and he doesn’t hear it.

⁴⁹ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 207.

But there is a problem with aligning Latimer's epistemological narrowness with that described by Cavell and Moi, because they ascribe that impoverished mode of relation to the skeptic. "Skepticism," Cavell writes, "is not the discovery of an incapacity in human knowing but of an insufficiency in acknowledging what in my world I think of as beyond me."⁵⁰ And for Moi, Cavell's "acknowledgement," "resists the positivistic model of knowledge from which skepticism is a recoil...mov[ing] beyond epistemology to raise questions of ethics and morality."⁵¹ But this is exactly what Eliot's skepticism does, as I argue throughout this chapter. The problem for Eliot is not epistemology – the pursuit of knowledge is itself a good in her fiction – but epistemology alone, without the other elements necessary for a "picture" of life.⁵²

Bertha's opacity ends just as inexplicably as it began: once they are married, the veil is lifted, and, Latimer explains, "I saw myself in Bertha's thought as she lifted her cutting gray eyes and looked at me...The terrible moment of complete illumination had come to me" (205). Terrible indeed, because the source of his desire disappears and in its place comes the knowledge he never wanted: "I saw all round the narrow room of this woman's soul—saw petty artifice and mere negation where I had delighted to believe in coy sensibilities" (205). The knowledge shared in a mutual gaze, the visual vocabulary used to describe that knowledge: these are themes we saw in Gaskell's novels, and see also throughout Eliot's fiction. "The Lifted Veil" suggests that such knowledge is dangerous. Why, then, throughout Eliot's career, do her characters desire communion

⁵⁰ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 12.

⁵¹ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 208.

⁵² George Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 248.

with other minds, and why do her novels so often proceed on the assumption that communion will lead to understanding, sympathy, and moral action?

Compare Latimer and Bertha's shared gaze, those "cutting gray eyes," with a similar moment from the end of Eliot's career. *Daniel Deronda* opens with the most recognizable scene of eye contact in Eliot's fiction, between Daniel and Gwendolen Harleth over a roulette table. The narrative's focalization alternates between these two characters as they piercingly observe one another. Daniel wonders, "Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams?" and Gwendolen, in turn, feels that "Deronda's gaze seemed to have acted as an evil eye" and finally "felt the orbits of her eyes getting hot."⁵³ They are aware of each other's gaze for several pages – it's hard to know how long in story-time – but during that time the path from eyes to consciousness is obstructed, and the characters are left to wonder what those eyes could possibly mean. In contrast to Latimer's revulsion, Daniel and Gwendolen feel a mutual attraction that persists throughout the novel. Juxtaposing these two scenes suggests that, for Eliot, visual-epistemological limits are a good thing, a sustainable source of fascination and a reliable basis for a sympathetic, ethically responsible relationship. It is not communion which generates sympathy, but the always impossible desire for communion, the earnest attempt at an impossible goal. Likewise, it is not always knowledge which corresponds to goodness, but the ardent, endless search for truth and understanding.

George Levine and Amanda Anderson have both argued, in different but importantly related ways, that in her writing Eliot strives for, or represents characters striving for, epistemological, ethical, and political ideals that are desirable in the abstract

⁵³ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Earl L. Dachslager (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005), 3–6.

but impossible in practice. Both Anderson and Levine have suggested that, just because an author aspires to a detached or objective perspective that is *prima facie* out of reach, it does not necessarily mean their text is politically or ethically nefarious. What these arguments reveal is that those perspectives and knowledges are prevented from being nefarious *precisely by their being impossible to achieve*.⁵⁴ Within the epistemological and ethical economies of Eliot's novels, the impossibility of certain ideals is *as necessary* for ethical existence as the ideals themselves. "The Lifted Veil" offers the clearest depiction of what happens when epistemological ideals are actualized, but Eliot's realist novels also exhibit an investment in the continued unachievability of the very ideals that motivate them. Knowledge is only desirable in Eliot's novels insofar as it is just out of reach.

Eliot's novels are invested in the ultimate unavailability of knowledge and are therefore skeptical, but it does not follow that they are anything other than realist. That realism and skepticism seem at best an odd pair and at worst incompatible is a consequence of the ways that literary critics have chosen to historicize the realist novel within the context of broader intellectual and philosophical traditions. Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* influentially argues that the realist aesthetic of eighteenth-century novels follows in part from seventeenth-century empiricisms.⁵⁵ Watt's thesis has been broadly contested, but it remains influential in part because the similarities between realism and empiricism are striking. Eliot's novels are routinely discussed as actively

⁵⁴ See Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance* and George Levine, *Dying to Know*.

⁵⁵ In particular, Watt looks to René Descartes and John Locke for examples of a philosophical discourse that eschews received knowledge in favor of individual experience. "[T]he novel," he argues, "is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation." Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000 [1957]), 13.

participating in – and often revising – the empirical tradition extending from René Descartes and John Locke through David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, George Henry Lewes, Auguste Comte and others.⁵⁶ This historical contextualization forces us to understand realism in general and Eliot's novels in particular as inherently optimistic with respect to the possibility and desirability of gaining knowledge. Cartesian epistemology, in particular, is entirely inhospitable to skepticism: in the first *Meditation*, Descartes uses skeptical critique to rid his mind of the possibility of skepticism and to find, instead, the grounding for certain knowledge.⁵⁷ While it is true, as Watt argues, that Descartes and Locke were major influences in the development of modern epistemology, they were not the only ones: loosening the bonds between realism and this particular tradition of empiricism allows us to understand the epistemological project of Eliot's novels anew, as a project that embraces a Montaignian skepticism against which such empiricism was a reaction.⁵⁸

One way to think of the epistemological difference between Descartes and Montaigne is to notice that Descartes' method looks forward to a kind of closure (clear and distinct ideas, certain knowledge), whereas Montaigne's operates propulsively without looking forward to any future state in which it will stop (except death: "our end is in the next world").⁵⁹ Nineteenth-century epistemologists like Comte, looking forward to

⁵⁶ For example, see George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*; Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*; Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian" in *Representations* 90.1 (2005), 61-74; Peter Garratt, *Victorian Empiricism*.

⁵⁷ Richard Popkin tellingly entitles one of his chapters, "Descartes: Conqueror of Scepticism." *The History of Scepticism*, 143.

⁵⁸ In Stephen Toulmin's (correct, I think) view, "[t]he opening gambit of modern philosophy [was], not the decontextualized rationalism of Descartes...but Montaigne's restatement of classical skepticism...with all its anticipations of Wittgenstein." Descartes' rationalism was a conservative response to Montaigne's skepticism. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 42.

⁵⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 1211.

the moment when “the philosophical system of the modern world will be founded at last in its entirety,” resemble Descartes in their search for method.⁶⁰ But “The Lifted Veil” aligns with Montaigne, rejecting the idea that inquiry should be conducted with epistemological closure in mind. It might even be said that Eliot extends Montaigne’s non-closural skepticism, because the tale refuses its characters and its readers the relieving thought that ongoing narrativity will cease upon death. “The Lifted Veil” opens with a more explicit promise of closure than anywhere else in Eliot’s fiction: “The time of my end approaches” (175). Readers are led to expect that the end of the story will coincide with the end of the storyteller, that closure will be enacted in the most lurid and final way. But while Latimer can foresee everything that will happen to him, including his own death, he cannot foresee death itself: he can envision the activity of *dying*, but not the state of *death*. In his visions of dying, “my thought stays in the darkness, but always with a sense of moving onward” (176). The tale ends on the very day on which he has foreseen his death to take place, but without achieving the final closure that death promises – Latimer still anxiously awaits the end. Having begun with a proleptic promise of death, the story ends with a retrospection upon that prolepsis: “I know these figures I have just written, as if they were a long familiar inscription. I have seen them on this page in my desk unnumbered times, when the scene of my dying struggle has opened upon me” (216). The ending lines repeat the promise without completing it, opening up to narratability (“dying struggle”) rather than closing down. “The Lifted Veil” thus reminds us that, even in a story that expects and desires closure, the cessation of narrative, the end of the story, is not really an end at all. As we will see in the next two sections, *Adam*

⁶⁰ Auguste Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy*, 13.

Bede and *Middlemarch*, like “The Lifted Veil,” cannot be defined by their closure because, I argue, they never (quite) close. In their resistance to closure, Eliot’s novels establish an equal resistance to closed, coherent, and totalizing worldviews and replace explanatory mechanisms (like empiricism) that tend toward system-building with ones that acknowledge the ongoingness of narrative and the ethical imperative of ceaseless inquiry.⁶¹

IV

According to critical commonplace, Eliot’s novels become more complex (and more interesting) as her career progresses.⁶² The relationship between her early and late works has been defined in stark terms: naivety vs. knowingness, simplicity vs. complexity, traditional vs. modern. In my view, Eliot’s career is not a study of contrasts but of development: I understand Eliot’s late novels to more fully embody and express thematic and formal qualities that are already present in the early novels. As I argue in this section, *Adam Bede* thematizes skepticism in moments of erotic eye contact, depicting a series of scenes that together illuminate the dangers of dogmatic certainty, and this thematization is formalized in the novel’s deeply ambivalent relationship to

⁶¹ Writing about *Daniel Deronda*, George Levine acknowledges the “distrust of rationality that is a recurrent aspect of George Eliot’s passion for knowledge” and ascribes to her a “conviction that mere rational and systematic thought was dehumanizing.” In making the argument that Eliot exhibits an anti-dogmatic narrative skepticism, I seek to carry these insights forward. *Dying to Know*, 186, 192.

⁶² In an illustrative example whose concerns are close to my own, Sally Shuttleworth juxtaposes the “naïve view of truth” inherent to *Adam Bede*’s realism with the more complex epistemology expressed in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. Shuttleworth constructs a clear and convincing narrative, describing a trajectory from a novelistic practice modeled on the “passive observation” of a natural historian to one modeled on the active construction of the experimental scientist. Equally representative is Josephine McDonagh’s claim that “[u]nlike the late works, which are noted for their complexity and coherence as intellectual inquiries, the early works tend to have a much less highly-wrought and finished quality to them. Indeed, in terms of their presentation of ideas, the early works often appear to be contradictory and incoherent.” Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1. “The Early Novels,” in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 42.

closure. Because it is *ambivalent*, and because *Adam Bede* seems to follow the patterns of a traditional, closural novel, its skepticism can only be said to be partially formed. But when it is read alongside *Middlemarch*, *Adam Bede*'s skeptical elements take on greater prominence.

Many of *Adam Bede*'s readers have, indeed, read it as a traditional, closural, realist novel. This has been true since the book's initial publication: in a letter to Eliot, Jane Welsh Carlyle wrote, "[i]t was as good as *going into the country for one's health*, the reading of that Book was!—Like a visit to Scotland *minus* the fatigues of the long journey."⁶³ More contemporary critics tend to focus on how the novel's "attention to detail gives solidity to [Eliot's] representation of the past"; or to suggest that *Adam Bede* offers an "empirically knowable, concrete reality"; or to argue that its "creed of realism, with its naïve view of truth, is based on the belief that the novelist, like the scientist, records a pre-given world."⁶⁴ In these readings, closure, realism, and empiricism, aligned and resonant, characterize this quintessential mid-Victorian novel.

There is, to be sure, a great deal of truth in these readings, but it is possible to read *Adam Bede* as working against these very qualities and instead reaching for, if not fully articulating, the skepticism we find in "The Lifted Veil" and which would later be fully developed in *Middlemarch*. *Adam Bede* looks nostalgically back to the pre-industrial English countryside at the turn of the nineteenth century (it is very precisely dated from June 18, 1799 to late June 1807). Its eponymous protagonist, a carpenter, and his counterpart in moral exemplarity, the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris, both embody a

⁶³ *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 72.

⁶⁴ Josephine McDonagh, "The Early Novels," 43; Rae Greiner, "*Adam Bede*: History's Maggots," in *A Companion to George Eliot*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 106; Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, 1.

Carlylean gospel of work: the first two chapters, which introduce us to Adam and Dinah, are tellingly titled “The Workshop” and “The Preaching.” Broadly speaking, *Adam Bede* is a marriage plot with Adam and Dinah the two characters gradually brought together despite several obstacles, including Adam’s desire for the self-absorbed milkmaid Hetty Sorrel and Dinah’s too-dogmatic commitment to preaching as a vocation. In its thematic economy as well as in its plotting, Eliot’s novel brings together these two initially disparate elements – vocation and desire – and ultimately conceptualizes legitimate desire *as* a vocation (as opposed to illegitimate desire, which, as we see occur between Hetty and Arthur Donnithorne, can have disastrous consequences).⁶⁵ It is only once desire has been conceptualized as a vocation – as something to be lived, rather than fulfilled – that these two characters can responsibly enter into a conjugal and sexual relationship. In this section, I emphasize the ways in which skepticism and narrativity are informing elements of the vocational desire that *Adam Bede* holds up as an ethically responsible orientation toward the world and toward others.

Adam Bede is a novel at odds with itself. In one respect, it is a novel with a severe disciplinary tendency. Hetty Sorrel is disciplined for her self-absorption, Arthur Donnithorne for his callous inattention to the consequences of his actions, Dinah Morris for her refusal to conform to norms of gender and sexuality, and Adam Bede for his erotic attachment to Hetty. Finally, Hetty and Arthur are disciplined *out of the story* and Dinah and Adam are disciplined *into* conjugal marriage. In another respect, however,

⁶⁵ These are the two key terms of Dorothea Barrett’s *Vocation and Desire*. She lends a startling breadth to these terms, writing that they “are intended to embrace, between them, all human need. They are therefore meant in their widest possible senses, and they form a dichotomy that is implicit in all George Eliot’s work.” But while vocation and desire initially form a dichotomy in *Adam Bede*, the novel works to ultimately synthesize them. *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot’s Heroines* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 17.

Adam Bede is a novel about erotic desire, the epistemological limits of empirical observation, and the ethics of narrativity. It is easy to forget, when we think about *Adam Bede* as a paradigmatic realist novel, that its plot involves sex, violence, and a criminal trial for child-murder.⁶⁶ How one interprets the novel depends upon what details one chooses to prioritize: the melodramatic middle filled with love triangles and infanticide, or the realist ending of heterosexual, companionate marriage and reproduction. I argue, by way of synthesis, that the novel's middle works to train its readers how to interpret its ending: by the time we reach the novel's conclusion, it has involved us in a habit of skepticism toward the very possibility of conclusiveness and closure. The novel's relatively tranquil ending is not tranquil because anything ends – not because it has achieved closure – but because the novel has trained us not to expect closure, but to expect and to feel comfort (*ataraxia*) in ongoingness and narrativity.

Adam Bede accomplishes this training, first of all, through its visual and ocular thematics; it returns throughout to images of eyes, glass, and mirrors.⁶⁷ As soon as we meet any characters, we are offered descriptions of their eyes and their gaze: the narrator notes “the keen glance” of Adam’s “dark eyes that shone from under strongly marked, prominent and mobile eyebrows” (6); his brother Seth’s “glance, instead of being keen, is confiding and benignant” (6); Dinah’s “grey eyes” (21) confront the “slow bovine gaze”

⁶⁶ Rae Greiner notices this oddity, too, arguing that for Eliot “the ordinary *was* strange” and “*Adam Bede*’s empirically knowable, concrete reality provides the setting for a meditation on complex historical processes that are surprisingly odd and unpredictable.” “*Adam Bede*: History’s Maggots,” 106.

⁶⁷ In her reading of *Adam Bede*, Caroline Levine identifies vision as the central trope of the novel: “the problem of the visual absorbs the project of acting ethically, and there may be no more important lesson in the novel than the task of seeing well.” She argues that *Adam Bede* seeks to define an ethical feminine sexuality, and that the act of seeing, in addition to being seen, is an important aspect of that sexuality. While Levine’s reading of *Adam Bede* is valuable for its attention to the novel’s visual thematics, I will be arguing that the novel has a more skeptical relationship to visuality than Levine acknowledges. *The Serious Pleasure of Suspense*, 106.

of the “slouching labourer[s]” who come out to hear her preach (17). Dinah’s eyes, in particular, receive a great deal of attention:

There was no keenness in the eyes; they seemed rather to be shedding love than making observations; they had the liquid look which tells that the mind is full of what it has to give out, rather than impressed by external objects...The eyebrows, of the same color as the hair, were perfectly horizontal and firmly penciled; the eyelashes, though no darker, were long and abundant...The eyes had no peculiar beauty, beyond that of expression; they looked so simple, so candid, so gravely loving, that no accusing scowl, no light sneer could help melting away before their glance. (21)

Adam Bede’s narrator separates many of the novel’s characters into two categories: those who are *keen*, like Adam, his mother Lisbeth Bede, and Mrs. Poyser, and those who are not, like Seth and Dinah.⁶⁸ Keenness is a productively plural concept, and the narrator makes full use of its range of meanings: it can refer to acute perceptiveness, as it does when the narrator juxtaposes Adam’s “bright keen glances” (40) with Dinah’s *expressive* eyes; it can mean *severe*, as when Adam’s “keen strong face became suffused with a timid tenderness” when he imagines spending time with Hetty (105); it can refer to the strength and sharpness of an emotion, as when Adam “keenly” feels “the danger that some other man might step in and get possession of Hetty’s heart and hand” (189); and it can refer to sharp intelligence, as when the narrator describes Adam as having “that mental combination which is at once humble in the region of mystery, and keen in the region of knowledge” (46).

⁶⁸ The narrator introduces us to Lisbeth by mentioning that “her dark eyes are somewhat dim now” and that “[t]here is the same type of frame and the same keen activity of temperament in mother and son, but it was not from her that Adam got his well-filled brow and his expression of large-hearted intelligence” (36). And Mrs. Poyser is compared to Dinah in this way: “The family likeness between her and her niece, Dinah Morris, with the contrast between her keenness and Dinah’s seraphic gentleness of expression, might have served a painter as an excellent suggestion for a Martha and Mary. Their eyes were just of the same colour, but a striking test of their difference in operation was seen in the demeanour of Trip, the black-and-tan terrier, whenever that much-suspected dog unwarily exposed himself to the freezing arctic ray of Mrs. Poyser’s glance” (67).

In keeping with its multivalence, keenness is also morally ambiguous in *Adam Bede*'s pages. In Adam's vocation, keenness, the ability to observe and measure details properly, is a clear virtue, and Adam's keenness informs his honesty and uprightness. But it can also be a stumbling block – Adam, for example, is so confident in his own understanding that, “whenever [he] was strongly convinced of any proposition, it took the form of a principle in his mind” and consequently “he had too little fellow-feeling with the weakness that errs in spite of foreseen consequences” (190). His keen desire for Hetty comes into conflict with this confidence in his own keen intelligence, and Adam himself falls into precisely the position he fails to forgive in others: he fails to foresee, despite a wealth of evidence, that his desire for Hetty will not develop in the way he hopes it will. And if Adam's keenness prevents “fellow-feeling” and leads to a particular blindness, Dinah's unkeenness has precisely the opposite effect, leading first and foremost to sympathetic relationships with everyone she comes into contact with. Her vocation as preacher, in contrast to Adam's, seems to require a lack in the same qualities that make Adam a good carpenter and moral agent. This moral ambiguity is most clear in the schematic chapter “The Two Bed-Chambers,” in which Eliot's narrator juxtaposes Hetty's self-absorption with Dinah's selflessness in a pair of tableaux: Hetty stares at a mirror, admiring herself and fantasizing about Arthur Donnithorne while, in the very next room, Dinah gazes out her window at the cows and pasture before closing her eyes, “that she might feel more intensely the presence of a Love and Sympathy deeper and more tender than was breathed from the earth and sky” (142–143). In its characterization of Adam and Dinah, the novel uses the concept of keenness to collect and measure the

relationships between vision, knowledge, desire, and morality, and those relationships are very unstable.

These questions become particularly salient when characters share moments of eye contact, when vision, desire, knowledge, and morality are the most muddled. Through much of the novel, both Adam and Arthur feel intense erotic desire for Hetty, whose “great dark eyes with their long eyelashes touch one so strangely, as if an imprisoned frisky sprite looked out of them” (138). These frisky eyes prove too tempting for Arthur, who, when he encounters Hetty alone in the Fir-tree Grove, takes advantage of her ignorance of the fact that he will never marry her: “Hetty turned her head towards him, whispered, ‘I thought you wouldn’t come,’ and slowly got courage to lift her eyes to him. That look was too much: he must have had eyes of Egyptian granite not to look too lovingly in return” (124). After this fateful moment, the narration slips into a present tense free-indirect style focalized through Arthur, thus capturing his anxious, erotic excitement: “Ah, he doesn’t know in the least what he is saying. This is not what he meant to say. His arm is stealing round the waist again, it is tightening its clasp; he is bending his face nearer and nearer to the round cheek, his lips are meeting those pouting child-lips, and for a long moment time has vanished” (124). This erotic glance leads directly to the melodramatic elements of *Adam Bede*’s plot: Arthur and Hetty have sex and conceive a child, Hetty, afraid of the consequences, runs away from home when her pregnancy becomes apparent, and, finally, abandons the unwanted child to its death.

The language of this passage indicates that, for Arthur, this is a closural moment. Both Arthur and Hetty, leading up to their meeting, have been anxiously awaiting their next encounter and, for both, their sexual desire comes to a satisfying end as the desired

object is obtained. Focalized through Arthur's perspective, the narrative voice recapitulates this closural thinking by shifting to the present tense, suggesting for the moment that story has caught up to discourse, and that this is the telos toward which the narrative has tended, even suggesting that "for a long moment time has vanished" (124). But even that "moment" during which time and narrative stand still, we are reminded, is but a "moment" still very much in time. And, cruelly, the characters themselves are made aware of time's incessant forward march as they, again, "looked at each other, not quite as they had looked before, for in their eyes there was the memory of a kiss" (125). Returning to its dominant past-tense third-person narration, the novel reminds us that Arthur is wrong: in this case, erotic fulfilment results not in closure but in scandalous narratability. But even Arthur, perhaps recognizing the change in Hetty's gaze, feels some discomfort that won't quite go away, so he devises a plan to "go and tell Irwine [the rector]—tell him everything. The mere act of telling it would make it seem trivial; the temptation would vanish" (126). Once he comes to this decision, "there was no more need for him to think" (126).

Although Arthur so insistently attempts to convince himself that he hasn't done anything wrong, it is impossible to read this scene without perceiving his understanding that he has. Arthur *does* know that Hetty anticipates that this budding romance will lead to legitimate courtship and marriage, and he *does* know that he will disappoint her in that anticipation – he even considers that the Grove is "haunted by his evil genius," a consideration which surely gives the lie to his anxious self-reassurance that it will all turn out fine in the end (125). The narrator continues in cutting psychonarration, "[h]e no sooner fixed his mind on the probable consequences of giving way to the emotions which

had stolen over him to-day...than he refused to believe such a future possible for himself" (125). Crucially, Arthur *has knowledge* of Hetty's mind and of the likely future – knowledge of her desire and her expectations coupled with an understanding that his own actions will have unpleasant consequences – but *he denies that knowledge*, feigning skepticism. This unearned skepticism, more self-justifying than questioning, leads him to the dogmatic certainty with which the chapter ends: his confident assertion that he can stop thinking. This is skepticism in bad faith, and it is skepticism used in the service of closure rather than narrative. What's more, it reveals one of the dangers of dogmatic certainty, reminding us of the superior morality of acknowledging uncertainty.

The erotic glance shared by Arthur and Hetty recurs in different form and with different actors throughout *Adam Bede*. It next occurs between Hetty and Adam: at this point, Hetty and Arthur have ended their affair and Hetty, having realized she won't be able to marry into the aristocracy, decides to accept Adam's proposal instead: "Hetty looked up at him, and smiled through her tears as she had done to Arthur that first evening in the wood...Adam could hardly believe in the happiness of that moment" (323). If the scene with Arthur and Hetty associates, only to then dissociate, erotic fulfillment and closure, this scene with Hetty and Adam represents the closural promise of the marriage plot. In the following chapter, ominously titled "The Hidden Dread," the narrator describes Adam's experience of the slow "progress towards the longed-for day" of their marriage (325). At the beginning of this chapter, we might expect a rather straightforward marriage plot: slow, gradual progress which will end ultimately in companionate marriage.

What's so amazing about their interaction, though, is that Hetty never verbalizes her response. She simply answers with her eyes and her actions: "Hetty did not speak, but Adam's face was very close to hers, and she put up her round cheek against his, like a kitten....Adam cared for no words after that, and they hardly spoke through the rest of the walk" (323). By emphasizing the silence of this interaction, and by describing instead their shared gaze, the novel presents to us a plausible example of mental communion – of two minds achieving knowledge of one another, very much like what we saw in Gaskell's novels. But this is also an ironic moment, for we know that Adam seriously misunderstands what is *actually* going on in Hetty's mind. The narrator informs us that "[s]he wanted to be caressed—she wanted to feel as if Arthur were with her again" (323). We are watching in real-time as Adam entirely misunderstands Hetty's mind, mistaking her displaced erotic desire for conjugal bliss. If that wasn't enough, that this scene echoes the earlier eye contact between Hetty and Arthur should give the reader an ominous sense of caution and doubt. Adam's assumed, but incorrect, knowledge looks forward to closure, just as Arthur's assumed, but self-deceiving, skepticism did. In both cases, the characters are in for a rude awakening.

If Adam thinks of his engagement to Hetty as a closural promise, his bride-to-be has the exact opposite reaction. She knows by now of her pregnancy, and she is tormented by the difficulties this will present on her road to a life of conjugal happiness and comfort, if not bliss and erotic excitement. As the chapter proceeds, Hetty replaces Adam as the focalizing center, and the narration again enters the present tense: "Hetty, in her red cloak and warm bonnet, with her basket in her hand, is turning towards a gate by the side of Treddleston road...Her great dark eyes wander blankly over the fields like the

eyes of one who is desolate, homeless, unloved, not the promised bride of a brave, tender man” (327–328). In this moment, Hetty plans to kill herself, and thereby to achieve another kind of closure (just as Latimer assumed his death would bring closure) in order to avoid the narratability of her engagement. Here, too, the narration recapitulates this closural promise by entering the present tense. In this case, like the earlier one, we and the characters are forcibly made aware of the elusiveness of closure.

This scene repeats one more time towards the novel’s end, again with different actors. Through all the novel’s melodramatic twists and turns, it builds towards the closure of companionate marriage between its two moral exemplars, Adam and Dinah. We see the same series of gestures when Adam approaches Dinah to propose: “What a look of yearning love it was that the mild grey eyes turned on the strong dark-eyed man! She did not start again at the sight of him; she said nothing, but moved towards him so that his arm could clasp her round” (475). After Dinah describes her love for Adam, he “paused and looked into her sincere eyes” once again before they agree to marry one another (475). *Adam Bede* thus presents us with a triplet of near identical scenes which take on a goldilocks structure. The first encounter between Arthur and Hetty is uneven in terms of class and power, the second, between Hetty and Adam, is uneven in terms of desire, and the third, involving Adam and Dinah, just right. The narrator even goes so far as to assert, as Adam approaches Dinah, “[h]e knew quite well what was in her mind” (475). This scene, in contrast to its twins, is indeed a closural moment, and that closure is explicitly epistemological in nature.

It is in this sense that *Adam Bede* finally conforms to the marriage-plot template, seeming to neatly resolve the erotic, epistemological, and narrative problems that have

plagued its characters up until this closural moment. But there are crucial differences between this scene and the earlier moments of eye contact that demonstrate Eliot's skepticism. First, this passage has an entirely different resolution than the other two, and not only because it actually ends in marriage. Their scene continues: "What greater thing is there for two human souls, than to feel that they are joined for life—to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting?" (475). Far from promising closure, or the end of narrative and temporal process, the coming together of Adam and Dinah promises yet more narratability: labor, sorrow, pain, "unspeakable memories." The list of verbs that defines their future life together, it should be noted, includes both of their original vocations ("labour" and "minister"). It is in this moment that the novel's treatment of the erotics of eye contact and of the ethical necessity of vocation come together, casting the relationship between Adam and Dinah *as* a vocation of desire. In other words, these characters do not achieve tranquility because closure and stasis have replaced narrative and process, but because they no longer *expect* that to happen. They are resigned to a life of narratability, a life of endless work and desire that, in that resignation, becomes comfortable. In this respect, *Adam Bede* offers a different way to conceptualize the relationship between narrative and closure: closure, such as it is, exists *within* narrative.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ This reading of *Adam Bede* thus corresponds to a great deal of work within the tradition of narrative theory which emphasizes that closure, if it does exist, can happen in unusual and incomplete ways, and which organizes narrative texts in ways that don't correspond to the narrative-closure dichotomy that we sometimes see. See Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 79-124; D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents*; and Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel*.

This third scene of eye contact is also distinctive because of what it omits, and these omissions correspond to its ultimate commitment to narrative over closure. It does not shift into the present tense, and it is not focalized through a single character's perspective. In the two earlier scenes, those grammatical shifts recapitulated the characters' expectations of closure: Arthur's sense that he would end his flirtation with Hetty and make an end of it, in the first instance, and Hetty's suicidal plans, in the second. In both cases, the grammatical shift shuts down any sense of futurity; from the characters' perspectives, the novel juxtaposes the closural promise of erotic fulfilment and of death with the narratability that brought the characters to the point of their meeting. But the scene with Dinah and Adam does precisely the opposite: it looks forward to an eminently narratable future.

Over the course of the novel, Adam and Dinah have loosened the characteristics that initially made their coupling impossible. Through his disastrous engagement to Hetty, Adam comes to accept that the world is full of unforeseen consequences. Dinah has loosened her grasp of preaching as a vocation and made room in her life for another. Both have replaced a dogmatic worldview with a suppler one, one more responsive to the world's uncertain processes and narratives. They have agreed, together, that their desire for one another is not an end-in-itself but rather a process, an ongoingness which, although certain things like death and sorrow can be predicted, has truly unforeseeable consequences. *Adam Bede* chastens desire, putting it in what Eliot thinks is its proper place. The fulfillment of Adam's desire does not mark the end of anything. It does not bring the narrative voice into the present tense. *Adam Bede's* traditionally closural ending

does not close down narrative so much as it closes down a particular idea of narrative: the kind that looks forward to closure.

Adam Bede is not a skeptical novel because it rejects the possibility of knowing other minds, or the possibility of knowledge itself. It is a skeptical novel because the possibility of knowledge is contextualized within a broader, ethical framework. Just as closure marks, not the fulfillment of desire, but the continuation of the right *kind* of desire, so it marks, not the achievement of knowledge, but the correct relation between epistemology and ethics. When the narrator tells us, in the closing scene, that Adam “knew quite well what was in [Dinah’s] mind” (475), Eliot gives us an anti-Latimer, the other side of the epistemological drama staged in “The Lifted Veil.” He knows what is in her mind, but that knowledge does not exhaust his possible interest in her, as it does for Latimer.⁷⁰ Knowledge is chastened, too: not thrown away, but reduced and reincorporated into a “picture” of “life.”⁷¹

V

Adam Bede arrives at a somewhat protean novelistic skepticism through its thematization of eye contact, knowledge, and desire and through its ambivalent closure; *Middlemarch* self-consciously develops this skepticism, informing its pages with a consistent Pyrrhonism. Eliot accomplishes this by relentlessly, and at times cruelly,

⁷⁰ This tolerance for knowledge is characteristic of Montaigne. In his essay “On Friendship,” or “On Affectionate Relationships,” he writes, for example, “[a]ll the arguments in the world have no power to dislodge me from the certainty which I have of the intentions and decisions of my friend...Our souls were yoked together in such unity, and contemplated each other with so ardent an affection...that...I [knew] his mind as well as I knew my own.” It is not the claim itself, but the spirit in which it is offered and its place within the broader work, that makes it skeptical: knowledge of another mind is no big deal when epistemology is only part of the picture. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 213. Something similar happens, as we have seen, in Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say*, 238-266.

⁷¹ George Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 248.

disillusioning her protagonist Dorothea Brooke of her faith in empiricism and her sense that knowledge of the world is there to be had if only she could see the world correctly. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot's engagement with these ideas is subtler – instead of approaching the possibility of knowledge through sensory experience thematically by repeating scenes of eye contact (although such scenes certainly do recur in *Middlemarch*) – she constructs a dense metaphors of vision that structures Dorothea's worldview, and consequently structures our own interpretation of the novel. When that system of visual metaphors is destroyed, so too is the novel's faith in the possibility of visual knowledge. In its place, *Middlemarch* offers a skeptical worldview informed by ongoingness and by an ethics of uncertainty.

Critics as diverse as Henry James and Gillian Beer have recognized that *Middlemarch*, more than Eliot's other novels, is self-consciously about science and epistemology. Ranging from its subtitle ("A Study of Provincial Life"), to the scientific metaphors in its Prelude ("the varying experiments of Time" [3]), to the fact that one of its protagonists is an experimental medical scientist, there is good reason to suppose that *Middlemarch* engages with Victorian intellectual culture in unique ways, even among Eliot's densely intellectual novels.⁷² Such scientific themes find their more domestic counterparts in the novel's consistent visual trope: just as in *Adam Bede* the narrator lingers on the "keen glance" of Adam's "dark eyes" (6) and Dinah's "grey eyes" (21), and as in *Daniel Deronda* we are recurrently reminded of Daniel's "gravely penetrating" "critical glance" (288-9), so in *Middlemarch* the narrator repeatedly draws our attention

⁷² See Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots* for the classic analysis of scientific language in *Middlemarch*. For a recent and compelling reading of Eliot that extends Beer's, see Ian Duncan, "George Eliot's Science Fiction," in *Representations* 125 (2014), 15-39.

to characters' eyes, emphasizing in particular "Miss Brooke's large eyes [which] seemed, like her religion, too unusual and striking" (9) and Casaubon's "deep eye-sockets" (16), which are so deep, it would appear, that he cannot actually see the world or any of the books in it from such a distance (and which, because of their depth, resemble those of John Locke, that paragon of empiricism). Their relationship blooms, if such a word can be used to describe it, from the difference in their visual capabilities: "I have been using up my eyesight on old characters lately," Casaubon laments; then, hopefully: "the fact is, I want a reader for my evenings" (17). Who better than Dorothea, with her large, unusual eyes, to read in the night? Vision becomes the catalyst for their bizarre courtship and their disastrous marriage. I take their budding companionship as the starting point for an analysis of the novel's visual metaphors through which Eliot uncouples the empirical association between visual experience and general knowledge. What begins as a stable relationship between characters – I'll lend you my eyes in exchange for your knowledge – quickly deteriorates, and the novel's visual figurations follow a similar trajectory from stable meaning to uncertainty, from empiricism to skepticism.

The scientific themes of *Middlemarch* famously annoyed James, who wrote in an 1873 review that "*Middlemarch* is too often an echo of Messrs. Darwin and Huxley." But this annoyance was counterbalanced by the fascination James felt for Dorothea. In his review, he comes face to face with Eliot's most celebrated heroine: "we seem to look straight into the unfathomable eyes of the beautiful spirit of Dorothea Brooke."⁷³ James, ever discerning, fixes his gaze on the site of *Middlemarch*'s greatest source of narratability: Dorothea's own hungry gaze, urgently, ardently seeking truth and

⁷³ Henry James, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 965, 959.

understanding. “Her mind was theoretic,” the narrator tells us, “and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there” (8). This “later-born Theresa[.]” (3) has a mind too grand for the mundane reality of 1830s middle-England, too ambitious for the restrictions imposed on her as a woman, and too epic for the genre of the realist novel. She seeks to escape her limited perspective and to achieve what Amanda Anderson might call a “detached” view of greater clarity, that “lofty conception” (8), from which she can understand her place in the world.⁷⁴

Middlemarch’s greatest tragedy is that Dorothea’s eyes fall on the person least likely to offer such a perspective, but her lackluster marriage to Casaubon forms the basis of *Middlemarch*’s skepticism. Dorothea’s fascination with Casaubon is built on a foundation of visual metaphors which prove, as their relationship deteriorates, to have been illusory. In the novel’s early chapters, she becomes preoccupied with the particular vantage from which Casaubon, she presumes, can see the truth: after he proposes that she learn Greek in order to help with his *Key to All Mythologies*, the narrator explains that “it was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek. *Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly*” (64; my emphasis). In Dorothea’s mind knowledge is figured as a place, a “province” that offers a unique perspective from which the world can be seen. We imagine Casaubon surveying his domain, squinting to make out the most distant and small truths, but always with an eye on the whole. This is the ultimate empirical fantasy, and one which isn’t for a moment disturbed by the fact that,

⁷⁴ For an analysis of “detachment” specific to *Middlemarch*, see David Kurnick, “An Erotics of Detachment: *Middlemarch* and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice,” in *ELH* 74.3 (2007), 583–608.

not only can Casaubon *not* see the truth, as we already suspect and as Dorothea gradually apprehends, he can't see much of anything at all. There is a real irony here: Dorothea supposes Casaubon can see the truth when she is the one contracted to see for him. That irony is amplified not only by the fact that Dorothea, too, is "short-sighted" (30), but also by the passage's evident sarcasm in its epistemological doubling down: the truth alone is not enough, it must be "more truly" seen.

Through Dorothea's ardor, her desire to achieve knowledge, *Middlemarch* constructs a complex set of visual metaphors, each contributing to an overall empirical orientation that associates vision with general knowledge. Knowledge is a place and a perspective, as we have seen, but it is also a light. Marrying Casaubon "would be like marrying Pascal," Dorothea thinks, "I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by" (29). Light becomes one of the novel's most prominent visual tropes: "what lamp was there but knowledge?" Dorothea reflects. "Surely learned men kept the only oil; and who more learned than Mr Casaubon?" (86–7). Or, in a passage that combines metaphors of light and of elevated perspective:

To reconstruct a past world, doubtless with a *view* to the *highest* purposes of truth – what a work to be in any way present at, to assist in, though only as a *lamp-holder*! This *elevating* thought *lifted her above* her annoyance at being twitted with her ignorance of political economy, that never-explained science which was thrust as *an extinguisher over all her lights*. (18; my emphasis)

Dorothea is in good company here because the metaphorical association of light and knowledge is as old as empiricism itself, visible throughout the history of science and epistemology. Dorothea imagines knowledge and truth with the aid of a remarkably consistent, and historically warranted, cluster of metaphors: the truth is illuminated by the lamp of knowledge, which can only be lit by "learned men" (87) who are situated at the

requisite elevation, who have a “lofty” enough “conception” (8) for that truth to be “more truly” (64) seen.

But Dorothea’s empirical metaphors get her into trouble by leading her to a position of dogmatism. The novel’s metaphors of light and perspective come together in a passage that expresses the extent to which Casaubon has, somehow, convinced Dorothea that he is an absolute authority on all matters concerning knowledge of the truth: “Here was a man who could understand the higher inward life, and with whom there could be some spiritual communion; nay, who could illuminate principle with the widest knowledge: a man whose learning almost amounted to a proof of whatever he believed!” (22). The visual metaphors with which Dorothea thinks about knowledge and truth all come together in a crescendo of epistemological ecstasy whose peak of intensity casts Casaubon as an absolute authority. Casaubon is deified: not only can he *see* truth, he can (“almost”) create it just by thinking it.

“Almost,” but not quite. That all-important qualifier reads like a brief narratorial interruption in a passage otherwise written in free-indirect style, as if to puncture Dorothea’s unwarranted epistemological optimism with a knowing wink. For Dorothea’s faith in Casaubon’s authority, her well-lit castle in the sky, is constructed on a rotten foundation: the mistaken empirical belief that knowledge is directly available, that truth inheres in the world, that it is there to be discovered if you only look in the right ways. Dorothea is recapitulating, though from a different angle, the epistemological sins of Casaubon, in his search for the key to all mythologies, and Lydgate, in his equally quixotic search for the primitive tissue. Both dogmatically assume that their scholarly inquiries will find a single explanatory mechanism for the entirety of history and of life,

that one key or one tissue can answer all our questions. Crucially, these quests are framed using the very same metaphors that guide Dorothea's thinking. For Casaubon, "[h]aving once mastered the true position and taken a firm footing there, the vast fields of mythical constructions became intelligible, nay, luminous with the reflected light of correspondences" (24); Lydgate, meanwhile, enters the "dark territories of Pathology" in order to search for "that fundamental knowledge of structure which just at the beginning of the century had been illuminated by the brief and glorious career of Bichat" (147). As Peter Melville Logan points out, Lydgate sticks close to empiricism, "insist[ing] that representation must be firmly tied to empirical experience in order to be truthful"; his dogmatic approach to medical science, which, creative though it may be, depends upon the empirical availability of a primitive tissue, dooms his project to failure.⁷⁵

Middlemarch relentlessly insists that Dorothea's dogmatic belief in Casaubon's empirical authority is also tragically naïve. It is during their honeymoon trip to Rome that the novel's visual metaphors shift away from dogmatic empiricism and toward something far less certain. The narrator describes Dorothea's strongly felt reaction to Roman architecture in the following way:

Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years. Our moods are apt to bring with them images which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze; and in certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St. Peter's, the huge bronze canopy, the excited intention in the attitudes and garments of the prophets and evangelists in the mosaics above, and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina. (193–194)

⁷⁵ Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century British Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 172.

On the previous page, Dorothea had thought of Rome as “the city of visible history” (192), and the transition from this optimistic description to her seeing St. Peter’s as “a disease of the retina” is a strong indication of Dorothea’s growing dissatisfaction, not only with her marriage to Casaubon, but with the visual-epistemological worldview that has led her to it. In this passage, light emanates not from Casaubon’s lamp of knowledge, but from a “magic-lantern” that creates “strange associations” that are so defamiliarizing because they upset the empirical expectations Dorothea brings to bear on the world. The chapter’s epigraph deepens this sense of visual shock:

A child forsaken, waking suddenly,
Whose gaze afeard on all things round doth rove,
And seeth only that it cannot see
The meeting eyes of love. (192)

The enjambment of the epigraph’s third line is telling, suggesting for a moment that Dorothea, certainly unable to see the “eyes of love,” may not be able to see at all.

Dorothea’s traumatized vision receives a further shock when she unexpectedly encounters Will Ladislaw, Casaubon’s young, Romantic, handsome cousin. Dorothea is distracted in one of Rome’s many museums, and as soon as Will enters, the novel’s visual metaphors, so near and dear to our disillusioned protagonist, are painfully, erotically refracted:

The first impression on seeing Will was one of sunny brightness, which added to the uncertainty of his changing expression...When he turned his head quickly his hair seemed to shake out light, and some persons thought they saw decided genius in this coruscation. Mr Casaubon, on the contrary, stood rayless. (209)

This devastating contrast between the bright, “sunny” Will and the dull, “rayless” Casaubon clearly illustrates that Dorothea’s implicit trust in Casaubon’s authority has diminished irreparably. But it also signals a shift in light’s figural meanings: displaced

entirely from Casaubon's lamp to a "magic lantern" (194) and now to Will's coruscating hair, light no longer emanates from a secure source. If light formerly signified certainty and knowledge, it now "add[s] to the uncertainty" of Will's "changing expression."

Will's "abundant and curly" hair (188), shaking out light in whichever direction its abundance and curliness allows, offers an image that radically destabilizes what was once a stable metaphor. Dorothea's expectation that vision is an empirical tool cannot survive the intensity of her dissatisfaction with Casaubon and of her desire for Will. Dorothea's love plot – her affection for Casaubon based in empiricism, and for Ladislaw in a desire that discredits it – is the agent of *Middlemarch's* skeptical critique.

It is striking, given the cruelty of Dorothea's epistemological disillusionment, that the narrator relies upon very similar visual metaphors. But the narrator proves to be more knowing:

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel...will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a center of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles around that little sun. (264)

This passage refers specifically to Rosamond, who sees divine providence behind the series of accidents leading to her encounter with Lydgate. As D. A. Miller has pointed out, though, the narrator is ironically commenting on the act of narration, which creates seeming, but false, order out of chaos.⁷⁶ The narrator displays a more earnest awareness of this fact elsewhere, as for example in the comment that "we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them" (85). Together, these passages suggest that the narrator is aware of their own entanglement within visual-epistemological thought patterns, and that the narrator's famously

⁷⁶ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents*, 157.

ambitious and gnostic assertions are made with the full knowledge that they may, in fact, be wrong. Instead of assuming that the novel has contradictory tendencies, or that it proceeds on paradox, or that it is self-undermining – as for example J. Hillis Miller does when he points to the “incoherent, heterogeneous, ‘unreadable,’ or nonsynthesizable quality of the text of *Middlemarch*”⁷⁷ – I argue that the narrator’s participation in a visual-epistemological system of metaphors that has proven illusory demonstrates a self-awareness that narratorial interpretations of the diegetic world are sometimes wrong, or sometimes only partly correct, or only correct some of the time. The narrator *is skeptical*.

Catherine Gallagher has gone so far as to name Eliot “the nineteenth-century novelist who is most skeptical about” the “categorical thought” underlying the realist novel; but, as Gallagher argues, that skepticism exists alongside Eliot’s deep investment in the project of realism.⁷⁸ Similarly, Eliot’s skepticism contributes to a renewed visuality that does not entirely do away with empiricism but rather recombines and redirects its elements and energies. Existing at both diegetic and discursive levels, skepticism becomes one of *Middlemarch*’s presiding ideas. The famous window scene offers the clearest example of how that skepticism informs a renewed visuality. As Dorothea stares out of her window contemplating once again her place in the world and how she can do some good in it, the novel’s consistent visual trope takes on a new character:

On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving – perhaps the shepherd with his dog.

⁷⁷ J. Hillis Miller, “Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*,” in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley, *Harvard English Studies* 6 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 144.

⁷⁸ Catherine Gallagher, “George Eliot: Immanent Victorian,” 63. And Linda S. Raphael argues that *Middlemarch* is characterized by a skepticism which “reinforces the idea that one’s world is not entirely knowable.” For Raphael, *Middlemarch*’s skepticism stops, as it were, at the level of narrative discourse. She traces “the relationship between a novel’s skepticism about knowledge and its own authority to represent that skepticism.” While our arguments are largely sympathetic, I suggest instead that *Middlemarch*’s skepticism extends to the narrative discourse. *Narrative Skepticism: Moral Agency and Representations of Consciousness in Fiction* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), 63-4.

Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (788)

In this moment, Dorothea learns to see properly, in a way that is participatory and constructive of ethical relationships. D. A. Miller suggests that this scene represents Dorothea's newfound capacity to make meaning out of what she sees: "Meaningfulness and life are in this moment reconciled, immanently charged with one another," he writes.⁷⁹ But the meaningfulness that Miller notices Dorothea noticing is rather different from the meanings he has been discussing. This is an ethical meaningfulness, distinct from the semiotic or, in my terms, the epistemological conundrums that have so consistently baffled Dorothea. Dorothea does not simply look out through her window with the epistemological goal of knowing her place in the world, of knowing the world itself; she feels, intuitively, in the act of looking, "part" of that world, which is a remarkably unspecific description but one that carries with it a powerful conviction. She adopts a position of necessary ignorance, working with that ignorance instead of against it: "perhaps" she sees this, perhaps that. The indefinite articles ("a man," "a woman"), already unspecific, shift as the passage proceeds toward even less definite descriptions: "figures," "the world," "manifold wakings," "life." While she feels the world as a whole, she will never be able to understand it, to know it as such. But this does not lead her to the conclusion that she should stop trying; it leads her to keep looking.

Visual experience gives rise to Dorothea's new relation to the world, but that experience and the figures through which it is expressed are given new meaning by the skeptical attitude, adopted here by Dorothea and, by extension, *Middlemarch*, which puts

⁷⁹ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents*, 177.

final, ultimate wholeness and understanding out of reach – she is not quite sure *how* to look, but she knows that she should, somehow. And Dorothea’s visual engagement with the world is ongoing; like *Adam Bede* and the famously non-closural conclusion to *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*’s ending is defined by its narrativity, not by closure. Or, as D. A. Miller has convincingly shown, what closure there is happens in several different, not quite commensurate ways. The novel’s iconic last words are entirely indefinite, promising future narrative, even history: “the growing good of the world” (838). These lines imply a wholeness impossible to understand *as* a whole, but that does not mean *Middlemarch* wants us to stop trying: *Middlemarch* doesn’t just want its readers to look, it wants them to keep looking; not just to view, but to review; it wants readers to revise, to keep desiring and inquiring, as any good skeptic would. What’s more, the novel suggests that we have an ethical responsibility to do so. Eliot’s skepticism is characterized by a mode of visibility that is at once epistemologically and ethically driven. It is epistemological insofar as we are enjoined to acknowledge an inevitable lack of understanding, and to keep that lack in view; it is ethical insofar as we are reminded that in the act of looking informed by such skepticism, we find our place as part of an ineffable whole, as one among others. Eliot thus develops a skepticism in which epistemological questions (what do I know?) and ethical questions (how should I live?) are the same questions.

In this respect, Eliot’s skepticism is in striking agreement with Cavell’s acknowledgement. This agreement may come as a surprise, though, since Cavell’s work is organized around a carefully articulated aversion to skepticism, one grounded in a fear,

not that we cannot know other minds, but that we might not acknowledge them as such.⁸⁰ Moreover, in line with Cavell, Eliot's commentators have faithfully maintained that she is not a skeptic, whether they use that term explicitly or not. For example, in her classic reading of *Middlemarch* Beer concludes that the novel's thematization of relationality through the figure of the web "allows a sense that everything is knowable and even that it may finally become known."⁸¹ More explicitly, Suzy Anger asserts that, because "[f]acts matter to" Eliot and because she remains committed to the pursuit of knowledge, "she is not a skeptic."⁸² What, then, do we gain by recognizing Eliot's novelistic project as skeptical, when we could productively understand it within a more straightforwardly Cavellian framework? Highlighting the counterintuitive agreement between Eliot's skepticism and Cavell's acknowledgement does not only reveal an underappreciated intellectual lineage, and it does not only help to define more precisely the salient qualities of Eliot's skepticism (although it does both of those things) – it also allows us to articulate a view of skepticism, not as solipsistic, but as a stance or way of life that enables the commensuration of epistemological and ethical registers.

It is important to recognize Eliot's skepticism as skepticism because only then can we fully grasp the scope of the intellectual work her novels attempt. In his *Blue Book*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Cavell's primary influence, castigates most philosophy for its "craving for generality," a craving he attributes to "our preoccupation with the method of science."⁸³ Wittgenstein's point here can be taken as a major one for Cavell: he wants

⁸⁰ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 12.

⁸¹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 154.

⁸² Suzy Anger, "George Eliot and Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 83.

⁸³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1965), 18.

philosophy to attend to the ordinary, the specific instances of daily life that create meaning. The ordinary, as Cavell puts it, is “the truth of skepticism,” which I take to mean the truth the skeptic is always looking for and always overlooking.⁸⁴ Cavell even explicitly celebrates Eliot’s novels (along with those of Jane Austen) as examples of “anti-philosophy” because, “in confronting everyday life with itself,” they takes “a contrary course to philosophy’s chronic flight from the ordinary.”⁸⁵ But there can be no doubt that throughout her career Eliot craved generality. Her narrators are famously didactic, generalizing and even sometimes universalizing certain claims about humankind. Eliot’s novels combine a deep suspicion toward dogmatic thought with an equally deep commitment to general truths. Framing skepticism not as a position or a dogma but a process – as a function of narrative and plot – reveals the extent to which her novels seek to formulate a way of life that can encompass and accommodate all the contradictions therein. We see this project not only in *Middlemarch*’s Dorothea plot, but throughout Eliot’s fiction, in the earnest but always fraught pursuits of truth and goodness of Dinah Morris and Adam Bede, or of Romola, or of Daniel Deronda. Her novels seek to reconcile an epistemological desire for general knowledge with an ethical obligation to the particulars of everyday life – her skepticism is what achieves this tenuous reconciliation.

⁸⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 122-24.

Discursive Acknowledgement in Thomas Hardy

It is the on-going—i.e., the ‘becoming’—of the world that produces its sadness. If the world stood still at a felicitous moment there would be no sadness in it.

—Thomas Hardy

I

In the second chapter of Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887), without context or explanation, we overhear John South say to his daughter Marty, “I should be alright for to-morrow if it were not for that tree!” What are we to make of that statement? Marty responds, “[t]he tree again – always the tree! Oh, father, don’t worry so about that. You know it can do you no harm.” But John will not be comforted: “that tree will soon be the death of me,” he says.¹ Later, Marty explains to the local doctor, Edred Fitzpiers, “[t]he shape of it seems to haunt him like an evil spirit. He says that it is exactly his own age, that it has got human sense, and sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him, and keep him as its slave”; and she adds, in a shockingly straightforward way, “[o]thers have been like it afore in Hintock” (101). What are we to make of *that* statement? That John South has been obsessively afraid of other trees? Or that other trees have “sprouted up on purpose to rule” other people in Hintock? The ambiguity in Marty’s sentence is vital, because it jams up our initial assumption that John South is merely imagining things. But what makes John South’s uncanny fear of the elm outside his house most strange is the fact that *he’s right*: when his neighbors conspire to cut the tree down in an attempt to cure his fear, the narrator reports, again with disconcerting matter-

¹ Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1998), 15. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. Epigraph: Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (Athens: University of George Press, 1985), 210.

of-factness, “his eyes rose from their hollows till the whites showed all round, he fell back, and a bluish whiteness overspread him...He lingered through the day, and died that evening as the sun went down” (102). As far as we are able to tell, the person dies because the tree does. None of this makes any sense, and yet the novel proceeds as if it did.

The surreal elm tree plot enters the novel sideways, in a doubly mediated conversation only partly overheard by a third character, and from there on it is never quite explicable in the terms the novel provides. The entire episode fits oddly, and the oddness of fit demands investigation. Why would the novel introduce an episode that it cannot explain? This chapter endeavors to make sense of this episode’s senselessness, and to argue that this easily overlooked subplot is essential to Hardy’s vision of the novel: I suggest that we understand John South’s relation to the elm as what Cora Diamond, in an essay about Stanley Cavell, calls a “difficulty of reality”: “experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability.”² To be sure, we could understand the tree itself to be a “difficulty of reality” for John South, but I am more interested in the ways that the relationship between them becomes a difficulty for the novel’s discursive reality, something resistant to its representational codes. The relationship between John South and the elm is a limit case for narrative representation; it rebuffs the novel’s genres of explanation. *The Woodlanders* posits a diegetic event that cannot survive the translation to discourse. Narrative and plot fail to make it make sense.

² Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, by Stanley Cavell et. al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 45-6.

“Among the earliest acclaimers of *The Origin of Species*,” sympathizer with lifeforms from the human to the insect, the living to the fossilized, landscape enthusiast, Thomas Hardy has inspired as much if not more anti-anthropocentric criticism than any other Victorian writer.³ Such criticism has predominantly focused on his animals – horses, sheep, dogs, pigs, birds, insects – who are made to suffer in various and memorable ways throughout his fiction. Hardy’s defense of animal rights and his representation of animal suffering undoubtedly deserve the critical attention they have received. It is only in recent years, however, that critics have begun to recognize the need to consider with equal care his plants, especially his trees. William A. Cohen and Elizabeth Carolyn Miller have, from different angles, made compelling cases that Hardy’s trees are vital parts of his evolutionary and ecological thinking.⁴ In Michael Millgate’s biography, we are told that Hardy refused to trim the trees around his house “for fear of wounding them.”⁵ In *The Woodlanders* the narrator describes “two overcrowded branches in the neighboring wood, which were rubbing each other into wounds, and other vocalised sorrows of the trees” (16).

In an essay on human-animal relations in Hardy’s novels, Elisha Cohn offers an informative heuristic for organizing the various ways critics have approached this topic. Cohn distinguishes between two theoretical models: the first, Deleuzian model “evokes a world...in which animals and humans appear to interpenetrate,” one characterized by

³ Thomas Hardy, *Life and Work*, 158.

⁴ William A. Cohen, “Arborealities: The Tactile Ecology of Hardy’s *Woodlanders*,” in *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 19 (2014), 1-19; Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “Dendrography and Ecological Realism,” in *Victorian Studies* 58.4 (2016), 696-718. See also John Heaney, “Arthur Schopenhauer, Evolution, and Ecology in Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders*,” in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 71.4 (2017), 516-45. While Heaney’s focus is not on trees specifically, his article fits within this general trend of considering Hardy’s representation of plant life.

⁵ Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 244.

“ontological continuity.” The second, Derridean model posits “strongly demarcated boundaries” between humans and animals and is characterized by an ethic of difference and sympathy.⁶ This distinction aptly encompasses a great deal of Hardy criticism, including Cohn’s own Derridean-inflected argument. In his essay on Hardy’s trees, for example, William Cohen explicitly draws on Deleuze to articulate the human’s “non-differentiation from its environment”: “one way to read” *The Woodlanders*, he argues, “is to regard the trees as people and the people as trees.”⁷ By contrast, Anna West draws on Derrida to emphasize moments of human-animal encounter in Hardy’s novels and to suggest that, in such moments, Hardy extends the idea of “the absolute unknowability of the other” to animals, and therefore demands that animals factor into our moral considerations as well as humans; “empathy” is a key word for her, as “sympathy” is for Cohn.⁸ In framing our relations with other creatures on an axis of knowability and unknowability, the Derridean model articulates its ethics epistemologically, just as the Deleuzian model does so on the basis of ontology. Here, I want to propose that Hardy’s elm tree demands a third model: drawing on the philosophy and criticism of Stanley Cavell – specifically, his concept of “acknowledgement” – I argue that Hardy’s ecological and evolutionary vision is grounded in ontological difference, and that it deliberately deviates from any conventional epistemological framework. Hardy’s novels are structured by what I call *discursive acknowledgement*: discursive, because it originates in the novel’s discourse and is directed toward a range of diegetic people,

⁶ Elisha Cohn, “‘No insignificant creature’: Thomas Hardy’s Ethical Turn,” in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 64.4 (2010), 496-501.

⁷ William A. Cohen, “Arborealities,” 2, 6.

⁸ Anna West, *Thomas Hardy and Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 9.

animals, plants, landscapes, and objects. Hardy's novels give structural and formal expression to the ethical mode of relation he values.

In elaborating the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy, Cavell laments an overreliance on epistemology in the philosophical tradition. Offered as a mode of relation that both includes and exceeds a relation of knowing, Cavell's "acknowledgement" involves "put[ting] ourselves in another's presence," "allowing ourselves to be seen"; it involves "revealing ourselves" as finite, vulnerable beings, recognizing that finitude and vulnerability in others, and forming a community grounded in that shared quality.⁹ Acknowledgement, unlike the Deleuzian model Cohn describes, is grounded in difference. Which is not to say it requires that we ignore our shared materiality, but rather that we accept our separateness from one another and the "sense of unknownness" such separateness entails.¹⁰ And, unlike the Derridean model, it contends that our relation to the world and our relations with each other should not be approached epistemologically, as if we required certainty in order to believe in the world or to believe someone when they speak. Cavell reframes an epistemological problem as a social/ethical one – or, rather, he argues that the social/ethical problem has been masquerading as an epistemological one all along. It is my contention that Hardy, especially but not exclusively in the elm tree plot, similarly seeks to jolt us out of a familiar epistemological framework. In *The Woodlanders*' elm tree plot, then, Hardy disavows narrative as a mode of explanation *and* epistemology as a mode of relation – he rejects the twin premises of narrative knowing.

⁹ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 333.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

Just as Gaskell and Eliot both prefigure and add dimension to the concepts of Cavell and ordinary language philosophy, so Hardy's discursive acknowledgement both anticipates and complicates Cavell's ethics. One difference is scalar: in Hardy's novels, many more things call out for acknowledgement than in Cavell – not just people, but animals, plants, landscapes, and even inanimate objects.¹¹ It is also a difference of form. For Cavell, acknowledgement predominantly happens between actual people in the world; but it also happens in theater – that is, audiences can acknowledge theatrical characters – where Cavell emphasizes the “humanness” of those characters.¹² Cavell is explicit, however, that acknowledgment does not happen in novels, where, he says, events are presented “as having happened”; the narrator “insert[s] a break” in the present – the co-presence between two minds – that is necessary for acknowledgement.¹³ Narrators get in the way of the readers' acknowledgement. In my view, however, it is possible to understand Hardy's narrators not as preventing acknowledgement but as enacting it – that is, the discursive perspective, framed as a representation of a (more or less) human mind, gives expression to the acknowledgement to which, in Hardy's view, everything from Tess Durbeyfield to the smallest insects to architectural structures are entitled. Hardy shows us what happens when a novel does not just thematically represent, but is formed according to, acknowledgement.

¹¹ Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie suggest that Cavell's humanism – which in this case refers to the fact that he only really writes about humans – is one of the major reasons literary scholars have been slow to accept his work. His focus on the human is at odds with “an anti- or post-humanist dispensation” in literary studies. They respond to this idea by invoking “Cavell's oft-repeated point that there is in fact nothing more human than the desire to transcend the human (to become, even, somehow inhuman or post-human).” In other words, the post-humanist impulse is itself deeply human, in Cavell's terms. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, “Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism,” in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Eldridge and Rhie (New York: Continuum, 2013), 4-5.

¹² Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 272.

¹³ *Ibid*, 335.

Hardy's novels mark a significant development in the move away from narrative knowing and toward a critical epistemology. By all accounts, Elizabeth Gaskell was a natural storyteller and, as I have argued, her occupation as novelist was informed by a faith in the epistemological potential of narrative. And one needn't read much George Eliot to see that she, too, took narrative very seriously as both an epistemological and ethical mode of thinking and writing, even if, as we have seen, it is skepticism that makes it work. Hardy presents a different case. He exhibits what Ruth Bernard Yeazell calls an "impulse to retreat from storytelling."¹⁴ Famously, he would much rather have been a poet, and he abandoned the novel for the poem as soon as his reputation and career were established. He began writing novels because it was a more viable commercial option, but his heart was only half in it: his first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, which was never published, had the noncommittal subtitle "A Story with No Plot: Containing Some Original Verses."¹⁵ Nevertheless, I argue in this chapter that Hardy saw unique epistemological promise in the novel even if, counterintuitively, he separated that promise from both narrative and knowing.

Instead of locating the novel's intellectual function in its narrativity, Hardy establishes that function in discursive acknowledgement, a mode of relation that refuses knowing – one whose subject is willing *to not know*. Discursive acknowledgement, framed against the idea of narrative knowing, is formalized in Hardy's novels as stillness, in moments when the plot pauses.¹⁶ One way to understand *The Woodlanders*' elm tree

¹⁴ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 135.

¹⁵ Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy*, 101.

¹⁶ My argument is in partial alignment with Elisha Cohn's in *Still Life: Suspended Development in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Cohn focuses on moments of "inattention and absorption" in nineteenth century novels, including Hardy's; these moments "ambivalently dilate and delay

plot is to notice that the novel does not seem at all concerned with making sense of what happens: it does not approach this particular story with an epistemological framework. Hardy invokes only to reject the idea that narrative is – and should be – “an instrument of knowledge.”¹⁷ Rather, Hardy uses the novel as way to cultivate nescience, introducing characters and events not to *explain* them, but to explore a sense of mystery and of “unknownness.”¹⁸

But Hardy is not a skeptic in the way Eliot is: he does not advocate ongoing inquiry in the face of nescience, but rather a reframing of the problem and, hence, the solution. The problem for Hardy is not the absence of knowledge but rather the sense of confusion and disorientation that can arise from seeking knowledge that is unavailable. If, for Eliot, we cannot know but we should keep trying anyway because the desire to know is an ethical way to engage with the world and with others, then, for Hardy, we cannot know so we should reformulate our mode of engagement. In that respect, Hardy’s novels are even closer to Cavell than Eliot’s. But Hardy’s connection with ordinary language philosophy raises a new set of questions: what would it mean to acknowledge a nonhuman animal, a plant, an inert object? “Few people seem to perceive fully as yet,” Hardy wrote in a letter to the Humanitarian League:

that the most far-reaching consequences of the establishment of the common origin of all species is ethical; that it logically involved a re-adjustment of altruistic morals by enlarging as a *necessity of rightness* the application of what has been called ‘The Golden Rule’ beyond the area of mere mankind to that of the whole animal kingdom.¹⁹

plots of self-culture.” I attend to similar moments of delay, but they are characterized not by inattentiveness but acute attentiveness, not affective lyricism but historical awareness. *Ibid.*, 3,5.

¹⁷ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 13.

¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 266.

¹⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Life and Work*, 376-77.

Hardy writes novels that acknowledge more than other minds: they acknowledge those *other* other minds – those of “the whole animal kingdom” – but his project is more radical than that: Hardy understands acknowledgement as a mode of relating to plants and nonhuman objects and, even more unusually, to ecology, that impersonal, complex, multi-scalar phenomena. In *The Woodlanders*, it is neither John South nor the elm that most concerns that novel, but the relation between them: neither character nor tree is inexplicable in itself – even John South’s fear can be understood – but together they are mystifying.

Hardy’s Darwinian interest in ecology, so visible in *The Woodlanders*, finds its corollary in the epistemological challenges presented by evolutionary history. This chapter argues that Hardy posits acknowledgement – which he formalizes as discursive acknowledgement – as a mode of relation to both evolutionary history and ecology. I explain Hardy’s disenchantment with narrative as a mode of explanation and his compensatory, nonnarrative aesthetic of stillness. The moments of stillness his novels emphasize – and the acknowledgement they make possible – set him apart from his contemporaries in the sciences, who adopted the idea that narrative can lead to ecological and evolutionary knowledge. This chapter also disrupts some dominant ecocritical paradigms, which recapitulate the nineteenth-century idea of narrative knowing. Hardy saw two major problems with narrative knowing: first, which I further elaborate in a reading of *The Woodlanders* (where I return to the elm tree), if narrative is meant to make sense of the complexities of evolution and ecology, it fails. It oversimplifies the complexities involved. The second problem with narrative knowing, which I describe in a reading of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), is that, in oversimplifying historical

complexity, it can lead to misinterpretation, violence, tragedy, and death. In both cases, Hardy posits acknowledgement – formalized in nonnarrative stillness, when the narrator delineates, rather than reduces, recognizes rather than attempting to explain, the complexities of ecology and history – as a more appropriate framework. Hardy’s novels suggest that by framing our relation to history and ecology ethically, as acknowledgement, we avoid the confusion and even violence that can arise from framing it epistemologically.

II

Why was Hardy so down on narrative, as a mode of representation and as a paradigm for understanding history and ecology? It is one of the complexities of his thought that he recognized the narrativity of living things and of historical change – what he calls “the on-going—i.e. the ‘becoming’—of the world” – and wanted to compensate for that narrativity, because he found it to be a source of suffering, or “sadness.”²⁰ Hardy is often described as a pessimist, because, he quotes Sophocles, “not to have been born is best,” but, as he also says in the same breath, his “practical philosophy” (as opposed to his metaphysics) “is distinctly meliorist.”²¹ The world is programmed, in its “on-going,” to bring sadness, but it is possible to design an ethics set against it: “What are my books but one plea against ‘man’s inhumanity to man’—to woman—and to the lower animals?,” he asks.²² There is not only a distinction, but an opposition in his thought between metaphysics, which we have no choice but to accept, and ethics. The novel is the art form perfectly suited to capture both poles of this philosophical antinomy: like the

²⁰ Ibid., 210.

²¹ Quoted in Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy*, 379.

²² Ibid.

world, it cannot exist without narrativity, and yet Hardy's novels consistently work to mitigate it.

George Levine has made a strong case for understanding Hardy's thematization of the natural world as a form of "enchantment," a concept he draws primarily from Jane Bennett (and which, in Bennett's articulation, fits in the Deleuzian framework).²³

Although enchantment has profound explanatory power for Hardy's novels, its philosophical orientation is ultimately at odds with Hardy's ethics. As I argue in this section, enchantment involves a metaphysics of narrativity that, in the discomfort it creates for Hardy, helps to explain why he formalizes his discursive acknowledgement in moments of narrative stillness. For Levine, the paradigmatic case of Victorian enchantment is Charles Darwin, one of Hardy's primary intellectual influences and one of the supposed culprits of disenchantment; notwithstanding his occasional reputation as mere, crass materialist, Levine argues, Darwin is in fact filled with wonder at the natural world and writes prose capable of instilling that wonder in others. The development of Darwin's theory of natural selection, far from rationalizing and so deadening the mechanisms of life, "was an act of loving engagement with the natural world."²⁴ Levine capably reads Hardy as a writer who, like Darwin, loves the natural world, one who, though he recognizes its cruelties and injustices, writes novels formed precisely to make visible the beauty and wonder of the natural world that can sometimes be difficult to discern. Hardy, he says, recognizes "universal connectedness – both material and moral."²⁵ That joining of materialism with morality is characteristic of the discourse of

²³ George Levine, *Reading Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁴ George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 26.

²⁵ George Levine, *Reading Thomas Hardy*, 33.

enchantment. As Hardy's letter to the Humanitarian League makes explicit, it is a causal relationship: the moral connectedness of things follows from their material connectedness.

For Jane Bennett, enchantment describes an affective mode of relation, a way of experiencing the world that accounts for its wondrous vitality, that leads to an ethics and a politics. In her early work, Bennett takes issue with the story that modern life is disenchanted, that science and technology, in naming and examining and controlling the world, in wresting our collective narratives away from religion and myth, have sterilized our relation to the natural world. By contrast, she articulates a "quasi-pagan model of enchantment" which mines the "ordinary" world for sites of meaning in the absence of a divinely teleological paradigm.²⁶ For Bennett, enchantment can "spill[] over into critical consciousness" and thus color our lives and our politics with "an ethic of generosity toward others."²⁷ Bennett's project of cultivating this mode of relation, with a view towards more expansive generosity, certainly aligns her project with Hardy's, to expand the golden rule.

The concept of enchantment helps to explain Hardy's sense that people, animals, plants, objects, and all things call out for acknowledgement. "Every voice in nature was unanimous in bespeaking change," Hardy writes, and his novels demonstrate again and again that it is of the utmost importance to stop and listen to those voices.²⁸ Hardy's novels implicitly distinguish between something having its history recounted for it and

²⁶ Bennett pithily defines her central term: "To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday." Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁸ Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, ed. Rosemarie Morgan and Shannon Russell (London: Penguin, 2000), 213. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

that thing recounting its history itself. In novels that are often characterized by a third-person narrator whose omniscience is demonstrated at every turn, Hardy relocates, or distributes, the agency of narration. Indeed, the narrator's authority derives in part from the ability to recognize and acknowledge the histories contained within other things. This model of enchanted materialism follows a kind of narrative logic: first, we recognize the shared materiality and vitality of all things, which recognition awakens us to the marvels all around us, expanding the horizon of our affiliations, and, finally, our enchanted relation to the world "spills over into critical consciousness" and so inflects our politics.²⁹

In her later work, Bennett elaborates the ontology underwriting her ethics and politics: "vital materiality," or the idea that what we tend to think of as inert matter has agency and life.³⁰ In this sense, Bennett's "enchantment" is characterized by a kind of ongoingness that clashes with Hardy's ethics and his emphasis on still images that disrupt plot. Bennett draws on a tradition of vitalism traceable to Lucretius and running through Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze, emphasizing the "trajectories, propensities, or tendencies" of nonhuman things.³¹ Her work forms an important part of a developing field of scholarship sometimes called "new materialism," which deemphasizes any essentializing distinctions between life and nonlife, human and nonhuman, spirit and matter. It is not uncommon for Hardy's critics to understand him as a materialist in much the same way. Elaine Scarry, for example, memorably understands Hardy to see "the earth as an extension of the human body," and, reciprocally, "human

²⁹ Jane Bennet, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 27.

³⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), vii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

beings as earth's eruption into intelligence onto its own surface."³² And William Cohen suggests that Hardy views people "as first and foremost in their bodies" which are themselves "part of and open to the world."³³ Humans, animals, plants, rocks, and all things are made of the same stuff, all part of a single ecology. We might say that in Hardy the shared materiality of diverse forms of existence justifies an ethics attuned to the suffering of animals and plants, and one alive to the potentiality of seemingly inert objects.

As Bennett's language suggests, the tradition of vitalism informing the concept of enchantment is grounded in movement, in the Aristotelian sense – in the actualization of potentiality. In a fascinating explication of this intellectual history, Elizabeth Grosz gives Darwin pride of place, suggesting that his theory of evolution "produced a new ontology" grounded in the elaboration of difference: life, a vital force that precedes and exceeds any of its predicates, is constantly undergoing a process of becoming, what she calls "self-overcoming," in which it is differentiated from itself in new and surprising ways – leading to the development of new lifeforms, new forms of collective life, and, most intriguingly, artistic creation.³⁴ For Grosz, this is how new things are created, by things never continuing to be themselves but constantly *moving*, realizing their latent potential.³⁵

³² For Scarry, Hardy's "subject is not the passage of persons through the world but the passage of embodied persons through the world." Elaine Scarry, "Work and the Body in Hardy and Other Nineteenth-Century Novelists," *Representations* 3 (1983), 199n12, 90.

³³ William A. Cohen, "Faciality and Sensation in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*," *PMLA* 121.2 (2006), 440.

³⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 4, 8.

³⁵ Life, she writes, "must be understood as the ongoing tendency to actualize the virtual, to make tendencies and potentialities real, to explore organs and activities so as to facilitate and maximize the actions they make possible. The living body is itself the ongoing provocation for inventive practice, for inventing and elaborating widely varying practices, for using organs and activities in unexpected and potentially expansive ways, for making art out of the body's capacities and actions." *Ibid.*, 20.

In a similar vein, Bennett emphasizes the “conatus” of all things, living and nonliving – their “active impulsion” – including the “vibratory” quality of roadside detritus.³⁶ Things move: we do not only share with everything else a material existence, but a material existence that is constantly changing.³⁷

This is where enchantment comes up short in explaining Hardy. He accepted the idea that everything is constantly changing as fact, but he didn’t like it, and he certainly didn’t want to ground an ethics in constant motion. “It is the on-going—i.e., the ‘becoming’—of the world that produces its sadness,” he writes in his autobiography, continuing, “[i]f the world stood still at a felicitous moment there would be no sadness in it.”³⁸ Given the paratactic quality of this text (this philosophical reflection is followed immediately by one regarding the difference between children raised in rural areas and those raised in cities), it is not entirely clear what Hardy means by this, but I think George Levine is correct in understanding this statement to implicate Hardy’s artistic vision, and the protocols of novelistic representation, in addition to his vision of the natural world: for Hardy, “art is the place where structures can be created against the ‘crass casualty’ of history.”³⁹ In other words, Hardy uses art to compensate for the lamentable “on-going” quality of the world. If Bennett and Grosz embrace the becoming of vital matter and construct an ethics, politics, and aesthetics grounded in that movement, Hardy views it as tragic and develops an ethics, politics, and aesthetics designed to counteract it.

³⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2, 5.

³⁷ It is worth noting that materialist philosophies like those discussed by Bennett and Grosz were available to Hardy, not only through Spinoza (whom we know he read) but also through his contemporaries like W.K. Clifford and John Tyndall, who elaborated their own vital materialisms.

³⁸ Thomas Hardy, *Life and Work*, 210.

³⁹ George Levine, *Reading Thomas Hardy*, 55.

III

Critics have largely agreed that *The Woodlanders* is Hardy's fullest exploration of evolution and ecology. Patricia Ingham rightly observes the "Darwinian persistence" evident in its attention to the interrelations between the human and natural worlds.⁴⁰ The protagonist, Giles Winterborne, and his companion in labor, Marty South, intuitively understand the ecological interconnectedness of things, an understanding which is manifest in their relations to the trees that constitute their native environment.

Winterborne exhibits "a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech he was operating on" (64), a sympathy made all the more urgent by the fact that those trees quite literally struggle for existence:

On older trees...huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs. Here, as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling. (52)

The Woodlanders would seem to render incomplete Hardy's own statement, made twenty-three years later, that Darwinism requires that we extend the golden rule throughout "the whole animal kingdom."⁴¹ Plants, too, demand our recognition. Felicitously, George Levine calls the abundant "nonhuman worlds" of Hardy's novels their "understory," a forest metaphor which aligns those lifeforms extraneous to plot but that receive Hardy's greatest care with the vegetable world.⁴²

These characters being woodlanders, their local economy depends upon trees. In the first chapter, Marty South is introduced as she labors to make spars, a tool made from

⁴⁰ Patricia Ingham, "Introduction," in *The Woodlanders*, by Thomas Hardy, xx.

⁴¹ Thomas Hardy, *Life and Work*, 376-77.

⁴² George Levine, *Reading Thomas Hardy*, 3.

sticks necessary for roof thatching; Mr. Melbury, father of Grace Melbury, who is unofficially engaged to Winterborne, is “the timber, bark, and copse-ware merchant” who employs Marty’s father, John South (17); and Winterborne is “in the apple and cider trade” (25), with “a marvellous power of making trees grow” and “fingers...endowed with a gentle conjuror’s touch in spreading the roots of each little tree, resulting in a sort of caress” (63-4). It in this context that we are introduced to John South’s pathological relation to the elm tree. Despite the fact that John South is a peripheral character, his death is hugely significant because he holds a life-lease on his property, which means that his lease ends when his life does. This is important not only for his daughter, Marty, but for Winterborne, too, who lives on the property.

In accounting for John South’s bizarre subplot, so at odds with Winterborne’s and Marty’s close relation to the trees, critics have focused on the macabre humor of the episode and on John South’s presumed nervous condition. William Cohen is emblematic in devoting only one paragraph to the episode, and glossing it as an “exaggerat[ion], in both pathetic and comic form,” of “the agency of trees in human affairs.”⁴³ Andrew Radford similarly understands the episode as a “macabre parody” of Winterborne’s arboreal affinities; Radford devotes more attention than Cohen to the elm, but understands John South’s fear anthropologically, as “a totem fantasy,” and psychologically, as a “neurasthenic torment,” “a neurotic fantasy,” and “arboreal paranoia.”⁴⁴ In these moments, Radford echoes Gillian Beer, who similarly frames John

⁴³ William A. Cohen, “Arborealities,” 15.

⁴⁴ Andrew Radford, “Dethroning the High Priest of Nature in *The Woodlanders*,” in *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Keith Wilson (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 316-17.

South's nervousness as an "anthropological/psychological" event.⁴⁵ But if this episode is a joke (and it is), it is not only a joke; and if it is a quirk of woodlander anthropology and psychology, it is something more than that, too. If we remember that John South claims to have been born the same year the elm was planted, then his sudden death means that he and the tree have the exact same life span. In other words, there is no scalar difference between human and tree life in this story. But this is not how things are supposed to work.⁴⁶ Moreover, the elm episode depicts an ecological interconnectedness so interconnected as to appear unnatural. As Beer puts it, South's life is "literally dependent" on the tree's. Here might be the clearest example of Cohen's claim that in *The Woodlanders* the barrier between trees and people dissolves; but instead of imagining the person/tree to be "rooted, budding, leafy, and abloom," as Cohen does in focusing on Winterborne, we have to see him as wounded, choked, and infected.⁴⁷ The John South episode evocatively exemplifies the consequences of scalar collapse: the difficulty, or the painfulness, of incorporating scalar synchronicity into our genres of understanding, and into the genre of the novel.

By its acts of literalization, John South's plot is a grotesque of the idea that ecological interrelations can be explained through narrative. But it is also a grotesque of plot's place in the novel. If we read *The Woodlanders* with E. M. Forster's pithy definition of plot in mind – "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality" – it becomes obvious that, indeed, John South's relation to the tree is pure plot: he dies

⁴⁵ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 233.

⁴⁶ Benjamin Morgan claims what is otherwise true in saying that *The Woodlanders* depicts the "overlapping but discontinuous biological temporalities of trees and persons." "Scale in *Tess* in Scale," in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 52.1 (2019), 53.

⁴⁷ Willian A. Cohen, "Arborealities," 7.

because the tree does.⁴⁸ But that is as far as we can take the explanation. One of the effects of ecological thinking is that causality becomes impossibly complex. When everything interacts with everything else in a variety of feedback loops operating on different scales, it becomes immensely difficult to say with any kind of assurance that A happened *because* B did. By imbricating the causality of plot in the far more complex causality of ecology, Hardy offers a simple plot whose form (B causes A) belies the complexity of that formula. He puts a simple act of causation on display which turns causation into a black box. And because the casual relation is one we can accept at the level of form but not at the level of content, readers of *The Woodlanders* are left with an uncanny sense that this episode should make sense but doesn't (If John South died first, would the tree have followed?). John South's death, tangential and bizarre though it may seem, repercusses loudly on the novel's main plot: Winterborne loses his position, and, consequently, Mr. Melbury reneges on his promise to allow his daughter Grace to marry him. Instead, Grace marries the philandering doctor Fitzpiers, which she soon comes to regret. The killing of the elm tree sets all of this in motion: the novel's plot takes on the confounding complexity of ecology.

What the episode accomplishes, then, is a comprehensive reduction: it reduces historical timescales, ecological interrelations, and plot to their simplest elements. Like a laboratory controlling for extraneous variables, the John South plot brings the questions of scale and narrative that so consistently organize Hardy's thinking into the starkest possible relief. Narrative scalar alignment happens here, and yet the result is poverty, decline, and death. We are left with a sense that the scalar differences between people

⁴⁸ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 86.

and trees are important; that closeness like Winterborne's is good (a closeness that grows out of difference), but a too-closeness is possible, and that a dissolution of historical and ecological distinctions between trees and people, posited here in the fictional world of "as if," would actually be counterproductive, not only because people and trees might die but also because *it doesn't make sense*. In other words, if our desire for scalar alignment is an epistemological desire, one born of the desire for historical and ecological knowledge, then the fictional reduction of scales in a plotted episode doesn't work. It is not only a *story* problem, as critics have tended to frame it by emphasizing John South's nervous condition – it is a form problem. John South's death makes clear that, for Hardy, plot and narrative are not the arenas in which the novel can adequately address the complexities of evolution and ecology.

The episode, we might say, following Diamond, is "painful in its inexplicability" – not only because it costs the lives of John South and the elm, but because it sets back the novelistic goal of articulating a way of thinking that can accommodate different historical and ecological scales.⁴⁹ *The Woodlanders* offers what might seem like an easy solution only to pull it out from under us. It insists on the reality of scalar difference and on doing the work of negotiating those differences. As the novel proceeds, moreover, the mechanisms of the close relation between humans and trees become more opaque, not clear, and any hope for an explanation dissolves. After Winterborne dies, the narrator reflects on his and Marty's close relation to the trees. I quote the passage at length to note the shifting emphases:

Marty South alone, of all the women in Hintock and the world, had approximated to Winterborne's level of intelligent intercourse with Nature....The casual glimpses which the ordinary population bestowed upon that wondrous world of sap and

⁴⁹ Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," 46.

leaves...had been with these two...a clear gaze. They had been possessed of its finer mysteries as of commonplace knowledge; had been able to read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing...together they had, with the run of years, mentally collected those remoter signs and symbols which seen in few were of runic obscurity, but all together made up an alphabet...The artifices of the seasons were seen by them from the conjuror's own point of view, and not from that of the spectator. (330-31)

This passage frames their relationship to the woods in a few different ways. First, it is “intelligent intercourse,” a phrase which implies mutuality, give-and-take, conversation; then, it is observation and reading, like learning a new language and decoding the “finer mysteries” of something telling its story but to which you cannot communicate in return; finally, it is something else entirely, not an egalitarian conversation nor the reading of a book but an act of creation (“artifice” and “conjuror” giving us two different flavors of creation). As this passage proceeds to describe Marty’s and Giles’s demystification of the Hintock woods, it becomes successively more mystifying to readers, and it leaves its epistemological framework behind. At the beginning of the long paragraph we might justly have assumed that they have labored long to learn the language of the forest; by its end, we cannot be sure they do not have the creative power of gods. Here, as with the John South episode, Hardy posits an ecological relationship that rebuffs the novel’s genres of explanation.

In “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” Derrida plays on the similarities of the first-person present tense forms of the verbs “to be” (*je suis*) and “to follow” (*je suis*); this wordplay allows a prepositional relation of adjacency (and hence difference) to inflect what is otherwise a statement of identity. The human-animal relation is for Derrida one of “absolute alterity,” but this alterity is grounded in the fact of identity – insofar as something is a human it is also an animal. The sameness implied by the verb “to be” is inflected with difference, because each individual animal is an

“unsubstitutable singularity,” a “mortal existence” that “refuses to be conceptualized” – hence their unknowability.⁵⁰ I agree with Elisha Cohn and Anna West that there is something of this Derridean ethic of otherness, framed against the Deleuzian ethic of sameness, that colors Hardy’s depiction of the human-tree relationship in these moments. The prepositional adjacency that Derrida describes seems more appropriate than the “ontological continuity” emphasized by Deleuze and William Cohen: when we see, for example, “Winterborne...being fixed to the spot by his apple-tree,” we are reminded not only of their shared qualities of “fixedness,” as Cohen reads this scene, but of their difference: Winterborne cannot greet Grace Melbury not because he cannot, as the uprooted tree cannot support itself, but because he has to support the tree. While Cohen claims that in this moment “Giles and the apple-tree are identified with each other,” I think it is more accurate to say that he and the tree depend upon one another – he for economy, the tree for staying upright – and that their mutual dependence is figured as resemblance.⁵¹

Although it is apt, however, Derrida’s model cannot quite explain what happens in Hardy’s novel because, at its core, it describes an epistemological relation. For Derrida, to include animals in our moral consideration we must recognize their *unknowability*, which, even as its negative, remains within the conceptual arena of knowledge. By contrast, Hardy’s narrator disavows a relation of knowing, preserving, or perhaps encouraging, a degree of mystery in his explanation of how exactly the novel’s sylvan subtlety works. The narrator’s description of Giles and Marty leaves readers in the

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, in *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002), 369, 378-80.

⁵¹ William A. Cohen, “Arborealities,” 14.

position of knowing that the forests' "runic obscurity" can be learned, but not knowing how; in fact, at the end of the long paragraph quoted earlier, we know less than we did at the beginning about the nature of this relationship. We are both inside and outside, allowed to partake in the enigmatic interpretation of the woods' language and creation only to the extent that such knowledge (though it might be better to call it intuition, or conjuration) can be translated into narrative discourse. Explanation is not the right way to represent Winterborne's and Marty's occult awareness. Elsewhere, the narrator displays a disinclination toward explaining a person, in much the same way: "It would have been difficult to describe Grace Melbury with precision, either then or at any time. Nay, from the highest point of view, to precisely describe a human being, the focus of a universe, how impossible!" (38). According to the narrator, the people around Grace "mainly saw something that was not she"; "the woman herself was a shadowy conjectural creature," obscured by "the outlines presented to Sherton eyes" (38-9). Here again, when we might expect the narrator to tell us about "the woman herself," the explanation we get is no explanation, but a reference to something occult, something enigmatic, and therefore something that cannot be represented in narrative discourse. Finally, we are told that she is "a shape in the gloom...whose true quality could only be approximated by putting together a movement now and a glance then, in that patient attention which nothing but watchful loving-kindness ever troubles to give" (39). A "shadowy" "shape," Grace can only be approached "approximately" by means of the proper ethical relation, one which, in this case and others, the narrator adopts and models precisely by disavowing any relation of knowing.

In my view, Cavell gives us the language to describe the ethical mode of relation modeled by the narrator more effectively than either Deleuze or Derrida. Throughout his lifelong engagement with “the threat of skepticism,” Cavell consistently argued that epistemology is the wrong framework with which to understand our relation to others. “Our relation to the world,” he says, “is not one of knowing.”⁵² *The Woodlanders* similarly suggests that a relation of knowing is inadequate to the kinds of historical and ecological enigmas that constitute life. The narrative discourse acknowledges Grace’s separateness, as well as a separateness between Winterborne and the trees with which he is so well adapted. Narrator, character, and tree do not exhibit “ontological continuity,” as Cohn summarizes the Deleuzian model.⁵³ Nor do these relationships exist within a framework of knowing, as the Derridean model, adopted by Cohn and West, suggests, with its focus on “the absolute unknowability of the other.”⁵⁴ Of course, we might say that the relationship between John South and the elm tree is unknowable, and we would be correct, but it would be the right answer to the wrong question. The elm tree plot, the mystery surrounding Winterborne’s and Marty’s arboreal affinities, and the narrator’s refusal to describe Grace Melbury all suggest that knowability, explanation, and narrative discourse may not be the most felicitous tools to describe the mode of relation Hardy values. Instead, Hardy suggests a kind of acknowledgement, where not knowability and unknowability, but presence and recognition, are the relevant concepts. *The Woodlanders’* narrator, in these crucial moments, disavows the idea of narrative

⁵² Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 48.

⁵³ Elisha Cohn, “No Insignificant Creature,” 496.

⁵⁴ According to Anna West, “Hardy leaves a margin for the unknown and unknowable.” *Thomas Hardy and Animals*, 9-12.

knowing. In the place of narrative and knowledge, *The Woodlanders* offers a structure of discursive acknowledgement – demonstrated when the narrator acknowledges without explaining the novel’s ecological relationships, or the “human being,” the “woman herself” – as the most promising way to compensate for the inexplicability of its characters and trees, and most of all the relations between them.

IV

The topic of scalar difference informs a great deal of Hardy criticism. Throughout his fiction, Hardy invokes the timescales of evolutionary and geological histories, emphasizing, like nineteenth-century naturalists and like contemporary ecocritics, the incommensurability of these scales with the scale of human life. As we have seen in *The Woodlanders*, his novels wonder whether it is possible to commensurate otherwise disparate scales, to make sense of the scalar disjunction between human life and the vast, inhuman stretches of geological time, and the equally vast networks of nonhuman life. There is some disagreement about how Hardy addresses these questions, and about how we ought to think of scales ourselves. In *Darwin’s Plots*, Gillian Beer argues that Hardy “pay[s] homage to human scale”: in scaling his novels to the individual life, Beer argues, Hardy reasserts the value and meaningfulness of a scale that was beginning to look smaller and less significant.⁵⁵ According to Beer, scales are both “absolute” and “multiple” in Hardy’s novels, which means that they overlap without interacting – they offer competing interpretive frameworks.⁵⁶ In contrast and explicit rejoinder to Beer, Benjamin Morgan has recently contended that Hardy’s novels represent relative, rather than absolute, scalar multiplicity. Instead of “aspiring to recover a stable position in the

⁵⁵ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 223.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

wake of Darwinian thought,” Morgan suggests Hardy’s novels “dramatiz[e] the impossibility of any such recovery.”⁵⁷ For Morgan, Hardy’s novels conceive of scalar multiplicity not as an intellectual problem needing a solution but as a fundamental reality of human experience. With Morgan, I understand scales in Hardy to be relative, but I also think Hardy did search for a “stable,” or at least stabilizing “position” that could ground an ethical engagement with history. Throughout his novels, Hardy formalizes the stabilization of disparate scales in moments of stillness, images that accumulate and juxtapose scales and therefore offer an opportunity to acknowledge them, without necessarily aligning or reconciling them.

For a salient example, we might look to the opening chapter of *The Return of the Native* (1878) – the point in Hardy’s career, according to his biographer Michael Millgate, when he began to think that the novel could be “an appropriate vehicle for the communication of ideas.”⁵⁸ The opening chapter, “A Face on Which Time Makes But Little Impression,” describes in memorable prose “the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath.”⁵⁹ The opening paragraphs suggest that something about the heath disrupts the experience of time: “The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon...and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight” (11). By way of illustration, the narrator imagines a “furze-cutter,” the kind of daily laborer so often taken by Hardy to exist in symbiosis with the natural world, who, looking up at the sky and down at the heath,

⁵⁷ Benjamin Morgan, “Scale in *Tess* in Scale,” 57. See also Benjamin Morgan, “Scale as Form: Thomas Hardy’s Rocks and Stars,” in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. Jesse Oak Taylor and Tobias Menley (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2017), 132-149.

⁵⁸ Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy*, 189.

⁵⁹ Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed. Lauren Walsh (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005), 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

doesn't know whether to keep working or stop, because he doesn't know whether it is day or night. We are asked to contemplate the landscape through the rhythms of daily labor. The diurnal passage of day into night and night into day are inscribed onto the landscape, but falsely. The heath obfuscates those rhythms, preferring instead the "moonless midnight," when "the obscurity in the air and the obscurity in the land closed together in a black fraternization toward which each advanced half-way" (11-12). It is at midnight that the heath "tell[s] its true tale" (11).

The diurnal timescale of human labor does not suit the heath, which in "tell[ing] its true tale" reaches into the deep past, telling of its nearly unimaginable antiquity. It is a "great inviolable place" with "an ancient permanence": "The untameable, Ishmaelish thing that Egdon now was it always had been. Civilization was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation" (12-14). Even as the heath disowns the human timescale of daily labor, the narrator, in acknowledging that disavowal, reinstates the human scale by anthropomorphizing the landscape, giving it a "face" and a "garment." Metaphors such as these have often been understood as aspects of Hardy's commitment to the material continuity between the human and natural worlds, but in this instance such symbiosis seems out of reach: the furze-cutter's need to know the time of day and the narrator's attempt to dress the heath in human garb are in varying degrees thwarted by the heath's own telling, which opens out into a history so deep and so slow that it would appear to be unchanging. It is perhaps in response to the heath's resistance to such interpretation that the narrator reaches toward the mythological: it is "titanic," the "new Vale of Tempe," "Ishmaelish" (12-13). Here myth serves as the outermost extent

of what can still be considered the human scale, the origin stories that have made human existence meaningful.

Hardy's chapter dramatizes a push-and-pull between the human scale and the geological. The narrator's anthropomorphizations certainly make sense of the heath for the reader, but they are also contested as soon as offered. Through this interpretive wrangling, Hardy insists that the heath's histories, while manifestly *there*, need to be properly read in order to be properly understood, and that such reading is often beyond the scope of human intelligence (constrained as it is by the human scale). It is not that the heath does not in certain ways conform to the diurnal rhythms of the human scale, it is that those rhythms coexist with and shade into a different scale. In other words, history on a human scale is *in* the heath – "though the gloom had increased sufficiently to confuse the minor features of the heath, the white surface of the road remained almost as clear as ever" (14) – but there are other histories in the heath as well. One of the reasons that "the relationship between a person or object and its history is infinitely complex," as Laura Otis puts it, is that persons and objects have more than one history that operate on incommensurate scales.⁶⁰

But the heath's ancient scale anchors what is otherwise a confounding chaos of histories. "To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon," the narrator posits,

between afternoon and night, as now, where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathland which filled the whole circumference of its glance, and to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, *gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New.* (14, my emphasis)

⁶⁰ Laura Otis, *Organic Memory: History and the Body in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 162.

Although the heath's "ancient permanence" (14) is part of the accumulation of historical scales that creates an interpretive dilemma, it is also the compensatory static image that at least to a certain degree resolves it. It is a backdrop against which it is possible to measure, for example, the (not quite as) ancient history of the road cutting across it, "which branched from the great Western road of the Romans, the Via Iceniana, or Ikenild Street" (14). What this opening chapter demonstrates, then, is that even when a landscape "tell[s] its true tale" (11), and even, perhaps especially, when an interpreter as canny as Hardy's narrator is there to listen, what results is a potentially mystifying accumulation of incommensurate scales and a push to acknowledge, rather than understand by consolidating or aligning, those histories. To listen properly to the landscape's telling gives "ballast" to the interpreter; its most ancient history can frame our sense of history and of our place in it. Notably, Hardy's chapter consists entirely of the narrator's monologue. The narrator attempts, with varying degrees of success, to make sense of the heath by means of different interpretive frameworks: daily labor, anthropomorphism, myth, and geology. The point is not that the novel can corral each of these frameworks, or organize them in a self-consistent way, but that it acknowledges all of them, giving voice to the heath's voiceless materialization of its own histories. Hardy's novel acknowledges the heath, and that acknowledgement, in turn, stabilizes an otherwise unstable relation to history. For Cavell, "[a]cknowledgement goes beyond knowledge in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge": just as acknowledgement entails knowledge, so, in Hardy, acknowledgment leads to historical awareness.⁶¹

⁶¹ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 257.

Something similar happens in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), where Hardy lingers lovingly over a barn. Like many things in Hardy, this barn is old – four hundred years old, in fact. And, what is most important, its history is legible to the naked eye: the barn’s “functional continuity” is obvious to any beholder, “the permanence of the idea which had heaped it up” a cause for appreciation (126). Even among Hardy’s novels, which are so attentive to material objects and their histories and so prone to intellectualized narratorial commentary, this description stands out for its elevated tone: better, because of its longevity, than “either the church or the castle,” the barn metonymically represents that most important of human institutions: “the defence and salvation of the body by daily bread is still a study, a religion, and a desire” (126). One gets a sense that “still” is the most important word in that sentence, that what is most admirable about agricultural labor is that it “still” ensures our survival; unlike the church or the state, with their many revolutions, agriculture exhibits “continuity” and “permanence,” recapitulated here by the novel’s lingering over a still image, stilling the plot for several pages. Moreover, the barn distills the long history over which its existence has spanned, its “remnants of mediaevalism” counterpoised by an equal “modernism” (126). The longevity and the stillness of the barn offer an opportunity, not to reconcile historical scales or to offer knowledge of historical process, but rather to collect it, or contain it, to render visible its many aspects.

Like the heath in *The Return of the Native*, the barn’s age and stillness both disrupt the experience of history *and* compensate for that disruption. The barn does not project a positivist record of fact, whereby we can observe its qualities in order to learn what it might have been like to live in the fifteenth century. Hardy’s is not an antiquarian

interest in remnants of the past. Viewing the Weatherbury barn, rather, is like viewing a “picture of today in its frame of four hundred years ago,” one which

did not produce that marked contrast between Ancient and Modern which is implied by the contrast of date. In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. The citizen’s *Then* is the rustic’s *Now*. In London twenty or thirty years ago are old times: In Paris ten years or five. In Weatherbury three- or four-score years were included in the mere present” (127).

The barn, like the heath, serves two historical functions that move in opposite directions, that, together, demonstrate the historical drama at the heart of Hardy’s novelistic project. First, the barn connects the past and present – “Ancient and Modern” – in a way that is unusually clear. It is praised for that reason. Second, however, its historical “continuity” is juxtaposed to other experiences of history, endemic to and contained within different geographical spaces, which means that its historical clarity is no clarity at all, since it is one among many available histories. The barn’s continuity is not praiseworthy because it offers a definitive historical record – not because it offers historical knowledge – but because, like the heath, it offers “ballast” at the same time that it renders visible the relativity of history.

What this passage makes clear, with its visual figuration of a relativistic history, is that Hardy’s historical sensibility is not grounded in narrativity. Theorists like Hayden White and Fredric Jameson have articulated what history looks like when it is understood as narrative – a historiographical paradigm which, I argue, differs in important ways from Hardy’s. For White, history itself is not narrative; rather, in historiography, it is emplotted according to a specific set of genres and expectations, *narrative* history being one mode among others. Narrativity, he suggests, imbues history with “imagined” closure

and moral meaning, revealing our “desire” for formal and moral coherence.⁶² Narrative therefore imposes its own form – one with specifiable ideological content – on the raw materials of history. For Jameson, by contrast, although “history is *not* a text, not a narrative” but an “absent cause,” the act of interpretation reveals history’s essential “narrativization in the political unconscious,” and in so doing it allows us to “approach...the Real itself.” Like (or *as*) the unconscious, history’s narrativity is both there (as noumenon, the Real) and absent (as phenomenon), available only through indirect observation.⁶³ According to Jameson, Marxism reveals that “the human adventure is one,” made up of “vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot.”⁶⁴ Together, White and Jameson isolate a question of central importance for historiography: is history inherently narrative, or is narrative something we add to history?⁶⁵

The potential narrativity of history was a live question in nineteenth-century Britain, too, as naturalists employed the inherently narrative concept of “development,” or evolution, to plot the history of life.⁶⁶ Hardy’s fascination with what Martin Rudwick calls “deep history” and with the dense ecological interconnections implied by Darwinian

⁶² Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 1-25.

⁶³ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 35. Jameson’s suggestion that history both is and is not a narrative depends upon, in addition to the language of psychoanalysis, the dialectical reasoning he inherits from Lukács, for whom the proper (i.e. realist) narrativization of “appearance” – that which “manifests itself immediately and on the surface” of history – allows it to “penetrate the laws governing objective reality.” Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, by Theodor Adorno et. al. (London: Verso, 2007), 33, 38.

⁶⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 19-20. White glosses Jameson’s argument as a theory of “narratological causality,” whereby a historian recruits the past “in such a way as to make of the present a fulfillment of...[its] promise.” *The Content of the Form*, 149.

⁶⁵ For helpful elucidation of this historiographical problem, see Matthew Garrett, “Philosophies of History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. Matthew Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 87-101; and Joshua Clover, “Genres of the Dialectic,” in *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017), 431-450.

⁶⁶ As Gillian Beer observes, “because of its preoccupation with time and with change evolutionary theory has inherent affinities with the problems and processes of narrative.” *Darwin’s Plots*, 5.

theory is evident in nearly everything he wrote.⁶⁷ The revolutions in both geology and evolutionary theory during the nineteenth century lent a new narrative quality to natural history. Before the nineteenth century, in fact, natural history was not a historicist discipline, which is to say it generally did not interpret its objects of study in the context of historical change.⁶⁸ But nineteenth-century developments in the earth and biological sciences introduced those temporal elements, establishing the “inherent affinities” between natural history and narrative that Beer describes: as Adelene Buckland has persuasively argued, nineteenth-century geologists, as well as novelists, worked to formulate new narrative protocols in order to encompass the vast tracts of time scientists were beginning to glimpse.⁶⁹ Among naturalists, one of the dominant frameworks for understanding and communicating the unthinkable long stretches of time implied by geological and evolutionary science involved the relative representational accuracy of different genres of narrative writing: novel, history, romance, epic. In his massively influential *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), for example, Charles Lyell defines “strata” as “when several rocks lie like the leaves of a book, one upon another,” and he combats the so called “catastrophist” interpretation of those strata, which would read the geological record literally and so view earth’s history as a succession of dramatic

⁶⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Life and Work*, 158; Martin Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁶⁸ As Martin Rudwick explains, “natural history” “denoted the description of the natural world, and the orderly classification of its diversity, without any temporal connotations whatever.” *Bursting the Limits of Time*, 53. For a helpful account of the distinctions between history and historicism in the nineteenth century, and of the historicization of natural history during the same period, see the essays collected in Mark Bevir, ed., *Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁶⁹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 5. Buckland argues that “geologists...were key protagonists in ‘a major cultural transition in attitudes toward how to tell the truth in narrative.’” *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 19. The embedded quotation is from Michael McKeon, “Generic Transformation and Social Change: Rethinking the Rise of the Novel,” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 383.

convulsions, by dismissively suggesting that such an interpretation would “assume the air of a romance.”⁷⁰ Following Lyell, Darwin “look[s] at the natural geological record, as a history of the world imperfectly kept, and written in a changing dialect.”⁷¹

Perhaps the most striking example of the affinity between natural history and literary narrative is that of Robert Chambers, author of one of the most controversial and widely read scientific treatises in the nineteenth century. Chambers’ *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) is an evolutionary history of everything, ranging from the formation of the solar system to the first life form (“simple germinal vesicles”) to the origins of humanity (“the type of all types”) and to the development of humanity’s moral sense.⁷² It synthesizes some of the most prominent and cutting-edge scientific theories in Victorian Britain, and its consolidation of those theories draws on a number of narrative literary genres. Early in his career, Chambers assigned himself the penname “Young Waverley,” thus paying homage to Walter Scott, his literary hero and patron.⁷³ According to James Secord, *Vestiges* is modeled on Scott’s historical novels, a genre that helps to bring the bigness of his history down to a recognizable size.⁷⁴ And Bernard Lightman classifies *Vestiges* as an “evolutionary epic,” a narrative genre that organizes history on the grandest scale around the universal law of progressive development.⁷⁵ Lightman cites

⁷⁰ Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, ed. James A. Secord (London: Penguin, 1997), 450, 29.

⁷¹ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229.

⁷² Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation and Other Evolutionary Writings*, ed. James A. Secord (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1994), 205, 272-73.

⁷³ James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 82.

⁷⁴ “[T]he evolutionary narrative,” he argues, “emerged as part of the same processes that produced the classic form of the European historical novel.” *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷⁵ Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 221.

Vestiges’ “vast expanses of time” in labeling it “epic,” but the designation works in more ways than one. Chambers’ providential promise of continued progressive development, of “a nobler type of humanity,” accords well with Lukács’ vision of epic, which he says “gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within”: life unfolds its own latent perfection.⁷⁶ *Vestiges* follows a teleological narrative structure, distinct from Darwinian natural selection (with its random variation), that enfolds its specialist vocabulary, its “vast expanses of time,” and its mishmash of scientific theory within a recognizable, comprehensible, and predictable form.

Whether we classify *Vestiges* as historical novel or epic is less important here than the more general insight it offers into the ways evolutionary theorists conscripted the protocols of literary narrative. Indeed, if Jameson seems ambitious in asserting Marxism as “the great collective story” that unifies history, then the nineteenth-century evolutionists like Chambers, Herbert Spencer, and T.H. Huxley are even more so, offering evolution as a universal law, permeating everything and therefore enfolding all that has ever existed within a yet more collective story than Marx’s and Jameson’s.⁷⁷ Even Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection, which lacks the conceptual simplicity and developmental telos of Chambers’ and Spencer’s alternate theories, frames history as a great and collective story: “from so simple a beginning,” he writes, “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.” There is “grandeur” indeed in this “view of life”⁷⁸: as Hayden White explains, narrativizations of

⁷⁶ Vast expanses: Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science*, 220; nobler type: Robert Chambers, *Vestiges*, 276; totality: Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 60.

⁷⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 19.

⁷⁸ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 360.

history impose an implicit moral order and formal coherence on seemingly random phenomena. Darwin's theory resists this imposition more than others by recognizing the agency of chance mutations in the evolutionary process, but even he lends to nature grandeur, beauty, and wonder by encompassing its diversity within a collective story.

Nothing exemplifies the power of such a story better than the prevalent nineteenth-century idea, evident in Chambers, that ontogeny (the development of individual organisms) recapitulates phylogeny (the history of species) – a blurring of conceptual boundaries Gillian Beer calls “one of the most fruitful disturbances of meaning in the literature of the ensuing hundred years.”⁷⁹ In Chambers' terms, during gestation “each animal passes...through a series of changes resembling the *permanent forms* of the various orders of animals inferior to it in the scale.”⁸⁰ He means this literally: “Our brain goes through the various stages of a fish's, a reptile's, and a mammifer's brain, and finally becomes human.”⁸¹ On this model, evolution happens as a result of either prolonged or foreshortened embryological development, resulting in either more or less advanced lifeforms.⁸² As Beer suggests, the words “evolution” and “development,” with their “inherent affinities” with narrative process, entailed (and continue to entail) both ontogenetic and phylogenetic transformation, thus rhetorically erasing a profound scalar difference. Within this context, the inclusive concept of “development” enabled the narrative synchronization of different historical scales: one narrative, like *Vestiges*, can

⁷⁹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 15.

⁸⁰ Robert Chambers, *Vestiges*, 32.

⁸¹ This false logic informs the “scientific” racism evident in Chambers work and that of other nineteenth-century naturalists: After developing through these stages of animality, Chambers continues, the human brain “passes through” the different human races before reaching “the highest or Caucasian type.” Ibid., 306-7.

⁸² The classic account is Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1977). See also Ian Duncan, *Human Forms: The Novel in the Age of Evolution* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), especially chapter 3, “Lamarckian Historical Romance.”

encompass and align the multiple scales of development that together comprise the history of earth, life, species, and individual.

This scalar conflation in the natural sciences resembles a similarly savvy maneuver in the nineteenth-century novel. In Ian Duncan's recent account, around 1800 the novel assumed the mantle of the "universal discourse" of human nature, conceived as the "relation between the history of individual persons...and the history of the species": ontogeny and phylogeny, once again.⁸³ The new genres that characterize the nineteenth-century novel – the bildungsroman and the historical novel – were in particular designed to mediate the vast scalar differences between the individual and the species: in the pivotal novels of Walter Scott, Duncan argues, the history of the nation mediates between individual history and species history, serving as the "vital middle range that accommodates, indeed constitutes, the human."⁸⁴ The middle scale reconciles the extremes, bringing them into uneasy alliance within a developmental narrative form that gives shape to human nature. The developmental logic in both scientific and literary texts – Mark Bevir calls the Victorian period "the heyday of...developmental historicism" – responded to the need to reconcile divergent historical scales, and narrative (whether in novels or evolutionary epics) gave form to those reconciliations.⁸⁵

Like Hardy's contemporaries, literary critics often home in on narrative as a vital representational mode for addressing questions of evolution and ecology: it is often the narrative qualities of the novel that lead these writers to elaborate its intellectual promise. In one of the foundational ecocritical studies, Rob Nixon regularly draws on a vocabulary

⁸³ Ian Duncan, *Human Forms*, 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸⁵ Mark Bevir, "Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain," in *Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain*, 2.

of narrative, story, and plot to call for new strategies of representing the invisibly slow processes of global change.⁸⁶ Adapting Nixon's "slow violence," Tina Young Choi and Barbara Leckie "turn to the role of narrative in soliciting consent for, and belief in, the slow causalities so critical to a comprehension of climate change today."⁸⁷ And Jesse Oak Taylor, also drawing on Nixon's work, clarifies how narrative, according to this tradition of scholarship, is able to facilitate forms of thinking well-suited to the problem of climate change: "narrative places objects or entities and events in sequence in order to understand the relationships between them, thus offering pliable and nuanced models through which to forecast the consequences of our actions."⁸⁸ Just as Chambers and other evolutionary theorists mobilized the protocols of narrative representation, so contemporary critics argue for its power in our most pressing scientific and political crisis. The novel is a privileged site for each of them. In ways that we have seen throughout this chapter, Hardy disrupts this dominant paradigm. In *The Woodlanders*, Hardy makes a case that narrative and plot, considered as mechanisms of scalar alignment and explanation, simply don't work. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, to which I now turn, Hardy elaborates what his earlier novel somewhat elliptically suggests: that scalar conflation in narrative is an act of violence.

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⁸⁶ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 10.

⁸⁷ Tina Young Choi and Barbara Leckie, "Slow Causality: The Function of Narrative in an Age of Climate Change," in *Victorian Studies* 60.1 (2018), 576.

⁸⁸ Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 16.

“But my history. I want you to know it.”⁸⁹ So responds Tess Durbeyfield to Angel Clare’s relentless marriage proposals. She has refused him several times with growing uneasiness because she does, in fact, desire him, and she does imagine a future for herself as his wife. But Tess’s “history” gets in the way of fulfillment: in the Victorian idiom, she is a fallen woman. Before, she had been raped by Alec D’Urberville and given birth to a child out of wedlock, and she now worries that her disgrace precludes future happiness in love and desire. When Angel, who is never very attentive to Tess herself but to an idea of her, invites her to narrate that history, she thinks twice and subtly shifts scales: “I—I...am not a Durbeyfield, but a D’Urberville” (206-7). Not personal history but family genealogy: Tess descends from an “extinct” (15) line of nobles whom she knows Angel despises out of a general sense of the injustice of aristocratic hierarchy. She knows, therefore, that revealing this genealogical fact will cover for her, passing as something of which she might very well have been ashamed. And finally, in describing Tess’s scalar shift from personal to family history, the narrator introduces a yet more expansive scale, reasoning that “her instinct of self-preservation was stronger than her candour” (207). That “instinct” transcends Tess’s personal and family histories and reaches to a quality shared by all living things, from the rural milkmaid to the snails she treads underfoot to the fir trees encircling the heath. In a matter of two pages, Hardy rapidly overlays Tess with (at least) three historical timescales. This is a common practice in this late novel, where, as Gillian Beer has argued, Hardy attempts to accord the historical scale of the individual life with the history of species, life, and earth.⁹⁰ *Tess*,

⁸⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, ed. Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 206. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

⁹⁰ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 220-241.

which divides Tess's life into naturalistic "phases," is structured by scalar shift. They drive its plot, and they orient it around a pressing intellectual dilemma it purports to overcome.

In *Tess*, Hardy makes explicit that people serve as historical icons, too. Just like all things, organic and inert, the human body becomes for Hardy a realization of the histories that define it. But Tess's historiographical function is complicated by the novel's insistent subjectivism. For Hardy, meaning depends most of all on the consciousness trying to find it. "The world is only a psychological phenomenon," the narrator tells us: "The universe itself only came into being for Tess on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born" (97, 172). This insistence on subjective meaning-making leads Laura Otis to assert that, for Hardy, "bodies and landscapes" are not "mere vessels" of the past, "not texts through which history can easily be read": rather, "history lies...in the mind of the beholder."⁹¹ Which is not to say bodies like Tess's don't manifest history – they manifest *histories*, and the historical framework we apply to their interpretation in part determines its outcome. Whether we think of Tess as a woman whose *bildung* shapes her existence, or as a descendent of the D'Urbervilles whose life is contoured by the inheritances of a fallen family, or as a vital being subject to the contingencies of Darwinian natural and sexual selection inflects our sense of history and her place in it. Herein lies the novel's intellectual function, as Hardy imagines it: *Tess* transcends the hermeneutic difficulties presented by these overlapping scales of history. It acknowledges, without reducing, all of them. Tess simultaneously realizes the

⁹¹ Laura Otis, *Organic Memory*, 168-172.

disparate and incommensurate historical timescales of ontogeny, genealogy, and phylogeny; her short life opens up into scales of history as expansive as any.

The novel's characters, however, fail to acknowledge her several histories. When Tess does narrate her personal history of sexual violation and motherhood to Angel (after their marriage), he responds, "You were one person: now you are another...I repeat, the woman I have been loving is not you" (248). Throughout his courtship of Tess, Angel had thought her "a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature" (136), "a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into individual form" (146). She was "no longer the milkmaid" (146): Angel's attraction to Tess is in fact an attraction to an ideal of womanhood he imagines her to embody, a deindividualized type subject not to the ontogenetic laws of *bildung* but only to the phylogenetic laws of sexual attraction and reproduction, what the narrator later calls "cruel Nature's law" (162). He equates, in other words, Tess as an individual with Tess as a type, a conceptual conflation that recapitulates a historical one: Tess as a person with a history with Tess as an agent of species development. When he learns of Tess's personal history, Angel is conceptually unequipped to acknowledge the scalar difference between individual and species life.

He responds, moreover, with another act of scalar conflation: he blames Tess's fallenness on her descent from fallen aristocrats:

I cannot help associating your decline as a family with this other fact—of your want of firmness. Decrepit families imply decrepit wills, decrepit conduct. Heaven, why did you give me a handle for despising you more by informing me of your descent! Here was I thinking you a new-sprung child of nature: there you were, the belated seedling of an effete aristocracy! (252)

Angel's lack of historical awareness leads him to successively conflate three distinct historical timescales, each of which, the novel suggests, influences Tess but none of

which is definitive. The natural-historical scale of phylogenetic development, the genealogical scale of family descent, and the ontogenetic scale of individual development are all valid but incomplete frameworks within which to understand Tess. Angel's mind collapses and refracts the scalar differences that are so vital to Hardy's vision of ethical engagement and interpretation.

Angel's inability to disentangle Tess's several histories is framed as an act of violence. What makes these scenes tragic, though, is the novel's acknowledgement that disentangling these historical scales is extraordinarily difficult. Throughout the novel, the narrator shifts between scales regularly and often without comment, juxtaposing the very small with the very large in sometimes confounding ways. In his descriptions of Tess's appearance, for example, the narrator holds the various scales so closely together that they become mutually implicative, like the different strands of a rope. In the novel's early pages, the narrator describes her appearance as a product of her personal history: "Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still. As she walked along to-day, for all her bouncing happy womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves of her mouth now and then" (21). In this passage, Tess embodies her personal history. But that description is complicated as soon as offered, because several paragraphs before this passage we are told of the landscape's features, which are described in the same manner: "In those days [during the reign of Henry the Third], and till comparatively recent times, the country was densely wooded. Even now traces of its earlier condition are to be found in the old oak copses and irregular belts of timber that yet survive upon its slopes, and the hollow-trunked trees that shade so many of its pastures" (19). The close rhyme between

these two passages – especially the “curves” of Tess’s mouth with the “slopes” of the landscape – imbricates the ontogenetic scale of Tess’s life with the geologic scale of the country landscape as well as the scale of national-historical economic development, whose “trace” can be discerned in the deforested pasture. A few pages later we are told that between Tess and her mother “there was a gap of two hundred years...When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed” (29). Here, Tess herself embodies modernity against her mother’s traditionalism. (It is worth noting, too, that after Tess’s sister Liza-Lu, the next three youngest Durbeyfield children are named Abraham, Hope, and Modesty. Their Judeo-Christian names add a particular flavor of history to this already overdetermined family). As the scale of the novel’s focalization narrows to Tess alone in the early chapters, the scales of its historical interpretations expand and multiply. We are offered an accumulation of timescales that threatens chaos.

The mutual imbrication of Tess’s ontogenetic development and the earth’s geologic history makes visible an additional historical dilemma. The individual follows a different narrative pattern than the earth: one is linear, predictably progressing through childhood, adulthood, senescence, and death, the other cyclical: “The season developed and matured,” Hardy’s narrator tells us: “Another year’s instalment of flowers, leaves, nightingales, thrushes, finches and such ephemeral creatures, took up their positions where only a year ago others had stood in their place, when these were nothing more than germs and inorganic particles” (144). Already in this passage we can see the conflict between the “ephemeral creatures,” who grow and decay, and the recurrent season, but this conflict is most alive with respect to Tess herself. In moments when Tess thinks of

her own history, her reflections take on the recurrent, cyclical pattern of the earth's seasons:

[Tess] philosophically noted dates as they came past in the revolution of the year: the disastrous night of her undoing at Trantridge with its dark background of The Chase; also the dates of the baby's birth and death...there was yet another date, of greater importance to her than those; that of her own death...a day which lay sly and unseen among all the other days of the year, giving no sign or sound when she annually passed over it; but not the less surely there. (111)

Her death is not a single moment in time somewhere in the future, the closure of her all-too narratable life, but a day that comes and goes with each passing year.⁹² But, immediately after this reflection, the narrator reminds us of the inexorable linearity of Tess's life: "Almost at a leap Tess thus changed from simple girl to complex woman" (112). There is something cruel in "thus": that she conceptualizes her own mortality is a sign of her maturity, the quality of mind representing the next stage of her development; that she frames her existence cyclically reminds us of its linear progression toward death.

And that linear development is written onto her body, just as her ninth and twelfth years are: "Symbols of reflectiveness passed into her face...her eyes grew larger and more eloquent. She became what would have been called a fine creature; her aspect was fair and arresting" (112). But that is not all, because if personal history leaves its mark, propelling Tess ever deathward, we are told that such marks are in part effaced by "the invincible instinct towards self-delight," a natural "spirit" that "rose automatically as the sap in the twigs" (113). This instinct is a trace not of Tess's personal history but her natural history. It "pervades all life," the narrator explains, and the consequences are profound: "it was impossible that any event should have left upon her an impression that

⁹² D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

was not in time capable of transmutation” (119). The linearity of personal development overcomes the cyclicity of earth’s history only to be overcome in turn by the spirit, common to humans and to trees, by which its traces are obfuscated. These incommensurate timescales are in competition here, just as they are in *Return of the Native*’s heath. Although the narrator shifts scales in a way that emphasizes the difficulty of disentangling them, the fact that each is included as a relatively discrete historical framework means the novel is capable of acknowledging, if not understanding and explaining, each of them.

But the narrative voice, as several critics point out, exhibits a troubling, erotically charged fascination with Tess. Feminist critics tend to understand *Tess*’s narrator as overtly male and voyeuristic, implicated in the violence, sexual and otherwise, inflicted on Tess: “The narrator’s erotic fantasies of penetration,” writes Penny Boumelha, “enact a pursuit, violation, and persecution of Tess” in very much the same way that Angel’s and Alec’s own erotic fantasies do.⁹³ Along similar lines, Kaja Silverman suggests that it is often the narrator’s desires that “structure our view of Tess,” which lends the novel, as one early reader put it, a quality of “rather too much succulence.”⁹⁴ On this reading, Tess literally cannot escape the erotic investments of the male gaze because, even when she is alone, the narrator is there, watching and desiring. The same critics, however, also attend to the ways the novel refuses to reduce Tess to a passive object of desire and victim of violence: the novel has been called “radical” for its depiction of Tess’s own “sexuality, which remains unknowable and unrepresentable,” irreducible to a single ideological

⁹³ Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982), 120.

⁹⁴ Kaja Silverman, “History, Figuration and Female Subjectivity in ‘Tess of the d’Urbervilles,’” in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 18.1 (1984), 11. Succulence: quoted in Millgate, *Thomas Hardy*, 277.

function; it has been suggested that Tess proves recalcitrantly free of a totalizing male gaze by the fact that she is not always “identical with herself”; and, most emphatically, that Tess’s “sexually vital consciousness,” her resistance to classification, and above all her “will to self-determination” make her “not just one of the greatest but also one of the strongest women in the annals of English literature.”⁹⁵ There is a consistent through-line in these readings: Tess is elusive, impossible to pin down and define. The men around her continually project their ideals onto her – as aristocratic daughter ready to marry, as sexual partner, as farmer’s wife, as the typified ideal of womankind – but, although the violent consequences of such projections accumulate, they are just as continually shown to be partial, incomplete, and unjustified.

In Kaja Silverman’s fascinating reading of *Tess*, for example, the novel’s engagement with history partially thwarts the ever-present “colonizing male gaze”: drawing on Erich Auerbach’s theory of figural history, Silverman observes that, as a figural fulfilment of the D’Urbervilles in whose portraits Tess’s features are discernable, Tess “slips constantly out of focus.” I want to extend Silverman’s claim that in light of Tess’s historicity she is “not identical with herself,” and therefore that she frustrates various attempts at interpretation.⁹⁶ Instead of figural history, however, I think the overlapping scales of phylogeny, genealogy, and ontogeny provide Tess with that elusive, unclassifiable resilience. In a recent essay, Alicia Christoff has reframed the relationship between the narrator and Tess by focusing on moments of what she calls “unintegration,” when Tess seems to dissolve into her surround. Christoff wants to reimagine the narrator

⁹⁵ Respectively: Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women*, 121; Kaja Silverman, “History,” 14; and Rosemarie Morgan, *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 85.

⁹⁶ Kaja Silverman, “History,” 7, 13, 14.

(and the author and reader) as potentially “a benign rather than a persecutory presence,” one who does not always conscript Tess into a desiring male gaze and so violate her autonomy, but actually enables the idyllic moments of unthinking narrative suspension which are, perhaps, her only moments of self-determination.⁹⁷ Like Christoff, I want to emphasize complexity – holding in view the more benevolent elements of the novel’s relation to Tess without losing sight of its violence. We should not (or not only) understand Hardy’s narrator as a better lover than Alec and Angel – one who, if creepily erotic in one sense, also incorporates that into a fuller picture – but rather as a representative of a discursive acknowledgement that incorporates the several scales of Tess’s histories. Through its discursive acknowledgement, the novel conspires with Tess, or on her behalf, to make her nonnarratable – to allow her to escape from narrative and plot. In other words the novel demonstrates the potential violence of narrativization *and* the freedom that comes from escaping it.

It is necessary to recognize the often-uncomfortable relation of the narrator to Tess, as well as the narrator’s sometimes misogynistic pronouncements about sexual difference, as a function of Hardy’s commitment to Darwinian thought. *Tess* is a deeply erotic novel, and Tess focuses all of its erotic desires. In the novel’s most erotic passages, we can detect an engagement with Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, which he painstakingly delineated as the necessary addition to natural selection in *The Descent of Man* (1871). If natural selection explains the struggle for existence, the transmission of traits beneficial for survival from one generation to the next, sexual selection “regulates the operations of beauty, appeal, and attraction.”⁹⁸ As Evelleen Richards explains,

⁹⁷ Alicia Christoff, “Alone with Tess,” in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 48.1 (2015), 22.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 124.

although Darwin avoids explicit mention of “human sexuality or erotic desire,” *The Descent of Man* is “saturated with sex”: it insists that “sex and superfecundity are the driving forces of organic change.”⁹⁹ Sex and superfecundity are two fairly accurate ways to describe *Tess*: Tess’s reiterated erotic appeal should be understood as a function of her existence within an evolutionary history incommensurate with her life as an individual. It is “cruel Nature’s law” (162). *Tess*’s plot would seem to suggest that sexual and natural selection are, sometimes, at odds: for women, Hardy urges, winning the competition of sexual selection can be actively detrimental to survival.¹⁰⁰

The phylogenetic process of sexual selection ensnares Tess. As Beer has argued, that particular natural law is one of the several plots working against her, propelling her ineluctably toward an early death. The law governing beauty and erotic attraction is blind to the circumstances of the individual lives it informs: it “rides like a juggernaut over and through individual identity and individual life spans.”¹⁰¹ Just as natural law ignores social law, so too does social law, designed precisely with individual lives in mind, ignore natural law: Hardy’s narrator explains, Tess “had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly” (98). This sentence is characteristic of Hardy’s approach to incommensurate scales in *Tess*. The act of describing a contradiction that follows from a scalar disjunction – here,

⁹⁹ Evelleen Richards, *Darwin and the Making of Sexual Selection* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), xxvi.

¹⁰⁰ In a passage that is unintentionally apt for Hardy’s novel, Grosz insists on the distinction between natural and sexual selection in Darwinian thought: “Sexual selection is not another, more complicated form of natural selection...because it does not harmonize with or further the aims of natural selection. The appeal of beauty is not simply another more complicated and indirect test of fitness. Rather, taste, appeal, and aesthetics are fundamentally irrational and unpredictable forces within individuals and species, although they conform to certain parameters and are able to be delimited and analyzed in terms of their effects.” We might say that Hardy is, precisely, delimiting and analyzing the effects of an irrational sexual attraction. *Becoming Undone*, 141.

¹⁰¹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 225.

the different moral imperatives of the natural and the social scales – *scales* them, which is to say, measures them against one another in order to discern the difference between them. Diegetically, in Tess’s world, these scales are indeed “absolute,” as Beer would have it; discursively, however, they are relativized, shown to exist in a shared space of contradiction – a contradiction which could be, if not resolved then at least lived in, if not for the blindness of those living inside and failing to distinguish between social and natural law. This sentence is emblematic, then, insofar as it acknowledges the simultaneity of seemingly incommensurate, competing scales. What it suggests, most of all, is that it is not possible to choose one scale and ignore another, nor to completely resolve their difference. It shifts the tenor of response: it is not an epistemological problem, as in how to know which framework to apply, but an ethical one, as in how to live in both at once.

Hardy’s shift away from thinking of the novel in epistemological terms is discussed in the preface to *Tess*’s fifth edition, where he addresses the controversy his novel inspired over its overt sexuality and its polemic against what he viewed as the hypocritical sexual mores of late Victorian Britain. He writes, “a novel is an impression, not an argument” (5). He insists upon the truth of his representation, but dissociates “truth” from rational explanation and disputation. Critics tend to read that statement as a part of the novel’s subjectivism, and they are right to do so; but it also orients readers away from a relation toward Tess constructed on a foundation of knowledge – the relation that Angel, for example, disastrously assumes in his failure to toggle scales – and toward one constructed on a foundation of acknowledgement. The narrator is impressed by the several scales that constitute Tess’s historical existence, acknowledging, not only

the natural, the social, and the individual scales, but how they interact with one another – narrating how the contradictions, if left unacknowledged, are made to harm Tess.

The major difference between Tess and the other historical icons I have discussed is that she is not unmoving, and certainly not unchanging. She is carried along by a hyperactive plot, constantly moving from place to place; her body changes as her pregnancy develops and is brought to term; she begins as a peasant and ends as a murderer, with many social roles between; most significantly, she dies. I think the novel accommodates Tess's transient ephemerality in two ways, each a function of its discursive acknowledgement. First, in acknowledging and so relativizing Tess's several histories, the novel makes Tess's individual life contiguous with her family and species life – the relationships between these scales are made visible, without collapsing their differences. In other words, Tess's short life metonymically opens out into a history as expansive as the barn's or the landscape's. Tess herself, through her simultaneous histories, "stills" history in a way not unlike a stable, old object or lifeform.

Second, although the novel recognizes "the on-going—i.e., the 'becoming'—of the world," it also represents those "felicitous moment[s]" when the world "[stands] still," and when Tess's sadness, and the sadness of her story, is temporarily held at bay.¹⁰² Tess's tragedy is that she is such a narratable character, when she desires more than anything to be free of the state of narratability. Her happiest moments are moments of dissolve, when, for example, "the occasional heave of the wind became the sigh of some immense sad soul, coterminous with the universe in space, and with history in time" (38); or when the dancers at a party create a "vegeto-human pollen" in the deindividuating

¹⁰² Thomas Hardy, *Life and Work*, 376-77.

vigor of their festivities (72); or when she, her companions, and “surrounding nature form[] an organism of which all the parts harmoniously and joyously interpenetrate[]” (74). With remarkable frequency, readings of *Tess* revolve around this notable distinction between the novel’s narrative and nonnarrative elements. Christoff’s “unintegration” corresponds with Silverman’s “utopian episodes” of “anti-transcendentalism,” with Tim Dolin’s focus on the novel’s melodramatic tableaux, and with Beer’s distinction between plot and writing.¹⁰³ (These *Tess* centered readings line up neatly with Levine’s notion of the “understory” and Cohn’s focus on nonnarrative “absorption” in Hardy’s work more broadly.)¹⁰⁴

Both of these accommodations are evident in the novel’s closing scenes. As Tess and Angel flee her pursuers, they happen upon an ancient pagan monument in the night. “It is Stonehenge,” Angel declares, “[o]lder than the centuries, older than the d’Urbervilles” (415-16). Out of sheer exhaustion, Tess lies down on one of the monument’s massive stones, creating a not so subtle tableau. Tess’s body, fated for a premature deadly wound, rests against an ageless object, so old its provenance remains a mystery. As the sixteen men approach the sleeping Tess to capture her, Angel asks that they let her awake naturally:

When they saw where she lay...they showed no objection; and stood watching her, as still as the pillars around. [Angel] went to the stone, and bent over her, holding one poor little hand; her breathing now was quick and small, like that of a lesser creature than a woman. All waited in the growing light, their faces and hands as if they were silvered, the remainder of their figures dark, the stones glistening green-grey, the Plain still a mass of shade. (418)

¹⁰³ Alicia Christoff, “Alone with Tess,” 22; Kaja Silverman, “History,” 19,15; Tim Dolin, “Melodrama, Vision, and Modernity: *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*,” in *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, 328-344; Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 220-41.

¹⁰⁴ George Levine, *Reading Thomas Hardy*; Elisha Cohn, *Still Life*.

The whole scene takes on an uncanny quality of stoniness, a stillness entirely at odds with the violence waiting on the other side of this particular silence. Even the sentences become more rigid, semicolons and commas joining short phrases together without the flexible tissue of logical connectives. Tess is absorbed along with everyone and everything around her into an ancient history characterized by complete stillness. Finally, on the novel's final page, as Tess hangs, Angel and Liza-Lu – who replaces Tess as Angel's wife, as if to remind us that Tess's individual existence shades into a genealogical one – kneel in prayer, “and remained thus a long time, absolutely motionless” (420). Tess's violent death is framed by two moments of perfect stillness, each of which evokes a scale of history that exceeds Tess's life. The stillness of these last scenes means that Tess, at the cost of her life, has become free from narratability and from plot. Her histories are acknowledged and made meaningful in spite of the narrative that kills her. *Tess*, in resisting the kind of knowledge that would come from the narrative synchronization of scales, generates, instead, the kind of knowledge that Cavell locates inside acknowledgement. It is a nonviolent, non-determinative, non-scientific kind of knowing. And yet, we know Tess through the irreducibility of her many histories.

Henry James's Critical Epistemology

The end of the story is what equates the present with the past, the actual with the potential.

– Paul Ricoeur

I

In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, narrative can kill.¹ Henry James never quite matches Hardy's morbid sensibility, but his novels are similarly attuned to the ways that narrativization can be coercive. Insofar as narrative "equates...the actual with the potential," as Paul Ricoeur puts it, James understands it to limit the freedom and autonomy of his characters.² This is especially true if narrative is conceived epistemologically, as a method for achieving systematic knowledge of that which is being narrativized. James, like Hardy, is uncomfortable with the relationship of knowing between narrator and character. We might think of his preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, in which he describes "suddenly" meeting "that extremely *disponible* figure of Christina Light whom I had ten years before found left on my hands at the conclusion of 'Roderick Hudson,'" and who now "'walk[s]' round his house of art like [a] haunting ghost[.]"³ Giving Christina Light "a future" in *The Princess Casamassima* is "like the act of clothing her chilled and patient nakedness" – a necessary act, he suggest, demanded by the sheer existence of her body. But, he continues, he "mistrust[s]" such unfinished characters because, it would seem, they somehow evade his artistic control.

¹ Epigraph: Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 182.

² Ibid.

³ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. R.P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner, 1934), 73. Hereafter abbreviated as *Art* and cited parenthetically in the text.

They assert a will of their own.⁴ “[M]y sense of a really expressed character,” he continues, “is that it shall have originally so tasted of the ordeal of service as to feel no disposition to yield again to the strain.” An unexpressed character, Christina Light has a body with needs; she is a “her”; she lives. By contrast, “[r]eally expressed character[s],” whose stories have been “completely recorded,” receive the objectifying pronoun “it.” Such characters should be, he says, “more or less honourably buried.” There is a real tension here: this unfinished character needs to be clothed, but in clothing her, James is again submitting her to the “ordeal” and “strain” of narrative (*Art 73*).

This passage records the ethical ambiguity of narrative, as James saw it. James’s language is, after all, characteristically multivalent: on the one hand, it would seem that his goal is to “complete[]” Christina Light’s character, to fully “express” her until she is left depleted, no longer “*disponible*.” But, on the other hand, he offers her “a future,” one which “had for its prime effect to plant her in my little bookbinder’s path” (*Art 73*). The botanical metaphor is striking; it suggests that “plant[ing]” Christina Light in a new novel is to renew her vitality and allow her to grow. There is a different affective register here, oriented not toward a future death and burial but a future life: one gets a sense that, although James “mistrust[s]” Christina Light, he is relieved to find her still alive. And yet, we are also left with the uncomfortable feeling that to “plant” her in a new novel, to give her more narrative, will, at the same time, conscript her as a servant and lead to her death. James’s several metaphors suggest both that Christina Light is given autonomy and that she is forced into deadly labor by her narrativization.

⁴ For James, it seems that Christina Light really *is* a person: “Christina had felt herself, known herself, striking, in the earlier connexion, and couldn’t resign herself not to strike again. Her pressure then was not to be resisted” (*Art 74*).

In this chapter, I argue that James's initial impulse to "plant," to "cloth[e]," to bestow freedom and autonomy on his characters exists in ethical tension with the tendency of narrative to conscript them into service and to lead them toward a closural stasis. In order better to preserve the initial impulse in the absence of its consequent effect, I suggest, James turns to criticism as compensation for what he views as the coercive restrictions of narrative. Criticism, for James, is a habit of thought as much as it is a genre of writing. To define it *as* a habit of thought is the burden of this chapter, but a preliminary definition is a useful starting place: it privileges the potential over the actual, the possible over the definite; it is a way of looking (and of reading) at something (or someone) that has been determined, defined, classified, or otherwise made knowable and reimagining it in ways that frustrate that knowledge. Criticism takes something specific, something particular, and it acknowledges what it might have been and what it might still be – the bestowal of potentiality upon an actual object or person is, for James, a benevolent act of criticism. Kevin Ohi suggests that James's late style has a "power of potentialization": his critical epistemology, I argue, has that same power.⁵ For James, the peril of narrative is that it makes things knowable, and the benefit of criticism is that it replaces that knowledge with a different mode of epistemological relation. As a habit of thought, criticism is formulated in James's novels just as clearly as in his critical writing, if not more so: in his novels, criticism and narrative are juxtaposed and shown to interact in a way that redirects the idea of narrative knowing into a critical epistemology and into critical writing.

⁵ Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), 169.

“The writerly text is not a thing”: Roland Barthes’s instructive distinction between readerly and writerly texts ultimately leaves those categories rather fuzzy around the edges, suggesting that we can find the writerly *in* what is otherwise readerly (as he does with Balzac’s story “Sarrasine”), or that maybe the writerly is something we do to the readerly, a mode of engagement with the text in which the reader “re-writes” what is already written: “the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system.”⁶ In Barthes’s language there is a resounding echo of James’s critical epistemology, which is likewise a warrant against any “plasticized” vision of the world, any static view in which the world’s characters sit still long enough to be made knowable within a “singular system.”⁷ Barthes furthermore demonstrates the Jamesian critical epistemology by problematizing his own categories: not only the writerly and the readerly, but also the five codes that structure his reading of “Sarrasine.” One way to describe James’s critical epistemology is to say that while narrative threatens readerliness, criticism introduces writerliness; narrative is deterministic, leading in its forward momentum to a “single structure” that can and sometimes does reduce the world to determinate meaning, and criticism is the habit of thought that cannot abide systematization. In James, too, the critical epistemology is what rescues the subjects of narrative from structure, from determination, from meaningfulness and knowability; it is what preserves freedom, to the extent that it can. The Jamesian critical epistemology is

⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 4–5.

⁷ It is true that Barthes lists criticism among the singular systems threatening stasis (along with ideology and genus), but given the criticism to which Barthes is responding this is not surprising: the densely typological nature of structural narratology, according to Barthes, does indeed “attempt to see all the world’s stories...within a single structure.” *Ibid.*, 3.

thus a long way off from the ways we tend to think of criticism. To criticize is to cut, to make distinctions and judgements; it is to explore limits and to make meaning. But we should not take such assumptions for granted: if recent debates about methodology in literary studies have come short of clarifying what it is we do when we do literary criticism, they have made it abundantly clear that criticism, in fact, entails a number of different styles, investments, affects, and approaches. Criticism is, in other words, an unstable concept. James justifies our taking that instability seriously: he defines a habit of thought that insists on open-ended possibilities such as those we've seen define approaches to literature over the history of criticism. His critical epistemology is still evident in literary criticism, considered as a collective practice.⁸

II

What does the novel *do*? “Yes—oh dear, yes—the novel tells a story,” writes E. M. Forster, “[t]hat is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish it was not so.”⁹ Writing nearly two decades after James’s New York edition, Forster here echoes one of James’s own exasperations: “The novel is of its very nature an ‘ado,’ an ado about

⁸ This chapter is indebted in obvious ways to Ross Posnock’s argument that James is a cultural critic whose “response[] to modernity” has “challenging, even radical, political implications.” Posnock’s focus on “figures of illegibility,” on how James “socialize[s] them...by redirecting their energy back toward a social order whose demands for legibility might then be challenged,” and on the ways such a critique demonstrates that “psyches and social structures might be shaped by less coercive mappings” has been a major influence on my reading of James. Moreover, the curiosity Posnock describes is adjacent to – perhaps even partly explained by – the critical epistemology I locate in James. However, my focus remains squarely on James’s practice of literary criticism, as opposed to a cultural criticism that shades for Posnock into “critique,” in the sense that term would be used in critical theory. Elaborating the complex relationship between James’s cultural criticism, as Posnock describes it, and my understanding of his literary criticism would require an essay of its own. Such an essay would surely take into account, among other things, Dorothy Hale’s argument that “cultural studies has been deeply influenced by a tradition of theory about the novel whose origins lie in the formalist criticism of Henry James.” Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), vii, 3; Dorothy Hale, *Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 4.

⁹ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 26.

something,” he writes, dismissively, as if it didn’t much matter what the ado was about (*Art* 48).¹⁰ For James, as for Forster, the novel’s narrativity – that it is a succession of events, temporally organized; that, simply put, stuff has to happen – is at best a necessary evil. To understand why, we might think of James’s late tale “The Jolly Corner” (1908), in which Spencer Brydon haunts his childhood home during the night in an attempt to encounter his “alter-ego,” or the person he might have been had his life gone differently. “The Jolly Corner” is a melancholy account of a middle-aged man’s quest to recover the possibilities, the potential he once enjoyed, but which he has lost as his life has taken a definite shape. Brydon’s “ado” is to be haunted, when he finally confronts his alter-ego, by its sheer, irreducible actuality: “He saw, in its great grey glimmering margin, the central vagueness diminish, and he felt it to be taking the very form toward which, for so many days, the passion of his curiosity had yearned. It gloomed, it loomed, it was something, it was somebody, the prodigy of a personal presence.”¹¹ The hopeful “vagueness” of possibility is replaced by a definite “form,” a “something” rather than an anything, an actual rather than a potential existence. The tale demonstrates, as Millicent Bell puts it, “[t]hat the actual must defeat the merely possible.”¹² I would only add that in this instance the possible deserves a grander modifier than “merely,” since the possible is what is so precious in James’s stories.¹³

¹⁰ James attempts in another preface to eliminate the distinction between “doing” and “feeling” in order to justify the primacy of “feeling,” rather than “doing” in his novels: “I then see their ‘doing,’ that of the persons just mentioned [i.e. his characters], as, immensely, their feeling, their feeling as their doing” (*Art* 65).

¹¹ Henry James, “The Jolly Corner,” in *Major Stories and Essays*, ed. Leon Edel et. al. (New York: Library of America, 1984), 518.

¹² Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 28.

¹³ In a reading of *The Ambassadors*, Kevin Ohi notes “the paradoxical content of Strether’s aesthetic education,” of his belated relation to his own life, “as if the lives one didn’t lead could be made present, potentially actualized, but as potential.” This seems similar to what happens in “The Jolly Corner,” but if, as Ohi argues, “the dominant affect” of *The Ambassadors* is “joy,” then “The Jolly Corner,” as a ghost

As we have seen, during the nineteenth century there was a prevalent idea that narrative had a positive epistemological function, that it could create ordinary knowledge, or forestall dogmatism, or, in the case of several naturalists, that it could reconcile irreconcilable scalar differences. But to read James is to be reminded that we should absolutely *not* take it for granted that narratively derived knowledge is desirable. As Leo Bersani has so persuasively argued, meaning and truth are in an important sense antithetical to James's principle virtue, freedom. According to Bersani, James's novels are committed to an idea of freedom which designates the ability to invent or to compose oneself without recourse to or determination by "an enslaving truth" that would diminish that freedom.¹⁴ James, as Bersani shows us, recognizes the link between narrative and epistemology that so enamored others in the nineteenth century, but his response is freighted with an awareness that to become knowable is to become less free. James's uneasiness about meaningfulness, or, more precisely, about being made to be knowable, entails, therefore, an equal discomfort with narrative.¹⁵

story, is more attuned to the sense of loss that comes from encountering what might have been. Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, 157, 165.

¹⁴ It should come as no surprise that many of the most astute readings of James in recent decades have come by way of queer theory, with its characteristic problematization of received categories and identities. These readings owe much to Bersani. Eve Sedgwick's several, excellent essays about James are case in point. See also Hugh Stevens's claim "that 'sexuality' (or the 'erotic') both *constitutes* the Jamesian character in a crucial sense, yet also...marks a space in which the very possibility of selfhood is questioned"; and Kevin Ohi's reading of Jamesian style (its "interruptions of intelligibility") as instantiating "the corrosive effect of queerness...on received forms of meaning, representation, and identity"; or David Kurnick's assertion that James's "characters are participants in a shared effort to evade psychic distinction." I owe a great deal to this critical discourse. Leo Bersani, "The Jamesian Lie," in *A Future for Astyanax* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 132-3; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic," in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 182-212; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 35-65; Hugh Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1; Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, 1-2; David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 14.

¹⁵ In conceptualizing James's discomfort with narrative, I hope to reframe Fredric Jameson's claims about narrative in *The Antinomies of Realism*, a book which has exerted a major influence on novel theory since

For James, narrative propels his protagonists along a path from potentiality to actuality, from the *freedom* to compose oneself, as Bersani puts it, to the “enslaving truth” that comes from having been composed.¹⁶ As “The Jolly Corner” demonstrates, in James we are confronted by a suspicion that narrative can be isolating, that it can restrict and even violate the freedom of the people caught up in its movements. His novels continually contend with this double bind: that narrative, the very thing necessary for the existence of his characters, the air they breathe, is simultaneously a threat to their being, capable of violence outside of the author’s control and at odds with his values. James is committed to potentiality as opposed to actuality, possibility as opposed to facticity, and narrative, as it proceeds, shifts the potential to the actual, the possible to the hopelessly real.¹⁷ Narrative is for James a process of determination which shuts down possibilities as it proceeds. This is the other, more sinister side of thinking of narrative as something that gives form. Once the momentum of one narrative picks up, other possibilities are prevented from actualizing; the field of potentialities, so precious to James, is constantly

its publication. For Jameson, realism is defined by a dialectical tension between two opposed temporalities, one called “the narrative impulse” and one called “affect” that describes “scenic elaboration, description and above all affective investment, which allow it to develop towards a scenic present which in reality, but secretly, abhors the other temporalities which constitute the force of the tale or *récit* in the first place.” In other words, Jameson tracks the way that realism shuttles between the forward movement of narrative and the stasis of affect, the body, and the scene. This chapter deals with similar raw materials, but frames them rather differently: the portions of a text that resist “the narrative impulse,” for me, are not affective, but critical and thus intellectual, motivated by and directed toward a particular way of thinking. Moreover, James’s novels have a clear investment in one mode of thought (criticism) over the other (narrative). *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013), 11.

¹⁶ Leo Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie,” 132–3.

¹⁷ See Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*. Bell rightly points out that this is a source of great frustration for James, but she argues that narrative – insofar as readers encounter it temporally – compensates for the loss of potential by offering several meanings (or “unmeanings”) that are ultimately unassimilable into a single, overarching meaning; that is, narrative becomes for Bell the *preserve* of potentiality. By contrast, I argue that narrative itself in its temporal unfolding is, for James, that which destroys potential.

diminishing in an entropic pull toward the deadening effects of being narrativized or, what is worse, of having been narrated. For James, narrative fixes.

This quality of narrative is evident in James's theoretical reflections on his own novels, which often involve metaphors of circumscription, confinement, and possession. "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere," he writes, "and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so" (*Art* 5). His preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* includes a curious architectural conceit with shades of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado": "It came to be a square and spacious house...but, such as it is, it had to be put up round my young woman while she stood there in perfect isolation" (*Art* 48); loving though this may sound, Isabel's house becomes, as *Portrait*'s narrator explains, "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation."¹⁸ And the preface to *The American* involves a rather macabre metaphor for the relationship between author and character: "A beautiful infatuation this, always, I think, the intensity of the creative effort to get into the skin of the creature; the act of personal possession of one being by another at its completest" (*Art* 37). Sounding as much like Ted Levine's Buffalo Bill as himself, James nevertheless announces in this moment a central complexity of his novel theory, namely that the "creative effort" is only partly creative; it is also partly appropriative, involving, on the one hand, a creator and a creature and, on the other, two "being[s]" who share more or less equal states of existence, but who are otherwise entirely unequal in terms of freedom and autonomy. In other words, it rests on an epistemology where, as Stanley Cavell

¹⁸ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Richard Poirier (New York: Library of America, 1992), 442–443. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. This particular architectural conceit casts shades of doubt on Anna Kornbluh's argument that architecture is for James a radical, even utopian figure for novelistic construction. See "The Realist Blueprint," in *The Henry James Review* 36.3 (2015), 199–211.

points out, knowledge is conceived as a property relation.¹⁹ To write a novel is not only to create another being; it is to create another being in order to possess them, to create in order to restrict their autonomy and to control their fate.²⁰ In other words, to be narrativized is to be circumscribed, confined, and possessed; it is to be made knowable, and to be made knowable is to be made less free.

Most critics understand James's resistance to narrative as part of his project to spatialize what is an essentially temporal art form in order to legitimate its status as serious art.²¹ Whatever else is implied by James's vexed relation to narrative, according to a number of his critics it indexes a definite elitism. These accounts have picked up on one of the two main arguments James makes in his essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884): that the novel has been "vulgarised," that "good novels are much compromised by bad ones, and that the field at large suffers discredit from overcrowding."²² There is an undeniable strain of elitism in these claims, but the other major argument James makes in this essay provides another, more forgiving angle from which to view his discomfort with narrative. Namely, James argues that one cannot prescribe how a novel ought to be written, as Walter Besant, the author of the essay occasioning James's response, attempts to do: "The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant—no limit to his

¹⁹ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10.

²⁰ For a recent account of this paradox, see Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Henry James's Portrait-Envy," in *NLH* 48.2 (2017), esp. 327.

²¹ See, for example, Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 32; and Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3-4.

²² Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *Henry James: Major Stories and Essays*, ed. Leon Edel et. al., 577.

possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes.”²³ It is worth noting the value James sees in open-endedness, in illimitable possibilities and in the absence of prescriptive, *a priori* determinations. To be a novelist – one with the proper sensibilities, one “on whom nothing is lost” – is to confront pure possibility, to have the freedom to choose a subject and to convert that subject into art.²⁴ To be sure, “*the* Novel” is, for James, “the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms,” but *a* novel can never be that (*Art* 326, my emphasis). This is because every choice the artist makes, every narrative event that actualizes what was once potential, stiffens its elasticity, determines its reality, reduces its prodigiousness. The virtue of *the* novel, as a category as opposed to a single text, is that it is a category without limits, one which can comfortably encompass, as James’s criticism does, the pleasurable adventures in Robert Louis Stevenson, the intellectual seriousness in George Eliot, and the sociological impulse in Honoré de Balzac.

It is of course relevant that in these moments James is writing as a critic and thus making visible the connection between *a* novel and *the* novel. The capacity to keep the particulars of a single novel in view – its “air of reality (solidity of specification)”²⁵ – and to sincerely engage with those particulars, and to simultaneously maintain the openness, the largeness of *the* novel category, is the job of the critic. The critic is thus able, in the act of engaging with a particular novel, to sustain the potentiality that narrative is constantly diminishing, to maintain contact between a single novel and the novel in theory. “[O]ne sees the critic as the real helper of the artist, a torch-bearing outrider, the

²³ Ibid., 578.

²⁴ Ibid., 581.

²⁵ Ibid.

interpreter, the brother”: “When one thinks of the outfit required for free work in this spirit,” writes James, “one is ready to pay almost any homage to the intelligence that has put it on.”²⁶ The good critic achieves a certain freedom, is “indefatigably supple,” but uses that freedom for others: “[h]is life, at this rate, is heroic, for it is immensely vicarious.”²⁷ The critic heroically, selflessly makes the artwork *more free*. It is my contention that the critic does so by preserving the potentiality that narrative diminishes. The critic, in these terms, is better than the novelist.

Narrative fixes, and criticism opens up; narrative determines, and criticism imagines otherwise. But how does this actually happen? What, that is, does criticism do? Practically speaking, one thing criticism does is simply produce more writing. It does so, more importantly, by responding to other writing. It continues the process and elaboration of writing; it allows the critic to *rewrite* what has already been written, as Barthes does with Balzac. Also relevant here are Stanley Cavell’s sense, expressed in an elaboration of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, that “[a] measure of the quality of a new text is the quality of the texts it arouses,” as well as Andrew Miller’s distinction between conclusive and implicative criticism: some criticism (conclusive) makes claims about a text and its effects, true or false, and those claims are the source of the criticism’s interest; other criticism (implicative) contains latent *implications*, possibilities for future thought, for future writing, and the invitation to “unfold” or to “perfect” such criticism constitutes its principle interest.²⁸ But where Miller locates the relevant implications in a

²⁶ Henry James, “The Science of Criticism,” in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁸ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5. Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 30–32.

particular style of critical writing, for James criticism is what makes visible and extends the implications and possibilities of novels. Criticism appreciates and judges, it explores and reopens what has already been determined, acknowledging that determination, but only as a contingency, as something that might have been otherwise. James's desire to rewrite what has already been written (to make the readerly writerly) is of course manifest in the revisions he makes for his New York edition: these revisions are a product of his own critical epistemology – the intellectual habit he brings to bear on his own novels, evident, above all, in the critical prefaces that append his revised works.²⁹

The implicit, paired associations of narrative and actuality, on the one hand, and criticism and potentiality, on the other, are written into James's discussion of "re-perusal" and "re-representation" in the final preface of his New York edition, to *The Golden Bowl* (*Art* 335). There, James writes of the challenges and anxieties attendant upon criticizing and revising one's own work:

Since to get and to keep finished and dismissed work well behind one, and to have as little to say to it and about it as possible, had been for years one's only law, so, during that flat interregnum, involving, as who should say, the very cultivation of unacquaintedness, creeping superstitions as to what it might really have been had time to grow up and flourish. (*Art* 337)

Through the march of time, and as a result of his increasingly imperfect memory of the novels themselves, James begins to wonder what "might really have been" had they gone differently. In the next sentence, he offers an image of his books with "accumulated dust," with "wizened faces," "grizzled locks," and "superannuated garments" (*Art* 337).

²⁹ See the essays collected in David McWhirter, *Henry James's New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). McWhirter's introduction emphasizes certain ways that James's New York Edition "anticipate[s] the discourse of poststructuralism": "For if the edition can be seen as an attempt at monolithic self-definition, it also should be apprehended as a conscious experiment in intertextuality which deliberately brings a variety of different 'voices' ...into relation, without insisting that they converge on any architectural or monumental completeness." *Ibid.*, 7.

His original compositions, in other words, have the look of elderliness, of “age and infirmity” (*Art* 337). But just as soon as this metaphor takes hold, it is discarded, not for a different register, as is so often the case in James, but for its opposite: “in point of fact I had rather viewed the reappearance...as a descent of awkward infants from the nursery to the drawing-room under the appeal of enquiring, of possibly interested, visitors” (*Art* 337). This about-face does not simply reiterate James’s struggle to properly metaphorize his own experience, but instead recounts the profound shift of his relation to his own works as he transitions from thinking of them as narratives which have reached their conclusion – as “finished and dismissed” – to thinking of them as opportunities for critical examination and revision, as canvasses filled with potentiality for reworking: “criticism after the fact was to find in them arrests and surprises, emotions alike of disappointment and of elation: all of which means, obviously, that the whole thing was a *living* affair” (*Art* 342). To criticize one’s own work, as he does in the prefaces, and to use such criticism as an opportunity for rewriting, as he does in the New York editions of his novels, is to convert the actual back into the possible, the old into the young; it is to recognize the “*living*” qualities of something which might easily be mistaken for dead.³⁰

According to Dorothy Hale, James is the origin point of an influential novel theory called “social formalism” that understands the novel to have a unique capacity to “formally both encapsulate and fix a social world” and to “materialize” the “identity” of the author depicting it.³¹ Hale ascribes to James a complex intellectual maneuver: he

³⁰ Paul B. Armstrong approaches the critical epistemology in these prefaces when he writes that their “obliqueness is part of an attempt to direct and even discipline the reader’s attention without coercing or constraining it—a contradictory project that enacts a paradoxical ideal of criticism as a rigorous response to the text and an infinitely free act of imagination.” “Reading James’s Prefaces and Reading James,” in David McWhirter, ed., *Henry James’s New York Edition*, 127.

³¹ Dorothy Hale, *Social Formalism*, 5, 38.

creates a shortcut around the critique of objectivity, trying to show that, in the novel, “objective interpretation can be accomplished in a world where meaning is necessarily subjective”: social formalists “imagine...that the form of the novel can accurately instantiate both the identity of its author and the identity of the subject the author seeks to represent.”³² In my view, objectivity has a much more ambivalent function. To “fix” something, as Hale argues that James’s novels do to both the represented object and the representing subject, is to make it actual and knowable. These terms juxtapose meaningfully with the value terms of James’s criticism: potential, changeable, living. To finish a novel is to fix a social world; to criticize it is to unfix it, to reopen it and to allow the novel’s potential to take center stage.³³ It is criticism that performs this act of benevolence, a habit of thought which can grasp the novel as a category without being limited by any one novel. “The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting,” writes James:

That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of. The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable, and such as can only suffer from being marked out or fenced in by prescription...A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression.³⁴

James’s definition of the novel relies on abstractions so abstract as to be nearly useless as a guide for either writing or judging a novel. Terms like “interest,” “intensity,” “impression,” and “life” seem almost laughably imprecise when compared to, say, twentieth-century structural narratologists, whose penchant for typology resulted in an

³² Ibid., 8.

³³ Thus, while Hale argues that James’s “social formalism” is designed to preserve the represented object’s alterity, I think it would be more accurate to say that it is the critical epistemology, rather than the narrative representation, that is responsible for its freedom from artistic control.

³⁴ Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 577–78.

astonishing proliferation of precisely defined concepts. Like the Delphic injunction to know thyself, James's novel theory rests upon the idea that selves and novels can take "innumerable" forms, and that each instance will be the source of its own criteria.³⁵

James develops a criticism that rejects classification and circumscription and therefore one that exists in tension with his own narratives. He insists that critics remain in touch with generality, but his version of generality is decidedly open-ended and pluralistic. Toril Moi has recently called attention to literary theory's "craving for generality," or its tendency to prize above all else the concept with clear, definable edges which can entail and predict every example of a given phenomenon.³⁶ James is typically cast as a formalist, codifying certain principles of novelistic production like point of view and the scenic method, and his critical writing provides a substantial chunk of novel theory with its origin myth. We might therefore think that certain Jamesian principles – like the center of consciousness – likewise crave generality, that James's desire is to generate generalizable terms transposable from one text to another. But the shoe doesn't quite fit: it is hard to see how James attempts to codify anything, and his criticism seems to point directly away from clearly defined, portable concepts, just as it points away from a "fixed" social world. In many ways, as we have seen, criticism's opposite is narrative – not the novel, which is irreducible to its "narrative impulse."³⁷ One of the most

³⁵ We can see this in action, as it were, when James distinguishes between Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Edmond de Goncourt's *Chérie* in the following terms: "One of these works treats of murders, mysteries, islands of dreadful renown, hairbreadth escapes, miraculous coincidences and buried doubloons. The other treats of a little French girl who lived in a fine house in Paris, and dies of wounded sensibility because no one would marry her. I call *Treasure Island* delightful, because it appears to me to have succeeded wonderfully in what it attempts; and I venture to bestow no epithet upon *Chérie*, which strikes me as having failed deplorably in what it attempts." "The Art of Fiction," 589.

³⁶ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 93.

³⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 8.

interesting qualities of Jamesian criticism is that it exists in his novels, in tension with their narratives. That coexistence, to which I now turn, is crucial for the epistemological continuity of novelistic realism and literary criticism.

III

In James's novels, criticism and narrative form two alternative habits of mind. Their close proximity, even inextricability demonstrates the paradox that, though it is designed as an alternative to narrative thinking, the critical epistemology depends for its existence on a close relation to it. This section argues that in *The Portrait of a Lady* James gives embodied form to the critical epistemology in the figure of Ralph Touchett, a character who is at once central and peripheral to the novel's plot. Ralph gives expression to near-Wildean wit, and it is tempting to describe his sensibility and his role in the novel as ironic, even camp, but he is ultimately too sincere for that. Ralph's ironic sincerity, his playful earnestness, is the central quality of criticism as it is elaborated in this early novel. That quality comes through most of all in relation to the novel's thematization of classification, or the epistemological process of placing a particular thing in a general category.

The Portrait of a Lady is a novel about Isabel Archer. It follows her journey from New York to England and then on to Italy. The American in Europe, in this case, wants desperately to understand the curiosities of European civilization, to master and thoroughly to enjoy – either by preserving or by thwarting – its conventions: when Isabel arrives in England, she announces her intention, like the voyaging naturalist, to collect “specimens.” It is a word that demands attention in a novel by Henry James, a writer so inattentive to the scientific world in comparison with Gaskell, Eliot, Hardy and many

other novelists, but a word, the narrator tells us, “that played a considerable part in her vocabulary” (66). The naturalistic lexicon with which Isabel greets her new European surroundings – of specimens and types, classes and groups – introduces *Portrait*’s abiding concern with the processes and implications of classification. One way to think of *Portrait* is as a novel in which a central group of characters struggle to understand one another, to define one another as this or that, friend or foe, lover or not; to classify one another in order to compass the relationships that together constitute a social whole. What will Isabel do? Whom will she marry? What is the nature of the relationship between Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle, and what are its consequences? Like a set of puzzle pieces whose edges won’t sit still, the characters in this novel never quite fit together in a coherent way, even though the construction of that puzzle seems to be everyone’s goal. This section engages with *Portrait*’s theme of classification in order to map its attitude toward narrative and criticism – two modes of thought which, for James, take opposite positions on classification – and to locate James’s intellectual and moral sympathies in a critical, as opposed to a narrative, epistemology.

To classify something is to fix it in time and place, to locate it within a larger system, and to define its relationships to the other members of that system. Isabel’s desire for “specimens” is only one example, albeit a salient one, of the novel’s concern with the vexed relations between the particular and the general. An early conversation between Isabel and Ralph distils the competing paradigms with which to approach this relation: for Isabel, it is a process beginning with multitudinous and variegated experience that works its way toward classificatory stability, whereas Ralph reverses that process, beginning with a category and watching its members thwart its definitional work. Ralph

responds to Isabel by pointing to Lord Warburton and commenting, “well, now, there’s a specimen.” Their dialogue continues:

‘A specimen of what?’ asked the girl.
 ‘A specimen of an English gentleman.’
 ‘Do you mean they are all like him?’
 ‘Oh no; they are not all like him.’ (66)

This conversation, like so many throughout James’s fiction, places a concept between two interlocutors who negotiate its meaning and application. What does it mean to call someone a specimen? Where Isabel looks for conformity to type, Ralph sees variation on a theme; one emphasizes similarity, the other difference, one containment, the other excess. This conversation maps the “centrifugal-centripetal context between meaning and unmeaning, unity and diversity” that Millicent Bell observes onto the concept of classification, offering, I would add, a framework with which to distinguish a narrative (i.e. centripetal) from a critical (i.e. centrifugal) epistemology.³⁸ Of course, each of these things can be and often is implied by the concept “specimen,” but it matters in which sense it is used. *Portrait* comes down clearly on this issue: siding with Ralph, the novel positions classification as Isabel sees it – as conformity to type – as a serious danger. By contrast, Ralph’s version of classification, which acknowledges categories without allowing them to determine his interpretation of the thing itself, is valorized in *Portrait* as the most ethical mode of engaging with the world and with others. It “uncovers,” in Posnock’s words, “a discrepancy, a nonidentity, between a concept and its social actuality.”³⁹

³⁸ Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, xi.

³⁹ Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, 73.

The novel's title clearly announces that classification is one of its principle concerns, and it is anything but straightforward: unlike, say, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there is no actual portrait in James's novel, at least not in any literal sense. Are we then meant to take the novel itself as the portrait? And surely the "lady" of the title refers to Isabel, who is more definite than the title gives her credit and is also *not* a lady, because she is not, and never becomes, a member of that class (having rejected Lord Warburton). Insofar as the title classifies the novel, it does so in a way that seems deliberately misleading: it is, in fact, a non-portrait about a non-lady. One effect of the title is to ensure that we understand its classificatory impulse – an impulse that is elsewhere meant to clarify or give order – as something which paradoxically opens up its constitutive categories, allowing us to imagine otherwise. The title seems to classify in the way that Ralph would, with a playful and ironic awareness of the shortcomings of classification: the categories of genre and class will serve more as an opportunity for play than for definition. The novel announces that it will subvert, in other words, the kinds of classification that are meant to order the world.

The slipperiness of classification is, furthermore, on full display in the novel's opening chapter, which depicts Ralph, his father Daniel Touchett, and Lord Warburton enjoying afternoon tea when they receive a telegraph from Mrs. Touchett which says, in part, "[t]aken sister's girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent" (11). This telegraph informs them that Isabel, who is unknown to any of these characters, will be coming to Europe with Mrs. Touchett; it is also nearly indecipherable, offering to its readers an opportunity for interpretation: "But who is quite independent," Ralph wonders,

and in what sense is the term used? – that point is not yet settled. Does the expression apply more particularly to the young lady my mother has adopted, or does it characterise her sisters equally? – and is it used in a moral or in a financial sense? Does it mean that they have been left well off, or that they wish to be under no obligations? or does it simply mean that they are fond of their own way? (12)

Whatever Mrs. Touchett may mean by calling Isabel independent, we can take the novel to have a meaning of its own, one that is not merely referred to in this scene but is actually enacted. That is, James demonstrates Isabel's independence by emphasizing how Mr. Touchett, Ralph, and Lord Warburton struggle to understand how she might be classified, or how she might belong to a category which would, by definition, diminish that independence; and the irony is all the more palpable because the category into which they attempt to classify her is defined precisely by independence. This opening chapter brings into focus one of the novel's central concerns: the association between a person's independence – freedom, liberty – and their illegibility, their resistance to classification and definition.⁴⁰ But the other side of that question is brought into play, too: what does it mean to classify someone (or something) as independent, original, unique? Is independence a guarantee against classification, or is it itself a classification?

These questions are given renewed force during Gilbert Osmond's courtship of Isabel, whose classificatory impulse is baffled by Osmond: he "resembled no one she had ever seen...Her mind contained no class which offered a natural place to Mr. Osmond—he was a specimen apart" (269). Despite Isabel's desire to organize the world as "individuals belong[ing] to type," she values Osmond's originality, his recalcitrance to categorization (269). He has "the interest of rareness," "he was original without being eccentric" (269): Isabel seems to *know* what originality means, in a way that contrasts

⁴⁰ As Posnock points out, James celebrates such "figures of illegibility." *Ibid.*, 3.

with Ralph's uncertainty about the meaning of independence, and this knowledge leads her to judgment. Originality is a good in itself, sufficient reason to admire Osmond and to respond favorably to his advances. In contrast to Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton, Isabel's first two suitors who each fit nicely within the "class[es]" contained by her mind, Gilbert Osmond has a mystery about him that serves for Isabel as a sort of narratable condition, a reason to enter this marriage plot rather than the several others available to her.⁴¹ It is worth stressing exactly how Isabel's relation to Osmond differs from Ralph's relation to Isabel: Isabel, in a sense, classifies Osmond within the category of *the unclassifiable*, the original, the independent; he represents a kind of utopia, a no-place that is also a good-place, substantiated by his very insubstantiality and defined by his indefinability. Ralph, by contrast, notices the same qualities in Isabel and refuses classification altogether, opting instead to appreciate the many possibilities implied by her originality – she might be this, or she might be that, but she will be something and it is terribly exciting not to know what that is. He wants to keep her from being classified for as long as possible, to ensure that she remains free, uninterpretable, with a world of possibilities before her. It is for this reason he bestows such wealth upon her: "Don't try so much to form your character," he tells her, "[l]ive as you like best, and character will form itself" (228–29).

For Ralph, independence means the ability to baffle attempts at classification. After he meets Isabel for the first time, he explains to his mother that "[i]t's her general air of being some one in particular that strikes me" (42). Ralph's observation is of a piece with *Portrait's* thematic concerns involving the always fraught relation between

⁴¹ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

particular and general, instance and type, and with its mode of engaging that theme, which is so often just a bit off-center, or just a bit ironic, in a way that makes the novel's representations of classification seem half serious and half parodic. Ralph's classifications repeatedly demonstrate a generous playfulness characterized by a desire to do his peers justice and by a self-reflexive awareness of his own classificatory impulses. When Isabel asks Ralph whether he thinks Madame Merle is "worldly," he responds, "Worldly? No...she is the world itself!" (259). Ralph sees that Madame Merle, like Falstaff, has a character which exceeds all possible description, which hungrily consumes and so substantiates any adjectival category. It is in this sense that he does justice to her: not by giving her the benefit of the doubt, but by adjusting his categories to her, rather than the other way around. And when asked about Gilbert Osmond, Ralph wavers, "Who is he—what is he? He is a mysterious American, who has been living these twenty years, or more, in Italy. Why do I call him mysterious? Only as a cover for my ignorance; I don't know his antecedents, his family, his origin" (257). No other character in *Portrait* – not even Isabel – displays as much justice and self-consciousness in their attempts to classify other people.

Ralph's resistance to classifying Isabel looks downright heroic when we contrast it to the machinations of Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle. When Madame Merle first tells Osmond that she has found the perfect wife for him, he is initially suspicious, inquiring in an admonitory tone: "Is she beautiful, clever, rich, splendid, universally intelligent and unprecedentedly virtuous?" (246–247). Is she, in other words, perfect, unlike anyone else I have ever met? Remarkably, the answer to this question is yes; like Ralph, Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond notice Isabel's striking originality, but unlike

Ralph, they view that originality as an opportunity to shape her, to classify her as they see fit. “She has too many ideas,” Osmond observes, sounding like the stereotype of an abusive husband, “[f]ortunately they are very bad ones” because, after all, “they must be sacrificed” (294). Where Ralph sees openness, expansiveness, and potentiality, Osmond sees superfluity and lamentable excess, an opportunity, not for her, but for him, to define her in relation to himself *as* a wife. “He perceived,” the narrator tells us in another moment of exquisite villainy, “a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by rejecting the splendid offer of a British aristocrat” (311). Osmond and Merle take a “centripetal” narrative approach to classifying Isabel – striving to turn her into an “it” – and it is striking to observe that Isabel shares this paradigm, even if she applies it far more magnanimously.⁴²

Over the course of the novel, at the hands of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, Isabel travels a path from a position of freedom to one of “suffocation,” from illegibility to classificatory stability. Upon arriving in England, Isabel resolutely tells Ralph, “I am very fond of my liberty” (19), and, in his turn, Ralph becomes very fond of Isabel’s liberty, too. Critics have replicated Isabel’s sense of herself as an emblem of freedom in their attempts to understand why, if Isabel is so fond of freedom, she marries Gilbert Osmond and then returns to him at the end of the novel with a perfectly adequate exit strategy in place: Millicent Bell thinks of Isabel as “James’s most absolute heroine of potentiality”; Patrick Fessenbecker calls Isabel a “willful wanton” who “does not desire any experience more or less than another”; Daniel Wright argues that Isabel has a “desire

⁴² Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, xi.

for everything” and a reciprocal fear of choosing anything in particular, for exchanging “the openness of ‘everything’” for “merely *something*, a path already taken.”⁴³ Isabel values freedom above all else, and to bind herself to anything in particular – to a husband, to a country, to a plan for her life – is to limit that freedom. There is a lot to be said for this reading of Isabel, and indeed at the beginning of *Portrait* she does represent freedom, for others as well as herself, and at the end she has little to no freedom left. But in focusing on the relationship, specifically, between Isabel and the concept of freedom, criticism on *Portrait* has looked past a position that the novel (as opposed to one of its characters) takes with respect to freedom, a position that, crucially, resides not in Isabel’s character but in Ralph’s; more specifically, it resides in Ralph’s relation to Isabel’s freedom, in his intellectual, moral, and financial efforts to preserve the freedom of someone other than himself, and specifically of someone whose freedom progressively (i.e. narratively) disappears. He is the “heroic,” “immensely vicarious,” “indefatigably supple” “intelligence” who works on behalf of an increasingly legible subject of narrative.⁴⁴ The novel reimagines the location of freedom, and this relocation, I argue, corresponds to a position the novel takes regarding the relative merits of narrative and criticism.

As Bersani’s analysis implies, it is important to understand Isabel’s freedom in a double sense: she has, and then loses, a positive freedom of action, to live her life as she sees fit. And she also has, and then loses, a negative freedom from knowability, from any

⁴³ Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, 32; Patrick Fessenbecker, “Freedom, Self-Obligation, and Selfhood in Henry James,” in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 66.1 (June 2011), 79; Daniel Wright, *Bad Logic: Reasoning about Desire in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 158–59.

⁴⁴ Henry James, “The Science of Criticism,” 98–99.

“enslaving truth.”⁴⁵ After Isabel’s marriage to Gilbert Osmond, the characters around her – especially, but not exclusively, Ralph – fully understand her unhappiness despite her best efforts to preserve the ineffability she enjoys at the novel’s beginning. Isabel desperately tries to retain her illegibility, but trying to be something that she used to effortlessly be makes her desperation all the more obvious. In one of their late conversations, the narrator briefly – and, for this portion of the novel, uncharacteristically – reports Ralph’s thoughts instead of Isabel’s: “Her mask had dropped for an instant, but she had put it on again, to Ralph’s infinite disappointment. He had caught a glimpse of her natural face, and he wished immensely to look into it. He had an almost savage desire to hear her complain of her husband” (481). Isabel, who used to exist in the idiom of natural history, who sought a “natural” place for people in her mind, is now, like Gilbert Osmond, artificially concealing what is natural and what is, to Ralph, all too obvious. In this sense, she is not really, or not finally, a “figure or illegibility.”⁴⁶

Isabel, as a protagonist who is gradually emplotted and ensnared in the process of narrativization, serves as a particularly potent symbol of the hazards of narrative. Since “[t]he novel is of its very nature an ‘ado’...and the larger the form it takes the greater of course the ado,” “that was what one was in for—for positively organizing an ado about Isabel Archer” (*Art* 48). Having planned to “build large,” James would seem to be in for quite the ado (*Art* 52). James acknowledges the necessary evil of narrativizing his beloved protagonist and the tragic consequences of that narrativization. It is not difficult to imagine James hoping against hope that maybe this time Isabel won’t marry Gilbert

⁴⁵ Leo Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie,” 132. See also Patrick Fessenbecker, “Freedom, Self-Obligation, and Selfhood in Henry James.”

⁴⁶ Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, 3.

Osmond, won't become ensnared by the pernicious plotting of Madame Merle. But, alas, "that was what one was in for," an "organiz[ed]," emplotted, structuring "ado about Isabel Archer." To read *The Portrait of a Lady* is to be reminded that narrativization and emplotment can all too easily result in a tragic, determining stuckness.

It is, of course, not difficult to establish that Gilbert Osmond is a bad husband, but it is worth dwelling for a moment on the terms of his badness and the effect he has on Isabel. She becomes an "object" (311), she is "put in a cage" (353), she is forced to live in "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (443). She is determined, defined, classified, possessed. Each of these figures is characterized by a lack of mobility – she is trapped, with no way out, as the walls close in around her, progressively restricting her freedom of movement and her freedom from knowability. Even before she marries Osmond, Isabel has a nascent sense of his stickiness: his house, she reflects, "looked somehow as if, once you were in, it would not be easy to get out" (261). Plot, for James, is "a set of relations" or "those situations that, by a logic of their own, immediately fall, for the fabulist, into movement, into a march or a rush, a patter of quick steps" (*Art* 42). There is a sense in this passage of the components of a narrative *falling into place* or moving to get into position. One of the most interesting things about the concept of plot is that it serves as an interface between motion and stillness, between temporality and logic, between what happens and what those things mean.⁴⁷ Isabel, as the subject of this plot, has made her motions, and she has fallen, as it were, into precisely the place plotted for her by Osmond and Madame Merle. To become the subject of a

⁴⁷ As Peter Brooks puts it, "Plot...is the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning." *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), xi.

narrative, the subject of a plot, is necessarily to reach an end. And that end is one of determination, one in which the potentiality so evident at the narrative's beginning is altogether lost.

If Isabel, in her protagonicity, serves as a tragic reminder of the effects of narrativization, then Ralph embodies the critical epistemology. The narrator tells us that Ralph had been given “the key to modern criticism,” the practice of which includes his characteristic irony and his often profound, even wise interpretations of those around him (38). Ralph's irony flows from his unique position as at once central to the novel and off to the side. Through the first half of *Portrait*, Ralph receives as much narrative attention as anyone, but he is also exempt from the erotic economy that is the novel's primary narratable condition by the fact of a vague illness, called “a consumption” but otherwise unspecified (202). The second half of the novel is more and more focalized through Isabel's perspective, as she assumes her sacrificial place as the center of consciousness, and Ralph is by an equal measure pushed more to the side, disappearing for long stretches of time. Ralph is, of course, sacrificed in a more literal sense than Isabel, and his deathbed scene clarifies that his sacrifice has been in the name of life and of freedom, that he has to die in order for others to live. “There is nothing makes us feel so much alive as to see others die,” he tells Isabel, “[t]hat's the sensation of life—the sense that we remain. I have had it—even I. But now I am of no use but to give it to others” (593–94). In one of his last remarks to Isabel, he tells her that she “will grow young again” (596), just as James, decades later, watches his novels undergo the same alchemical process in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*. That is the value of Jamesian criticism – it attaches itself

to a narrative in which actuality has replaced potentiality, and it stubbornly holds on to the possibilities that have seemingly, almost certainly evaporated – although maybe not.

Ralph's relation to Isabel has not always been justly appreciated by James's critics. Considering Isabel's roles, first, as the emblem of freedom and, last, as the image of freedom lost, Ralph has often been grouped with the novel's other characters as being somehow responsible for that transition. Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle, to be sure, are more directly responsible for emplotting Isabel, but Ralph, the argument goes, in his anonymous bequest, inadvertently guarantees her entrapment by making her wealthy and, therefore, making her susceptible to Osmond. In attempting to set Isabel free, Ralph is often compared to an artist, who, though he loves his characters, traps them against his will. Laurence Holland, for example, considers Ralph's plan fundamentally "creative," deriving, as Ralph himself puts it, from his "imagination"; his creative act, though, is "immoral" and causes Holland to compare Ralph to Shakespeare's Iago.⁴⁸ Millicent Bell is more generous in her evaluation, suggesting that Ralph's benevolent attitude toward Isabel represents James's own desire to make her free: he is "like a novelist experimenting with the possibilities latent in his characters," but, Ralph, like James, puts Isabel on a "particular course...in the very act of trying to grant her freedom."⁴⁹ While it is tempting to view Ralph, as Holland and Bell do, as a figure for the creative artist, his intellectual attitude – his habit of thought – contrasts quite clearly with the determining, classifying effects of narrativization. His most meaningful act, I argue, is not an act at all, strictly speaking, but a thought, an attitude, a paradigm – it is his critical epistemology,

⁴⁸ Laurence B. Holland, *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), 28–29.

⁴⁹ Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, 89–90.

which, despite Isabel's increasingly actual entrapment, keeps alive the beauty and excitement of possibility.⁵⁰

It is, in fact, Gilbert Osmond who most faithfully represents the artist. During their courtship, Gilbert reminds Isabel, "Don't you remember my telling you that one ought to make one's life a work of art? You looked rather shocked at first; but then I told you that it was exactly what you seemed to me to be trying to do with your own life" (317).⁵¹ Gilbert's most prized quality is "taste" (252); his house "told of habitation being practiced as a fine art," and he himself resembles "portraits of the sixteenth century" (234–5); his daughter, Pansy, "had a kind of finish which was not entirely artless" (263): "she was like a sheet of blank paper—the ideal *jeune fille* of foreign fiction" (287). Gilbert's principle actions in *Portrait* are to *form* Pansy and Isabel as he sees fit, to artistically render them as extensions of himself. *Portrait* aligns these artistic endeavors with the undesirable vision of classification with which the novel begins: to take something that is alive, something that moves and changes and has a mind of its own, and to fix it in place. Osmond himself recognizes the contrast between his way of thinking and Ralph's, worrying when Isabel decides to return to Ralph's death bed in England: "[h]e wished her to have no freedom of mind, and he knew perfectly well that Ralph was

⁵⁰ One exception is Dana Luciano, "Invalid Relations: Queer Kinship in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*," in *The Henry James Review* 23.2 (2002), 196–217. Luciano argues that Ralph's marginality makes him, paradoxically, central to the novel's imagining of modes of kinship and affiliation beyond the reproductive temporality of heterosexual coupling. In doing so, her vision of Ralph comes closest to my own: "as a translator of life," she writes, "Ralph operates as both writer and reader simultaneously. And as his translations of Isabel's potentialities reveal, while there is, in the Jamesian text, more than one possible way of getting it right, there is always, as well, the possibility of getting things wrong" (204). In my view, Ralph's role as a writer and reader, as well as his attachment to potentiality, aligns him with the critic, more than the translator.

⁵¹ Laurence Holland also views Gilbert Osmond as a figure for the artist: "In this view of Osmond are joined both the finished work of art—the drawing with which Osmond is associated so intimately—and the master whose style was displayed in making it." *The Expense of Vision*, 36.

an apostle of freedom” (477). To the very last, Ralph’s ability to imagine freedom, and to convince others of its desirability, is one of the novel’s most narratable conditions, continually threatening to unsettle Osmond’s well-laid plot. The artist, it turns out, at least in this case, fears the broadness of the critic’s mind, his ability to imagine otherwise.

In *Portrait*’s intellectual economy, Ralph plays the part of the critic – always with an eye to the unactualized potential of those around him, even in the face of stubborn actuality. With him dies the critical epistemology that James clearly values above the classificatory processes of narrative. Considered in this way, we can begin to understand why Isabel returns to Osmond at the end of the novel. Moral and personal answers to this question are almost always unsatisfactory, because the capitulation to an unhappy marriage seems so at odds with Isabel’s love of freedom – freedom is, after all, there for the taking. Considered thematically and generically, however, the question takes on a different character: Isabel returns at the end because the source of the novel’s critical epistemology – its emblem of freedom, potential, and possibility – has left its pages. Narrative has outlasted criticism, but narrative’s victory is a somber one. *Portrait* is a melancholy novel, one that is not fully satisfied with its own generic classification, but one which, despite Ralph’s efforts, cannot break out of novelistic convention; or, more precisely, it can only break out of those conventions to the extent that Ralph’s critical epistemology can be represented.

IV

In *Portrait*, Ralph represents the critical epistemology, thus giving readers a clear sense of what it looks like and of its limitations. This form of engagement does not persist in James’s late novels, where there is often no explicit representative of criticism.

In *The Ambassadors*, for example, the role of criticism might be said to transcend the constraints of character and of theme that are imposed on it in *Portrait*. What was thematized in Ralph's character is, in *The Ambassadors*, literally an aspect of its form. What I hope to demonstrate is that James's morbid fascination with the epistemological dimensions of narrative is written into the structural relationship between the narrator and the protagonist, Lambert Strether. Strether serves as the novel's center of consciousness with remarkable consistency: James explains in his preface that, although "other persons in no small number were to people the scene, and each with his or her axe to grind...Strether's sense of these things, and Strether's only, should avail me for showing them; I should know but through his more or less groping knowledge of them, since his very gropings would figure among his most interesting motions" (*Art* 317-18). We see Strether at the same time that we see *with* him: we learn, for example, of Maria Gostrey only through her relationship with Strether, and we simultaneously learn of Strether's learning of her – we see her through Strether even as we see him see her.⁵² Despite his conscription as the novel's only center of consciousness, though, Strether actually rebels and resists his role as the sole source of narrative information. Strether's resistance to the relation of knowing between narrator and character allows the critical epistemology to suffuse *The Ambassadors* in a way that it could not in *Portrait* because of its thematic and characterological limitations.

Strether's resistance to his structural relation to the narrator takes two specific forms. First, he resists the narrative teleology that is imposed on him: to travel to Europe as an "ambassador" for his fiancée Mrs. Newsome, find Chad Newsome, determine the

⁵² For an analysis of the complexity of this relationship, and how it inflects James's criticism of his own work, see Paul B. Armstrong, "Reading James's Prefaces and Reading James."

specifics of his life in Europe, and bring him back to America. Strether is a famously bad ambassador, and his trip becomes more listless vacation than determined effort. Second, Strether resists the knowledge produced by his relationship with the narrator: knowledge about him as well as knowledge he might possess about others. Strether remains remarkably ignorant regarding the obvious sexual relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet, thus obscuring the knowing his narrative is supposed to produce. More to the point, he is also able to achieve interpersonal knowledge without making that knowledge available to the narrator or the readers of *The Ambassadors*. These two forms of resistance (to narrative temporality and to narrative revelations) are related in ways with an importance for James that is impossible to overstate: Strether resists the knowability – what Cavell might call a sense of knownness – that comes from being narrativized and therefore actualized.⁵³ Although he is not a critic, in the sense that Ralph is, Strether's structural relation to the narrator – one of closeness tempered by distance, shared consciousness shaded with occlusions and privacy – accomplishes for the *Ambassadors* what was only an act of Ralph's imagination in *Portrait*. In his preface, James calls *The Ambassadors* “frankly, quite the best, ‘all round,’ of all my productions” (*Art* 309). The critical epistemology that James portrays in Ralph's character becomes a quality of this novel “all round”; it becomes a kind of pervasive, yet enigmatic, aura of *The Ambassadors*, characterizing its style, its tone, and its structure.

One of Strether's keynotes for his unexpectedly pleasurable trip to Europe – in addition to the familiar theme of “freedom,” of which he becomes a partisan – is that he

⁵³ Cavell writes of a “sense of unknownness” in “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 265.

“wanted to put himself in relation, and he would be hanged if he were *not* in relation.”⁵⁴

With what or with whom it is difficult to say, but one gets the sense that Strether doesn't discriminate on this score: so willingly taken in hand by those he meets, so open to new experiences, he proves a lovely and a rather disorienting companion for readers of *The Ambassadors*. But there is another way to consider Strether's relationality, one with more sinister connotations. We can detect it, for example, in James's explanation of why he did not make Strether a first-person narrator:

Had I meanwhile, made him at once hero and historian, endowed him with the romantic privilege of the 'first person'...variety, and many other queer matters as well, might have been smuggled in by a back door. Suffice it, to be brief, that the first person, in the long piece, is a form foredoomed to looseness, and that looseness, never much my affair, had never been so little so as on this particular occasion. (*Art* 320)

There is a curious claim in this passage: that the addition of perspectives – specifically, that of a third-person narrator in addition to Strether's own – can prevent “variety” and “looseness,” that more perspectives can make the novel tighter and more consistent.

Admittedly, one can imagine *The Ambassadors* becoming rather loose if Strether's mental meanderings were left unchecked by the narrator, but Strether's idiosyncrasies as a protagonist cannot explain away this otherwise counterintuitive claim that more perspectives produce less variety. It is a more general claim than that: any “long piece” is susceptible to this particular danger. Crucially, one thing that including a third-person narrator does is to ensure that Strether only ever exists “in relation” with the narrator, and it is to this fact, I argue, that we must attribute the averted looseness of *The Ambassadors*. It is, in other words, not the accumulated perspectives that tighten the novel, but rather the consistent relational structure that forms between Strether's and the narrator's points

⁵⁴ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 2008), 86. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

of view – a relational structure that, as we will see, (at least partly) keeps Strether’s wandering wonder in check.

Such legislated relationality between narrator and character brings to the foreground certain epistemological problems of perspective: as the narrator’s, and so the reader’s, perspective is limited, the amount of knowledge that remains unavailable to that perspective becomes a major thematic concern. This is true of each of James’s major late novels, which, despite introducing epistemological problems which might seem insurmountable, in fact offer a rather optimistic sense that there are ways to accommodate the gulf separating two minds – not unlike Gaskell’s ordinary knowledge. In *The Golden Bowl*, for example, Fanny Assingham offers an intensely detailed interpretation of Maggie Verver’s motivations which turns out to be spectacularly accurate. “It was as if, God help me, I was seeing *for* them – I mean for the others,” she dizzily reflects to her husband Bob, “it was as if I were suddenly, with a kind of horrible push, seeing though their eyes.”⁵⁵ Fanny’s amazed description foregrounds the discomfort that attends such perspectival assimilation: a “sudden” “horrible push” causes her to see *for* them. Far from a symbiotic relationship, she describes a forcible displacement of perspective, a taking over of what rightly doesn’t belong to her – here again we have a Cavellian sense of knowledge as possession.⁵⁶ But where *The Golden Bowl* offers a violent vision of “seeing *for*,” *The Ambassadors*, which is the gentlest of James’s late novels, offers, instead, a model of seeing *with*. To be sure, *The Ambassadors* posits as axiom the impossibility of seeing with – the irreducibility of two perspectives. But in his constant efforts to put himself “in relation” with others, Strether continually finds himself locked

⁵⁵ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (London: Penguin, 2009), 298-299.

⁵⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 10.

in eye contact with various other characters in acts of mutual observation: he observes others even as he observes those others observing him. For Strether, these moments invariably conjure knowledge of the other's mind; they produce knowledge for Strether, but, crucially, that knowledge is only obliquely narrated and therefore remains unavailable to the narrator and reader.⁵⁷ What I want to suggest is that these moments are narratively illicit; in them, Strether breaks free from his conscripted role as narrative focalizer and achieves an epistemological privacy that is otherwise unavailable.

To conceive of Strether's epistemological desires as contrary to the narrative's legislation may seem like an ascription of too much rebelliousness – after all, Strether is no Kate Croy or Charlotte Stant. But passive resistance is resistance all the same, and it would be a mistake to take Strether's peaceful adherence to “the common unattainable art of taking things as they came,” as complacency (79). In fact, Strether's passivity is precisely where his resistance to the narrative is most apparent. Strether's desire to “put himself in relation” – a surprisingly intransitive verbal phrase – could be rephrased as a desire to maintain the potential to enter into relation with whomever he next meets, to give full play to the possibilities of walking down a Parisian street (and, indeed, he meets and enters into relation with several strangers). Strether's detours – his relationships with Maria Gostrey, Little Bilham, Madame de Vionnet and ultimately Chad himself – disrupt the streamlined narrative temporality imposed on him.

⁵⁷ See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) for an insightful discussion of the ways that “gesture” often opens into what he calls the “moral occult”: “the domain of spiritual forces and imperatives that is not clearly visible within reality, but which they believe to be operative there, and which demands to be uncovered, registered, articulated” (21). If the knowledge Strether achieves can be described as “occult,” it is an occult that is remarkably resilient to the narrator's interpretation.

Strictly speaking, the narrative temporality is imposed on Strether by his fiancée and Chad's mother, Mrs. Newsome. Structurally speaking, however, Mrs. Newsome resembles the narrator to an extraordinary degree. James notes in his preface that, though she is "away off with her finger on the pulse of Massachusetts," Mrs. Newsome is "no less intensely than circuitously present through the whole thing" (*Art* 319).⁵⁸ She is both there and not there, a presence whose physical absence cannot stop her from controlling the narrative in ways that are unavailable to Strether and from which he struggles to escape.⁵⁹ After all, Mrs. Newsome sets the narrative in motion by sending Strether as an "ambassador" to retrieve her son Chad, and she adds another cast of characters – Sarah, Mamie, and Jim – when Strether lags behind the narrative pace she wants to impose. After Strether travels from London to Paris, he receives a series of letters from Mrs. Newsome intended to direct his actions: "They would arrive, it would seem, her communications, at the rate of several a week," and, as Strether reflects, "[h]is friend wrote admirably, and her tone was even more in her style than in her voice – he might almost, for the hour, have had to come this distance to get its full carrying quality; yet the plenitude of his consciousness of difference consorted perfectly with the deepened intensity of the connection" (77). Mrs. Newsome's letters forge a relationship between herself and Strether characterized by a dialectical tension between distance and closeness,

⁵⁸ In important ways, the Jamesian narrator resembles the narrators of several other nineteenth-century novelists. We might think of Audrey Jaffe's discussion of the Dickensian narrator, whom she locates "not in presence or absence, but in the tension between the two," or of D. A. Miller's characterization of the Austenian narrator: "Here was a truly out-of-body voice" whose "overall impersonality determined a narrative authority and a beauty of expression both without equal." Audrey Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 4; D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1.

⁵⁹ Mrs. Newsome's narratorial perspective is even more visible when Sarah Pocock, the ambassador more faithful to her commission, "felt the fixed eyes of their admirable absent mother fairly screw into the flat of her back" (347).

between “difference” and “connection,” that in this very interplay resembles the narrator’s ability to both see and see with Strether.

Fundamentally, Mrs. Newsome’s letters try to direct the novel’s plot. They express her “desire that [Strether] should be worried with nothing that was not of the essence of his task” (78). Both Mrs. Newsome and the narrator use a written language notable for its style to forge a relationship with Strether that is at once distanced and close and whose functions are to direct his actions, to produce knowledge of Chad’s life, and to build teleologically toward a desired ending. We can therefore detect in Strether’s gradual resistance to Mrs. Newsome’s directives a sense of oppression that resonates in the relationship he has with the narrator. After receiving these letters in Paris, Strether does precisely the opposite of what Mrs. Newsome wants: “In the Luxembourg gardens he pulled up” and “passed an hour in which the cup of his impressions seemed truly to overflow” (77). Strether passively resists, and the ease with which he does so invigorates him (in an inward, thoughtful kind of way):

More than once, during this time [his week in Europe], he had regarded himself as admonished; but the admonition this morning was formidably sharp. It took as it hadn’t done yet the form of a question – the question of what he was doing with such an extraordinary sense of escape...It was the difference, the difference of being just where he was and *as* he was, that formed the escape – this difference was so much greater than he had dreamed it would be; and what he finally sat there turning over was the strange logic of his finding himself so free. (77)

Graduating from a guilty sense of admonishment to a more celebratory sense of his liberation, Strether uses this hour in the Luxembourg gardens to great effect. With Mrs. Newsome, at least, the “difference” (repeated three times here) has won out over the closeness, and Strether’s newfound sense of freedom from his Woollett commissioner represents a resistance to precisely the kind of relationship the narrator legislates.

Strether does everything he can while in Europe to resist Mrs. Newsome's insistence that he move in the straightest line possible from point A to point B: she wants a streamlined teleological narrative, but Strether at first subverts that teleology before ultimately inverting it. His most effective act of resistance is "to put himself in relation" with people other than Chad. Even if upon stepping off the boat with "a consciousness of personal freedom as he hadn't known for years" Strether celebrates that he is "independently, unsociably, alone," he puts himself in relation with Maria Gostrey with remarkable speed (21-23). The paragraph immediately following his giddy solitude narrates his meeting with Maria, and from that point forward Strether continues to meet new people and, by meeting them, to forestall the ending prescribed to his European narrative by Mrs. Newsome. The narrator signals Strether's resistance with language that casts his new relationship with Maria as a new beginning: "Nothing could have been odder than Strether's sense of himself as at that moment launched in something of which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past and which was literally beginning there and then" (25). This rather unspecific "groping" for the "sense" of things is a sentence of potentiality, entirely averse to definition (*Art* 317-18).

Such relations slow things down and seem, temporarily, to resist the narrative propulsion forward through time altogether. As Strether aimlessly wanders through Paris he realizes "the truth that wherever one paused in Paris the imagination reacted before one could stop it. This perpetual reaction put a price, if one would, on pauses; but it piled up consequences till there was scarce room to pick one's steps among them" (88). Thus, after "lingering for five minutes on the opposite side of the street" from Chad's balcony (87), Strether reflects on the ways that putting oneself into relation with Paris slows time

and narrative progression to a near standstill. All forward momentum is lost and Strether “lingers” indecisively on the city street, an inactivity that only becomes more difficult to break:

Before Strether had cut the knot by crossing, a young man [Little Bilham, not Chad] had come out and looked about him, had lighted a cigarette and tossed the match over, and then resting on the rail, had given himself up to watching the life below while he smoked. His arrival contributed, in its order, to keeping Strether in position; the result of which in turn was that Strether soon felt himself noticed. The young man began to look at him as in acknowledgement of his being himself in observation. (89)

Already figured as a Gordian knot, the act of crossing the street is delayed even longer by his mutual observation with the “young man,” “keeping Strether in position.” Having stood there for five minutes, uncertain of what to do, Strether’s narrative teleology ceases its motion altogether.

What’s so striking about this passage is its insistent focus on visuality: Little Bilham steps outside, “looked about him...watching the life below,” “notices” and “looks” at Strether “as in acknowledgment of his being himself in observation.” Little Bilham looks at Strether looking at him just as Strether looks at Little Bilham looking at him. Then, in the following paragraph: “The young man looked at him still, he looked at the young man; and the issue, by a rapid process, was that this knowledge of a perched privacy appeared to him the last of luxuries” (90). At the balcony, then, we see an act of mutual observation with a twofold effect: first, teleological narrative progression is replaced by reflective immobility. Second, Strether achieves a kind of knowledge. The knowledge he discovers is that of another narrative path, an alternative to the one prescribed to him by Mrs. Newsome: to go up to the balcony, “the only domicile...in the great ironic city, on which he had the shadow of a claim” (90), even though he has no idea who the young man is. Before he does so, he reflects on what, according to the plan

prescribed by Mrs. Newsome, he *should* do: “It came to pass before he moved that Waymarsh, and Waymarsh alone, Waymarsh not only undiluted but positively strengthened, struck him as the present alternative to the young man in the balcony. When he did [finally!] move it was fairly to escape that alternative” (90). The mutual observation he shares with Little Bilham gives rise to this knowledge in a way that is difficult to describe, but that ultimately leads to Strether’s movement away from Waymarsh and toward a new relation, contrary to Mrs. Newsome’s imposed narrative teleology. It is as though Strether, by sharing a glance with Little Bilham and by repeating Waymarsh’s name three times (thereby banishing him, it would seem, in fairy-tale fashion), can finally move forward along a narrative path he has freely chosen and that offers him “privacy” (90).

These acts of mutual observation happen regularly throughout *The Ambassadors*, and their result is often a kind of knowledge that we might call, following Peter Brooks, “occult.”⁶⁰ We see this, for example, when Strether attends Gloriani’s party: “Suddenly, across the garden, he saw Little Bilham approach, and it was a part of the fit that was on him that as their eyes met he guessed also *his* knowledge” (163). Or, at the same party, as he meets Madame de Vionnet: “It was a click of the spring – he saw the truth. He had by this time also met Chad’s look; there was more of it in that; and the truth, accordingly, so far as Bilham’s enquiry was concerned, had thrust in the answer” (178). And after Sarah Pocock, the second ambassador, arrives on the scene: “What he was asking himself for the time was how Sarah Pocock, in the opportunity already given her, had judged her brother – from whom he himself, as they finally, at the station, separated for their

⁶⁰ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, esp. 153-197. For a helpful discussion of the dynamic between vision and truth in James’s novels, see Leo Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie.”

different conveyances, had had a look into which he could read more than one message” (284-285). This list represents a sample of the way *The Ambassadors* persistently associates mutual observation and knowledge. The type of knowledge these moments produce is remarkably intersubjective; that is, by means of eye contact alone, one character can, as it were, enter into the knowledge of another, knowledge that is otherwise confined by that character’s perspective. Strether’s knowledge is the ordinary or nonviolent knowledge like that we saw in Gaskell; it is like the knowledge in acknowledgement.

But that knowledge takes a very particular form that helps to distinguish these relationships – the momentary mutual glances Strether continually participates in – from those he shares with the narrator and Mrs. Newsome: it is a non-verbal knowledge. These moments reveal “occult” or “abysmal” knowledge, hidden beneath the surface and made manifest only obliquely and often without explicit expression.⁶¹ Take the meaningful glance shared by Strether and Waymarsh in the theater box, for example: what is it, after all, the “queer and stiff” “something” that “passe[s] in silence between them”? Whatever it is, it is in response to Maria’s intimation, which she later makes explicit, that Little Bilham and the (still absent) Chad are in communication, and it leads Strether to have “one of those quiet moments that sometimes settle more matters than the outbreaks dear to the historic muse.” “The only qualification of the quietness was the synthetic ‘Oh hang it!’ into which Strether’s share of the silence soundlessly flowered” (114-115).

⁶¹ “It is merely logical,” Peter Brooks writes, “that the most ‘abysmal’ meanings are figures through the trope of muteness...for this provides the ultimate approach to recognitions that are so delicate, obscure, submerged that they cannot be embodied in direct statement but only gestured toward...The very rhythm and punctuation of late Jamesian conversations...suggest the need to postulate meanings in the margins between words, a desire to make the reader strain toward making darkness visible.” Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 179.

Remarkably, the only verbalization during these moments – the “Oh hang it!” that qualifies the quietness – somehow “soundlessly flower[s]” into the silence waiting for it, modifying that silence, it would seem, without changing its fundamental character. The knowledge into which Strether comes at this moment is insistently non-verbal. Even the (presumably audible) spokenness of Strether’s exclamation is consumed by the silence that so dominantly characterizes this exchange. Once the sense of Maria’s earlier intimation is made explicit – that Little Bilham has been acting on Chad’s orders – Strether asks, “Do you *know* that?” and Maria responds: “I do better. I see it. This was, before I met him, what I wondered whether I *was* to see. But as soon as I met him I ceased to wonder” (115). This whole exchange revolves around an understanding of Little Bilham’s behavior that is somehow best captured silently and that both is and is not knowledge. This moment and the others like it that recur throughout the novel represent an ordinary knowing, one that, in its occlusions, its refusal to make that knowledge actual, demonstrates what Ohi calls style’s “power of potentialization.”⁶²

The nonverbalized, only obliquely narrated understandings that result from these moments of eye contact escape the confines of the narratable, leaving readers with an at-best ambiguous understanding of the “occult” knowledge these characters so reliably grasp. That is, these are moments in which Strether successfully resists not only the dictates of Woollett, but also the legislated relationality imposed by the narrator – Strether understands something that remains frustratingly unavailable to us, and by means at which we can only wonder. Importantly, it is by entering into relation with other characters that Strether can achieve this freedom; by sharing a mutual, and mutually

⁶² Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, 169.

meaningful, glance, Strether can for the moment overcome the perspectival limitations that are otherwise so resilient and, in the same act, bring into existence another, freely chosen relationship to which the narrator has only partial access. After all, the knowledge shared in these moments depends on mutuality – it takes two to share a meaningful glance. What these moments make visible, then, are not the limitations imposed on Strether’s perspective, but rather the limitations imposed on the narrator’s. Strether’s perspective becomes unavailable.

Strether’s successful resistance to the narrative is also evident in the space between the chapters. For example, Strether travels from London to Paris between books one and two, and between the second and third books he travels up to Chad’s apartment after locking eyes with Little Bilham. In fact, the balcony scene takes place at the very end of the second book, whose last sentence is: “However, he would tell him [Waymarsh] all about it” (90). The third book then begins: “Strether told Waymarsh all about it that very evening, on their dining together at the hotel” (93).⁶³ These two sentences cover exactly the same ground, but their discursive continuity belies the temporal gap that exists between the two diegetic moments. Where the surface of the text is smooth, the transition natural, Strether has in fact broken free both from Mrs. Newsome’s imposed temporality and from the narration. But the narrative can’t simply push forward; its momentum is gone, and the unnarrated event exerts its gravitational pull: “Chad had been absent from the Boulevard Malesherbes – was absent from Paris altogether; he had learned that from the concierge, but had nonetheless gone up, and gone up – there were

⁶³ This is akin to the moment in Austen’s *Emma* when, as D. A. Miller points out, one chapter ends and the next begins with the same sentence. But, he observes, “[t]he inconsequence of this odd little repetition makes us overlook its startling weirdness, or more accurately, prevents us from retaining our sense of this weirdness.” *Jane Austen*, 63-4.

no two ways about it – from an uncontrollable, a really, if one would, depraved curiosity” (94). As the narrative moves forward, it is continually pulled backward. Strether, as the focalizing center, has a certain share of the narrative voice, and that share works against the novel’s forward momentum, against the “narrative impulse,” in an effort to slow things down.⁶⁴ As the reader moves from chapter to chapter and from book to book, they must think of *The Ambassadors* as something not-quite narrative, as something that resists its own status as narrative by continually pulling their attention away from its teleological progress toward an ending and by directing their focus to those things which remain unnarrated.

We can therefore see how both Strether, as the narrative’s focal center, and the narrative itself, in the relationships between books built into its structure, resist narrativity – the impulse to move forward through time – and it is with this resistance in mind that we can finally make sense of Strether’s shock upon seeing Chad and Madame de Vionnet during his sojourn to the countryside. The first of two chapters dedicated to this episode, idyllic in the extreme, narrates Strether’s pleasant solitude: “He walked and walked as if to show himself how little he had now to do” (412). The terms in which he conceives of his short vacation are strikingly non-narrative: the trip is an homage to “a certain small Lambinet that had charmed him, long years before.” Indeed, his experience on this day resembles less a time-bound progression through a story than a landscape painting: the village he visits “affected him as a thing of whiteness, blueness and crookedness, set in coppery green” within an “oblong gilt frame” (415). But the village is not *just* a painting, because that “picture” “was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage” and,

⁶⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 8.

what's more, "the picture and the play seemed supremely to melt together in the good woman's broad sketch of what she could do for her visitor's appetite" (416). In its accretion of generic possibility – the scene is a painting, a play, a sketch, even the "good woman's" culinary creation – this episode illustrates what David Kurnick calls the "generic undecidability" of James's fiction with particular salience.⁶⁵ It is as if Strether doesn't really know what sort of art form he's in, but whatever it is, it isn't a narrative. The persistence with which he suggests, through the narrator's free indirect style, various non-novelistic paradigms for understanding his experience belies, more than anything, a desire to be outside narrative, to exist in some non-temporal, or at least non-teleological, space.

Of course, the second chapter dedicated to this episode spoils Strether's fun. It is in this chapter that Strether finally realizes that the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet is not, as Little Bilham would have him believe, "a virtuous attachment" (149). He comes to this awareness when he sees them in a boat on the river, coincidentally taking a day's vacation in the same village. But it is not just that he sees them; it is that he sees them see him and, in an act that betrays their bad faith, they momentarily consider pretending not to have seen him: "He saw they would show nothing if they could feel sure he hadn't made them out" (419). After the failed, or betrayed, mutuality of their eye contact, he can't shake the "idea that they would have gone on, not seeing and not knowing, missing their dinner and disappointing their hostess, had he himself taken a line to match" (419–20). But they do ultimately acknowledge him, and the narrator calls this recognition "violence averted" (419–20). In

⁶⁵ David Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, 124.

this moment, we see the other side of a violent epistemology, according to Cavell: the skeptical act as one of dispossession.⁶⁶ This scene particularly stands out in a novel that is, as we have seen, so filled with moments of mutual observation that so recurrently results in some “occult” understanding that exists independently of the narrative.⁶⁷ The novel has conditioned its readers to expect mutuality in these moments, to expect Madame de Vionnet to observe Strether as he observes her. But here the novel does precisely the opposite:

Significantly, Strether gains knowledge through this mutual observation as well, but it is not the same “occult” knowledge that escapes narrative expression. It is, rather, knowledge that reminds Strether of his original mission, of his commission by Mrs. Newsome to discover whether Chad has behaved dissolutely and to bring him home. It is also, as Strether reflects, uncharacteristically specific and explicit: “He kept making of it that there had been simply a *lie* in the charming affair – a lie on which one could now, detached and deliberate, perfectly put one’s finger (423). If before this moment Strether had “dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll,” he now understands “the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed” (425). This is knowledge sanctioned by Mrs. Newsome and by narrativity, by the teleological movement towards the story’s ending that is now all too actual. The complex optics of this episode cause Strether to revise his understanding of his own situation: “Chad and Madame de Vionnet were then like himself taking a day in the country – though it was as queer as fiction, as farce, that their country could happen to be exactly his” (419). Queer as fiction: this

⁶⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

⁶⁷ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 21.

scene, as Kevin Ohi observes, “rupture[es]...the painting Strether has been walking around in,” and, in that rupture, Strether is jolted into generic self-consciousness.⁶⁸ He is forced to confront not only the diegetic fact of Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s affair, but the extradiegetic, formal fact of his novelistic existence. He is awakened into awareness of the inevitable ending to which the narrative has been teleologically tending, and against which he has unknowingly been working.

But if Strether is forced to acknowledge the inevitability of his novel’s ending, he has one last act of resistance up his sleeve. The final page of *The Ambassadors* suggests the possibility that it is a particular kind of novel: a marriage plot. Indeed, Maria’s suggestion that Strether stay in Europe with her threatens to place James’s novel in that most teleological of genres. It is then in Strether’s rejection of her offer, tempting though it may be, that we can locate his victory over teleology. And Strether’s last words, which are also the novel’s last words, achieve what is a final freezing in place, a deictic marker that refuses narrative momentum: “Then there we are!” (470). As deictic markers go, this one is notably unspecific. Strether gestures in a genre that can only indirectly represent gestures, thereby reintroducing some of the “generic undecidability” that was tragically lost a few chapters earlier.⁶⁹ Where are we, exactly? Strether’s last act is one that refuses the specific actuality of a novel’s ending, one that works to preserve the possibilities inherent in an invisible gesture. We are stuck in undecidability and potentiality. The novel thus preserves the critical epistemology which has, throughout, existed in tension with its narrative.

V

⁶⁸ Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, 163.

⁶⁹ David Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, 124.

When Henry James writes that “[t]he only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting,” he makes one of the originary statements of modern literary criticism. The “interesting,” as Sianne Ngai tells us, is a privileged category for modern literary criticism because it is an aesthetic judgment that persists in a discipline that is otherwise disinclined to view itself as dispensing aesthetic judgments. Ngai routes her discussion of the “merely interesting” through German romanticism, where critics like Schlegel developed “a new theory of the criticism of art that would in turn entail an explicit break with judgment.”⁷⁰ But, Ngai points out, to call something interesting is still to make an aesthetic judgment, even if it is a modest one: it “ascrib[es] value to that which seems to differ, in a yet-to-be-conceptualized way, from a general expectation or norm whose exact concept may itself be missing at the moment of judgment.”⁷¹ The “interesting,” you might say, contextualizes or subsumes the aesthetic judgment within an epistemological framework, because the difference that matters is the “relatively small surprise of information” that “marks a tension between the unknown and the already known”; it “is generally bound up with a desire to know and document reality.”⁷² The “interesting” thus names a process, whereby a “feeling based judgment” (of surprise or wonder) is *ex post facto* given a conceptual or epistemological explanation.⁷³

The conceptual justification of a non-conceptual judgment serves a vital function: it allows for, even constructs, social networks. In Bruno Latour’s phrase, “interesting”

⁷⁰ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 111.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 173.

texts literally “assemble the social” networks that facilitate the shared projects of meaning-making and knowledge production.⁷⁴ This social element of aesthetic judgment is precisely what matters most to Stanley Cavell: he describes “the aesthetic claim...as a kind of compulsion to share a pleasure, hence as tinged with an anxiety that the claim stands to be rebuked.” He continues, “[i]t is a condition of, or threat to, that relation to things called aesthetic, that something I know and cannot make intelligible stands lost to me.”⁷⁵ And yet there is something more fundamental in Cavell’s “compulsion”: while Ngai and Latour emphasize the sociality of the aesthetic judgment by noting its incorporation into a broader epistemological project (“a desire to know and document reality”), Cavell relates this compulsion to the more basic sociality of being intelligible, of saying what you mean and being understood in what you have said:

The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community...I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself...The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason.⁷⁶

Cavell phrases this last sentence in a surprising – one might say, interesting – way: he is not explaining that in searching for reason we search for community – which is one way to understand Ngai and Latour – but rather that the search for community *is itself* a search for reason. Community is the criteria of reason. Cavell makes a similar reversal here as in “Knowing and Acknowledging,” where he insists that to acknowledge is to know, rather than the other way around. As we have seen, this reversal fundamentally shifts the criteria

⁷⁴ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Cited in Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 114.

⁷⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 9.

⁷⁶ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 20.

for what it means to know something or someone; it indexes a different epistemological plane, one that, in Cavell's work, criticism comes to occupy.

When James places such emphasis on the "interesting" as a mode of critical judgment, I think it is important to recognize the ways it similarly points to a different epistemological plane. Criticism makes claims, but, as I have been arguing, no claims that would serve a positivistic, systematic, or definitive epistemological goal.⁷⁷ James rejects this type of claim, and in rejecting it he "unfolds" or "perfects" the epistemological reflections of Gaskell, Eliot, and Hardy, rather than overturning them.⁷⁸ For James, criticism claims to revive the object of one's knowledge by dislodging it from systems of classification and definition and thereby revealing what one doesn't know; it claims to say what has been left unsaid and, in saying it, to offer further opportunities to say more. In one of the most poignant moments of modern literary criticism, James suddenly closes his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, "[t]here is really too much to say" (*Art* 58). I read this as an explicit claim to mutual intelligibility and sociality: James has had his say, but there is so much more one could say that someone else should pick up where he leaves off. The claims of criticism are explicitly framed against definition and systematic circumscription. We can hear something of James's expression in Virginia

⁷⁷ Contrast this with Dorothy Hale's discussion of the "interesting" in James's criticism. "For James," Hale writes, "the novel will prove interesting only to the degree that it successfully expresses the novelist's unique point of view." That point of view, Hale continues, is distinguished by the novelist's "ability to express his own point of view authentically," that is, objectively, thus conveying an impression of the world unsullied (in theory) by the limitations of perspective. For Hale the "interesting" describes an aesthetic and (implicitly) epistemological reinstantiation of a discredited objectivity. While I agree with Hale that art (and criticism) is meant "to actualize the latent 'value' of the situation" being rendered or criticized, I differ from the claim that "it is the objectiveness...of the artistic subject that allows James to believe that alterity can be instantiated through artistic form." I suggest instead that James's focus on the "interesting" points us toward a different epistemology that strives for elaboration, rewriting, and tuition, for conceptualizing or giving language to what has so far been unconceptualized or unstated. *Social Formalism*, 24, 32, 38.

⁷⁸ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection*, 29-30.

Woolf's desire for the liberation of "the enormous burden of the unexpressed," and in Susan Sontag's enjoining question, "[n]ow, what *else* can be said?"⁷⁹ In criticism, there is always more to say because criticism is an invitation to say more. Its claims are "claims to community."⁸⁰

Criticism, as I have suggested, is a collective enterprise. It obviates the "true/false toggle" and runs on the "interesting."⁸¹ One way to understand the epistemological grounds of literary criticism – and to further connect that epistemology to Henry James – is to call it pragmatist. "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it," writes Henry's brother William, "[t]ruth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events."⁸² For William James and other pragmatists, the truth of an idea is measured not by its correspondence to reality but by the practical effects of its being considered true: "How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false?"⁸³ Pragmatism involves a fundamental rejection of the epistemology following from Cartesian dualism: it rejects the notion that our minds represent to themselves a non-mental reality, and that "truth" is measured by the fidelity of those representations.⁸⁴ The consonance between William James's pragmatism and Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy should not be lost. The claim that truth is measured by its practical effects has a cousin in Wittgenstein's notion

⁷⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (Orlando: Harcourt, 1984), 54. Susan Sontag, "Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1997), xi.

⁸⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 20.

⁸¹ Garrett Stewart, "The World Viewed: Skepticism Degree Zero," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (New York: Continuum, 2011), 90.

⁸² William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, ed. Giles Gunn (London: Penguin, 2000), 88. Of course, William's influence on Henry has been well-covered. See Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3-7.

that in “a *large* class of cases...the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”⁸⁵ In either case, there is no transcendental “truth” or “meaning” that exists separately from the idea or word it describes. Indeed, the neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty traces an intellectual history characterized by its rejection of the “mind-as-mirror” theory of representational epistemology through Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein; and the historian Stephen Toulmin offers a yet broader history of philosophical modernity – one also defined against Cartesian and Kantian rationalism – from Montaigne to Wittgenstein.⁸⁶

Broadly speaking, these are the intellectual contexts in which we should understand the realist novel and the practice of literary criticism that grows from it. The consequences of understanding literary criticism in this way are profound, both in terms of its internal logic (such as it is) and in terms of its increasingly precarious place in the university. First of all, we must understand literary criticism as a thoroughly social phenomenon. William James gets at this quality in a strained way, suffused as his text is with the lexicon of American capitalism: “What,” he asks in a moment of emphasis, “is the truth’s cash-value?”; “Truth lives,” he continues, “for the most part on a credit system...We trade each other’s truth.”⁸⁷ This is an idea that (thankfully stripped of its economic framing) has over the past several decades come to exert a major influence on the history and sociology of science. Bruno Latour’s work is paradigmatic insofar as it disrupts the notion that “truth” names a definitive reflection or description of reality.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 25°.

⁸⁶ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*; Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁸⁷ William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 88, 91.

⁸⁸ For one representative example, see his essay “Circulating Reference”: “As we examine in detail the practices that produce information about a state of affairs, it should become clear how very unrealistic most of the philosophical discussions about realism have been.” In *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 24.

Scholars in this field stress that scientific knowledge is the result of a *social* process, rather than a strictly epistemological one. For Steven Shapin, scientific knowledge is neither more nor less than the consensus of scientific practitioners who are bound together by mutually agreed-upon conventions of credibility: “What counts for any community as true knowledge is a collective good and a collective accomplishment. That good is always in others’ hands, and the fate of any particular claim that something ‘is the case’ is never determined by the individual making the claim.”⁸⁹

In this respect, claims to scientific knowledge resemble the claims of literary criticism. But while science and literary criticism are analogously social processes, the nature of that sociality differs markedly. Put simply, literary criticism does not establish its claims on a consensus model. Science calls for a particular kind of response: social networks warrant its claims by agreeing to them (or not), thus establishing consensus (or not). This is how “truth *happens* to an idea.”⁹⁰ Literary criticism calls for a different kind of response: not agreement, per se, but “rewriting” (Barthes) or “tuition” (Cavell); it calls for its social network to say more (Sontag), to say something “interesting” (James, Ngai).⁹¹ Scientific consensus is a kind of actualization (as William James says, it is how truth is “realized”), whereas literary criticism instead strives to preserve the potentiality of texts by saying more about them. Understanding literary criticism to operate on a model other than the consensus model – pluralism of response – makes clear why it is continually defunded by a neoliberal university that wants to see measurable results, the

⁸⁹ Significantly, two paragraphs after this passage Shapin admiringly cites William James and Richard Rorty. Steven Shapin, *The Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5-7.

⁹⁰ William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 88.

⁹¹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 5; Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4-5; Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*.

Production of Knowledge. It also makes clear why “method” is a misguided concept, insofar as it plays into the hands of a scientistic (i.e. consensus based) model of knowledge production – one is reminded of James’s apposite expression, “the fatal futility of fact” (*Art* 122).

And yet, criticism is no less an epistemological process. Just as Ralph Touchett and Lambert Strether are able to achieve a noncoercive knowledge of others, so critics, in rewriting the object of criticism, obtain and create knowledge of its unspoken latencies; they record an encounter grounded in the text’s qualities and in their own critical practice. Understanding criticism as a specific practice on nonscientific epistemological grounds offers a bit more substance to that overdetermined shibboleth, close reading, which is too often framed as the “method” of criticism. In an exquisite description – not to say demonstration – of the practice, D. A. Miller likens close reading to Jane Austen’s “close writing,” the formal technique of free-indirect discourse.⁹² Miller writes of his own close reading practice as “an almost infantile desire to be *close*, period, as close as one can get, without literal plagiarism, to merging with the mother text.”⁹³ This is Barthesian rewriting but in a different affective mode, oriented not toward radical refraction and dispersal but fidelity. But, Miller continues,

the practice of close reading has always been radically cloven: here, on one side my ambition to master a text, to write *over* its language and refashion it to the cut of my argument, to which it is utterly indifferent; there, on the other, my longing to write *in* this language, to identify and combine with it. The adept in close reading must assert an autonomy of which he must also betray the weak and easily overwhelmed defenses.⁹⁴

⁹² It is not incidental that Andrew Miller’s Cavellian mode of criticism involves what he calls “critical free-indirect discourse.” Andrew Miller cites the same passage from D. A. Miller’s book. *The Burdens of Perfection*, 84-91.

⁹³ “In an essay once,” he continues parenthetically, “citing the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, I left out the quotation marks.” D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen*, 58.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Miller's terms displace one another as his passage proceeds, from "close reading" to "writing" to "close writing." He elliptically asserts what Elaine Auyoung has recently made explicit: that literary-critical close reading *is writing*.⁹⁵ Close reading is rewriting ("refashion[ing]") "in" and "over" a text.⁹⁶ Criticism makes claims about the text that, in the practice of "close writing," strive not for scientific truth but for a closeness tempered with distance that, in the mode of Ralph Touchett, rather than Mrs. Newsome, acknowledges what is *in* the text but has been left unsaid, perhaps because it could not have been said in any way other than the critic's own voice.

"A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life."⁹⁷

Criticism, we can add to James's assertion, is a personal, direct impression of a text. It is also, as Raymond Williams would later write, "a definite practice, in active and complex relations with its whole situation and context."⁹⁸ William's description of criticism (or, what he thinks criticism should be) exists in productive tension with James's description of a novel. Where, for James, the project seems almost entirely individual, for Williams it is fundamentally relational. But, despite this tension, I think together they describe criticism's centrifugal quality: it always originates in the "definite practice" of a critic, but it results in a public assertion. Understanding criticism as both a "personal" and a thoroughly social practice requires that we articulate the epistemological grounds on

⁹⁵ "[W]hen we refer to what literary critics do as *reading*, we obscure how much their interpretations are shaped by unspoken conventions involved in *writing* literary criticism." One is also reminded of Elizabeth Hardwick's defense of book reviewing as a serious endeavor: "Book reviewing is a form of writing." Elaine Auyoung, "What We Mean by Reading," in *New Literary History* 51.1 (2020), 94. Elizabeth Hardwick, "The Decline of Book Reviewing," in *The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick*, ed. Darryl Pinckney (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), 64.

⁹⁶ D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen*, 58.

⁹⁷ Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," 578.

⁹⁸ Raymond Williams, "Criticism," in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 86.

which it makes it claims. Henry James is a crucial figure in the development of that critical epistemology, because his novels and his criticism form a historical hinge between its origins in the nineteenth-century realist novel and its practice in modern literary criticism.