

**The Ethical (Re)Turn:
A Metacritical Study of Turn-of-the-Century Literary Ethics**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the “ethical turn” in Anglo-American literary studies, which first gained momentum around the 1980s and became widely established by the 21st century. The “ethical turn” marks the rise of ethical criticism, or the reading of literature through the lens of ethico-political efficacy, as contrasted with formalist or aestheticist modes of reading attentive to the ‘text-in-itself.’ The debate about literature’s ethical, political, and instrumental value vis-à-vis its own autonomy and aesthetic value arguably reached a crisis point around the turn of the century, as enthusiasm for New Criticism and deconstructive criticism began to wane. Increasing disenchantment with these distinct but broadly formalist projects paved the way for critics like Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, J. Hillis Miller and others to seek out new justifications for an ethically oriented criticism, one attuned to the text as an ethical, political, and social object. Though this “ethical turn” has evolved into a variety of critical practices since then, its underlying assumptions continue to persist in the many “ethics of” discourses which cut across disciplines as well as the variously political thematics of postcolonial, ecocritical, and feminist criticism familiar today.

My contribution to this broadly accepted historical account is to return to the “ethical turn” and some of its earliest proponents, in order to counter the widely held view that this ‘turn’ was really a radical departure from the formalist and poststructuralist modes of criticism that preceded it. I argue in this dissertation that the earliest critics partaking in this ethical turn, including Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum, shared a set of ethical presuppositions in common with the formalist critics and poststructuralist critics to which they were opposed: namely, a position ‘outside’ ethics, or what Ronald Dworkin calls “external moral skepticism.” Therefore, rather than cede to the model of historical rupture or break, I argue that the early

‘ethical turn’ was a subtler shift in valence: one that took the negative project of poststructuralist critique, or what Derrida calls an ethics of “letting be,” and asserted it as a substantive moral position, even a normative prescription (*Writing* 141). Caught between the antinormative presuppositions of the postmodern episteme, the aestheticist’s commitment to literary autonomy, and the felt need for an ethical intervention into literary criticism, these early ethical critics ultimately failed to resolve the entailing tensions, falling short of a coherent account of literary ethics. The resulting incoherence, I argue, has contributed to the paralytic situation for criticism recently diagnosed by Joseph North, in which *criticism*, premised on making judgments and interventions into culture, is subsumed by the passive, descriptive model of *scholarship*. Through a series of case studies and close engagements with the literary ethics of Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, Dorothy Hale, and other key contributors to the ethical turn, my dissertation makes a metacritical case that an implicit ethical consensus—namely, an ethics based on *nominalism*, or the rejection of universals—has been the stumbling block preventing these critics from bridging ethical concern with attention to form, and foreclosing the more comprehensive ‘aesth-ethical’ criticism which they seek.

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This dissertation is dedicated to all those literary academics who feel a bit out of step with theoretical developments in the discipline, all who might be embarrassed to admit that their categories of judgment about 'good' and 'bad' literature continue to feel salient to their literary experiences, and all who believe, like I do, that literature is illegible so long as it is dis-embedded from the ethical adventure of living. I hope this project helps towards finding the firm footing you were looking for.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Introduction: Returning to the “Ethical Turn”	1
A Brief History of the Ethicist-Aestheticist Debate.....	15
Aesthetic Autonomy as Ethos: Refuting External Moral Skepticism.....	20
The Ethical Critics in Contradiction.....	37
Nominalism as the ‘Constitutive Contradiction’	45
Structure & Method	50
Chapter I. The Ethical Turn & Nominalism: Reading Davis and Womack’s <i>Mapping the Ethical Turn</i>	56
Is ‘Ethical Criticism’ Really Critical?.....	57
An Ethos (or Pathos) of Spectatorship and Scholarship.....	68
“Skepticism as Dogma”: The Nominalism of Ethical Criticism.....	82
Conclusion.....	107
Chapter II. The Ethical Turn & Pluralism: Reading Wayne C. Booth’s <i>The Company We Keep</i>	110
Introduction: Why Booth?	110
A Brief Overview	118
Booth’s Transcendental Arguments: Refuting External Moral Skepticism	121
The Presuppositional Fallacies of Critical Pluralism.....	136
Conclusion: Pluralism & Nominalism	151

Chapter III. The Ethical Turn & Particularism: Reading Martha C. Nussbaum's <i>Love's Knowledge</i>	156
Introduction: Why Nussbaum?	156
A Brief Overview	160
Nussbaum's Transcendental Arguments: Refuting External Moral Skepticism.....	166
The Presuppositional Fallacies of Particularism.....	182
Conclusion: Particularism & Nominalism.....	204
Chapter IV. The Ethical Turn & Perspectivalism: Reading Dorothy Hale's <i>The Novel and the New Ethics</i>	211
Introduction: Why Hale?	211
A Brief Overview	218
Hale's Transcendental Arguments: Refuting External Moral Skepticism.....	226
The Presuppositional Fallacies of Perspectivalism.....	251
Conclusion: Perspectivalism & Nominalism	266
Conclusion: Returning to the Ethical Turn: Turning in Place, or a Turning Point?.....	269
Overview.....	269
The Literary Apology	275
The Philosophical Apology.....	288
Final Thoughts.....	301
Works Cited	307

Introduction: Returning to the “Ethical Turn”

By the turn of the 21st century, the phrase “ethical turn” became a commonplace across the humanities, appearing in fields as diverse as literary and cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy.¹ In the broadest sense, the ‘ethical turn’ describes a trend in which scholarly inquiry has become increasingly explicit about the relevance of its subjects to social, ethical, and political concerns. The proliferation of this phrase, ‘ethical turn,’ and the growing number of “Ethics of ...” publication titles across so many disparate fields suggest a sea change across disciplines rather than a local development. The ethical turn can thus be understood as a meta-disciplinary shift in how academic institutions conceive of their responsibilities to the broader world and, if so, has served as a hedge against what John Guillory calls the “inward turning” of contemporary academia (9). Coping with a “radical uncertainty” about the “social aim of scholarship,” academics across the ‘ethical turn’ discourse have felt the need to hold their disciplines to account: to provide what Guillory calls a “*rationale*,” the justificatory grounds or *raison d’être* of a discipline (8-9). In such a search for rationales, the turn to ethical concern seems to provide the necessary justificatory ground for a disciplinary apologia. Ongoing controversies surrounding literary criticism’s ‘crisis of legitimacy’ make it clear that literary studies and criticism have been no exception to this search for legitimization (Day 1).² In fact, there are some suggestions that literary studies and criticism were the very site

¹ Zygmunt Bauman’s *Postmodern ethics* (1993) and other works provide the “model” of the contemporary ethical turn within sociology (Canceran 5), while James Laidlaw’s “For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom” (2002) is said to be a “landmark” of the ethical turn in anthropology (Fassin para. 1). An analogous ethical turn in psychology, drawing from the philosophy of Levinas, is noted by John C. Hecker (iii). These same developments within philosophical disciplines are represented by “the ethical turn” in continental philosophy from the 1980s onwards (Eagleton 203) and by such Levinas-inspired thinkers as Alain Badiou (Boothroyd).

² Gary Day identifies the legitimization crisis of literary studies as the result of a certain self-defeating skepticism within postmodern critical theory: “The problem of legitimization is part of the landscape of postmodernism and may be expressed as follows: where does critical theory find the authority for its pronouncements when it has effectively demonstrated that all texts, *including its own*, are riddled with errors, unconscious assumptions, contradictions, slippages and rhetorical machinations?” (1, emphasis added).

of the ethical turn's inception (e.g., Rebecca Mitchell claims that Martha Nussbaum was first to describe a "turn" towards ethics in her first major work of literary criticism, *Love's Knowledge*) (230). Within literary studies and criticism, the ethical turn's struggle for legitimation takes shape as a revalorization of moral and political readings of texts and a renewed interest in what sort of ethical value literature has to offer.

Although the ethical turn can serve as an umbrella term for the many disparate branches of political and ideological criticism that have become common practice in the field, from postcolonialism to ecocriticism, it can also designate the work of a more limited set of critics operating in the 80s and 90s who, arguably, were among the earliest contributors to this more overt interest in literary ethics within the discipline. Among these are a group of Neo-Aristotelians indebted to the Chicago school of criticism, which includes Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum. Other contributors include a select group of poststructuralist critics, such as J. Hillis Miller, Stanley Cavill, and, as some have argued, the later Derrida of *The Gift of Death* (1995) and the later Foucault of *The Care of the Self* (1988).³ From their very different paradigmatic standpoints, these critics all shared a common interest in tracing the links between literature and ethics, restoring the relevance of literature to life. To that extent, these critics set themselves against what Asbjørn Grønstad calls a prevailing "scientification of literary studies": one which "emphasized surface phenomena" over "less immediate issues pertaining to the cultural and moral value of any given work," a tendency which contributed to "the relative occlusion of ethics" (31-32). The push towards an ethically oriented literary criticism came to a head during the Ethical Criticism Symposium of 1997-1998, a conference panel that resulted in a

³ Rebecca Mitchell lists Miller, Booth, and Nussbaum as the earliest inaugurators of the ethical turn in literary criticism (229). Asbjørn Grønstad has a chapter on the ethical turn in literary study wherein he lists Miller, Booth, Nussbaum, and the later Derrida as the main figures (32). As one instance of this broader trend, Patrick Gamez notes the "ethical turn" in Foucault's later thought and reception of his work, beginning in the early 1980s (108).

series of articles published across two volumes of *Philosophy and Literature*. This spat of polemical articles was the site for a protracted debate between Richard Posner (arguing against ethical criticism) and Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth (arguing for) (Peek). Prior to and after this watershed moment, a number of special issues on the subject of ethical criticism were published in an array of prominent journals (the 1983 issue of *New Literary History*, the 1988 issue of *Ethics*, the 1991 issue of *PMLA*, to name a few), and many volumes and books on the topic of ethical criticism have been published since then.⁴ All said, the work of these early ethical critics paved the way for the more overt interest in literary ethics in the leadup to the 21st century, a development which, though distinct, is nonetheless continuous with the more explicitly political discourses of postcolonial criticism, ecocriticism, and feminist criticism familiar today.

To better understand the ethical turn, we must therefore turn back to the underlying assumptions that motivated some of its earliest contributors. Critics who partook in this early 1980-1990s current of criticism read literature through the lens of ethical value: literature is seen as the site for ethical debate and moral inquiry (Booth), as the cultivation of the reader's moral faculty for careful attention and perception (Nussbaum), as the ethical autonomy "of the words of the text over the mind and words of the reader" (Miller *Ethics* 58). Although the dissimilarity of their themes might convey the impression that these literary-ethical projects are entirely distinct, even incommensurate or at odds, what is at stake for all the ethical critics is not simply a commitment to some preferred moral lesson but the view that aesthetic questions of *form*, *style*, and *medium* are value-laden as well. The unique affordances of literary forms are revealed by these critics to come freighted with their own moral baggage, since these forms are fitted for

⁴ See Adia Mendelson-Maoz's "Ethics and Literature: Introduction" for an impressive list of special issues on the topic of ethical criticism published from the 1980s to the early 2000s.

conveying certain values that cannot be relayed in other kinds of language. And so, for Nussbaum, “[l]iterary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth” (*Love’s* 3), while Booth’s expanded conception of *virtues* (as “‘powers,’ ‘strengths,’ ‘capacities,’ or ‘habits of behavior’”) (*Company* 10) allows him to “abandon ... the notion that an interest in form precludes an interest in the ethical powers of form” (*Company* 7) and to expose “the falseness of any sharp divorce of aesthetic and ethical questions” (*Company* 11).⁵

Given this collapsing of *ethos* and *aesthesis*, ethical criticism is no longer understood as one mode of literary approach to be contrasted against formalist criticism, but it is in fact the *superlative* mode of approach for appreciating a text’s aesthetic and formal dimensions (paradoxical as this may seem to the entrenched polemics surrounding aestheticism and ethical concern). Thus, Martha Nussbaum positions herself against the compartmentalization of disciplines characteristic of modern Anglo-American academia by claiming that there is a paradigmatic unity of effort across literature, aesthetics, philosophy, one rooted in *ethics* as the common meta-disciplinary domain (*Love’s* 18). True to her interest in the Ancient Greeks, Nussbaum bids us to take up the premodern sensibility that literature and philosophy are not separable domains but are both “ways of pursuing ... a single and general question: namely, how human beings should live” (*Love’s* 15). The inevitability of authors, critics, and theorists staking some answer to that quintessential ethical question—the idea that literature’s “very nature entails language loaded with ethical judgments, implants views about how to live or not to live”—is then what justifies the text as a *valuable* object, which is to say, an ethical offering to its imagined community (Booth “Ethical” 18). Thus, for Booth, there is no work of literature that

⁵ For a closer treatment of this collapsing of form into content, or aesthetics into ethics, see my in-depth study of Booth’s arguments in Chapter II and Nussbaum’s arguments in Chapter III.

does not prescribe its values, no work that “does not exhibit its author’s implied judgements about how to live and what to believe about how to live” (“Why Ethical Criticism” 19). Given its inescapable normative subtext, a text can no longer be understood as a value-neutral object for technical dissection by impersonal scholars. The text is best realized as ethically *urgent*, as making a moral injunction or political intervention to its readers, which in turn renders the text as something salient and significant to life *beyond* literature. This apologia or ‘rationale’ for literary study works not by juxtaposing the autonomy of literature against more general ethical concerns, but by conceiving of literature’s autonomy as precisely derived from its unique bid within ethics, the unique value judgments and ethical prescriptions endemic to its formal features and aesthetic qualities. By making such an argument, ethical critics seek after a ‘both-and’ solution to two disciplinary needs: the need to account for literature’s singularity and aesthetic distinctiveness, to render literature “a legitimate object of disciplinary study,” as well as the meta-disciplinary need to *justify* that study by realizing literature’s relevance to the broader world beyond itself (Guillory 8). This ‘both-and’ solution avoids the circular appeal to ‘art-for-art’s sake’ by explaining literature’s singularity and autonomy not against but *through* the more general domain of ethical, social, political concern.

Whether overtly or implicitly, the ethical critics thus take ethics to be the constitutive ground of literary, aesthetic, critical work. Literature is not distinct because of its disciplinary compartmentalization but rather because it emerges out of its own unique bid within the antecedent and more general domain of ethics. As Nussbaum puts it, “writing itself is a choice, an act, and not a neutral act either” (*Love’s* 311). For her, aesthetic choices of form, style, and medium should be taken seriously for their “statement-making functions” and, furthermore, “forms themselves express a content” with moral and philosophical meanings (*Love’s* 289).

Nussbaum ends up viewing literature “as a source of a human sort of truth,” though distinct from abstract and propositional truths, emerging out of its own ethical presuppositions about what is ‘the good life’ (see Chapter III) (*Love’s* 229). Likewise, for Booth, literature is not free-floating fabrication or fiction so much as it is a hypothetical or speculative mode of ethical and philosophical truth-seeking. Literature cannot therefore avoid rhetorically prescribing its own truth claims, its own normative subtext, its own “fixed norms” (*Company* 143).⁶ Ultimately, these critics’ view of ethics as the constitutive ground for literary-aesthetic matters depends on a still more paradigmatic presupposition, one that generalizes beyond literary ethics to ethics as such: their arguments depend on the assumption that *everything* we do is value-laden, in fact, and there is no way of stepping outside an ethical framework of value. To use a phrase by Daniel Schwarz that I will continually invoke throughout this project, there is no such thing as a “moral holiday,” according to the ethical critics (5).

The paradigmatic assumption that enables these arguments for ethical criticism is thus a sense of the inescapable *necessity* of normativity, conceived as some determinate judgment about what is good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust, what should or should not be done. There can be no possibility for a neutral, free-floating, nonprejudicial ground for literary production and reception, since the practices of both authors and critics are preceded by some prior framework of value that motivates their work. This conception of normative value judgments as a constitutive precondition for all humanistic, cultural, and critical work speaks to the *inevitability* of practicing ethical criticism, which has served as the implicit rallying point of the ethical critics: what Marshall Gregory calls the “inescapability” of practicing ethical criticism (“Ethical

⁶ “One common recent way of describing the kinship in this huge family [literature, philosophy, humanities subjects] has been to call all histories and philosophies fiction. My move is the reverse: I am treating all narratives and philosophies as incipient rivals, not because all are ‘fictional’ (in the sense of being untrue) but because all are ‘philosophical’ (in the sense of rendering truths more or less palpable)” (Booth *Company* 348).

Criticism” 196), whether we recognize that criticism as ‘ethical’ or leave it “disguised” under different labels (“‘Political,’ ‘Social,’ or ‘Cultural’ criticism; ‘Psychological’ or ‘Psychoanalytic’ criticism; ... ‘Reader-Response Criticism,’ ‘Feminist Criticism,’ and ‘The Discourse of Power’”) (Booth *Company* 25).

The Transcendental Logic of Ethical Criticism

Little, if any, work has been done towards exposing the logical form of these prevailing arguments in support of ethical criticism. Consequently, one of my main goals in this project is to identify how the ethical critics do in fact consistently rely on a distinct and formalizable brand of logic: what is called, within philosophy, a *transcendental argument* (not to be confused with transcendentalism, say, or any other spiritualist connotation of the term ‘transcendent’).

Transcendental logic involves the proof of some proposition by pointing to the fact that the truth of the proposition is a *necessary precondition* to another proposition or practice which we already demonstrably assent to. The structure of a transcendental argument can be formalized as follows:

Premise 1: X is the necessary precondition for Y.

Premise 2: Y is the case.

Conclusion: Therefore, X is the case.

Stern and Cheng point out that “while epistemology perhaps remains their natural home, the use of transcendental arguments in ethics is of undoubted significance” (“Transcendental Arguments”). Used by Aristotle, and made famous by Kant, transcendental arguments have since seen a “revival” in recent decades, particularly in the realm of moral philosophy as a “source of normativity” and a justification for moral realism: the possibility of a rational ground for making

moral judgments (Illies 30). To trace this transcendental argument as it pertains to ethical criticism, we might recreate one instance of it as follows: as literary critics and scholars, we communicate with each other about literature; this fact would be impossible unless, in the very instance of doing so, we implicitly presuppose the *importance* and *value* of doing so. The valuing is a *necessary precondition* of the doing. And what we value in this contingent way is dependent upon what we value more generally: that is, on a holistic paradigm of value, antecedent to any subset of questions about literary value. Therefore, to practice literary criticism or scholarship with the pretense of being value-free and morally neutral is almost a contradiction in terms. This would be tantamount to a performative contradiction between claiming to not value something while nevertheless continuing to do it. Thus “even the most skeptical theorists imply by their *practice* that stories do matter,” Wayne Booth writes, and this is the chief reason why “a criticism that takes their ‘mattering’ seriously cannot be ignored” (*Company* 4).

The basic form of a transcendental argument is deceptively simple, but it has definite advantages as well as deeper implications. As far as the advantages, the argument is eminently pragmatic, in the sense that its second premise (“Y is the case”) is simply some empirical observation about what we, in fact, do. Our ongoing *practices*, then, reveal the values and norms we tacitly presuppose, no matter how discursively we may deny that we are being ethically motivated. To make the consequences of this point to literary study more legible, we might extend its logic to the form-content distinction, adding that any *formal* practice presupposes an implicit *content*; every medium comes with a (moral, ethical, political) message. Because any discursive, linguistic, or literary act is in its very form a communicative and rhetorical appeal, this very medium betrays a motive to make an injunction or intervention within its imagined community, implying some normative delineation between what is and is not good, what ought

and ought not be done. This co-identity of aesthetic forms with ethical prescriptions has been dubbed “the distribution of the sensible” by Jacques Rancière, another turn-of-the-century critic interested in the relationship between ethics and aesthetics: “the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience,” which are “prejudicially linked from the outset to a certain regime of politics” (8-9).

The inevitability of values, judgments, and discriminations in art, literature, and criticism is how the ethical critics are able to lead their aestheticist opponents into a *reductio ad absurdum*, demonstrating how the aestheticist position is self-defeating. Any critical stance that questions literature’s relevance to ethico-political norms, or that pretends not to assume its own ethico-political norms, “is for practical purposes an ethical contradiction,” Booth writes, “in that it subverts the community of discourse in which it seeks to claim or carve a place” (*Company* 7, emphasis added). To practice literary criticism with the assumption of being value-neutral and free of ethical judgments (as the formalist critic, say, purports to do) would be a performative contradiction, insofar as the decision to practice such criticism at all is to make the methodological assumption, proceeding out of a general value judgment, that a formalist criticism is indeed *valuable* to do and even *should* be done. In this way, the transcendental form of argument has been likened to a proof by contradiction: proving a claim by demonstrating how negation of the claim would contradict its own ground of assumptions and make itself self-refuting (Gottlieb).⁷ Thus, Nussbaum levels a “charge of inconsistency” against formalist critics who ostensibly jettison any ethical concern from their reading of literature, as well as the poststructuralist critic who is suspicious of universal moral verities (a skepticism dependent on its own pre-critical certainties) (*Love’s* 7). After all, such critics’ view of ethical criticism as a

⁷ See Paula Gottlieb’s subsection titled “The Elenctic Method and Transcendental Arguments” in “Aristotle on Non-Contradiction.”

kind of “violence to the literary work” is unconscious of “its relationship to its own critique” (*Love’s* 289), obscuring the fact that “to concentrate on form to the neglect of the work’s sense of life and choice is not a solution, only violence of a different sort” (*Love’s* 172). In other words, the formalist critic is just as culpable of imposing their value judgments onto a work as are the critics with more overt ideological precommitments. A transcendental argument about the *inevitability* of normative judgments in any discursive, linguistic, literary act—even in the attempt to bypass such judgments—thus serves as a crucial though so far unrecognized cornerstone for the case for ethical criticism.

As far as the broader implications of this transcendental mode of argumentation, what is at stake in such a legitimating ground for ethical criticism is a substantive reconceptualization of what constitutes ethics and ethical judgment altogether. Everything of substance hinges on Premise 1 of the ethical critics’ argument: that ethical values are indeed a *necessary precondition* for a given practice, in this case the production and reception of literature. For such a sweeping statement to hold, it cannot be that ethical judgments are ubiquitous merely for some contingent reason about our inborn human judgmentalism, say, or some incidental psychological predilection we all have for making moral evaluations (a predilection which we could work against, with enough energy and effort). Such a view would render value judgments in the contingent terms of emotivism or expressivism: judgment as a psychological disposition (a “mood,” to use Rita Felski’s term for the contingent basis of critique), among other possible psychological dispositions (20). According to such an assumption, ethical judgment is primarily a cognitive act or state of mind, one which a subject could conceivably opt out of (which, it is crucial to note, undoes the first premise about the *inevitability* of valuing). Therefore, for the first premise about *necessity* to hold, it must be that value judgments are more than psychological or

dispositional insofar as they are basically a constitutive precondition for any and all action and decision, anything people *do*, practically speaking, whether or not they happen to be conscious of the value judgments that inform their actions. The underlying rationale for this point, and its implications for literature and the arts, might be best hinted at in a provocative and critically neglected passage by Wayne Booth:

Each work of art or artifice, even the simplest wordless melody, determines to some degree *how at least this one moment will be lived*. The quality of life in the moment of our ‘listening’ is not what it would have been if we had not listened. We can even say that the proffered work shows us how our moments *should* be lived. If the maker of the art work did not believe that simply experiencing it constitutes a superior form of life, why was the work created and presented to us in the first place? (*Company* 17)

Booth’s argument reveals a distinctly pragmatic reframing of what constitutes value judgments: not as the conscious assent or denial of some moral proposition, nor the instrumentalist pursuit of some desired outcome. Ethics in light of Booth’s passage is a practical matter of the *exclusivity* of a choice, set against a potential horizon of alternative possible actions or decisions: If an author writes a text, it is necessarily to the *exclusion* of all other possible texts that could have been written; if we read a text, it is necessarily to the *exclusion* of all other possible texts we could have read (or acts entirely other than reading or writing we could have committed to). Therefore, to the degree that the text instantiates such selections, the very singularity and exclusivity of the text’s existence implies an avowal of itself and its underlying values as *good*, *right*, valuable, worth reading, and an implicit rejection of all conflicting and incommensurate claims to value (as well as all texts, potential or actual, predicated on those values). Without this antecedent substrate of *a priori* value judgments, as Booth’s rhetorical question points out, the

text loses any intelligible rationale for being written or read (“why was the work created and presented to us in the first place?”) (*Company* 17). There is no longer an intelligible answer, a *rationale* to why the text is a *valuable* contribution, that is, a contribution in the domain of value, which forfeits any ethical dimension to the text as well as any coherent justification for why it ought to be read at all (a problem that is clearly of central relevance to the ‘legitimation crisis’ of literary study and criticism).⁸

The transcendental argument for the inevitability of value judgments amounts to the claim that any decision to act one way or another is necessarily reliant on some antecedent normative evaluation about what is *more* valuable or *less* valuable to do. And this inevitability of valuing, in turn, is premised on the horizons of potentiality that emerge from our collective and individual agency, which is why Marshall Gregory describes the centrality of choice, agency, and community as an axiomatic assumption of ethical criticism:

Why is it that we cannot escape questions of morality and ethics? *Because human actions are imagined and chosen rather than prescribed or programmed.* Because there is a dimension of choice to almost all forms of human conduct, conduct is always subject to moral and ethical evaluation. ... Because human beings are as fundamentally social in nature as ants and bees, but because the forms of our sociability are chosen and cultural rather than programmed and genetic, ethical and moral considerations inevitably arise within the social nexus. ... This is not to say what the content of those categories is or

⁸ Even if one concedes that every text comes with ‘baked in’ norms and value judgments, one might rightly wonder whether this ethical content can be paraphrased. To what extent can a text’s implicit norms be summarized and prosaically expressed, separately from the text itself, and to what extent is this moral content uniquely and unrepeatably instantiated by the text’s formal dimensions, which would make any critical exegesis or exposition of those values necessarily reductive, as in a loss in translation? This question of ‘paraphraseability’ in literature ends up being quite central to the functions, limits, and ultimate goals of criticism (ethical or otherwise), for if paraphrase is necessarily reductive rather than helpfully elucidating, the rationale for practicing criticism suffers a serious blow. Booth, Nussbaum and Hale each touch upon the subject of the ‘paraphraseability’ of a text’s norms in one way or another; see Chapters I, II, and III.

should be, but it is to say that moral categories themselves are both persistent and necessary elements of social existence – the only kind of existence available to human beings. (“Ethical Criticism” 196-197)

All said, the transcendental argument for ethical criticism depends on a pragmatic reframing of what constitutes value judgments, as ‘always already’ presupposed in any and all practices, and in the very act of performing those practices. This pragmatic view of judgment works against a more reductive, ratio-centric view which relegates value judgments to consciously articulated propositions, overt expressions of belief, or narrow social mores. Rather, ethical judgments are ‘baked into’ lived experience, according to this view, and, insofar as we are not masters in our own house and may not even be aware of the reasons for our behaviors, our motivating value judgments may be altogether outside the bounds of conscious awareness (hence the “unconscious” aspect of ideology, revealing “true values that were hidden even from the authors themselves”) (Hale *Novel* 3). Ethics in this pragmatic view is a matter of ‘deep’ subconscious structures, embodied in action, thought, feeling, perception and in fact pre-constituting them as their very conditions of possibility. Thus, Booth writes that his “ethical criticism” could equally be called “characterological criticism,” “psychic criticism,” “behavioral criticism,” “temperamental criticism,” “personality criticism,” no less than “political criticism” or “ideological criticism” (*Company* 8) or (tongue-in-cheek) “the axiology of psycho- and politico-poiesis as it is problematized by narratology” (*Company* 12). Ultimately, the differences between these designations are only superficial, seeing as they all express a common sentiment: that nothing in the text is ethically neutral, that what we are in fact doing when reading a text critically is articulating the underlying paradigmatic values which explains the text’s emergence

as a concrete object, prefiguring the text in what Daniel Schwarz calls an ‘a priori world’ of values and norms (3).

But to recognize that ethical norms and values precondition all that we do, critics must abandon the reductive view of ethics as “the narrowest possible moral codes,” says Booth, which reduces ethical criticism to the judgmentalism of “whether some part of a given story violates this or that moral code” (*Company* 18). In short, ethical criticism, in the hands of these particular ethical critics, is not reducible to *evaluative* criticism per se (“I shall not ... arrive at a comfortable double column headed ‘Ethically Good’ and ‘Ethically Bad,’” Booth writes) (*Company* 4). It is the prevailing view of ethical criticism as a dogmatic and reductionist evaluative criticism that explains why ethical criticism has existed in such a twilight zone within the modern history of literary study. Marshal Gregory describes the situation as follows:

for the last 100 years—from the time of the “art for art’s sake” movement to the present—most literary critics have strongly objected to “ethical” as an adjective for either “literature” or “criticism.” Inside the academy, ethical criticism seems immediately to conjure images of Plato packing the poets out of his republic, or the memory of Matthew Arnold talking about “the best that has been thought and said,” or the mental image of F. R. Leavis intoning on and on about “the great tradition.” (“Ethical Criticism” 195)

Ethical criticism, in short, has been allied with a barebones evaluative criticism in which texts are simply so much fodder for the critic’s reigning ideology: a text is either good or bad, ally or enemy, according to the critic’s *a priori* value schemes. Booth, Nussbaum and other critics working in this vein seek to rescue ethics from this more reductive instrumentalist register, whereby the primary criterion for critical evaluation is a text’s utility in achieving some preferred ethico-political outcome. Instead, ethical critics propose a more original, expansive, Aristotelean

sense of *ethos*, an attention to a text's "overall effect on the *ethos*, the *character*, of the listener" (Booth 18). In contrast to an instrumentalist focus on a text's practical results in the world, "that effect is not to be measured by some simple study of overt behavior after listening: it must include the very quality of the life lived while listening" (Booth 18) (a formulation of ethics that rejects "any sharp divorce of aesthetic and ethical questions") (Booth 11). The ethical critics are thereby able to bypass many of the polemics which have unduly narrowed so much of what literary ethics is taken to be: arguments about propaganda and moral didacticism in literature, for instance, or the problematics of censorship or canonization. Instead, these ethical critics take on more primal and existential questions: What role does literature play in shaping the ethos of readers (a role necessarily exceeding any idea of the text as an inert and autonomous object for impersonal study)? How are literary forms uniquely equipped to deliver this ethical freight? And what do *aesthetic* delineations between 'good' and 'bad' literature tell us about those same evaluative delineations in their *ethical* sense ('right' and wrong,' 'just' and 'unjust,' politically 'progressive' and politically 'problematic')?

A Brief History of the Ethicist-Aestheticist Debate

Such questions are clearly important, but they are also contentious to raise. To see why this is so, it is necessary to re-embed the contemporary turn to ethics within its historical context. The question of how art and ethics relate has a long and fraught history, to say the least. Noël Carroll frames that history in terms of two broad camps: ethical critics, who see art as having a moral or social function, and 'aesthetic autonomists,' who believe that aesthetic or literary value is best accounted for within the work's own terms, a value irreducible to any instrumental and extratextual register of efficacy ("Art and Ethical Criticism" 351). This debate between ethical

critics and aesthetic-autonomous critics reaches as far back as Wilde, further back to Kant and Sidney, and still further to Horace and Plato, a history impossible to relay in full but worth at least a cursory survey. The tensions were formulated most famously in Plato's *Republic*, in which the ideal city-state, founded on a notion of absolute moral good, seems to necessarily leave out the poet, as too irresponsible and corruptible to fit in the perfect polity. Jacques Rancière argues that this classical period of the arts exemplified an "ethical regime" in which the primary concern is how an image "affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities," a question which "prevents 'art' from individualizing itself as such" (16). Arguably, it was not until Kant's separation of art from ethics, best highlighted by his notion of aesthetic disinterestedness, that aesthetics became widely recognized as an autonomous domain of value and inquiry in Western thought. What began as a philosophical supposition would play itself out as a cultural practice during the Romantic era, in which the assumption of aesthetic autonomy served to elevate those rarefied domains of culture and the arts to almost sacred standing, summed up by Matthew Arnold's consecration of 'culture' and his injunction for literary critics to remain above all else disinterested in their study of art, to study "the object as in itself it really is" (*Function of Criticism* 3). The same aesthetic autonomy, somewhat refurbished, persisted in its modernist form in New Criticism and its emphasis on close reading, which for the more socially and politically concerned critics seemed to set up undue boundaries between "art and social reality" (Menand and Rainey 6).

However, it was with the emergence of poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches to literature around the 1960s and 70s that aesthetic autonomy reached its peak as well as its paradoxical limit, culminating in a hermeneutics in which text and world alike are assumed to partake in pure textuality and play, a radical underdetermination of meaning. Such sentiments as

Barthes's "death of the author" (142) or Derrida's rejection of the "*hors-texte*" (*Of Grammatology* 158) assume language to be a purely creative and constructive act and text an infinitely interpretable object, resistant to any singular normative, fixed, or final reading—which, for many, meant resistant to ethics. The struggle to resolve the apparent aporia between aesthetics and ethics, or ethics and literature, came to a crisis point with the radical formalism of 'textuality,' which made it "increasingly difficult to locate the ethical self: the site of responsibility, decision, freedom, and the will" as well as the "potential for effective action and creative originality" (Doran 9). The Manichean struggle that was perceived between proponents of the postmodern episteme and more ethically concerned literary critics is adequately summarized by a section title by Marshall Gregory: "Ethical Criticism's Fall and Postmodernism's Rise" ("Redefining Ethical Criticism"). That response was precipitated, in part, by the moral scandals and accusations of quietism accruing to many of the prominent deconstructionist critics at the time. There was, for instance, "the then-shocking revelation that Paul de Man, one of the leading theorists of the Yale School, had published articles sympathetic to Nazi causes" (Mitchell 228). At the same time, poststructuralists were continually defending themselves against "the charge that the work of Jacques Derrida and his interlocutors encouraged an ultimately empty nihilism" (Mitchell 228).

In light of a century's worth of formalisms of various stripes, the contemporary ethical turn, or *return*, gains its salience. The 'ethical turn' was seen as a way to flip this trend, a "counter-movement" against postmodernity's antinormativity and moral relativism, premises which appeared to underplay ethical agency and delegitimize any justified grounds for political action in the world (Mitchell 228). Such controversies prompted critics and theorists in the 90s to take up a moral apologetic, "to argue for the ethical implications of poststructuralism, noting, for

example, the significance of the work of phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas for Derrida's ideas" (Mitchell 228). With this renewed interest in a Levinasian and alterity-based literary ethics, crystallized best in Robert Eaglestone's *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (1997), a more general trend came about in which critics and theorists sought to retrieve the previously neglected ethical dimensions of poststructuralist, postmodernist, and deconstructive criticism. There was a turn towards the late writings of Derrida, for instance, which seemed to depart from purely textual or deconstructive projects into explicitly "religious, ethical, and political themes" (Quigley 8). An analogous 'turn' appeared in readings of Foucault, which likewise prioritized his later works, turning away from his criticism of institutional power towards his ethics of the self (Gamez 108). As it became acceptable to talk about morality, selfhood, agency, and literary ethics in more explicit ways, without fear of being labeled an old-fashioned moral didactic, an ethical revival in criticism occurred at the cusp of the 21st century. Landmark texts in ethical criticism such as *The Company We Keep* by Wayne C. Booth, *Love's Knowledge* by Martha Nussbaum, and J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading*, among others, championed a trend in which literary texts began to be seen, again, as sites for moral education and moral improvement. By the time of the Symposium on Ethical Criticism, the tides of the critical discourse had definitely turned away from more strictly formalist modes of reading, and many critics set out to chart new paths towards literary ethics.

The ethical turn in literary studies is thus conceived as a decisive step away from its aesthetic-autonomist predecessors—be they the cloistered New Critics and their focus on close reading or the deconstructionists like Paul De Man or Derrida and their undelimited textuality—in favor of a renewed ethico-political commitment to see the text as first and foremost a moral and social object with an ethical freight. Whether its partakers prefer a more general or

philosophical ‘ethical’ criticism or a more activist ‘political’ or ideological criticism, a renewed interest in moral agency and the ethical efficacy of the text is shared by them all. In this sense, Robert Doran explains, “[p]ostcolonial theory, feminism, queer theory, identity politics, and other ethico-political discourses take what is in effect a more *conservative* position” (10). By returning to the subject and to moral agency, “insofar as the author is a privileged locus of power, ethnic identity, gender/sexual identity, and ethical responsibility” (Doran 10), ethical criticism deviates from the more radical premises of the postmodern “death of the subject” which preceded it.^{9 10}

One of my proposed interventions is to problematize the straightforwardly progressive narrative that sees the ethical turn as a radical break from the preceding formalist and poststructuralist criticisms. Rather than a revolution, I argue, the ethical turn is better imagined as spinning its wheels, complicit in the same logics which it purports to overcome. To realize why the linear account is untenable, we need only recognize the logical consequence of conceding to the ethical critics’ transcendental arguments for the *inevitability* of ethical norms. If it is true that ethical values are basic to literary and critical texts, and that there is never any ‘moral holiday’ in the writing, reading, or criticism of literature, then consistent adherence to that claim would logically extend to the formalist and poststructuralist projects also, even if retroactively. This would compel us to uncover the ethical norms that necessarily motivated the

⁹ James Phelan makes a similar point: “The ethical turn, I believe, is part of the general reaction against the formalism of Yale School deconstruction in the wake of the revelations of Paul de Man’s wartime writings; it is also compatible with, though distinguishable from, the continuing power of feminist criticism and theory and the rising influence of African American, multicultural, and queer criticism and theory, all of which ground themselves in sets of ethico-political commitments” (“Sethe’s Choice” 107).

¹⁰ The question might be raised as to whether this deviation was a genuine innovation, something new, or a regression back into a familiar and complacent humanism. Ultimately, whether the ethical turn is best imagined as a nostalgic ‘return’ or else the ‘revolution’ of a radical new ethical sensibility—a turning point or a turning in place—will depend on where one locates the axis of this ethical ‘turn,’ exactly, and how one figures the circumambulatory model of history implied by this image of ‘turning.’ That is a question I leave for the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

writings of the formalist and deconstructive critics as well. In other words, accepting the ethical critics' argument that ethical norms are *inevitable* would require us to see the formalists and poststructuralists as no less ethically motivated than the ethical critics who rally against them, even if such an admission makes the contribution of the ethical critics somewhat less distinct and downplays their interventionist 'break' from the formalism of deconstruction, say, to which they were opposed. The irony is subtle, but it comes with suggestive implications about the nature of these polemics and raises some provocative questions that centrally motivate this project: Is there a false dialectic between ethical critics and aestheticist critics, unwittingly propped up by certain reifications on either side? Might there be an underlying logic, a hidden consensus, beneath the overt disagreements between aestheticist critics and ethical critics? Do their polemics actually subsist on a set of premises that both critical 'camps' share? In what follows, I seek to answer these questions in the affirmative. The effect is to significantly revise our understanding of the 'ethical turn' and to expose the hidden complicities of the ethical critics with the thesis of 'aesthetic autonomy' they seek to refute. We turn to some of those underlying presuppositions now.

Aesthetic Autonomy as Ethos: Refuting External Moral Skepticism

Critics partaking in the 'ethical turn' of the 1980s and 90s had two opponents against whom they defined themselves: on the one hand, the formalists and aesthetic-autonomists (best represented in the minds of contemporary scholars by the New Critics); on the other hand, poststructuralists and deconstructionists in the postmodern vein. At first glance, aesthetic formalism and poststructuralism may seem strange bedfellows. Certainly, these 'schools' of criticism could not be farther apart in their *overt* ideological commitments and values. Yet even

if their means of approaching literature are wholly alien to each other, the ultimate upshot of their critical approaches share certain striking resemblances. Derrida's rejection of the *hors-text* (*Of Grammatology* 158) and Barthes's death of the author (142), no less than Wellek and Warren's "fidelity" to literature's "own nature" (37) or John Crowe Ransom's jettisoning of "Moral studies" (4) from the bounds of criticism, amount to the same preference for the singularity of the text as a linguistic artefact. The effort to foreground the 'text-in-itself' through close reading, or 'textuality' through fine-grained linguistic deconstruction, serves equally to push to the background the text's ethical and social dimensions, favoring the analysis of language and rhetorical figures instead. Indeed, it has become common practice in the scholarly discourse, since at least Tobin Sieber's *The Ethics of Criticism* (1988) and Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself* (1979), to talk about poststructuralist criticism as basically a more radical kind of formalism: both partake in a kind of "negative hermeneutics" that eliminates all things extraneous to a given bit of language; both presume a certain ambiguity and indeterminacy surrounding language's capacity to signify beyond itself (Graff 147). "While disputing the privileged status of poetry," says Siebers, "poststructuralism offers no serious threat to the doctrine of autonomy; it merely broadens its influence," extending the thesis of autonomy away from the poem and into language (generalizing New Criticism's "death of the poet" to become poststructuralism's "death of man") (45). "Derridean readings," Richard Rorty writes, suggested "similar possibilities" as those of the New Critics insofar as they "were also accustomed to set aside the poet, her intentions, and her historical context and to look instead at what they called 'the inner workings of the poem itself'" (173). The parallel is largely on account of the poststructuralist critics' overweening focus on signification rather than the signifier, and on a constructivist view of language over a mimetic one. The basic *topos* of poststructuralism

with its focus on textuality, its skepticism towards stable signification and referents, and its perspectivism with regards to values, has largely served to isolate the text as a complex linguistic artefact, one best suited for *epistemological* dissection rather than *ethical* judgment. By setting aside concerns about the broader extratextual world, and thereby the ‘meaning’ of a text as it pertains to that world, such reading practices necessarily favor an approach that is more concrete, fine-grained, more impersonal and objective—in short, more scholarly. But like the proverbial pinned butterfly, the effort to isolate the text as an object for scientific dissection seemed to denature, even to kill, what literature as such was, robbing it of its urgency and relevance to our ethical lives and undoing any coherent ground or rationale for *why* we ought to read literature or do criticism in the first place: hence the crisis for which the ‘ethical turn’ was a response.

Yet there are still deeper axiomatic assumptions shared by the poststructuralist critics and formalist critics, which may go unnoticed if we concede only to their most overt pronouncements and self-descriptions. What enables the close study of the text-as-such, divorced from any dependence on a pretextual world and from its ultimate impacts on a world to come, is a distinct presupposition about the nature of ethical concern: namely, that it is only one possible concern among many. After all, the implicit thesis of literary or linguistic autonomy places literature into a special category beyond the bounds of ethical consideration, but this exception is entirely incompatible with the first premise of the ethical critics’ transcendental argument: the *inevitability* and *inescapability* of ethical judgments, as the constitutive preconditions for literature, language, and cultural work of any kind. Among the enabling assumptions for aesthetic autonomy of any stripe is thus an implicit negation of this thesis: a view of ethical judgment as *elective* rather than inevitable. The drawing of a bounded space around literature is equally a circumscription around ethics, dependent on a conception of ethical concern as its own

compartmentalized field separable from others, lateral to every other discipline or domain of study, like botany or, for that matter, like literature. In fact, the appeal to the autonomy of a text or of language might well be linked to a broader injunction to disciplinary autonomy familiar since the scientific positivism of the Enlightenment, through which Matthew Arnold's injunction to study the aesthetic "object as in itself it really is" can be seen as continuous with the positivistic injunction among scientific disciplines to study the world 'as it really is,' in a *non-prejudicial* and *value-free* way (*Function of Criticism* 3). In sum, I argue across this project that aesthetic-autonomists and formalist critics do more than assume the autonomy of the text and of aesthetics as its own rarefied domain (although they do this, too). Their belief in aesthetic autonomy is not *ex nihilo*, after all, but tacitly depends on an antecedent assumption in the domain of ethics: they must first assume the exact same autonomy with regards to ethics, circumscribing ethics as only one discipline, one distinct mode of approach, one arbitrary 'mood,' among others.

In sum, aesthetic-autonomists assume there is a way of being *in* an ethical mode (of thought, of reading, of criticism) and of being *outside* that ethical mode and in some other frame of interpretation. Such a bounded delineation of what constitutes ethics, as an elective, non-binding, autonomous discipline among others, seems to be assumed without much question by any formalist critic arguing, as Richard Posner does, that the "moral properties" of a text "are almost sheer distraction" (24). Such a narrow construal of ethics, ethics as "the narrowest possible moral codes," is what then allows critics to conceive of an 'outside' to ethics (Booth *Company* 18). Stepping into this imagined 'outside' becomes necessary for these critics' project of redress against the many flaws of excess moralism they perceive in literary criticism, be they the problems of moral didacticism, the puritan strictures of censorship, the false premises of

canonization, or any of the pitfalls of universal judgments and evaluations. Formalist and poststructuralist critics alike share a view of such judgments and evaluations as oversimple, reductive, homogenizing impositions: acts of ‘categorical violence’ against the unique autonomy and particularity of literature or language.

In conceiving of judgment in this way, however, these critics miss the fact that their own views involve a substantive meta-ethical commitment in its own right and are dependent on precisely such a judgment: a critical condemnation of judgment as such. At the same time, their view of literature as occupying a space outside ethical concern, a nonmoral realm of the ‘aesthetic,’ requires them to see their *own* critical methods and approaches as likewise void of ethical prejudices and considerations. A critic’s ability to register and respond to the autonomy of a text would be impossible unless, at the same time, they presumed their own capacity for autonomy, for scholarly disinterest and detachment. Aesthetic-autonomists must presume their own capacity to stand ‘outside’ the realm of ethical judgments, in other words. And it is this extra-moral or supra-moral position—an Archimedean stance that purports to stand ‘outside’ ethical norms, even as it obscures its own—that is most challenged and taken to task by the ethical critics. The *moral neutrality* of aesthetic formalism and the *moral relativism* of poststructuralism are equally offered up as a second-order position above the ethical landscape, devoid of its own first-order ethical assumptions. This similarity, if not identity, explains how Booth is able to position himself against *both* aesthetic formalists *and* moral relativists in a single sweep when he describes his opponents as “those who think ethical judgments have nothing to do with genuine ‘literary’ or ‘aesthetic’ criticism, and those who think that ethical judgments about stories can never be anything more than subjective opinion” (*Company* 16). Both critical stances suffer from the same predicament: a posture that critiques ethical judgment while

obscuring its own ethical ground. Both offer up a critical vantage point that presents itself as morally neutral, while veiling its own preferred norms, its own ethical values, its own motivating ‘ought’ claims or moral injunctions.

Seen in these terms, we can better understand why the ethical critics rallied against formalism and poststructuralism in equal measure. The commonalities between formalism and poststructuralism come into clearer focus when set against the ethical critics’ thesis about the necessity of ethical norms. By purporting to take up a stance ‘outside’ any value judgments or norms, radical formalists tacitly reject the premise that such judgments are a *precritical* and preconditioning necessity for any and all actions, practices, and discourses, even the most critical or theoretically radical discourses. What is at stake in the ethical criticism debate, then, is not so much any one mode of reading literature as it is the status of ethical judgments as such: whether ethical judgments are contingent or necessary, elective or inevitable, a dispositional ‘mood’ or an unavoidable precondition for anything we do. Hence the ethical critics are united in their rejection of one underlying assumption which they see pervading Anglo-American analytical philosophy more broadly: that ethics is a *techne*, an autonomous discipline of scholarship, one that is *lateral* to the study of literature or other humanistic disciplines (rather than in a *vertical* relationship, of ground to surface, as a “paradigm” is the constitutive ground of its further articulated “normal sciences”) (Kuhn 11). The legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin echoes the sentiment of the ethical critics in arguing that the compartmentalization of disciplines “has ruled the roost in academic and literary philosophy for many decades, particularly in the Anglo-American tradition,” a situation which he attributes to the presumed incommensurability of disparate values (2). Unlike the abiding view of disciplinary autonomy, which sees each discipline as having its own discipline-specific values, Dworkin holds to the position of value

holism: the view that “all true values form an interlocking network, that each of our convictions about what is good or right or beautiful plays some role in supporting each of our other convictions in each of those domains of value” (120). The very separation of ‘moral’ from ‘nonmoral’ domains has precluded an understanding of what ethics even is: the domain of general concern, the search for a comprehensive axiology of value. Recognizing that our frameworks of value are holistic, comprehensive, and paradigmatic, ethical critics view ethical judgments as unavoidable, necessitating, and preconditioning, antecedent to our more articulated theories and practices. Some substrate of ethical norms, some belief about what ‘ought’ to be, whether consciously recognized or unconsciously enacted, is unavoidable in any literary, cultural, and critical work, and indeed any act involving our individual or collective agency. Importantly, this refutation of value neutrality applies to the reading and reception of literature no less than to its production. Even as the ethical critics refute the possibility of *literature* being bereft of ethical norms and value judgments, they likewise refute the same possibility for literary *criticism*.

The Janus face of being both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ ethical norms is this project’s reoccurring motif, as it aptly describes the logical contradiction and ethical hypocrisy noticed by the ethical critics, one that is crucial to understanding the ethical turn discourse and its surrounding polemics. In his *Justice for Hedgehogs*, Ronald Dworkin speaks of a philosophical position he calls external moral skepticism. This is the belief that one can interrogate morality, normativity, and judgment by performing an “external, meta-ethical inspection of moral truth” that exists outside any moral claims of its own: external moral skepticism “purports to rely entirely on second-order, external statements about morality” (31) and “denies any basis for *itself* in morality or ethics” (25, emphasis added). Dworkin describes external moral skepticism as an

“Archimedean” posture which “stands above morality and judges it from outside”; critics committed to external moral skepticism “are able to denigrate moral truth, they say, without relying on it” (32). In sum, critics who are external moral skeptics believe they can evaluate some moral content, or morality wholesale, from an impersonal, morally neutral, meta-ethical ‘outside,’ without themselves being evaluative or normative—without adopting some or other *pre-critical* ground of values which they take for granted as generally true and which is the very basis for their critique. It is this hypocrisy, a denial of ethical truths dependent on its own idea of ethical truth, that has been the chief target of the ethical critics.

As proof that such a state of moral hypocrisy is indeed centrally relevant to the problematics of contemporary literary criticism, we can turn to one of the most prominent critiques of external moral skepticism within the discipline, one carried out by Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique* (2015). Everywhere throughout Felski’s landmark text is this demystification of the ‘myth of absence,’ of impersonal or ‘neutral’ scholarship, of the critic that hypocritically obscures their own assumptive ground: “While critique is often hailed for puncturing or deflating schemes, it is also an identifiable scheme in its own right”; “Rather than being a weightless, disembodied, freewheeling dance of the intellect, critique turns out to be a quite stable repertoire of stories, similes, tropes, verbal gambits, and rhetorical ploys” (6-7). Crucially, Felski is not critiquing critique for abiding by some fixed set of norms (which would only extend the very logic of critique she is positioning herself against, its abiding myth of moral neutrality). She is critiquing critique for *obscuring* its norms, in its pretense to objectivity, neutrality, and impersonality, an obfuscation which becomes its own form of dogmatic injunction:

My objection is not to the existence of norms as such—without which thinking could not take place—but to the relentless grip, in recent years, of what we could call an antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma. (9)

In light of Dworkin's critiques of external moral skepticism, we can better understand the ethical implications of Felski's 'critique of critique' and the incongruity that comes with any view of the text, or of the critic, as dispossessed from any underlying ethical values. Felski's 'antinormative normativity' repeats a critique made by Booth against what he calls "dogmatic neutrality:" the undercover normativity taken up by critics and authors who seek to extricate a text from its ethical dimensions (*Rhetoric* 144).¹¹ At bottom, the notion of aesthetic autonomy, no less than the notion of critical impersonality or scholarly objectivity, actually depends on underlying *meta-ethical* assumptions about the very status of ethical judgments—as elective, contingent, non-binding—amounting to a belief in a neutral position 'outside' ethics. Refuting external moral skepticism is therefore a critical component to realizing my dissertation's broader thesis, about the hidden complicities between ethical criticism and formalist criticism. Such a complicity cannot be noticed until one recognizes that formalism is not so much an escape from ethical concern as it is committed to its own implicit normative imperatives.

Recognizing the undercover normativity of aesthetic autonomy requires us to realize how the very idea of the text as *sui generis*, uncategorizable in ethical terms, is not itself a presupposition-free, morally neutral assumption. As Nussbaum puts it, "the appeal to aesthetic detachment is not innocent of politics" ("Exactly" 76). Rather, the aesthetic-autonomy thesis is crucially dependent on an anterior set of ethical norms, even as it pretends to commit to the project of objective scholarship. J. Hillis Miller, the poststructuralist critic, provides for us a clear

¹¹ See Chapter II for Booth's arguments for ethical criticism.

representative instance of how a literary-critical practice can never be divorced from a stake in the domain of ethics (even as, *especially* as, it pretends to be). Miller, in his essay on Henry James's *Golden Bowl*, calls us to treat a literary text

with the presumption that it may be *sui generis*, an example of itself, peculiar, particular.

It might then be exemplary of ethical situations in real life, not in the sense that it provides universal rules but in the sense that we may learn from it how much on our own we are when we are in a shrewd situation and must make an ethical decision. ("How to Be" 271)

Miller presents a vision of the text as a purely self-existing concrete object, a self-referential artifact, irreducibly particular, utterly outside the bounds of the general: he likens this vision of the text to the American Declaration of Independence ("How to Be" 280). But Miller's view is not a view of text merely, for it is rooted in his general, anterior, paradigmatic view of life: what Miller takes to be "real life" are situations of irresolvable particularity, contingency, and uncertainty, and it is this 'real life' that a resistance to universality and generality can help us realize ("How to Be" 271). Earlier in the same essay, Miller outlines his view of ethics in more detail, showcasing how it is nothing less than Miller's *ethics* of autonomy that sets up the conditions for his *literary* and *aesthetic* autonomy:

Ethics, even ethics in its literary dimension, is a dangerous and slippery field, since it so tempts those who enter it to generalized speculation or prescription. Ethical prescription may claim to have a universal basis but is likely to be no more than the reassertion of unconscious ideological assumptions peculiar to a given society or person at a given time. *All situations demanding ethical decision, it may be, are singular, not assimilable to general rules or evaluations.* ("How to Be" 271, emphasis added)

This passage demonstrates how Miller's call to treat the text as *sui generis*, singular and autonomous, is preceded by his more paradigmatic view of 'ethical situations' as singular and autonomous, concomitant with his wholesale skepticism with regards to generality, universality, evaluation, and prescription. Miller calls us to read the text as an autonomous object not because he happens to be wearing the hat of a literary critic, but because, as his rationale above makes clear, such autonomy is "exemplary" of the best way to read "real life" ("How to Be" 271). It is nothing less than Miller's own ethics of autonomy that compels him, in an irony almost too subtle to notice, to *resist* ethics: to categorically deny judgment, in order to encounter the text as an utterly pure autonomous isolate, *sui generis*, self-existing, absolute. Miller's is an ethics in the negative, an ethics in which the impulse to judge is itself what must be judged away, in which general ethical judgment is itself, generally, bad, and in which the cardinal sin can be summed up as "generalized speculation or prescription" ("How to Be" 271).

To properly note the incongruity that inheres to external moral skepticism, we can no longer grant the poststructuralist's or formalist's self-description by conceding to their claims that they are indeed stepping 'outside' the domain of ethical judgments, abandoning any universal or categorical claims, and are wholly concerned with the text's autonomous self-existence. Such claims emerge out of their own ground of ethical prescriptions. Among my main contentions in this project is that it is not so much an aesthetics of autonomy as an *ethics* of autonomy that undergirds the various stripes of radical formalism, particularly poststructuralist criticism in J. Hillis Miller's vein. This ethics of autonomy is one that calls for a radical emancipation from all ethical norms and categories. Such an ethos is one that is widely adopted within turn-of-the-century literary criticism, made famous by Derrida's negative ethics of "letting be": the call to resist any categorial violence, to undo any judgments and generalizations

in one's encounter with a text (*Writing* 141). The same literary ethics continues to show up in more contemporary contexts, for instance in Judith Butler's poststructuralist truism that the way we "change for the better" is to "actively try to judge less and undergo more" (*better*, of course, being the second-order judgment that has been snuck in) (Hale *Novel* 187). The prevailing normative consensus might be summed up by what Dorothy Hale calls "the overthrow of epistemology by experience, the troubling of certainty by an apprehension that comes through surprised feeling" (*Novel* 190). But if a negative capability for uncertainty, indeterminacy, aporia and ambiguity is raised up as the new ethical standard, the effect is to foreclose any legitimating justification for making judgments, any value claims about what is ethically right or wrong, politically just or unjust, and ultimately the grounds for ethical action and political intervention. I argue in this project that such an anti-critical stance is lethal not only to ethical criticism but indeed to criticism as such and its very grounds of legitimation, since it forecloses any justification for practicing critical judgments and any intelligible rationale for why literature ought to be pursued at all—what literature's relevance to the *general* might be, and why it is ethically important. Despite this incongruity, such an ethics of autonomy has been widely adopted within turn-of-the-century criticism, and without sufficient question or scrutiny. Moreover, I claim that such an ethics might be at the root of the much-bemoaned legitimation crisis in literary criticism.

Lest I appear too categorical in these broad judgments myself, this meta-critical observation about literary criticism's 'crisis of legitimacy' is by now a well-worn trope among established scholars in the field, rooted in a situation in which judgment itself has been judged away. John Guillory, for example, has pointed to literary criticism's lack of "rationale" in his 2022 work *Professing Literary Criticism*. Guillory's contention is that we no longer know *why*

we do literary criticism: criticism no longer has a coherent rationale. Guillory believes this situation is tied to the English department's continued surrender to the demands of the market and the increasing professionalization of academia: the question being, what is the criticism of literature even *for*, in a society in which every reader is an individual consumer with their own subjective tastes and preferences? On what grounds can literary critics pretend to offer their judgments as more valuable than those of average, non-academic readers? Michael Clune calls this the problem of "dogmatic equality" in *A Defense of Judgment*, which he, too, attributes to the creep of market-driven consumerism into academia (4). Clune points out how the subduing of critical judgment and evaluation in literature (as he puts it, the view that "[j]udgments of artistic value are subjective") has not ushered in an age of virtuously open-minded readers and critics (2). Rather, it has only served to obscure a neoliberal paradigm which reduces all things into interchangeable goods of equal value. This observation is echoed elsewhere by Joseph North, in his 2017 work *Literary Criticism*, when he makes the point that the diminished status of criticism is "a continuation and intensification of neoliberalism, for which all questions of value are to be given up for arbitration by the market" (204). North points out that literary criticism in its most basic impulse involves the judgement and evaluation of texts, and thereby critics seek to make interventions into culture—to actively shape culture. But without any coherent normative paradigm to legitimize such an intervention, literary criticism has been subsumed by the model of passive, descriptive, impersonal scholarship instead. Although North makes his target out to be New Historicism, not poststructuralism, the real culprit is the way that New Historicism has precluded any "break toward the general" (185), any capacity for "speaking to and on behalf of the general" (181), that is the essential impulse of criticism, judgment, and evaluation. This is precisely my diagnosis of the pitfalls of poststructuralist criticism: that its

tendency to deny *universality* as its foremost metaphysical bogeyman has ended up denying *criticism* also, seen as the practice of evaluation and judgment, which depends on and presupposes the capacity for categorical thinking. But because such categories are ‘always already’ presupposed, even in such a categorical denial, the result of this critical blindness is a performative contradiction: a categorical rejection of categories, or a general rejection of generalities, or, as Terry Eagleton and Rita Felski have noted twelve years apart from each other, an “antinormative normativity” (Felski 8) in which “the non-normative has become the norm” (Eagleton 16-17).

In sum, the aesthetic formalists and the poststructuralists alike share an interest in divorcing the concrete text from any general subtext of norms and values, separating the text from its implications in the more general domain of ethics. Aesthetic-autonomists must imagine the text as a pure surface, groundless and autonomous (a presupposition that plays out quite overtly in the recent turn to “surface reading”) (Best and Marcus 1), and legible only to an equally individual and autonomous critic. One way that I hope to lend clarity to this ‘ethics of autonomy’ is to point to the presupposition upon which such an ethics subsists: namely, an assumed ontological antinomy between singularity and categoricity, between the particular and the general. I will argue in the forthcoming chapters that such an ethics of autonomy is dependent on *nominalism*, or the philosophical view that the particular is self-existing, autonomous, *sui generis*, separable from the general. The domain of the general, vaguely associated in the contemporary critic’s imagination with the faraway floating abstractions of Platonic forms, is seen as a belated imposition onto a more primary substrate: the concrete particulars, epistemically privileged with the status of the Real. Nominalism thus presumes to sever any continuity between the general and the particular, between set and subset, by believing

the more general set to be arrived at exclusively through a process of induction from the particulars. This bottom-up relationship renders the general as entirely derivative and dependent upon the particular. Thus, the general is seen by the nominalist as the falsely reified superstructure: symptomatic, epiphenomenal, illusionary, and ultimately unreal, epistemically false as well as ethically culpable (“dangerous and slippery,” to quote Miller) (“How to Be” 271). It is this sort of nominalist ontology that raises up an ethics of radical particularity, autonomy, and individualism, since it is the particular and the individual that become the sole recourse for truth, goodness, and political rightness. Such an ethic emerges in the familiar injunction to “not judge”—to never generalize—while remaining blind to itself as its own universalizing judgment. (And so, Quentin Meillassoux points out how the “partisans of ‘radical finitude’ or of postmodernity, who dismiss every variety of universal as a mystifactory relic of the old metaphysics,” would not extend their thesis so far as to disqualify their own “*universal* discourse concerning the very nature of this relation”) (43, emphasis added). By pointing out this critical blindness, we find a compelling confirmation of the ethical critics’ central thesis: that there is no escaping a normative subtext, not even in the most apparently formalist kinds of criticism, and certainly not in an ethical position that pretends to stand ‘outside’ ethical norms (i.e., external moral skepticism). A negative ethics that resists judgments, an ethics that seeks to radically break free of all ethical normativity, is in reality rooted in its own normative ethos: a romantic individualist impulse to be a radically free, autonomous, autotelic subject. We would do well to remember Terry Eagleton’s warnings about such antinormative presuppositions, that such an injunction to groundlessness is “a crass Romantic delusion” and a “politically catastrophic

one” at that (15-16): what North calls an “anti-institutionalism,” a “suspicion of any form of positive collectivity ... or simple neoliberalism” (163).¹²

This, then, constitutes one of the value propositions of this project: to reinvoke the arguments of the ethical critics in order to reread aesthetic autonomy, radical formalism, and poststructuralism as all equally allied to the project of *external moral skepticism*, the Archimedean posture of standing ‘outside’ ethics. Although aesthetic formalism has often been imagined as the undue idealization of the aesthetic object, and critiqued on those grounds, I make the bid in this project that the root assumption of aestheticism is primarily the view of *ethics* as an autonomous and elective domain, tantamount to any other technical domain or discipline. This underlying view is one that favors the autonomy of disciplines and domains, divorced from any shared normative ground, rendering each field of study, including literary study, as an autonomous and impersonal *techné* without any binding stake in the general. Perhaps, to be yet more provocative, it amounts to an *ethics of autonomy*. This plays out whenever a critic assumes the stance of the pure autonomous subject, positing themselves as groundless and free of any binding belief, any prejudicial norms, any paradigmatic framework of assumption, any *necessary preconditions* to their own critical positions. There are thus two broad ‘ideals’ of criticism and scholarship that are set up by the assumption of external moral skepticism. One is the ideal of the impersonal critic-scholar, who stands autonomously above and beyond any ethical stake, any normative subtext, in the project of objective scholarship and science, purely formalist or textualist, uncontaminated by any antecedent values or prescriptive prejudices. The other is the critic as Romantic and radical emancipator, engaged in the project of rescuing the text’s

¹² For a wider historical treatment of nominalism as it pertains to literary ethics, see Megan O’ Conner’s dissertation *Nominalism, Romanticism, Negative Dialectics*, which traces how nominalism has been the pivoting point for the dialectics between the Enlightenment and Romanticism—a dialectic that has continued in more attenuated forms through Hegel, Marx, Adorno, and into the present (2019).

autonomy, seeing the text as *sui generis*, radically autonomous, a declaration of independence and autonomy (“Groundless in itself, it created its own ground. ... It is without precedent or justification, but it creates by the act itself the grounds that justify it”) (Miller “How to Be” 282-283).¹³ Many scholars have made similar observations about “the hidden ethical motivations” of aesthetic autonomy, like Siebers, who believes the problem of aesthetic autonomy lies in how it “forced critics to make a choice between human and poetic autonomy”; *political* autonomy and *aesthetic* autonomy thus enter into a Manichean struggle (46). While granting his point, I depart from Siebers’ view by arguing that the two injunctions to autonomy, though apparently at conflict, are actually allied in their underlying presuppositions. A more general logic of autonomy is at stake, setting up a jockeying for power over which autonomy, political or poetic, takes precedence. In fact, far from protecting the singularity of literature from an ethical judgmentalism or puritanism, the view of literature as autonomous can easily be coopted by critics and theorists to serve their own ethico-political commitments to autonomy, since a view of the text in terms of its groundless and unfettered freedom will apply, at its logical limits, to the critic’s own reading of the text as well. And so, Miller admits that, like the very autonomous text he is reading, his own critical interpretation is equally constructed out of whole cloth (a ‘declaration of independence’), arbitrary and autonomously bootstrapped, groundless and free:

my reading of *The Golden Bowl* is justified by the text, while at the same time, if it is a responsible reading, if it is responsive to the demand the text makes, it is also to some

¹³ The dialectic between moral relativism and moral neutrality as the dual assumptions of contemporary criticism might account for the observation made by Rita Felski (although it is not a perfect correspondence) about the two models of ‘suspicious readers’: the critic who “‘digs deep’ into a text in order to retrieve a concealed or camouflaged truth” (always boiling down to the truth of the text’s arbitrary, groundless, irrational and ideological origin), and the other critic who “stands back” from a disenchanted position of “equanimity,” which is to say non-ideological neutrality (7). In either case, moral relativism or moral neutrality preclude a self-reflexive recognition of the critic’s own normative assumptions—a recognition which, presumably, would restore the ‘limits’ of critique and allow for more sincere, affective, ‘naïve’ modes of reading.

degree interventionist, initiatory, inaugural, and in that sense unjustified. ... The reader must act on his or her own, on the basis of a reading that has no fully prescribed basis.

I hereby take that responsibility. (“How to Be” 283-284)

I hope it is clear by now that the assumption of the text’s radical autonomy depends on its own normative claim about the very status of ethical norms and categories, how ‘real,’ necessitating, and inevitable they are versus how contingent, constructed, groundless, or “unjustified” (Miller “How to Be” 283-284). For ultimately it is the idea that all ethical values and judgments are, in the final analysis, constructs of the subject, boot-strapped into existence, a matter of our individual free choice and volition (“initiator, inaugural,” ultimately irrational and “unjustified”), that raises up a Romantic ethos of absolute autonomy where we become, with Nietzsche, the minters of our own values (“How to Be” 283-284).

Insofar as the late twentieth-century revival of ethical criticism sets itself against the thesis of radical aesthetic autonomy, the ‘ethical turn’ might be conceived as the interdisciplinary bridging of these two contingent domains, ethics and literature. But the ethical turn might also be understood as something far more holistic, a paradigm shift in what we take ‘ethics’ to mean at all. Reading Nussbaum, Booth, and other ethical critics, we might begin to see ethics no longer as an autonomous discipline among others, an impersonal *techné*, as it has often been assumed to be in Anglo-American ethical philosophy, but as *the* discipline, the meta-disciplinary and paradigm-level gestalt out of which the various disciplines emerge and which acts as their necessary constitutive ground. As Nussbaum puts it, humanistic disciplines such as philosophy and literature share their concern with the singular question of ethics: how we should live. The ethical turn is therefore tantamount to a *meta*-disciplinary turn, as the search for Guillory’s ‘rationale’ or North’s ‘paradigm,’ the grounds of legitimation for any and all disciplines: in this

case, an answer to why we ought to read literature, ultimately rooted in a normative bid about how we *ought to live*, the quintessential questions of ethics that render life—not only literature—meaningful and legible.

The Ethical Critics in Contradiction

Thus far, my account makes it seem as if the ethical critics did indeed inaugurate a radical break in the history of the literary discipline. However, having established the first part of my thesis—that formalist approaches to literature are, despite their claims to the contrary, inevitably rooted in a normative ground or ethos—I move on to the second part of my two-pronged thesis. My second argument is that, however insightful their critiques of other critical approaches, the ethical critics themselves failed to remain consistent to their own central thesis about the inevitability and ubiquity of ethical value judgments. When it came to their own literary-critical projects, they did not wholly abandon the safety and purity of a position ‘outside’ ethics (a fact that emerges in their frequent apologetic qualifications that their own brand of criticism is non-prescriptive, non-evaluative).

As I intend to show in the upcoming chapters, the dividing line between an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ to ethics is a line that the ethical critics themselves hop across opportunistically and inconsistently. Whenever the ethical critics are on the offensive against formalists and poststructuralists, they boldly advance their thesis that there is no ‘outside’ to ethics (best summed up by Schwarz’s pronouncement about there being “no moral holiday” in literary study) (5). However, when pressed about their *own* ethical norms and values, and how their own norms necessarily prescribe their literary-critical theories, these critics get cold feet: they retreat back to external moral skepticism, an ‘outside’ to ethics, and a non-normative (sometimes anti-

normative) point of view which they had hitherto denounced and claimed to be impossible. There is thus an unnoticed complicity between the formalists and poststructuralists and the ethical critics that supposedly formed the countermovement against them. With one foot in ethics and one foot out, or pretending to be out, these ethical critics play out a fundamental contradiction that I argue lies at the very heart of the ethical turn. This incongruity is the result of a fraught and unsuccessful negotiation between two incommensurate epistemes: an antinormative postmodern skepticism towards ethical judgments, in which judgment is an act of ‘categorical violence’ against the text, and, on the other hand, the felt urgency of our ethical convictions and political commitments. In other words, this incongruity is nothing less than the well-worn antinomy between the ironic detachment of moral relativism—the sense of the contingency of all value claims—and the need to rationally legitimate our sincerely held moral values, our felt sense that some moral or political values are simply ‘true’ or ‘right.’ And so, for Dorothy Hale, the ‘new ethics’ that defines the contemporary search for literature’s legitimating grounds is made up of “constitutive contradictions” (*Novel* 99), contradictions which inform “*both Nussbaum’s ethical philosophy and the poststructuralist new ethical theory*” alike, a situation that “developed in the attempt to articulate the positive social value of literature for our postmodern age” (*Novel* 181, emphasis added). It is worth quoting Hale at length on this point:

contemporary academics who seek to move beyond the gasp and squeal of postmodern critical styles have attempted to put the case for the ethical value of literature on a more objective footing ... to prove that literature possesses an ethical value that goes beyond a particular culture’s construction of that value. (*Novel* 45-46)

Such a pull away from postmodern relativism in search for an ‘objective footing’ (i.e., a legitimating ground) for literary ethics is the prism that most sheds light on the precarious and

embattled status of turn-of-the-century ethico-political criticism. I argue that this ‘new ethical’ project has failed, in light of the ultimately irreconcilable premises between poststructuralism and ethical criticism. A critical stance that views ethical norms as arbitrary, autonomous, elective, is a stance that purports to exist ‘outside’ its own presupposed normative certainties (“groundless and at the same time [creating] its own grounds”) (Miller “How to Be” 280), but such an Archimedean meta-ethical posture cannot be reconciled with the view that there is no “moral holiday” from our “a priori worlds,” that ethical norms are an inevitable and inescapable precondition to all our theories and practices (Schwarz 3-5). The ethical turn, then, has a Janus face between two incommensurate views of ethics and value judgments: as arbitrary or rational, optional or binding, an antinomy between *contingency* and *necessity* that it could not, on its own terms, resolve.

My project’s intervention is thus to question the widely accepted account of the ethical turn as an inaugural break in 21st century literary criticism, and to deemphasize its discontinuity with poststructuralist criticism and its aesthetic-autonomist correlates. Rather than a departure, I argue, the ethical turn represents a continuation of the same antinormative logic on a more articulated level: a negative evaluation of ethical judgments (i.e., external moral skepticism) has been consolidated into its own ethos, an ethics in the negative. The distinction between postmodern or poststructuralist criticism and the ethical turn thus represents not a radical break from amorality into morality, from quietism to political concern, but the perpetuation of a deeper logic that cuts across them. Even as the ethical critics have shed some of the more superficial markers of a postmodern sensibility, replacing a skepticism towards absolutes and ethical norms with more sincere ethical convictions, these critics consolidate the kernel of their antinormative predecessor in less visible and more entrenched ways.

This very dialectic, between an overt ideological commitment on the one hand and a tacit skepticism about ethical norms on the other, has been noted by many critics, in a wide variety of critical contexts. For instance, Robert Doran in his *Ethics of Theory* explores “the seeming contradiction” of how postmodern theory, which, “in its formative phase, was denounced as amoral, nihilistic, and quietist ... could also be the source of the ‘political turn’ in the humanities,” and how the latter might well be “the logical and inevitable” consequence of the former (1). Amanda Anderson, an influence on Rita Felski,¹⁴ points in a less favorable way to the very same “alliance between the poststructuralist critique” and “the form of sociological reductionism that governs the politics of identity” (10). Within the widely different context of postcolonial criticism, Paul Gilroy has identified a similar dialectical structure operating within the cultural formation of the Black Atlantic, a dialectic he describes as a “double-consciousness” between “two distinct but currently symbiotic perspectives”: “the essentialist and the pluralist standpoints” (31). Gilroy points to the deeper epistemic continuity under the misperceived disparity between pluralism and essentialism, which “are in fact two different varieties of essentialism: one ontological, the other strategic”: one a philosophical assumption, the other an implementation of that same assumption into political practice (31).

It is perhaps the critics in the speculative realist movement, however, who most clearly outline this paradoxical continuity between the antinormative presuppositions of postmodernism and the strong ideological commitments that would seem, at least on the surface, antithetical to such skepticism. For Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude*, there is a sense that the absolute rejection of absolutes has become its own normative injunction, succeeding only to “occlude one lacuna by another”:

¹⁴ Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 24

Far from abolishing the value of the absolute, the process that continues to be referred to today as ‘the end of absolutes’ grants the latter an unprecedented license – philosophers seem to ask only one thing of these absolutes: that they be devoid of the slightest pretension to rationality. (45)

Metaphysical absolutism, so much the target of poststructuralist critiques, has merely been replaced by the victory of fideism. Such fideism turns out to be a reaction to overriding skepticism, not its antithesis: “Scepticism with regard to the metaphysical absolute thereby legitimates *de jure* every variety whatsoever of belief in an absolute, the best as well as the worst” (46), so that “the struggle against what the Enlightenment called ‘fanaticism’ has been converted into a project of moralization,” and the “fundamental decisions that underlie metaphysics invariably reappear, albeit in a caricatural form, in ideologies” (49).

Each of the above critics, in their respective discursive contexts, observes a tacit alignment between two strains of critical thought that seem superficially disparate: the antifoundationalism of the postmodern episteme, with its radical interrogative skepticism towards absolutes and universals, and the overt “topicality” of political thematics (to use John Guillory’s term), accompanied by rather grand claims about “the socially transformative effects of these thematics” (Guillory xii) that are “*justified by faith*” and attended by an apparently absolutist dramaturgy between what is politically progressive and what is problematic (Guillory 76). Each of these critical voices, though never quite speaking in sync, confirm the central thesis of this dissertation: that there is not so much opposition as there is continuity between the antinormative presuppositions of the postmodern, poststructuralist episteme and the purported return to ethics that marks turn-of-the-century literary criticism. What is involved in the ethical turn is not therefore a substantive shift in premises but rather, I argue, a subtler switch in

polarity: from a skeptical, deconstructive, critical-interrogative project to the very same project now asserted as a positive commitment, even an ethico-political program and prescription. What Terry Eagleton once chastised as High Theory's "assault" on the "normative" has thereby consolidated itself into what Rita Felski calls, twelve years later, an "antinormative normativity" (9) or what Michael Clune calls a "dogmatic equality" (4), according to which judgment itself (and critique by extension) is paradoxically judged as a vice—and in those cases when it is still practiced, suffers from a paralytic lack of legitimating rationale. Ultimately, this paradoxical antinomy yields up the situation highlighted by Joseph North in *Literary Criticism*, in which criticism, premised centrally on making judgments and interventions into culture, lacks any coherent paradigm for itself, becoming subsumed by the passive, descriptive model of scholarship and historicist-contextualist analysis instead. There is thus a widely felt sense among critics working in the post-critique movement that an overriding belief in the absolute contingency of all ethical values and norms has actually served to undermine critique rather than enable it. The sentiment is summed up by Rita Felski in her claim that "suspicion is not being harnessed to oppositional or transformative ends" (3) or by Quentin Meillassoux when he writes that "critical potency is not necessarily on the side of those who would undermine the validity of absolute truths" (49), or earlier by Terry Eagleton in a more caustic mood ("Only an intellectual who has overdosed on abstraction could be dim enough to imagine that whatever bends a norm is politically radical") (15).

Though the thesis may seem a fairly general one, the disciplinary stakes of this project's central claim can be guessed at. For one, if the dialectic between the preceding poststructuralist 'formalism' and the turn to ethical criticism resembles a relationship of codependence, rather than a genuine antagonism, it suggests that each side of the issue has neglected something

important in its polemics against the other, something constitutive of its own internal impulses which it ought to retrieve from the other side. An expanded understanding of what constitutes ethicality and what constitutes textuality, aesthetics, or form is in order if there is ever to be a synthesis, which is ultimately the hope for a fuller, richer, more comprehensive kind of criticism. It is no coincidence, then, that the call for a synthesis between aesthetics and ethics can be heard everywhere in contemporary literary scholarship (often framed in terms of a break away from the presuppositions of postmodernism). Various ‘post-postmodernist’ movements have emerged in recent years with the intent to break free of the default critical-interrogative stance of deconstruction and ‘suspicious hermeneutics’ to retrieve what has been called a New Sincerity, a negotiation between the self-aware ironies of postmodernity and sincere affective engagement with text, meaning, and close reading.¹⁵ Some have called this New Sincerity an “*aesth-ethical*” sensibility, implying that a break from the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion seems to involve precisely such a synthesis between aesthetic value and ethical value (Vermeulen and Akker 2). Caroline Levine’s *Forms* is one contemporary example of a project that seeks to draw out the ethical dimensions intrinsic to forms, the ways that forms are not reducible to rarefied constructs in the artworld but make up the fabric of sociopolitical life, that we *live* in forms as much as we contemplate them in art. And the post-critical school, in the vein of Rita Felski, Eve Sedgwick, and Carolyn Dinshaw, have likewise sought to retrieve more ‘naïve’ modes of reading, abandoning the default critical stance that interrogates the arbitrary or ideological

¹⁵ Elina Siltanen describes the New Sincerity as “a broad term referring to a phenomenon which in the field of American poetry has been traced back to online discussions in 2005 New Sincerity presents the self as unmediated: banal, naïve and emotional, exploring these stances as oppositions to ironic hyper-awareness and cynicism, while not fully diverging from them. Sincerity is viewed as a performance of deliberate naiveté that indicates *commitment* to emotion” (980).

underpinnings of a text in order to engage with the text in sincere, affective, embodied ways.¹⁶ Meanwhile, scholars like Joseph North and John Guillory have called for a provisional rehabilitation of the New Critical approach, a centering of literary study back onto the literary text.¹⁷ In all these cases, what is sought after is a ‘both-and’ between an attention to form and an attention to ethical instrumentality, rather than the dichotomous ‘either-or’ that has informed so much of the critical polemics. Given this widespread search for a broader, more restorative theory of criticism, the thesis I propose (that the ethical turn has *not* been a departure from the formalism preceding it but is actually a perpetuation of the same premises along new lines) would then be an important diagnosis of the current critical landscape, a reframing of the discipline’s history, and a step forward in the search for a genuinely synthetic ‘aesth-ethical’ criticism.

Nominalism as the ‘Constitutive Contradiction’

Something else important to the scholarly discourse is suggested by the thesis of this project. If the ethical critics do not substantively disagree with the aestheticists and vice versa, and the two camps are in reality arguing past each other, it suggests there is an underlying and unaccounted for confusion at the root of these polemics. Such a discursive situation—the appearance of a disagreement, subsisting on an unwitting consensus—suggests that the root issue is something like a logical recursion or contradiction within the basic terms of the debate. A theoretical contradiction can play out discursively between two disagreeing parties who share the same set of incoherent premises but are only playing out that incoherence on a collective and

¹⁶ See Anker and Felski’s *Critique and Postcritique*, particularly p. 10 for notes on Sedgwick and other critics in this vein. See Dinshaw’s *How Soon Is Now?* for an account of “amateur time” in reading, as a counterpoint to linear time with its singular registers of what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘progressive’ critical lenses.

¹⁷ See North’s *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* and Guillory’s *Professing Criticism*.

dialogic level, in the form of an entrenched polemic. In this way, a conceptual contradiction could set up the very “conditions of intelligibility,” to use Rancière’s terms, for the polemical debates between ethicist and formalist critics (*Politics* 4).

As one provisional piece of evidence that this is indeed the case for the current debate, we can point to a certain irony, which is that the critiques leveled by each critical ‘camp’ against the other share certain striking resemblances. Take, for example, the typical critiques made by the ethical critics against the art-for-art’s-sake critics. The target of their critiques is often similar: the false notion of a pure art object, or a pure domain of ‘art’ as such, which ideates away into some far-off and vaguely Platonic realm of forms, divorced from the concrete material realities and sociohistorical contexts in which that object and its production are inescapably embedded. Such accusations of quietism and escapism, rooted in the false consciousness of an ‘aesthetic’ realm transcending its political and material substrates, will be familiar to most anyone working in the literary discipline today. But consider the many critiques that the aestheticist and formalist critics level against the ethical critics. Chief among these critiques is that ideologically motivated readers fall short of any concrete engagement with the text itself: the ethically committed critic must pre-emptively filter the text through a predetermined and prejudicial agenda, reducing the text to the simple binary of ‘ally’ or ‘enemy,’ and instrumentalizing the art object to serve a set of norms alien to itself. The problem is a failure to engage with the text as it *really* is, concretely, materially, immediately, and the appropriation of the text towards far-flung political hopes and utopic aspirations which have little to do with the text’s own inner logic. Now consider how similar the aestheticist’s critique is to the earlier ethicist one in its basic assumptions. In both cases, the failure is one of ideating away from the concrete and lapsing into a false universalism, be it the ‘universalism’ of a transcendent domain

of pure forms or the ‘universalism’ of some ethico-political utopic horizon. In either case, the universal appears as the bogeyman, while the concrete appears as the panacea. What must be undone, such critiques imply, is the critic’s tendency to abstract away, to reify their *a priori* mental constructs, with the corrective being the close and concrete engagement with hard-nosed realities on the ground (whether these happen to be the historical-material realities surrounding the text’s production or the sensory-empirical realities of the text as object). In either case, the call is ultimately to do better science, and less criticism: to attend to the concrete, and not to generalize, universalize, or judge. The irony is that each critic, ethicist or aestheticist, accuses the other of being too universalist, too generalizing, and not concrete enough in their literary work. This rough sketch is not meant to substitute for a more rigorous analysis, which remains to be had in the forthcoming chapters, but it is at the least a suggestive framing of the problem, and one that I have not seen considered elsewhere in the scholarship.

If my above account is more or less accurate, as I hope to show in the chapters that follow, then we can better diagnose the deeper condition that underlies these contemporary polemics between ethical criticism and formalist criticism: a particular ethical, epistemic, and even ontological consensus they both share. My project’s third and final bid is that the root issue explaining the divide between the two competing forms of criticism is *nominalism*, defined as the rejection of universals, abstractions, or categories in favor of the primacy of concrete particulars. This explanation will seem strange and oddly divorced from the issue at first glance, so it calls for a more extended account. To simplify somewhat, the antinomy between art-for-art’s-sake and art-as-ethical-instrument is often imagined, implicitly or explicitly—and from both ends—as a Manichean struggle for primacy between the *concrete*, the *individual*, the *sui generis* on the one hand and the *categorical*, the *universal*, and the *abstract* on the other. In

recent years, and perhaps unexpectedly so, ethics has been associated with the *concrete* end of the bargain—a hard-nosed encounter with the concrete sociopolitical realities, historical conditions, and power relations that underpin our need for real political change—while ‘aesthetics’ has been relegated to a problematic universalism, as an escape to some unreal domain of ideas, of ‘culture,’ obscuring its complicity in the power arrangements that constitute its true conditions of possibility and production. However, there was a time when a different sensibility reigned, when concrete engagement with the text was seen as the salve against a universalizing mind that seeks to reduce all its objects to abstract ethical norms and political precommitments. This vaguely Romantic individualism was (and still is, to the extent that it continues to circulate today in the post-critical advocacy for ‘naïve’ or ‘surface’ reading) also motivated by a commitment to *concrete* work, to tangible, material, immediate apprehensions of realities *sans* the gloss of various idealisms. At risk of making too broad a claim, I would venture to say that this sensibility shared across the ethical and aestheticist critics—this default privileging of the concrete and the particular—is the unacknowledged locus of the problem between the ethicists and the aestheticists as it currently stands. Nominalism is both what the ethicists and aestheticists share in common and what pits them against each other and splits these two critical groups polemically apart.

Nominalism has a long history in philosophy, reaching back to William of Ockham (of ‘Ockham’s razor’ fame), and has many contrasting definitions.¹⁸ Since my dissertation is a work of metacriticism, not philosophy proper, it will suffice for our purposes to define nominalism in the simplest sense as the epistemic and ethical *rejection of universals*. We can understand universals in the most inclusive way to mean universal concepts and abstractions, general

¹⁸ See “Nominalism in the later Middle Ages” by Joël Biard.

categories and principles, or else anything that is not the particular, the material, or the concrete. Nominalism takes such things as categories or universals (including moral categories and universals) to be ultimately unreal: derivative at best, harmful obfuscations at worst, an artificial overlay covering up the more primary reality of the particular, the concrete, the sensate and empirical. Davis and Womack's metaphor of "external ethical forces," artificially imposing themselves onto the more basic substrate of concrete literary works, is part and parcel of the nominalist view of ethics (x) (see Chapter I).¹⁹ In this project, I demonstrate how the definitive consensus of ethical criticism is some variation on the nominalist theme. What goes under the umbrella term of 'the ethical turn' is better understood not as a project of moral revival so much as one of problematizing the status of universals, categories, or abstractions, picking up where poststructuralism left off, though charging it with the positive valence of ethical and political value.

Noticing the nominalist consensus may seem uninteresting at first glance because, taken at face value, there is nothing that appears *prima facie* wrong with the nominalist position. Nominalism can be read more charitably as a necessary corrective to overly dogmatic, generalizing, universalizing modes of thought and of criticism and is widely lauded as the root of ethical thought and feeling, to the point of seeming to many critics intuitive and beyond dispute: summed up succinctly by the injunction to 'not judge,' to not reduce the particular to categories

¹⁹ Notice how the description of ethical judgments as imposed upon some passive object, in an act of 'categorical violence,' imagines ethical judgments as imposed from without, *externally* (ethics as an 'external force'). But this metaphor of external imposition must first assume the object being judged exists 'outside' any ethical point of view of its own, in some pristine value-free space that is then invaded by the judgments of our unscrupulously moralistic critic. Alternatively, if we were to see the text not as the hapless victim of our judgments but as having its own ethos, predicated on its *own* judgments, then the metaphor of 'imposition' would be replaced by the metaphor of mutual interaction or exchange—a collision or, to use Booth's term, a "coduction" of ethical points of view (*Company* --). Indeed, this is the running metaphor of Booth's *The Company We Keep* (see Chapter II). The subsequent chapters shall show how ethical critics rule out the view of any object existing 'outside' ethics, particularly when it comes to cultural, linguistic, and literary objects, which always involve individual and collective agency and therefore value judgments.

of moral commensurability. Politically, this attitude is amenable to a liberal individualism and pluralism, familiar in the acknowledgement that each person and their perspective has absolute value, being irreducibly particular, and because irreducibly particular, necessarily incommensurate with all other positions and perspectives. Nevertheless, the nominalist position depends on a logically fatal circularity: a circularity summed up by the simple self-refutation of rejecting general principles as a general principle. It is too easy to forget that nominalism is itself a generalization, an ‘ism,’ offering an abstract position, even an ontological assumption about the absolute priority of particularity (note how even to use the term ‘particular’ as such is to invoke a general category). In short, nominalism creates its own categorial violence which, though often pointed to obliquely by the literary critics surveyed here (particularly by Charles Altieri; see Chapter I), is rarely faced in full or explored to its fullest extent. This means that the consequences of that theoretical circularity to literary studies and criticism have rarely been fully recognized and appreciated. The paradox of rejecting general rules as a general rule, so innocuous as to seem not worth pointing to, is nonetheless a paradox, and the contradictions it creates widen into a conceptual fissure that runs across entire swathes of critical discourse. This project will demonstrate how many of the ambiguities, aporias, paradoxes, and polemics that trouble the ethical critics—between self and society, empathy and appropriation, sign and signified, and other sites of ethical struggle—are not so much noticed by these ethical critics as they are actively propped up by their implicit nominalism, which sets up the entailing problematics.

Structure & Method

I have presented my project's central claim upfront: that *nominalism* undergirds the contemporary polemics between formalist and ethicist criticism; moreover, on account of their unacknowledged nominalism, critics partaking in the early 'ethical turn' lapse into complicity with the very *external moral skepticism* which they otherwise critique in their opponents, undoing the grounds of legitimacy for their own literary-critical projects. The substantive work of laying out the evidence and the consequents of this claim remains. To that end, this dissertation proceeds by the following outline. Chapter I lays out the theoretical groundwork of the project by exegeting some of the root assumptions of turn-of-the-century ethical criticism, relying on a range of articles by ethical critics and especially Davis and Womack's anthology *Mapping the Ethical Turn*. In Chapter I, I make the case that nominalism is indeed the unspoken consensus of those critics contributing to the turn to ethical criticism, accounting for much of the controversy and definitional struggles surrounding the 'ethical turn' and playing out between its proponents as well. Among the chief entailments of nominalism, summed up as the refusal of any universal or collective value claims, is a preference for descriptive scholarly work (for 'mapping' and 'mimesis') over and above the interventionist work of judgment, evaluation, and criticism. In Chapter I, I argue that this situation is what accounts for Joseph North's and John Guillory's diagnosis: that literary criticism has been subordinated to literary scholarship, due to a lack of any coherent paradigm or compelling rationale for criticism and its evaluative imperatives. In sum, I argue in this chapter that the 'ethical turn' in literary studies is something of a misnomer and has not really succeeded in its intervention, although this failure has yet to be widely acknowledged as such within the scholarship.

Chapter II proceeds to exemplify how these nominalist presuppositions play out concretely via a close engagement with Wayne Booth, among the earliest critics to usher in the

‘ethical turn,’ and his book *The Company We Keep* (1988). Pluralism is shown to be among the chief epistemic, ethical, and ontological entailments of nominalism as they appear in Booth’s brand of ethical criticism, while also being critiqued for certain circularities and contradictions endemic to it. Although Booth sets out with the commendable intention to bridge formalist and ethicist modes of literary reading, his nominalist premises cause him to adopt a critical pluralism that lapses into external moral skepticism and resets the initial conditions of the problem he sets out to solve. This chapter lays out the precise logics at play in this recursion through a close reading of Booth’s *The Company We Keep*.

Chapter III demonstrates how the same root assumptions, and the same circularity, play out in the thinking of perhaps the most influential of the early ethical critics, Martha Nussbaum, and her work *Love’s Knowledge* (1990). Here, the nominalism or particularism that is the root presupposition of the ethical critics is shown on full display, along with the internal contradictions endemic to Nussbaum’s nominalism. Being a trained philosopher, as well as the first literary critic to make explicit the ‘ethical turn’ in literary studies, Nussbaum is most lucid in laying out the theoretical presuppositions which the contemporary turn towards ethical criticism takes on board. Taking up the same template as the previous chapter, Chapter III grounds its findings in a close engagement with *Love’s Knowledge*, supplemented by Nussbaum’s other writings.

Chapter IV concludes the series of case studies with Dorothy Hale and her work *The Novel and the New Ethics* (2020), chosen for its contemporaneity and to demonstrate how the same pluralism and particularism continues to persist as the reigning model of literary ethics decades later. Hale’s concern with alterity, or what I call perspectivism, is caught up in a logical bind that shares the same basic structure that we see in Booth and Nussbaum. What is at stake is

more than the coincidence of a formal-logical contradiction, however. My dissertation concludes by outlining how the circularity endemic to each of these three critical projects—based respectively on pluralism, particularism, perspectivism—accounts precisely for the polemical divides between ethical and formalist criticism. The irony is that in each case, the ethical critic’s very intention is to bridge the two, to discover the ‘aesth-ethical’ synthesis of a fuller and less polemical criticism, attentive both to form and to ethical value. While sharing the same commendable intention, the solutions provided by each critic falls into a circularity that only lapses back into the initial conditions of the problem they set out to solve, revealing how the turn towards ethics is still too enmeshed in the premises of the preceding poststructuralism—namely, its nominalism—to constitute a robust ground for legitimation for literary ethics, a rational account for why we ought to read or critique literature at all and why doing so might be important to ethical life.

Admittedly, this project is focused on a small subset of critics, so it cannot serve towards a full-fledged treatment of the ‘ethical turn’ in the broadest sense, as a trend spanning many decades and disciplinary developments. The best my dissertation can provide is a modest first towards an archaeology of the paradigms undergirding contemporary literary ethics and criticism (similar to what Joseph North calls for in his 2017 work *Literary Criticism*). To avoid the problems of scope creep that can come with such a theoretically ambitious project, I chose to structure this dissertation as a series of case studies, prioritizing close engagement and ‘deep cuts’ of a select few critical works. Any attempt to cover the whole plethora of turn-of-the-century critical traditions that could be conceived as ‘ethical’ or ‘political’ would have spread this project too thin. Some degree of arbitrary delineation was therefore unavoidable. In my selection of critics, I chose to take the discourse surrounding the ‘ethical turn’ at face value,

going with the widely held view that Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum are among the earliest figures to legitimate ethical criticism in the Anglo-American context in a widespread way,²⁰ while highlighting Hale as one representative instance of those same grounds of legitimation continuing to be invoked in a more contemporary context. What the scholarly discourse recognizes can only approximate what is actually the case, however. No doubt many voices that contributed to the turn to ethics have not been traced in this project's provisional 'canon' of ethical criticism (Edward Said is only one honorable mention). Another related objection would be to the easy reciprocity I have assumed between 'ethical' criticism and 'political' criticism, which draws us into the semantic debate about what exactly are 'ethics' and 'politics' and the substantive differences between them, and to what extent the 'ethical turn' is or is not a 'political turn.' The ethical critics themselves tend to define ethics expansively enough to make 'ethical criticism' and 'political criticism' virtually indistinguishable²¹ (though, of course, their definition of 'ethics' is precisely what stands in need of proving). Although I do rely on a few critics of a more Marxist or overtly ideological bent (e.g., Terry Eagleton, Joseph North, John Guillory, and others), these are invoked in a tertiary way to support certain points in my argument. Ultimately, the choice of any one determinate ethical system or tradition—Aristotelian, Marxist, poststructuralist, or otherwise—would obscure the more general logic I wished to uncover in this project: the meta-ethical position which these critics stake against *external moral skepticism*. The particular ethical views on offer within the writings of Booth, Nussbaum, and Hale are ultimately less important than the general refutation of external moral skepticism which, I argue, unites all critics writing towards the ethical turn, whatever their distinct ethical positions may be. And so,

²⁰ Wolfreys et al describe ethical criticism as originating “in the latter half of the twentieth century” and being associated with “such figures as F. R. Leavis, John Gardner, Wayne C. Booth, Martha C. Nussbaum, and J. Hillis Miller, among others” (109). See Richard Posner (2), Stow (1-2), Mitchell (229).

²¹ See Chapters II and III.

notwithstanding these many caveats, I believe this project does make findings that are of general value to the discipline, however idiosyncratic the selection of critics. What is at stake are more paradigmatic happenings — the “underlying perspective, approach, values, methods, and theory” of these critics, to use Daniel Schwarz’s terms—which only a close and sustained critical engagement could unearth, and which necessitated a focus on depth over breadth (12).

In sum, these chapters contribute a series of close studies towards a metacritical thesis, one that exegetes the ethical norms that have been tacitly presupposed by turn-of-the-century ethical criticism. Among these root presuppositions, I claim, is the assumption of *nominalism*, which takes for granted the untenability of any general or universal claims. Following this descriptive account, the critical account also follows: I point to how this nominalist assumption sets up an underlying paradox which contributes centrally to the ongoing polemics between ethically concerned critics and aestheticist-formalist critics, suggesting that the debates between them have been founded on unsound premises. I make the case that it is the root presupposition of nominalism which (1) is shared by all the major contributors to the ‘ethical turn’ surveyed here, (2) traps the ethical critics in a vicious circle that forecloses them from laying out a coherent rationale for the very ethical criticism they are advocating for, and, what is more, (3) accounts for the polemical divisions between ethical criticism and formalist criticism. Through a series of case studies and close engagements with the works of Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, Dorothy Hale, and other ethical critics, my dissertation makes a metacritical case that a consensus towards nominalism has prevented ethical critics from successfully bridging ethical concern with attention to form, precluding the more comprehensive ‘aesth-ethical’ criticism which they are after.

Chapter I. The Ethical Turn & Nominalism:
Reading Davis and Womack's *Mapping the Ethical Turn*

“Every question we ask in our classrooms is an ethical and political question, deriving from our hierarchy of what is essential and what needs to be known. Are not our syllabi and reading lists political and ethical statements?”

— Daniel Schwarz, “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading” (9)

“In the end, if there is any single defining characteristic in the ethical turn that marks contemporary literary studies, it resides in the fact that few critics wish to return to a dogmatically prescriptive or doctrinaire form of reading. Our past failures make such hubris unattractive.”

— Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, “Preface” to *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (x)

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the concrete work to support my basic thesis that *nominalism*—defined as the rejection of universals and the *a priori* privileging of concrete particulars—is a guiding normative assumption within the so-called ‘ethical turn’ in literary studies. Providing an outright account of this thesis at too general a level, untethered from concrete texts, would not be convincing, however. Instead, it would best serve our purposes to dive into a series of close engagements with representative texts of ethical criticism at the turn of the century, building up my case gradually and from the bottom up. Thankfully, many scholars have already done good work in mapping the ethical turn in literary studies, a surveying effort which might otherwise take up the entirety of this project. Rather than attempt my own exhaustive account of the many stripes of ethical criticism that have come to prominence in literary studies in the last several decades, I turn to the editorial work done by Davis and Womack in their 2001 collection *Mapping the Ethical Turn* as my representative sample. Featuring essays by such prominent critics as J. Hillis Miller, Wayne C. Booth, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Altieri, Susan Gubar, and others, the collection offers an authoritative

survey, even if not an exhaustive one, of the revival of ethico-political concern in Anglo-American literary studies and what was meant exactly by that fraught phrase ‘ethical criticism’ by the turn of the century. In the sections that follow, I move through a close reading of select essays by critics in this collection in an attempt to answer the following questions: Given the apparent range and diversity of thought included within this ethical turn, are there shared assumptions and common concerns among the principal critics? Furthermore, what sets of problems have brought these various critical positions under the singular rubric of ‘ethical’ criticism? Does Davis and Womack’s collection reveal any shared preoccupations between and across critics partaking in the ethical turn? My answer is in the affirmative. Moreover, these preoccupations turn out to be not so different from those of the poststructuralist critics against whom which the ethical critics purportedly define themselves.

Is ‘Ethical Criticism’ Really Critical?

A close reading of select essays across *Mapping the Ethical Turn* will show how the ‘ethical turn’ discourse is defined by a certain doubleness between ethical criticism conceived as a type of scholarly inquiry and as a practice of critical judgment: is ethical criticism a *descriptive* endeavour or a *prescriptive* and evaluative one? The ‘ethical turn’ thus straddles the line between “scholarship” and “criticism” explored by Joseph North, a dichotomy that North believes to be definitive of the contemporary legitimacy crisis of literary criticism (18). The doubleness of the ethical critics can be summed up as follows: the ethical critics justify their projects by offering transcendental arguments about the *necessity* and *inevitability* of norms and values in any work of literature or criticism; however, the conspicuous absence of their *own* judgments, prescriptions, and evaluations in their literary-critical projects leads them to lapse into a

performative contradiction between their theoretical justifications for ethical criticism and the actual practice of their criticism, which is not consistent with their justifications. This doubleness between ethical criticism as non-evaluative scholarship and as evaluative criticism sets up certain irresolvable aporias and ambiguities, trapping the ‘ethical turn’ discourse in a descriptive regime of representation, and foreclosing the impulse to critical judgment and intervention. To see how see this doubleness plays out, we now turn to the preface of *Mapping the Ethical Turn*.

In their preface, editors Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack provide their synoptic view of the collection, which is worth unpacking for the telling commentary it provides on the ethical turn as a whole. Davis and Womack begin by positioning themselves against the naïve view that critics suddenly became ethical in literary studies. They emphasize that their use of the label ‘ethical turn’ “is not meant to suggest that only in recent years have we seen a shift toward the marriage of ethical thought and literary study” (ix). Rather, their collection “highlights a terrain that has always been there” (ix). But if ethical thought has never left literary studies, this raises the question of why or how there could an ‘ethical turn’ at all: What was the impossible departure from ethical questions that necessitated this inevitable return? Notably, Davis and Womack present poststructuralist criticism as an attempt to make such a departure, to find a foothold ‘outside’ ethics:

many critics during the poststructuralist era have doggedly and determinedly sought to place distance between themselves and any mention of an ethical or moral perspective in their work. Of course, such a response seems only natural when understood in the context of the demise of modern humanism, its failure in the face of two world wars, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the horror of genocide and holocaust, and the oppression of peoples whose narratives somehow fell outside the bounds of an Anglo- or

Eurocentric point of view. Yet to pretend that the ethical or moral dimensions of the human condition were abandoned or obliterated in the shift to postmodernity certainly seems naïve. (ix)

According to Davis and Womack, then, even the antinormative tendencies of poststructuralist criticism never constituted a genuine departure from ethical questions, even if many postmodern critics (as well as their detractors) sought to situate their mode of criticism explicitly beyond ethico-political concerns. As Davis and Womack put it, “it would be ludicrous to imagine that readers of literature over the past several decades somehow disengaged their ethical faculties,” implying that readers and critics who approached texts from a poststructuralist lens were no less ethically engaged than their more complacently humanistic counterparts (x). Moreover, Davis and Womack’s rejection of the idea that poststructuralist criticism stepped ‘outside’ ethics carries deeper implications. Having ruled out the “naïve” model of historical rupture or break, Davis and Womack implicitly assume that no escape, no departure, no thinking beyond ethics was ever a possibility (ix). Without belaboring the point, we can highlight how Davis and Womack tacitly rule out external moral skepticism; in short, they posit that every critic (including the poststructuralist critic) necessarily stakes claims from an ethical position. Davis and Womack implicitly invoke the transcendental argument for ethical criticism that I outlined in the introduction: no critic can in the end disengage their “ethical faculties,” and some normative stake about what is ethically and politically good or bad, right or wrong, is inevitable in any literary-critical work (x). As I intend to show across this project’s several chapters, this point about the inescapable necessity of ethical judgments, values, and norms makes up much of the main thrust of the ‘ethical turn’ discourse. By affirming the ubiquity and inevitability of ethico-political norms and values in all literary production and reception, critics contributing to the

ethical turn lay out the grounds of legitimation they need in order to argue for literature and literary criticism as deeply important to our moral and political lives.

Nevertheless, Davis and Womack do perceive a change in the prevailing view of ethics within literary studies, a qualification that complicates their argument: “What *has* changed over the course of the twentieth century in our discussion of ethics and literature is the simplistic, uncomplicated prescription of external ethical forces regarding so many different literatures and cultures” (x). We might dwell on Davis and Womack’s choice of words here, particularly the rejection of an ethics that is ‘simplistic’ and ‘uncomplicated.’ A stance against simplicity in favor of complexity can be felt in the title of Wayne Booth’s contribution to the collection, “Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple,” or Martha Nussbaum’s own defense of ethical criticism, titled “Exactly and Responsibly,” which offers a Jamesian moral ideal of “more exacting demarcations” (59) in contrast to an ethics based on the “rule of the cheap and easy” (James, qtd. in 59). Latent across all the essays in Davis and Womack’s collection is a negative evaluation of simple doctrinaire rules, in favor of better realized “moral complexities” and “inevitable ambiguities” (Booth, “Why Ethical Criticism” 19). These essays likewise exhibit a reticence towards “prescription” that is, importantly, “external,” supposing that ethical prescriptions exist ‘outside’ literature somehow and are artificially imposed upon it in a blanketing way, as if from an external vantage point (Davis and Womack x). It is this ‘external’ ethics, or the propped-up normative authority presumed by such an ethics, against which the new ethics defines itself. All these assumptions lead Davis and Womack to the following summing-up passage: “if there is any single defining characteristic in the ethical turn that marks contemporary literary studies, it resides in the fact that few critics wish to return to a dogmatically prescriptive or doctrinaire form of reading. Our past failures make such hubris unattractive” (x). The

significance of this characterization ought not to be overlooked. The ethical turn is not imagined by Davis and Womack as the sudden revival of ethical concern in literary criticism so much as the emergence of a “new ethics” onto the scene, to use Dorothy Hale’s phrase: an ethics *sans* doctrine or dogma, without prescription, and without bondage to a troubled past, favoring such things as complexity, particularity, heterogeneity, alterity, difference.²² Davis and Womack’s preface thus reveals how it is not that ethical concerns had been discarded and are now, with equal suddenness, being taken up again, but that a new set of ethical norms has supplanted the old. These new ethical norms are distinguished by complexity over simplicity, ambiguity over certainty, and the disbelief in some privileged moral perspective, some stance of normative authority which would impose itself onto literature and reduce its real particularity and diversity.

Careful readers might notice how such presuppositions regarding complexity, difference, heterogeneity, are difficult to distinguish from the poststructuralist assumptions that according to Davis and Womack supposedly necessitated the ‘ethical turn’ to begin with. We might recall Deleuze’s negative ontology of “pure difference,” constituted as a resistance to “generality” (1), or else Derrida’s *différance*, to list some provisional examples of a poststructuralist episteme resistant to general or doctrinaire normative categories (*Writing* xvii). But what seems to happen in Davis and Womack’s collection is that this “poststructuralist” resistance to generality, with its attention to complexity, particularity, and rejection of prescriptive normative certainties, gets refigured as an ethical stance in its own right (ix). This shift in valence from a negative deconstructive project to a positive and even prescriptive literary-ethical program explains how Davis and Womack can conceive of the ethical turn not as a diffuse proliferation of critical methods but as a distinct consensus in its own right, consolidated by a “single defining

²² See Chapter IV for my in-depth treatment of Dorothy Hale’s “new ethics,” a destabilizing ethics of alterity or otherness.

characteristic”: namely the resistance to the “dogmatically prescriptive” and the “doctrinaire” (x).²³ We might conclude from these brief but suggestive passages that the basic tenets of poststructuralist criticism, including its negative stance towards universal categories and its critical interrogation of absolutes, is now, with the ‘ethical turn,’ taken up in a positive, even a programmatic sense.²⁴ In this new ethical paradigm, the skeptical overthrow of norms, dogmas, expectations, categories, and conventions is our most important literary-ethical work, and the radically incommensurable, the irreducibly particular, the singular and *sui generis*, is the site of absolute ethical value. In effect, the ethical turn, in the terms set forth by Davis and Womack, transforms the postmodern interrogation of the doctrinaire, the dogmatic, the categorical into a positive ethical project for literature, a *new* ethics and not merely a reactive or remedial project of critique against the humanist ethics of old. Rather than conveying the paradigm in the context of a skeptical dismantling of inherited humanist norms, the new ethical criticism advocates for heterogeneity, relativity, complexity, and particularity directly and prescriptively as part of a positive program of ethical engagement.

Indeed, the essays in *Mapping the Ethical Turn* are virtually unanimous in affirming, celebrating, and perhaps even prescribing a capacity for moral complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and aporia—in literature as in life. This fact becomes obvious once these affirmations are seen not in terms of ‘simple’ or first-order moral judgments but as constituting a more

²³ Fredric Jameson once made a parallel observation when he noted how the postmodern appeal to heterogeneity is illegible without some underlying hegemonic unity: “it was only in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm that genuine difference could be measured and assessed,” and without which there is only “sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable” (6).

²⁴ Terry Eagleton, writing at the turn of the century himself, confirmed the observation by noting how “the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge” (13) has turned from a critical-interrogative posture into its own positive and prescriptive certainty, one in which “the non-normative has become the norm” (16).

slippery, second-order, *meta*-ethical position on judgment as such. While considerations of space mean I cannot exhaustively cover every essay in the collection, a brief sketch ought to suffice to illustrate this running theme. In his essay “Sethe’s Choice,” James Phelan advocates for Toni Morrison’s virtuous negative capability, her narrative refusal to provide moral judgments of her characters, particularly Sethe’s choice to kill her child: “the negative capability to refrain from any irritable reaching after ethical closure about Sethe’s rough choice” (106). Instead, Morrison’s virtuosity as an author lies in how she “seeks to multiply the number of valorized ethical perspectives” (99), “stops short of rendering any clear ethical judgment” (101), “gives us space to defer any final conclusion” (101), “leads us to rule out certain ethical responses ... without leading us to a clear position” (104). Ultimately, the meta-ethical lesson that Morrison’s novel bids us to conclude is that “Sethe’s choice is somehow beyond the reach of standard ethical judgment. ... Consequently, the ethically irresponsible thing to do is to resolve the problem by reaching a clear and fixed judgment of Sethe’s action” (106). Margaret Urban Walker’s essay “Moral Repair and Its Limits” likewise explores the meta-ethical lessons inhering to Morrison’s works, which demonstrate how moral reconciliation sometimes requires that we step *outside* the bounds of morality (for instance, by adopting measures that are “both *of* justice and *other than* justice”) (119). Morality requires a capacity for “ambiguity” (118) in which there is no such thing as “*the*—one—beautiful theory that specifies always when and whether to punish or pardon or forgive or forget” (124). “What serves better,” Walker writes, “are *detailed understandings*—practical, historical, political, and moral—of the many facets of moral repair as they apply to *concrete situations*” (124, *emphases added*). We might note how “better” is itself a category of evaluation, smuggled in by Walker at the meta-ethical level, even as her prescription is constituted as a rejection of any simple evaluative judgments (124).

The focus on ‘concrete situations’ and ‘detailed understandings’—on complexity over simplicity, specificity over categoricity, singularity over commensurability—turns out to be the running theme of the literary apologias in this collection. Nussbaum’s valorizations of Henry James hinges on the same arguments; for her, Jamesian novels bring us “into contact with the complexity of our own lives” by emphasizing “the importance of grasping complex and frequently fine-tuned qualitative distinctions” and resisting “excessively simplistic and reductive approaches to human experience” (Nussbaum “Exactly” 63).²⁵ For other critics in the collection, this inflection towards complexity away from simple and reductive categories invites us into the generative tensions of “a self-contradictory dynamic” (Lundeen 91) that encourages “continual self-questioning” (Meffan and Worthington 146). Literatures can create such productive ambiguities by deploying “the partiality of the particular to protest against universalizing rhetoric” (Gubar 183) and resisting “excessively fastidious principles” (Couser 224), since literary texts “appeal as particulars” which are “impossible to interpret ... as relying on concepts or ... specifiable criteria” (Altieri 52). Literatures’ resistance to commensurability or categoricity thereby undoes a “moralistic conception of morality” (Diamond 266) and allows us to better realize the value of the “*sui generis*,” “the peculiar, particular”—a value that evades all categories of ethical judgment (“not assimilable to general rules or evaluations”) (Miller “How to Be” 271).

Whether or not these critics’ characterizations are indeed adequate treatments of the literary texts in question, what is interesting is the remarkable parallel across their accounts: what Charles Altieri describes, in his contribution to the collection, as the overriding “commitment to singularity” over “categoricity” (36). The thematic similarities across these critical writings are

²⁵ See Chapter III for a treatment of Nussbaum’s literary ethics of particularism.

only further stressed by the sheer variety of literatures, genres, and forms being explored: film (Davis and Womack), poetry (Lundeen, Gubar, Marshall), autobiography (Couser), the lyric (Altieri), the novel (Nussbaum, Phelan, Meffan and Worthington). In spite of this literary variety, each critic seems to converge on a strikingly similar thematic takeaway: each prescribes an attention to complex particulars over normative categories, presenting the capacity for moral indecision, ambiguity, and indeterminacy as, decidedly, a moral virtue. All these models of literary ethics affirm the capacity for inhabiting a state of incommensurate moral commitments, a capacity for moral differences, doubleness, doubt that allows us “to look closely, to pay attention to fact” (Marshall 203), as the singular meta-ethical virtue one *ought* to adopt. It can be difficult to recognize these presuppositions as making up a distinct assumptive medium in its own right, given that it is almost an *absence* of assumption that is being advocated for here; the new ethical attitude resists “generalized speculation and prescription,” as Miller puts it (“How to Be” 271), and is less about “what is right,” as Altieri writes, than about “what is possible” (51). It is difficult to recognize, in other words, how these critics’ injunction to attend to moral complexities, ambiguities, and aporias might well constitute its own set of normative parameters—difficult because of how it slips from first-order deliberative moral judgments into a second-order meta-ethical proposition about judgment as such. What is involved are “second-order moral considerations,” as Meffan and Worthington write in a footnote, which, unlike “first-order moral consideration” that “applies a particular evaluative framework to assess actions or character,” apply to “the status of evaluative framework themselves” (147).

Yet there is much explanatory power to the theory that these presuppositions surrounding moral complexity, ambiguity, and negative capability consolidate their own kind of moral certainty and normative ground. Returning to Davis and Womack’s preface, we can observe the

important consequences of this switch in polarity from a *negative* project of moral skepticism to a *normative* one, one that positively prescribes such moral skepticism as a meta-ethical capacity for inhabiting moral differences. One consequence of this prescription, however counterintuitive it may seem, is that ethics becomes imaginable exclusively in terms of a negative posture of non-judgmental passivity, receptivity, or what Charles Altieri calls “pathos”: an ethics no longer in the *prescriptive* vein but in an agapeic, receptive, *descriptive* one (45). After all, to assert what is good or bad would be to commit the taboo of a “simplistic” or “doctrinaire” first-order moral prescription; not *evaluation* but neutral, non-evaluative *description* is what is implicitly selected for by such rejection criteria (Davis and Womack x). That very stance of scholarly impersonality can be guessed at in Davis and Womack’s titular metaphor of ‘mapping’: “Ethical critics, like cartographers, do not necessarily discover or make a territory but, instead, describe and give shape to what has always existed” (be it texts, people, art, etc.)—an essentially representational injunction to attend to things as they ‘really are’ (ix). Davis and Womack see the ethical critics as engaged in a descriptive project, perhaps a historiographical one—a mapping of the times—but by no means are they offering their own opinions, evaluations, or interventions. Indeed, Davis and Womack contend that the ‘ethical turn’ in literary studies is implicated in a *representative* regime: in contrast to “prescriptive or doctrinaire forms of reading,” they argue that “ethical criticism appears to be moving, in all of its various forms, toward a descriptive mode” (x). They see this descriptive mode as a counterpoint to a doctrinaire ethics, imagining the descriptive mode as “a dialogue between what has occurred in the past and what is alive and in process at the present” (futures, notably, are abandoned in their dialogic metaphor) (x). Even narrative, so often understood as morally prescriptive in nature, is best imagined in the representational sense for Davis and Womack, as “a gesture to represent what all too often is unrepresentable,

ineffable” (x). Yet the overriding choice to describe and not to prescribe, to represent and not to enact, to favor historicism and presentism over the future, can take on the form of a normative prescription in its own right, and like all prescription, be future-bound.²⁶ What remains of moral and political work in such a model of ethicality is mapping, mirroring, and mimesis: the call to witness, to represent the Other, which elevates the passive reception of *pathos* into its own legislative principle. This line of development is suggested in the very organization of the collection, as the concern with literary ethics that inaugurates Part I turns gradually into a preoccupation with themes of *visibility*, *witnessing*, and *seeing* (what Charles Altieri calls “spectator emotions”) in Parts III and IV (35). All said, it is surprising to note how even as the ‘ethical turn’ is superficially imagined as the rekindling of ethical urgency in literary study and criticism, its “single defining characteristic” is not a concern with moral prescription at all but in fact the very reverse: a reticence and reluctance towards “prescriptive or doctrinaire forms of reading,” coupled with an essentially *descriptive* project of mapping and mimesis, a commitment to representational accuracy and perceptual specificity (Davis and Womack x).

In sum, Davis and Womack’s preface points to an overall consensus which they identify (and perhaps share themselves) in all the critical positions they have curated: ethical critics are engaged in a representative or descriptive regime; theirs is an ethics of reception, representation, and response. Davis and Womack’s own ‘mapping’ metaphor might not be an impersonal description of the ethical turn so much as an instantiation of it, an inability to think beyond the terms of descriptive representation. Yet even as such a commitment is imagined to be the opposite of a dogmatic moralism or judgmentalism, I shall show in what follows that the actual

²⁶ Jörg Heiser makes the point that all attempts at “periodization,” of which the ‘ethical turn’ is an example, “always – still – come with the underlying assumption associated with classical avant-gardes: that they are not only descriptive or even critical-analytical, but *programmatic*” (emphasis added, 55-56).

result is an overriding (i.e., dogmatic) concern with mimetic representations and accurate perceptions: whether this be the critic's commitment to a more "descriptive mode" of literary reception (David and Womack x), a renewed commitment to literary *realism* among contemporary authors, or a reticence towards evaluative judgments and normative prescriptions more generally, an injunction against judgments of *value* that allows us to "look closely, to pay attention to *fact*" (Marshall 203, emphasis added).

An Ethos (or Pathos) of Spectatorship and Scholarship

The scholarly mode of literary approach outlined above is established within the first few essays of the collection, in subtle ways that will require careful tracing to unpack. Part I of *Mapping the Ethical Turn* features essays by Daniel Schwarz, Wayne C. Booth, and Martha Nussbaum that are characterized by a hopeful moral realism: the idea that ethics can involve "rational inquiry" (Booth "Why Ethical Criticism" 16). The essays in Part I seem to have as their originating impulse a return to positive ethical affirmations: a renewed optimism about humanism, for Schwarz, and about moral education, for Booth, and ultimately the possibility for deriving *moral knowledge* from literary texts. Schwarz, an advocate for a humanistic cultural criticism, refutes external moral skepticism outright in his claim that there is no such thing as "a moral holiday" (5): the basic principles of criticism continue to take hermeneutical questions for granted (What does the text *mean*? What is its *value*? How do "imagined worlds reflect anterior ones"?) since, following Aristotle, "the aesthetic, ethical, and political are inextricably linked" (9). While Schwarz's general position is felicitous enough for ethical criticism, the specifics of his argumentation do reveal a whole host of deeper precommitments. A closer look at the

opening paragraph of the essay shows how deeply implicated Schwarz's position is with the regime of representation already outlined by Davis and Womack in their preface:

We are in the midst of a humanistic revival or at least a neohumanist burst of energy.

New Historicism and cultural criticism have paved the way for this turn by focusing on *representation and mimesis*. Not surprisingly, when the representation of a priori worlds becomes important, issues of how humans live and what they live for become central because they are what concern us as readers and teachers – sometimes in spite of ourselves. (3, emphasis added)

What is clear is that Schwarz is drawing a causal link between the contemporary focus on representation and mimesis and what he sees as the ethical turn's "humanistic revival" (3). What is also clear is that this causal link depends on what Schwarz calls the "a priori worlds" of a text (3). This is a key concept which Schwarz returns to throughout his essay, a concept he variously refers to as "anterior worlds" (9), a world that "precedes the text" (3). The notion of an anterior world might be summed up as the world a text must take for granted, an antecedent world that is presumed to exist by a text, though it may not overtly refer to it. It is this assumed, antecedent, *pretextual* world that makes a text inescapably an act of representation and mimesis for Schwarz.

What makes ethical criticism necessary and valuable for Schwarz, then, is his belief that authors, texts, and readers never step outside of the anterior, antecedent, "a priori worlds" of their presuppositions and paradigms (9). All texts take some world for granted: assumptions about reality, our place in it, what it means to be human, the nature of good, and so on. There is no text that lacks a subtext, no text that evades its own answers to the most axiomatic questions within ethics, ontology, epistemology, and other general domains. Indeed, Schwarz goes further

to apply these truisms to criticism, arguing that his humanist hermeneutical method is not only how we ought to read literary writers but how we should read critics, too:

It may be worth the effort to induce from each interpretive text a persona of the critic to see if we can explain his or her subjectivity and thus understand *the critic's underlying perspective, approach, values, methods, and theory*. That is, we must read critical texts as if they, too, were spoken by a human voice to a human audience, and – as if we were hearing a first-person narration – we must attend to what is missing or distorted. (12, emphasis added)

Schwarz, then, believes that critics, too, have their ‘anterior worlds’: worlds they take for granted. To unpack a critic’s “underlying perspective, approach, values, methods, and theory” is to unearth their paradigmatic ground, to expose their axiomatic assumptions about life, the universe, and their place in it (12). Hermeneutics is thus this method of unpacking any text, any critical position, and indeed any discrete proposition, in order to unveil the subtext of beliefs undergirding it: assumptions about ontology, epistemology, ethics, politics, and identity that are necessitated by the more overt claims and formal features available to a surface reading.

Schwarz’s hermeneutics, in short, follows the structure of transcendental logic: the excavation of the *necessary presuppositions* of any discrete claim or linguistic act. For Schwarz, it is in the *inescapability* and *inevitability* of this basic presuppositional substrate—the fact that we *all* stake claims on these paradigmatic questions—that means that what we do as authors and critics will always be ethical, always be normative, that “we are our values, and we never take a moral holiday from our values” (5). In the same way that Davis and Womack deny any possibility for a critic to ‘disengage’ their “ethical faculties” (x), Schwarz’s hermeneutic method of ethical criticism refutes the thesis of external moral skepticism: all positions, all texts, advocate an ethics

and are never normatively neutral or ethically skeptical ‘all the way down,’ because all come with axiomatic assumptions about the world and necessarily advance those paradigmatic commitments, overtly or implicitly, consciously or otherwise. In sum, we see how Schwarz sets up a transcendental argument about the *necessity* of norms, values, and judgments as his justificatory grounds for practicing ethical criticism.

In the second essay of the collection, Wayne C. Booth presents arguments in line with those of Schwarz, arguing for the position that all literature is always already ethical. A student of the Neo-Aristotelian Chicago School of criticism, Booth positions himself against pure formalists and moral relativists alike: “those who think ethical judgments have nothing to do with genuine ‘literary’ or ‘aesthetic’ criticism, and those who think that ethical judgments about stories can never be anything more than subjective opinion” (16). Booth’s essay defends a two-pronged thesis: “ethical criticism is relevant to all literature, no matter how broadly or narrowly we define that controversial term; and such criticism, when done responsibly, can be a genuine form of rational inquiry” (16). The operative word in Booth’s argument is *inquiry*: the notion that we can investigate into moral quandaries and actually come up with moral knowledge, rather than merely imposing our own pre-existing moral views in an evaluative way:

The very phrase ‘ethical inquiry’ is for some thinkers an oxymoron. Ethical *indictment* of a story? Of course you can have that, as a personal expression. Ethical celebration? All right, if it will please a collection of fellow believers. But inquiry? The word implies the chance of arriving at established, decisive conclusions: *knowledge*. About ethics, many still claim, there can be no such conclusions – and thus no genuine inquiry about them.

(16)

Booth insists that in practice, however, we all take for granted a belief in the capacity for art and literature to impart moral knowledge and to morally educate us, however rarefied our critical positions may be: “whether critics defend or attack ethical criticism, and whether or not ‘ideological’ critics use ethical terms, nearly everyone concedes that no matter what we do or say about the ethical powers of art, those powers are real” (17); “When the question is generalized – ‘Do you think that a large share of your ethical education, your construction as a person, was performed by stories, from infancy on? – most answer decisively, ‘Yes’” (18).

As with Schwarz’s argument, Booth’s position only makes sense if it is true that all literature is inescapably, inevitably, and always ethical in its most basic presuppositions: literature’s “very nature entails language loaded with ethical judgments, implants views about how to live or not to live” (18). Like Schwarz, Davis, and Womack, Booth rules out any possibility of a position ‘outside’ ethics: an impersonal vantage point from which authors or critics can lord above morality or normativity, without themselves advancing something normative of their own:

Though many modern authors try to disguise this fact by dealing overtly with character qualities not ordinarily thought of in moral terms – such virtues as uncompromising pursuit of existential truth or honest probing of postmodernist mysteries – I can think of no published story that does not exhibit its author’s implied judgements about how to live and what to believe about how to live. (19)

The reason that critics and authors have mistakenly believed they can exist above or beyond ethics, Booth argues, is that ethics has been misleadingly reduced “to the narrowest possible moral codes,” which reduces ethical criticism, in turn, to a question of “whether some part of a given story violates this or that moral code”—in other words, to an evaluative form of criticism

(18). By contrast, what Booth is after is a restoration of ethics to a more original, expanded sense of *ethos*: “the overall effect on the *ethos*, the *character*, of the listener. And that effect is not to be measured by some simple study of overt behavior after listening: it must include the very quality of the life lived while listening” (18). Booth advances an idea of *ethos*, in contrast to a more prescriptive ethics, as a way of talking about the overall effects of a text on the reader (rather than prescribing in advance whether these effects are good or bad).

Booth’s defense of ethical inquiry dovetails with Schwarz’s defense of anterior worlds. Ethical criticism is first and foremost an *inquiry* for Booth, not an evaluation, and the basically scholarly notion of inquiry depends on exploring and discovering a territory that is already there (to “describe and give shape to what has always existed,” to use Davis and Womack’s terms) (ix). What is ‘already there’ is the ‘a priori world’ of the text, which is to say the presuppositional subtext that constitutes the text’s conditions of possibility: the fundamental beliefs about reality, humanity, and morality which the text takes for granted in a tacit dimension and which explains why and how it could be written at all. Booth’s model of ethical inquiry depends on the idea that there is something to ethically discover within a text, that a text is prepossessed by its own normative *ethos*, its own ethical point of view, which is not reducible to our own projects and moral preferences as critics; the task of ethical criticism, in this view, is to discover that *ethos* through something like exegetical exposition and critical dialogue.²⁷

Here, however, is where the basically representational terms set forth in Davis and Womack’s preface become most evident, and most problematic. Because both Booth and Schwarz focus so much on moral *knowledge* and moral *inquiry* (and the model of objective scholarship this implies), both critics hesitate to state the obvious but difficult problem of ethics:

²⁷ See Chapter II on Booth’s *The Company We Keep* for an account of Booth’s critical pluralism.

the problem of evaluation or judgment. In other words, Booth and Schwarz do not seem to contend with the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify a text's underlying ethics without also taking a position on that ethics. For Schwarz, ethical criticism remains in the descriptive vein: it is the hermeneutical unpacking of a text's own ethical subtext, its 'a priori world.' For Booth, this process may entail moral debate and disagreement among readers but, again, presumably for its own sake. In neither case are we given any coherent grounds to decide that a text is morally, ethically, or politically wrong or that it is morally, ethically, or politically right. Remaining at the notion of moral *inquiry* rather than judgment—remaining, in short, in a *descriptive* scholarly mode rather than a critical one—Schwarz and Booth hesitate to put forward some substantive notion of moral good of their own, leaving no room for evaluative criticism in their accounts. According to them, ethical criticism involves hermeneutical inquiry and objective description of a text's own ethical values, but never an evaluation or assessment of the values themselves (which would reveal the critic's own ethical hand).

Given the basically *scholarly* commitment to knowledge and inquiry outlined above, we can return to the representational, descriptive, mimetic terms of 'the ethical turn' as outlined by Davis and Womack's preface with a renewed sense of the stakes. I believe there is a strong case to be made for the links between the ethical turn's commitment to literary "representation and mimesis" (Schwarz 3) (allied to a mode of criticism that is "descriptive" rather than "doctrinaire") (Davis and Womack 10) and the antinormative presuppositions of the postmodernist episteme that supposedly preceded the ethical turn. Such a link supports my contention that there is more collusion than innovation between the contemporary turn to ethical criticism and its poststructuralist precursor. Each tacitly takes up what Ronald Dworkin calls external moral skepticism: each "purports to rely entirely on second-order, external statements

about morality” (31) and “denies any basis for *itself* in morality or ethics” (25, emphasis added). But if Davis and Womack are right to consolidate the “single defining characteristic” of the ethical turn as a commitment to “descriptive” inquiry over “dogmatic” prescription, we can more easily foreground such a commitment as a normative ethos in its own right (x). A scholarly commitment to descriptive representation thus appears less like an absence of ethics and more like an ethics of ‘letting be’, of spectatorship, *pathos*, and witnessing, which condemns any ethics involving assertive identifications, active interventions, and critical judgments as culpable of ‘categorical violence.’

In an essay within *Mapping the Ethical Turn* titled “Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience,” Charles Altieri comes closest to unveiling the underlying normative logic outlined above. Altieri characterizes the contemporary turn to ethics in terms of “spectator emotions”: the capacity to feel from afar, to have moral emotions of sympathy and *pathos* (35). However, Altieri reveals how the preference for the passivity of *pathos* over a more assertive *ethos* is symptomatic of a certain logical circularity that characterizes contemporary literary ethics: the fact that an ethical commitment to resist categorical violence is actually complicit in its own categorical violence, trapping itself in an “endless regress” (35). In such a model of ethicality, a critic cannot generalize their own ethical claims without being culpable in what they perceive as an unethical act of appropriation, homogenization, and a denial of the other’s singularity and autonomy. They thereby forfeit the capacity to *affirm* or *assert* anything within the domain of ethical judgment, as this implies a normative stake that risks becoming a general rule; ethics can only be passively receptive, an absence of assertiveness, a negative ethics of ‘letting be.’ According to Altieri, the prioritizing of a socially attuned *pathos* leads to a neglect of what *ethos* can offer, which is found in “the kinds of willing that are fundamental to literary experience,”

emerging in “modes of challenge and provocation” (51). Altieri is setting himself against an ethics in the negative—an ethics based purely on reception, restraint, and sympathy towards the other—and is restoring an ethics in an affirming, assertive, agential sense of investment, identification, and action.

To explore a practical, textual example of how this preference for pathos bears out on ways of reading, Altieri goes against the ethical critic Martha Nussbaum and her reading of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Nussbaum supposes that we are meant to straightforwardly sympathize with the character Bigger, but Altieri objects:

Rather, what moves us to that mercy for Bigger is our affective investment in certain images of ourselves based on our overall political commitments. These investments do seem to me crucial to politics and are certainly modified by literary experience, but not quite by the experience of sympathy, or any other pathos-oriented attitude, and certainly not by what Nussbaum celebrates as the emotions of a judicious spectator For what in part leads us to go against what we know from our sympathy with Bigger is an intensely personal commitment to aligning ourselves with the politics of hope rather than the politics of despair and with willingness to take political risks rather than to insist on safe order. These impulses are strengthened not by sympathy per se but by developing investments in positive identifications. (50)

Bigger is not meant to be a passive object for sympathy, Altieri argues, but a point for active self-identification, for the imaginative performance of positive and assertive ethical and political investments. Without this positive element of *ethos*, *pathos* can only give us a model of ethicality premised on spectatorship and sympathy from a distance: it lacks an existential primacy, a ‘self’ that is changed and affected by the literary experience (the same ‘self,’ incidentally, assumed by

Booth's *ethos* and Schwarz's humanism). And this focus on external sociality, the politeness and propriety of *pathos*, is rooted in an anti-critical ethics of self-restraint and negative capability: an ethics that cannot assert, cannot prescribe, cannot will, cannot have its own agential center, without becoming complicit in a potential act of violent appropriation as a consequence. For Altieri, one symptom of this commitment to passive sympathy, pathos, and polite sociality is the downplaying of more lyrical modes of literature, which involve agential identification and existential investment, implying this 'spectatorship' ethos has bearings not only for criticism but becomes the basis for literary canonization as well (31). This fact is confirmed by the overwhelming preference among the principal ethical critics for the novelistic realism of Henry James, for instance (see Chapters III and IV).

Altieri's misgivings are only one expression of a deeper conceptual problem that comes with an ethical commitment to representation. A scholarly project of descriptive 'mapping,' no less than a spectatorship ethos of witnessing, loses any legitimating reason for being unless it also seeks to change the state of affairs thereby, to improve the scholarly discourse somehow, to be implicated and involved in the situations it describes, ultimately to create some sort of intervention for the better. Representation as the be-all, end-all of ethical thought and feeling thus seems fated to fail, given that accurate representation is an infinite and undelimited horizon. Setting representation as the terminal point of literary-ethical work raises broad questions about the limits of such a literary ethics: How accurate must our representations be to be truly ethical, to do justice to the object of representation, be it text, person, event, or entity? How accurate *can* a representation be, without coalescing into an identity with its object? And what (or who) ought we to represent, a metalogical question that could not be settled in terms of representation alone? Finally, is it possible to claim that representation and reception are what are most ethically

valuable? Conative and desirous states of mind, counterfactual modes of action that enact rather than describe, strong and assertive identifications, and utopic and future-bound outlooks on the world seem at least as important to ethical life, if not more so, than representation and response. The fact that these are underemphasized or overlooked by a concern with representation, the call to witness, or the reception of otherness, is no trivial critique of those ethical modes. It hints at an underlying set of normative assumptions in turn-of-the-century literary ethics that has perhaps gone unrecognized and ought to be better understood.

Turning away from Davis and Womack's collection for a moment, we can note how the mimetic regime of representation shows up within literary studies in myriad ways. One of these is the turn-of-the-century renewal of realism, in both the philosophical and the literary sense. The philosophical aspect of this neo-realist turn is captured by Bruno Latour's "*stubbornly realist attitude*": a post-critical hedge against the all-encompassing skepticism that pervaded the poststructuralist era of criticism (231). Such an anti-skeptical stance is best represented by the rise of the speculative realist movement, including such thinkers as Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman (though the connection to literary criticism there is more remote).²⁸ But the representative regime emerges more locally in the renewed interest in *literary* realism, as seen in the rise of "neo-(or, 'dirty')-realism" explored by Josh Toth in *The Passing of Postmodernism* (3). Here, the 'neorealist' turn in literature is cognate with an ethical recognition of the real existence of others unlike ourselves. Toth argues that "an increased theoretical interest in the issues of community and ethical responsibility" that has precipitated from the "ethico-political 'turn' in critical theory" has been matched by a correlative change in literary tastes and preferences: away from the play of "postmodern metafiction" to "more grounded (or

²⁸ See Meillassoux's seminal *After Finitude* and Harman's *Object Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*.

‘responsible’) works of neo-realism” (Toth provides Toni Morrison’s work as a prototype of this ‘post-postmodern’ style) (3). This new reign of realism takes root despite the fact that many postmodern critics famously interrogated the possibility of accessing the Real, although, as Kathleen Lundeen points out, only by presuming the Real’s absolute purity: “Notwithstanding postmodern pronouncements that all systems of representation are mechanisms of distortion (a claim that tacitly argues there is a truth to be distorted), the collective faith that representation is possible has not diminished” (84). It is illuminating in this context to read New Historicism, too, as an essentially realist and representational endeavor, only playing out at the level of criticism rather than literature. As Joseph North has argued, the historicist’s focus on fine-grained contextualist analysis has, in its very terms, precluded evaluative criticism in favor of *descriptive* scholarship: mapping and mimesis over critical action and intervention (11). Daniel Schwarz makes these links between realism, historicism, and the ethical turn yet more firm when he argues that the ethical turn had its road paved for it by New Historicism’s focus “on representation and mimesis” (3). All said, the common theme of this realism, be it ontological or literary, is the commitment to ‘isness’ over ‘oughtness,’ to ‘facts’ over ‘values,’ and to representational accuracy over and above prescriptive claims, evaluative judgements, or normative injunctions. The mimetic regime of representation and realism, offered up as a comprehensive model for literary ethics, would necessarily foreclose literary *criticism* in favor of literary *scholarship*. After all, the scholarly endeavor to “describe and give shape to what has always existed” seems fundamentally at odds with the critic’s essentially active, prescriptive, and participatory role of cultural intervention, evaluation, and change (Davis and Womack ix).

One possible reason for the ‘realist turn’ identified by Toth, Schwarz, and the speculative realists is that realism constitutes a *bare minimum* of normativity (what Meillassoux calls “a

modicum of absoluteness”) without yet venturing into the more precarious territory of advancing any particular moral claim (49). Realism, whether of the literary variety or in the broader philosophical sense, demands at the very least a subordination of the self to some broader necessitating reality, a curbing of the ego’s narcissistic and solipsistic tendencies in an encounter with an Other outside oneself: a reality *not* reducible to a Kantian category of the mind or solipsistic construct of the self. Such a bare form of realism thus serves as the necessary grounds for an ethical, other-oriented life, once the Other is no longer reducible to a construct of the subject but has real and autonomous existence. This logic more than anything can explain why critics writing towards the ethical turn, trapped between the felt urgency of their ethico-political commitments and a postmodern interrogation of the normative, must, at minimum, assert a kind of realism as a first step towards restoring ethical criticism. A ‘stubborn realism’ and a ‘modicum of absoluteness’ are the stopgaps against an overriding skeptical doubt about the legitimacy of any and all moral claims as necessarily arbitrary, culturally relative, historically contingent, ideologically constructed, and without rational basis. In failing to go further and stalling at realism, however, the result is predictably a literary ethics in the *descriptive* or mimetic mode: an overriding concern with mapping the real, with perceptual accuracy, with witnessing the Other, and, most of all, with an experientialist and situationist phenomenology that attends to the particular and the concrete—“spectator emotions” (Altieri 31) that call us “to look closely, to pay attention to fact” (Marshall 203). Terms for what we should actually *do* beyond that perceptual attention, however, remain scant and underdeveloped, all because of the hesitation to speculate beyond the particulars of accurate perceptions and specific encounters (to make any “break toward the general,” as North puts it) which is likewise a reluctance to interfere with or act upon a reified ‘Real’ (185). Lacking any basis for shifting from ‘is’ into ‘ought’—lacking, in short,

any axiological criteria for selection, evaluation, decision, action, and intervention—realism cannot help but regress back to a diffuse perceptualism in which to lay any claim on the Real, to assert any evaluative delineation of good or bad, itself becomes the cardinal sin.

To sum up, critics partaking in the ethical turn seek to raise the old ghosts of moral truth, ethical judgment, and political urgency, but they are unable to bring them back to life and legitimacy without summoning the less savory specters of universality, generality, commensurability, and categoricity. Despite their best intentions to break free of an overweening antinormativity in literary studies, ethical critics' concessions to the poststructuralists' anxieties about general norms and universal categories ends by stalling their ethical impulses at a *representative* regime for literary ethics. According to this representational regime, the peak of ethical thought and feeling is the accurate perception of textual particulars (at the level of criticism), the pathos of witnessing characterological others (at the level of literature),²⁹ and a broad preference for literary and novelistic realism, but whose very terms preclude any legitimating account for the more active modes of ethical *prescription*, critical *evaluation*, and cultural *intervention*. In the final section of this chapter, I hope to show how a reluctance on the part of the ethical critics to assert their own normative claims is not so much a virtuous negative capability as it leads them to lapse back into the problematics of external moral skepticism which, ironically, had been their main point of contention against the poststructuralist critics. I shall demonstrate that what is involved in this commitment to scholarly objectivity, impersonality, or neutrality, to description, representation, and realism (both at the levels of criticism and of literature), is not the absence of a normative injunction but the *affirmation* of an absence as its own substantive ethical and political commitment. This ethos can be summed up

²⁹ For more details on the connection between realism and the representation of characterological 'others,' see Chapter IV on Dorothy Hale.

as a commitment to ‘isness’ over ‘oughtness,’ tantamount to a naturalistic fallacy in which the object of study ‘as it really is’ (the Arnoldian injunction to study the cultural object “as in itself it really is”) is judged to hold *greater value* than any evaluative discriminations about what ‘should’ or ‘ought’ to be (*Function of Criticism* 3). Until this anti-critical injunction to ‘let be’ is discovered as a value-laden normative ethos in its own right, however, it will be difficult to recognize as well as to dislodge—difficult to imagine an alternative to the overweening predominance of scholarship over criticism as diagnosed by Joseph North.

“Skepticism as Dogma”: The Nominalism of Ethical Criticism

Whether this fact is an editorial accident or revealing of Davis and Womack’s own unconscious assumptions, the editorial organization in *Mapping the Ethical Turn* exemplifies the very line of development traced above. Beginning with Schwarz’s bold arguments against external moral skepticism and in favor of moral realism, the essays in the collection gradually lapse back into a diffuse sense of aporia and ambiguity in Parts II, III, and IV, finally culminating in an essay by deconstructive critic J. Hillis Miller that offers what is almost the polar opposite of Schwarz’s conclusions. Where Schwarz views ethical norms as necessitating, inevitable, paradigmatic, pre-empting literature in our “a priori worlds” (3), Miller’s views the text as *sui generis*, locating the text’s singularity precisely in how it *breaks away* from any necessitating assumptions, taking nothing for granted: the literary text as “groundless” and creating “its own grounds” (“How to Be” 280), “a decisive break” which he likens to the American Declaration of Independence (“How to Be” 282). For Miller and other literary autonomists, the text’s concrete existence can be properly apprehended only once the text is seen “with the presumption that it may be *sui generis*, an example of itself, peculiar, particular,”

radically disjunct from any ethical-philosophical categories (“How to Be” 271). And yet, the paradigmatic commitment that precedes and prescribes Miller’s own reading of texts (what Schwarz calls “the critic’s underlying perspective, approach, values, methods, and theory”) (12) comes into focus, revealed to be the “commitment to singularity” set against categoricity described by Charles Altieri (36). This is the commitment to “the individualist values” of singularity, autonomy, particularity, concreteness affirmed as its own *universal* norm (Altieri 36). In sum, the claim I will be arguing for in the rest of this chapter is that the chief culprit behind the ethical critics’ hesitancy to ‘break towards the general’ is the overriding assumption of *nominalism*: a default belief in the ontological primacy of the *particular*, the *concrete*, the *singular* and the *sui generis*, set against a pervasive doubt about universal or collective categories and general prescriptions. A closer look at the essays by Charles Altieri, Kathleen Lundeen, James Meffan and Kim K. Worthington will show how the paralytics of nominalism are endemic across the ‘ethical turn’ discourse, emerging again and again in the most disparate literary-critical contexts. The result is what Rita Felski has called “the relentless grip, in recent years, of what we could call an *antinormative normativity*: skepticism as dogma”: a suspicion towards general value judgments that is unconscious of its own dogmatically assumed normative ground, its own substantive bid in the domain of ethics (9, emphasis added).

Charles Altieri is the first critic in the collection to highlight such a logical circularity and moral duplicity among the ethical critics, rooted in their nominalist presuppositions. Altieri, whose main interests as a scholar include modernist poetry, positions himself against ethical criticism, arguing that it is reductive and neglectful of the existential core of literary and aesthetic experience. Altieri’s axiomatic ground comes to the surface in his definition of ethical criticism, which he lays out in terms of two competing currents of thought. On the one hand, Altieri

highlights an ethical criticism that is philosophically informed and humanistic in tenor, popularized by Martha Nussbaum (see Chapter III); on the other hand, Altieri points to a deconstructionist criticism, premised on a Levinasian ethics of alterity. Altieri describes the two ‘schools’ of ethical criticism respectively as follows:

At one pole we have an emphasis on how involvement in concrete situations enriches our capacities for making discriminations and keeps our judgments in close relation to the emotions of sympathy and empathy; at the other we have a deconstructive concern for an ethics of letting be that is acutely aware of the imperializing work usually done by professions of empathy and of sympathy since it is the responder who gets to specify what those emotions involve. (34)

The first, more ‘traditional’ form of ethical criticism views the relationship between concrete situations and general judgements as complementary: “we simply cannot rely on ... abstract principles,” its adherents claim, “without supplementing them with the more flexible, narrative-based modes of judgment” (34). Altieri would likely place Booth and Schwarz into this category, insofar as these critics advocate for an interplay between the “nominalism” of concrete literary works and the more general, philosophical principles latent within a work’s subtext (Schwarz 5). This more “flexible” view, in which “abstract principles” are supplemented by concrete enrichment, involve “spectator emotions”: the capacity to feel from afar, to have moral emotions of sympathy and *pathos* (35). By contrast, the second form of ethical criticism, deconstructive and Levinasian, opposes the particular and the general much more starkly and so is “sharply opposed to the moral, the domain of principle. Ethical values emerge in reading because there we feel the violence of our will to make texts mean something we can state abstractly while we also have to recognize the capacity of the desires working within textuality to resist that will” (Altieri

35). In a logical move that is central to my own argument, Altieri reveals how, in reality, these two modes of ethical criticism are “mirror images of one another”: “Each stresses the ethical importance of attending to dense *concrete* presentations of *particular* actions” as a counterpoint to “more *abstract* and *categorical* modes of ethical inquiry” (34, emphases added).

Although Altieri does not name the culprit outright, it is clear that both forms of ethical criticism are fundamentally *nominalist* in their driving assumptions: both prioritize particularity over and against abstract categoricity. Where Nussbaum’s brand of ethical critic might see the particular as an important supplement to the categorical or universal (and often times the more ethically important half of the equation),³⁰ the deconstructionist type of ethical critic sees the text’s radical autonomy as victimized by the reader or critic’s tendency to generalize or universalize, and therefore imagines literary ethics as a situation of resistance against the reductions of category and commensurability. What such a mode of literary reading calls for is a negative capability, a suspension of judgment, in an encounter with a radical otherness that refuses any prefabricated conceptual categorization. But both versions of ethical criticism, Altieri points out, advance an ethics of particularism; the difference is only in degree.

The fact that it is *nominalism* which is the common assumption across both modes of ethical criticism becomes evident in Altieri’s critique of those modes. While Altieri admits that “both perspectives have a good deal to offer literary criticism,” he points out how they “also leave us with substantial problems, making it impossible not to have to reach out for additional theoretical terms” (35). He describes these substantial problems as follows:

There arises immediately the question of how we reconcile the two quite different views of concreteness and the two quite different views of the values that ethical judgment

³⁰ See my chapter on *Love’s Knowledge* for my treatment of Nussbaum’s nominalism and particularism.

seeks. Does dwelling on the denseness of particular actions afford a richer model of ethical judgment, or does it encourage casuistries that evade the clear and necessary application of principles? Once these two alternatives emerge, we clearly cannot rely on the concrete experience of texts to help us determine which one is to be preferred. For returning to the concrete cases for our answer will, in theory at least, produce endless regress unless one can somehow relink such concreteness either directly to universals or to methods of judgment that somehow have a more flexible version of generality built into them. (35)

But Altieri points out the fatal flaw of such an enterprise: “once we begin seeking explanatory principles *we put at risk the very concreteness that we want to celebrate*” (35, emphasis added). The deconstructive mode “at least faces up to the gulf between particulars and supporting categorical principles. But its ways of engaging that gulf runs a serious risk, for it seems as if the ideal of takes on the function of a moral category and hence produces its own form of violence” (36). In other words, the increased emphasis on particularity within deconstruction turns out to be its own abstract, categorical, normative imperative; to the degree that it *categorically* prescribes particularity and rejects generality, it becomes a form of the very ‘violence’ it sets out to undo. Altieri’s objection points rather starkly to the problems of nominalism: the logical discrepancy of rejecting principles on principle, of favoring the concrete as a general rule. What is more, the deconstructionist’s choice to favor the concrete over the general is itself unaccounted for and unexplained, Altieri observes, revealing it to be a basically arbitrary commitment:

More disturbing, deconstructive literary ethics has to face the problem of its so far not having done very much to specify what is so valuable about singularity per se in relation

to literature or so necessarily destructive in the judicious use of categories. This version of ethical criticism may rely on the individualist values sustaining the modern philosophy that it is quick to reject. (36)

In other words, the assumption of the primacy of the concrete over the categorical is not self-evident or self-explanatory; the deconstructionist's "binary opposition between singularity and the categorical" remains an ontological, ethical, normative assumption, not the absence of one, and relies on a whole host of presuppositions, including the very streak of 'individualism' which the deconstructive mode would seem to define itself against (36).³¹ On this account, Altieri is dissatisfied with both forms of ethical criticism: "Neither emphasis on concreteness can sustain a satisfying theoretical position. Deconstruction cannot even postulate much of an ethical theory for literary experience because it cannot supplement its commitment to singularity without falling into bad faith" (36).

Altieri attacks the Levinasian ethical criticism on the basis of a transcendental argument: he tests the deconstructionist's practice based on whether it can be consistent to its own theoretical presuppositions. What Altieri means by 'bad faith' is a failure to stand up to this presuppositional test: deconstruction's rejection of principle on principle necessarily refutes itself on its own terms, trapping itself in an "endless regress" (35). Altieri's internal method of critique

³¹ Deconstructive or poststructuralist criticism is famous for what James Heartfield calls the "death of the subject," interrogating any stable metaphysical category of subjectivity in favor of a more radical Derridean *différance*. Altieri is highlighting an irony here, which is that such a poststructuralist project appears to depend on the very "individualist values" it would seem to oppose (36). After all, the poststructuralist critic's ability to apprehend the radical autonomy of text or of language would be impossible without first assuming the radical autonomy of the critic themselves. As Richard Rorty puts it, deconstructionism is motivated by "the critic's experience of continual self-renewal," an experience of creative autonomy and interpretive arbitration achieved "through the continual overcoming of previously adopted frameworks of interpretation" (192). Thus, Heartfield notes the paradox that poststructuralism has been charged with "an *excessive* subjectivity," even as it presents itself as an interrogation of the subject (*The 'Death of the Subject' Explained*).

becomes most obvious when he draws the “insuperable problems in contemporary ethical criticism” down to the very “logical structure” of that criticism (45):

This criticism insists on there being something distinctive in how concrete texts engage our moral attention, and yet it has to interpret the value of that engagement in terms of the very philosophical methods and generalizations from which the concrete reading deviates As Derrida might put it, ethical theory wants the concrete both to establish values and to supplement value schemes, yet the very role of supplement undercuts the concreteness by making it dependent on abstractions and undercuts the abstractions by making them dependent for their realization on something that philosophy apparently cannot provide on its own. (45)

The issue becomes more than a theoretical quibble about criticism when we realize, with Altieri, that these assumptions do not only involve prescriptions about how to read but, being ethical, are also prescriptions about how to live: “Success in such reading then holds out the promise that we can adopt the same attitudes towards society” (35). In the case of a Levinasian ethics of letting be, the moral and social injunction is to remain “wary of the forms of violence that so easily mask as welfarist principles inattentive to the needs of those for whom we see ourselves speaking” (35). But if this ethical injunction also “performs its own form of violence,” as Altieri warns us, the ethics of ‘letting be’ can easily become one such welfarist principle, inattentive to the real needs of others because of an overly rigorous commitment to some general rule (i.e., the rule of overruling rules) (36).

It is the impossibility of breaking free of categoricity, without also advancing a categorical rule thereby, which leads to the second basic problem pointed out by Altieri: the prevalence of *pathos* in ethical criticism. Ethical criticism has focused too much on socially

polite forms of reading, Altieri argues, including sympathy and compassion, which fails to comprehend the full gamut of literary experiences. What is most interesting, however, is how Altieri traces this focus on pathos to the nominalist problematics explored prior, the tension between the concrete processes of literary experience and the need to supplement these with more general philosophical principles: “When we realize how philosophy has to strain for the fit that melds it with literary experience, we also understand the pressure to let pathos take over from ethos, or to become the sole relevant ethos” (45). This ‘strain’ between philosophy and literature comes down to the aporia that Altieri identifies within the nominalist presuppositions of ethical criticism: namely, the paradoxical appeal to particularity as its own *general* moral-philosophical prescription (35). Altieri argues in this subtle yet suggestive passage that the impossible “strain” of fitting together these two incompatible propositions turns into a “pressure” to let pathos take over (45). *Ethos*, which prioritizes personal identification and agency, becomes supplanted by *pathos*: attention to the other, deference to the other, an ethics of ‘letting be’ that forestalls any categorical judgment. This subterranean connection between the paradoxes of nominalism and the injunction to *pathos*, sympathy, and ‘spectatorship emotions,’ explains how Altieri can see the pathos-based literary ethics of Nussbaum and the more radically project of deconstruction as “mirror images” of each other, expressions of the same underlying nominalism (34).

All said, Altieri reveals how the preference for *pathos* over *ethos*, for spectatorship and sympathy over active intervention and critical judgment, is symptomatic of the “binary opposition between singularity and the categorical” perceived by the nominalist (36). Because the nominalist assumes an insoluble disjuncture between the singularity of literary experience and the general domain of moral-philosophical categories, the nominalist critic cannot generalize

their own ethical claims without being culpable in what they perceive as an unethical act of appropriation, homogenization, and a denial of the other's singularity and autonomy. In sum, the "endless regress" of a *general* injunction to the *particular* (a denial of categoricity that becomes its own categorial violence) ends up displacing ethics from any assertive center of subjective identification (*ethos*) and turns ethics into a game of social deference (*pathos*), in which we must continually defer to the spectatorship of an 'other' that virtuously exceeds our own conceptions or categories (35). Although Altieri makes his target out to be ethical criticism, we see in all his arguments how his primary target all along is the *nominalism* of that ethical criticism. The self-enclosed circularity of nominalism explains the hypocrisy which Altieri attributes to contemporary ethical criticism: the inauthenticity of the "grand ethical dog show," "self-promoting" and "self-congratulatory," assuming an "unwarranted dignity" and an "aura" of moral authority, all of which, for Altieri, deserves "embarrassment" and even "some self-disgust" (30). But, as we have seen, it appears the hypocrisy and insincerity noted by Altieri is not a feature of ethical criticism per se so much as the logical hypocrisy of nominalism as a model for literary ethics, insofar as being ethical in the sense expected of nominalism would precisely undermine the very capacity to consistently practice that ethics. Altieri's critique misses its target, however, because his assumption is that all ethical thought is captured by some variation on the nominalist theme (whether it be Nussbaum's more moderate nominalism or Levinas's more radical one). Attributing the "endless regress" of nominalism to ethics itself (35), Altieri advocates for a lyrical, existential, amoral venture towards "the shadows or margins of ethical discourse"; and yet, in reality, those margins are not outside ethics so much as they are outside a reductive ethics "drenched in pathos" and based on nominalist presumptions (45).

By misattributing the pitfalls of nominalism to ethical thinking as a whole, however, Altieri makes a move that is lethal to his overall argument. After all, on what basis can Altieri advance his lyrical mode of reading unless he believes in its value, its goodness, its helpfulness to others—unless he advances it as an ethics in its own right? Altieri seems to recognize his difficult position; elsewhere in the essay, Altieri is more apologetic and less stridently critical of ethical criticism. His solution is not totalizing, he claims, but merely provisional, a remedial response to the trends of our time: “it may be necessary now to push against claims about the ethical in the name of a richer model for approaching questions about ethos, so that one can envision ways that in the long run allow literary experience to affect what we take ethical judgment to involve” (32). The last part is telling: in ‘the long run,’ Altieri does believe his attention to the ‘shadows or margins of ethical discourse’ will link back up to ethical concerns in the end; it is only that critics need to step outside our current, limited models of ethics, as a project of redress, before we can retrieve a more authentic, more fully realized literary ethics. Altieri’s position, then, was never above or beyond ethics: it is only a slow boil towards ethics, a temporary byroad, and a corrective response to the overly narrow conception of ethics currently circulating in the prevailing models of ethical criticism.

There are problems with Altieri’s proposed alternative, however. His slow-boil solution involves participation in “states that are either too elemental or too transcendental or too absolute or too satisfyingly self-absorbed to engage ethical criticism” (32). Works attentive to such states, such as Yeats’s “Prayer for my Daughter” or “He and She,”

explore the limitations of all judgmental stances by requiring complex blends of sympathy and distance and hence eliciting our fascination with extreme states of mind

while complicating any possible grasp of how one might put such states into the categories of commensurability on which ethical judgment may ultimately depend. (32)

The real culprit for Altieri, then, is revealed to be *commensurability*. Commensurability risks becoming homogeneity, which Altieri sees as the action of all ethical judgment, and this neglects the distinctive, singular, qualitative nature of experience. It is the recognition of this qualitative existence that, for Altieri, is not reducible to ethics but is distinctively aesthetic: the experiential substrate of literary experience leads one to “understand how there is a dimension of ethics that cannot be put into words but must be approached by thinking about how we might understand Wittgenstein’s dictum that ethics and aesthetics are one” (33). For Altieri, then, an aesth-ethical criticism (the goal of so much of these critical polemics) is best imagined as a provisional and dialectical *resistance against* ethics: a stance against the assumption of commensurability implied by moral judgments, in favor of the absolute, irreducibly particular nature of existential experience. Put simply, Altieri’s solution to the reductions of ethical criticism is to find a foothold ‘outside’ ethics, to retrieve the radical singularity of the existential and the experiential that evades ethical categories.

If we have been attentive to Altieri’s arguments thus far, however, this solution is a non-starter. Altieri has looped back into a commitment to singularity set against categoricity—a reappropriated version of the nominalist logic he had initially critiqued in Nussbaum and Levinas—and thereby exposes himself to the same “endless regress” for which he chastises the ethical critics (35). This inconsistency, between his critique of nominalism on one front and his acceptance of nominalism on another, betrays Altieri’s inability to think beyond the nominalist paradox, experienced by Altieri as an irascible inner conflict, a “deep emotional problem” which he describes at length:

On the one hand I am made uneasy by the self-confidence and imperialist philosophizing that reduces the great imaginative range of literary experience to the less intellectually demanding but quite important moral and political truths that a philosophy devoted to spreading the values of human flourishing can promulgate. On the other hand I am not happy with myself for being so easily seduced into the equally distressing arrogance of the literary critic appalled at our marvelous complexity being oversimplified merely because someone who has devoted her life to the project wants to use literature for making the world a better place in which to live for large segments of its population. I am forced to confront the fact that my view of literary experience can promise only moderate modifications in how some individuals view the world, so it cannot even approximate the kind of social impact that Nussbaum projects for these texts ... Yet I still want to argue that the very grandeur of her enterprise leads our attention away from those concrete processes by which literature does affect individual lives in ways that noble sentiment about public welfare simply cannot accomplish. (44)

Trapped between what he sees as ‘imperialist philosophizing’ and the equal arrogance of advocating for complexity for its own sake, Altieri tentatively reaches for those “concrete processes” in the text which evade reduction to any notion of commensurability and public good (44). But this solution proves difficult to substantially distinguish from the nominalist commitment to concreteness and specificity set against categoricity and commensurability which Altieri had previously critiqued. Ironically, a retrieval of such ‘concrete processes’ in literary texts is precisely what Nussbaum sets out to do as well; Nussbaum’s literary ethics involves “the concrete perceptions of life and feeling embodied in literary forms” (*Love’s* 311) that stands

outside “any antecedently built system of rules” (*Love’s* 37).³² Seen in terms of this same commitment to singularity over commensurability, there turns out to be little discernable difference between Nussbaum’s ethics of “fine-tuned *concreteness*,” Levinas’s resistance to categorial violence, and Altieri’s existential incommensurability (*Love’s* 37). The end result for their literary ethics—an injunction to attend to the particular, the singular, and the *sui generis* as the absolute site of literary work—is strikingly similar across all three projects, despite the superficial differences in how they argue their way there (and despite even their apparent disagreements). Altieri’s doubleness—his critiques of nominalism, followed by his lapsing back into nominalism of a different flavor—is symptomatic of the cannibalizing state of affairs that comes with nominalism’s categorical rejection of categories, a recursion that returns circuitously to the selfsame rejection, again and again.

Ultimately, Altieri is subject to the criticisms raised by Booth: namely, that aestheticists and moral relativists misunderstand ethics as a matter of narrow “moral codes” or social mores (18). This narrow perception of ethics leads them, in dialectical fashion, to perform a rejection of ethical concern in literary study; of course, they must reject this narrow ethics on their own ethical grounds, advocating for what they see as a superior, expanded, restored form of reading or writing which reveals their ethical hand. Altieri advocates for a turn to the ‘margins of ethical discourse,’ a step ‘outside’ ethical norms, yet his arguments reveal that he ultimately wishes ‘in the long run’ for this work to restore a new ethical sensibility. But this definitional ambiguity surrounding ethics, a position that purports to be both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ ethics, risks slipping into a duplicity and becoming stuck in a familiar closed circle: that the resistance to ethical categories is consolidated, paradoxically, as the most *ethical* work to be done. By tracing

³² See Chapter III for a thorough treatment of Nussbaum’s particularism, which ought to show how difficult it is to substantively distinguish Nussbaum’s *pathos* from what Altieri’s *ethos* is offering.

Altieri's arguments, we see that Altieri is not against ethical modes of literary approach at all, yet in his polemical stance against ethical criticism wholesale, there is a real danger of confusion in the basic terms of this debate, to the effect that Altieri might be replaying and reifying the nominalist understanding of ethics he is trying to overcome. All such circularities could be avoided once we rule out the possibility of external moral skepticism, however: the idea that a critic can adopt a second-order vantage point above ethics that is not itself rooted in its own first-order ethical assumptions. Altieri falls into this trap: rejecting ethical concern in literary criticism, only to restore his own preferred understanding of *ethos*. The irony, in his case, is that he arrives at a newly dressed variation of the same nominalism he had initially refuted.

Part II of Davis and Womack's collection shows where the normative horizon of nominalism leads within more politically active forms of literary criticism. The essays in Part II confront the difficulties of race, power, and identity politics but also, in a more tacit sense, the difficulties endemic to an ethics of nominalism. All three essays explore the aporias that attend our ethical imperatives: the authors problematize ethics as a zero-sum game and power struggle between competing interest groups, setting up such quandaries as the impossibility of genuine empathy (Lundeen), of making an ethical decision (Phelan), of moral reconciliation or repair (Walker). However, a careful excavation of the underlying presuppositions—the “a priori worlds” of these authors—will reveal the extent to which these many ethical-philosophical aporias are in fact symptomatic of the tacit nominalism I described prior (Schwarz 3). The opposite of the general is the particular, so if we concede to the nominalist's view that to generalize, to universalize, or to posit shared normative standards is to necessarily step beyond the bounds of what is ethical (e.g., to engage in an unethical act of appropriation, homogenization, categorial violence), then our only recourse for ethical thought and feeling is an

appeal to the particular, the concrete, the uncategorizable, the singular, as the sole remaining site of ethical value. One consequence of such a paradigmatic commitment to singularity over categoricity would seem to be the dissolution of any shared ethical stakes, of any positive form of collectivity, of a commons however conceived, and the zero-sum logic of fractionation and fragmentation that ensues: what Joseph North calls an “anti-institutionalism,” a “suspicion of any form of positive collectivity,” or “simple neoliberalism” (163).

To illustrate these consequences as they play out in the practice of criticism, we might single out the first essay from Part II of the collection, “Who Has the Right to Feel?” by Kathleen Lundeen. Lundeen explores how empathy has become a problem in literary ethics: “Writers or readers who appear to empathize with another’s life experiences are often accused of arrogating a cultural authority to which they have no natural claim” (83). Lundeen’s case study is a poem by Felicia Dorothea Hemans, “Indian Woman’s Death Song,” as an example of how the unethical appropriation of a cultural other can be performed in the name of a glibly assumed empathy. The problem, Lundeen argues, is endemic to language itself: that is, the disjunction between personal expression and public words, between the individual and the social, between self and other. However, in addition to engaging with the substantive issues of racial and colonial politics which make up the explicit thematics of her essay, Lundeen also notices a theoretical recursion that threatens to bury that important political work, even to impede it. In the binary terms of ‘self’ and ‘other’ explored by Lundeen, *any* relation to an other is liable to become a self-interested appropriation of the other by the self and, with it, self-interest, since to ‘feel for the other’ means to deny the other’s singularity by reducing them to an object for one’s sympathies, one’s language, and finally one’s own political, social, cultural positionality. Remaining exclusively within this dichotomous binary, however, it follows that no empathic

bridging between differences, no shared space or synthetic alternative is imaginable at all; there is only a zero-sum game between incommensurate positions, in which the self's gain is necessarily the other's loss.³³ Even as Lundeen critiques Hemans's poem as an example of unethical appropriation, Lundeen picks up on this theoretical aporia within the alterity discourse and problematizes it.

Lundeen does not herself subscribe to a total skepticism regarding the possibility of empathy or sympathy, of feeling with or for a social or cultural other. Lundeen approaches a *reductio ad absurdum* argument by observing how a totalizing skepticism regarding our capacity to relate to cultural others and persons of different backgrounds and identities would, in the end, become self-defeating to literature:

Discourse of all kinds – poetic, fictional, critical – is taken at this time to be an artifact of social identity; the language of a particular text is thus treated as the secret code of those who share a designated mark of social identification. Moreover, since everyone is marked by society in a number of ways (through, for instance, ethnicity, class, sex, religion, age, physical mobility, and nationality), if we were to insist on shared identity in all areas, writers would only be fit to represent themselves, and readers, to understand representations of themselves. By this logic, autobiography would emerge as the sole

³³ The assumption of ethics as a zero-sum logic, involving competing interests and incommensurable values that can never be reconciled, is another running theme of the ethical turn discourse. Margaret Urban Walker writes, "What repairs moral relations for one party may damage them for another; what provides bases for trust or hope for some may necessitate measures that inspire fear, resentment, or contempt in others. One way of reconnecting people may rule out another" (119); "the problems of multiple parties and differing relations among them ... tax the powers and foresight of schemes of moral repair. It is not only that not everything can be done; it is that some things can be done only at the price of others" (121). Such stark conclusions about the moral landscape push critics like Walker to seek out an alternative that might transcend or overcome the zero-sum logic between incommensurate ethical values, a position *outside* ethics—failing to see, however, that in so doing, they simply prescribe their own revised model of ethics as a solution. For a treatment of value incommensurability and moral pluralism as it pertains to the ethical criticism debate, see Chapter II on Booth.

legitimate creative genre, and it would be suitable only for a readership of one: its author.
(83)

“Though no one proposes surrendering to such an extreme position,” Lundeen writes, the question persists: “to what extent is our literary engagement biologically or culturally determined?” (83-84). The persistence of this question points to the fact that it involves unavoidable, axiomatic assumptions—a critic’s “underlying perspective, approach, values, methods, and theory” (Schwarz 12)—and that some answer to this question will be equally unavoidable in our criticism of texts. Recognizing the inevitability of staking some claim on the issue, Lundeen likewise understands the logical consequence of accepting a wholesale biological, social, or cultural determinism, which is that it would undermine any and all of our literary and critical practices insofar as it would trap every author within the suffocating solipsism of their own irreducibly particular positionality. For this reason alone, such determinism could not be congruent with our ongoing literary and discursive practices, and we would refute that determinism in our every attempt to continue practicing literature and cultural or critical discourse of any kind. Failing to recognize these various presuppositional contradictions identified by Lundeen, between our theoretical commitments and our actual practices, results in a theoretical impossibility as well as a moral duplicity:

Though postmodern critique has not preempted representational acts, it has left many in a duplicitous relationship with culture, one in which they exercise their faith in language by speaking and writing but remain skeptical of others’ verbal expression, always keeping an eye out for the ways they are being had. (Lundeen 84)

The passage above performs another transcendental argument or *reductio*: to problematize the trust in language as a means of predicating reality would invalidate all that we try to do with

language, including those very discourses which perform that critique (using language, as Lundeen points out). Again, our premises become incoherent with our practices.

Despite her powerful transcendental arguments, however, Lundeen does little to go beyond the terms of these paradoxes; she merely points to them as a “tension” to resolve (92). Her conclusion involves inhabiting and accepting this irresolvable and paradoxical state, but it is an aporia which threatens to become its own form of certainty and normative demand. It is one thing to note that such zero-sum practices as Hemans’s poem are, in fact, practiced and to critique such practices; it is something very different to imply there is no way out, no alternative, no ethical way of empathizing or sympathizing, an implication which seems to reside in any failure to suggest alternatives or improvements to one’s object of critique. The first kind of critique points to a problem with the intention of positing probable solutions; the latter surrenders to the problem as a fatalistic fixture beyond which we cannot think, setting up a “politics of despair” (to use Altieri’s apt term) which could not plausibly help the appropriated other nor the benighted and insensitive self who is doing the appropriating (50). It is at this juncture that remaining in a ‘descriptive’ mode becomes ethically culpable: a way of reinforcing and reifying a given antinomy or aporia, rather than getting to its root cause through an intervention that cuts to its premises, questions them, and shows a better way. Ultimately, because Lundeen’s essay does not provide such alternatives, readers are left with little more than a sense of moral aporia and indecision. Such indecision can be consolidated as its own prescriptive ethos, its own normative injunction, as evident in the essays by Phelan, Walker, and other critics explored prior.

Given the paralytcs of these various ambiguities, antinomies, and aporias, a representative regime of literary criticism finds its foothold within the ensuing essays. The very title of Part III, “Making Darkness Visible: The Ethical Implications of Narrative as Witness,”

suggests how the theoretical obstacles explored thus far set up a situation in which ethics is best envisioned in the visual-perceptual terms of “spectator emotions” (Altieri 35): a *pathos* and passivity in which the overriding concern is representation, visibility, and witnessing. Since critics cannot ‘intervene’ ethically, due to the arbitrary nature and inherent violence of ethical norms, all that can survive such totalizing rejection criteria is a project of non-intervention, an ethics of ‘letting be,’ which amounts to perceiving what is already the case. In short, ethics is reduced to the representation of others. These people or events which are the objects of representation themselves involve moral agents and moral actions, however, so ethics turns into a kind of spectatorship, a second-hand ethics of ‘witnessing.’ Even this hands-off solution cannot escape the Catch-22 circularities, however: the representative regime’s anti-prescriptive ethics of ‘letting be’ remains open to being ethically problematized, all because of the underlying normativity such a commitment (or absence of commitment) will nonetheless imply. As proof that such a spectatorship ethics cannot protect critics from accusations of ethical and political culpability, we might consider the opening essay of Part III, titled “Ethics Before Politics: J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.”

In this essay, James Meffan and Kim K. Worthington point to the very same sort of circularity noticed by Lundeen, Altieri, and others in the collection, this time in the context of postcolonial studies: how the rejection of categories sets up its own circular categorial violence. Meffan and Worthington focus on South African writing; according to them, “ethical writing in South Africa is that which engages with, and is responsible to, Otherness—where the self-Other binary is always understood in terms of the most visible markers of difference, those of skin color” (131). Recalling Paul Gilroy’s critiques of essentialism in *The Black Atlantic*, Meffan and Worthington problematize what they see as the “often simplistic assumptions about the political

efficacy of ‘resistance writing’” in South African literature and the binary, either-or, zero-sum logic that is involved:

Protest or acquiescence is yet another inadequate binary imposed on a literature, culture, and country already riven by the prescriptions of binary thinking: black/white, aesthetics/politics, colonizer/colonized, guilt/blame. Understood in these terms, ethical (white) writing in South Africa is a literature constituted in and as the writer’s political responsibility, indeed duty, to refuse racial authority, paradoxically (as we will argue) by speaking of and for the marginalized or silenced Other Our interest lies less in the work of Coetzee, or in South African writing more generally, than in the extent to which unexamined assumptions about ethical responsibility pervade postcolonial discourse and render deeply problematic claims about the efficacy of ‘resistance writing’ as a means of challenging imperial or racist constructions. (132)

The root problem—as they describe it, “how to represent histories alterior to European colonialism without reenacting and reinscribing colonial representational violence”—is, according to Meffan and Worthington, primarily a theoretical and normative problem (134). Part of the problem is “a failure to define adequately who or what ‘the other’ is” (134). The authors trace this problem down to an unnoticed circularity in the concept of alterity itself:

[Alterity discourse] does little to establish the basis for a claim that acts of violence toward the Other are unethical, unless with recourse to the terms of an ethical framework that is here assumed to be unproblematically self-evident, indeed imperative. (Moreover, paradoxically to hold such an understanding up as an imperative is to enact the same kind of epistemological violence that the imperative proscribes.) (134)

The ‘paradox’ pointed to by Meffan and Worthington repeats the circularity of nominalism identified by Altieri: a commitment to the Other’s singularity, which sets itself against categorical reductions, while “assumed to be unproblematically self-evident” actually subsists on categorical imperatives that have been smuggled in by the backdoor (134). The result of being caught in such a closed circle is that there is *no* position that is not conceivably culpable and complicit, not open to the accusation of violence, a Catch-22 situation which Meffan and Worthington describe as follows: “The writer’s dilemma might be summed up thus: to speak or write (the Other) or not to speak or write (the Other)? Not to speak the Other might render one guilty of exclusion or omission; however, speaking the Other enacts another kind of betrayal,” the assumption of universality which purges the uniqueness, singularity, and alterity of the other (137). Meffan and Worthington are pointing to a contradiction on the level of presuppositions: a commitment to represent otherness becomes self-defeating, since the commitment must reify itself as its own universal imperative, obscuring the destabilizing and decentering ‘otherness’ which would seem to be its very object. Representations of alterity can acquire an ethical valence only once authors and critics sneak in some outside normative criteria through the backdoor (in the case of South African writing, as Meffan and Worthington point out, the hidden essentialism of rigidly politicized racial differences).³⁴ Indirectly, Meffan and Worthington’s critique highlights the inevitability of normativity in literary-critical work, the necessity for some ethical or normative framework, some absolutized delineation between what (or who) is good or bad. It is this covert essentialism within the alterity discourse which Meffan and Worthington object to:

³⁴ Meffan and Worthington’s critique parallels those of Meillassoux, Gilroy, and Doran outlined in the introduction, who point to the unseen continuity between the antinormative skepticism of the poststructuralist episteme and the rigid essentialism of identity politics. See Chapter IV on Dorothy Hale for a more detailed treatment of an alterity-based ethics, and how its virtuous negative capability obscures the hidden normative prescriptions upon which it subsists.

the ways that Levinas's more fruitfully ambiguous concept of alterity is reduced by political polarization to a "*comparative Otherness*," which "necessarily reinscribes it within binary logic (and hence epistemological violence)" (135, emphasis added).

Meffan and Worthington's solution to the "circularity" of the politics of alterity is fraught by the same problem they would solve, however (138). Their proposal is to turn away from a *politics* of alterity and adopt a more expansive, existential, Levinasian *ethics* of alterity, which they argue is a more flexible, more subject-specific, more contextual form of self-critique than the essentialized terms of postcolonial politics can provide. "A reconsideration of the ethical, rather than the political, nature of Coetzee's representations of interpersonal interaction," they write, "might suggest ways in which the circularity of such a debate could be short-circuited" (137-138). Using J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* as their case study, Meffan and Worthington demonstrate the complicated and nuanced nature of an ethics (as opposed to a politics) of alterity, which opens readers to a more open-ended process of self-questioning, liminality, uncertainty, indecision and doubt. This radical doubt frustrates the need for political certainties; the "self-questioning" invited by an ethics of alterity "may well not be enough for those who, in the face of gender (or race or class) inequity, seek solutions that will enable us to speak with our Others without speaking for them" (146). Yet Meffan and Worthington argue that this lack of political solutions is precisely the virtuous negative capability of an ethics of alterity, which "cuts to the heart of a certain brand of liberal multiculturalism" by raising second-order ethical questions, "speak on whose terms? whose equality?" and ultimately opening out to broader "political possibilities" (146). Put simply, an ethics of alterity provides the productive absences and generative questions that can act as a corrective to the overdetermined and essentialized answers of postcolonial politics.

It is strange that Meffan and Worthington fail to notice how this solution ends up jumping out of the pan of identity politics and into the fire of its underlying presuppositions—into the same “circularity” they had previously problematized, in fact (137-138). Meffan and Worthington’s own critique of the postcolonial politics of alterity was that ‘otherness’ as an ethical category is too theoretically indeterminate to serve as the grounds for an actionable ethos, thus requiring other ethical criteria to be smuggled in and covertly essentialized in practice. If Meffan and Worthington’s critique is a valid one, then Levinas’s original concept of alterity, far from being a solution, might actually be a cause for the essentialized or politicized version. In response to a more theoretically radical notion of otherness, the essentialist redeployment of an ethics of alterity towards political ends might well be the inevitable reaction (paralleling what Paul Gilroy calls the “symbiosis” [185] or “double-consciousness” [112] between an ontological pluralism and a politicized essentialism). By reverting back to an original notion of alterity, Meffan and Worthington have not “short-circuited” the circularity so much as reset its initial conditions: conditions endemic to the very ambiguity of alterity itself.³⁵ If so, the problem which Meffan and Worthington identify in postcolonial discourses of otherness—that they seem to depend on an assumed ethical imperative, a binary of good and evil taken up as absolute—could not be solved by a return to the Levinasian version of alterity, only temporarily postponed. Although the authors recognize the covert absolutism that attends a politics of alterity, their solution is only to lean further into a more indefinite ethics, but Meffan and Worthington fall short of recognizing the implications of their own critique: that a merely perceptual or phenomenological basis for ethics, one that does not prescribe some normative ‘ought’ or

³⁵ See the chapter on Dorothy Hale’s *The Novel and the New Ethics* for an in-depth treatment of an ethics of alterity and its entailing problems.

‘should,’ some criteria for decision-making and judgment, only makes itself vulnerable to the hidden norms that will inevitably be snuck in as a corrective.

All said, despite the wide-ranging variety of subject matters covered in Part IV (tellingly titled “Ways of Seeing: The Diversity of Applied Ethical Criticism”), the paradigm at this point in the collection is firmly in place. Each essay takes on board the “binary opposition between singularity and the categorical” described by Altieri and tacitly presupposes that it is the singularity of the particular which we must favor, either as a provisional hedge against normative categories or indeed as the absolute site of all ethical value (36). For it is the fine-tuned perception of the contingent, the circumstantial, the particular that is the highest expression of moral sense according to this paradigm (a perceptual model of ethics, “the quickened life of reflection and observation,” inviting “the possibility of responsibility *without moralism*,” as Cora Diamond puts it in her account of Henry James) (262). The result for literary criticism is a perceptual program of attending to the radical singularity of the text (or of persons, cultural others, aesthetic objects) but a singularity which can only be retrieved by extirpating its object from any subtext of general ethical norms, moral categories, and evaluative judgments. Thus, J. Hillis Miller ends the collection by prescribing the solution of radical particularity: to treat a literary text “with the presumption that it may be *sui generis*, an example of itself, peculiar, particular” (“How to Be” 271). What appears as Miller’s aesthetics of literary autonomy is circumscribed by his more general ethics of autonomy, however: Miller himself indirectly admits that his wholesale rejection of “generalized speculation and prescription” in literary reading involves adopting the same generalized *ethical* attitude towards “real life” (“How to Be” 271) (or, as Altieri puts it, “[s]uccess in such reading then holds out the promise that we can adopt the same attitudes towards society”) (35). We might recall Schwarz’s truism that any literary-critical

project always comes out of the critic's 'a priori world,' "the critic's underlying perspective, approach, values, methods, and theory" (12), which necessarily extend beyond literature and into life—into "how human beings should live" (Nussbaum *Love's* 15).

If true, Miller's injunction to literary autonomy must be located in deeper and more general presuppositions. Indeed, as Rorty writes, the deconstructionist approach exemplified by Miller is "a movement far broader than literary criticism," involving "an ongoing, subtle, profound change in the self-image of Western intellectuals" (196), what Rorty calls an ethics of "self-renewal," "an endless process of self-unravelling, self-betrayal, self-subversion" (173) (echoing what Dorothy Hale pejoratively calls the neoliberal's subject commitment to "endless change") (*Novel* 123-124).³⁶ The fact that this commitment to change, inconsistency, and infinite interpretability constitutes its own ideological commitment, and cannot in the end be relegated to a mode of textual approach, means it is not the stepping 'outside' ethical norms which its adherents purport it to be. The paradigmatic commitment that precedes and prescribes Miller's reading of texts comes into focus, revealed to be the "commitment to singularity" described by Altieri: a commitment to "the individualist values" of singularity, autonomy, particularity, concreteness as its own *universal* norm (36) (a stepping *outside* ethical judgment, or "generalized speculation or prescription," as its own general prescription) (Miller "How to Be" 271). Endemic to such literary nominalism is an anti-critical ethics of letting be, an ethics of pathos and spectatorship, one that sees all category, all generality, and all prescription as (categorically, generally, and prescriptively) bad, but whose commitment to radical singularity leaves itself without terms for asserting or prescribing anything—including its own commitment. Such a state of paradoxical indecision—variously described as a state of "endless regress" (Altieri 35) or

³⁶ See Chapter IV; Hale critiques the projects of Zadie Smith along these lines.

“duplicitous relationship” (Lundeen 84) or “circularity” (Meffan and Worthington 138) by critics in this collection—takes on its own normative fervor, becoming a moral end in itself.

Conclusion

As Davis and Womack map for us, the authors in this collection do not advance a solution or an intervention to the literary-ethical quandaries and questions they raise—not on paper, at least. Theirs is a descriptive mode, outlining the shape and structure of particular literary-ethical aporias. But if external moral skepticism is indeed untenable—if it is true that no value-neutral position for literature or criticism can exist—then we must recognize the ways in which these critics’ gestures to productive absences, generative ambiguities, and ethical aporias could not themselves be ethically groundless, value-free, and morally neutral observations of the literary-ethical landscape. Rather, these gestures towards aporias and ambiguities are better understood as means of positively advancing a negative ethics of aporia and ambiguity in its own right; each essay ends up arguing for the moral value of literature’s capacity for complexity, uncertainty, and shades of grey. In short, the solution the authors propose by being descriptive with these problems, paradoxes, and aporias is precisely not to solve these problems but to notice them, to perceive them accurately—the assumption that being “finely aware” will necessarily entail being “richly responsible” (Nussbaum *Love’s* 83; see Chapter III). This perceptual accuracy, a confrontation with morally difficult facts, may be the beginning of a literary ethics, but it is clear, I hope, why it could not be the end of such an ethics. *Indecision* cannot amount to a substantive ethical position, not without disabling the very urgency of feeling and calls to action that appear definitive of our ethical stakes and political hopes. Pointing to problems hardly seems significant or meaningful unless it is also the preliminary move towards making an

intervention and bringing about positive change; a scholarly diagnosis, in short, ought to be the prelude to a critical cure. This eventuality, however, and the shift from *scholarship* to *criticism* so sought after by Joseph North, risks being infinitely deferred as long as critics continue to subscribe to a literary ethics built on nominalist grounds: namely, the assumption that to assert general ethical norms and categories is ethically problematic. To break out of the circularity seems like the necessary next step for a literary ethics that is not self-defeating.

In sum, the antinormativity of the postmodern and poststructuralist episteme, or what Terry Eagleton calls “the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge” (13), continues to rein in the ethical turn and its felt need for normative claims and ethical injunctions, trapping literary critics in a perpetual doubleness or circularity (a circularity in which “the non-normative has become the norm”) (16). In spite of the hopeful tenor of realism and humanism definitive of the ethical turn overall, the lack of justificatory grounds for moral judgments and ethical interventions has left the ethical critics with little recourse beyond an appeal to a representational regime: a commitment to *pathos*, particularism, and accurate perceptuality as the baseline for their ethical thought and feeling. A situationist morality and the nominalist privileging of irreducible particularity (manifesting as a literary ethics of perceptual accuracy; see Chapter III on Nussbaum) takes on the tenor of an overriding normative concern. But this scholarly commitment to accurate representations of the particular, to the *singularity* of the object of study or the ethical ‘other,’ separated from general concerns, ends up being insufficient as an ethical framework to legitimize critical intervention and change, an indecision which lapses these critics back into moral uncertainty, skepticism, and doubt. The many paralytics proliferating throughout discourses of self and other (Lundeen), for instance, or

within postcolonial identity politics (Meffan and Worthington), or between a liberal-humanist ethical criticism and a deconstructive ethical criticism (Altieri), are predictable once the paradox of nominalism is recognized as the circumscribing limit of these discourses.

The subsequent chapters will advance my thesis about the ethical turn by moving through three key texts within ethical criticism: Booth's *The Company We Keep*, Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*, and Hale's *The Novel and the New Ethics*. Each work of ethical criticism, I will show, ends up circling around a particular theme: respectively, *pluralism*, *particularism*, and *perspectivism*, each of which I take to be a variation on the others and ultimately grounded in the assumptions of nominalism. My approach in the following chapters is to meet each text on its own terms, gesture to certain contradictions within its own framework through an internal critique, and with some support from outside scholars and critics, trace the roots of those contradictions to the covert nominalist consensus I have outlined in this chapter. I want to be clear about the bottom-up nature of my approach, as I am mindful about the pitfalls of applying a reductive theory to a polyvalent text (the greatest anxiety of the nominalists) and have sought to address this concern by focusing the bulk of my otherwise theory-based project on close readings and case studies. I believe I have made a convincing account in each case that my reading is not the reductive imposition of a theory from 'the outside' but is very much a bottom-up discovery rooted in the texts themselves, and that the textual evidence amply supports my theory about the persistence (and the dangers) of nominalism within contemporary literary ethics.

Chapter II. The Ethical Turn & Pluralism:
Reading Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep*

"I shall not ... arrive at a comfortable double column headed 'Ethically Good'
and 'Ethically Bad.'"

— Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep* (4)

"To repudiate one scale is necessarily to imply another."

— Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (69)

Introduction: Why Booth?

Although probably best known for his 1961 work of narrative theory, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth is widely cited as one of the most influential critics behind the ethical turn in literary studies.³⁷ His writings were a significant influence, though not always a remembered one, behind the resurgence of literary-ethical interests at the cusp of the century. Booth persistently argued for ethical criticism as the basic form of literary criticism as such, a position that has led critic Thomas Conley to state, "it is hard to find many critics ... who have over the last few decades asked of literature and of its readers the degree of ethical engagement Booth does" (169). Booth's legacy might not enjoy the same spot in the limelight as Martha Nussbaum's has, yet his influence is nonetheless traceable in much turn-of-the-century ethical criticism, including Nussbaum's own works.³⁸ In fact, the debate between Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Posner at the *Philosophy and Literature* symposium of 1997-1998 is considered by some to be the inaugurating event of the ethical turn within literary criticism.³⁹ Although Booth is among the leading figures of the ethical turn in literary studies, he did not

³⁷ See Wolfreys et al (109), Posner (2), Stow (1-2), Mitchell (229).

³⁸ See Chapter III.

³⁹ Simon Stow explores the symposium in his 2000 article "Unbecoming Virulence," as does Ella Peek in her treatment of the "Ethical Criticism of Art." Both rely on the symposium as a definitive instance of the debate between formalist critics and ethical critics.

seek to redeem ethical criticism by turning back to a crude moral didacticism in literary reading. Booth is better seen as one of the critics who most sought to bridge the divide between formalist and ethicist criticisms, rejecting “any sharp divorce of aesthetic and ethical questions” (*Company* 11). For all these reasons, I have chosen to dedicate a chapter to Booth’s *The Company We Keep*, treating it as a case study for certain premises which, I will claim, continue to circumscribe how scholars conceive of ethical criticism today.

One reason to focus on *The Company We Keep* is because it represents Booth’s most thorough articulation of his literary ethics, grounded in a critical pluralism. Like this dissertation, Booth’s *The Company We Keep* is driven by questions about “how art and ethics ... should be joined or separated,” and Booth’s own answer to that debate is, in a sense, an appeal to the dialogical plurality of the debate itself (ix). In *The Company We Keep*, Booth’s argument in the main is that the moral diversity, dialogue, and debate generated by literature (and criticism of literature) constitutes a large part, if not the lion’s share, of literature’s value and merit. And while this view is championed most explicitly and thoroughly by Booth, it is a view that is present to some degree in all the other ethical critics I will be looking at in this dissertation. Since this view—that the plurality of moral possibilities and moral differences generated by a text constitutes its chief *ethical* and even *aesthetic* merit—is so widely prevalent within ethical criticism, it seems necessary to dedicate a chapter to critical pluralism, using Booth as one of its earlier precursors and foremost apologists.

Indeed, Booth went further than perhaps any other critic towards articulating a literary ethics grounded in critical pluralism. Although pluralism is a wide-ranging concept, John Kekes sets forth what is perhaps its most explicit definition by listing a series of theses, among which are the incommensurability of values, the fact that values sometimes conflict, the lack of any

single authoritative standard to resolve these conflicts, and the possibility of nevertheless, however provisionally, arbitrating among values (17-37).⁴⁰ The last thesis in particular distinguishes pluralism from relativism (which might be summed up by the first three theses alone). Arguably, these pluralist premises continue to define the assumptive grounds of much contemporary literary criticism today. Consequently, many critics rarely feel the need to be explicit about their pluralism. In “The New Metacriticisms and the Fate of Interpretation,” Paul Fry calls the current state of presupposed pluralism the “Conversation Era” of criticism, in which various non-competing theories and methodologies of criticism are practiced simultaneously with the presumption of a peaceful coexistence, even though the methodologies are very often opposed. But in their ‘agreement to disagree,’ Fry believes there lies an unspoken consensus: “Their abstinence from infighting shows what all the above do have in common” (267). According to Fry, the “common focus of critique that keeps their solidarity intact” is their opposition to “the dream of unscaffolded interpretation, with its specter of Romantic solitude, seen as a challenge to the communal atmosphere of conversation” (267). In other words, the conversation era of criticism holds all texts to be positions within a historicized dialogue, always mediated by a particular community of interlocutors; likewise, all criticism is seen to be constituted communicatively or rhetorically, a social and not a private affair. Given a communitarian pluralism as the prevailing consensus, the one thing that all these disparate critical streams do agree on, Paul Fry points out, is the nonexistence of any single authoritative

⁴⁰ As much as John Kekes is a recognized thinker on the topic of pluralism, he is also a noted conservative and anti-liberal, and his definition of pluralism must be taken with the baggage of suppositions that come with any ideological precommitment. In spite of his anti-liberalism, however (which one might think would predispose him against pluralism), Kekes has been an advocate of pluralism, believing that some values are genuinely incommensurable and some value conflicts genuinely irresolvable. At the very least, this four-part definition of pluralism seems serviceable for our purposes, whether we stand for or against these four theses.

interpretation of a text, one might that be privately accessible to a singular reading subject apart from some broader discursive community that necessarily mediates that subject's reading.

Booth has no doubt contributed to the prevailing pluralism of conversation-era criticism. The same assumptions of conversation-era criticism described by Paul Fry characterize Booth's writings, which "focus on 'community'" (Antczak 36), on the rhetorical basis of literature, and assume the "self is, irreducibly, social" (Conley 165). Yet Booth's own model for pluralism represents something unique in the discourse, which is one important reason for making it my case study. The strangeness of Booth's critical pluralism lies in the fact that it is caught somewhere between an admission of pluralism on the one hand and, on the other, a recognition of the inevitability and necessity of ethical judgments and evaluations. Booth frames his central preoccupation in *The Company We Keep* as follows: "how can we talk about why some [texts] are better than others without falling into a judgmental stance that would destroy them all?" (268-269). Booth consistently walks this difficult tightrope between recognizing the plurality of possible moral views and recognizing the methodological necessity for holding, however provisionally, to some idea of moral truth, in order to avoid the slippery slope into moral skepticism, relativism, and subjectivism. His project can be seen as the search for a middle path between moral relativism and moral dogmatism, a defense of Kekes's third thesis: the possibility for rationally arbitrating among conflicting values despite having no shared standard for doing so. Booth's commitment to pluralism informs his very style of writing, too, which, as Thomas Conley puts it, lies in his concessional 'both-and' perspective: the rhetorical mode of *controversia*, which provides a charitable account to both sides of any given controversy (169). As Booth himself exclaims about *The Company We Keep*, "on the other hand" is the "constant refrain of this book!" (379). Given the explicit doubleness of its tensions, Booth's work,

particularly *The Company We Keep*, finds itself on the very threshold between a postmodern concession to pluralism, with its critique of normativity, moral commensurability, and universal judgments, and the ethical turn's revitalization of ethical and political concerns. Booth's work exemplifies a tension described elsewhere by Garber et al as "the tension between the poststructuralist critique of ethics and the ethical critique of poststructuralism" (ix). The liminal status of Booth's writings, existing on the cusp between a pluralistic postmodernism and a criticism concerned with ethics, is what makes his texts among the most productive sites for an investigation into critical pluralism and its ramifications (and limitations) for literary ethics. Among those limitations, I will argue, is an antinomy built into pluralism itself: pluralism as an acceptance of moral difference on the one hand and as a prescriptive moral norm on the other, one that would assert itself to the exclusion of other, non-plural ethical possibilities.

All the talk of ethical criticism surrounding Booth makes it easy to forget that, far from being a moralizing critic, concerned with literature in its purely didactic dimensions, Booth is first and foremost a pluralist. As a member of the Chicago School of critics, Booth was heavily indebted to the pluralistic neo-Aristotelian philosophy of Ronald Crane and Richard McKeon (Wimsatt). McKeon, in turn, was a champion of philosophical pluralism, looming "massively and portentously behind the whole Chicago effort" (Wimsatt 52), and his prominence in the field earned him a leading role in drafting up what would eventually become UNESCO and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights—no small influence (McKeon 3-4). I point to this legacy of influence to demonstrate the clear through-line that exists between Booth's literary-critical pluralism and the political ramifications of such a pluralism in the world. It is one way to keep in mind the sobering fact that pluralism is itself a commitment, not the absence of one, and like all commitments has moral and political consequences, not only literary ones. The fact that

Booth is better known for being an *ethical* critic rather than a pluralist is one confirmation of the theory that pluralism has become one of the most persistent and unquestioned presuppositions of contemporary literary ethics. Yet pluralism is not always seen as a substantive ethico-political position in its own right, tending to be offered up instead as an openness to all possible ethico-political positions. Of course, this is part of the problem I am attempting to think through in this work, which is that one of the symptoms of a normative consensus is the difficulty of recognizing it as such.

It is precisely this paradoxical ‘both-and’ tension between pluralism and ethics in the normative sense—or, more to the point, between pluralism as an openness to moral perspectives and pluralism as *itself* a moral perspective, even a moral prescription—which I believe has made Booth’s legacy a fraught, sometimes indistinct, and ultimately ambiguous one. Rebecca Mitchell falls prey to this ambiguity when she forgets Booth’s pluralism by describing Booth as a morally didact critic, by contrast to Martha Nussbaum:

The degree to which Nussbaum’s version of literary ethics endorses ambivalence over certainty is cast into relief when we consider her conclusions alongside Booth’s. He had gone further, suggesting—perhaps wryly, perhaps not—that it would be up to readers to decide ‘just which of the world’s narratives should now be banned or embraced in the lifetime project of building the character of an ethical reader’ (489) [qtd. from *Company*].

This kind of instrumentalist approach has not won favor; rare is the work of literary criticism which prescribes reading. (230)

Mitchell’s closing comment is revealing of the deeper paradox at play within the reception of Booth. After all, the sentiment she summarizes to illustrate Booth’s supposedly ‘prescriptive’ critical program effectively amounts to ‘leave it up to the reader’; it is difficult to imagine a more

anti-prescriptive, open-ended program for reading than that. Booth himself makes his anti-prescriptiveness clear when he writes that “every reader must be his or her own ethical critic” (*Company* 236-237). Nevertheless, the terms which Booth retains of ‘banning’ or ‘embracing’—excluding or including, condemning or condoning, in short, the question of judgment, arguably the bare minimum of moral thought—is still enough of a bogeyman for Mitchell to cast Booth as being morally prescriptive. Booth’s persistence in retaining terms for moral judgment, while at the same time being noncommittal about his criteria for such judgment, shows “he was keenly aware that he was swimming against prevailing currents in literary theory” and may have wished to appease both sides, to have it both ways, to defer his own position (in true pluralist fashion) to ‘the other hand’ (Mitchell 229).

The ambiguity was endemic to the comparatively short-lived Chicago School itself, which William K. Wimsatt describes as playing into a “pattern of retracted pluralism”: the Chicago School’s assertions of pluralism were always followed by some more assertive claim incompatible with pluralism, since it would exclude other possible claims in the pluralist pleroma (56). Anticipating Paul Fry’s more recent critique of “conversation-era criticism,” Wimsatt complains that “McKeon’s basic view of the systems [of criticism] as parallel, discrete, and aloof from one another, rather than successive, partial, and overlapping in an attempt upon common problems,” (57) results in a state of discourse in which “critics are shadow boxers in separate rings who can’t lay a glove on one another” (53). Such separate islands of discourse do seem to evacuate the point and purpose of discourse altogether, if a claim is never actually in any contact with alternative or opposing claims—a contact that implies some mutual incompatibility to be resolved. And so, Wimsatt writes that in spite of McKeon’s account of the different systems of thought “as parallels or analogues,” McKeon persistently sneaks in “some sort of amendment or

concession to the effect that, after all, the systems somehow do compete and can be compared and preferred to one another; there is some validity and truth if we can only get at it” (52). When pressed on what those criteria for truth are, however, the pluralist must retreat to their initial claim of incommensurability, lest they assert some ethical paradigm as being privileged over any other. Effectively, then, pluralism is relativism with promissory notes, deferring to an assurance about truth standards which can never be cashed in without abandoning the initial pluralism.

The tensions that exist between ethics and pluralism may not be readily obvious; some may hold the two notions to be complementary or even identical (i.e., being open to different ideas of good and bad is itself a *good* thing, and it’s *bad* not to be). Part of the work of this chapter, then, will be to show how the difficulties are not merely semantical but in fact point to a self-refutation within the very premises of pluralism that have prevented ethical criticism from getting off the ground. My chief aim in this chapter is to demonstrate how Booth’s dual commitments to ethical criticism and to critical pluralism make his project suffer from certain circularities internal to its premises, and it is these premises which, because they have gone unnoticed, have continued to trap the ethical turn and its controversies in a recursive logical loop. To that end, what follows is a close reading of *The Company We Keep*, guided by my own running line of commentary. As the implications of Booth’s arguments build over the length of the chapter, it will become apparent the ways in which the underlying premises of Booth’s project involve an inner contradiction that generalizes to critical pluralism as such. I conclude by pointing to these pluralist paralytcs as expressions of a broader philosophical assumption: *nominalism*, taken as the renunciation of generalities, categories, and universals. The result is that Booth’s ‘turn’ towards ethics turns out to be no real turn, no advent at all, so much as a turning in place: the antinormative skepticism that informs the poststructuralists, a bugbear for

Booth and other ethical critics, persists throughout the very ethical criticism they deploy to critique it, only with new window dressing. Booth's turn to ethics is thus not a departure from the antinormative premises of postmodernism he was positioning himself against so much as its perpetuation along new lines. Despite my disagreement with Booth, there are productive possibilities within Booth's pluralism that converge on important insights, even if I claim that Booth does not fully realize them. I note those latent, neglected dimensions of Booth's arguments and seek to save them, in a sense, from Booth's own pluralism. In so doing, I hope I can be charitable in true Boothean fashion to the pluralist presuppositions of contemporary ethical criticism while also gesturing to the ways it remains insufficient as a ground for literary ethics.

A Brief Overview

The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (hereafter referred to as *Company*) helpfully states its two central goals in the prologue.⁴¹ The first purpose of Booth's project is to revitalize ethical criticism after the longstanding pre-eminence of formalist and deconstructive modes in literary studies. Booth wants "to restore the full intellectual legitimacy of our common-sense inclination to talk about stories in ethical terms," which involves seeing readers and writers as moral agents, as "persons" and not "labyrinths, enigmas, or textual puzzles" (x). The second aim

⁴¹ Booth's definition of 'fiction' and 'story,' like his definitions of ethos and virtue, is characteristically expansive and all-embracing. Far from limiting his insights to narrative genres such as the novel, Booth defines a 'story' as "not only novels, short stories, epics, plays, films, and TV dramas" but "every presentation of a time-ordered or time-related experience that in any way supplements, re-orders, enhances, or interprets unnarrated life" (14). "Even the 'purest,' most aggressively 'poetic,' least moral tales," Booth writes, "will work as stories, something that leads-from-here-to-there, only if they make the reader 'want more of this friendship'" (201). Notably, the idea of a 'time-ordered experience' includes poetry and a host of forms usually classed as non-narratological; Booth doesn't hesitate to apply his critical insights to the poetry of Yeats or e.e. cummings, for instance (215-219). Given his expansive notion of 'story,' we can safely say that Booth's insights in *Company* are intended for literary reading wholesale, in spite of the humbler pretensions of his subtitle.

of Booth's *Company* deals with the pluralist half of the bargain, summed up in the book's titular quotation: literary criticism must be "relocated" from "flat judgment for or against supposedly stable works to fluid conversation about the qualities of the company we keep" (x).

In this second aim, Booth reveals how his 'relocation' of ethical criticism represents a significant departure from straightforward moral evaluation. "I shall not ... arrive at a comfortable double column headed 'Ethically Good' and 'Ethically Bad,'" he writes (4). Booth arrives instead at a more fluid, expansive, and qualitative sense of *ethos*: that is, a text's overall effects on a reader (4). Instead of "a laying down of ethical axioms" (x), Booth is "interested in a much broader topic, the entire range of effects on the 'character' or 'person' or 'self.' 'Moral' judgments are only a small part of it" (8). Booth's more expansive sense of *ethos*, beyond the strictures of evaluation or prescription, "must cover all qualities in the character, or ethos, of authors and readers, *whether these are judged as good or bad*" (8, emphasis added). Lacking a broad enough term to describe this project ("characterological criticism'? 'psychic criticism'? 'behavioral criticism'? 'temperamental criticism'? 'personality criticism'?"), Booth concludes that "'ethical' must serve" (8).

Already, a certain doubleness is present in these dual premises. On the one hand, Booth wishes to return to a "common-sense inclination to talk about stories in ethical terms"; on the other hand, Booth also wishes to expand those ethical terms precisely beyond their common-sense use (8). Going beyond such basically ethical and evaluative terms as good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust, ethics is rather about registering "the entire range of effects" of a text on a reader (8). Ethical criticism, in short is a *descriptive* and not a prescriptive endeavour: not about judgments of good or bad, but about descriptions of actual happenings; not about how we 'ought' to read, but about what does in fact occur to our ethos in reading. As Monica Johnstone

puts it, *Company* represents a “move away from prescriptive ethics and toward descriptive inquiry in ethical philosophy” (59).⁴² By recalling my arguments in Chapter I, we can already see how Booth’s model of ethical criticism is more closely aligned with the mode of non-evaluative scholarship; ethical ‘criticism’ might almost be a misnomer, insofar as a text’s characterological effects are studied sans critical evaluation (“whether these are judged as good or bad”) (8).

Here, in the meeting between Booth’s two premises (the return to ethical concerns on the one hand and the non-evaluative, expansively redefined sense of ethics on the other), we come into contact with Booth’s celebrated coinage, *coduction*:

the way in which I believe ethical criticism should be conducted in the world [is] not by a laying down of ethical axioms and a timeless deduction of consequences, but by a ‘coduction’ ... that tests our actual responses in conversation. (x)

Booth’s focus on “actual responses” reveals the pragmatism inherent to his ethical criticism (x). A text’s ethos is discovered empirically, experientially, practically and procedurally, *in situ*, in the way a text changes a reader in the very act of reading. Elsewhere, Booth describes coduction as moving away from “flat deductive patterns” in which “any story based on this or that approved or rejected norm is good or bad” and adopting instead “a living relation with the story” (422-423). He also describes coductions as “not finally *about messages*; they are *constructions of experience*” (377). As a neologism, Booth’s coduction is meant to contrast against the logical processes of deduction and induction (i.e., it is an alternative to logic altogether, or a collision of different logics). Coduction is not about the content or substance of our beliefs but is rather about

⁴² Booth’s move is part of a broader trend within moral philosophy towards so-called “thick” ethical concepts over “thin” ones: if “thin” concepts (e.g., good and bad, right and wrong) are purely evaluative, “thick” concepts (e.g., courageous, humble, avaricious) contain both descriptive and evaluative elements (Väyrynen 1). The hope, it seems, is to be able to secure a link between evaluative judgment and descriptive fact, crossing the fact/value gap thereby. It is part and parcel with Booth’s Aristotelianism, which focuses on a more practical virtue ethics (over, say, a Kantian ethics that favors abstract moral principles). The notion of “thick concepts” was first developed by Bernard Williams, incidentally a major influence on Martha Nussbaum (Terzi 610); see Chapter III.

the form and shape of our experiences as they collide, influence, and interact with one another in the encounters between reader and text, reader and author, or reader and reader in critical dialogue. Coduction is not about how a belief may cohere in a system of thought or correspond to some bit of reality—not, in other words, about truth value. Rather, coduction is an attention to the collisions *between* different beliefs, or minds, or persons, or texts and their mutual influence. As Nussbaum writes in a review, it designates “a cooperative argument not so much *ad hominem* as *inter homines* ... in which principle, concrete experience, and advice from one’s friends interact over time to produce and revise judgments” (“Reading” 234). We rub off on each other; that is coduction in a nutshell, and why ‘friendship’ or ‘company’ make up the guiding metaphor for Booth’s humanist theory of literary ethics. Having concluded this brief sketch of Booth’s project, I will proceed in the following sections to unpack the key premises of that project and point to the essential highlights. I begin my account by highlighting what I take to be the strongest points of Booth’s arguments, and I end by pointing to the deeper problems and contradictions his argumentation implies.

Booth’s Transcendental Arguments: Refuting External Moral Skepticism

The most consistent, compelling, and cogently realized argument that runs through *Company*’s 500 pages is a transcendental argument against both moral neutrality and moral relativism: the entirety of *Company* can more-or-less be summed up as a refutation of external moral skepticism (as defined by Ronald Dworkin) within the context of literary criticism. Booth’s earlier work, *Rhetoric of Fiction* made a similar assertion. In it, Booth argued that all authors, without exception, “consciously or unconsciously ... impose” a “fictional world upon the reader” (i): “the author’s judgment is always present,” he writes, “always evident to anyone

who knows how to look for it” (20). Walter Jost affirms Booth’s rejection of moral neutrality when he sums up Booth’s writings as “grounded on the premise that all knowledge is mediated in some degree by the ‘horizons’ or ‘paradigms’ or ‘fiduciary frameworks’ in which we necessarily move and have our being” (25). For Booth, our worldviews are inescapable; a text can never be separated from the worldview, paradigm, ideology, or ‘fiduciary framework’ which its author unconsciously presupposes and the normativity that such a framework will imply.

The running theme of *Company* is an argument in the same vein. *Company* exhaustively outlines the basicness of ethical judgments in literature and criticism alike. Literary study is not a question of having norms or not having norms, according to Booth; it is only a question of being conscious or unconscious about the norms we already happen to have. “The only choice we have is either to become conscious and explicit about doctrinal agreements and differences or to rely on them silently and even unconsciously,” he writes (422). The inevitability of normativity means that other schools of criticism are ‘always already’ engaged in ethical judgments and evaluations, even though they fail to acknowledge this fact by avoiding the label ‘ethical’:

though most people practice what I am calling ethical criticism of fictions, it plays at best a minor and often deplored role on the scene of theory. It simply goes unmentioned in most discussions among professional critics. Surveys of current ‘schools’ do not even describe ethical criticism as a possibility they disguise it, in effect, under other labels: ‘Political,’ ‘Social,’ or ‘Cultural’ criticism; ‘Psychological’ or ‘Psychoanalytic’ criticism; and more recently terms like ‘Reader-Response Criticism,’ ‘Feminist Criticism,’ and ‘The Discourse of Power.’” (25)

But even formalist critics, Booth argues, who are supposedly concerned only with the text-in-itself, do not escape an ethics: “even those critics who work hard to purge themselves of all but

the most abstract formal interests turn out to have an ethical program in mind—a belief that a given way of reading, or a given kind of genuine literature, is what will do us most good” (5). Given the inescapability of our ethical norms, to question the relevance of a text’s norms, or to claim one does not abide by any norms in one’s reading, “is for practical purposes an ethical contradiction, in that it subverts the community of discourse in which it seeks to claim or carve a place” (7). Booth’s engagement in “the work of worrying consciously about contradictions and inconsistencies” (444) reveals his transcendental method of logical argument:

The point here is to underline, once more, *the great gap between theory and practice*, and the distressing contortions critics must exhibit if they both rely on the dogma [that moral knowledge is impossible] and attend to their own sense that some narratives are indeed worth more than others. (29, emphasis added)

Insofar as Booth’s argument points to the *necessary preconditions* of our practices—the assumptive ground that critics assume pragmatically and methodologically, even if they do not lay out those assumptions discursively or prosaically—Booth’s argument follows the logic of a transcendental argument. In other words, Booth’s defense of ethical criticism rests on the argument that our very practices, even when critics *claim* that moral evaluations ‘ought’ to be done away with, necessarily *presuppose* some moral evaluation about what is good, right, just, or worth doing. “[E]ven the most skeptical theorists imply by their *practice* that stories do matter,” Booth writes, and this is the chief reason why “a criticism that takes their ‘mattering’ seriously cannot be ignored” (4). And insofar as a critic’s *overt* theoretical pronouncements and the presuppositions *implied* by their practices can enter into contradiction, Booth can critique the formalists, moral relativists, and external moral skeptics on the basis of the logical untenability and “ethical contradiction” of their positions (7).

One of the clearest instances of Booth's refutation of external moral skepticism on the basis of its "ethical contradiction" is the critique that Booth levels against the literary critic George Steiner (7). In Chapter 2 of *Company*, Booth turns to an essay by Steiner titled "The Scandal of the Nobel Prize," in which Steiner complains that the Nobel prize was denied to more deserving writers while also, however incongruously, arguing that value judgments are based on arbitrary standards. Steiner's claim that no objective criteria exist to differentiate more deserving artists from less deserving artists necessarily invalidates his entire critique of the Nobel judges as being unfair, however; "But of course Steiner's heart is not in this disclaimer," Booth writes"; "it cannot be if he is to maintain that the Nobel committee has made significant mistakes" (29). Booth concludes his critique of Steiner with a passage that sums up the circular self-refutation of external moral skepticism:

we must ask how Steiner can harmonize his attack on the Nobel folks for getting everything wrong with his claim that critical judgments have no objective status whatever. If his judgments are simply and only *his*, what basis can he have for saying that the awards have been egregiously, even wickedly, misplaced? In other words, *what ground has he given us for listening to his judgments?* (30, emphasis added)

Here, Booth gives us an exemplary case of the transcendental refutation of relativism: the claim of moral relativism invalidates any justificatory ground for the value assertions made by the relativist (and most especially their tacit injunction that we *ought* to adopt moral relativism). The fact that such normative judgments are paradigmatic, persisting, and inescapable—even in the attempt to escape them—is Booth's central contention in his critique of Steiner's external moral skepticism. Rather than argue moral judgments away, or try to think ourselves outside of our own normative assumptions, Booth believes we ought to better understand why moral judgments

appear to be fixtures of our literary work and, indeed, all that we do: “[w]hen ever any human practice refuses to die, in spite of centuries of assault from theory, there must be something wrong with the theory” (6).

Relying on his refutations of external moral skepticism, Booth points out how even those critics most adamantly opposed to moralizing or didactic modes of literary reading are opposed to it on *normative* grounds, and do end up prescribing a particular kind of reading: “The inconsistency in such moves is comparable to what we find in those readings based on the assumption that all interpretive choices are ‘indecidable’: the *only proper* reading of such-and-such a work is the one showing that it has no proper reading!” (390). In fact, any critic who would condemn Booth’s model of ethical criticism—as “instrumentalist,” in Mitchell’s terms (230, or as “censorious,” as Richard Posner does (3)—would only confirm Booth’s overarching argument for the continual importance of practicing ethical judgments: “I can only hope that when readers disagree with my judgments, they will find that in their very way of disagreeing they exemplify the validity and importance of ethical criticism and of hard thought about how to do it well” (Booth *Company* xi). Ethical judgment, in short, is inescapable, and even a thoroughgoing resistance to some or other ethical stance could only be done from its own ethical position. As Booth puts it in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “To repudiate one scale is necessarily to imply another” (69).

Booth debunks external moral skepticism by revealing it to be a prescriptive moral dogma in its own right (and thus self-undermining). Booth calls this state of undercover normativity “dogmatic neutrality”: “At the beginning of the modern period, no doubt the danger of dogmatic overjudgment was the greater one. But for at least two decades now, I am convinced, far more misreading has resulted from what I can only call dogmatic neutrality”

(*Rhetoric* 144). It is this ‘dogmatic neutrality’ that has prevented critics and authors from recognizing that their injunction to stand above and beyond prescriptive moral judgments in their treatment of literature is actually dependent on its own antecedent set of dogmatic norms. Due to ‘dogmatic neutrality,’ authors have imagined themselves as floating above the first-order moral judgments of their less sophisticated characters; an analogous situation is true of literary scholars, who purport to stand above the moral judgments of the texts under their scrutiny. Each appears to take up an Archimedean posture ‘outside’ any moral judgments of their own. In *Rhetoric* as well as throughout *Company*, Booth points to the fundamental irony of such a feigned moral neutrality, which is that it always ends up advocating for itself as a moral norm: “Writers who are successful in getting their readers to reserve judgment are not impartial about whether judgment should be reserved” (*Rhetoric* 77).

Given that ‘dogmatic neutrality’ actually entails its own normativity, it also ends up prescribing its own criteria for literary canonization, inevitably privileging certain texts over others. Critics under the sway of external moral skepticism will favor texts which share their supposed moral neutrality, texts which are reluctant to advance pronouncements on their characters or to reveal the author’s own normative stake—in short, modernist realist works, broadly conceived. Critics working under the assumption of ‘dogmatic neutrality’ end up canonizing such works in which the perspective of the author is conspicuously (though never actually) absent. The effect of the “author’s objectivity” is not an absence of ethical stakes, however: it is an ethics advocating for “an attitude of impartiality” towards the characters of a story: “Sometimes this impartiality is made to sound like universal love or pity or toleration” (or *pathos*; see Chapter I); “Indeed, a very great deal of modern fiction has been written on the assumption, itself a basic commitment to a value, that to understand all is to forgive all” (Booth

Rhetoric 77). We are reminded here of Nussbaum's commitment to spectatorship sympathy, *pathos*, and the realist regime of representation to which it is allied, as discussed in Chapter I. Something like this inclination would seem to be what Booth is critiquing in his account of the ethos of 'impartiality,' moral neutrality, absentee narrators, and 'letting be' inhering to novelistic realism. Set against literary realism's "attitude of impartiality," authorial objectivity, and lack of narrative commentary (*Rhetoric* 77), texts that happen to be more explicit about their moral values are often dismissed by critics as "sub-literary": a sign that a preferential canon is inevitably entailed, even in the commitment to being nonprejudicial and dispossessed of normative assumptions (*Company* 201).

Having exposed 'dogmatic neutrality' as itself a dogmatic norm, Booth is now able to reveal the ubiquity, inevitability, and inescapability of our normative claims. Booth dubs the inevitable normativity of a text its "fixed norms" (143). While any text may have a surface of "nonce beliefs" (fictional constructs which "the narrator and the reader embrace only for the duration"), this performative level of belief subsists on a deeper, implicit substrate of "fixed norms," those beliefs which "are by implication applicable to the 'real' world" (142-143). The "fixed norms" of a text are sincerely held by the author, even if never articulated outright, and are imparted to the reader, however implicitly, as authoritative and normative claims about reality: an author "only plays with some beliefs while offering others as holding for all human worlds" (143). Fixed norms are what constitute the shared and unspoken backdrop to the text's overtly fictional or constructed elements and, to that degree, are what enable the text to be legible to real-world readers at all: "the implied author and the implied reader share them as normal both for the fictional world and for their world as it is or ought to be" (143). The difference between 'nonce beliefs' and 'fixed norms' is the difference between the surface text and its subtext (or

what Schwarz calls a text's 'anterior world') (3): if text is the explicit linguistic construct, available to sensory apprehension and surface reading, the subtext is the implicit set of premises informing the text. It is the paradigm or worldview which constitute the text's conditions for possibility, pre-empting the text yet discovered there 'between the lines.'

It is clear by now, I hope, that Booth's position depends crucially on the logic of a transcendental argument: all texts carry ethical, ontological, anthropological pretexts which they presuppose as their necessary preconditions and which they hold to be beyond question. It is not a matter of *whether* a text makes assumptions in such paradigmatic domains as, say, ontology or ethics or epistemology; it is only a question of *which* assumptions it happens to have. All texts depend on an *a priori* normative subtext, on "a priori worlds" (Schwarz 3); all texts "recommend one view of ultimate reality as against various mistaken views" (Booth *Company* 341). More complex texts may be more difficult to decipher for their fixed norms, but this "does not mean that fixed norms have disappeared; they have simply become less blatant" (*Company* 149). The work of ethical criticism in such cases remains the same: to unpack the text's presuppositions ("a fully responsible ethical criticism will make explicit those appraisals that are implicit") (*Company* 8-9). Again, it is not a question of whether texts promote certain norms or no, only a question of whether those norms are conscious or unconscious, exegeted or implied, exposed or hidden.

Finally, Booth's refutation of external moral skepticism applies even to those texts which are self-consciously constructed, ironizing, open-ended, and deliberately resistant to any didactic final reading. Such texts will nevertheless carry fixed norms and will impose those norms just as didactically as the more morally explicit texts, a fact which Booth describes with characteristic wit: "Many a current novelist and poet cultivates a non-committal air. Choose your favorite pose,

the one that is most non-committal: that ‘air’ will be, or will imply, the author’s recommended world” (341). Even in such ‘open-ended’ texts, the fixed norms will rhetorically invite a singularly ‘correct’ reading: for instance, the reading that shows they have no single reading. Such texts implicitly make the prescriptive claim that a Keatsian negative capability and lack of closure *ought* to be our moral stance: they recommend “an openness to the world, including even that part of it that looks like vice or corruption,” implying “the worst vice is to be self-protective, ‘holier-than-thou’” (487). Hence even the most ‘open’ texts invite us to share their ethical values and do not escape a normative prescription: “even the most evasive author simply and paradoxically fails to evade us – unless the work itself eludes us and lies seemingly inert upon its shelf” (149). In sum, Booth’s restoration of ethical criticism hinges on his argument that ethical judgments are basic presuppositions in all of our practices, ubiquitous and unavoidable: it hinges on a transcendental argument against external moral skepticism, which supposes authors or critics can sit on the moral sidelines from an Archimedean posture of neutrality, lacking any ‘fiduciary framework,’ any fixed norms, any ethical stake.

Among the implications of Booth’s arguments, and why Booth’s expansively redefined sense of ethics is important to note, is a particular reframing of what constitutes ethical judgment. Ethical judgments and evaluations are not something externally imposed onto the brute facts of a text, as acts of judgment are commonly conceived. Rather, judgments emerge bottom-up and are immanent to the text itself, our immediate reading experience, and indeed all our practices. What is implied is an idea of ethics as something basic, constitutive, not abstracted from experience but endemic to it. Booth’s pragmatic reframing of what constitutes ethics and ethical evaluation is summed up most succinctly in the following passage from *Company*:

Each work of art or artifice, even the simplest wordless melody, determines to some degree *how at least this one moment will be lived*. The quality of life in the moment of our ‘listening’ is not what it would have been if we had not listened. We can even say that the proffered work shows us how our moments *should* be lived. If the maker of the art work did not believe that simply experiencing it constitutes a superior form of life, why was the work created and presented to us in the first place? (17)

Norms and value judgments, from this view, are not propositional axioms abstracted away from practical life but are the pragmatic methods of procedure assumed in the most basic act of creating an artwork. And among those unconscious presuppositions is something like the ethical importance of the text or work: it is written to be read and, to that extent, to recommend itself and its own worldview, its own stake on moral truth, over other contending claims. Moreover, this view of judgment as ‘baked in’ to the event of the text is an eminently pragmatic notion: it requires no farfetched metaphysical speculation, only an attention to the fact of the text itself, its selection against all other possible texts—indeed, against all other possibilities. By the sheer fact of its coming into existence, the text, as a unique and singular object, involves an implicit counterclaim against all other possible texts the author or anyone else could have written. At the very least, its value assertions are latent and in the negative (eliminating all that “would have been if we had not listened”) (17); the singularity of a text’s existence depends on the implicit exclusion of all other possible texts, a counter-assertion against all texts with incompatible or antithetical fixed norms.

By drawing down to the basic singularity and selectivity of a text, seen as an act of *exclusion* and therefore always already implicated in evaluative discriminations, Booth is able to

collapse the dichotomy of fact and value, of ‘is’ and ‘ought.’⁴³ Booth’s arguments highlight how the very factual ‘isness’ of a text or artwork is not, ironically, autonomous, self-existing, or value-neutral, since for the work to come into existence at all, the author must have made a series of value-laden preselections (consciously or otherwise) against an entire backdrop of alternative possible works that could have been made. The same selectivity is true of the reader, who must collaborate in the author’s decisions, entering into the author’s company to the extent that they decide in favor of reading *this* text over any other. Seeing the text as a singular selection, set against a background of alternative potentialities and possibilities, inevitably involves an evaluative assertion that *this* eventuality must be more valuable than any of those alternatives. In this most basic sense of a selection, the text’s very existence implies an evaluation, a moral injunction, a built-in ‘ought.’ It is in this sense that Booth valorizes “Matthew Arnold’s oft-mocked assertion that poetry is ‘a criticism of life’,” which is “in this precise sense profoundly right” (345). All artworks on this account (and not only the most explicitly didactic works) “offer a view of how the world works, a view that criticizes all other views of the world” (342). All art asserts a worldview, in contrast to alternative worldviews. Booth’s argument upends the commonly circulating idea of judgment, implied by Davis and Womack, in which ethical values are belatedly imposed (in the fashion of “external ethical forces”) upon some value-free, morally neutral substrate (in this case, the text or artwork, conceived of as a purely material object) (x).⁴⁴

⁴³ Collapsing the fact/value split is a recurring concern for Booth throughout *Company*, since Booth believes that unless the fact/value distinction is collapsed, all value systems are doomed to be arbitrary: “The argument for the fact/value split, taken seriously, would of course mean that all judgments of value are by definition ‘merely personal opinion’ or at best conventions of a given community” (29). The hope, it seems, is to be able to secure a link between evaluative judgment and descriptive fact, crossing the fact/value gap thereby (yet another instance of straddling the boundaries between *scholarship* and *criticism*). Drawing moral judgment down to the basic fact of a text’s existence, as a singular object incurring the opportunity cost of all other possibilities and potentialities, is one way Booth wishes to collapse fact and value, ‘is’ and ‘ought.’

⁴⁴ Booth might argue, in the fashion of a transcendental argument, that such a view of the text as a value-neutral object itself necessitates a whole host of moral and metaphysical assumptions (assumptions which take the primary aspect of reality to be amoral or morally neutral ‘stuff’). Like dogmatic neutrality, such assumptions fail to escape

By helping critics admit that a moral paradigm is basic and unavoidable to any work of literature, any work of criticism, and indeed any human act, Booth brings us to the conclusion that the reading of literature simply *is* the coduction, the clashing and convergence, between differing values, different ethical and political ends, differing worldviews. For Booth, an awareness of our own worldviews is the critical issue that defines contemporary literary studies, explaining “the exploding literature on ‘possible’ and ‘alternative’ worlds” and why pluralism—as the encounter between worldviews—has taken on such moral importance for literary scholars in recent decades (336-337). If anything constitutes an ‘enemy’ to Booth’s otherwise all-embracing pluralism, it is the sort of blind dogmatism that is unaware of itself as a dogma, unwilling to examine its own commitments, and therefore unwilling to enter into a shared community of open discourse and ethical inquiry.⁴⁵

The immediate consequence of exposing paradigm-level differences is that it obliges critics to address the fundamental ethical questions: what are our moral views? Where do we disagree? To which moral ends, which utopias, which norms are each of us inclined? What are our respective understandings of the good? And more difficult metamoral questions are raised, too: how do we justify and legitimate our moral views, given these moral differences? Is

their own normative injunctions (for instance, that we ought *not* to impose any ‘oughts’ onto that morally neutral reality).

⁴⁵ One might wonder what makes Booth’s assumptions different from those of an ideological criticism, ever attentive to the pitfalls of ‘false consciousness.’ The critical difference might be the pluralist’s belief in rational discourse and reason. While Booth recognizes the all-encompassing nature of our paradigmatic norms and that there is no stepping beyond them into neutrality, he nonetheless holds to a belief that paradigmatic differences can be dialogically negotiated through reasoned disagreement, discourse, and debate. ‘Pluralism’ is, in a sense, a name for the meta-ethical container of these paradigmatic differences, but that ‘meta-ethical’ stance has its own substantive ethical assumptions: for one, an overriding optimism about human reason, assuming a cosmopolitan civility in which differing commitments and values can be arbitrated and negotiated peaceably. Ideological criticism, while recognizing the inevitability of our ideological precommitments and positionalities in the same way, has far less faith in our ability to rationally and discursively arbitrate our paradigmatic differences, presuming they are, at bottom, *irrational* commitments. If our paradigmatic commitments are indeed, at bottom, irrational, constructed, fideistic, rooted in will-to-power rather than will-to-truth, then differences between paradigmatic commitments could not be resolved through appeals to reason or dialogue but only through other means: power, coercion, or the changing of material conditions.

morality itself rooted in something, that is, in metaphysical or ontological realities, as a moral realist might believe? Is it subjective bootstrapping or social convention, as per the constructivist view? Literature raises, in short, the questions of different and disagreeing moral paradigms, and it is on these dialogic grounds that Booth makes his apology for literature and for ethical criticism. Critical dialogue, discourse, and debate about such paradigmatic questions simply are the point and purpose of literature for Booth. The inevitability of embarking upon paradigm-level criticism is described by Booth as follows:

our subject becomes unmanageably large—in effect a union of the history of philosophy, the history of literature, and the history of conversation about both. Prudence would dictate dropping such a subject at once. But such a subject has a mind of its own, and it insists, almost against my will, on a few hints about where *it* would like to lead some better-qualified future inquirer: into a territory where all large efforts of the human mind are kin. (348)

Booth's claim amounts to the idea that arts and humanities subjects cannot be compartmentalized from one another, because all are dependent on more foundational, unspoken, and often covert positions taken on the deepest questions in ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy: in short, all work in the humanities engages us in the exposure and comparison of differing paradigms and worldviews. The humanities, including the study of literature, cannot be undertaken except holistically or paradigmatically.

When a critic is engaged in ethical criticism, especially of narratives, they inevitably implicate themselves in questions of clashing worldviews, opposing metaphysical possibilities, and incommensurate moral norms: “ethical debate about narrative values can lead almost instantaneously into *ultimate questions*” (43). This is true given the evaluative nature of ethics as

a delineation of good from bad, since “it seems clear that ethical criticism cannot escape assuming from the start at least one of its major conclusions: some experiences with narrative are beneficial and some harmful” (Booth *Company* 40). However one might object to the discriminatory aspect of ethical judgment, such basic ethical delineations cannot be thrown out without dispensing with *all* of one’s ethical stakes and claims, all distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, just or unjust. And so, the delineation between beneficial and harmful texts instantly shuttles us into the most all-encompassing moral questions, into our paradigmatic- and worldview-level ideas of what we take to be the ultimate notion of good (and consequently evil): the choice “may ultimately be more like choosing a religion than like choosing a friend suitable for daily conversation” (335), implying that “[e]ven the most secular fictions are thus engaged in a ‘religious’ exchange” (346).

As much as Booth may wish to avoid these kinds of all-or-nothing ethical stakes, he recognizes that he is trapped in a bind, as to ‘opt out’ from an ethically evaluative reading would admit moral neutrality and thus invalidate the very necessitating aspect of ethics he is trying to retrieve, the urgency and inescapability so definitive of ethical thought and feeling. He wrestles with this difficulty in the following passage:

The extreme difficulty of this kind of criticism has often tempted me to abandon this part of the project. If I am led to appraise whole commonwealths, religions, ontologies, am I not surely doomed to talk airy nonsense? ‘You are turning the library,’ I hear a mocking voice say, ‘into a culture emporium; you would turn critics into pretentious prophetic voices that merely add to the cacophony.’ (335)

And yet, Booth recognizes the *reductio ad absurdum* in operation here, that is, the impossibility of the contrary: “But before we give up, we should remember that if we as critics are doomed, if

we cannot hope to engage in worthwhile talk about such matters,” then the authors we read “are doomed as well – doomed to be trivialized” (335). In other words, if critics cede their own ethical judgments in their readings of literature, committing to moral neutrality instead, then they cannot avoid trivializing the ethical judgments made by the very texts and authors they read: so why read them? It is this inescapable quandary that forces the critic to be consistent to their ethical values if they want to avoid trivializing, by proxy, the work of criticism and literature. Otherwise, the critic enters into the performative contradiction in which they *claim* ethics is irrelevant yet “imply by their *practice* that stories do matter” (4). Forced to be consistent to their own fixed norms, the reader is exposed to the real implications and consequences of their ethical values, confronting their own definitions of good, their ontologies of reality, and other elements of their basic worldview in their every encounter with a text that agrees or (especially) disagrees with that worldview. This fact explains why ethical criticism, as an exposure of our “ultimate commitments,” “is the most difficult of all critical modes” (19) and “one of the most important kinds of talk we can ever attempt” (335).

All considered, Booth’s critical pluralism amounts to an exercise of exposing differing ultimate commitments. Critical pluralism affirms that differences in reading, in criticism, and in theories of literature do boil down to more paradigmatic differences between people’s basic presuppositions about the world, about human life, about the good, and so on. Pluralism is the admission of those paradigmatic differences, the becoming conscious and aware of those divergent fore-structures of thought and perception in our encounters with different texts, authors, and critics. But being a non-prescriptive position, resistant towards any “flat judgment for or against supposedly stable works,” Booth’s pluralism can offer no next step to take nor any intervention of its own (x). Booth does not intend his ethical criticism to itself be a normative

program, involving its own judgments or evaluations, but wants it to be a form of “ethical inquiry,” study, or science, yielding up “*knowledge*” (“Why Ethical Criticism” 16). Understood in this sense, the notion of pluralism is reduced to the indexical function of pointing to a state of affairs: the fact of disagreeing paradigms, “the *fact* that valuers vary so markedly,” a fact that even the most committed valuers could not find objectionable (35).

The Presuppositional Fallacies of Critical Pluralism

Thus far, I have tried to chart out what I see to be the most compelling aspects of Booth’s arguments in *Company*—aspects that seem to have been buried in the many misprisions surrounding Booth, given his precarious position as both an ethical critic and a pluralist critic. Those who have been attentive to Booth’s line of argumentation will notice a certain ineluctable irony, however. If Booth offers his pluralistic ethical criticism as a purely *descriptive* hermeneutic exercise, and quite explicitly foregoes any evaluative discriminations between “Ethically Good” and “Ethically Bad” in his own literary reading, does it not seem as if Booth’s pluralistic model for criticism sneaks in the very myth of ‘dogmatic neutrality’ which he initially sets out to debunk? (4) Although Booth admits the inevitability of ethical judgments at both the levels of *literature* and *criticism*, he seems to make a special exception for his own *meta*-critical posture, conceiving his critical pluralism as a neutral space for literary-critical differences that is itself aloof and void of any ground-level evaluative discriminations of its own. In sum, there seems to be a subtle though serious inconsistency between two elements of Booth’s project: on the one hand, Booth’s refutations of external moral skepticism at the levels of literature and criticism; on the other hand, his offering up of critical pluralism as an Archimedean posture that is descriptive, non-evaluative, and unencumbered by any first-order value judgments about what

is ultimately “Ethically Good” and “Ethically Bad” (4). Even if these two claims seem to exist at different levels of analysis, it remains the case that Booth’s model of pluralism as a non-prescriptive openness to ethical differences runs up against his more general arguments for the *inevitability* of prescriptive judgments and ethical norms. In this context, we might recall Booth’s earlier argument: if we reject the practice of evaluative judgments at the level of *criticism*, we delegitimize the value judgments inhering to *literature* by extension, rendering them pointless, “doomed to be trivialized” (335). But if this argument is sound, we ought to ask, why would this logical extension cease to apply to Booth’s own meta-critical, meta-ethical posture as a pluralist? Wouldn’t it follow that Booth’s pluralistic ethical criticism is ‘doomed to be trivialized’ also, unless it is offered up for the sake of some pressing moral good, as a *prescriptive* project which critics *ought* to embark upon? This logical flaw seems to demand that ethical criticism be itself *ethically* valuable and important—and even the *most* valuable of all critical modes, as Booth strongly suggests (“one of the most important kinds of talk we can ever attempt”)—and therefore involves the normative claim that we *ought* to practice ethical criticism over alternative or contending modes of reading (335).

What is at stake, in sum, is a contradictory doubleness in Booth’s project, between pluralism as a second-order openness to different ethical positions and pluralism as a substantive first-order ethical position in its own right. In the latter case, pluralism would *exclude* other, *non-pluralistic* moralities, therefore compromising its inclusiveness and no longer being consistently pluralistic. To avoid such a contradiction, it would seem that pluralism must lack moral content, or else it becomes one contending moral view among other moral views, forfeiting its status as a meta-ethical space for moral differences. If so, Booth must be content with a *descriptive* pluralism, not a prescriptive one, which explains why his project seems more aligned with ethical

scholarship rather than criticism, being a “move away from prescriptive ethics and toward descriptive inquiry in ethical philosophy” (Johnstone 59). Indeed, Booth repeatedly disparages evaluative criticism and is continuously wary of the ever-looming threats of canonization, censorship, and moral puritanism. He frequently reasserts the importance of standing above any brute evaluation of a text or any dogmatic prescription for criticism—reasserts, in short, the moral neutrality of his own critical pluralism—by rejecting the outright moral commendation or condemnation of literary works, which would culminate in a simplistic “ranking of works” and which Booth takes to be a “waste of time” (120). Being consistent to these premises, we must concede that all that can be accomplished by Booths’ descriptive pluralism is to map the fact of ethical disagreement or difference—with no attempt at offer answers, make critical interventions, or prescribe changes (59). Yet the problem of pluralism in this descriptive sense is that it cannot move one step further towards resolving those ethical aporias, as we have seen in *Mapping the Ethical Turn* and the descriptive regime: it simply reiterates them, and perhaps even reifies them. In short, a descriptive pluralism is something of a tautology, in that it does not create an intervention, offer a solution, nor ameliorate the situation of moral disagreement, as it must remain aloof in order to not become a moral prescription in its own right. This tautological, morally neutral, descriptive ethics (neutrality itself as an ultimate value) lends to “the curious sense,” as Ellen Rooney puts it, that Booth “has no opponents”; “Booth never excludes any critic by naming him an *anti-pluralist*” (“Critical Understanding” 1234). Yet if Booth’s pluralism is indeed non-prescriptive, non-evaluative, non-discriminatory and merely descriptive, it would seem to take up the posture of being *outside* any moral point of view, a position void of any value judgments, which would be incongruous with Booth’s many refutations of external moral skepticism.

The alternative—to offer pluralism as a substantive and prescriptive ethical position—is also attended by serious problems. While no one would deny the *fact* of multiplicity, that disagreeing paradigms and ethical perspectives do exist, to raise up multiplicity as an ultimate *value* is itself an ethical position, and thus exclusive, and thus no longer truly and consistently plural with regards to other ethical positions. If Booth resists any singular notion of moral good, while also ruling out any escape into a value-neutral point of view, then it seems Booth has one precarious middle path available to him between these two pitfalls: to prescribe the very *plurality* of moral goods as the singular highest good in his value hierarchy. Such a paradox might seem merely rhetorical on my part, yet Booth is quite candid about the fact that multiplicity is his singular reigning value in several moments of the text, as seen in the passages below.

In one section, Booth critiques the “overly-ambitious logic of critical evaluation” (51) and claims that the problem of ethical criticism, as it was conceived before him, boils down to being too reductively evaluative. Evaluative criticism “stacks narratives into a single pyramid, with all of the candidates competing for a spot at the apex. Such an assumption, when applied rigorously, will always damn a large share of the world’s most valuable art” (56). Wary of such censorious reductions, Booth advances the following alternative:

I propose that we think instead of an indeterminate number of pyramids, or – since pyramids suggest a rather formidable stasis – of a botanical garden full of many beautiful species, each species implicitly bearing standards of excellence within its kind. (56)

The shift from ‘pyramid’ to a ‘multiplicity of pyramids’ and finally to a ‘garden’ may seem to indicate the flattening of all value hierarchies, an end to reductively evaluative readings. But Booth realizes he cannot be wholly consistent to this view since he is, after all, advocating for the value of the pluralist garden over other possible metaphors. True to his own arguments about

the inescapability of value judgments, his proposal is itself rooted in an evaluation, insofar as it is dependent on some general judgment about what would be more or less valuable for critics to do. Booth finally concedes this fact in no uncertain terms, admitting the need for some universal value, however provisional, if his literary-ethical project is to get off the ground:

if we must have a universal, let us make it the value of experiencing many good kinds of narrative, each kind marked by quite different combinations of good qualities, some in seeming conflict with other good things, and some perhaps in other contexts decidedly harmful. (56, emphasis added)

Although Booth began by breaking away from the pyramid model of a value hierarchy, his rhetorical slip in the passage above—offering a single, even if hypothetical, universal norm—reveals how the pyramid ends up being raised up from underneath him. Booth seems to realize his pluralism is not, nor could it be, a meta-ethical position hovering above first-order ethics, not without upending his arguments for the *inescapability* of ethical judgments upon which his entire defense of ethical criticism depends. Consistency to his own refutations of external moral skepticism would require Booth to positively prescribe value pluralism as the capstone of his own value hierarchy (even as it is imagined precisely as the rejection of all value hierarchies). The result is perhaps an inverted pyramid: the capacity to experience a multitude of values, even contradictory values, is for Booth the singular, ultimate, universal value; thus, Booth praises such a capacity for plurality as the “very mark of rationality” (97). Booth has made the normativity of his liberal humanism quite plain in this passage.

Another example will be equally revealing of the normative underpinning of Booth’s project, despite his many claims that his pluralism stands above any single evaluative paradigm. In a section tellingly titled “The Threat of Multiplicity,” Booth describes how various

proclamations within poetry—pronouncements about truth, life, the universe, and so on—seem radically incommensurate with other competing claims made by other writers in other works (342). Life is a falling away from “the visionary gleam,” as Wordsworth wrote; or is life a “C-major chord,” as Browning once expressed (qtd. in 343)? Or perhaps life is “an incurable disease,” as per Abraham Cowley, or a “jest” as John Gay puts it, or is it W. S. Merwin’s “gloomy garment” (qtd. in 343)? Despite all this multiplicity, however, Booth writes that to deny that each claim *is* intended as an authoritative pronouncement about life (i.e., as a truth claim) would be met with upset by the author: “Threatened by such a multiplication of worlds,” Booth writes, “it is no wonder that critical tradition has preferred to surrender any truth-claim for them But doing so would rightly upset all the authors who made those assertions of truth: they did not want us to approach their narratives with sterilized, gloved hands, for fear of real contact” (344). Booth seeks to reimbue literature with *urgency* and contention by retrieving the strong and substantive claims implied by these poetic utterances, recalling Altieri’s invocation of *ethos* and identification, set against the spectatorship of *pathos* and pluralism (see Chapter I). To retrieve the assertive and exclusive aspect of these poetic utterances, Booth notes how these poetic claims are indeed substantially incommensurable, involving the difficult collision of differing “ultimate commitments” (335). Insofar as these claims are incompatible, they cannot simply peacefully coexist, and their singularity or exclusivity is, in fact, what makes them *interesting* as poetic claims. Booth momentarily positions himself against an ever-concessional pluralism, in which the singularity and distinctiveness of each of these poetic utterances is effaced under a peaceable gloss in which they can all be simultaneously true without any contention, disagreement, mutual incompatibility, or exclusive stake on truth.

Booth's rescuing of the exclusivity of these poetic truth claims is rescinded pages later, however, when Booth finds himself in the very same proclamatory mode as the poets. Waxing poetic about 'life,' Booth resolves the 'threat of multiplicity' with a mythopoetic pronouncement of his own, claiming that "the total collection of cosmic myths that any one person can take in will *always* be to some degree incoherent and self-contradictory Human life is *inherently*, *inescapably* multivalent, poly-storied, pluri-mythic" (348, emphases added). Booth's claim might be uncontentious, were it to be purely descriptive, since the presence of a multiplicity of myths among believers is a plainly observable fact. Yet we cannot neglect how the absolutist, ahistorical terms in Booth's pronouncement ("always," "inherently," "inescapably") imply far more than verifiable fact and, insofar as such a claim seems impossible to ascertain, veer off into the territory of speculative metaphysical assumption. Booth's contention that multiplicity, incoherence, and self-contradiction not only exist but are 'always' 'inherent' and 'inescapable,' fundamental and essential to all human life, is in the order of a grand myth or metanarrative, perfectly exemplifying one of those monolithic truth claims about 'life' which Booth was poking fun at in the poets. Whether we happen to share Booth's vision of existence as intrinsically 'pluri-mythic' or not, Booth's essentialist terms reveal the unconscious certainty of his reigning paradigm: the view that incoherence and contradiction are *always* an *inherent* and *inescapable* feature of *all* human life. Given his reigning myth, Booth ends up withdrawing his appeal to the exclusivity of incommensurate truth claims, returning instead to a pluralistic situation of incommensurability without disagreement. His solution to the 'threat of multiplicity' is "acknowledging that all statements of truth are partial ... and by embracing the very plurality"; "no reader is faced with an either/or choice" between metaphoric worlds (345). By circling back to this all-inclusive pluralism, however, Booth has undermined the very *exclusivity* of those

poetic truth-claims which he had initially set out to recover from the “sterilized, gloved hands” of a value-neutral reading (344).

And here is where the ‘other hand’ of Booth’s broad-minded pluralism and concessional rhetoric comes across less as a polite admission of difference and more as a kind of moral duplicity or logical incoherence. Having spent so long arguing that ‘fixed norms’ are inevitable in the better half of *Company*, Booth proceeds to make exceptions for his own program for criticism, arguing that “we cannot expect, in such complex matters, to formulate rules” (266) and that “we live in a world of many genuine ‘goods’” (165-166). The “very mark of rationality” in a world of plural values and incommensurate norms is to be variable, adaptable, noncommittal in one’s values (97). Booth concludes not so much with some resolution to this doubleness, the indecision of being both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ his own ethical norms, but rather defers the question by placing the hot potato in the reader’s hands: the “one principle underlying *Company*” is that “every reader must be his or her own ethical critic” (236-237). We see in all this concessional rhetoric what Rebecca Mitchell meant by describing Booth as keenly “aware that he was swimming against prevailing currents in literary theory” (229): though he argued exhaustively about the inevitability of normative assumptions in literature and criticism, when pressed about his own ethos, he seems to continually step ‘outside’ any prescriptive set of fixed norms of his own.

This doubleness in Booth’s pluralism, as either a neutral position or a normative one, seems to explain the ambiguity in Booth’s reception within literary scholarship. Some reviewers read Booth as wishy-washy and inconsistent (for instance, Ellen Rooney accuses him of excluding “those who would exclude others”) (*Seductive Reasoning* 86), while others see Booth as over-judgmental and moralistic (such as Richard Posner) (3). However paradoxical, both

conflicting readings of Booth can be true at the same time, once we recognize that the situation of contradiction is actually endemic to Booth's own position: Booth is advocating for a non-prescriptive pluralism *both* as an openness to alternative paradigms *and* as an exclusive paradigm in its own right. On the one hand, Booth's pluralistic criticism remains hovering at the meta-ethical level of disagreeing moral paradigms, the 'coduction' or differential space *between* different moral views. On the other hand, it appears that Booth cannot occupy this interstitial, 'inter-paradigmatic' space while being consistent to his own refutations of a paradigm-free, value-neutral position. The space of coduction, which is to say the collision of different paradigms, presumes some morally neutral space *outside* any paradigm to register the difference. But this seems to grant that the critic's own norms are a non-factor in their rendering of the text's norms, and that the ethical critic who traces this coduction, this collision of paradigmatic differences in their reading experience, has an unexplained capacity to step *outside* their own moral paradigm in order to track the differential interaction. If we are to stay consistent to Booth's refutations of external moral skepticism, then this value-neutral perch *between* or *beyond* paradigms would seem untenable. It is a subtle conceptual wrinkle, but it implicates 'coduction' in the very myth of external moral skepticism that Booth had so taken to task.

Booth's pluralism is thus at odds with itself, though it would be unfair to characterize Booth as entirely unaware of his blind spots. Many moments of *Company* reveal Booth wrestling with himself and with the fraught logic of his own claims; these moments are illustrative of some of the broader problems invited by pluralism. Across *Company*, Booth oscillates ad-hoc between acknowledging the plurality of ethical values and the very pressing problem of having to pragmatically decide between those values in day-to-day living, including the reading of literature. Such decisions assume some higher-order selection criteria through which one can

prioritize among the indiscriminate powers, potentials, teloses, desires, and values: a pyramid of values is, in practice, assumed, however much it is condemned in theory. Indeed, Booth does appeal to such a higher-order level when he invokes Charles Taylor's distinction between first-order desires and the second-order desire to "*desire better desires*" (271). Booth writes that "it is this kind of reflection, the effort to discover what I *ought* to desire, what I really should desire to desire" that defines what it is to be a moral agent (271). This evaluative distinction between desires, a second-order desire for an "ethos-I-would-prefer-to-have-and-will-therefore-cultivate," is explainable by what one takes to be a greater value or virtue, which is how one is able to go beyond ground-level desires at all and acquire an aspirational meta-logical desire for *better* desires (271). Booth frequently invokes these higher-order criteria, gesturing to some unexplained process by which a reader decides whether a given text "is or is not an improvement over what [they] have previously desired," but, again, the substantive discussion of *what* those criteria are, or what those better desires may be, is never attempted (272).

Another 'voice of conscience' moment occurs in Booth's struggle between the self as a stable category and as a diffuse, socially determined one. Booth wants ethical criticism to recognize texts as created by moral agents, by "persons," not "labyrinths, enigmas, or textual puzzles" (x), and claims that "every reader must be his or her own ethical critic" (236-237). Booth views the text in terms of a living interchange between authors, readers, narrators, and characters, as persons and ethical agents, hence the humanistic overtones of his friendship-based model for criticism. And yet, Booth equally advances the view of the 'self' as totally indeterminate, porous, the product of social influence, which seems to decenter that locus of moral agency. Feeling some sense of the contradiction, Booth begins to ironize himself in this passage:

‘How absurd,’ some may still want to say, ‘to be so malleable, so imitative, so dependent on the genius of others. How sad not to show integrity to your *own* self, not to be sincerely in touch with your *own* true feelings. And how insincere all this sounds, how genuinely hypocritical, how messy. Where is the integrity in all this shifting from ideal to ideal, from code to code? And where is the ‘real’ Wayne Booth, all this while? Are *you* an amorphous collection of selves, like the pathetic, frenetic character Mucho Mass at the end of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*? (258-259)

Although he concedes that selves are constituted by their surroundings, Booth refuses to remain satisfied with simple social relativism. Social relativism would mean that communities cannot be themselves evaluated, cannot be more or less just (since, in the socially determinist view, a community is the grounds for all moral evaluations and so not itself subject to evaluation). Rather than slip into social relativism, Booth is engaged in a constant search for “the community of communities ... that ethical-political community, that company we keep, in which all human beings live and have their being” (Jost 36). However Booth may evade the ascription, he is in search for the *true* or *right* community: an idea of community which, presumably, is *not* the product of his own contingent social determinism. Once again, there is some unspoken higher-order criteria that allows Booth to wonder about the possibility that some friendships, some texts, some of the company we keep, and some social orders, might be better than others. Notwithstanding that Booth consistently invokes these higher-order criteria, to hedge against an overriding skepticism and distinguish his literary ethics from a barebones moral relativism, he never ends up delivering on these promissory notes, instead deferring circularly back to the pluralism of possible answers.

Booth exhibits the same internal frictions and tensions with regards to his own pragmatist leanings. While coduction is an eminently pragmatic notion, as the non-theorizable collision of moral differences, Booth must ultimately propose this working out as a *morally* good thing, not merely a useful one; he cannot fully reconcile himself to a purely pragmatist view of truth as ‘what works’ or ‘what is expedient.’ Booth understands that sidestepping the question of what is ‘ethical’ (what is good?) and remaining at the level of the ‘efficient’ (what works?) is to forego the substantive moral question of which good we ought to work towards, and even the distinction of what works *better*: “we should ask ourselves just what we would expect of any myth that claimed not just to *work* (some adherents’ lives were in some way ‘bettered’) but to *work better* than other myths” (352). Such a problem is basic to moral philosophy: the substantial difference between good as a means (i.e., good for achieving a fixed goal, useful, pragmatic) and good as an end (i.e., which goal *ought* we fix in the first place?). Try as one may, it seems impossible to talk about what is efficiently or pragmatically good, as a means to an end, before having already fixed the moral end one should pursue in the first place: avoiding this question is only to sneak in a moral answer readymade. Along similar lines, Booth elaborates on the inevitability of having a value hierarchy (abandoning, for the time being, his own garden metaphor): “even those of us who are in some final sense pragmatists feel a strong need for some standard other than mere ‘working,’ or – if we stay within the pragmatist’s language – some way of defending a hierarchy of kinds of working” (352). Despite his own pragmatist leanings, Booth concludes, he cannot subscribe to a fully pragmatist view in the line of Richard Rorty (a fellow student of Richard McKeon), precisely because the practical question of ‘what works’ always presumes an anterior answer as to what we *ought* to work towards:

While making the suggestion (to me congenial) that ‘edifying philosophy’ should aim at ‘continuing a conversation rather than at discovering [final] truth’ (1979, 373) [qtd. from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*], [Rorty] makes no bones about insisting on the real superiority of his conversational model over the final-truth model. (352)

And yet, in another about-face, neither does Booth. Booth’s universal value—the pleromatic garden of pluralistic conversation—simply *is* his final vocabulary, and so he falls prey to the same finality with which he characterizes Rorty. The fact that Booth notices the problem so acutely in Rorty but not in his own view seems to be the characteristic blind spot in every case of external moral skepticism: the moment one envisions oneself as not possessing a normative stance but being neutral, objective, impersonal, descriptive, is the moment one becomes blind to one’s own normative assumptions (and, not by coincidence, highly critical of the normative positions of others). It is only when one practices the even-handed consistency of applying one’s critiques to one’s own position that it becomes clear whether or not one is caught up in a situation of double standards: ‘rules for thee, but not for me.’

Faced with all these irresolvable contradictions—between self as individual or social, between ethics as descriptive or evaluative, between morality as a pragmatic and pluralistic process or as justified by some ground in truth—Booth frequently finds himself at an impasse. Conveniently enough, Booth comes to the conclusion that a state of hypocritical contradiction might not be so bad, after all: “What is forgotten in our universal condemnation of hypocrisy is that a kind of play-acting with characters, or characteristics, a kind of *faking* of characters, is one of the main ways that we build what becomes our character” (252). Booth’s apology for hypocrisy is rooted in the multiplicity of the self, its irreducibly self-contradictory nature, and his “pluri-mythic” ontology (348), leading Booth to raise the following rhetorical question: “If we

are characters-in-process, taking on and playing widely diverse roles, how can we ever say that one proffered role is superior to another?" (272). Again, Booth's view must finally bottom out at a pluralism of all possible views, since he cannot give a justified account for his own pluralism without thereby making it prescriptive. "[E]ven though he would not abandon his commitment to pluralism," Frederick Antczak writes in a review, Booth had to ultimately admit "his own inability to carve out a ground from which to argue for it" (7).

And yet, how does Booth reconcile his apology for hypocrisy with his "work of worrying consciously about contradictions and inconsistencies" in his critique of other positions (444)? If hypocrisy is a positive value, why then does he problematize "the great gap between theory and practice" in detractors of ethical criticism (29), or continually trouble "the self-privileging discourse that exempts itself from its own analysis" in relativistic discourses of power (385)? Why all his transcendental arguments, whose primary critical thrust lies in critiquing other positions for their internal logical inconsistency, their performative contradictions and hypocritical self-refutations? Booth would have to admit that he cannot reconcile his critiques of special pleading in others with his apologies for it in his own case—that this must be part of his absolute faith in the "incoherent and self-contradictory" nature of human life (348). But such a faith is distinctly his 'fiduciary framework,' not the absence of one, and as a paradigm, it seems to elevate double standards almost as a virtue in its own right, allowing Booth to slip between contradictory claims ad hoc while critiquing others for their own inconsistency.⁴⁶ The result turns ethics into a loose situationism. As in any case of external moral skepticism, it allows one to

⁴⁶ Walter Jost, while positively praising Booth's multifaceted body of work, seems to suggest the same sort of slipperiness I note here, "an identity crisis" or "a crisis of coherence": "Wayne Booth impresses one not so much as a single Booth than as a complex field of Booths"; "Is there a center to this widening (or at least fluctuating) gyre...?" (19); "what identity, what integrated self, does so diverse a generalist as Booth offer us?" (31). While Jost concludes that such uncertainties are a positive feature of Booth's championing of the liberal arts, I hope to have demonstrated that they are more primarily the result of his elevating value pluralism as an overriding norm.

problematize others for being morally dogmatic, all while holding oneself to be morally neutral—that is, morally pure. Such a “lapse in memory” is “strategic,” Ellen Rooney writes in a review, since Booth’s pluralism is built upon a contradiction: it is “fatally and unconsciously undercut by the very principle that Booth offers to support it” (“Critical Understanding” 1234), namely, “a community that excludes no one” (“Critical Understanding” 1232). Booth’s pluralism is allied to his humanism, Rooney points out, conceived as the basis for the most non-exclusive community. But this “unproblematic ideology of humanism” is problematic for many; one problem is that it makes no room for the possibility of bad faith actors, unjust practices, and all those behaviors one might morally, ethically, and politically condemn (Rooney “Critical Understanding” 1232). Such morally evaluative distinctions are what Booth, and pluralists, must strategically ignore to perpetuate pluralism as a positive value or universal norm.

Booth’s way out of these manifold problems, like McKeon’s before him, is to continuously retract his pluralism, offering what he calls “a pluralism with limits”—though what those limits are (limits which are presumably normative limits) is an answer that remains conspicuously absent in his account (489). In an essay with the suggestive subtitle of “How Not to Dig Our Own Graves,” Booth concedes that he has no definitive answer to what the limits of pluralism might be; forced to choose between an infinite regress or some ultimate value, he ends by saying “you will hear no more about this intriguing question today” (“Preserving the Exemplar” 415). Booth’s flip-flopping concessions to the ‘other hand’ explains both his contradictory reception among reviewers as well as the continual oscillations in my own critiques of Booth, as to whether or not his pluralism stands ‘outside’ or ‘inside’ its own normative prescriptions. The ambiguity is a constitutive one, and this is itself, perhaps, the chief problem with Booth’s project. In the end, Booth might reply that such contradictions are

themselves an instance of pluralistic disagreement, further proof of pluralism, and so a good thing. Rather than question pluralism for the contradictions it invites, what has to be overturned instead is “a justification for pluralism on the philosophical level”; Booth’s “own privileged assumption,” as Antczak put it, is that “pluralism is so important a good for criticism that no arguments nor argumentative failures can overturn it” (7). And if that is not an instance of moral dogma, it is difficult to imagine what would qualify.

Conclusion: Pluralism & Nominalism

Given Booth’s critiques of the “overly-ambitious logic of critical evaluation” (51) that “stacks narratives into a single pyramid,” how could the capstone of Booth’s *own* value hierarchy—“the value of experiencing many good kinds of narrative”—be exempt from his own critical awareness (56)? The reason for this unwitting paradox in Booth’s project, I argue, is that Booth’s pluralism is built upon nominalist grounds. There is convincing evidence that the logic of Booth’s pluralism depends on an antecedent assumption about the untenability of universal categories, general claims, and commensurability. An *a priori* refusal of universal, general, or collective categories pushes Booth to accept “the ultimate incommensurability” of values (“Martha” 303); such a “pluri-mythic” ontology is the one thing that Booth seems to affirm as an absolute verity, mythopoetically proclaimed across *Company* but never itself accounted for or explained (*Company* 348). An *a priori* assumption about the radical incommensurability of values pre-emptively figures ethical judgment as necessarily contradictory, divided, irreconcilable at its core, resulting in a vision of ethical life that will “always be to some degree incoherent and self-contradictory”—a state of contradiction that, in a sense, excuses or justifies

the more attenuated contradictions in Booth's own project (348).⁴⁷ If so, nominalism and its wholesale skepticism towards the universal, the general, or the categorical may turn out to be the real culprit, the tacit subtext of *Company* and its critical pluralism.

One explicit admission of Booth's nominalism can be found in a footnote, where Booth expresses "a radical sense of the inadequacy of all categorical placement" (491). Elsewhere, Booth reveals his nominalist view of universals: that universals are only expressions of "an isolate" person, "unique and alone," which "must be viewed finally as a mere statement of [a] private vision, an outburst of private taste" (267). The first rebuttal is to ask whether this view of universals is itself something that Booth holds to be true universally (or "finally," as Booth puts it) (267). Booth's phrase 'all categorical placement' is itself a category, after all, labeled generally and universally by Booth under the category of 'inadequate.' If Booth's claim is a general and categorical claim, how could it be exempt from its own logic—how is it not an "outburst" of Booth's own "private taste"? (268) And if Booth's claim is indeed nothing more than a "mere statement" of his "private vision," what grounds do the rest of us have for considering its truth value as a highly general claim? Booth falls into the same predicament that he so astutely points out in the moral relativism of George Steiner: "If his judgments are simply and only *his* ... what ground has he given us for listening to his judgments?" (30). The paradox here is a fundamental one: a nominalist claim about the impossibility of accessing universal states of affairs must deny the very grounds that would allow such a claim to hold true universally. The second objection to raise against Booth's statement is that, whether or not we concede to the ontological reality or epistemic viability of universals, to read a universal as

⁴⁷ Contrast this with Ronald Dworkin's notion of value holism. Value holism is the thesis that "all true values from an interlocking network, that each of our convictions about what is good or right or beautiful plays some role in supporting each of our other convictions in each of those domains of value" (120).

individual is almost to invert the very definition of the concept. Precisely the whole point of a universal is that it is not idiosyncratic or individual but universal, true of both you and me. And yet, Booth's claim would seem to assert that all universal claims are (universally) relegated to the mind of "an isolate" person, "unique and alone," lacking any genuine contact with the broader realities which such claims predicate (267). Booth's implicit nominalism becomes plainly apparent in these instances of *Company*. Thomas Conley points out Booth's nominalism in no uncertain terms when he writes "Booth's ethical criticism is based not on universals but on particulars" (162) or, as Booth puts it, it is "always embedded in the lives of particular persons at particular moments" (*Company* x). An embeddedness in the particular, the concrete, and the contingent would not represent any problem in Booth's ethical criticism if it even-handedly made room for the possibility for criticism to make *general* extrapolations and judgments as well, "to break towards the general," described by Joseph North as the prerogative of criticism (185). But if we take Booth's claims about universals and categories at face value, his one-way inflection towards particularity becomes amply evident.

However overt Booth may be with his nominalism, the many contradictions explored in this chapter seem to imply the nominalist recursion, defined as the categorical rejection of categories. Without recourse to categories, the particular becomes our only site of value; and the particular, being irreducibly plural, manifold, multifarious, cannot be theorized or expressed in linguistic categories. Because of this assumption, all that critics have recourse to in their readings is what they can experience, empirically, moment-to-moment. Interpretation (if it can still be called that) becomes an entirely positivist and verificationist endeavour: immersion in the particularities of a text, without any capacity to assert some categorical judgment or interpretive pronouncement about the text. It is this particularism that explains the experientialist and

pragmatist underpinnings of Booth's coduction, its focus on "actual responses" (10) and "experience" (377), set against deductive principles and logical categories which, because general, are to be rejected. It is this particularism which explains Booth's choice to avoid the "overly-ambitious logic of critical evaluation" (51) (given its universalizing stakes, its "ultimate commitments") (335), relegating his ethical criticism to a "descriptive inquiry" instead: a positivistic science, rather than an evaluative ethics (Johnstone 59). Even as Booth wishes to restore ethical criticism and (speaking now as ethical critic and not as pluralist) bemoans "the helpless particularism that results if we do nothing but follow our impulses where they lead," he himself offers no answer to the problems of particularism (269). Booth's gestures to second-order desires, to the community of communities, to some criteria of selection between various virtues, remain gestures only and never firm up into anything substantial, as his acceptance of nominalism prevents him from laying claim to any generalization. Finally, it is the nominalist assumptions underlying his pluralistic literary ethics that leads Booth to defer these problems to each individual reader's private judgment ("every reader must be his or her own ethical critic"), the individual subject being the site of greatest particularity that Booth can intuit (236-237). Of course, if each individual reader *must* be their own critic (note the prescriptive injunction), this seems to make the whole point and purpose of reading *Company* moot. If Booth does not offer his *own* judgments as an improvement, if his book does not purport to furnish readers with a *better* way of reading than what they had previously known, then by definition it can make no intervention or injunction upon its readers. All that Booth's petition to individual readers' private judgments can do is to grant readers permission to do precisely what they have been doing all along anyway, to continue to be their "own ethical critic" with their own existing standards of evaluation, a non-interventionist stance that makes Booth's project vulnerable to the moral

tautology of pluralism previously explored (236-237). The absence of an injunction effectively defangs Booth's critical program and demotes his pluralism to indexical description, a repetition of the facts, dissolving criticism into neutral scholarship and rendering it complicit with the representative regime described in Chapter I.

To conclude, I have sought to argue that the problems of Booth's critical pluralism are nominalist in nature. The one universal norm which Booth is willing to raise up, as his pyramid metaphor concedes, is pluralism, or multiplicity, or the incommensurability of values, or what might be framed more simply, in the negative, as the rejection of any universal or collective claims to value. Given this undercover normativity and its attendant problems, our treatment of the ethical turn must continue to engage with the criticism at this paradigmatic and metacritical level, if we are to avoid lapsing into similarly self-defeating recursive logics. As I hope to demonstrate, a distinct paradigm does emerge upon such metacritical inspection; a distinct worldview comes into view. It is this worldview which I have called *nominalism*, and which I have argued is the paradigm undergirding Booth's pluralism and its manifold problems. It is also the hidden normative consensus shared by many of the most prominent voices in turn-of-the-century ethical criticism, as the subsequent chapters will show.

Chapter III. The Ethical Turn & Particularism:
Reading Martha C. Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*

“No claim about novels in general, far less about literature in general, could possibly emerge from this book.”

— Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (23)

“[T]he choice to write at all expresses, itself, a content.”

— Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (311)

Introduction: Why Nussbaum?

There is little doubt within the scholarly discourse that Martha Nussbaum is a leading figure in the turn to ethical criticism in literature.⁴⁸ Given her influence on the ethical turn (critic Rebecca Mitchell believes she even coined the phrase [230]), her inclusion in my project is a must. More than a matter of her prominence or influence, however, Nussbaum's arguments in favor of ethical criticism make her work especially relevant for present purposes. Like Wayne Booth before her, Nussbaum is committed to resolving the antinomy between ethical and formalist modes of reading: her work offers a productive analogy between “moral attention and our attention to works of art” and represents an effort to collapse the antinomies between aesthetic value and ethical concern in literature (*Love's* 149). Her contention, echoing Booth, that an effective “ethical criticism ... does not preclude formal analysis, but actually requires it” makes her work centrally relevant to the ongoing search for an ‘aesth-ethical’ criticism within the discipline (*Love's* 233).

As both a philosopher and a literary critic, Nussbaum is distinguished by the interdisciplinary approach she takes between philosophy and literary study, particularly in *Love's*

⁴⁸ See Schulenberg's “Resuscitating Ethical Criticism: Martha Nussbaum and the Moral Significance of the Novel” and Wrighton's “Reading Responsibly between Martha Nussbaum and Emmanuel Levinas: Towards a Textual Ethics for the Twenty-First Century.”

Knowledge (1992), a book which brings “philosophical awareness to bear upon the works of literary imagination” (Sirridge 61). Wayne Booth considers *Love’s Knowledge* to be “the best modern discussion of the ways in which what we call philosophy and what we call literature interrelate” (“Martha” 302). He argues that *Love’s Knowledge* presents “a full conspectus on the whole double-world of literature and philosophy ... wedding philosophy and literature at the altar of ethical criticism” (“Martha” 310). Booth’s remark suggests that Nussbaum’s interdisciplinary approach is enabled by her view of ethics as an essentially *meta*-disciplinary endeavor, binding the otherwise disparate domains of philosophy and literature together. Indeed, Nussbaum’s defenses of ethical criticism frequently amount to the claim that the compartmentalization of disciplines (particularly its “demarcation into separate moral and nonmoral domains”) involves loaded *ethical* assumptions from the start, thereby precluding the more originary, expansive, Aristotelian sense of ethics that interests her (*Love’s* 25).⁴⁹ It is her view of ethics as a *paradigmatic* domain of human concern that allows Nussbaum to cut across the compartmentalization which has beset Anglo-American academia, and to realize philosophy and literature as different attempts upon the common problems of ethical inquiry:

For the Greeks of the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C., there were not two separate sets of questions in the area of human choice and action, aesthetic questions and moral-philosophical questions, to be studied and written about by mutually detached colleagues

⁴⁹ Legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin shares Nussbaum’s view of disciplinary autonomy, claiming that an unduly narrow conception of ethics has set up the conditions for disciplinary compartmentalization. Dworkin believes that compartmentalization “has ruled the roost in academic and literary philosophy for many decades, particularly in the Anglo-American tradition,” which he attributes to the presumed incommensurability of disparate values, itself rooted in the rejection of his own position: value holism (2). Value holism sets itself against the sequestering of disciplines and domains by assuming “all true values from an interlocking network, that each of our convictions about what is good or right or beautiful plays some role in supporting each of our other convictions in each of those domains of value” (120). What is valuable in one discipline or domain of human endeavor cannot, in a final analysis, be separated from what is valuable in another, and ultimately from some more general (i.e., ethical) framework of value.

in different departments. Instead, dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics were both typically framed by, seen as ways of pursuing, a single and general question: namely, how human beings should live. ... The ‘ancient quarrel between the poets and the philosophers,’ as Plato’s *Republic* ... calls it, could be called a quarrel only because it was about a single subject. The subject was human life and how to live it. (15)

Although Nussbaum does not necessarily propose a nostalgic return to Ancient Greek ethics, she remains interested in a premodern sense of ethics that does not relegate ethical questions to a specialized domain of inquiry, parallel and lateral to other humanistic domains. Rather, ethics in her view is the very ground of those domains, the practical working out of a holistic axiology of value, “an adventure of the personality as a whole” (*Love’s* 88) according to which a subject endeavours to become someone “on whom nothing is lost” (to use the phrase by Henry James that Nussbaum relies on to express the peak of ethical thought and feeling) (qtd. in Nussbaum, *Love’s* 84). Literature and philosophy are both motivated by this meta-disciplinary aim, the search for some holistic answer to that most general ethical question, “How should a human being live?” (*Love’s* 25). In fact, Nussbaum suggests, it is only against the shared backdrop of this fundamental question that the contrasts between literature and philosophy could come to light at all. On these general ethical grounds, Nussbaum is able to mount her defense for the singularity of literature: literature offers up unique answers to these fundamental ethical questions, answers that cannot be had within moral philosophy alone. Invoking the Greek poets and Sophoclean tragedy, Nussbaum argues that literature, but especially the modern Jamesian novel, is predicated on “the ethical importance of contingency, a deep sense of the problem of conflicting obligations, and a recognition of the ethical significance of the passions,” ethical

insights which literature can help us realize better than any other form of language or discourse (14). Thus, ethics does not subsume the singularity of literature or literary study in Nussbaum's view but rather provides the very legitimating grounds for literature and its autonomy. It is because literature offers its own exclusive answers to these ethical questions (and not because it departs from ethical concern) that Nussbaum is able to differentiate and ultimately to *legitimate* literature as an invaluable contribution to human thought and feeling.

Without veering too far into the history of ideas, it is enough for present purposes to point out Nussbaum and Booth's shared Aristotelianism, especially the empiricist presuppositions inhering to their Aristotelianism, and how these are tied to their liberal humanism, their pluralism, and their commitment to particularity (the significance of which will become apparent in this chapter's closing section). In spite of Nussbaum's similarities with Booth, however, what makes Nussbaum's work unique and worth attending to for this project is how clear and explicit she is with unpacking the broader paradigm underlying her literary ethics. Being a trained philosopher, Nussbaum is far more rigorous at unveiling the more general philosophical entailments of her liberal-humanist literary ethics and is ultimately more consistent to the presuppositions she shares with Booth (who is far more slippery in his continual concessions to the 'other hand'). Nussbaum unpacks the value hierarchy that was otherwise only suggestively implied in Booth's work, revealing that moral pluralism is not the absence of a moral paradigm, not a skeptical uncertainty about universal norms, but is in fact the raising up of the plurality, relativity, and *incommensurability* of values (what Nussbaum asserts as "the "Noncommensurability of the Valuable Things") as a distinctly universal reality (*Love's* 36). The refusal to make universal value claims is not, I argue, a true absence of such claims, but, given the inevitability of some paradigmatic framework of belief, is better realized as the *affirmation* of

an absence: a certainty about incommensurability that is its own positive commitment and, as a commitment, entails its own moral imperatives, its own exclusions and evaluations, its own prescriptions and even its own politics. My analysis of *Love's Knowledge* in the sections that follow will serve towards exploring the practical ramifications of that fact to Nussbaum's literary criticism and the problems it entails for criticism's legitimating grounds. The structure of this chapter follows the template of the previous one. I begin with a brief summary of *Love's Knowledge*, proceed to outline the strongest aspects of Nussbaum's arguments, and end with the fallacies that emerge when Nussbaum's defenses of ethical criticism are applied even-handedly to her own position.

A Brief Overview

Love's Knowledge (1992) is a collection of essays, originally published across a range of philosophical and literary journals, whose arguments are collectively summed up by Nussbaum as follows:

The essays argue for a conception of ethical understanding that involves emotional as well as intellectual activity and gives a certain type of priority to the perception of particular people and situations, rather than to abstract rules. They argue that this conception, rather than being imprecise and irrational, is actually superior in rationality and in the relevant sort of precision. They argue, further, that this ethical conception finds its most appropriate expression and statement in certain forms usually considered literary rather than philosophical—and that if we wish to take it seriously we must broaden our conception of moral philosophy in order to include these texts inside it. (ix)

The perceptual, the emotional, and the literary or narratological offer up something of irreducible value that threatens to be smothered by their counterparts in abstract theory and the generalizing tendencies of traditional moral-philosophical discourse. The goal of Nussbaum's collection is to retrieve this value, as a way of legitimating the study of literature (as not "irrational" but "superior in rationality") by invoking "Aristotelian arguments against *generality*" (particularly against Plato) in favor of a "fine-tuned *concreteness*" (38, emphases added), a concreteness that is resistant to the reductions and reifications of conceptual abstractions and categories. Broadly speaking, Nussbaum conceives of ethical and aesthetic value in terms of a rendered particularity. By drawing readers into direct encounters with particular characters, into singular situations that resist commensurability, novelistic narratives immerse us in life's irremediable complexity and contingency and help to hedge against the reductions of universal or general claims to knowledge or value.

Chapter 2 of *Love's Knowledge*, titled "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," provides the most succinct account of her primary thesis. This essay introduces the overall conceptual framework informing the collection as a whole, lays out Nussbaum's most axiomatic presuppositions, and shows how these paradigmatic assumptions circumscribe both her literary criticism and her ethico-political views as well. Nussbaum begins with the thesis of "plural values and noncommensurability" (55), claiming that the principle of ethical plurality demands the "priority of the particular" (66). Nussbaum invokes Aristotle's "powerful negative arguments" against the notion of "scientific" practical reasoning, that is, against the search for a comprehensive science of ethics and values (55). Instead, Aristotle believes that a viable approach to ethics depends on "perception": "some sort of complex responsiveness to the salient features of one's concrete situation" (55). Nussbaum sets

this perceptual acuity against the more ‘Platonic’ tendencies of science and rationality which, she argues, depend on the assumptions of value monism. Value monism is “the claim that all valuable things are commensurable,” that is to say, reducible to a single monistic view of ‘the good’ (55). Aristotle presents a contrasting picture of choice, as “a quality-based selection among goods that are plural and heterogenous, each being chosen for its own distinctive value” (56-57).

Here, the notion of a plurality of distinctive values, each “an end in itself” (59), shows the necessary ties between *pluralism* and *particularism*. By first rejecting value commensurability and realizing the radically individual nature of each value, we are led to take up an ethics of particularity and perceptuality as the only way to properly perceive each value without ‘effacing distinctness’ (60):

the general spirit of Aristotle’s noncommensurability leads directly to and supports his account of the priority of particulars. For his noncommensurability says, Look and see how rich and diverse the ultimate values in the world are. Do not fail to investigate each valuable item, cherishing it for its own specific nature and not reducing it to something else. (82)

For Aristotle “the ‘particular’ is ‘prior’ in ethical reasoning” (67). Saying so, he launches “an assault on the priority of the *general*, and probably of the *universal* as well” (68). In turn, Nussbaum argues, this assault on ethical generality is “closely linked to the attack on commensurability” (66). Like Booth, who explicitly sought to step out of the necessitating chain of logical deduction and induction by offering up an alternative ‘coduction,’ Nussbaum promotes an Aristotelian privileging of perception because of the ways it circumvents logical categoricity and commensurability: “Practical insight,” she writes, “is like perceiving in the sense that it is

noninferential, nondeductive; it is an ability to recognize the salient features of a complex situation” (74).

An ‘assault’ on the general, the universal, the categorical, on logic and norms, sets up the preconditions for Nussbaum’s claims about the “rationality of emotions and imagination” (75). As she argues, “to defend noncommensurability is to reopen the space in which the emotions and imagination operate and have their force” because these are always particular, arising in concrete circumstances and elicited by specific objects (83). Nussbaum draws from Aristotle to claim that the “intentional object” of emotions is “the apparent good,” which is to say that all emotions and affective responses are grounded in some perception of what constitutes value or goodness (78). Emotions thus have moral and intellectual weight; they “have a cognitive content; they are intimately related to beliefs or judgments about the world. ... The belief is the necessary basis and ‘ground’ of the emotion. It might even be said to be a constituent part of the emotion itself” (291). Nussbaum follows Aristotle in arguing that our emotional and affective states involve moral beliefs, philosophical dispositions, and theories of the world: “Aristotle does not make a sharp split between the cognitive and the emotive” (78). Indeed, a fine and responsible perception of a situation requires the full participation of “the personality as a whole,” including the emotive and cognitive, the perceptual and theoretical alike (88).

Nussbaum thus foregrounds three major themes: pluralism, particularism, and emotionalism. All of these, however, are but “different aspects of a single idea,” namely an ethics of perception (83). She characterizes this ethics, referencing the phrase from Henry James, as an injunction to become “‘finely aware and richly responsible,’” to be someone “on whom nothing is lost” (83). A “responsible” perceiver is therefore one who acquires a comprehensive view that is nonetheless attentive to particularity. The Jamesian subject on whom “nothing is

lost” is synonymous with “the Aristotelian agent” whom “we could trust to describe a complex situation with full concreteness of detail and emotional shading, missing nothing of practical relevance” (84).

Even more relevant to the delineation of a literary ethics is that such a moral-perceptual agent closely resembles the artist and/or perceiver of art. For Nussbaum, ethical awareness has an aesthetical dimension not because ethics is a matter of taste, but because morality requires

a high type of vision of and response to the particular, an ability that we seek and value in our greatest artists, and especially our novelists, whose value for us is above all practical and never detached from our questions about how to live. Fine conduct requires above all correct description; such description is itself a form of morally assessable conduct

The novelist is a moral agent; and the moral agent, to the extent to which she is good, shares in the abilities of the novelist. (84)

By offering up an ethics of perception and particularity as the highest expression of moral responsibility (as the general disposition one *ought* to adopt), Nussbaum is able to bridge the literary and the ethical in her scheme (84). The generality of Nussbaum’s ethical injunction is underlined by the fact that she prescribes it for both the “artist” and the “perceiver of art”: an ethics of literature as well as literary criticism (84). What literature calls authors and readers to do, especially in novels of the Jamesian and realist sort, is analogous to the demands of ethics as Nussbaum understands it: that is, to attend to the irreducible individuality of the persons and predicaments one encounters. The perceptual logic of Nussbaum’s literary ethics becomes most evident when she states in the passage above that representation—or “description”—is the prerequisite for “fine conduct,” that is, ethical behavior (84). Being “finely aware” is necessarily bound up with being “richly responsible” (83). The hope is that by envisioning, representing,

perceiving accurately—by fully attending to ‘truth’—one’s pursuit of the ‘good’ will follow as a natural consequence.

In prescribing an attention to particulars as her general ethical injunction, Nussbaum’s approach collapses ethics into epistemology, insofar as the practice of making general value judgments or normative claims (what ‘ought’ to be) is subsumed by the accurate representation of concrete factual particulars (what ‘is’). *Ethos* becomes *aesthesis*, a matter of fine perception and sensibility. This ethical privileging of particularity and perceptuality results in a realist ethical program (as befitting Henry James’s novelistic realism) of perspectival accuracy, committed to “more exacting demarcations” (59) set against the “rule of the cheap and easy” (Nussbaum “Exactly” 59). The broader political connections are evident as well: a call to individuality, a call to particularism, and a call to representation are all wrapped together in the common cloth of a paradigm that we might broadly label as liberal-democratic (after all, “social democracy and the art of the novel are allies,” since both involve a basically *representational* regime of ethics) (*Love’s* 391). In fact, the ambiguities and pluralities of opinion that are generated by the variety of perceptions, *sans* commensurability, themselves constitute her universal ideal: a “cosmopolitan liberal polity,” Stow points out (194). Nussbaum’s ethics of perception, which was from the beginning an ethics of *individual* and *incommensurate* values, leads her to raise up the plurality of perceptions as the singular aim of ethical and political education:

Aristotelian education is aimed at producing citizens who are perceivers. It begins with the confident belief that each member of the heterogenous citizenry is a potential person of practical wisdom, with the basic (that is, as yet undeveloped) ability to cultivate practical perception and to use it on behalf of the entire group. It aims at bringing these

basic abilities to full actuality. As both Aristotle and Periclean Athens insist, the core of this education will be found in the studies that we now call ‘the humanities’—in the qualitatively rich study of human life through works of art and literature, through the study of history, and through humanistic forms of social inquiry. (103)

In these world-scale political entailments of Nussbaum’s literary-critical project, amounting to an entire model of citizenship and social order, we see how there can be no escaping some holistic, paradigmatic, ‘fiduciary framework’ when it comes to value judgements, not even in a subject so apparently discrete as the value of the Jamesian novel. On one front, Nussbaum disavows the need for normative certainties, for general rules and ethical prescriptions in literary-critical work, as part of her defense of the uniquely ethical value of the novel. Yet, as we can see in the above passage, she does appeal to her own general normative ground in doing so: a “heterogenous citizenry” of “perceivers” (103), in service to a regime of “correct description” and representation (84). Nussbaum’s ethics of perception and particularism, more than a merely *literary* ethic, is thus rooted in a paradigmatic ethical assumption about what constitutes the ideal polity. I end this summary of Nussbaum’s central arguments in order to move on to the salient features.

Nussbaum’s Transcendental Arguments: Refuting External Moral Skepticism

This section outlines what I take to be the strongest aspects of Nussbaum’s arguments in *Love’s Knowledge*, which, as with Booth, turn out to rely on the logic of a transcendental argument. Nussbaum’s primary argumentative move in this vein is to level the playing field between ethical literary criticism and formalist literary criticism by arguing for the *inescapability* of ethical judgments, the basicness and ubiquity of value judgments in all aesthetic and critical

practices. Nussbaum points out how formalist critics, too, assert their own categorical judgments and are not innocent of ethical prescriptions: “It has been easy enough to feel that ethical writing must do violence to the literary work. Of course it should have been obvious that to concentrate on form to the neglect of the work’s sense of life and choice is not a solution, only violence of a different sort” (172). Consequently, the formalist’s thesis of aesthetic detachment implicates itself in an implicit contradiction, insofar as (like Booth’s ‘dogmatic neutrality’) such a thesis cannot avoid prescribing its detachment as a normative assumption and legislative principle; as Nussbaum puts it, responding to the aesthetic-autonomist Richard Posner, “the appeal to aesthetic detachment is not innocent of politics” (“Exactly” 76). By flipping the tables on the formalists and exposing their own presupposed ethical assumptions, Nussbaum levels an argument against the supposedly ‘value neutral’ approach of formalist criticism (and the resulting compartmentalization that divides ‘moral’ from ‘nonmoral’ domains) that is analogous to Booth’s: *all* literary-critical practices come with ethical presuppositions. In a variation of Marshall McLuhan’s adage that “the medium is the message” (vi), Nussbaum argues that any formal or stylistic choice is always laden with moral and philosophical baggage:

My first claim insists that any style makes, itself, a statement: that an abstract theoretical style makes, like any other style, a statement about what is important and what is not, about what faculties of the reader are important for knowing and what are not. There may then be certain plausible views about the nature of the relevant portions of human life that cannot be housed within that form without generating a peculiar implicit contradiction. The second claim is, then, that for an interesting family of such views, a literary narrative of a certain sort is the only type of text that can state them fully and fittingly, without contradiction. (7)

The fact that medium and message can either complement or contradict one another first requires seeing that the medium has an implicit message of its own. No medium is neutral, then, and no style lacks substance: “No stylistic choice can be presumed to be neutral—not even the choice to write in a flat or neutral style” (245). Nussbaum concludes that every style comes out of a perspective, even a worldview, a philosophical bid about the nature of reality, the self, society, and so on. She writes, “Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth” (3).

Even as she refutes the purported moral *neutrality* of forms and of formalist criticism, Nussbaum relies on a similar critique to refute the assumptions of moral *relativism* made by the poststructuralist critics. I bring up this fact to demonstrate that the true target of Nussbaum’s critical attacks is not exclusively the thesis of moral neutrality, nor of moral relativism, but more primarily the external moral skepticism which they both share: the idea that we can take up a second-order position above ethics absent any assumptive ethical ground of its own. To begin with an illustrative case of Nussbaum’s refutations of relativism, we turn to Chapter 8 of *Love’s Knowledge*, titled “Sophistry about Conventions.” Originally published as part of a conference organized by E.D. Hirsch Jr. and Richard Rorty, Nussbaum’s chapter is a response to the antifoundationalism of Stanley Fish’s essay “Anti-Professionalism,” which, among other things, argues for the relativity of truth:

Fish argues that the only criterion of truth we have for judgments made in a given profession is the prevailing (currently dominant) view of things among practicing members of the profession According to Fish, there is, in any case, no significant distinction to be found between persuasion and manipulation, or even violence. (228)

Nussbaum's response to Stanley Fish is to point out the internal contradiction of his position: if Fish's claim is true, his argument applies equally to itself, must be its own 'violence,' and so can give readers no rational reason to assent to his claim. "In its mild form," Nussbaum goes on to explain, Fish's radical skepticism "tells us that there are no arguments, only assertions of one's views and perceptions. In its radical form it knocks a vital prop from under all argument by doing away with noncontradiction" (222). By comparing Fish to the Greek sophists and the Protagorean subjectivists, Nussbaum extends her critique to all those who espouse a radical skepticism about truth, all who are "forced to suspend the Principle of Noncontradiction" by asserting the relativity of truth as an absolute truth (221). Nussbaum believes it is important show the relativists that, for reasons of self-contradiction, "there is profound incoherence in their own position," as the position subverts the very ground it depends on to make its own claim intelligible, not to mention valuable, to its discursive community (223). Where Stanley Fish claims that "contradiction" is "emblematic of a necessary condition of human life" (Nussbaum *Love's* 106), Nussbaum objects by echoing the elenctic refutation made by Aristotle in *Metaphysics IV*: contradicting the law of non-contradiction is a radically self-refuting proposition, because such a proposition can no longer negate its contrary and so defuses itself into unintelligibility.⁵⁰

These internal critiques of external moral skepticism (whether it take the form of moral neutrality or moral relativism) are important to note because they reveal Nussbaum's one absolute, the one "rock-bottom" axiom that she takes as her epistemic ground. "At the rock-bottom level," Nussbaum writes, "there will be at least one principle—the *Principle of*

⁵⁰ See Stern and Cheng, para. 15-19, for an account of Aristotle's elenctic refutation.

Noncontradiction—to which any thinking, speaking being is committed just in virtue of being that” (223, emphasis added):

As Aristotle argues ... we can show the attacker of this principle that any discourse in which he engages, even in articulating his attack, depends on this principle. He has only two choices: either he will say something or he will remain silent. If he remains silent, we no longer have to deal with him.... But if he does say something, and something definite, then you can go on to show him that in so doing he is in fact believing and making use of the very principle he attacks. For in order to be saying something definite he has to be ruling out something else as incompatible—at the very least, the contradictory of what he has asserted. (223-4)

Nussbaum’s reliance on Aristotle’s elenctic refutation—the denial of any claim that refutes itself by contradicting its own assumptive ground—is abundantly evident in the passage above.

Nussbaum’s critiques of both the aesthetic-detachment thesis and the moral-relativism thesis depend on demonstrating their internal contradictions, the ways they delegitimize their own claims to truth by subverting their necessary assumptive ground, all of which confirms

Nussbaum’s reliance on the logic of a transcendental argument.⁵¹ After all, such arguments

depend on the idea that any given claim, no matter how seemingly restricted in scope, logically

depends on a host of paradigmatic presuppositions in the general domains of ethics,

epistemology, ontology; these presuppositions are tacitly and pragmatically assumed to be true in

⁵¹ An entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy sheds light on the relation between Aristotle’s defense of non-contradiction and the logic of transcendental arguments: “Aristotle’s “elenctic refutation” has been fruitfully compared to a Kantian transcendental argument. Transcendental arguments generally run as follows: If certain aspects of experience or thinking are possible, the world must be a certain way. Since these aspects of experience or thinking do exist, the world is a certain way. These aspects of our experience or thinking presuppose that the world is a certain way. That the world is a certain way explains these aspects of our experience or thinking and not the other way round. On this interpretation, Aristotle would be arguing that the world conforms to PNC [Principle of Non-Contradiction], or that PNC is true, because it is presupposed by and explains the opponent’s ability to say something significant” (Gottlieb para. 18).

the very assertion of the claim, whether or not they are ever made explicit or overt. When a system of thought sets up a performative contradiction in which its overt claims and its implicit assumptions are at odds, thereby denying the principle of non-contradiction, this is enough for a self-evident refutation of the system.

Nussbaum's critiques highlight how she does not relegate value judgments to propositional knowledge or discursive claims alone but, like Booth, considers value judgments to be actively enacted and embodied in *practice*: our search for the good is "a real practical activity," "our deepest practical searching, for ourselves and others" (24); "both empirical and practical" (25); "our common experience, our active practical questions, give a unity and focus to the search that it might not seem to have when we regard it solely on the plane of theory" (28). And so, as a rebuttal to those who would interrogate the idea of moral truth that is implied in any normative claim, Nussbaum replies with the practical "Aristotelian's answer": assuming a normative claim

is what we *actually do*—and what we must most urgently do more, and do better. We do ask how to live. We do compare and assess one tradition, one way, one answer against another—though each one contains norms of procedural rationality—undeterred, in our neediness, by the messiness of that enterprise. What I propose here is not a merely theoretical undertaking, but one that is urgently *practical*, one that we conduct every day, and must conduct. (28, emphases added)

In other words, Nussbaum's arguments for the ubiquity and inevitability of ethical judgments depends on her prior notion of such judgments as a pragmatic necessity, a methodological inevitability, insofar as they make up the very motives for any human practice. And the principle of non-contradiction happens to be one of those necessitating procedural assumptions, without

which any claim becomes self-contradictory, any discourse becomes self-defeating, any practice becomes self-paralytic.

Nussbaum's invocation of the principle of non-contradiction has important implications for her overall literary-philosophical program. While Nussbaum offers the elenctic refutation as "only the beginning of a sketch of what is involved in the Aristotelian reply to the sophist," it is far more than provisional; she also believes that "it offers a basis for a coherent, non-naïve, 'internal' realism": a reliable and coherent paradigmatic ground for criticism (224). Nussbaum describes such 'internal realism' (invoking Hilary Putnam's phrase)⁵² by painting a picture of various strata of belief, with 'deeper' beliefs being more foundational (as all other beliefs depend on them) and more attenuated beliefs being more provisional, optional, or contingent. The image is a clear account of the presuppositional substructure of belief, the fact that some beliefs are *necessary preconditions* to our more overt expressions, discourses, and practices, insofar as they are tacitly assumed to be true as a methodological and procedural necessity:

Very near this bottom level will be certain other beliefs ... that also seem to be so deeply embedded in all thought and discourse that we suspend them on pain of incoherence. At the 'top,' on the other hand, will be various beliefs and principles that seem purely arbitrary, that we could alter readily without changing much of serious importance Most of the interesting cases are in the middle somewhere. ... To the extent to which it is appropriate to say of a principle or belief that it is optional for us, to that extent it is not deep in our lives. To the extent to which it is constitutive of our procedures of life and thought, to that extent it is not optional at all. (224-5)

⁵² See Putnam's *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, p. 123.

The principle of non-contradiction is one of those deepest non-optional propositions about epistemology and the world. Nussbaum approaches a Kantian argument (despite her apparent disdain for Kant expressed elsewhere) (173) by singling out non-contradiction as one of those transcendental categories of thought which we assume *a priori* in all our actions and all our discourse. Moreover, non-contradiction is a principle which makes us hypocrites should we try to refute it, for we would be assuming the very principle of non-contradiction in trying to predicate a sentence to prove its contrary.

Nussbaum has found her epistemological ‘rock bottom’: a legitimating *terra firma* by which to ground rational inquiry. By remaining consistent to the principle of non-contradiction, Nussbaum argues, it is possible to develop a method of procedure for adjudicating among various competing beliefs and propositions, i.e., an “internal realism” (224):

When we are confronted with a contradiction between two principles, we do not say, well then, since there’s no uninterpreted given, it’s all free play and any story has as good a claim as any other if it can be made persuasive. We try to resolve the contradiction first, of course. But if we cannot, we recall the very basic commitment we have to the Principle of Noncontradiction as necessary for all thought and discourse. Using this, then, as a regulative principle (refusing to assert the contradiction), we set ourselves to adjudicate between the competing principles, asking in each case what the cost would be of giving each up. And we opt for the one that “saves the greatest number and the most basic,” as Aristotle puts it, of our other beliefs. (225)

Nussbaum points to this “holistic” procedure of coherence-seeking (174) as an “example of a rational argument, of rational justification, that in no way relies on an uninterpreted given” (226). Nussbaum states that the ruling out of contradictions “can be said to yield, in a perfectly

recognizable sense, ethical truth” insofar as it avoids the casuistries of self-interested sophistry and “rhetorical manipulation,” proceeding rationally “by the patient clarification of alternatives and by the detection of incoherence and contradiction” (226).

Furthermore, working out such contradictions is not a matter for sterile philosophical discourse but comes to bear on Nussbaum’s understanding of literature as well: “the activity of justification I have described shows, I believe, one very important link between philosophy and literature” since “literature can show us in rich detail, as formal abstract argument cannot, what it is like to live a certain way,” that is, what it would be like to be fully *coherent* with a given theory of the world, to live it out emotively, affectively, in embodied experience, not only as a set of inert or abstract propositions (227-228). The question for ethical criticism to raise is, “‘What sense of life is expressed in this work as a whole?’—in its design, the shape of its sentences, the interrelationships of its parts” (233). Even literary reading and literary experience depend on something like the principle of non-contradiction, then: the fact that a text offers a whole way of life, that its formal qualities fully embody its ‘fixed norms,’ crystallized down to the text’s concrete details, in a congruence of content and form, practice and theory, medium and message.

Accordingly, Nussbaum argues that any mismatch between form and content within a literary text (i.e., an aesthetic incoherence) is analogous to the very same “charge of inconsistency” she levels against the *ethical* incoherence of the sophists and moral relativists (7). A contradiction between a text’s overt message and the implied norms imbedded in the text’s formal medium becomes, in this light, a textual flaw:

Suppose one believes and wishes to state, as Proust’s Marcel does, that the most important truths about human psychology cannot be communicated or grasped by

intellectual activity alone: powerful emotions have an irreducibly important cognitive role to play. If one states this view in a written form that expresses only intellectual activity and addresses itself only to the intellect of the reader (as is the custom in most philosophical and psychological treatises), a question arises. Does the writer really believe what his or her words seem to state? If so, why has this form been selected above others, a form that itself implies a rather different view of what is important and what dispensable? it seems at least *prima facie* plausible to suppose that the author has either been oddly inattentive or is actually ambivalent about the view in question. (7)

In other words, Nussbaum's critique of a text's *aesthetics* likewise involves an attention to logical integrity and non-contradiction: "how the telling and the told are matched" (246).

Nussbaum likens a form-content mismatch to a performative irony: "the text is making a set of claims, but its formal choices seem to be making a different and incompatible set of claims" (7).

It is precisely because Proust does not allow such a performative contradiction in his work that his writing is exemplary, since it "states in its form exactly what it states in its paraphrasable content; what it tells about knowledge it also commits itself to in practice" (7). For Nussbaum, the principle of non-contradiction expresses itself *formally* and *aesthetically* no less than philosophically and ethically, in terms of a reciprocity between theory and practice, content and form, medium and message, text and subtext. It is on the basis of this logical integrity that Nussbaum defends the unique philosophical import of literature, narrative, and the novel: such forms communicate a 'content' that could only be consistently relayed, "fully and fittingly, without contradiction," by their unique formal properties (7). Much like a fully lived out ethical philosophy requires attention to the way our thoughts and actions cohere together (the avoidance of hypocrisy, double standards, and special pleading), the same ethical imperative underlines

Nussbaum's *formal* concerns as well: how an artwork coheres together, insofar as the implied content of its aesthetic elements works in tandem with its more overt messages and themes.

A practical example of Nussbaum's reading method can serve to firm up the relevance of these philosophical suppositions to literary criticism. In Chapter 12, Nussbaum applies her standard of 'internal realism' to a particular set of literary texts, Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* trilogy. Here, Nussbaum demonstrates how contradictions between content and form can be seen as an *ethical* failing, no less than an aesthetical one. Nussbaum makes a negative assessment of Beckett's novels and their underlying norms along these lines. She characterizes Beckett's trilogy as partaking in a skeptical-deconstructive project in which storytelling and narrativizing as such are subject to radical doubt, always revealed to be contingent constructs. As she explains, the trilogy follows two characters, Molloy and Moran, tracing their "stories of progressive disintegration" in which their every attempt to make meaning gives way to "the filthiness of conception" and the "vain longing for salvation" (Nussbaum *Love's* 298). Nussbaum points out, however, how the general disdain for human emotion which Beckett's trilogy displays, its "collapsing of the emotional structure itself" (301), depends on its own narrative assumptions, delivering covertly its own absolute meaning even as it undermines all possibility for final meanings as forms of "original sin" (298). In short, Beckett's absurdist project, its rejection of any finalities in the attempt to put "an end to fictions," turns out to be "an artfully constructed fiction of his own," obscuring the *pre-critical* assumptions which remain invisible to its own critical irony (305). Nussbaum sets out to show how the cynical skepticism expressed by the many deconstructions of meaning in Beckett's *Molloy* trilogy are caught up in a situation similar to the Cretan liar, in which they are parasitically dependent on the very narrative structures they would seek to dismantle:

We are forbidden ... to have the comfortable thought that something happy and liberating and conclusive is happening here. And when we notice that things are not happy and conclusive, we notice in ourselves a yet a third level of disgust: disgust at the disgust with human disgust that motivates Moran's search for ending and keeps him always within the constraints that this search opposes. But then, of course, we are likely to notice that that reaction is, as well, a part of the same old trap: for it sets our desires rushing off to imagine what would be a *real* happy ending. And that's itself a defect calling for more judgment. (305)

For Nussbaum, Beckett's infinitely recursive project fails to register "its relationship to its own critique" (289). The deconstructions of meaning in Beckett's novels are the result of an "act of judgment" that is "itself inside the stories and, therefore, doomed to affirm the stories even as it calls them into question" (288). Such an act of judgment is familiar as the error of external moral skepticism, critiquing all moral meanings, judgments, and evaluations without acknowledging its own critique as a moral judgment as well, rooted in its own norms.

Nussbaum uses the language of religious zeal to describe how it is that this recursive logic in Beckett's skeptical anti-narrative can be wantonly overridden and overlooked. There is "a deeply religious sensibility at work; for we have at all times the sense that mere human beings are powerless to make," that is, powerless to have agency, "on account of the fact that there is something very much more powerful in this universe that does all the making," namely, the social order, taken as one monolithic force (309). In its resistance to universal or collective meanings, Beckett's project takes such collective meanings to necessarily be an imposition of power: "But, we might ask, why is it that these voices are so intolerant of society and of shared forms of thought and feeling? Why aren't they willing to allow that the common-to-all might be

and say themselves?” (310). In such a question, the problem of nominalism rears its head: the general need not be assumed to do violence to the individual, Nussbaum points out. Even though Nussbaum’s counterpoint works against the particularism and individualism for which she advocates elsewhere in *Love’s Knowledge*, we see how Nussbaum levels a critique against nominalism when it suits her purpose of dismantling the external moral skepticism of her poststructuralist opponents.

Nussbaum’s analysis of Beckett’s *Molloy* ends up serving as a broader critique of what might be viewed as a poststructuralist epistemology, since the paradigm informing Beckett’s novels “is not a view peculiar to the voices [of Beckett’s characters] but one that has a long philosophical-literary history, and one that is recently reemerging as the dominant view of emotion in philosophy and in social anthropology” (288). Ultimately, says Nussbaum, the denial of universal meanings, shared narratives, or collective moral stakes assumed by this episteme is rooted in a radical and Romantic individualism that is itself quasi-religious in its absolutism (what I have called, in the introduction, an *ethics of autonomy*):

Isn’t it, really, because they are in the grip of a longing for the pure soul, hard as a diamond, individual and indivisible, coming forth from its maker’s hand with its identity already stamped upon it? Don’t they reject shared language because they long for a pure language of the soul itself by itself and for pure relationships among souls that will be in no way mediated by the contingent structures of human social life? ... Their very despair gives evidence of their deep religiosity. (310)

Nussbaum notes that such overriding skepticism about ultimate or universal meanings participates in “the same old religious acts” that it purports to critique and is “no less violent, no less constraining, than the original first-order confession concerning the filth of the body” (306).

When a blanket denial of all collective or universal claims is subject to its own critique, and the critic-skeptic is made to be self-reflexive about their own normative ground, then such critiques are revealed to be no less generalizing or universalizing, rooted in the same desire for grand narratives or unifying myths that they pretend to dislodge. “An implicit claim is made by these voices [of Beckett’s characters] to be the whole world,” Nussbaum writes, pointing to the necessity for paradigmatic outlooks, for some answers, however provisional, to the big questions of life, humanity, the universe, and meaning, even in the very interrogation of such ‘metanarratives’ (308). To conclude, Nussbaum’s fundamental critique of Samuel Beckett’s “project of radical undoing” is that it suffers from an internal failure to be self-consistent (293). Beckett’s project, she argues, is “encased within the very structures it opposes, and it announces as much with relish, confessing, in the end, to its own fictionality and making us see that this assault on stories is just another story” (305).

Nussbaum’s reliance on Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction to refute Beckett’s project is important to note, as it confirms my thesis that the *practical* application of her ethical criticism to literature, no less than her *philosophical* defense of that ethical criticism, depends on the form of a transcendental argument. Both in practice and principle, Nussbaum’s criticism is founded on the thesis that any aesthetic practice, any critical discourse, *any* claim, no matter how isolate, contingent, neutral or ‘antinormative’ it may seem, is dependent on antecedent normative assumptions. By extension, the assertion that some claim or practice might be ‘value-free’ commits a performative contradiction by ending up prescribing a position ‘outside’ ethics as its own *ethical* stance. The implications of Nussbaum’s mode of argumentation goes far beyond a critique of Beckett’s novels. It implies an entire mode of criticism, an ‘internal realism’ which, alongside that of Booth, seeks out “contradictions and inconsistencies” internal to a system of

ethics, regime of perception, or work of literature (*Company* 444). Nussbaum's bridging together of formal attention with ethical concern hinges on her transcendental argument that ethical assumptions are *necessary preconditions* for any human activity. Any formal feature, any creative act or stylistic choice, cannot be divorced from some presupposed normative subtext, which grants that feature ethical and philosophical weight, substance, *content*. Achieving an 'aesth-ethical' criticism, one that is attentive to both the ethical and formal dimensions of a text, involves an attention towards the logical integrity or else the contradictions between the two: "how the telling and the told are matched" (246). It is on these grounds that Nussbaum is able to justify her claim that literary forms, the novel in particular, are uniquely capable of embodying ethical and philosophical insights in a manner impossible for the more abstract philosophical treatise.

One might wonder how it is that Nussbaum's advocacy for ethical criticism has come down to something so elementary as a defense of the principle of non-contradiction. But as a philosopher, Nussbaum seems to intuitively appreciate that holding to this basic principle of logic has deep practical and even *ethical* implications, insofar as it highlights how any value judgment about what is good and bad, right or wrong, just or unjust, necessarily *contradicts* its conflicting and incommensurable claims. "To see that there is a genuine opposition here," between the different norms underlying different aesthetic and literary styles, "is the first step toward serious work on these questions, so long obscured by an assumption that there is a neutral contentless way of conversing" (Nussbaum *Love's* 259). Despite expressing a kind of pluralism elsewhere in *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum is nevertheless keen on one absolute: "Nothing is held unrevisable" in the Aristotelian inquiry about the good life, "except the very basic logical idea that *statement implies negation*, that *to assert something is to rule out something else*" (26,

emphases added). Nussbaum's insistence on the exclusive dimension of ethical claims recalls Booth's defense of the exclusivity of poetic utterances, how poetic statements are "assertions of truth" and that we do disservice to its authors by approaching them otherwise, "with sterilized, gloved hands, for fear of real contact" (*Company* 344). And insofar as a text's *ethos* is indeed exclusive in this way, the text embodies a substantive (even if inchoate and inarticulate) ethico-political commitment. All said, the ethical critics' recognition that literature is "about something real and really important" depends on realizing that a literary text, on account of its inescapable normative subtext, offers readers an exclusive claim to truth or goodness that necessarily enters into contradiction with every other rival set of norms (Nussbaum *Love's* 227).

Latent in Nussbaum's invocation of the principle of non-contradiction here, though Nussbaum never quite realizes it, is a refutation of Kekes's idea of pluralism: that is, the idea that conflicting and contradicting value claims can each be 'true' in their own right. Nussbaum's counterclaim that "statement implies negation" recalls Booth's argument that any creative act is a selective decision that determines "*how at least this one moment will be lived,*" a discrimination which, insofar as it pragmatically *excludes* alternative and incommensurate possibilities, assumes a general normative judgment about "*how our moments should be lived*" (*Company* 17). Furthermore, since any given claim, and not only explicitly ethical claims, is selective and exclusive in the same way, then said claim necessarily carries within it a normative injunction. The fact that any discrete truth claim is meaningful only insofar as it opposes other possible truth claims with which it is incompatible bespeaks a value-laden separation between what would be *right* or *wrong* to believe. Along these same lines, Nussbaum implies that every rhetorical act involves an ethical evaluation, to the extent that it presupposes that it would be

good for others to heed the claim, and *bad* not to (without which an answer to ‘why’ the claim is made at all diffuses into unintelligibility).⁵³

In sum, seeing the principle of non-contradiction as a ‘rock bottom’ axiom is what allows Nussbaum to recognize the basic exclusivity of an ethical claim, which in turn helps to realize the inescapable urgency and what Booth calls the “ultimate commitments” of a literary work (*Company* 335). That a literary text has such exclusive and ultimate commitments at all legitimates the importance and value of literary criticism in general, and ethical literary criticism in particular. In other words, the principle of non-contradiction allows Nussbaum to argue for the *inevitability* of normativity, the impossibility of a “moral holiday” in literary study (Schwarz 5), at the same time refuting the thesis of external moral skepticism. Finally, Nussbaum’s insistence on the exclusive and non-commensurable nature of ethical paradigms implies more than a theory of literary ethics. It calls for a particular critical *practice* as well, wherein the critic undertakes “the detection of incoherence and contradiction” (Nussbaum *Love’s* 226), “the work of worrying consciously about contradictions and inconsistencies” (Booth *Company* 444), between the text and its subtext with the aim of seeing whether the text’s ethical offering is indeed a livable one.

The Presuppositional Fallacies of Particularism

We end this chapter by showing how Nussbaum’s very potent critiques of external moral skepticism actually end up undercutting her own literary ethics of particularism. Like Booth, Nussbaum is strongest when she points out the performative contradictions and internal inconsistencies inherent in external moral skepticism, whether expressed as the moral neutrality

⁵³ In this sense, statements of ‘fact’ do indeed overlap with statements of ‘value,’ description with prescription, which is perhaps the root of that inchoate synthesis of ‘fine awareness’ with ‘rich responsibility’ that Nussbaum is intuiting.

of formalist criticism or the moral relativism of poststructuralist criticism. But Nussbaum is at her weakest whenever she realizes she must positively assert some alternative set of norms for her critical practice. Because of her reticence towards general and categorical value judgments, this positive and assertive side of her project gives way to indecision and ambivalence, until finally she lapses into the same skeptical outlook towards normative claims, the same posture ‘outside’ ethics, that she was working against. Mary Sirridge, in a review of *Love’s Knowledge*, echoes my point about the internal self-refutation of Nussbaum’s project:

There is, however, a more serious problem that she does not seem to see [...] : fine awareness and rich responsiveness do not seem to be self-justifying. Rather, they seem to be, in moderation, an indispensable part of ethical reasoning, which may in the end also involve general norms. These general norms may well conflict in some cases with unconditional indulgence in the ethic of perception. (65)

Nussbaum’s appeal to fine perceptions, offered up as a hedge against reductive general rules, is not “self-justifying” and itself involves “general norms,” thereby setting up an untenable internal conflict (Sirridge 65). In this closing section, I shall show how it is on account of this logical loop that Nussbaum ends up circling back to a position quite like those of her opponents, advocating for the very antinormative tendencies she had initially set out to refute. Her project, like Booth’s, is thus ultimately a half-measure: correct in its critical and diagnostic description, yet complicit in the very same logic it critiques in its prescribed solution (or virtuous lack thereof).

The same ambiguity which troubles Booth’s reception in the scholarship, his status as either an overly censorious critic or a noncommittal one, thus returns to haunt Nussbaum. Is Nussbaum’s literary ethics truly and consistently a commitment to particularity or, as Altieri

argues, does this commitment to resist rules, norms, and general categories assume its own general normative ground, thereby trapping itself in an “endless regress” (35)? Is Nussbaum’s thesis of value incommensurability finally a *pluralistic* openness to different values or a *prescriptive* value in its own right? Booth, in a review of *Love’s Knowledge*, argues for the latter thesis, that Nussbaum is overzealously committed to her moral view: “despite her energetic commitment to a pluralistic embrace of incommensurables, Nussbaum finally seems to me surprisingly monistic” (“Martha” 307). Booth sees Nussbaum as much too evaluative in her privileging of modernist novels over abstract philosophy. “Though *Love’s Knowledge* opposes one kind of hierarchy,” namely, the one that elevates philosophical abstraction, “it does construct a hierarchy of its own, from the least effective moral educators to the most effective”:

Nussbaum’s hierarchy places “philosophical treatises” at the bottom, with “fictional narratives” a rank above, “long fictions” above that, and “long *novels* in their most powerful *modern* forms” earning the most privileged position, finally reaching its apex at “Henry James among the novelists” (Booth, “Martha” 304). “Nussbaum never flatly asserts this hierarchy,” Booth concedes, “but the book attempts again and again to demonstrate something like it” (“Martha” 304). In other words, Booth, with his characteristic attention to a critic’s ‘a priori world,’ the necessitating assumptions that undergird a critic’s more overt pronouncements, is able to see the tacit hierarchy of value that Nussbaum must presuppose for her more contingent claims about the novel to make sense. While Nussbaum *claims* to be a pluralist about moral values, what her many arguments *presuppose*, implicitly, is a quite monistic evaluative hierarchy: novels at the top of her literary hierarchy, and *value incommensurability* at the top of her ethical hierarchy.

Although Rebecca Mitchell characterizes Booth as the more prescriptive of the two ethical critics, she does mention “what some regard as [Nussbaum’s] untroubled acceptance that

the novel and its ethical project are necessarily good”; Nussbaum argues in no uncertain terms that “literature, and not traditional philosophy, [is] able to communicate more clearly the nature of reality and its ethical imperatives” (230). Where Booth is content to envision literature as an emporium of possible moral positions, each colliding and ‘conducting’ in an atmosphere of friendly disagreement, Nussbaum takes up a more exclusive and argumentative position: literature, and modern realist novels in particular, and the works of Henry James especially, capture some core truth about the human condition (namely, the “Noncommensurability of the Valuable Things”) that other forms, philosophy in particular, cannot (*Love’s* 36). If a commitment to value noncommensurability was latent in Booth’s *Company* and required some teasing out, in Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge* those same “fixed norms” are asserted much more explicitly and prescriptively (Booth *Company* 143). The impossibility of reconciling different values is offered up by Nussbaum’s literary ethics not only as an irreducible fact about life but also as a definitively good and morally necessary thing, as a positive and prescriptive *value* in itself. Thus, the fact that the novel does not give us a “hierarchical deductive system of the sort Plato would have wanted,” nor even “a more modest and open-ended framework,” is “part of the truth conveyed by the novel that this *should* be so” (Nussbaum *Love’s* 258, emphasis added). Nussbaum has moved further from Booth’s non-committal perch above the moral landscape by asserting value incommensurability as a substantive ethical commitment in its own right: a positive assertion that moral differences are valuable, something we *should* have, a normative truth best relayed by the Jamesian novel. Perhaps it is Nussbaum’s more committed moral claims which have made her, more than the ever-concessional Booth, the recognized voice of the ethical turn in literary studies. It is also this firmer normative stance that allows Nussbaum to ‘canonize’ the modern realist novel as the flagship for her entire literary-philosophical program (seen as the

best medium for realizing moral incommensurability, “profoundly committed to an anti-Platonic view”), whereas Booth’s own literary selections range across a far wider variety of fiction and poetry (123).

A telling irony arises in Booth’s review of *Love’s Knowledge*, however. Despite the accusations which Booth levels against Nussbaum for being overly committed to her moral values, Booth also advances the opposite claim in his review: that Nussbaum is not committed *enough* to pluralism, to the “reality of incommensurability, the raw painful fact that some genuine values cannot be harmonized or reduced under this or that hierarchical system”:

Like every other responsible pluralist I know anything about, she feels the necessity to distinguish her views from utter relativism of the solipsistic kind. And she fears (I, of course, would say wrongly) that to say what I have just said, implying an embrace of more than one rival philosophy, is simply to give away the store to the relativists. We reply—we who are, of course, the only *thoroughgoing* pluralists—that she talks too much as if she ran the only legitimate candy store on the block. (“Martha” 307)

In other words, Nussbaum’s commitment to an evaluative hierarchy precludes her from being a ‘thoroughgoing’ pluralist, Booth argues, since a pluralist must commit above all to a plurality of hierarchies. But the fact that Nussbaum shares Booth’s commitment to the incommensurability of values is quite overt in her philosophical defense of literature. In fact, it is nothing other than this axiomatic commitment to the plurality of values which justifies her raising up the novel in her value hierarchy in the first place, as the best vehicle for realizing value incommensurability. So, what gives?

As I hope to show, the two ethical critics are much closer than they are apart, in spite of their polemics. After all, the doubleness which Booth identifies in Nussbaum’s project is

reflective of his own in *The Company We Keep*. In Chapter II, we saw how Booth asserts his rejection of value hierarchies as the implicit apex of his *own* value hierarchy (“if we must have a universal, let us make it the value of experiencing many good kinds of narrative”): an inverted hierarchy with multiplicity as its monistic peak (*Company* 56). Such a literary ethics can be accused of being *both* dogmatic and over-prescriptive *and* noncommittal and relativistic, as we saw in the paradoxical reception among Booth’s reviewers—a paradox that now repeats in Booth’s appraisal of Nussbaum, when he condemns her for being “monistic” even as her commitment is precisely to plurality and incommensurability (“Martha” 307). This doubleness in the reception of both Booth’s and Nussbaum’s literary ethics is not due to an incomplete or uncharitable understanding of their ethics, I argue; rather, the confusion is endemic to the literary ethics itself. The apparent disagreement between Nussbaum and Booth thus plays out a faux dialectic that subsists on an antecedent situation of agreement: an agreement containing the very internal contradiction troubling each of their respective critical systems. It is this shared ground of contradictory premises that explains why the two critics can enter into disagreement with each other despite sharing essentially the same paradigmatic position.

This paradoxical polemic can be traced down to the categorical rejection of categories, or what I have called *nominalism*: a default stance of suspicion towards universalities, categories, generalities, and abstractions of all stripes. Booth makes Nussbaum’s own nominalism explicit in the following passage:

Nussbaum insists that whatever general principles we come up with must meet three criteria: (a) they must leave room for new and unanticipated features, as experience unfolds ... ; (b) they must acknowledge the context-embeddedness of relevant features;

and (c) they must honor the ethical relevance of particular persons and relationships ...
 (“Martha” 305)

In other words, Nussbaum’s criteria for what counts as valid general principles are that they must (a) be subordinated to experience, (b) must acknowledge that they arise out of a particular context or situation, (c) must focus on the personal and the individual. Each of these criteria, when examined on its face, amounts to a repudiation of the very idea of a general principle: as something general, consistent, and explanatory (*Love’s* 250-251) (reminding us of Booth’s statement that universals are only expressions of “an isolate” person, “unique and alone,” which “must be viewed finally as a mere statement of [a] private vision, an outburst of private taste”) (*Company* 267). At the same time, Nussbaum’s criteria are offered up as general principles for validating general principles. The result of this doubleness is a system of thought that works against all forms of generalizing in favor of particularity, specificity, immediacy, and experientialism, while obscuring its own generality, and so, once its adherents encounter it as *a priori* assumptive theory held to be generally true, becomes caught up in an endless regress and continual self-struggle. As Charles Altieri succinctly puts it in his critique of Nussbaum and the ethical critics, an “emphasis on concreteness [cannot] sustain a satisfying theoretical position” and “cannot even postulate much of an ethical theory for literary experience because it cannot supplement its commitment to singularity without falling into bad faith” (36).

That ‘bad faith’ paradoxical struggle is the prism that most sheds light on the disagreements between the two ethical critics, Nussbaum and Booth, as well as the inconsistencies internal to each of their literary-ethical programs. When Booth calls out Nussbaum for not being a ‘*thoroughgoing* pluralist’ (in spite of his own purported pluralism and alleged openness to alternative perspectives) and Nussbaum calls out Booth’s pluralism for

“bending over backwards” to “subjectivists and skeptics” (“Reading for Life” 180) (despite her self-describing as “a pluralist” elsewhere) (“Exactly and Responsibly” 63), we see how the contradictory logic of nominalism can play out *both* amongst themselves *and* within their respective systems. All this is to say that the vicious circle can take place practically, discursively, collectively, and not only within the bounds of a formal philosophical system: as a worldview, it impinges on discourse and deeds as much as on theory. This explains how Booth and Nussbaum can share the same presuppositions but, because those presuppositions suffer from incoherence, still manage to disagree with each other and point the fingers of blame.

Towards the end of Chapter 2, Nussbaum gives way to these very misgivings and uncertainties about her literary ethics of particularism. Anticipating her critics, Nussbaum raises the question of whether her perceptual ethics merely yields “an empty situation morality”:

This ethical norm [of perceptual particularity] will be charged with being empty of content. In one sense this charge is correct. *Because of the priority of the particular, we can give no general account of deliberative priorities*, and also no general account of the techniques and procedures of good deliberation, that would suffice to discriminate good from defective choice in advance of a confrontation with the matter of the case. (93, emphasis added)

Nussbaum realizes that to assert any general claim about “deliberative priorities” (i.e., about values) would imply some generalization, and any such generalization would be antithetical to the very ethics of particularity she is offering in defense of literature and the novel (93). To remain consistent, she foregoes any attempt at providing general guidelines or “sufficient conditions” for practicing criticism: “our own decision rests with perception” (93). This situation recalls Charles Altieri’s critique of the nominalist paradox of ethical criticism (“once we begin

seeking explanatory principles we put at risk the very concreteness that we want to celebrate”) (35).

However, given that one cannot perceive everything, whether in a literary text or in life, the question arises (that eminently ethical question) of *selection*, of what to prioritize in our perceptions, what is *salient* to attend to, and what we ought to pick out from the virtually undelimited procession of perceptual flux. Nussbaum’s solution to the ambiguities invited by the diffuse situationism of her literary-ethical scheme is “the metaphor of theatrical improvisation” (which amounts, as we can see below, to a call for even “*more*” receptivity to the particular):

The salient difference between acting from a script and improvising is that one has to be not less but far *more* keenly attentive to what is given by the other actors and by the situation. You cannot get away with doing anything by rote; you must be actively aware and responsive at every moment, ready for surprises, so as not to let the others drown. (94)

Of course, such a solution is begging the question of “improvising when to improvise,” as Nussbaum herself points out (96): “How can we tell when to do each of these things? How can we be sure to improvise at the right and not the wrong time, with the right and not the wrong sort and amount of flexibility?” (96-97). Nussbaum’s answer to this fundamental quandary is straightforwardly circular: a call to more particularity: “For it must be: there is no general rule for this, the discrimination rests with perception. The experienced navigator will sense when to follow the rule book and when to leave it aside” (97). As Joseph North aptly points out, however, “When your guide begins to enthuse about the sheer variety of different paths available, it may be a sign that you are lost” (161). Nussbaum’s appeal to open-ended improvisation, her non-interventionist, anti-systematic ethics of reading, might not be “a new method or a new

paradigm” after all so much as “an acceptance and even a celebration of the lack of any such method, the lack of any such paradigm” (North 173).

Nussbaum’s anxieties about her answer show through in her defensive insistence that the result of her literary-critical project is not actually an anti-critical relativism: “this absence of formula does not mean that we have laissez-faire, or that any choice one makes is all right Nor does it mean that we have no place to turn for guidance” (97). It is here that stories, literary narratives, come to Nussbaum’s rescue: “We turn to stories of practical wisdom, both for representations of fine attention, and in order to be formed ourselves, as readers, into just such attentive and discriminating beings” (97). But the ethical question of selection remains: which narratives, which stories? Nussbaum’s own choice of James as the “moral ideal” (and not Proust, Beckett, or any other novelist) (162) seems rooted in her own antecedent ethical assumptions, perhaps her commitment to the values of “social democracy” (*Love’s* 391) and political pluralism, a “compassionate/egalitarian vision of the world” that Nussbaum elsewhere admits prescribes her literary preferences (“Exactly” 75). But if Nussbaum’s own literary-critical project depends on such antecedent ethical norms, preexisting and prescribing her own literary preferences, how could the texts themselves be the source of this Jamesian ethic she claims is to be found there? Again, her solution to the “laissez-faire” relativism of her literary-critical scheme is an appeal to the texts themselves as the grounds for moral “guidance,” but wouldn’t our very choice of texts or authors, or even our preferences of genres and forms, not be predetermined by our ethical commitments in the same way as they are for Nussbaum (97)? Nussbaum’s way out of the endless regress of relativism, in which “any choice one makes is all right,” is to offer up the literary texts as a stopgap to this endless regress, but this sidesteps the very problem she sets out to solve if our very selection of texts is mediated by our preexisting moral values (87). Her

appeal to the texts themselves as a way out of the relativism of her literary-critical scheme amounts to little more than a question-begging deferral of the question of *which* ethics we ought to adopt, and *which* texts we ought to read. If so, it does not seem like literature really educates us in the ethics of particularity and contingency which Nussbaum claims to find there, but rather that our choice of texts and literary preferences will confirm our preexisting ethical values.

Altieri's critique in this context is apropos:

Does dwelling on the denseness of particular actions afford a richer model of ethical judgment, or does it encourage casuistries that evade the clear and necessary application of principles? Once these two alternatives emerge, *we clearly cannot rely on the concrete experience of texts to help us determine which one is to be preferred*. For returning to the concrete cases for our answer will, in theory at least, produce endless regress. (35, emphasis added)

All this is to show that Nussbaum's turning to stories as a way to sidestep the casuistries invited by her non-prescriptive criticism is no solution; she still has not escaped the problem set up by her appeal to anti-systematicity, the result of which is still a "laissez-faire" individualism in which "any choice one makes is all right" (97).

Nussbaum's virtuous "absence of formula" for criticism (*Love's* 97) plays out a problem noticed by critic Simon Stow: Nussbaum, finding herself "in a pluralistic culture" that is "much less likely to deliver a cohesive agreement than in the [Aristotelian] polis," must resort to making "the books *themselves* the direct origin of our moral improvement" (192, emphasis added).

"Perhaps because she recognizes this problem," Stow writes, "Nussbaum has to draw a much tighter connexion between the act of reading and the subsequent moral improvement," given that there is "no other mechanisms at work in society to reinforce the lessons allegedly delivered by

the text” (192). For Stow, this means that Nussbaum is “forced to strengthen the claims made about the moral impact of reading beyond the bounds of credibility” (194). I would add to Stow’s claim by tracing this problem—namely, Nussbaum’s excess faith in literature’s ability to inculcate moral values—to the closed hermeneutic circle I described earlier. Nussbaum’s defense of literature depends on affirming the priority and plurality of the particular; and yet, to avoid the ethical problems of laissez-faire situationism, relativism, and subjectivism that such an appeal to particularity and anti-systematicity might invite, Nussbaum is “forced” by logical necessity to argue that the literary texts *themselves* will furnish us with the requisite moral certainties that are otherwise lacking in her scheme (Stow 194). This neglects how our very choice of texts, our literary preferences, and even our interpretations of those texts would seem to be prescribed by our existing ethical commitments. The result is that we have not truly gotten rid of the necessity for some *a priori* ethical position, despite all of Nussbaum’s arguments against “general rules” in literary reading (97).

At this point, Nussbaum appears to concede the closed circle of her reasoning, giving up on an attempt at rational justification for her literary-critical project, and in fact describing this absence of justification as a courageous openness to the ‘occasions of life’:

Has anything been said here? Does all this have any content? This question keeps on returning. For there is a tendency, both in philosophy and in life, to seek out theories that fix things in advance. It seems both shameful and dangerous to have accomplished so little and to have left so much to the occasions of life. The answer is: just as much content as the truth. (97)

Like Booth, who abandons any “justification for pluralism on the philosophical level,”

Nussbaum concedes that she can offer no attempt at rationally legitimating her literary criticism

(Antczak 7). And like Booth, who sought to sidestep any moral content or commitment of his own, Nussbaum provides a program without a prescription: a *descriptive* ethics of mapping ‘the occasions of life.’ One need only contrast such a proposal with the ethical practice of judgment, evaluation, and intervention in order to appreciate the anti-critical valence of such a literary ethics. Joseph North warns us that “moves of this kind,” offering openness and indeterminacy as their own program for criticism, “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” (163). While there would seem to be a vast difference between Nussbaum’s projects and those of Foucault, North’s comments invite us to see a parallel in this shared appeal to anti-systematicity. Nussbaum herself acknowledges that in “the new norm of perception, ... there is a bewildering problem about authority,” but it is a problem which, like Booth, she defers to the improvisation of individual readers (181). And like Booth, in order to not defang her arguments of any critical bite and reduce her position to the moral tautology of ‘laissez-faire’ individualism, Nussbaum ultimately ends up affirming and positively *prescribing* such anti-critical ambiguity as her singular, overriding, meta-ethical norm.

Productive ambiguities, generative tensions, and antinomies and aporias are thus the running theme of Nussbaum’s literary apologia. As explored earlier, Nussbaum legitimizes literature’s moral-philosophical value precisely by juxtaposing it with that philosophical tradition which upholds universality, commensurability, and categoricity. Booth, however, highlights a latent irony in Nussbaum’s apologia. He observes how Nussbaum one-ups her mentor Aristotle by claiming that “poetry is not only more philosophical than history; it is more philosophical than philosophy” (“Martha” 302). Literary narratives and especially the modern realist novel are philosophical for Nussbaum because they possess a certain virtuous negative capability, an

ambiguity which Nussbaum praises as ‘love.’ Literary experience calls us to lovingly attend to that which seems to “lie outside of the ethical stance and to be in potential tension with it” (50), “subversive of morality narrowly construed,” a commitment to “complexity and variety” against “reductive theories” (22). In sum, Nussbaum argues that literature’s general ethical-philosophical value lies precisely in how it subverts normative categories of judgment (e.g., good, bad, just, unjust, right, wrong) by attending to the radically particular, the *sui generis*, an “extra-ethical element” which evades all categoricity (52) and exists “beyond the universal,” graspable only by “a loving, and therefore particular, vision” (160). Simple and reductive as this prosaic summary may seem, a detailed reading of *Love’s Knowledge* does reveal how Nussbaum’s literary ethics exists on the Janus-faced threshold of nominalism, stepping ‘outside’ general and categorical ethical prescriptions yet implicitly prescribing such an ‘outside’ as the *general* ethical injunction that justifies and legitimates literature’s value. Nussbaum’s philosophically informed arguments for the *inevitability* and *inescapability* of ethical norms thus clash against her literary apologia, seen as a romantic (i.e., ‘loving’) injunction to break free of all restrictive and prescriptive normative categories.

Navigating the paradox of these dual claims, circling around it, and finally stopping short of resolving these “irreconcilable visions” between “exclusivity and general concern” sums up Nussbaum’s line of thinking in *Love’s Knowledge* (190). This logical loop might have a certain subversive attraction to it, but put in plain terms and removed of any mystifying charge or romanticizing rhetoric, Nussbaum’s logic becomes familiar to us as the “binary opposition between singularity and the categorical” critiqued by Altieri, and a reification of the nominalist recursion (36): the universal value of literature, as Nussbaum would have it, lies in its *resistance* to universality. Nussbaum thus pretends to be agnostic regarding any general, universal, or

collective claims to value in her approach to literature, but in actuality asserts such an agnostic absence of categorical claims as a substantive ethical paradigm: a virtuously non-prescriptive call to “Look and see how rich and diverse the ultimate values in the world are” (82). The injunction to ‘look and see’ (rather than *act, judge, intervene*) recalls Altieri’s “spectator emotions” and the pathos of ‘letting be,’ precluding evaluative judgments in favor of a regime of accurate representations (36): the commitment to “correct description,” “producing citizens who are perceivers” (Nussbaum *Love’s* 84). All said, the “pervasive tension” or “uneasy oscillation” (52) between singularity and categoricity, particularity and generality, “exclusivity” and “general concern,” (190) is a constitutive ambiguity in Nussbaum’s project. This ambiguity sets up an ambivalence about how we ought to read her project—as either prescriptive or non-prescriptive, normative or neutral, involving a generalized ethical claim about ‘how we should live’ or else confined to the autonomous study of the Jamesian novel without any stake in the general.

In her more pluralistic moods, Nussbaum refuses any general dimension to her assertions, stating that “No claim about novels in general, far less about literature in general, could possibly emerge from this book” (*Love’s* 23). “In neither work [*Love’s Knowledge* and *Poetic Justice*] do I make any general claims about ‘literature’ as such,” Nussbaum writes; “indeed, I explicitly eschew such claims in both works, and I insist that my argument is confined to a narrow group of pre-selected works” (62). Such qualifications would seem to run up against all her arguments against the compartmentalization of disciplines, however, as well as her arguments supporting the *inevitability* of general norms and paradigmatic frameworks. At other times, however, Nussbaum is far less apologetic and does not limit the scope of her arguments to the Jamesian novel. Bringing to mind Booth’s diffuse use of the term ‘fiction’ (which, in his hands, includes “any time-related experience,” even the poetry of e.e. cummings) (*Company* 14), Nussbaum sees

non-novelistic forms as also inescapably ethical: “even with regard to works I do not discuss at all – poetic dramas, lyric poems, novels by novelists very different from Dickens and James – the aesthetic-detachment thesis is implausible if we use ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ in the broad sense that I have consistently and explicitly given them” (“Exactly” 73). Along these lines, Nussbaum adamantly argues against any possibility of being value neutral in these literary-critical questions: “No starting point is altogether neutral here. No way of pursuing the search, putting the question, fails to contain some hint as to where the answers might lie” (*Love’s* 25). And yet, in another about-face, Nussbaum makes a subtle admission of her own second-order neutrality elsewhere, when she claims that her “choice of starting point” for her “literary-ethical inquiry” is the question, “How should one live?,” a starting point that is, notably, “*neutral*, leaving [different moral theories] for investigation inside the inquiry ... excluding at the start no major story about the good life for human beings” (“Perceptive Equilibrium” 245, emphasis added). One might wonder whether moral neutrality as Nussbaum’s ‘choice of starting point’ for literary-ethical inquiry in this passage is not itself the paradigmatic presupposition being made. What is the hidden normativity of neutrality, the position which holds itself to be beyond any moral position in order to see a plurality of positions—to see moral difference not from the inside, as one already prepossessed by a moral view, but from the external Cartesian distance of an ideal, impersonal, value-neutral observer? Nussbaum’s ‘choice of starting point,’ though mentioned only in passing, might be Nussbaum’s subtle admission that she does slip into the same external moral skepticism or ‘dogmatic neutrality’ as Booth does, and which she finds to be so problematic in her formalist and poststructuralist opponents.

To understand the root cause of these ambiguities in Nussbaum’s project, and the doubleness of being both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ its own ethical norms, we need to better

understand the epistemic and ethical aporias that are internal to Nussbaum's presuppositions. I suggested earlier that among the definitive epistemological assumptions undergirding Nussbaum's literary ethics is her neo-Aristotelean empiricism: the thesis that all true knowledge comes from perceptions. This is not a remote issue of epistemology, since it is precisely this assumption that makes up her entire justificatory grounds for the ethical value of the Jamesian novel: Nussbaum's appeal to a Jamesian-Aristotelean ethics of perception is set against a Kantian view that holds ethics to be *a priori* (ethics is "not, as Kant thought, *a priori*," Nussbaum writes) (173). Nussbaum's preference for the particular amounts to the peripatetic axiom that an attention to concrete facts—that is, to *a posteriori* perceptions and experiences—is a better guarantor of truth and goodness than the *a priori* reifications and mental categories of the mind. Here is where the problems in Nussbaum's scheme crop up, however, since by unduly juxtaposing the particular and the general in an adversarial dialectic, Nussbaum risks a critical oversight: she neglects the hermeneutical truism that any perception of a particular is always already dependent on some more general frame of interpretation, often preceding and prescribing the perception itself. By disavowing the *a priori*, Nussbaum's ethics of fine-tuned perceptions plays into the naïve realism of the brute empiricist: the view that reality (in Nussbaum's case, the novel) manifests to us in an uninterpreted, brute-factual way, via the unmediated perceptions of concrete facts. Such a valorization of empirical perception as epistemically basic, the grounds for certitude, cannot but reduce the conceptual, the categorical, the rational-logical, and the aprioristic, as so many impediments to these brute facts: at best precarious inductions from those particulars, at worst obfuscations of them.

Nussbaum's arguments for the ethical value of literary reading are grounded in precisely such an empiricist episteme. At its logical limits, such an episteme renders our *a priori*

categories as troublesome impediments to the concrete perceptions, something we ought to overcome in order to let in our experiences in an untrammelled and unmediated away.

Nussbaum's rejection of the *a priori* is thereby allied to what Dorothy Hall calls a project to "overthrow ... epistemology by experience," the preference for phenomenology over knowledge, a project that is definitive of the "new ethics" of poststructuralist criticism (Hale 190). This 'new ethics' is not so new, however, if only one recalls Gadamer's classic critique of Enlightenment positivism in *Truth and Method*. Gadamer points out how the positivistic project of undoing all assumptions, all prejudices and preconceptions, to better apprehend the brute facts of reality, fails to register itself as its own *a priori* assumption (what Gadamer calls the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice") (275). Rank empiricism suffers from the same paradox, since as a doctrine of knowledge it must make exception to itself; empiricism holds that every claim to truth is derived from sense-data, but it cannot support this very general claim *empirically*, requiring recourse to terms beyond itself. Pure empiricism of this sort has been famously taken to task by such contemporary philosophers as W. V. Quine and Bertrand Russell, and we need only repeat one internal critique made by Russell in "The Limits of Empiricism" to demonstrate the fatal circularity:

I will observe ... that empiricism, as a theory of knowledge, is self-refuting. For, however it may be formulated, it must involve some general proposition about the dependence of knowledge upon experience; and any such proposition, if true, must have as a consequence that [it] itself cannot be known. While therefore, empiricism may be true, it cannot, if true, be known to be so. This, however, is a large problem. (165)

Rank empiricism turns out to be an *a priori* axiom: an *a priori* axiom that all knowledge is *a posteriori*, which breaks down into contradiction the moment it is made to be consistent to itself

(the moment the observer becomes a datum, too).⁵⁴ These critiques of Enlightenment empiricism and positivism amount to the postmodern/premodern truism that hermeneutics is inescapable, in other words, and there is no such thing as an uninterpreted, value-free, positivistic ‘brute fact’ without a host of prerequisite assumptions (anymore than there can be a perception without a perceiver, or a discrete fact without an entire world that makes that fact possible). Nussbaum’s literary ethics of perception in *Love’s Knowledge* simply fails to contend with this hermeneutical truism. In those rare moments when Nussbaum does recognize that perception depends on a host of *a priori*, *pre*-perceptual commitments—that perception is never *neutral*—Nussbaum retreats into a circular argument that perception itself will supplant these precommitments.

One instance of this circularity emerges in a telling passage when Nussbaum confronts the conundrum of having to paraphrase a scene from Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*. Nussbaum is faced with the quandary of having to exegete the scene for her readers, in order to make her more general point about the merits of a Jamesian ethics of perception, but doing so *without somehow reducing the scene’s irreducible specificity*. We are reminded, again, of Altieri’s point about the performative contradiction that comes with any *general* injunction to attend to the concrete and the particular; Nussbaum’s attempt at interpretation, paraphrase, and prosaic restatement of this scene in *The Golden Bowl* would “put at risk the very concreteness that we want to celebrate” (Altieri 35). Confronted with this circularity, Nussbaum is forced to expose what she must “presuppose” as critic:

⁵⁴ In the endeavour to show the limits of pure empiricism, there is a risk of adopting the opposite extreme: the god-like perspective that all knowledge is derivable from the mind. To be clear, I do not intend to throw out the baby of empirical knowledge with the bathwater of empiricism. What I am hedging against is not empirical knowledge per se but the reductive doctrine which holds that *nothing but* empirical experience qualifies as knowledge. I would prefer the even-handed and holistic approach that sees both *a priori* categories and *a posteriori* perceptions as necessary to a fully-fledged and nonreductive theory of epistemology. It is this more comprehensive theory that Nussbaum’s commitment to perceptual particulars would foreclose.

How can we hope to confront these characters and their predicament, if not in these words and sentences, whose very ellipses and circumnavigations rightly convey the lucidity of their bewilderment, the precision of their indefiniteness? Any pretense that we could paraphrase this scene without losing its moral quality would belie the argument I am about to make. I presuppose, then, the quotation of Book Fifth, Chapter III of *The Golden Bowl*. Indeed, honoring its “chains of relation and responsibility,” I presuppose the quotation of the entire novel. (149)

In other words, Nussbaum’s presupposition—that is, her antecedent framework for interpreting the novel—is simply to ‘presuppose’ the novel itself. This is tantamount to a circular appeal to the text-in-itself as her framework for interpreting the text. Her ‘presupposition’ actually undoes the entire idea of a presupposition, which is to say a belief that precedes our perceptions and which we bring to some object of interpretation. Nussbaum would never baldly assert that she is free of any interpretive frame in her reading of James’s novel, of course, but by sidestepping the substantial problem of paraphrase by an appeal to the text-in-itself, she does so implicitly.

Nussbaum’s ethics of perception is pervaded by similar hermeneutical problems. Perception must play double-duty in Nussbaum’s view: the perceiver is “doubly responsible” both for the right disposition towards the particulars *and* for undoing any preexisting disposition so as to better let the perceptions in (155-156). An ethics of perception is *a priori* and *a posteriori* all at once: it is both that which resists our need for normative certainty, yet it is also the general normative injunction we must bring to any perceptual encounter. Perception is the encounter with incommensurate particulars that evade all categoricity as much as it is, categorically, the generalized attitude with which we must approach the particulars. The serious though unacknowledged problem is that if the text, so irreducibly individual and particular, is

indeed self-exegetical—if we could simply ‘presuppose’ the text as our framework for interpreting the text, as Nussbaum purports to do with *The Golden Bowl* scene—then this delegitimizes the entire point and purpose of Nussbaum’s exegesis of James’s novels, her literary-philosophical criticism, and, indeed, criticism altogether. Why write *Love’s Knowledge*, or advocate for ethical criticism, or provide any critical commentary on the works of Henry James, if every literary text is indeed its own best advocate and interpreter? We would be better served by ‘presupposing’ James’s novel in our reading of it, skipping Nussbaum’s exegesis entirely. The situation of tautology is familiar to us by now; it was in Booth’s pluralism also, disarming any legitimizing reason for why readers ought to read Booth’s critical work, seeing as he makes no normative bid to improve how readers read texts. The same is true of Nussbaum’s anti-prescriptive ethics of perception. If we can say nothing *general* about the text that is true or illuminating about it, if paraphrase is necessarily reductive, then criticism must remain mute, silencing Nussbaum’s own efforts at criticism as a consequence. Again, Nussbaum concedes that “there is a bewildering problem about authority” in the “new norm of perception” she is offering (181), which raises the question of how she legitimizes the authority of her own reading as critic and interpreter, but it is a question she leaves up to “the occasions of life” (97). All said, Nussbaum’s ethics of perception turns out to unwittingly play into a residual Enlightenment positivism, the myth of neutrality or objectivity so taken to task by postmodern critiques of the Enlightenment, now writ as a literary-critical program: the myth of an ideal observer, whose unmediated perceptions of the concrete ‘brute facts’ grant the reader/perceiver privileged access to uninterpreted truth from a groundless and assumption-free position.

In the end, the fatal flaw in Nussbaum’s ethics of perception is that it underplays how perception is a value-laden process of *selection*. Perception picks out what is salient out of an

undifferentiated mass, a salience which presupposes some value-based discrimination that inheres to the very act of perceiving. There can be no highlighting some isolate perceptual ‘fact’ without presuming, as a pragmatic necessity, some preceding judgment that determines the criteria of selection, a truism amply explored by the many postmodern critiques of positivism. Nussbaum frequently invokes her ethics of perception in terms of concreteness, responsiveness, situatedness (a “complex responsiveness to the salient features of one’s concrete situation” [55], the call to attend to “a complex situation with full concreteness of detail and emotional shading, missing nothing of practical relevance” [84]), but what Nussbaum leaves unaccounted for in these calls to perceptual acuity is her use of the terms ‘salience’ and ‘relevance,’ and how these are not determinable by perception alone. Given that the group of all possible perceivable things is an unlimited expanse that itself can supply no criteria for determining what is salient or relevant, to even perceive a thing is to presume some aprioristic frame of valuing that determines what we *ought* to perceive in the first place, where we ought to direct our attention, what is most meaningful to see. Without this act of highlighting, differentiation, selection, saliency, *valuing*, we would not perceive at all, or would perceive only a homogenous flux, which amounts to the same. Perception is thus exclusionary, even evaluative, a thought that has been well articulated by Jacques Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics*: the thought that any *aesthesis* or regime of perception (“the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience”) (8) ‘always already’ implies a normative *ethos* that delineates what (or who) *ought* to be perceived (“prejudicially linked from the outset to a certain regime of politics”) (9). Once we recognize that perceiving *everything* is a conceptual as well as a practical impossibility, even a contradiction in terms, we recognize the limits of a representative regime for which ethicality is

wholly circumscribed by a totalizing appeal to perception and particularity (i.e., the nominalist contradiction inhering to a *generalized* particularity).

All this is to highlight that Nussbaum's ethics of perception plays into a residual Enlightenment positivism, an episteme of prejudice-free perception. The irony is that Nussbaum was adamant to refute such a myth of neutrality, tracing it to "the long-standing fascination of Western philosophers with the methods and the style of natural science" (19). Yet in her appeal to the "priority of the particulars," we still find the scientific positivist's injunction (which is also the Arnoldian injunction) to see things 'as they really are,' unmediated by any general *a priori* assumptions, any prejudicial commitments. Lurking in Nussbaum's axiomatic ground is the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice" (Gadamer 275), or what Dorothy Hale calls the project to "overthrow ... epistemology by experience" (190), a privileging of the particularities of sense-experience over abstract *a priori* categories. But it is a project that cannot supply any general rationale for itself without "falling into bad faith," thereby undercutting any justified account of its truth or any rational argument for why it ought to be adopted (Altieri 36). This becomes a problem not only for Nussbaum's model of criticism but for the grounds of legitimacy she charts out for literature as well. If literature is a call to loving particularity and individual perception, then literature must in its very terms be opposed to broad normative categories, general ethical concerns, and collective political commitments. But such an assumption, rather than bridging general ethical concerns with attention to the particularity of forms and the singularity of texts, effectively cleaves aesthetic attention and ethical concern down the middle, setting up the very antinomy which Nussbaum would want to solve.

Conclusion: Particularism & Nominalism

Fleeing from the reductions of a Platonic *value monism* (i.e., everything is reducible to a single register of value) and adopting its antithesis in a dispersive *value pluralism* (i.e., our myriad values are radically incommensurable), Nussbaum fails to recognize a more holistic and synthetic alternative to the binary: what Ronald Dworkin calls *value holism*. Dworkin defines value holism as the thesis that general values (e.g., being a good person) and more particular values (e.g., being a good writer) are mutually informing, interconnected, though not collapsible into each other, with neither the general nor the particular being privileged as more ethically or epistemically ‘basic’:

all true values from an interlocking network, that each of our convictions about what is good or right or beautiful plays some role in supporting each of our other convictions in each of those domains of value. We can seek truth about morality only by pursuing coherence endorsed by conviction (120).

What is involved in *value holism* is not the binary opposition between general values and particular values but a tree-like or dendrological model of axiology, in which myriad values belong to common sets of broader, more expansive values, sets that do not exclude or erase the individual values on the ground but in fact act as their enabling precondition, as a tree-trunk is the basis for its branches:

It is also necessary to understand morality in general as having a tree structure: law is a branch of political morality, which is itself a branch of a more general personal morality, which is in turn a branch of a yet more general theory of what it is to live well. (5)

Given this tree-like relationship between general and particular values, it is quite apt to say that prioritizing the particular over the general amounts to ‘sawing the branch upon which one sits.’ Such a self-undermining state describes the circularity inhering in Nussbaum’s nominalism, in

which her ethics depends on a *general* evaluation that particular values are *more* valuable, even as such a claim would saw off the antecedent logical ‘branch’ upon which it depends. But as soon as there is the possibility for a mereological reciprocity between the general and particular, with neither level denying the existence of the other (as opposed to the nominalist’s imagined *antagonism* between the general and the particular), the contradictions fade away: it becomes possible to conceive of a continuum between a general value and its manifold expressions in more practical, more particular values which, like branches, emerge out of some shared root. I suggest that this rejection of value holism in favor of value pluralism—that is, the rejection of value *coherence* in favor of value *incommensurability*—is where the incoherences and contradictions in the rest of Nussbaum’s literary-ethical project begin.

Despite her many appeals to the ultimate incommensurability of values, Nussbaum does come close to realizing value holism in several moments of the text. A mereological image of parts-to-wholes emerges when Nussbaum argues that to “value each separate constituent of the good life for what it is in itself entails, then, recognizing its distinctness and separateness from each of the other constituents, *each being an irreplaceable part of a composite whole*” (60, emphasis added). This image of a multiplicity of parts embedded within a composite whole is radically different from the vision of pluralism, as a disorganized array of atomistic values, dis-embedded from any shared frame. The nature of that paradigmatic whole, however, and its *own* value, remain latent and unexplored in Nussbaum’s account (reminiscent of Booth’s indistinct appeals to some higher-order criteria for arbitrating among competing values, which never get fleshed out). Nussbaum’s arguments for the continuity between emotion and cognition also presume a holistic and synthetic undertaking: “the commitment of the agent to confront all the complexities of the situation head on, in all their indeterminacy and particularity, and to regard

the act of deliberation as an adventure of the personality *as a whole*” (88, emphasis added). For all the irreducible particularity of our piecemeal perceptions, Nussbaum’s contention that ‘good’ perceptions require the analytic mind and the emotional aspects alike invokes a kind of value holism, too: an all-things-considered understanding involving the whole person. Finally, Nussbaum’s very methodology for criticism presumes the value holism I am describing: “The procedure is holistic: it holds nothing unrevisable, but seeks for *coherence* and ‘fit’ in the system *as a whole*” (174, emphasis added); a search for “*coherence* and fit in the web of judgment, feeling, perception, and principle, *taken as a whole*” (26, emphasis added). While Nussbaum never explicitly explores value holism as an alternative to the Manichean dialectic between monism or pluralism, the hope for a holistic and coherent axiological framework seems to be tacitly assumed in these moments of *Love’s Knowledge*. Nussbaum’s very defense of the principle of non-contradiction would seem to support the possibility for all values coming together into a coherent axiology, without which the principle of non-contradiction must be necessarily violated from the very onset of ethical valuing. Holism would serve as a way out of the irresolvable contradictions that so preoccupy Nussbaum between monism and pluralism, unity and diversity, the general and the particular: a both-and reciprocity between the two, rather than an either-or antinomy that favors one or the other as more ontologically and epistemically foundational.

Nussbaum never takes on board this synthetic ‘both-and’ alternative to the binary between the particular and the general, however. She does admit the limits of her ethics of perception (the “perceiver as perceiver cannot see it all”), but rather than concede that the whole of ethics could not be circumscribed by perception if this were the case, and that ethics therefore has need for terms outside the particular, Nussbaum chooses to give up on the wholeness instead

(abandoning in the process the very principle of non-contradiction she took to be axiomatic): “to get the whole,” the perceiver “must at times stop being the sort of person who cares for wholeness” (189). Nussbaum ends up forfeiting her synthetic model of “perceptive equilibrium” between the particular and general and opts instead for a dualistic model of never-ending precarity, tension, and oscillation between the two: “the goal might not be equilibrium at all, but a dynamic *tension* between two possible *irreconcilable* visions,” “an *unsteady oscillation* between ... exclusivity and general concern” (190, emphases added). These terms (tension, oscillation, irreconcilability) recall the nominalist’s “binary opposition between singularity and the categorical” identified by Altieri as the running assumption of ethical criticism (36). In her closing endnote to *Love’s Knowledge*, Nussbaum seems to realize that this antinomy, even antagonism, between the particular and the general in her conceptual scheme would undo her model of ‘love’ as a mutually informing reciprocity between the two: “one might still wonder whether there was not a tension, rather than an illuminating dialogue, between the particular and the general in such deliberations” (391). Although Nussbaum’s question is aptly raised, her answer partakes in what is by now a familiar circularity. These tensions between Nussbaum’s commitment to concrete particulars (to “historical particularity”) and to general truths (her “notion ‘human being’ as the organizing ethical notion”) “are not opposed, but have a common root,” that common root being “human finitude,” a call “to love particular people and to have concern for the concrete events that happen to them” (391). We must not be taken in by the *pathos* of Nussbaum’s answer, however, if we are to notice the failure in logical coherence, and how her answer amounts to another case of question begging: Nussbaum resolves the antinomy she has set up between the general and the particular by a further appeal to the particular (to “particular people” and “concrete events”) (391).

We are by now firmly within the vicious circle of nominalism: a commitment to particularity, justified only by a further question-begging appeal to particularity. We would do better justice to Nussbaum's transcendental arguments, about the *inevitability* of ethical norms, by recognizing that Nussbaum's injunction to break free of 'general norms' in favor of perceptual particularity subsists on its own *a priori* general norm. And yet, in spite of Nussbaum's many arguments for the inescapability of ethical norms, Nussbaum's own 'antinormative normativity' ends up overriding all her arguments in the end: "Love is, in a sense, *outside of morality* And yet it is a natural movement of the *most truly human morality*, and its fitting completion" (361, emphasis added). Nussbaum remains apparently unaware that this stepping 'outside' morality is itself what sits at the apex of her value hierarchy (the "*most truly human morality*"), and the result is a paradoxical position that says stepping 'outside' ethics is *itself* the most ethical stance to take (361, emphasis added). The result is an ethics in the negative—an "antinormative normativity," as Felski puts it (9)—that, while presenting itself as apophatic, pluralistic, value-free, neutral, actually *affirms* the virtuous absence of norms and the negative capability of 'letting be,' foreclosing any "break toward the general" (North 185). Such an ethos undoes the ground for any and all critical judgments, in favor of the descriptive and representative regime of accurate representation: a spectatorship ethics of fine-tuned awareness and concrete perceptions. Such an anti-critical regime of pure representation cannot but preclude in its very terms any possibility for intervention, evaluation, or action.

Having concluded Chapter III, we can already note the common pattern among the two leading contributors to the ethical turn. Wayne Booth argued for the ubiquity and inescapability of ethical judgments, which is also an argument for the impossibility of moral neutrality and the all-pervading prevalence of normative horizons in literature and criticism. Yet Booth, faced with

the daunting prospect of having to actually outline his own ethical norms in prescriptive fashion, regressed into a position outside all paradigms and all assumptive ground: a neutral meta-ethical position above the moral landscape. In this ad-hoc rhetorical retreat, however, he ends up abandoning his legitimating arguments for ethical criticism: that is, his advocacy for the inescapability of ethical norms. Nussbaum's arguments suffer from the same regress. She begins with a defense of ethical criticism, arguing for the ubiquity and necessity of ethical judgments and the normative assumptions that underpin even such matters of form and style. However, the moment she is pressed to offer up her own fixed norms, she ends with a retreat into external moral skepticism that undermines all her prior arguments. In this way, both Booth and Nussbaum, the two leading voices of the early turn to ethics within literary study, stand on an equivocal threshold, an 'inside' and an 'outside' to ethics, amounting to duplicity between a critically conscious antinormative skepticism and the sincere urgency of social concerns, ethical convictions, and political commitments. This duplicity persists within the reigning model of literary ethics that continues to be invoked decades later, as I intend to show in the next and final chapter.

Chapter IV. The Ethical Turn & Perspectivalism:
Reading Dorothy Hale's *The Novel and the New Ethics*

“[T]he complex and frequently contradictory notion of otherness ... resists consolidation into a single philosophical system or a confident truth claim – an irresolvability that can become its own source of ethical value.”

— Dorothy Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (11)

“But unlike the poet, the politician must act as well as be. Can the capacity for being in mystery and uncertainty translate into ethical political action?”

— Dorothy Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (132)

Introduction: Why Hale?

Dorothy Hale is among the foremost theorists and historians of the novel working in literary studies today. Hale is most recognized within the scholarly discourse for her study *Social Formalism* (1998), which makes the case for a counterintuitive continuity between the formalist project of Henry James and the Bakhtinian underpinnings of contemporary social, cultural, ideological approaches to texts, at least within the history of the Anglo-American novel. Hale's more recent scholarly work, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (2020), continues in the same vein, bridging together several currents in novelistic theory and criticism that might otherwise seem entirely incommensurate: poststructuralist criticism with its critiques of the subject, the contemporary emphasis on the social, political, and ethical relevance of literature, and the modernist formalism of the 20th century novel. To the extent that her scholarly work contributes to charting the hidden affinities shared by formalism and the contemporary turn to ethics in literary studies, Hale's project is centrally relevant to my own. Her historical excavation of an 'aesth-ethical' sensibility in *Social Formalism*, written over two decades ago, preceded more recent ventures such as Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2006) or Caroline Levine's *Forms* (2017), which shows how persistent the search for a synthesis between ethical concern

and attention to form has been over the last several decades. It seems as if attempts to reconcile ethics and aesthetics have reemerged again and again within literary study, independently and in different contexts, in desperate bids to break free of the antinomies. The repetitiveness of the effort, however, suggests that none have made a decisive intervention, and the fundamental problems persist in the continued absence of a “paradigm” (North) or “rationale” (Guillory) for literary criticism as such. In light of these antinomies, Hale’s project is valuable for its explicit concern with literary ethics and her general thesis that such an ethics is not disjunct but always bound up with literature’s aesthetic and formal dimensions. Although Hale limits her historical account to the modern Anglo-American novel (or purports to, at least; I will problematize that disciplinary autonomy below), the general drift of Hale’s argument has deeper antecedent assumptions that map onto my own project. These serve to confirm one of the cornerstones of my thesis: that the long-standing antinomy between ethics and aesthetics in literary study appears to hinge on an unrecognized consensus that cuts across formalism, poststructuralism, and ethical criticism alike. Through a close analysis of Hale’s *The Novel and the New Ethics*, this chapter will attempt to tease out the presuppositions of this underlying consensus and, with help from Hale’s own arguments, trace their continuity with the nominalist problematics explored in this project thus far.

This final chapter focuses on Hale’s more recently published *The Novel and the New Ethics* (2020) for a number of reasons. Firstly, Hale’s latest work goes further towards articulating her earlier arguments in *Social Formalism*, making explicit the normative ground undergirding both the modern Jamesian novel and contemporary ethical and ideological criticism but which was previously glossed under a broadly ‘social’ concern in *Social Formalism*. In a

review of *Social Formalism*, literary theorist Gerald Prince breathlessly conveys some of the breadth of Hale's synthetic approach:

In this fine book Dorothy J. Hale argues that (Anglo-American) theorists of literariness and analysts of its ideology, formalist students of fiction and Marxist-inspired ones, poeticians and cultural critics, Henry James, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Henry Louis Gates have much more in common than we or they (would) think. What unites them, what links novel theory with cultural studies or identity studies and puts not only the three writers just mentioned but also Percy Lubbock, Wayne Booth, Gerard Genette, Roland Barthes, and Barbara Johnson on the same theoretical continuum is their "social formalism," their belief that the novel embodies social identity as well as a social world in its formal features and that it has social efficacy through its form. (345)

The Novel and the New Ethics continues Hale's ongoing attempt to bridge disparate critics and authors from across the twentieth century—figures as far apart as Fredric Jameson, Henry James, Toni Morrison, J. M. Coetzee, William Faulkner—by tracing a single underlying consensus that, however fraught and internally at odds, informs them all. This consensus, she argues, is an ethics of alterity: an ethics engaged with the otherness of characters vis-à-vis authors, the otherness of marginalized identities, or the otherness of the text's own autonomous existence (among other 'others'). Hale argues that this engagement with otherness inheres to the novel's very form and continues to be invoked by theorists and critics in their legitimation of the novel's literary-ethical value to this day. Thus, *The Novel and the New Ethics* has the effect of laying out a rationale for novelistic ethics: an account for why reading novels can actually be a type of moral, ethical, political work. To that extent, Hale shares affinities with the project of the ethical critics. What is more, the counterintuitive thesis of *The Novel and the New Ethics* is that Henry James's

novelistic aesthetics set the terms for current trends in cultural studies and the turn to ethico-political criticism (what she calls the “new ethics”) a full century later (--). In tracing these continuities, Hale’s literary history in *The Novel and the New Ethics* engages explicitly with the complicities I have been tracking thus far between the ‘ethical turn’ in literary studies and the various strands of aesthetic autonomy which, at least superficially, provided the ethical critics with their ideological adversary. Finally, the fact that *The Novel and the New Ethics* (2020) has been so recently published can serve to highlight the contemporary relevance of the arguments in my earlier chapters, linking the projects of the early ethical critics to the grounds of legitimation still being invoked in literary ethics today.

To the extent that Hale’s literary history is synthetic and conciliatory, hopping freely across the polemical divides between modernist formalism, poststructuralism, and ideological criticism, we can productively link it to Booth’s own conciliatory and pluralistic rhetoric, his rejection of “any sharp divorce of aesthetic and ethical questions,” and his project’s attempt to wed the two together via ethical criticism (*Company* 11). Like Booth’s works, Hale’s literary-historical narrative is marked by an enthusiastic bridging of antinomies: a search for a fuller, restorative mode of literary reading in which attention to form and to ethical concern can be conceived as expressions of the same project. Hale partakes in the same broad optimism characteristic of Booth’s pluralism and the ethical turn overall (what Daniel Schwarz calls its “neohumanist burst of energy”) (3) because Hale’s account restores a faith in the essentially *representational* capacity of literature (especially the realist novel) to depict characterological ‘others’ (i.e., to depict “the singularity of characterological personhood”) (Hale 194). Given Hale’s humanistic optimism and her conciliatory approach, Benjamin Paul describes *The Novel and the New Ethics* as “a refreshingly optimistic book, with the imaginative capacity to recast the

internecine conflicts of the literary critical establishment as part of a larger cultural aspiration toward an ethical, though ever-faltering, engagement with otherness” (497). Such an ethical orientation towards otherness has many parallels with Booth’s own pluralistic deference to ‘the *other hand*’ and his view of literary experience as a relational “coDUCTION”: the differential collisions between different persons, perspectives, paradigms (*Company* x). Along similar lines, Hale argues that the modern novel, characterized by its “protean nature, its capacity to be anything at all” (167), gained legitimacy only once its “capacity for heterogeneity” was ascribed with “ethical value” by authors and critics in the Anglo-American literary tradition (139). In sum, the novel was consolidated in the public and critical imagination once its *aesthetic* dimensions, characterized by the capacity for representing difference and heterogeneity, was ascribed with *ethical* value (“an irresolvability that can become its own source of *ethical* value”) (Hale 11, emphasis added).

Nussbaum, we recall, likewise argued for the ethical value of the Jamesian novel on the basis of the “ultimate incommensurability” of values upon which the novel’s aesthetics was predicated (*Love’s* 303). Perhaps a more unexpected parallel between Nussbaum and Hale, however, is found in the collapsing of author and critic that takes place in Hale’s literary-historical account. Mirroring the identity that Nussbaum is after between author and philosopher, Hale’s selection of texts shows a preference for authors who are also academics, critics, or theorists (e.g., Henry James, Toni Morrison, J. M. Coetzee, Zadie Smith), and Hale spends as much time close-reading their critical and scholarly writings as their literary ones. This is no accident. The general drift of Hale’s argument parallels Nussbaum’s central contention: that literary authors are on a level playing field with critics and philosophers, insofar as they make ethical injunctions, normative claims, and theoretical postulates, except, unlike those of critics

and philosophers, these are instantiated within the very formal structures of their written works. Like Nussbaum, who argued that literature could be “more philosophical than philosophy” (Booth “Martha” 302), Hale conceives the Jamesian novel as not merely embodying certain ethical axioms so much as inaugurating its own ‘new’ ethics through the very singularity of its formal dimensions. As Frederick Feldman observes in a review,

The suggestion, ultimately, is that post-structuralist theorists have their defenses of literature backward—James’s novelistic ethics set the terms for ethical theorization, and not the other way around. ... Literary criticism often receives its framework from the philosophers; in tracing family resemblances between post-structuralist and liberal humanist ethics, Hale would reverse the usual hierarchy and make J. Hillis Miller and Judith Butler the progeny of Henry James. (792)

To the extent that this ‘reversal’ favors the primacy of novelistic form as *sui generis*, as an ethical teacher in its own right, it parallels Nussbaum’s thesis in *Love’s Knowledge*: literature need not be measured by moral-philosophical value, since literature’s own value is best captured by how it steps ‘outside’ the parameters of prosaic moral-philosophical discourse. Benjamin Paul makes this connection between Hale and Nussbaum yet more evident:

Hale’s intellectual aversion to programmatic interpretations (philosophical or otherwise) of Jamesian ethics suggests that Nussbaum’s importance to her argument goes beyond the contrast provided by a seemingly outmoded humanism. The thesis of *Love’s Knowledge*, after all, is that the novelist deserves to be read as an equal to the philosopher, and one lesson of *The Novel and the New Ethics* is that *the novel is more than equal to the task of its own theorization*. (496, emphasis added)

Paul's closing words in the above passage recall the collapsing of text and interpretation that occurs in Nussbaum's hermeneutics, how Nussbaum 'presupposes' the novel itself in her interpretation of the novel (see Chapter III). A similar stepping 'outside' any antecedent or assumptive ground is true for Hale's ethical legitimation of the novel; according to Hale, the novel's very resistance to being theorized, its "protean nature, its capacity to be anything at all" (167), is "precisely what invests a particular novel's narrative procedures with value – a value that refuses any prefabricated or formulaic notion of what right narrative ethics might be or whether right narrative ethics can be in fact be self-consciously achieved" (14). The novel's 'value,' in sum, lies in its refusal of any *a priori* categories of what is good, right, or valuable, a value "ungraspable through predetermined assumptions" (Hale 161). In the rejection of any *a priori* value scheme (the fact that alterity is "not grounded in a systematic ethical philosophy that establishes a priori a particular emotional connection or type of interpersonal relation" [54], the fact that such an ethics "does not solve in advance the problem of its own regulation" [46]), the echoes of Nussbaum's particularism and perspectivism in Hale's literary ethics are most evident.

Yet a resistance to *a priori* certainties, categories, and conventions can consolidate its own certainties, if the ethical aporias explored in the previous chapters are any indicator. The evidence for the undercover normativity of Hale's novelistic theory, and the problems attendant to it, will be tackled in the forthcoming sections, which follow the structure of the earlier chapters. I begin first with a brief summary of Hale's literary history in *The Novel and the New Ethics* and its basic terms. I then proceed into what I consider the most insightful and illuminating moments in Hale's work, rooted in the recognition that even to defy formal constraints, as the modern novel is said to do, or else to step outside ethical norms, comes with its own formal limits, its own normative contours. In short, Hale repeats a transcendental

argument about the pragmatic inevitability of value judgments and ethical norms and the impossibility of neutrality that is definitive of all the ethical criticism advocates. Where Hale's account falls short, however, is in failing to consistently apply her implicit refutations of external moral skepticism to the very ethics of alterity she describes, which is always offered up by its adherents as a stance 'outside' any substantive ethical commitment—a "meta-ethical" container for moral difference that is unaware of its own value-laden existence, its own ethical ground (Hale *Novel* 191). The end result of such an ethic is not so much an openness to difference, heterogeneity, and otherness, which it is purported to be, as it is the prescription of an internal contradiction that is wrestled against without end—and ultimately without the possibility for ethical action and political intervention. All said, Hale's model of literary ethics, conceived of as the attempt to bridge the "gasp and squeal of postmodern critical styles" (45) with "the felt need in the present moment to revivify the social relevance of literature" (ix), appears to play into a nominalist circularity amply familiar to us from the previous chapters. The 'ethics of alterity' which Hale ascribes to the modern novel amounts to a categorical ethical commitment to represent otherness, an otherness that necessarily *exceeds* all representations and categories, resulting in "a lived state of paradoxicality, the sense of being alive within a contradiction" (153): a sense of "unverifiability" (191) that is itself elevated as "an objective truth" (175).

A Brief Overview

Hale's central thesis in *The Novel and the New Ethics* (hereafter referred to as *The Novel*) can be summarized as follows: the modern novel, in its early history as a literary form, suffered from a kind of "protean" formlessness (xi), "its capacity to be anything at all" (167). This feature made the modern Jamesian novel distinct from the nineteenth century novel (in the vein of

Stowe, Dickens, or George Eliot) which was seen as “valuable for the social good it can accomplish” through its themes and content (xii). It was not until Henry James, however, that the modern 20th century novel began to be seen as a distinct and legitimate literary form, wherein the novel’s ethicality is no longer related to its content or message but is a direct feature of its ‘protean’ formal dimensions. This consolidation of the modern novel as a legitimate literary form was achieved not by the codifying of formal techniques or tropes, Hale’s argument goes, but through a more circuitous route: through the ethics that authors and readers began to apply to the modern novel’s formal heterogeneity, post-factum. As Hale puts it, “the novel became recognizable and appreciable as a literary form only when that form was understood as laden with ethical meaning” (xi). What Rosenthal calls the “innate formlessness” of the modern novel, in a review of Hale’s work, became its normative underpinning and unifying field because that heterogeneity was now understood as a platform for moral education (“Theory” para. 19). The assumption was that by engaging with the singularity of the myriad characters and perspectives within a novel, freed from the bounds of conventional narrative and formal structures, readers were learning about social difference and expanding their moral capacities for empathy, identification, and so on (Hale *Novel* xi). What was once an inchoate ‘formlessness,’ resistant to stable narratives or didactic social messages, could be conceived as a formal property in its own right only once that formlessness was reframed as an ethical capacity for characterological *representation*, thus allowing the very heterogeneity of the modern novel to be conceived as its chief *ethical* merit. According to Hale, it was this collapsing of aesthetics into ethics that finally legitimated the Jamesian novel in the public and critical imagination, and, as she goes on to explore, continues to be definitive of novelistic theories and practices today. Through an analysis of the works of Toni Morrison, Zadie Smith, J. M. Coetzee, and other contemporary author-

critics, Hale is able to argue that today's novel continues to be defined by the same grounds of legitimation as James first inaugurated, with the novel's perceived value as an artform ultimately resting on the ethical takeaway that readers get from their encounters with plurality, heterogeneity, and irremediable relativism and perspectivism which the novel as form provides. "The novel," Hale claims, "still can be, as James and Woolf declared, anything at all – but this variety coalesces into an art form when it can be comprehended through or as an ethics of alterity" (141).

Hale's phrase for this unifying principle or function that defines the novel as a distinct aesthetic form is the "ethics of alterity" (xii), or what she also calls the "new ethics" (ix). In the hands of modern and contemporary novelists, an ethics of alterity becomes "the basis of aesthetic unity: all the narrative choices and procedures of their novels are infused via their artistic task with the ethical pursuit of otherness" (11). With her attribution of alterity to novelistic aesthetics, Hale invokes an entire history of thought reaching back to Emmanuel Levinas, who first used the term "alterity" to describe an ethical orientation that is disruptive to the limits of subjectivity, an ethics that takes the infinite demand of relationality to an Other as its (anti)foundation, a radical ethical responsibility that precedes any fixed metaphysics or ontology (*Totality and Infinity* 42-43). Hale's unexpected insight about the modern novel is that this ethical injunction towards 'otherness' was present already in the perspectivalism of Henry James's novelistic aesthetics. James himself famously described the axiomatic assumptions of his novelistic practice as follows:

The house of fiction has ... not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows need not be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still

pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. ("Preface," para. 7)

Caught between a "million" pluralistic possibilities, perspectives, positionalities and the call to "individual" subjectivity, James's aesthetics sets forth a relation between subjectivity and sociality that is imaginable as an irresolvable tension or "doubleness" between the two (Hale *Novel* 109): a doubleness familiar as identity and alterity, self and other, a subject's 'individual vision' set against a society of a million other 'possible windows.' For Hale, this generative tension hinges on the precarious pivoting point of "irreducible relativism," so that the antinomy between the individual subject and the social is never resolved but rather positively affirmed as an unsettled, precarious, constitutive contradiction of each (Hale *Novel* 89). Moreover, the precarity between subjective identification and social contingency is best realized as a process of ongoing experience, "the overthrow of epistemology by experience, the troubling of certainty by an apprehension that comes through surprised feeling" (Hale *Novel* 190). Such a phenomenological horizon can never be settled, which is to say, it is best lived out in the ongoing-ness of *narratives*, not inert moral-philosophical propositions.

Among the primary expressions of this epistemic and ethical contingency inhering to the modern novel is the novelist's *own* ethical capacity to be self-reflexive about the limits of their subjective positionality. This self-awareness on the part of the novelist opens them to recognize how their own authorial powers always risk lapsing into a potentially unethical act of appropriation, "an authorial act of domination," a situation that leads them to defer to the autonomy of their fictional characters (120). This is the form of alterity that Hale explores most frequently in *The Novel and the New Ethics*: cases where a fictional character is said to have an independent personhood not reducible to the author's own aesthetic projects and narrative aims.

Thus, “one of the central endeavours of *The Novel and the New Ethics*” is to show that what is at stake in the Jamesian notion of narrative ethics is “not simply ... the representation of the personhood of a particular fictional character” but also the “ethical relationship between fictional character and the ethical character of the author,” a negotiation between the author’s creative autonomy and their ethical deference to the autonomy of their characters (28). The novelist’s second-order awareness that the entirety of their novel is “*itself a perspectival event*” (111) opens them to an “authorial experience of disempowerment in relation to the fictional world” (15), thereby serving as a precondition for the ethical recognition of the autonomy and singularity of their characters. Such a metalogical awareness serves to dislodge the author’s aesthetic concerns with plot structure and formal devices that define other literary forms, subordinating them to an ethical concern with characterological *representation*. A novelist’s ethicality is thus measured by how much the novelist accommodates a character’s autonomy, how fully they *represent* the character in their uniqueness and singularity, and how much they resist the temptation to instrumentalize their characters towards their desired narrative ends.⁵⁵ A chief sign of this “renewed concern in fiction writing with the representation of character,” Hale observes, is the contemporary interest in debating “the success or failure of narrative technique to do justice to the personhood of characters” (xii). The representational terms of such an alterity-based ethics reveal how this “new ethical enterprise” is closely allied to the commitment to *representation* definitive of the ethical turn overall, as discussed in Chapter I (Hale 2).

A tension already arises, however, between *ethics* and *aesthetics* in this formulation, which Hale is careful to suss out. If any formal choice is always an act of closure to alternative

⁵⁵ It is fruitful to recall Booth’s comments about modern literary realism in this context, how such realism is predicated on “an attitude of impartiality” towards the characters of a story: “Sometimes this impartiality is made to sound like universal love or pity or toleration”; “Indeed, a very great deal of modern fiction has been written on the assumption, itself a basic commitment to a value, that to understand all is to forgive all” (*Rhetoric* 77).

and incommensurate possibilities, positions, subjectivities, and *non-representational*, insofar as formal choices are creatively constructed rather than passively receptive, then form as such can be seen as complicit with an exclusionary and therefore ethically culpable failure to represent otherness. Aesthetic devices can be seen as acts of ‘categorical violence’ against the singularity or autonomy of characters, and thus impediments to the ethical concern with representation. Indeed, Hale is quick to highlight how the “conflict between alterity and artistic design” is a constitutive one for the modern novel, and how the formal dimensions of novelistic fiction are as often chastised as they are valorized as means or impediments for realizing otherness (120):

ever since the novel was first theorized as a literary form, the conflict between alterity and artistic design has organized the debate about its generic identity. The personalization and contextualization of style insisted upon by novelistic narration means that plot, like lyrical style, has the force of an authorial instrument of power, an attempt by the novelist to impose art upon life, an authorial act of domination that encroaches on the life of the storyworld. The modern novel’s commitment to the creation of autonomous characters positions any act of narration as a potential encroachment on the existential freedom of that character. (120)

Narrative structures, aesthetic designs, and formal constraints are seen in this alterity-based tradition as stumbling blocks to the ethical capacity for representation which the modern novel’s comparative formlessness and heterogeneity seemed to promise. And yet, the fact that this “conflict between alterity and artistic design” continues to inform the novel’s “generic identity” today, as Hale exhaustively outlines across her book, suggests that, for all of the novel’s supposed “innate formlessness,” the formal elements to novelistic narratives persist and are never entirely overcome (Rosenthal “Theory” para. 19). Consequently, it is not the ethical

commitment to characterological representation alone, nor the formal or narratological devices of novelistic narratives, but the “conflict” or “doubleness” between the two that uniquely characterizes the modern novel as form (120).

Hale finds an affinity between this Jamesian aesthetics of characterological perspectivism and two projects that might appear to be the very antithesis of such an aesthetics: the social concern of contemporary ideological criticism, and poststructuralist critiques of the subject. Although these projects might seem utterly at odds with what Henry James was up to, Hale argues that they are ultimately motivated by the same normative horizon: a skeptical recognition of the radical contingency of perspectival subjectivity, matched by an equal faith in the ethical powers of representation. Hale claims that the many contemporary critiques of Jamesian novels, which tend to condemn them on the basis of their complacent individualism,⁵⁶ are actually “mounting a critique of James that is staged from within the house of fiction that he has built” (101), since “to read James’s form as the expression of hegemonic identity is to turn the lesson of the master back onto the master” (169). After all, James’s perspectival thesis about the “irreducible relationality” of point of view seems nothing other than this selfsame resistance to hegemonic identities, dogmatic norms, and absolute verities (Hale 95), amounting even to an interrogation of subjective certainty (as sensed in James’s condemnation of first-person narration, his call to “forbid the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation”) (“Preface to *The Ambassadors*” 320-321). James’s perspectival aesthetics was thus an early precursor to poststructuralist critiques of the subject, however “counterintuitive” such a conclusion may seem, as Rosenthal points out in a review (“Novel” 496).

⁵⁶ Since at least Fredric Jameson, it has become commonplace to associate Henry James’s novels with a complacent and conservative individualism. Hale seems motivated to undo this trend, retrieving the more radical potentials of Jamesian aesthetics that have been neglected in such accounts.

To establish the continuities between these two projects—a modernist perspectivalism and a postmodern poststructuralism—Hale argues that James’s presuppositions have so pervaded every level of the novel’s aesthetics, and even its overt themes, that the novel has continued to champion a Jamesian perspectivalism even into the contemporary context: “the novel as a cultural agent has contributed to the modern belief in personal identity as grounded in perspectival relativity,” since the novel is “an art form that takes perspectivalism for granted” (108).⁵⁷ Across *The Novel and the New Ethics*, Hale explores multiple levels of perspectival relationality playing out within contemporary novels—between characters and characters, characters and authors, characters and readers, readers and novelistic form, readers and authors (the permutations go on)—arguing that each is structurally “homologous” to an ethical encounter with a destabilizing alterity or otherness (200). A character’s limited point of view, realized within a social context of other characters which that character is prevented from accessing, is isomorphic to the *reader’s* experience of the novel, in that the novel’s invitation to identify with said character is likewise impeded by the countervailing recognition of the reader’s own limited subjectivity. The novel is thereby engaged in a *mise-en-abyme* affirmation of perspectivalism at every level: from the intradiegetic dissonances between different characters, the extradiegetic dissonances between characters and the formal devices of plot, and the ironic distance between readers and characters.

Perspectivalism is thus both the *ethos* and the *aesthesis* of the modern novel as form, and it is these very dissonant internal tensions that have consolidated the novel in the minds of

⁵⁷ The extent to which this history played out through James’s direct influence is somewhat unclear in Hale’s account. It seems much more likely that James’s novelistic aesthetics was simply one expression of a broader historical and cultural paradigm shift. However, the absence of any such paradigmatic account in Hale’s literary history does lend the impression that she credits James as the sole inaugurator. Thus, Feldman observes that Hale’s literary history makes it seem as if James did indeed “set the terms” for the ethical turn, and that poststructuralist philosophers like Butler and liberal humanist ethicists like Nussbaum are indeed “the progeny of Henry James” (792).

contemporary authors and critics as the best medium for conveying the “doubleness of perspectivalism”: an invitation to identification, disrupted by an awareness of the contingency of that identity (109). In this perspectival doubleness, ‘character’ serves as the pivoting point: a fictional character calls us to immerse in and identify with an individual point of view, while simultaneously making us aware of the constructedness, the contingent limits and sociological underpinnings of that point of view (ultimately of *any* point of view, reflecting these ethical insights back to the reader’s own positionality). And yet, in the novel’s unwillingness to completely give up the call to immersion and identification, in its continued investment in the powers of imagination, sympathy, empathy, and a more radical alterity, the novel resists that sociological reductionism even as it affirms it. This precarious inner tension is simply what the novel *is*, as form: “the form of the novel suits the expression of this paradox because it can represent homologically the doubleness of perspectivalism” (109). By consolidating the paradox of perspectivalism—a constitutive tension between contingency and general ethical concern—as its *own* ethical point of view, Hale is able to argue for an unbroken continuity between the presuppositions of the modernist novel and the contemporary ethico-political turn in literary studies.

Hale’s Transcendental Arguments: Refuting External Moral Skepticism

Being a literary historian, Dorothy Hale is the least overtly critical of the three literary scholar-critics explored in this project. Hale refrains from any direct critical evaluation of texts, critics, or theorists, taking up a scholarly posture and choosing to speak instead through the voices of the authors and critics she surveys. Hale signals her neutral, scholarly, historicizing approach up front when she claims in the preface to have no stake of her own, and that she is

merely outlining a consensus in how *other* theorists, critics, and writers have theorized the novel in recent decades: “*The Novel and the New Ethics* does not attempt to adjudicate among the ethical defenses of literary value, philosophical or literary, with the goal of settling the debate by putting forward the ‘right’ theory of novelistic ethics” (xi); again, she reasserts her neutrality in saying “my aim is not to attempt to refute, correct, or refine new ethical arguments by approaching them with a commitment to a particular philosophical tradition” (xi). And yet, there are several instances in *The Novel and the New Ethics* when Hale seems to gesture to rather serious problems endemic to the ethics of alterity she outlines. Although Hale’s explicit negative evaluations are few and far between, the implicit assumptions of her literary history reveal a strong critical undertow to her account. This undercover critical dimension of Hale’s literary history is worth unpacking in the following section, as it demonstrates how Hale’s project, like Booth’s and Nussbaum’s, does hinge on a transcendental argument: a claim about the *inevitability* of normative ethical assumptions, one that implicates the alterity-based ethics in a debilitating self-contradiction.

In her subtle, scholarly, and understated way, Hale highlights how the ethics of alterity that has defined the discourse surrounding the modern novel lacks any sound justification for itself. As early as her preface, Hale suggests that what is involved in the ethics of alterity is something like an arbitrary commitment, applied post-factum to the novel and not really traceable to its formal properties:

it is a register of the strength of this tradition in our current cultural moment that it is controversial for me to argue, as I do, that no absolute or necessary ethics of narrative develops from this tradition—despite the fact that it is this necessary ethics that novelists

seek as a guide to their artistic practice and ... that literary critics believe they find there.

(10-11)

With this “controversial” move, Hale separates herself from the alterity-based tradition she commits to studying, commenting on its lack of sound legitimation (10). Hale’s insight is that nothing is “necessary” about this ethics of alterity, nothing about the novel per se requires it to be true, and that is has been something of an arbitrary and ad-hoc solution to the problems of novelistic form (10-11). Hale’s observation about the arbitrariness of such an ethic is echoed by Meffan and Worthington’s treatment of Coetzee’s novels, when they argue that a commitment to alterity “does little to establish the basis for a claim that acts of violence toward the Other are unethical, unless with recourse to the terms of an ethical framework that is here assumed to be unproblematically self-evident, indeed imperative” (134). A similar criticism is expressed by Altieri, when he argues that a Levinasian commitment to the singularity of the other “has to face the problem of its so far not having done very much to specify what is so valuable about singularity per se in relation to literature” (36). By highlighting this lack of legitimating grounds, Hale suggests that the ethics of alterity is not genuinely ‘found there’ in novelistic form but seems to involve an ideological commitment that precedes the novel itself, suggesting something more paradigmatic at stake than the aesthetics of the novel alone.

Hale’s implicit critique of this new ethical paradigm becomes most obvious in her favorite rhetorical trope across *The Novel*, which is to point out how contemporary ideological and poststructuralist critiques of the modern Jamesian novel actually reproduce the same presuppositions as their very object of critique. Turning the tables on James’s critics, Hale reveals how their critiques of James’s project rely on the same underlying paradigm as did James, a turn that Hale relies on again and again to defuse these literary-critical polemics and

reveal their underlying dialogic unity. Along these lines, Hale argues that Toni Morrison, in her negative assessment of Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*, is in fact partaking in a Jamesian assumption about "the ethical value of otherness" (80), "mounting a critique of James that is staged from within the house of fiction that he has built" (101). Hale uses Morrison's critique of James "to argue that it is precisely the conflicted view of ethics that they both share that positions otherness as a rich problematic," since "both positions take the ethical value of otherness as the key value for judging the success or failure of novelistic narrative, and that this problematic (contradictory in itself) works to produce novels as unified works of art" (80). Adam Zachary Newton replays a similar complicity in his own critique of James, according to Hale. Newton critiques James on the basis of James's unethical imposition of power onto fictional others, so that "Newton can deem James an ethical monster"; and although Hale takes pains to distinguish the subtle differences between Newton's and James's projects, Newton's critique ends up confirming James's perspectival thesis in the end, Hale claims, by "extending James's own investigation into the limits and possibilities of fiction's capacity for achieved alterity" (195). Deeming James an 'ethical monster' because of an apparent failure of alterity, even as the Jamesian tradition is itself the foremost champion of an alterity-based ethics, is the doubleness that Hale sees in both James and James's critics (given that such an ethic is itself imagined as a commitment to "doubleness") (109). Critics and authors working in this tradition might see these constitutive ambiguities as proof that an alterity-based ethics is a "rich problematic" (80), thereby serving to reconfirm the value of such an ethic. However, by observing how all these critiques of the Jamesian novel actually *recreate* James's core assumptions, Hale implicitly shows them to lack any critical bite, to not be interventionist at all but complicit in the reproduction of a hidden consensus.

We need only reinscribe Hale's observations of this doubleness with the critical valence of *duplicity* to realize what is really entailed here: these critiques of James risk entering into contradiction with the very premises that motivate their criticisms to begin with. Insofar as these critics' negative judgments of James condemn him for his 'unethical mastery' and authorial imposition of power, they are also failures on the part of these critics' to be properly self-reflexive with regards to the irreducible contingency of their *own* positionality, to properly practice the self-restraint of 'letting be' and achieving an "encounter with states of being outside of and different from the self" (5-6). The intellectual environment described by Hale thus seems dangerously recursive, setting up a critical culture of 'debunking,' suspicious hermeneutics, and one-upmanship in which it is always possible to make the (self-defeating) claim that one represents otherness better than others. What Virginia Woolf suggestively calls the "cannibal art" of the novel thus becomes a cannibal criticism, too (qtd. in Hale 139).⁵⁸ Again, Hale is not consistently critical towards the problems of complicity attending these critiques of James, however (suggesting that she might share a commitment to the Jamesian project herself and is happy to see them all agree with her theory). Hale often implies that these poststructuralist and ideological critiques actually succeed at "extending James's own investigation" further than James himself could, given the limits of his own contingent social positionality (195). But it is equally possible to read Hale's observation in a critical sense, if these further 'extensions' do not represent a radical departure from the preceding consensus but a deeper entrenchment of its basic terms.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ These observations confirm Lundeen's critique of those discourses of suspicion that set up a "duplicitous relationship with culture" in which they "exercise their faith in language by speaking and writing but remain skeptical of others' verbal expression, always keeping an eye out for the ways they are being had" (Lundeen 84).

⁵⁹ All this can be explained much more simply by the expansiveness and slipperiness of the term alterity, as Meffan and Worthington observe, and the fact that alterity must smuggle in some 'modicum of absoluteness' that selectively essentializes what or who is the most ethical 'other' to attend to (see Chapter I). The ad-hoc nature of this absolute sets up a Catch-22 situation in which any normative claim, as well as any formal limit, can be vulnerable to the

It is in Hale's treatment of the novelist Zadie Smith, however, where Hale most reveals the hidden critical valence of her project. Hale breaks the mold of her literary-historical survey in Chapter 3 of *The Novel and the New Ethics* by adopting a distinctly critical stance towards Zadie Smith's literary theories. Hale's exploration of Zadie Smith's writings, from Smith's novelistic works to her non-fiction ones, works as a serviceable example of an internal critique: the identification of a contradiction between Smith's *theories* as an intellectual and her *practices* as an artist and novelist (exemplifying the typical structure of a transcendental argument).

Hale begins her critique by arguing that Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty* (2005) is written to be a deliberate foil to Elaine Scarry's philosophical treatment of the subject, *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999). According to Hale, Smith offers her novel as a counterclaim to Scarry's more philosophical discourse, staging how "the novel's idea of an idea is different from the philosopher's" (97). Rather than "enumerate the fundamental qualities of beauty," Smith's novel "stresses its relativity and social constructedness" (97). Smith's *On Beauty* thereby counterposes itself to philosophical abstraction, showcasing "the particularity and contingency of each individual's apprehension of beauty" and "demonstrating how "any abstract idea a character might hold" is "inseparable from an individual's social position within a particular cultural formation" (97). These are all so many ways of saying that Smith's novel has a nominalist emphasis, exemplifying Nussbaum's ethics of particularity by way of a commitment to contingency and relationality, set against the generalizing and universalizing tendencies of philosophical thought.

However (and here is where the incongruity in Smith's project crops up), Hale also notes how Smith's novels are characterized by a certain irascible *sincerity* towards aesthetic feeling

accusation that it ethically fails to realize alterity, because of what the claim must neglect, being an exclusive, selective, singular claim that necessarily denies its contrary (i.e., its 'other').

and ethical affirmations, by strong and affective identifications that would seem to belie that overriding contingency, self-reflexivity, and skeptical uncertainty. Hale points to this sensibility when she quotes Smith in writing, “You’re constantly told in college and elsewhere that good taste and good fiction are about not pushing, about not expressing your opinion too forcefully. ... It’s nonsense, and it’s time to stop” (qtd. in 101). Smith here is rallying against the ethos of self-negation and self-restraint that is expected of the modern novelist or author: she is after the more disagreeable side of ethics, a commitment to *ethos* over *pathos* (Altieri 31), to sincere identification with “ultimate commitments” over a passive deference to the positions of ‘others’ (Booth *Company* 335).⁶⁰ “The flash of certainty, the call of beauty – these judgments seem to come to us as unmediated insights,” Hale observes about Smith’s *On Beauty*, “no matter how much we also know through our reflective knowledge that their very irresistibility is the sign of our ideological investment and social position” (106). Hale’s insight is that Smith’s very *practice* as a novelist—put simply, her persistence in *continuing to write*—belies that Smith does not fully subscribe to a model of ethicality premised on self-restraint, skeptical doubt, social contingency, negative capability, and otherness-orientation. An alternative set of norms is assumed in the very *practice* of writing novels, echoing what Schwarz meant by his claim that “saying always has an ethical dimension” (5) or Nussbaum’s claim that “writing itself is a choice, an act, and not a neutral act either. It is opposed to other forms of action or passion: *to listening, to waiting, to keeping silent*” (*Love’s* 311, emphasis added). Thus, Hale writes how

⁶⁰ And yet, how does Smith reconcile her willful assertiveness as a novelist with her earlier critique of James, whose own critiques of George Eliot’s writings “fail” because “he does not open himself up to Eliot’s otherness” (100)? Wasn’t James being too pushy, too forceful, instead of being properly receptive to identities other than his own? In another about-face, Hale writes how “Smith’s rebellion” against the ethos of self-restraint “is in fact *conducive* to advancing the Jamesian aesthetics of alterity”; “through her conviction that good fiction is not at odds with the expression of strong authorial opinion ... Smith affirms the perspectivalism upon which the aesthetics of alterity rests” (101, emphasis added). Even what would seem to be the very *opposite* of alterity, i.e., the strong assertion of authorial identity, is assimilable to the doubleness of alterity in Hale’s capacious scheme.

“*On Beauty* simply refuses to be scandalized by the knowledge that aesthetics and philosophy serve as ideological instruments through their discursive erasure of the social agents who produce them” (106). To write a novel at all is to reach beyond one’s absolute contingency, to offer values and ways of being as “assertions of truth,” because the very act of writing asserts the belief that one’s general truth-claims can reach other readers, other cultural identities and sociological determinations (Booth *Company* 344). Smith’s novel is proof that “the social practices of beauty making, truth telling, and literary creation persist, despite the rational understanding of their ideological instrumentality” (105-106).

What Hale is unearthing here in Smith’s practice as a novelist is the subterranean realm of the presuppositional, those deep, embodied, unconscious, and paradigmatic intuitions upon which our practices subsist. It is what one does *practically* (not what one claims theoretically) that tells the truth about one’s beliefs: “One can falsify a description of oneself or lie in a statement of belief,” writes Hale, “but one can’t counterfeit the way one sees, the point of view from which one makes sense of the world” (108). For Hale and Smith, the existence of this unconscious substrate of sense-making, the invisible fore-structure of thought that determines one’s view of the world, is what grants cognitive value to what otherwise seems like the anti-critical valence of ‘naïve’ affective engagement and subjective identification in literary experience. “For Smith it is precisely the uncontrollable revelation of value through the representational choices made by an author,” Hale claims, “that makes literature a privileged discourse for knowing identity” (107).

In this apologia for literature, in which literature is not less but only differently ethical and philosophical in value, not subordinal to criticism or theory but itself an Arnoldian “criticism of life” (*Essays* 3), Hale repeats the insights of Schwarz and Booth by revealing literature to be a

matter of ‘deep’ structures of thought and feeling, “a priori worlds” (Schwarz 3), unconscious “ultimate commitments” (Booth *Company* 335) which run deeper than what we can articulate in conscious critical-analytical discourse. Smith believes writers have “a duty to express accurately their way of being in the world” (Smith, qtd. in Hale 108), to affirm their underlying worldview, requiring not intellectual articulation merely but a fully embodied, affective, procedural enactment, what Nussbaum calls “an adventure of the personality as a whole” (*Love’s* 88). The necessity of affective immersion, identification, *ethos* to this process amounts to an admission that “precisely because a ‘a way of being in the world’ is something that is lived by the author, it can never be fully known by her ... her way of seeing can never be wholly visible to her” (since her way of seeing is what makes things visible to begin with) (Hale 108). Hale and Smith’s defense of literature is founded on a distinct epistemological claim: that external moral skepticism is a false idea, because our ‘a priori worlds’ and normative assumptions can never be gotten rid of, and we never step outside of some “fiduciary framework” or paradigmatic ground which we assume as axiomatic, no matter how critical our posture (Jost 25). ‘Naïve’ immersion in literature regains epistemic value in this view, insofar as our most paradigmatic substructures of thought can only be unearthed (to the extent they can be unearthed at all) by full and sincere subjective identification, rather than by a scholarly, critical, or skeptical posture of impersonal distance, one that pretends to stand ‘outside’ any ultimate commitment to a paradigm of its own.

The continued *practice* of literature, the fact that “literary creation” does “persist” (Hale 105-106), turns out to be the novelist’s best argument against a more rarefied ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ that would theoretically explain away all sincere subjective identification as an instance of ideologically determined ‘false consciousness.’ Thus, “[u]nlike Foucauldian and Marxist subjective functionalism” (189), Hale observes, “Smith does not chastise the novel for

its contribution to the social production of bad political formations like the liberal subject” (maybe because, for Smith, the liberal subject is not actually such a ‘bad’ formation) (106). The transcendental argument at play in Smith’s ethos as a novelist is that the very *practice* of literature and language is predicated on a claim of common ground, whether potential or actual: a “community of communities” (Jost 36) and an “attempt upon common problems” (Wimsatt 57), a general normative appeal which, whether such an appeal is true or right, is logically *incompatible* with any overriding claim of cultural relativism or sociological determinism. The absence of such a general appeal—of any “break towards the general,” as North puts it—would logically pare down literature to a solipsistic minimum: “writers would only be fit to represent themselves,” Lundeen writes, “and readers, to understand representations of themselves. By this logic, autobiography would emerge as the sole legitimate creative genre, and it would be suitable only for a readership of one: its author” (83). One might well deny any general or collective claim to truth or value, and assert the contrary claim of absolute relativism instead. But doing so would be tantamount to denying the presuppositional ground for literature itself, constituted as a communal and communicative appeal, losing thereby any coherent ethical justification for reading or writing literature—any account for why “literary creation” continues to “persist” in all sincerity, in spite of all the arguments for its “ideological instrumentality” (Hale *Novel* 106).

Yet the substantive argument implied in Smith’s sincerity as a novelist is rescinded in Smith’s role as theorist. According to Hale, an incongruity enters into the picture when Smith begins to write “as a public intellectual rather than a novelist” (124). In nonfiction works like *Changing My Mind* (2009), Smith reveals how the more *ethos*-based assumptions undergirding her novel-writing become subordinated to *pathos*, a “watered-down multiculturalism,” and a neoliberal commitment to “endless change” (124):

the notion of perspectivalism that so much enriches the ethico-artistic task of her novels collapses when she takes on the role of public intellectual into a weaker ethical notion of the self's frictionless capacity for endless change. ... As she states in the forward to *Changing My Mind*, 'I'm forced to recognize that ideological inconsistency is, for me, practically an article of faith.' The grounding in an ungrounded identity (whose key value is not the ethical effort to transcend ideological limits but the confident ability simply to refuse them) marks the paradoxicality of Smith's knowledge project as a public intellectual. (Hale 123-124)

Finding this antinomy unsatisfying, Hale ends up commending Smith as a novelist (her 'practice') but chastising the discrepancy that occurs in Smith's role as cultural critic and intellectual (her 'theory'). As novelist, Smith sought to break free of external moral skepticism, in which any sincere identification with an ethos is foreclosed from being anything other than a cipher for one's own self-interested ideological positionality. However, in her role as theorist, Smith abandons the more provocative implications of her "rebellion" against negative capability, absolute contingency, and cultural relativism (101). Her felt need to assertively express her 'way of being in the world' as something substantive and sincerely believed lapses back into a familiar 'doubleness' in which this claim is, again, nothing more than a feature of Smith's contingent identity, subordinated to an absolute cultural relativism (101). "The power of Smith's novel," Hale thus claims, is reabsorbed into a familiar, and familiarly paralytical, commitment to paradoxicality, passivity, and *pathos*: "the *oppositional* but *mutually defining* nature of these modes of knowing" (106, emphasis added):

On Smith's view, the conflict between the cognitive need to trust spontaneous apprehension (this is what I know, this is beautiful to me) and the epistemological doubt

derived from the knowledge that the ‘this’ one knows and feels is socially produced and politically consequential is the defining structure of knowledge within contemporary secular society. (106)

This ‘defining structure’ of irony and paradoxicality subsumes Smith’s project in the end. Hale observes how this situation leads Smith to affirm alterity as her absolute article of faith, at the expense of unveiling the core contradictions of such an absolute commitment: Smith

holds fast to the nonrelativized belief in social alterity as an ultimate ethical good, no matter what else she may change her mind about. Indeed [...] it is her belief in this value that leads her to believe that changing one’s mind is itself an ethical good—*as long as one does not change one’s mind, one supposes, about the ethical value of the social contingency of all value judgments.* (Hale 133, emphasis added)

That final thought, in italics, is the clincher of Hale’s entire internal critique. Hale exposes Smith’s normative assumptions, her elevation of the “social contingency of all value judgments” to a “nonrelativized” and “ultimate ethical good,” as self-negating, caught up in “logical contradictions” between its overt first-order claim and its smuggled-in, second-order presuppositions, its overtly stated skepticism and its implicitly assumed absolutism (133).

Smith as theorist and intellectual thus attempts to present herself as politically aloof, ethical only in a second-order sense, concerned not with “how the novel might be reformed to avoid bad politics” but rather “how the risk of bad politics attends any and all ways of knowing” (Hale 106). Yet, upon inspection, such a concern is itself an adage of liberalism and libertarianism, after all, and not apolitical: “an anti-institutionalism, the suspicion of any form of positive collectivity,” as Joseph North calls it, by which *all* politics appears to be *bad* politics (151). And this lapsing back into the absolute relativity of any ethico-political point of view on

the part of Smith is rooted, as ever, in a fear of committing the cardinal sin of ‘categorical violence’: “To feel that one knows a truth about the world is to think that this truth is by definition valid beyond the contingencies of personal experience,” a faux-pas which Smith cannot bring herself to commit (Hale 106). *Nominalism*, a skepticism about general claims, causes Smith to ‘forget’ the presuppositions of her *ethos* as a novelist, and to lapse back into the overriding *pathos* of self-restraint. This pits Smith’s sincerity as a novelist, with its sincere commitment to some general ‘way of being in the world,’ into a fundamental antinomy with the theoretical and ideological commitments that preclude all such general assertions—the assumption that any attempt beyond “the contingencies of personal experience” is always already an ‘unethical’ imposition of one’s own contingent positionality, implicated in the ideological instrumentalization of others (Hale 106).

All said, when Hale steps out of her role as scholar and historian and takes on the role of *critic* in her reading of Smith, Hale aptly highlights the more general flaws endemic to an alterity-based ethics: how such an ethics can slip too easily from a recognition of another’s autonomous personhood into an individualistic celebration of one’s own virtuous capacity for negative capability, self-doubt, even self-transformation, “the self’s frictionless capacity for endless change” (123). Transforming from what, into what, to what end, and what the criteria are for a “better” or “worse” change, however, are norms that are left deliberately, some would say generatively absent (111). Smith’s state of paradox reaches such heights of intellectual inscrutability and emotional uncertainty that, Hale says, it is “felt as self-obliteration” (110). Hale highlights the debilitating irony lurking in Smith’s theoretical commitment better than I could:

Rather than following out the ethical dilemma raised by such a stance, Smith instead nominates the capacity for change as an inherently ethical condition. Do I contradict myself between that essay and this? Then, yes, I have only proven my virtuous ideological inconsistency. (124).

We see how Hale appeals to the principle of non-contradiction (pointing out Smith's "logical contradictions") in order to show how Smith's elevation of 'ideological inconsistency' as an ethical virtue serves merely to assert a kind of laissez-faire situationism, negating any rational ground for judgments, norms, or certainties (133). It would be great if Hale had 'followed out the ethical dilemma' herself by extending Smith's self-refutation to the ethics of alterity more broadly—with its commitment to the "irreducible relativism" of values as the sole possible value (*Novel* 89), "the only possible meaning" (*Social* 7-8) and a "sacred social good" (*Novel* 215). This would have inflected Hale's entire literary history with the same critical charge that she selectively levels against Smith. But Hale ceases to recognize the "homologous" (200) structure when it comes to noticing its recursive circularity elsewhere, relegating this problematic recursion to Smith's project alone.⁶¹

Although Hale falls short of realizing the broader implications of her critique of Smith, Hale's refutations of Smith's theoretical commitments serve as a powerful critique of the belief in *absolute contingency* as the means to socially or personally desirable ends, especially evident in the passage below:

In her stance as a public intellectual Smith performs an act of pious discourse that she hopes will enable social transformation. Whatever logical contradictions there may be

⁶¹ Hale even goes so far as to paint Smith as the complacent neoliberal individualist and James and his successors as the socially conscious radicals by contrast: "neither virtuous irresolution nor boundless imaginative freedom are qualities of the novel as developed through the Jamesian tradition" (134), Hale claims, and Smith's theoretical pronouncements risk obscuring "the material forces that create social differences to begin with" (133).

within her argument, part of the hope is that the act of articulation holds transformative power: that material and social conditions will change through the act of saying so. (133)

Smith thus evinces an absolute faith in the ethico-political efficacy of self-reflexivity and absolute contingency. The critiques of the subject upon which such absolute contingency is predicated override any scruples about “logical contradictions” and work almost like a magical invocation: the faith that by simply engaging in ‘infinite critique’ and troubling our subjective certainties “through surprised feeling” (190), “material and social conditions will change” (133).

Hale’s critique of Zadie Smith’s “pious discourse” (133) provides concrete and compelling confirmation of the broader legitimization problems pervading contemporary literary study, as diagnosed by John Guillory. Smith’s confidence in the transformative capacity of representations of alterity is based on a sort of magical thinking, according to Hale; it is along these lines that Guillory argues that the social relevance and “grandiosity of aim” (85) upon which so much contemporary literary-critical work has depended for its legitimization has really involved an untenable “*justification by faith*,” obscuring the lack of any coherent justificatory grounds for itself (xiii). Like Smith’s “pious discourse,” which hopes that the simple verbal “articulation” of her contingency will have “transformative power” for society (Hale 133), the explicitly political “topicality” of literary study is founded on the hope that the mere presentation of these political themes will set in motion the “socially transformative effects of these thematics” (Guillory xii). *Faith* is therefore the operative term, contrasted with a reasoned and rationally worked out justification or grounds of legitimation for literature and criticism.

Recalling Nussbaum’s point that the denial of logic knocks away a “vital prop” for rational argument (*Love’s* 222), Amanda Anderson highlights the same alliance “between the poststructuralist critique of *reason*” and “the form of sociological reductionism that governs the

politics of identity” in *The Way We Argue Now* (10, emphasis added). According to Anderson, “the dominant paradigms within literary and cultural studies have had an adverse effect on the fostering of public-sphere argument” through their “tendency to oppose reason and ethos,” i.e., to relegate ethical judgments to the *irrational* (12). Likewise, Hale seems to understand that what is involved in the ethics of alterity is the diminished status of reason, in favor of an apophatic faith commitment to that which defies any categories of understanding: a faith founded on “a paradoxicality that both relies on reason but also (temporarily, but also again and again) disables reason” (Hale 154). Thus, Hale writes, “the novel reader retains the poststructuralist’s skeptical regard for reason as a tool of hegemony,” all while, paradoxically, “bestowing upon epistemological uncertainty a *positive (and absolute) ethical content*” (*Hale Novel* 191, emphasis added).

Hale calls out Smith for unconsciously lapsing into such a mystified absolutism: a “mystification of the literary imagination as the ethical agent of alterity,” “the magical, alterity-giving properties of the literary imagination” (128), through which “the plural self is an ethical accomplishment,” a “condition of personal plurality” that comes about from “the openness to beliefs and views that are not your own, that belong to other social subjects” (129). All this puts Smith in touch with “a universal truth: that ‘everything is doubled, everything is various’” (qtd. in 129) (recalling to mind Booth’s “inherently, inescapably multivalent, poly-storied, pluri-mythic” ontology) (*Company* 348). This ‘universal truth’ is “what Smith ultimately formulates as the universal condition of personhood in the era of globalization,” “the universal condition of multiperspectivalism, of necessary social pluralism” (130). Such a *universal* commitment is “a social idea for Smith: that of social relativity without social conflict,” “social diversity as a

benign plurality,” which amounts to a familiar assumption: “*ethical incommensurability without disagreement*” (130, emphasis added).

As these many connections to previous chapters continue to accrue, we can note how Smith’s universal belief in ‘ethical incommensurability without disagreement’ is recognizable as John Kekes’s theses of moral pluralism: that it is possible for contradictory values to be reconciled despite (or, to be poststructuralist for a second, *because of*) being contradictory (--). But because a contradiction is unthinkable, the “mind of the universally pluralized social subject” is dependent on “an account of ethical value in which the ethical agent has been rendered almost *wholly passive*”—wholly in a state of *pathos*, we might say (Hale 131, emphasis added). An “ethical rejection of dogmatism” defines Smith’s pluralistic stance, according to Hale (Booth’s dogmatic neutrality? Felski’s antinormative normativity? Dworkin’s external moral skepticism?) (132). Finally, Hale brings her critique to a head by raising a question that ought to give pause to any reader who might be overready to dismiss Hale as one of these very passive, pluralistic, neoliberal subjects she describes: “*Can the capacity for being in mystery and uncertainty translate into ethical political action?*” (132, emphasis added). Hale’s implicit answer is no. The apophatic mystifications of ‘unverifiability’ can only “lead to political solutions that are adequations, middle courses, acceptances of what can *possibly* be rather than the pursuit of what belief would deem *should* be”: ‘should be’ invoking the necessity for normative assertions and substantive ethico-political commitments (132).⁶²

⁶² Elsewhere, Hale notes how “a long line of ethical criticism has faulted James and his characters exactly for their penchant for *watching* rather than *doing*, understood by some as voyeurism rather than ethical commitment” (221, emphasis added). Even though Hale is speaking, again, through critical voices other than her own, these sudden bursts of critical potency on Hale’s part make one wonder where she stands on this Jamesian ethics of alterity herself. Hale seems to recognize, at least in this passing comment, that a negative attitude towards prescriptions, evaluations, and ‘should’ claims has ties to the visual-perceptual epistemology of the Jamesian realist novel, what Altieri calls “spectator emotions” (35) and what Booth calls “dogmatic neutrality” (*Rhetoric* 144).

Applying the logic of Hale's critiques of Smith to the rest of Hale's historical account reveals how the problems in Smith's theoretical commitments do indeed generalize to the broader tradition under Hale's purview. After all, Hale characterizes other novelists, such as Costello, by the same fideism as Smith: "for the contemporary novelist all beliefs are relativizable except the belief that the value of the novel lies in the achievement of ethical otherness" (171). Across *The Novel and the New Ethics*, Hale observes how the "meta-ethical emotion" of "*unverifiability*" (191), described elsewhere as "lived state of paradoxicality, the sense of being alive within a contradiction" (153), gets consolidated by this alterity-based tradition as "an objective truth" (175). Hale locates this emotion of unverifiability "beyond love, vulnerability, or anxiety" (191); her subtle jab against Nussbaum (i.e., 'beyond love') shows how Hale is keen to distinguish the radicality of such an ethics of alterity from "a seemingly outmoded humanism" (Paul 496). But Hale's parenthetical aside—that this "epistemological uncertainty" is bestowed with "a positive (and *absolute*) ethical content"—ought to be much more than a mere aside (*Novel* 191, emphasis added). The possibility that a resistance to absolutes can become its *own* absolute is, in some sense, the whole point of an alterity-based ethics, Hale might say, but what is less obvious, and much more concerning, is that this looks like the very "antinormative normativity" critiqued by Rita Felski, Terry Eagleton, Michael Clune, and other critics lamenting the contemporary crisis of criticism (Felski 8), all the problematics of criticism's paralytic incapacity "to break towards the general" (North 185). With this 'antinormative normativity' in mind, what Hale calls an 'ethics of alterity' appears as merely another designation for what Eagleton describes, at the turn of the century, as "the non-normative" becoming "the norm" (16-17): a totalizing rejection of "totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective

knowledge,” which is to say the reification of the *relativity* of values as its own *absolute* value, beyond which it is impossible to think (let alone judge, evaluate, or critique) (13). As Hale writes,

What is specified in the novelistic aesthetics of alterity is the ethical challenge and opportunity that *irreducible relativism* holds for modern society. ... By making cultural differences visible, the novel educates the reader in *the irreducible ethical relativity of all value*. The novel reader learns that any seemingly objective value is the projection of an interested point of view, a knowledge that in turn leads to self-consciousness about her own standards of evaluation, irreducibly connected with her own subject position. (89)

The closing claim in the excerpt above is familiar enough as a poststructuralist truism within contemporary criticism, but its categorical pronouncement—that *all* claims to objective value (note the universal quantifier) are projections of one’s subjectivity—is offered up by this ethic as a necessary *a priori* truth, an objective, ahistorical, universal claim.⁶³

All these antinomies are precisely the point, however, as Hale reminds us again and again in *The Novel and the New Ethics*. The critical disagreement, “unverifiability” (191), and “irresolvability” (11) generated by the novel’s ethics of alterity does not amount to a paralytic ambiguity so much as confirmation of the ethics’ virtuous capacity for difference, unsettledness, and open-endedness:

The uneasy logic, the switches in perspective from writer to reader, the appeal to the objectifying power of narrative, the larger instability and contradiction in the way that materiality is conceptualized, the confusion as to whether otherness as an ethical good

⁶³ In *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux refers to such a reification of relativity or relationality as a ‘Kantian correlationism,’ which consist of two incompatible and paradoxical propositions: “1. Nothing can be unless it is some form of relation-to-the-world ... 2. The previous proposition must be understood in an absolute sense, rather than as merely relative to our knowledge” (37).

constitutes a spiritual state or social condition: these tensions are precisely what distinguish the Jamesian novel tradition from pious discourse—and from any type of programmatic or systematic position-taking. (Hale 229)

The wholesale rejection of the ‘programmatic’ or the ‘systematic’ can become its own ‘pious discourse,’ however, which is why in some of the most speculative moments of the text, Hale explores those authors and critics for whom alterity takes on a spiritual or mystifying essence: alterity not only as a relation to some other but an apophatic ‘otherness’ in its own right. This ‘other’ is no longer a person or a thing but something more expansive and elusive, exceeding any one individual or any one relation. Hale points to this sensibility of irreducible relationality as “a circuit of interanimation,” in which writer and reader retain “their own subjective particularity even while they are united in their contact with a commonly shared and uncircumscribed spirit (divine or human) that is the basis for their relation” (99). As examples of alterity in this still more indefinite sense, Hale points to Salman Rushdie’s notion of “secular transcendence,” D. H. Lawrence’s notion of the “God-flame,” Virginia Woolf’s notion of “life,” and the religiosity of Levinas, the original site of an alterity-based ethics, all examples of what Hale calls “deliberately mysterious energies” (89) rooted in “an interanimating spirit” (88).

Hale describes how this mystical, apophatic aspect of alterity develops out of modernism and continues to be true of novelistic practices today:

the ethics of alterity distinguishes the novel as *the secular mode for the sacred social good of honoring otherness*. In a mixture of the spiritualism of Virginia Woolf and Wilson Harris with the religious philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, novelistic aesthetics develops out of modernism and into the contemporary moment as an ethico-political formalism. (215, emphasis added)

The novel's ethics of alterity partakes in a "secular" form of "transcendence": the elevation of relationality, or otherness, into an all-encompassing "sacred social good" (215). And while not all the critics and authors that Hale surveys partake in these explicitly transcendent terms, Hale is able to discern a broader unity of effort across the variegated history of the novel precisely insofar as she ascribes *all* these critics and authors with the same 'ultimate commitment': the raising up of alterity as an absolute, ahistorical ethical principle, whether these author-critics admit to this absolutism or only tacitly avow it. The novel is endowed with "a mystical capacity to transcend material conditions" by its "representational capacity for the depiction of alterity," even as such transcendence is caught in a tension with the novel's formal and narrative constraints (which act as "a register of the material and social conditions that impede or limit access to that spiritual animation") (99). This ethical pull towards transcendence, a longing for the Other, in friction with the formal, material, and social conditions that delimit that longing, make up the "constitutive contradictions" at the heart of novelistic aesthetics (99). In fact, it is alterity's status as a constitutive contradiction—an incommensurability between relationality conceived, on the one hand, as a transcendent principle and, on the other hand, as our all-too-human historical-material contingency—which provides critics and theorists with that 'doubleness,' that 'interanimating spirit,' that binds the novel into a distinct *ethos* and *aesthesis*. According to Hale's theory, these internal tensions between a novel's social-ethical concern and its formal-material dimensions, its longing for ethical transcendence limited by an awareness of its contingency, make up the very 'constitutive contradictions' that consolidate the novel as form for the authors and critics she surveys.

But it is important to note that in the absence of such a transcendent, mystical, apophatic dimension to alterity, there could be no generative friction with the material substrate, no

“constitutive contradictions” that make the novel’s aesthetics what it is (99). Hale’s history of the novel can consolidate the dialectical tensions between aesthetic autonomy and social concern only insofar as each is seen to be pressed into service towards the same “sacred social good”: a commitment to alterity, relationality, otherness, the self-reflexive recognition of a subject’s contingency (Hale 215). It is precisely these authors’ and critics’ elevation of an engagement with alterity as an absolute principle for ethics, a “sacred social good” (Hale 215) and a general answer to “how human beings should live” (Nussbaum *Love’s* 15), that provides Hale with the shared normative backdrop against which she can conceive of the manifold history of 20th century formalist and ideological discourses of the novel as partaking in the same project. Hale recognizes what these transcendent terms, this ‘sacred social good,’ must mean, however: that alterity has been raised up as an absolute arch-principle, the apex of these authors’ and critics’ value hierarchies, determinative of all ethical value. What makes this absolutism so difficult to discern, however, in spite of the overtly mythologizing language used by early modernists and Levinas’s originally religious conception of the term, is the cognitive dissonance, since what is involved is the absolutizing of a notion whose entire valence is relational. Hale’s entire account of this *mise en abyme* sensibility within the ethics of alterity, so exhaustively explored across *The Novel and the New Ethics*, might have been anticipated by picking out a single paragraph from the preface of *Social Formalism*:

In general, the problem that social formalists seek to address is how objective interpretation can be accomplished in a world where meaning is necessarily subjective, dependent on one’s point of view. So strong is the belief among social formalists that there is no meaning beyond subjectivity that *subjectivity itself becomes in this tradition the only possible meaning*. But because social formalists are equally committed to a

moral belief in the intrinsic good of alterity—that humans are most fulfilled when they come to know sympathetically persons who are substantially different from themselves—they have a stake in mitigating the radical relativism of their ontological position. They thus ascribe to certain representational forms the power to fix and limit subjective mediation through the concretization of identity If this definition of the social seems so minimalist as to barely warrant the term, that is exactly my point. (7-8, emphasis added)

In another rare moment when Hale becomes critical as well as historical, she points to the basic irony of this formulation. By consolidating individual subjectivity as its own *objective* meaning (the “only possible” meaning, in fact), ‘social formalists’ play out a paradoxically absolutist faith in a project of radical subjective contingency and critique. The assumption is that by troubling the limits of our contingent subjectivities, and by engaging in an ethical commitment to the representation of otherness (which must always exceed the forms of its representation, to be truly ‘other’), this negative, self-reflexive, critical-interrogative project will somehow be enough to warrant positive social, communal, and collective ethical meanings (7-8). In this paradigm, the social is reduced to “minimalist” subjective terms “so as to barely warrant term” (*Social* 8): “sociality felt as self-restraint” (Hale *Novel* 189).

Hale repeats Methan and Worthington’s critique of the alterity-based ethics (see Chapter I) when she reveals that it is precisely alterity’s hidden absolutism that is its chief appeal (its status as “unproblematically self-evident, indeed imperative”) (Meffan and Worthington 134), a normative certainty it smuggles in as a stopgap solution to “rampant relativism” (Hale *Social* 8):

contemporary academics who seek to move beyond the gasp and squeal of postmodern critical styles have attempted to put the case for the ethical value of literature on a more

objective footing ... to prove that literature possesses an ethical value that goes beyond a particular culture's construction of that value, or the say-so of however many practicing novelists, or a particular reader's testimony. (Hale *Novel* 45-46)

According to the authors and theorists whom Hale surveys, the engagement with alterity provides such an 'objective footing': "an aesthetics of alterity ... helps to naturalize [an] ethico-political view of narrative to the point where contemporary academic theorists can treat it as an *objective truth*, the grounding plank of their new ethical phenomenology of literary reading" (175, emphasis added). This is true, Hale observes, even for committed poststructuralists who would appear most overtly opposed to any notion of absolute or objective truth (such as J. Hillis Miller; "as much as Miller insists on the groundlessness of ethical judgment, his ethical theory is grounded in the *absolute value* of achieved alterity") (209, emphasis added). It is this very paradox that explains how poststructuralist critics can set out to challenge the "philosophical assumptions" of "persons as liberal individuals" and "ethics as a matter of individual responsibility and agency" but, in so doing, actually replay a deeper commitment to the absolute contingency of subjectivity that Hale argues was *already present* in James's individualism and perspectivalism (2). The result is that the poststructuralist "critique of the liberal subject actually supported the modernist notion of ethical value" (i.e., the value of perspectivism and subjectivism), except seeing that value this time as "inhering in literary form" (Hale 2-3).⁶⁴

All said, Hale roots a century's worth of disparate literary-critical discourses within a single paradigm, thus far concealed because its internal dissonance or "doubleness" (109), its

⁶⁴ To extend Hale's logic, we might add that the poststructuralist's relocation of an ethics of perspectivism to literary form was also applied to language as such (Siebers 45). In both cases, the autonomy of text or of language is retrieved by first asserting a *negative* claim about the subject's incapacity to fully apprehend that text or that language (or indeed anything beyond the subject's own categories of commensurability). Hale's point is that such a negative claim about the subject's irremediable contingency was present in James's perspectival aesthetics to begin with.

“unverifiability” (191) and “irresolvability” (11), make it is so difficult to grasp as an assumptive paradigm in its own right. Hale describes how novel writers and theorists across the twentieth century attempted to reconcile the ethical antinomy between contingency and general concern not by resolving the contradiction, but by assimilating it, affirming it, *absolutizing the relative* by transforming a Jamesian perspectivism and individualist subjectivism into its own collective social norm: some might recognize it as the norm of neoliberalism (though that term has also suffered from the same doubleness and diffusion).⁶⁵ This ‘constitutive contradiction’ at the paradigmatic level is then the ground that gives rise to the many lesser recursive logics that Hale explores in the ethics and aesthetics of alterity: the formlessness of the novel as its own form, the rejection of *a priori* value schemes as its own *a priori* value scheme, etc. Thus, Hale observes how it is alterity, relationality, or otherness that has functioned as a metonymy for modernity’s hidden absolutism (what Meillassoux calls a “modicum of absolutism”) (49), the last such absolute which is still possible to imagine in a pluralistic culture of a ‘million’ individual visions, and a stopgap solution to the problems of rampant skepticism or moral relativism. Alterity is held up by contemporary authors and critics as the objective metric, an “objective footing” to ethics and aesthetics alike (45), beyond any one subject position or any contingent social arrangement, by which writers and critics can all agree on what is ethical and formally successful as literature: namely, what disrupts the subject, what estranges, what attends to otherness, what relativizes and

⁶⁵ Aisling O’Donnell points to “the relative absence of a theoretical underpinning to modern neoliberalism. Tracing the history of the term, it becomes clear that modern economics has only a tenuous relationship to the type of economics the term ‘neoliberalism’ originally described. Furthermore, modern neoliberalism appears to be strengthened by the crisis it creates” (1030). Strengthened by its own crises, its own “theoretical ambiguity,” its own “vague and omnipresent” status (vagueness itself as the all-encompassing presence) (1030), this description of neoliberalism by O’Donnell could serve equally to describe the episteme of *absolutized relativism*, the “antinormative normativity” or “skepticism as dogma” described by Meillassoux, Felski, and others as paralytic to criticism (Felski 8). O’Donnell points out how this overriding *ethos* of ambiguity becomes, dialectically, the ground for the current post-truth “rise of populist movements” (1030), repeating Bruno Latour’s desperate call for a “stubbornly realist attitude” as the only possible corrective to populism in a post-truth ideological age (231).

realizes the contingency of our claims. The fact that such an ethic would seem to run into conflict with the complacent normative assumption upon which it subsists—that such disruptions are a *good* thing, something we *ought* to have as a collective norm—only confirms and reproduces the constitutive contradiction.⁶⁶ In drawing down to this ground of presuppositions, Hale is able to make a claim about a full century of literary-critical polemics that is almost ahistorical in its ambition and scope, arguing that an ethics of alterity has been the singular reigning normative assumption of novelistic theory and criticism (and arguably more than the novel) since modernist times and into the present. Joseph North aptly criticizes such an ethical injunction to anti-systematicity by pointing out how the result is not “a new method or a new paradigm”—not a ‘new ethics,’ after all—but “an acceptance and even a celebration of the lack of any such method, the lack of any such paradigm” (North 173): an absence of morality, to echo Nussbaum, as the “most truly human morality” (361). Given this closed circle beyond which it is impossible to think, and commitment to which could not be rational, because self-contradictory, but only an act of fideism or faith, the mystified spiritualist discourses of D. H. Lawrence, Woolf, and other early modernists begin to make sense as a kind of willful amnesia or obfuscation of the underlying paradox. “For the apex of fideism,” Quentin Meillaissoux reminds us, “occurs at the point where it becomes *the thought of piety’s superiority to thinking*” (48); and an *absolute relativism* demands an absolute piety, since it is in its very terms unthinkable.

The Presuppositional Fallacies of Perspectivalism

⁶⁶ Thus, Hale sums up Judith Butler’s poststructuralist truism as such: the way we “change for the better” is to “actively try to judge less and undergo more” (“better” being the second-order judgment calling us to reject first-order judgements) (Hale *Novel* 187).

Despite the powerful critiques that Hale levels above, there are ambiguities in Hale's own scholarly-historical posture; it is unclear to what extent Hale herself is neutral, critical, or celebratory of the ethics of alterity that other authors, theorists, and critics have ascribed to the novel. As Koenig puts it, "[i]t's sometimes hard to tell whether Hale is heralding a transvaluation of critical criteria or simply documenting it" (para. 12). It is likely that Hale herself is indecisive about the soundness of such an ethic, but, as we can see, indecision can become its own normative prescription (in fact, "unverifiability" is this ethic's prescription), and it is this liminal, unsettled, indeterminate position that perhaps comes closest to capturing Hale's attitude in *The Novel and the New Ethics* (191). Hale's own adherence to an ethics of alterity would account for her many claims that the disagreements, ambiguities, and paradoxes surrounding the novel's ethics of alterity are themselves the point and purpose of that ethic. As with Booth, who claimed critical disagreement to be the very *raison d'être* of literature, restating the many literary-critical controversies of his time as instantiations of his own reigning pluralism, the critical disagreements surrounding Jamesian perspectivalism are reabsorbed by Hale into that same perspectivalism. As Koenig points out in a review, the fact that "Hale is unwilling to advance her own interpretation as definitive" puts her in the position of asserting the different interpretations of this novelistic tradition, its capacity "to generate divergent critical responses," as its very ethical and aesthetic value: "a sign of its success" (para. 9).

Hale, like the other ethical critics, is most concerned with reconciling the apparent antinomies between poststructuralism and ethical criticism (what Garber et al express as "the tension between the poststructuralist critique of ethics and the ethical critique of poststructuralism") (ix).⁶⁷ Hale resolves those antinomies by envisioning the novel's aesthetics as

⁶⁷ Garber, Hanssen, and Walkowitz hint at the slippery tensions and complicities between poststructuralism and ethical criticism in their account of the ethical turn: "Ethics is back in literary studies, as it is in philosophy and

a precarious oscillation between two projects that have otherwise been held as distinct, even radically opposed: poststructuralism's "[p]erennial concerns about the novel's commodification, domination, and representations of otherness and subalternity" which "bespeak ethical consternation"; yet, "[a]t the same time," the humanistic appeal to "literary reading's promotion of empathy or justice" (Feldman 790). The result of this tension is what Hale calls today's "new ethics," involving "a constellation of post-structuralist thinkers engaged with literary ethics and concerned with defending individual political action and agency," as Feldman puts it in a review (though the alliance between 'poststructural' and 'individual' hints that something important has been swept under the rug) (792). The unlikelihood of this alliance between poststructuralism, liberal humanism, and Jamesian individualism is highlighted by Benjamin Paul when he describes Hale's project as tracing "an unlikely throughline connecting the Jamesian novelistic tradition to poststructuralist narrative theory and ideological critique" (491). Myriad reviewers of *The Novel and the New Ethics* characterize Hale's project of reconciliation by its paradoxes and contradictions: these describe her work as "a paradoxical convergence between formalist and sociohistorical claims about the novel" (Prince 345), involving a "paradoxical logic" (Prince 336) and "counterintuitive theoretical connections" (Rosenthal "The Novel" 486), the very irresolution of which is presented as a capacious negative capability ultimately testifying, for Hale, to "the strength of her argument" (Rosenthal "The Novel" 497). Hale herself describes her theory as a "convergence of the Jamesian novel tradition with poststructuralist new ethical theory" (*Novel* 218), revealing "a shared understanding of ethics as an ethics of alterity and a shared understanding of the novel as the genre of ethical alterity" and ultimately linking "self-

political theory, and indeed the very critiques of universal man and the autonomous human subject that had initially produced a resistance to ethics have now generated a crossover among these various disciplines that sees and does ethics 'otherwise.' The decentering of the subject has brought about a recentering of the ethical" (xiii-iv).

described liberal humanistic critics such as Nussbaum with poststructuralist critics such as [Judith] Butler” (*Novel* 174). Hale’s ‘optimism’ lies in this very intention towards reconciliation. She self consciously adopts “the most glaring fault line in twentieth-century criticism—the *divide between liberal humanism and poststructuralist ideological critique*—as the starting point for a *unified account* of literature’s ethical relationship to alterity” (Paul 497, emphases added).

Yet Paul’s choice of terms for Hale’s project (to begin a ‘unified account’ by assuming as one’s ‘starting point’ a ‘divide’) aptly describes the core problems that circumscribe Hale’s project from the onset. Hale’s rhetoric across *The Novel and the New Ethics* is replete with this idea of “constitutive contradictions,” existing “at the heart of the novelistic aesthetics of alterity,” as if the fault-line between poststructuralist criticism and ethical criticism were not a fault at all, in fact, but a generative tension within a broader dialogic unity (99). But Hale’s peaceable synthesis of these critical and polemical divides threatens to make her explanatory theory so expansive and all-inclusive that it absorbs all differences, until it becomes difficult to know what literary-critical tradition would *not* be assimilable to this ethics of alterity. Where Levinas grounds his original concept of alterity within an apparently interpersonal framework, Hale follows more recent trends by generalizing alterity into its much more capacious and inclusive sense: “the novelist’s task ... is so completely equated with the task of representing otherness that the notion of alterity has expanded to include the problem not just of knowing other people but of knowing alterity in a whole range of different states” (142). We might ask why Hale does not simply rely on the term “perspectivalism” to describe the novel’s aesthetics, in order to remain consistent with James’s own terms, or the term “relativism,” given how frequently Hale boils down the novel’s ethicality to “the irreducible ethical relativity of all value,” “the ethical challenge and opportunity that irreducible relativism holds for modern society” (89). For one, an

‘ethics of alterity’ benefits from the sense of an ethical injunction, the urgency of the other’s demand. At the same time, alterity is a characteristically underdetermined and expansive category (like Booth’s notion of virtue, “an irreducibly equivocal concept”) (Altieri 38), a flexibility that authors and critics in this alterity-based tradition are able harness in order to perceive a consistent ‘homology’ across all levels of relationality within the novel: to make the case that all these encounters with the various formal, characterological, narratological devices of the novel are instantiations of the selfsame principle of alterity. Alterity can take the form of an interpersonal encounter, but it can also be, for example, the recognition of the autonomy of a fictional character.

Yet ambiguities emerge when Hale’s argument goes beyond the life of literary characters to include wholly impersonal forms of alterity as well: for instance, the alterity of the narrative or literary text as such (“literary texts might be regarded as embodying otherness in their own right”) (5). With this subtle yet infinitely suggestive move, Hale opens up to a whole vista of literary possibilities that also partake in an ethics of alterity: the suggestion, implied in the works of J. M. Coetzee, that “all novelistic modes,” “beyond realism,” “beyond character-based modes of narration,” beyond “anachronistic notions of personhood,” are likewise implicated in an ethics of alterity, inasmuch as the text itself is irreducibly ‘other’ in relation to the reader or writer (141). And so, for Hale, the theories of Adam Zachary Newton, Andrew Gibson, and J. Hillis Miller likewise partake in an ethics of alterity, insofar as “the literary text is granted autonomous agency and even, to some degree, a subjectivity of its own” in their writings (193). The notion of literary autonomy—the independent existence of a text, as well as the estrangement or otherness that attends language as such—can also be subsumed within an ethics of otherness. The problem is that such aesthetic autonomy would seem to run in direct conflict with otherness conceived as

an ethical concern with the representation of characters. After all, a commitment to the singularity of the text as an aesthetic object risks becoming “a potential act of encroachment on the existential freedom” of a given character in that text, erasing the character’s own incommensurable singularity and autonomy (Hale 120); a commitment to one ‘other’ would seem to be incommensurate with a commitment to an other ‘other.’ Moreover, if a text can be ‘other’ in relation to reader or writer, it is unclear what makes the *novel* uniquely singled out for such a capacious notion of alterity. Although Hale contrasts the novel with more formalized literary modes such as the lyric (which for her is defined by an “authorial act of domination”), it seems plausible that any literary text or work of art, not only the novel, could conceivably ‘embody otherness’ in this capacious sense of simply being different from or other than the reader (120). In some moments of the book, Hale mentions the possibility that alterity can even be experienced in a purely private, internal, or subjective sense: alterity can include “otherness within—the conscious apprehension of an unconscious force within” (5-6). But this ‘self-othering’ raises the question of whether the subject really is as self-enclosed or autotelic as poststructuralists have problematized it for being. If the subject can become its *own* other, then what exactly is the contribution of alterity, conceived as a limit case to the subject?

All this is to highlight how Hale’s definition of otherness is all-embracing, to the point of sometimes diffusing into unintelligibility. Given how central the notion of alterity is to Hale’s entire argument, it raises some flags that Hale never stops to offer an explicit definition of alterity, not even a provisional one. Hale’s assumption across *The Novel and the New Ethics* is that what is meant by ‘otherness’ is self-evident, something that her current readership could take for granted. As we can see, however, the ambiguity smuggled into this self-evidence allows Hale to define alterity as the autonomy of the text-as-other, the autonomy of the characters-as-others,

and even as the otherness that plays out between critics when they disagree with each other about what fails or succeeds as ‘otherness.’ The absorption of all these differences begs the question of *what* (or *who*) is the otherness we ought to attend to, since attending to any one of these ‘others’ can be complicit in a “potential encroachment on the existential freedom,” the *autonomy*, of an other ‘other’ (120). The situation reminds us of Meffan and Worthington’s fundamental point that “a failure to define adequately who or what ‘the other’ is” (134) sets up a debate defined by “circularity,” in which “to speak or write (the Other) or not to speak or write (the Other)” are each equally liable to be ethically blameworthy (until some “unproblematically self-evident” normative standard is smuggled in to covertly essentialize which ‘other’ is the most ethical to attend to) (137).

All these antinomies between these ‘autonomies’ are precisely the point and purpose of this ethic, however, according to Hale’s theory. The lack of a program, the lack of a system, the lack of stultifying rules or standards, is what makes the new ethics so uniquely ethical (recalling Davis and Womack’s characterization of the ‘ethical turn’ by a “single defining characteristic,” the rejection of the “doctrinaire” and the “prescriptive”) (x). Even if “the conflicting or underdeveloped ideas about ethical alterity” may seem incoherent, Hale argues “this failure in philosophical coherence fosters a family of ideas that makes novelistic aesthetics seem more than a list of compositional dos and don’ts, more than a craft to be mastered” (10). A failure in philosophical coherence becomes a productive tension according to this tradition, even an enabling assumption for aesthetic and critical practice. All this represents a challenge for any clear delineation of who or what is included or excluded in this tradition, and therefore any direct critique of Hale’s own historical account, since the very attempt to critique Hale’s theory on the basis of its lack of explanatory power, say, or its diffuseness, or its internal contradictions, would

almost serve to confirm the representational accuracy of her theory, how it rightly captures this ethics' "unverifiability" (i.e., its lack of falsifiability) (191). The "constitutive contradictions" within an alterity-based ethics thus render that ethics so capacious that it becomes difficult to imagine any counter-tradition or any critique against that ethics that it could not assimilate into itself as part of its facilitation of 'difference' (Hale *Novel* 90). This amounts not only to a critique of the ethics itself, as Hale performed for us in the previous section, but a critique of Hale's *own* literary history, insofar as its built-in ambiguity threatens to entirely dissolve its explanatory power.

A look at the review literature suggests that this situation itself may be the strongest point of contention against Hale's account: that is to say, the very impossibility for any contention against her account. Indeed, such a confusion about the lack of any discernable 'countertradition' to an ethics of alterity informs virtually every criticism leveled against Hale's *The Novel and the New Ethics* within the current review literature. Frederick Feldman mildly criticizes Hale for failing to develop any account of "countertraditions" to the Jamesian model of alterity (793). Gerald Prince is more critical: Hale "provides few hints of what other such theorizations might be (Georg Lukács? René Girard? Marthe Robert?), and, because of her determination to show how formal aims are infected by social ones and vice versa, her book ultimately suggests that perhaps we are all social formalists" (345). Such a critique repeats Ellen Rooney's earlier account of Wayne Booth ("the curious sense" that Booth "has no opponents," since "Booth never excludes any critic by naming him an *anti-pluralist*") ("Critical Understanding" 123-4). The apparent absence of countervailing narratives to Hale's ostensibly comprehensive view of the modern novelistic tradition—a view that would have all novelists and critics singing the same praises for alterity—recalls Charles Altieri's critiques of Nussbaum's *pathos* and Booth's

pluralism in Chapter I: the ways these projects erase the possibility for any ethical disagreement, any sincere identification with a particular and exclusive *ethos*, any “ultimate commitments” (Booth *Company* 19), under the homogenizing gloss of a “conversation era” commitment to pluralistic differences (Fry 267).

Rosenthal is still more critical of Hale’s anti-critical historical account: “I found myself wishing for more exploration of the ways her ‘aesthetics of alterity’ relates to counter-traditions within theory and literature” (“Novel” 496). Although Hale does identify Proust, Beckett, and certain postmodern novelists as working outside the Jamesian tradition, they are only “passingly described” as such; moreover, Rosenthal problematizes that delineation by pointing to Proust’s legacy as “caught up in the tradition that Hale describes,” since Proust has been a significant influence on “contemporary writers ... who are more overtly concerned with the alterity of the fictional subject and the act of narration” (“Novel” 497). Rosenthal brings his critique to a fine point when he observes that Hale’s definition of ethics becomes so capacious that it is difficult if not impossible to determine what would *not* be ethical according to her scheme:

A lingering question, though, is what it would mean for a novel *not* to be ethical.

Certainly, Hale’s principle of selection favors novels that explicitly draw from a traditional question of ethical formalism. If we were to select other novelists—non-academics, or those less concerned with academics or fiction writers as central characters—it seems we might find something different. Yet it isn’t quite clear how. For Hale, on either side of the question of ‘character’ there is an ethics to be found. ... As mentioned earlier, she even suggests that even those who don’t care about James are likely to inherit his aesthetics (and the ethical assumptions that come along with them). (Rosenthal “Novel” 452)

The definitional flexibility of an alterity-based ethics leads to a lack of rigor in Hale's historical account, so that even any opposition to the ethics of alterity is assimilable to the selfsame commitment to alterity. The situation repeats the tautology of Booth's non-prescriptive program for criticism. Reviewers of Booth's critical works expressed the same ambiguity about whether or not Booth's capacious critical pluralism is simply a redescription of current literary-critical discourse (a "move away from prescriptive ethics and toward descriptive inquiry") (Johnstone 59) or itself a program and prescription that makes an intervention into criticism (Booth as "censorious" [Posner 3] and "instrumentalist" [Mitchell 230]). As explained in Chapter II, the absence of prescription in Booth's critical project (as its own implicit prescription) actually results in a lack of real explanatory power and critical sting: a tautological reiteration of the already existing state of affairs; in short, a regime of representation, subsuming critical intervention. Similarly, Hale's history of the Jamesian ethics-aesthetics of alterity risks becoming a tautological reiteration of the existing critical differences and polemics, rather than an explanation of them—unless it can make itself substantial by being prescriptive no less than descriptive about the normative horizons of that history.

Hale's status as a literary historian, no less than the diffuseness of her notion of alterity, brings us back to the basic question that has informed every chapter of this project so far: Is Hale's historical account finally a *descriptive* one or a *prescriptive* one? Is Dorothy Hale's literary history *neutral* or *normative*, a meta-ethical posture 'outside' ethics or actually celebratory of Henry James's novelistic ethics of alterity? Hale persistently avoids staking her own claims, yet there remains an ambiguity, pointed out by Andrew Koenig in a review of Hale's book, as to whether Hale's study provides "the history of a certain kind of novel" or if it is not in fact something much more general: "an endorsement of a certain kind of reading" (para.

18). Does Hale's historical account actually prescribe the very anti-critical, alterity-based ethics she is describing, one that espouses self-restraint and receptivity to the 'otherness' of texts, characters, and authors different from oneself?

Some criteria of selection did occur to Hale in her choice of representative novelists and critics, as well as in her ascription of the works she singles out as especially "strong novels in the tradition"—criteria that imply her own theoretical precommitments and, as she admits herself, an "affinity" for the Jamesian novels which she has committed her scholarly career to studying (xi-xii). Rosenthal makes the point, obvious to us now, that any theory of the novel is always a process of *exclusion* that reflects the theorist's underlying normative commitments. In the case of Hale's preference for the realist novels of Henry James, "it seems clear enough that the points Hale is making about modern American and British fiction cannot necessarily be taken as representative of fiction as a whole, or even as representative of a way of thinking about fiction as a whole" (Rosenthal "Novel" 451). Moreover, the problem of selectivity is not unique to Hale but is true of all theorists of the novel: "Although assuming a *descriptive* rhetoric, they are instead *prescriptive*, vastly delimiting the field of possible novels into a much smaller, more manageable, group" (Rosenthal "Theory" para. 1).

But what is the root assumption that allows scholars to purport to explain *without prescribing* what the novel really is? Rosenthal outlines the "starting premise" of such novel theories, in a passage that is especially illuminating for this project's purposes:

theories of the novel start from a premise of the nearly limitless formal possibilities of the novel—a premise of innate formlessness. These theories proceed to develop a form *out of* this formlessness. Yet in each case, we can see that the critics do so by excluding some of those texts that we might otherwise include. ("Theory" para. 19)

For Rosenthal, theories of the novel must first be perceived as a primordial or “protean” formlessness, its “capacity to be anything at all,” out of which, in a moment of radical creative autonomy, the theorist’s own preferred theory is produced (a hat trick which unconsciously reproduces, as Rosenthal suggests, the theorist’s preexisting normative ground) (Hale 167). One wonders how aware Hale is that these assumptions about the modern novel’s “protean nature, its capacity to be anything at all,” have their *own* form, emerging out of their own exclusions and evaluations, their own prescriptive horizons (167). Rosenthal’s answer appears to be no: in fact, this normative horizon is so fixed and hidden away, that for all of Hale’s insistence that her literary ethics remains localized to a single tradition or a single type of novel, it cannot help but generalize to the novel as such:

This larger question—of other novels—is not the one that Hale asks, nor one she sets out to answer. But it does seem to be invited by the collective “The Novel” in the title. We are used to seeing this in the titles of novel-theoretical works, and have been conditioned to expect extreme critical synecdoche: a few standing in for the unreadable many. To take a couple of ready-to-hand examples, Ian Watts’s *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) and Miller’s *The Novel and The Police* (1988) look at five novels each; Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* (1916; 1971) contents itself with one. When critics seek to offer an account of the novel, they are usually proposing instead a principle of selection. What is intriguing in Hale’s works is how explicit, and even foundational, she makes this operation. By looking exclusively at novelists who themselves have learned the same principle that she uses, she makes plain just how much the descriptions of novel theory are in fact a form of prescription. (“Novel” 452)

That Hale's aesthetic model generalizes beyond the Jamesian tradition and circumscribes "The Novel" as such is suggested not only by her book's title, but by some of the very author-critics whom Hale discusses—including Coetzee, who asserts that "all novelistic modes," "beyond realism," "beyond character-based modes of narration," are likewise implicated in an ethics of alterity, inasmuch as the novel itself can be an other in relation to the reader or author (Hale 141). As with Booth (whose broad definition of 'fiction' as "time-related experience" diffuses into lyrical poetry and virtually any literary form whatever) (*Company* 14) or as with Nussbaum (who hints that "even with regard to works I do not discuss at all," questions of style, "the shape and cadence" of sentences, "metaphors," "sound and rhythm," are not immune from her arguments) ("Exactly" 73), I would venture to claim that the basic predicament which Rosenthal points to—about the impossibility of neutrality—is no by no means exclusive to theories of the novel.

So, what is the normative ground of Hale's literary history? All this circling in place brings us back to the fundamental fault-line which was the starting premise of Hale's project: the fraught search for a synthesis between a poststructuralist episteme, with its antinormative skepticism towards universal or general truth claims, and the felt urgency of ethical and political norms, those "ultimate commitments" presumed to be generally true, right, good for all (Booth *Company* 335). In the overriding attempt to reconcile these two incommensurate epistemes as expressions of a single paradigm, Hale's literary history risks erasing their incommensurability and throwing all concern with contradiction out the window, to the point of elevating contradiction itself as its own organizing principle. For Hale, "theorists who disagree philosophically about the meaning and nature of ethics"—a substantial disagreement if ever there was one—are seen in Hale's theory to "all agree that certain features of novelistic narrative offer

the reader an ethical encounter with otherness” (xviii). But Hale’s consolidation of these many ethical contradictions as ‘constitutive’ (rather than dispersive, divisive, etc.) is so persistent that it reaches the point where Hale can off-handedly remark that individualists such as William James and critics of individualism such as Fredric Jameson are actually united in their engagement with the theme of otherness (6). If Hale’s literary history can gloss over such vast lacunae as those between James and Jameson, it raises the question of whether an ethics of ‘otherness’ is really the organizing ethical principle she takes it be, or whether it is not merely a redescription of the as-yet-unresolved disagreements between substantially incommensurate ethical positions. If so, Hale’s meta-ethical stance as scholar and historian, hovering above a century’s worth of literary-critical differences and disagreements, appears less like a polite abnegation of her own judgments and more like the infliction of considerable ‘categorical’ violence in its own right, collapsing even individualism and its critiques into a shared notion of alterity (itself seen as a virtuous absence of prescription and left ambiguously undefined) (191). In the end, given that Hale’s own reigning normative assumptions are left under wraps, it is difficult to parse apart Hale’s own scholarly position from the alterity-based tradition that she so exhaustively commits to representing. “If one were to situate her intervention within the history of novel theory,” Koenig points out, Hale’s literary history “is, pace Henry James, an endorsement of the realist novel over the art novel” (para. 17).

The elevation of contradictions as “constitutive”—the consolidation of doubleness as its own *singular* organizing principle—ends up cleaving apart the very union of ethics and aesthetics that would seem to motivate Hale’s synthetic theory (99). Doubleness undergirds the novel’s very conjunction of ethics and aesthetics, after all: the “understanding of the novel as caught between its social and aesthetic nature” is yet another *constitutive* contradiction, so that

the tension between the novel's ethical themes and its concrete formal-material existence is "constitutive of novelistic aesthetics, conceived of as an aesthetics of alterity" (120). But Andrew Koenig remarks that the result of this contradiction between social concern and attention to form is not so much a bridging of the two but the very reverse: "ethical and aesthetic are thus sundered in Hale's schema" (para. 13). The fact that not only ethical judgments but aesthetic ones are also liable to become an ethically culpable failure to attend to 'otherness' is another one of the entailing problematics, as pointed out by Koenig:

judgments of taste can turn in on themselves by Hale's reasoning. If you don't enjoy *On Beauty*, that means Smith is actually succeeding in unsettling your fixed assumptions about taste. If you do like it, that may be because the novelist hasn't pushed you hard enough. As Hale writes of *What Maisie Knew* (and Morrison's critique of it): "The novel succeeds" (i.e., aesthetically) "because its author fails" (i.e., ethically). But what if you simply don't like the novel? (para. 10)

Of course, Hale might rebut Koenig's critique with a Booth-like appeal to critical pluralism, as if these contradictions were the very point she was making: these rival conceptions of narrative and incommensurate critical goals generate a "rich problematic" which "(contradictory in itself) works to produce novels as unified works of art" (80).

In the end, even these self-contradictions do not constitute a critique of such an ethic but only serve as further proof of its capaciousness, its virtuous openness, recalling to mind Stanley Fish's claims that "contradiction" is "emblematic of a necessary condition of human life" (Nussbaum *Love's* 106). But this is only begging the question by assuming, again, that such capacity for "doubleness" and contradiction is a *good* thing, which is precisely what stands in need of proving. Like the circularity of Booth's pluralism, which elevated "hypocrisy" as a virtue

in its own right (*Company* 252), self-contradiction is not taken to be *prima facie* self-refuting in this model of ethicality. Rather, a state of contradiction is proof that what needs to be undone instead, as Antczak writes, is “a justification ... on the philosophical level” (7): a choice for “*piety*” over thought (Meillassoux), a “*justification by faith*” over epistemological coherence (Guillory xiii), finally “an overthrow of epistemology” (Hale 190). The status of alterity as a “privileged assumption” mirrors Antczak’s description of the invisible dogma lurking in Booth’s supposedly anti-prescriptive pluralism: an assumption that the ethics of alterity is “so important a good”—a “sacred social good,” in fact (Hale 215)—“that no arguments nor argumentative failures can overturn it” (Antczak 7).

Conclusion: Perspectivalism & Nominalism

Even though Hale limits her arguments to the history of the modern novel, I have sought to demonstrate that the logic of Hale’s project has a wider scope, apprehending a circularity whose roots run deeper than novelistic aesthetics alone. The constitutive contradictions of the novel’s alterity-based ethics are a localized instance of a broader, more paradigmatic problem that characterizes the turn-of-the-century debate between formalist and ethicist criticisms more generally: namely, the problem of external moral skepticism, or what Rita Felski calls “skepticism as dogma” (9). Each critical camp, formalist and ethicist, calls out their adversary for neglecting the radical singularity of ‘the other,’ critiquing them for complacently assuming their own normative categories of commensurability, meanwhile neglecting how their *own* critiques slip in their own essentialized sense of which ‘other’ is most ethical to attend to. Formalists attack ethicists for smothering literature’s singularity and autonomy under prescriptive ideological commitments, while ethicists attack formalists for smuggling in their

own complacent normative assumptions regarding ‘culture’ and aesthetic autonomy and erasing the sociological determinations that underpin literary production. Yet neither camp recognizes the irony that the ‘categorical violence’ which each is critiquing in the other constitutes the selfsame commitment to singularity, autonomy, radical particularity, and the general rejection of generality that defines their own position and is the basis for their own critiques. In their polemics against each other, the two groups thus replay and reify a deeper set of presuppositions which both take on board and which arguably sets up the very terms of their debate to begin with. What is more, these polemical conflicts serve to confirm the underlying ambiguity within the ethical commitment they all share, so that these disagreements virtuously reproduce the “universal truth” that “everything is doubled, everything is various” (Smith, qtd. in Hale *Novel* 129). An ethics of alterity is Hale’s name for these shared norms. Where I build on Hale’s project is by zeroing in on this ‘ethics of alterity,’ left all too ambiguous and imprecisely defined by Hale, and defining it more primarily as *nominalism*: the virtuous rejection of generality, universality, commensurability, in favor of the radically particular, the *sui generis*, the singular and autonomous.

This clarifying definition can better account for the structure and shape of the polemics revolving around formalism and ethico-political criticism than Hale’s more diffuse notion of alterity. A shared commitment to nominalism—the general rejection of generality—explains why each ‘camp’ of criticism is keen to expose the other’s generalizing assumptions, pointing these out as contingent, while their own grounding in general concern remains dogmatically obscure and covertly absolutized. A radically self-negating commitment to *absolute relativism* is thus at the root of these polemics and the best account I can think of for why literary ethics, and the felt impulse toward ethical and political concern, have been so thwarted by an abiding anti-

critical tendency in literary studies. In prescribing the absence of norms as its own norm, critics have critiqued critique and judged judgment away, but since this remains its own judgment and critique, the closed circle only continues to tighten—with all the entailing violence that such an image suggests.

Conclusion: Returning to the Ethical Turn:
Turning in Place, or a Turning Point?

“The title of this volume – *Mapping the Ethical Turn* – is not meant to suggest that only in recent years have we seen a shift toward the marriage of ethical thought and literary study. ... Ethical critics, like cartographers, do not necessarily discover or make a territory but, instead, describe and give shape to what has always existed.”

— Davis and Womack, preface to *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (ix)

“Attempts at periodization always – still – come with the underlying assumption associated with classical avant-gardes: that they are not only descriptive or even critical-analytical, but *programmatic*.”

— Jörg Heiser, “Super-Hybridity: Non-Simultaneity, Myth-Making and Multipolar Conflict” (55-56)

Overview

Having engaged in depth with three different contributions to the contemporary ethical turn, each one providing a different model of literary ethics, I conclude the project with a closing summary of my findings, a brief account of the implications, and some gestures to future work to be done. My thesis in the main has gone as follows: the attempt by numerous literary critics at the turn of the century to chart out a legitimating ground for ethico-political criticism has been fraught by an internal contradiction, expressed in myriad ways, chiefly in a critical stance which purports to be both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ any ethical paradigm of its own. Although these ethical critics made a strong case for the *necessity* of a normative ground to literature and criticism, and accurately diagnosed the problems attending certain formalist and poststructuralist approaches, their own projects failed to propose any substantive alternative set of norms that would be immune from those same problems. This critical blindness, I argued, was no incidental oversight but a *constitutive* incongruity, which ultimately caused their critical projects to lapse back into an external moral skepticism in which the interrogation of normativity is itself asserted as the

highest expression of ethical thought and feeling. The result is a “dogmatic neutrality” in which the injunction to ‘not judge’ is the overriding judgment, and in which prescription is subsumed by description, criticism by scholarship: a regime of representation, in sum (Booth *Rhetoric* 144). My purpose was to reveal this absence of norms, ‘ought’ claims, and ethical prescriptions as something other than the “meta-ethical” position that these literary critics (who are by and large liberal humanists) have assumed it to be (Hale *Novel* 191). Rather than representing a free-floating state of “unverifiability” (Hale *Novel* 191), a “non-committal air” (Booth *Company* 341) “groundless” and free (Miller “How to Be” 280), or a stance of scholarly neutrality hovering above the moral landscape, such a noncommittal position constitutes a substantive ethical commitment in its own right, and comes with its own parameters of evaluation and prescription and even criteria for literary canonization. I have designated this hidden normative consensus, largely under wraps within contemporary accounts of literary ethics, *nominalism*. It can be summed up as the categorical denial of categories, or the general denial of generalities, a paradoxical position that I have argued is the root cause of the more overt circularities within these critics’ literary ethics. My most suggestive proposal in this project (although, given the small sample size and risk of overreach, it must remain suggestive only) is that this nominalist circularity among the ethical critics is the same one that critics in the post-critique movement have dubbed an “antinormative normativity” (Felski 9). An overweening reluctance to assert general value judgments accounts for the hesitancy within criticism to “break towards the general” noticed by Joseph North (185), and the debilitating lack of “rationale” for criticism pointed out by John Guillory (8-9). I would not go so far as to claim that these ethical critics (Booth, Nussbaum, Hale) were the ones to inaugurate this anti-critical circularity; they are unlikely to have had so much influence on the discipline’s history as that. It is more likely that

they are only eddies in a much broader stream (or whirlpool, to use the more apt metaphor) whose wellsprings must be left to a different project to plumb.

Wayne Booth's critical pluralism, summed up best in *The Company We Keep*, was one of the earliest attempts at bringing ethical criticism to the forefront of literary study, counteracting both the antinormative skepticism as well as the prevailing formalism within the discipline. By implicitly prescribing pluralism, or the practice of 'coduction,' as the normative horizon of his literary ethics, Booth neglected to face up to the substantive moral paradoxes attending his pluralism, however, as an openness to different moral views that prescribes such moral differences as themselves the singular good of his own value hierarchy. The result of this paradox was a paralytic inability for his literary ethics to make any substantial intervention within literary-critical discourse, caught as he was in "prevailing currents in literary theory" (Mitchell 229) and, spiraling in those eddies, having to continually defer to "the other hand" (Booth *Company* 379). However, Booth's more assertive and contentious critical insights—namely, his transcendental arguments for the inescapability of normativity, and the internal self-refutations of aesthetic detachment and moral relativism—remain valuable elements of his project that ought to be rescued from the circularities of his critical pluralism.

Martha Nussbaum's ethics of particularism, as outlined in *Love's Knowledge*, was another major contribution to the early ethical turn and, like Booth's, was an attempt to overcome the turn-of-the-century polemics between formalist study and ethical concern in literature. Nussbaum's solution to the antinomy between ethics and aesthetics was not so much to overcome it, however, as it was to justify it by a still broader antinomy: the antinomy between the general and the particular, offered up as its own 'aesth-ethical' program. Nussbaum's literary nominalism, her ethics of particularism and 'fine-tuned perception,' although intended to retrieve

the irreducible singularity of literature and the unique ethical affordances of its forms, ends up juxtaposing literary autonomy with philosophical, prosaic, propositional truth-claims so starkly that it has the effect of undoing the very grounds for Nussbaum's *own* criticism. Unable to advocate for her particularism without acting in "bad faith" by smuggling in a general normative prescription (Altieri 36), Nussbaum lapses into external moral skepticism much like Booth: arguing that to step "outside of morality" might be "the most truly human morality" after all (*Love's* 361). The result is an anti-critical criticism, in which general judgments and evaluations are foreclosed in favor of a regime of perception and pathos, representation and response. That said, Nussbaum's internal critiques of the aesthetic detachment thesis and the moral skepticism of poststructuralism, as well as her application of the principle of non-contradiction as an axiomatic verity for epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics alike, has implications that break out of the circularity confining the rest of her particularism.

Finally, Dorothy Hale's *The Novel and the New Ethics* offers up a literary ethics grounded in the concept of alterity. The chief merit of Hale's work is to notice the hidden consensus that connects together the poststructuralist concept of 'alterity,' and its associated ideological critiques, with a modernist concept of 'perspectivalism' (itself revealed by Hale to be an absolutization of relativism). In short, what Hale dubs the 'new ethics' of alterity, described as an ethical self-restraint from judgment, I have dubbed *nominalism*: the negative capability of not generalizing as its own general injunction. Whether or not Hale intends to be critical or only scholarly, her account has the effect of revealing that this paradoxical norm renders critical intervention impotent because it means that *any* opposition at all (even between individualism and its critiques) ends up serving the same master principle of "doubleness": the "universal truth" that "everything is doubled, everything is various" (Hale *Novel* 129). The injunction to not

judge others, to be open and receptive to alterity, like Nussbaum's pathos or Booth's pluralism, reaches its logical limits in an affirmation of a negation: the absence of norms as its own norm. Although the peaceable optimism of Hale's account ends up painting over a century's worth of literary-critical differences and disagreements, as if all those critics were members of the same merry band of alterity advocates, this fact in itself constitutes the strongest possible internal critique of the underlying presuppositions at play. The monism of Hale's theory exemplifies the anti-critical recursions entailed by an absolute commitment to the relativism of all values.

All said, and as detailed in Chapter I, the ethical turn ends up being trapped within the "most glaring fault line in twentieth-century criticism" (Paul 497) ("between the poststructuralist critique of ethics and the ethical critique of poststructuralism") (Garber et al ix) to the effect of becoming critically paralyzed within a regime of representation: a passive receptiveness to what 'is,' over any positive prescription about what 'ought' to be. On a literary level, this regime plays out in a favoring of mimetic and realist literary modes, as Booth's notion of 'dogmatic neutrality' made clear, and as evidenced by Nussbaum's and Hale's distinct preference for novelistic realism (as well as their disdain for less realist, more 'lyrical' literary genres). On the level of criticism, this regime of representation expresses itself as a reticence towards value judgments and the favoring of neutral, descriptive, historicist inquiry: one might call it a preference for 'truthiness' over 'goodness,' for epistemology over ethics, or for *scholarship* over *criticism*, to use Joseph North's terms. And yet, because normativity cannot be done away with, this anti-critical regime is nonetheless offered up as its own distinct normative *ethos* (or *pathos*). On the level of ethics, then, this regime of representation, receptivity, response, makes its anti-critical self-restraint into a sign of virtue, rendering self-reflexive awareness about one's own contingency into the highest expression of ethical character, and asserting that what is most

ethically and politically needful is the representation of others. This plays out in an ethics of witnessing, a politics of representation, a call to attend to the other, and similar “spectator emotions,” which constitute an implicit denial of the more proactive and participatory modes of critical intervention and action (Altieri 35). In the representative regime’s “dialogue between what has occurred in the past and what is alive and in process at the present” (Davis and Womack x), between the historicism of what has been and the presentism of what is, the future of what “*should be*” is left virtuously ambiguous and undefined (Hale *Novel* 132). Yet without some forward-looking normative horizon to aim at, it is no wonder that prescription, judgment, and critical evaluation have been subordinated to the passive reception of scholarly representation: an absence of ethical prescription as its own ethical prescription.

This state of circularity brings us to all those questions of hope, progress, and new possibilities that ought to make up the closing gestures of any good conclusion. Are ethical critics doomed to turn in place, or is it possible to conceive of a turning point to these circularities, a way to think beyond the ethical turn’s turning in on itself? So far, I have hesitated to speculate this far, caught as I am in the already broad interdisciplinary (meta-disciplinary?) space between literary study and philosophy, which risks leaving readers from either discipline dissatisfied. My interdisciplinary and metacritical approach has been vulnerable both to accusations of a lack of philosophical rigor (Why stop at ‘external moral skepticism’? What are these antinomies themselves rooted in? What philosophical history is behind them? What alternatives do you suggest?) as well as to a lack of ‘concrete’ literary analysis (What do these broad happenings mean for literary scholarship and criticism? What alternative modes of reading and criticism do you recommend?). I will conclude the project with a few final reflections that I hope can address, at least provisionally, each of these potential criticisms. By doing so, I hope I

can make clearer the stakes of this project, both to more general philosophical issues and more locally to literary study, and end with those promised gestures to a way out of the closed circle.

The Literary Apology

In answer to the literary critic and scholar, who might say that these broad-scale conundrums are certainly interesting but have no direct bearing on literature, I wish to reaffirm the relevance of these epistemic and ethical quandaries to literature, criticism, interpretation, and hermeneutics. To the contrary, I argue that the ethical critics' thesis about the *inevitability* of ethical norms, as the necessary preconditions and *a priori* categories of thought and practice (along with the mode of internal critique that entails from that thesis), implies an entire form of literary reading and criticism. It might even be the missing 'paradigm' or 'rationale' for literary criticism sought after by Joseph North and John Guillory, although such a possibility would have to be pursued more exhaustively elsewhere. I have teased such a literary criticism throughout this project, but I will end my conclusion with a practical case study of such a method as it is applied to discrete literary texts, and as performed by Wayne Booth in *The Company We Keep*.

Booth puts his presuppositions about the inevitability of ethical norms into practice by performing a number of close readings of poems and novels throughout *Company*, and these make up some of the most interesting and revealing passages in his book. What is most remarkable about these passages is that Booth's ethical criticism turns out to be more than exegetical, more than an 'inquiry,' not limited to prosaic restatements and redescriptions of texts; in practice, Booth's ethical criticism provides him with grounds for *evaluation* as well. This is in spite of Booth's claims elsewhere in the book that he categorically seeks to avoid evaluative readings and 'rankings.' In the practice of actual reading, Booth very much judges certain works

as being “Ethically Good” and “Ethically Bad” (4), and comparatively better or worse, based on the presence or absence of certain formal features, though his criteria for judgment are largely under wraps and never articulated outright. It will be the work of this final section to reveal those presumed criteria of Booth’s close readings, exposing how a coherence-based internal critique has strong consequences for evaluative reading, as well as implications for ethics more broadly. It turns out that Booth’s evaluative judgments of texts (judgments which are simultaneously ethical and aesthetical) depend on the very same transcendental logic which Booth levels against his opponents and external moral skeptics: by noting *contradictions* between a text’s *overt* and *implied* elements.

As one case study, Booth provides us with a poem titled “Don’t Quit – Fight One More Round” by Edgar A. Guest, whose first stanza goes as follows:

When things go wrong, as they often will,
 When the road you’re trudging seems all uphill,
 When the funds are low and the debts are high
 And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
 When care is pressing you down a bit,
 Rest! If you must – but never quit.

Booth then shares a series of potential critical responses to the piece:

Critics of just about every persuasion will dismiss this verse as beneath consideration. Some will say that it is not poetry at all, since it is so blatantly didactic. Some may object not to the presence of doctrine but to its banality: it is so un-‘other’ as to sound just like the greeting cards we rifle through on the rack. Others might point to the flat diction or

the absence of imagery: the poem exhibits insufficient craft to command our attention, let alone respect. But no one of these in itself would necessarily be fatal. (212)

Any of the qualities listed might be present in a poem that we would otherwise consider worthwhile; none of them could be the decisive factor for our negative judgment. Booth also notes that the poem, after all, does offer “one good thing: a piece of sound (though trite) advice ... that to quit under adversity is usually bad Why, then, cannot we pluralists salvage ‘Don’t Quit’ as having one clear virtue, despite its obvious weaknesses?” (213). In his answer to this rhetorical question, Booth provides us with a decisive moment when he steps *beyond* pluralism to provide certain clear and distinct criteria for judgment: a ground of justification for why literary critics can confidently conclude that this text, despite its sound moral theme, is ultimately subpar. It is therefore worth paying attention to Booth’s reasoning here, since it is here that Booth departs from his strict pluralism and finally outlines those continually deferred “limits” to pluralism: that is to say, the grounds for critical evaluation (*Company* 489).

“The answer” as to why the poem is bad, according to Booth, is not a purely formal or aesthetic one but “is found in considering the ethos of the author and the pattern of desire that he offers us” (213). And that ethos, Booth argues, implies a certain disjuncture, a certain doubleness, a hypocrisy that undercuts the poem’s explicit moral message. What the poem suffers from is a lack of ethical and aesthetic *integrity*: an inconsistency between the poem’s overt moral content and its formal elements, which don’t in the least exemplify or enact that moral commitment:

this author is a character whose troubles—low funds, being ‘a bit’ care-ridden, feeling like sighing rather than smiling—are not comparable to the major troubles that really tempt us to ‘quit.’ ... What is worse, the troubles are not even convincingly his: *his poem*

does not in any sense either illustrate or conform to his message. The rhymes are obvious and easy; ‘a bit’ is clearly thrown in for the rhyme The meter is obvious and easy, with never a hint of difficulties risked and mastered. The diction is obvious and easy We see, then, that the ‘message’ of the poem is not in the least irrelevant to our judgment: we consider that message, one that has an obvious truth, and *we find an author whose many faults belie it at every turn.* (213, emphases added)

In other words, the author has failed to be consistent to the work’s message in his very mode of expression, and that internal contradiction, more than any single formal or thematic attribute, is why the poem falls flat. The poem’s theme—perseverance in times of difficulty—is betrayed by the author’s formal choices towards easy rhymes and accessible diction; and the content, too, is disjunct with itself, valorizing perseverance while offering up ‘sighs’ and pecuniary woes and trivial topics that fall short of any expectation of genuine grit or perseverance. In sum, the poem is built on an internal contradiction. Booth’s judgment of this poem depends on the same logic he relies on in his critique of, say, George Steiner, deconstructionist critics, or moral relativists (see Chapter I): a calling out of a logical hypocrisy or double standard between an overt claim and what is actually practiced, belying a lack of integrity or sincerity on the part of the speaker.

Booth moves on to another poem, “The Fiddler of Dooney” by Yeats, to demonstrate a poem that does, by contrast, earn our respect and attention (though with certain caveats, as we shall see). The poem, in brief, is about a fiddler who has a brother and a cousin that are priests; the poem explores how, even so, it is the fiddler who will be first to get into heaven, presenting the fiddler’s merriment as a moral virtue greater than piety, and contrasting his “book of songs” with their “books of prayer.” To save space, I won’t reproduce the poem, but Booth’s reflections on the poem are worth examining:

note now the obviously huge difference: in ‘The Fiddler’ my friend *the poet does in fact live the message of the poem before my eyes*. He asks me to do a poetic dance with him Like ‘Don’t Quit,’ this poem does not offer strikingly original images or fresh diction or experimental verse forms [and yet the speaker] implies, with his invitation, a full human equality with his readers. We are invited to practice dancing and fiddling with him. (215-216, emphasis added).

What Booth refers to as a ‘full human equality’ amounts to an absence of hypocrisy (‘rules for you but not for me’). Unlike the speaker in “Don’t Quit,” who implores readers to be resilient while taking the easy path himself, the speaker in “The Fiddler” is *personally* exemplifying his message in the very method and manner he delivers the poem: its playful contrasts and pleasant music. The alignment of form and content, so often a talking point in aesthetic theory, turns out to be a second-order effect of a *personal* integrity exhibited by the poetic speaker, a commitment that pre-empts the poem from contradicting its own premises. In this way, the dancer becomes the dance, the poet becomes the poem, and this aesth-ethical congruity, Booth seems to say, is why the poem feels *personally* implicating and inviting to the reader: it invites the reader to join in the dance.

Importantly, Booth’s judgment of Yeats’s poem does not depend on his agreeing with its overt moral content. In fact, Booth prefers the moral message of “Don’t Quit” to that of the “The Fiddler”:

The point for me is underlined when I realize that, considered as abstract propositions, the fixed norms offered by ‘Don’t Quit’ make better sense than the grotesquely oversimplified notion that fiddling and poetry are self-evidently more important activities than praying. (216)

For Booth, “The Fiddler” succeeds in spite of its superficial moral content. The poem’s achievement lies in the alignment between form and content, between message and delivery, between what the poet preaches and what he practices: a move towards integrity over hypocrisy. This is what grants the poem its distinct *ethos*, rendering it sincere, believable, and personable, which is why, according to Booth, “[h]e wins my friendship, as my real friends do, by offering a distinctive, engaging way of being together” (216). Although Booth may take issue with the poem’s fixed norms, he is nevertheless able to enter into its *ethos* more fully as a reader because it is lived out and exemplified (rather than undermined) by the poem and the poet, in the work’s very fabric and formal choices.

If the presence of an integrated *ethos*, a unity of form and content, is the mark of a poem with merit, it is along these lines that Booth performs a critique of e. e. cummings’s poem “ygUDuh.” The poem, briefly summarized, is a satire that mocks American bigotry against the Japanese during World War 2 and the American pretension to ‘civilize’ the Japanese. Using typographical plays and phonetic spelling to estrange the language and convey a rural, perhaps Southern, distinctly lower-class dialectic that is difficult to decipher, the poem’s message effectively amounts to “bigotry is absurd” (218). Booth describes the experience of reading the poem as follows:

For the moments that our puzzlement may last, the engagement is intense, intimate, narrow, and radically unreciprocal: “I, the author, will construct the code and watch you, the reader, figure it out.” ... Looked at more closely, however, the poem may come to seem tainted by another form of bigotry; in capitalizing on one rejected act of stereotyping on the basis of race, it relies on another, on the basis of class, as it suggests that people who speak substandard English embrace substandard moral notions. Unless

we can claim that cummings intends some further irony that will save his bigots from the contempt that the poem heaps on them, we have located *a moral incoherence* much more serious than what we found in “Don’t Quit.” The elite position of the poet attacking bigotry, reinforced by the elite assumption of readers who take pride in performing an intricate act of linguistic deciphering, is vulnerable to the reader’s question: “As you mock these slobs for their blindness to the Japanese as ‘other,’ where do you stand toward them as your ‘other’?” (218, emphasis added)

Booth’s scathing critique is ethical and formal in equal measure: the problem of the poem is a ‘moral incoherence’ which results in a disjunction between form and content. The poet’s aesthetic choice to deploy a closed, barely decipherable phonetic code in order to relay the language of rural low-class Americans, both estranging them and mocking them in equal measure, cannot help but be complicit in the moral logic of othering which the poem otherwise appears to satirize. Booth’s criticism is neither exclusively a formal critique nor a condemnation of the moral message (which he might otherwise agree with) but an integrated, holistic critique of the underlying presuppositional unity of the project itself. It points to an irresolvable fault-line in the poem’s very conceit.

The resulting lack of integrity has both moral and formal consequences: it sets up a stark ironic divide between the author and the satirized speaker, an ‘othering’ that feeds directly into a flattening of the speaker as a caricature, not a fully realized human being, while elevating the author (and reader) as part of an exclusive club of moral and intellectual superiors. The unintended irony, Booth points out, is that this repeats the very logic being criticized, the logic that the bigoted speaker is deploying against the Japanese other. Booth explores the dissonance as follows:

It is true that formally the poem offers an initial healthy grand shock of otherness But beneath that surface the poem is, both in form and in implicit doctrine, contemptuous of all but those who belong to a specific literary culture. It gives me no reason whatever for trying to understand either the inhabitants of its world or those unsophisticated readers who cannot decipher its surface In short, in achieving a maximum intensity and intimacy between author and implied reader—a reader postulated as someone who will not impose ethical criticism in self-protection—the poem implies a kind of friendship that is about as impervious to seeing the radically ‘other’ as a friendship could be. My friend cummings and I, we know what’s what, and we always have known. What a collection of bigots American society is! I thank thee Lord that I am not as other men. (219)

Hypocrisy, then, is what places the poem in jeopardy. By depicting its target as a stupid immoral brute, the poem’s unsympathetic elitism amounts to a failure to see that it is tacitly performing the very monstrous logic of othering that it is satirizing on a more overt level. This double standard, or “moral incoherence,” might never be noticed without Booth’s attention to the underlying presuppositions of the aesthetic and formal choices of the poem: the aesthetic choices come with moral baggage; tracking that moral baggage reveals it is in conflict with the poem’s overt moral content (218). An attention to the poem’s presuppositions reveals a duplicity between the poem’s explicit message and the message implied by its formal choices and mode of delivery: the same sort of contradiction that Booth points to in those critics who criticize ethical criticism all while complacently assuming their own moral grounds.

To consider one final example of Booth’s presuppositional mode of critique, I will trace his reading of Ezra Pound’s “An Immortality.” The opening lines of the poem are “Sing we for love and idleness, / Naught else is worth the having” (377). Booth argues the following:

The title openly celebrates a doctrine—against ‘morality’—and the poem’s central assertion is plain and direct: Nothing in life is worth having except love and idleness Since the poem obviously is a piece of highly contrived art, both visibly and audibly, *its ‘working’ openly contradicts its own assertion*: at least one thing ‘else’ is worth the having – a well-wrought poem. ‘Idleness’ does not produce such workings of rhyme, half-rhyme, and metrical mastery. What’s more, the poem *contradicts* its title: it advocates a specific morality, one that takes the anti-traditionalist position of ‘The Fiddler’ one step further.” (378, emphases added)

Once again, the poem rests on a contradiction: the mere fact that the poem was written refutes the speaker’s overt claim that ‘love and idleness’ are the only value. This is enough for readers to doubt the sincerity of the speaker’s claims and to find the poem’s core conceit unconvincing. That said, Booth does complicate his straightforward identification of contradictions: “To be inconsistent with itself may not be a very serious flaw in a poem; quite possibly Pound even intended these paradoxes as part of the poem’s proffered delight” (378). It seems important to Booth’s caveat that an *intentional* irony is quite different from an unintentional one; if an unintended irony reveals a morally problematic lack of self-awareness on the part of the author (as it did in “ygUDuh”), an intentional irony turns the paradox into a feature and an attraction, so that the work is really received on a meta-cognitive level. Booth’s apology for irony seems to say that not all presuppositional contradictions, not all failures in integrity, are unworthy of art, especially when the work is intentionally contradictory and therefore *staging* its irony as part of its performance.

However, the drift of Booth’s argument in the remainder of this case study complicates his concession, suggesting that an internal contradiction or paradox may be, after all, the root

cause of a reader's moral and aesthetic dissatisfaction (and grounds for a negative evaluation). In an experiment to demonstrate the importance of a poem's 'norms,' its moral content or theme, Booth substitutes "love and idleness" for "gold and jewelry" in Pound's poem. Booth notes that this does not fundamentally change the aesthetics or formal qualities of the poem, since the entire structure remains otherwise intact, but this simple substitution does fundamentally change the poem's meaning, and the change degrades the poem from being productively ironic, perhaps, to base, contemptible, and unworthy of attention:

What has really changed are the beliefs expressed—and the change surely wounds the poem cruelly. A man saying that nothing is worth having except love and idleness may be mistaken: I think he is seriously so. But he's not so seriously mistaken that I cannot understand and sympathize with his professed role, or remember times when I have tried it on for size. In sharp contrast, a man who would rather have his gold and jewelry than do high deeds is a contemptible, perhaps comic, money-grubber. I cannot separate my beliefs about his pusillanimity from the poem Thus the beliefs are part of the "music" that Pound made, part of the final beauty of the gift—of its power, its integrity, its harmony and revelatory richness. (370)

What Booth intends to show by his substitution of "love" for "gold" is that beliefs matter to our aesthetic appreciation of a work; there is no such thing as an aesthetic appreciation divorced from a work's moral message, content, or theme. However, the implications of Booth's experiment go deeper than a defense of thematic content. The radical change in Booth's response to the poem implies some strong moral criteria by which a celebration of material wealth simply *is* morally inferior to a celebration of love and idleness. Even if the celebration of love and idleness is 'seriously' mistaken, as Booth says, the celebration of material wealth is even more

seriously so, to the point of stretching the poem too far into moral incredulity to be taken up as a sincere ethos. A moral hierarchy is implied by Booth's tolerance of one moral incongruity (however disagreeable) and not the other (too severe to sustain the poem).

One suggestive reason for why the poem's revised theme appears to be objectively worse can be discovered by extending the logic of Booth's presuppositional criticism to the 'moral message' itself: to see the revised poem's message in terms of its own failure of 'moral coherence.' A poem that advocates for an amassing of material wealth, with no intended irony, *could only subvert the reader's own sustained engagement or interest in such a poem.* The reader's incentives are not there. If the amassing of material wealth represents the consolidation of one person's interests (in this case, the poetic speaker's), it can provide no reason for a reader to commit to the essentially reciprocal act of reading. A poem fully committed to promoting, for instance, selfishness, egocentrism, and Machiavellian values means the reader has no choice but to doubt every word in the poem, as it could only be an expression of those some values set against the reader's own interests, in a zero-sum game. Without ironizing, undermining, or otherwise qualifying such a message, the poem would be entirely at odds with any shared interest or common ground that the implied author might share with the reader; the message is "radically unreciprocal," in the way that "ygDuwah" is formally, and it falls short of the "full human equality" achieved in "The Fiddler of Dooney" (216). In short, a poem unironically praising pecuniary gain as its highest value turns out to be something of a contradiction in terms: such a poem implies no ethos at all, or an entirely amoral ethos, celebrating the speaker's self-interested pursuit of profit and offering nothing to a reader that doesn't contradict the very friendship assumed in the reading experience, as a reciprocal interaction between moral agents. In sum, the *moral* incoherence of the poem's message leads to an *aesthetically* dissatisfying experience.

While Booth does not go so far towards unpacking the presuppositions of his literary reading practice as I have here, these conclusions are consistent with the logic Booth deploys in defense of ethical criticism, and against his critics. That one consistent logic is that of a transcendental argument, in which the question is raised, *what must be true for this statement or this practice to be true?* What are the necessary and antecedent conditions, the ‘a priori world’ that has been assumed? Having deduced those logical premises, any contradictions between the premises and the conclusions, between the overt and the implied elements of a work, yield to moral and aesthetic flaws, imagined as a lack of integrity. In spite of Booth positioning himself against deductive logic, offering up *coduction* in its stead, his actual method of reading, which traces the moral implications of a work’s formal elements, is essentially deductive in nature. Moreover, Booth’s method provides grounds for either condemning or celebrating a given work: as either morally hypocritically and unlivable, or morally consistent and therefore a genuine *ethos*. We may tentatively propose an emerging thesis from these findings: a *moral hypocrisy* and a failure of *formal integrity* may turn out to be one and the same thing.

Booth explicitly resists any admission that his ethical criticism is an evaluative criticism. But as we have seen, Booth makes contradictory claims throughout *Company*, and he readily goes back on a previous claim when it is convenient in the context of a current argument (see the sections on the “Presuppositional Fallacies of Pluralism” in Chapter II), so we cannot always take his word for granted. Yet the one thread that *does* persist across Booth’s sometimes slippery argumentation is his transcendental form of critique: the refutation of moral neutrality, showing how any position, no matter how diffuse or open-ended it may seem, must ultimately derive from some presumed paradigm of value, some view of the good which it recommends over other views. Moreover, Booth’s transcendental argument for the inescapability of a normative ground

expresses itself as a distinct literary-critical practice. Booth is able to see the ethical preconditions undergirding any formal or aesthetic choice, the moral assumptions and values that those formal choices imply. It is this attention to the presuppositions of an artwork's various elements that allows Booth to trace where a contradiction in those underlying premises threatens the quality and integrity of the artwork as a distinct *ethos*. What is more, if Booth's critiques of moral neutrality are valid, then Booth himself cannot help but occupy a moral position, that is, he cannot help but be evaluative in his literary reading: and, as this section has attempted to show, he does, in fact, evaluate texts. The basis of Booth's evaluation lies in whether a work achieves an 'aesth-ethical' integrity of form and content, ultimately rooted in a *personal* integrity on the part of the author/speaker that resists the moral failings of hypocrisy and double standards, that plays out the 'golden rule' insofar as the author/speaker *is* the change they wish to see in the world, that they "*are*" their values, and do not merely express those values rhetorically (Schwarz 5).

Clearly, such a presuppositional mode of criticism comes with suggestive answers to those many debates about the continuities and antinomies between aesthetics and ethics. As a holistic interpretative undertaking, such an aesth-ethical criticism does not partition aesthetic qualities from ethical ones, 'moral' from 'nonmoral' elements, theme from style, content from medium. Every textual element, no matter how seemingly 'neutral' or value-free, is an exclusive selection, even an assertion, that depends on underlying preconditions, and those preconditions will bottom out at some moral point of view, some normative ethos, some 'ultimate commitment.' As a result, any isolated fact about the text, when analyzed for the presuppositions it implies, can provide an entryway into the text's ethos, its hermeneutic center, a logical operation from the particular formal feature to the more general ethical claim implied therein.

Sometimes, this deduction can reveal an irresolvable contradiction within a work's ethos, which threatens its status as an ethos altogether and thereby threatens the integrity of the work. But such a holistic assessment of the work is only possible once a critic sees it as offering an entire *paradigm*, an 'ultimate commitment' or 'way of seeing the world,' embodied practically in form, medium, and style as much as expressed overtly, thematically, or didactically. And at its furthest limits, such a mode of criticism generalizes from an evaluation of the merely formal or aesthetic integrity of a literary work and becomes something with broader ethical implications: it turns into an *ethical* criticism in the fullest sense, in that it measures the integrity of an ethos, the livability of some moral scheme or system of value. Latent in this literary ethics is the promise of a criticism of "whole commonwealths, religions, ontologies": a *paradigmatic* criticism by which differences between differing "ultimate commitments," different paradigms, might indeed be rationally evaluated, on the basis of which is livable, and which is contradictory, which exhibits integrity, and which is founded on a self-contradiction (*Company* 335).

The Philosophical Apology

I end with an answer to the philosophers, as this project is meta-critical, that is to say philosophical and theoretical, which itself stands in need of a defense in what many scholars have called this 'post-theory' era of literary study. Despite certain premature claims that theory is dead, however, theory has seen a widespread revival in contemporary literary discourse—or, what is more likely, it never really departed.⁶⁸ Only theory is no longer recognizable as the 'High Theory' designated by postmodernism (which Robert Doran considers to have been

⁶⁸ Jonathan Culler's *The Literary in Theory* (2006) serves as one prominent example of this refurbishing of theory, although many others could be listed.

“*antitheoretical*” all along) (3).⁶⁹ Rather, the contemporary turn to theory involves a whole slew of philosophical, epistemological, even ontological inquiries that return to first-principle questions, to a search for rational foundations to cultural and critical study. It is almost as if the end of philosophy assumed by Kant, the ‘post-philosophical’ era assumed by Rorty, or Derrida’s critiques of ‘logocentrism’ were wholly forgotten—or at least subsumed by broader concerns. We might class this ‘philosophical turn’ in literary scholarship (or ‘speculative turn,’ as some prefer to call it)⁷⁰ under the rubric of a wider New Sincerity, which includes restoratively affective approaches to the text (as in affect theory), theories of amateur reading (e.g., Carolyn Dinshaw), and other post-critical strains of literary study (e.g., Rita Felski). What all these ‘sincere’ modes of inquiry have in common is their contrast to the ironical remove of postmodern skepticism and deconstructive critique, which from the vantage point of impersonal expertise had proclaimed (prematurely, say their critics) an end to such inquiries. Instead, these post-critical modes—perhaps better called, with Meillassoux, “pre-critical”—offer to re-open the historic questions of knowledge, judgment, justification, and, yes, even ontology (3). Nowhere is this new sincerity and ontological optimism more evident than in the “speculative realism” movement. New theories of “Object-Oriented Ontology,” various refurbishments of Kant and Hegel, and appeals to Whiteheadian and Spinozian metaphysics have emerged across the scene of literary and cultural criticism (for example, in the Anthropocene discourse), which, though distinct, all share a return to the *real*, to the possibility for saying something coherent about reality without it reducing down to ‘human finitude’ (which, as its advocates point out, is itself

⁶⁹ Robert Doran writes, “one of the most striking paradoxes of the use of the term ‘Theory’ ... is that much of what goes under the name of ‘Theory’ is actually *antitheoretical*. That is, the figures associated with Theory are adamant that they not be seen as offering a ‘theory of’ something, in the sense of a transcendental, ahistorical, or universal account (e.g., a theory of the subject, of language, of signification, etc.). Theory’s *raison d’être* is to contest theoretical knowledge, showing it to be derivative and lacking in authority—and hence as possessing an irreducible ethico-political significance underlying its supposedly neutral objectivity” (3).

⁷⁰ See *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*.

an anthropocentric rendering of knowledge).⁷¹ As Robert S. Gall puts it, the speculative realists all assume, to varying degrees and subject to various qualifying redefinitions, that “it is possible for thought to once again think the absolute” (358). In all these tentative returns to the Real and towards the rational that define ‘post-postmodern’ and ‘post-critical’ sensibilities, there is the vague and troubling awareness that some kind of provisional absolute must re-enter thought, if nothing else but as a methodological and practical necessity for thought itself: some rationale for what Bruno Latour calls a “*stubbornly realist attitude*” (231). In this quasi-Kantian trend towards the *necessary preconditions* of thought, perception, judgment, and criticism, the ethical critics’ appeal to normative judgments as the constitutive ground for literary and aesthetic work finds its place in the broader stream.⁷²

This ‘return to the real’ seems like the precarious yet inevitable fallout of the radical anti-realism that preceded it. Critics and scholars appear anxious to break free of the paralytics of relativism and skepticism, both epistemic and ethical, in order to *say* something again and to legitimate their fields of inquiry. Derrida and Foucault, though often seen as the chief proponents of a radical relativism, both underwent something of a sea change in their late stage works, turning from a predominantly skeptical or interrogative mode to one engaged in more positive and ethical assertions about life, death, virtue, and the self.⁷³ The sense that criticism must locate

⁷¹ Brian Massumi’s Spinozean metaphysics underpins much of affect theory (see Gregg and Seigworth’s *Affect Theory Reader*), while Donna Haraway and Isabelle Stengers’ turn to Whiteheadian metaphysics might be invoked in the context of the Anthropocene discourse (Hamilton et al 8). As Hamilton et al put it, the Anthropocene discourse in general holds to the intuition that “one of the first requirements of the new geological epoch” is “to extend our ability to think and act beyond human experience” (11).

⁷² Thus, Jacques Rancière writes “aesthetics can be understood in a *Kantian* sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (8, emphasis added). It is the search for such pre-constitutive *a priori* categories of thought and sensibility by which Rancière seeks to cultivate an ‘aesth-ethical’ criticism, “a long-term project” of re-establishing the “conditions of intelligibility” of the debate surrounding ethical and aesthetic value. Perhaps, in a more tacit sense, this turn to the *a priori* is also a search for the conditions for rational debate and intelligibility at all (4).

⁷³ See Quigley 8, Gamez 108.

some *pre-* or *post-*critical stage of thought has echoed across literary discourse ever since, perhaps best captured by Rita Felski in her thought that “suspicion is not being harnessed to oppositional or transformative ends” (3). Along similar lines, John Guillory’s recent work, *Professing Criticism* (2022), is among the latest examples of literary study’s struggle for legitimation, the search for some clearly formulated “rationale” for the discipline: some measure by which literary criticism might be seen, against the orthodoxy, as a *rational* endeavour, one with epistemic value (346). The absence of such epistemic justification has not been the discipline’s liberation or emancipation, Guillory argues, but confusion and crisis, invalidating any authority that cultural and literary criticism might claim for itself against the disintegrative autonomation, specialization, and professionalization characteristic of neoliberal institutions.

Recognizing the necessity for a philosophically informed and rationally argued literary criticism, we can turn to the deeper philosophical conundrum at stake in the refutation of external moral skepticism that pervades this project. At the root of the literary-ethical debacles surrounding the ‘ethical turn’ discourse is a disagreement about the status of ethics: as either a realist endeavour or a constructivist one, as *necessary* or *contingent*. One views ethical judgments as necessary, inescapable, inevitable, pre-constitutive and *a priori*, the pragmatic and paradigmatic ground for any and all subjectivity, any human action or decision: an inevitability that rules out the possibility for a value-neutral position, a position ‘outside’ its own ethical assumptions. It is the position that “we *are* our values,” not that we create our values (Schwarz 5). According to this view of ethical norms, such general moral categories as good or bad, right or wrong, just and unjust, are not only inescapable and inevitable, as if we had to begrudgingly admit them back into critical awareness, but they in fact frame our critical awareness to begin with, forming the antecedent “a priori worlds” to all our more overt practices, discourses, and

critiques (Schwarz 3). Ethics is indeed (contra Nussbaum) *a priori*, or, to use more psychoanalytic terms, *unconscious*, but always unavoidable. The other view of ethical judgments sees such ethical judgments as arbitrary and elective, groundless and free, perhaps dispositional, certainly irrational, bootstrapped into existence in a willful assertion of radical subjective autonomy, an *ex nihilo* creation of the subject. In this view any and all ethical norms are radically contingent, and, for the more committedly ideological critics, reifications of the subject, symptoms of a false consciousness, and, ultimately, without basis in reality. In short, the first position views normative categories as the necessary *a priori* categories of subjectivity, while the other views them as the arbitrary and contingent constructs of the subject itself. Ethics is either *pre-critical* or *post-critical*, *ante-critical* or *anti-critical*: the necessary ground for criticism or else a suspect departure from critical awareness. And so, caught between these two incommensurate claims about the necessity or else contingency of ethics, we see how Zadie Smith's desire to strongly and sincerely assert her 'way of being in the world,' to feel the *necessitating* urgency of her ultimate commitment to an *ethos*, is voided by an overriding awareness that such a commitment must actually be an abdication of critical awareness, an uncritical amnesia that neglects the reality of absolute contingency (see Chapter IV).

This latter view—the view of the absolute contingency of all moral claims, which makes up the implicit assumption of much contemporary critique—might be better called a *criticism of ethics* rather than an 'ethical criticism' (the "poststructuralist critique of ethics" noted by Garber et al) (ix). According to such critiques, to positively assert any ethical judgments is tantamount to a complacent departure from a more radical, more skeptical, more destabilizing and interrogative mode of critique, in which all such normative certainties are passé in light of a critical consciousness that takes for granted the radical contingency of all value judgments. The effect,

however, has not been to overcome normative thinking, judgmental thinking, or the typical categorical discriminations between ‘good’ and ‘bad’; the effect has been to elevate the critical interrogation of ethical norms as ‘better,’ *more* ethical than the positive affirmation of any alternative set of norms. The result of this totalizing critique thus hits up against its paradoxical limits and becomes, ironically enough, an *anti-critical* stance that subjects all judgment to radical doubt: amounting to the poststructuralist injunction “to judge less and undergo more” as described by Dorothy Hale (*Novel* 187). “[S]kepticism as dogma” is Felski’s pejorative for this antinormative norm (9). Such a commitment to ‘pure critique’ has made invisible its own absolute bid in the domain of ethics, however, rendering itself blind to the assumptive ground of its own critical insights. By doing away with pre-critical certainties (or pretending to do so), such all-encompassing critique has benefitted from a privileged association with a radical avant-garde, typically attributed to the poststructuralist school. Critics in this vein proceed to deconstruct ethical certainties and normative categories by highlighting their absolute contingency, continually reproducing the truism that any and all ethical norms and value judgments are groundless, historically determined, socially contingent. But as countless ‘post-critique’ critiques have amply demonstrated, there is nothing really *radical* about an absolute contingency that sees all norms and value judgments as contingent, baseless, groundless, and culturally or subjectively relative. Such a cultural relativism is a familiar tenet of neoliberalism, after all: the very neoliberalism that one might expect such radical critiques to want to undo, since it neuters any critical potency by homogenizing all the contention of ethics and politics under the monistic gloss of a pluralistic multiculturalism that holds all belief systems to be equal (insofar as equally arbitrary). Thus the many ambiguities surrounding the critiques of Foucault, for instance, among the foremost figures to critique the ideological basis of knowledge. Many authors have expressed

uncertainty as to the complicity of Foucault's model of "power-knowledge" in the very institutional power dynamics he critiques—whether he condemns the way that the positivistic ideal of objective knowledge has obscured power relations, or whether he believes the coterminous alliance between will-to-truth and will-to-power to be, with Nietzsche, inevitable. To what extent is Foucault's 'power monism' a critique, then, and to what extent an enabling justification?⁷⁴ The fact that he is both applauded as a critic of neoliberalism and criticized as its complicit supporter are expressions of the same underlying doubleness inhering in an absolute relativism. The ambiguity is, again, a constitutive one: any claim of *absolute contingency* subverts itself, as it seeks to carve out its own general claim to truth while denying any ground by which to do so. As Wayne Booth puts it, the thesis that *all* knowledge is only an expression of power sets up a "self-privileging discourse that exempts itself from its own analysis" (*Company* 385).

External moral skeptics, as defined by Dworkin, are characterized by the same constitutive contradiction of absolute contingency. By believing they can perform a totalizing critique of the premises of normative thinking, highlighting the contingency of ethical judgments as social and cultural constructs, they neglect to recognize that their own categorical negative evaluation of judgment presupposes its own *a priori* ethical absolutes, absolutes that remain outside the bounds of their critique. That such critiques depend on a posture of impersonality, objectivity, and critical expertise only underpins the irony, as such a posture flat-out contradicts another presupposition which such advocates of absolute contingency take on board: that everything is political, everything is ethical, which is to say, nothing is neutral. Full consistency to this truism would mean recognizing that this is true of the absolute contingency which such

⁷⁴ Among the more recent critiques of Foucault's complicity with neoliberalism is Dean and Zamora's *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (2021).

critics appeal to as a universal and ahistorical reality. By arguing that all judgments are arbitrations of power (not so radical, insofar as they repeat the age-old arguments of the Greek Sophists and Protagoreans, as Nussbaum points out), such critics equally delegitimize their *own* critical claims and interventions as no less arbitrary than those of their ideological adversaries, which “knocks a vital prop from under all argument” (*Love’s* 222). This leaves the intellectually scrupulous reader with no intelligible reason to prefer the claims of these critics over those claims which they critique: the root problem highlighted in Booth’s internal critique of George Steiner, or Nussbaum’s internal critique of Stanley Fish, or Dorothy Hale’s internal critique of Zadie Smith. Criticism, in sum, has been hostage to the internal contradiction of Meillassoux’s ‘correlationist circle’: the thesis that “[n]othing can be unless it is some form of relation-to-the-world,” a thesis which exempts itself from its own contingency since it is held up as not “merely relative to our knowledge” but “absolute” (37).

As retrograde and overdone as these problematics surrounding moral relativism may seem, the irrationalism described above remains a constitutive fact of turn-of-the-century literary-ethical discourses, one which the ethical critics have been unable to think beyond. This self-undermining position was the subject of Bruno Latour’s famous text “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?,” an early precursor to the post-critical movement: its main point being that the “critical arsenal” and “weapons of social critique” (230) so cultivated by the antifoundationalist’s “excessive distrust” of facts “disguised as bad ideological biases” (227) have since fallen into the hands of ideological opponents of all stripes. A critique that takes for granted the contingent and ideological basis of all knowledge (a critique to which Latour himself had subscribed earlier in his career) becomes the very same “critical arsenal” deployed by the ideological opposition, epistemically weaponized by the rise of populist movements, for instance

(230).⁷⁵ Preceding Meillassoux's arguments in *After Finitude* by two years, Latour's article highlights how the contradictory belief in the absolute contingency of belief has set up the conditions for rampant fideism which, at its limits, makes critique impossible. Indeed, if it is the neoliberal leveling of all value into commodity exchange that a critic wishes to work against, then it seems criticism stands in need of some alternative normative ground to stand on that is solid, some coherent and paradigmatic 'rationale' by which their ethical claims will *not* be leveled by the same relativizing logic (rather than ceding to it).⁷⁶ And the salve to such an anti-critical and self-defeating determinism is, with the new sincerity and the speculative realists, to open up sincere ethical and epistemic questions again, not to see such questions with the cynicism that renders them in every case, without exception, absolutely contingent (which is merely to sneak in a Kantian correlationism, the "codicil of modernity," readymade and unquestioned) (Meillassoux 13).

Rational argument can only go so far, however, and here we must acknowledge its limits. Some might argue that integrity, coherence, and self-consistency are not self-evidently valuable properties of a belief system, and that by holding these to be self-evident in any internal critique, ethical critics like Booth and Nussbaum are arbitrarily asserting their own paradigm: in short, such critics are old-fashioned foundationalists in disguise. This might be the objection of Deleuze, who would subordinate the search for logical coherence to the seeking after radical

⁷⁵ Latour's point is echoed by Nussbaum, who points out how in "recent literary theory ... defenses of objective truth ... are all too quickly branded as reactionary and even 'fascistic' ... In responding to this it is important to recall the many ways in which relativist appeals to local tradition and denials of objectivity have been invoked to support reactionary and even totalitarian views in politics" (*Love's* 218).

⁷⁶ As Hamilton et al remind us in "Thinking the Anthropocene," invoking Latour, "perhaps the best way to fight capitalism is not to grant it this kind of enduring power, but to instead take a deflationary approach" (9). To echo similar arguments made by Fredric Jameson, Eagleton, and others, perhaps critics ought not grant power, ideology, and capital so much ground that, in a classic case of performative irony, critics undermine any capacity for the critical distance necessary to critique them.

breaks and differences,⁷⁷ or the critique of Derrida against the totalizing tendencies of “logocentrism” (Pada). There is much to commend in such antifoundationalist critiques: how often have ‘logical’ and ‘rational’ arguments turned out to be rooted in an arbitrary leap of faith, obscuring its own will-to-power and hidden ideological motives? Perhaps it is logic and reason that are themselves the roots of totalitarian excesses, after all. Why not be radically open to the contingent, then, to flux and change, and give up any pretense of a logical, coherent, rational account of things? Rather than make a straw puppet caricature out of such critiques, then, a thorough refutation should give the Deleuzean devil his due, seeing if the epistemological criterion of coherence and self-consistency can withstand the strongest version of this poststructuralist objection.

To that end, should someone assert that integrity, coherence, and consistency are *not* valuable properties of a belief system, and that contradiction or inconsistency actually *are* epistemically valuable, we can grant the claim *in toto*. We can go further, even, and propose a Derridean claim that language itself and all its discourses seem to be predicated on this arbitrary enforcement of logical normativity, down to its very grammar. Granting in its entirety the claim that coherence is *not* to be valued, and without so much as putting up a finger of resistance towards a rebuttal, we will find that the claim entails an inconvenient conclusion. If the proposition that ‘coherence is *not* an epistemic value’ is true, then it follows there can be no good reason to remain consistent to this claim, seeing as *the value of such consistency is denied by the claim itself*. In other words, the opposite claim, that ‘coherence is an epistemic value,’ would be equally warranted, and we lose all reason for preferring the first claim over the second. Yet the claim that ‘coherence is *not* a value’ nonetheless remains an *exclusive* claim, insofar as it denies

⁷⁷ See *Difference and Repetition*.

its opposite, that ‘coherence is a value.’ By denying coherence or non-contradiction, the claim cedes any hold that would be greater than its contrary and incommensurate claims, which defuses the claim’s conditions of intelligibility. A denial of the principle of non-contradiction leads thereby to a direct self-contradiction, as Aristotle first made famous in his elenctic refutation (Stern and Cheng).

Even this proof of the principle of non-contradiction will be unsatisfying to some, however. One might press on in believing a self-destructing proposition, of course, through sheer force of will or commitment to a cause. Nothing holds one back from doing so. At that point, however, one must admit to leaving the domain of thought, of language, of rational intelligibility and interlocution, of critical dialogue, discourse, and debate, of moral exchange and of community, and quite intentionally opt for arbitrary will and blind faith as the basis for one’s beliefs: “For the apex of fideism,” writes Meillaissoux, “occurs at the point where it becomes *the thought of piety’s superiority to thinking*” (48). But this pious commitment to an unintelligible self-contradiction comes at a serious cost: one loses any credible ground for being a critic of *other* systems of thought, of power abuses and of the incongruity and irrationality of other epistemes, given that hypocrisy. By constructing one’s position on the basis of an irrational fideism, one likewise legitimates the irrational fideism of one’s opponents, ceding any ground for critique. Logic and reason have never stopped the fanatic, however, and the pious commitment to a self-refuting claim takes a distinct and recognizable form within discourse (I have charted out a few such recursions as they play out in the polemics between Booth and Nussbaum in Chapter III, or between Altieri and the ethical critics in Chapter I). Rather than entertain an alternative episteme, one that might not be so self-refuting, the adherents of a closed circle double down with an insatiable zeal to push the selfsame contradiction further and further,

as if the logical circle could be overcome on its very own terms, as if the contradiction will finally contradict itself. Felski gestures to this as an unyielding faith in

a future critique that will transcend its current flaws and failings. In short, the disease also turns out to be the only conceivable cure; the insufficiencies of critique demand that it be magnified and multiplied, cranked up a hundredfold, applied with renewed vigor and unflagging zeal. Critique turns out to be, as scholars announce with a hint of satisfaction, an infinite task. (8)

The contribution of a coherence-based epistemology of ‘internal realism’ to Felski’s point is to outline this zeal as something more than an arbitrary disposition or “mood,” in Felski’s words, but as an attitude symptomatic of a precise and formalizable structure of thought: a *performative contradiction* between some overt practice and the ground of presuppositions which that practice takes as given. A self-devouring circle between practice and principle yields to a situation of cognitive dissonance, which pushes its more devout adherents to proclaim this vicious cycle as a virtuous one, in a triumph of piety over thought, ethics over reason. It is a form of contradiction which only an internal critique could highlight, which is precisely why this form of critique has been the most relied-upon intellectual move by the “postcritique” critics: the consistent application of an ‘infinite’ critique to itself. Whether it takes the form of Felski’s grounding of the groundless critic in a contingent subjectivity or “mood” (20), Latour’s applying “the sword of criticism to criticism itself” (*Critical Inquiry* 227), or Meillassoux’s critique of the paradox of absolute contingency, all these ‘critiques of critique’ share a common enemy: not the critic per se but the *hypocritic*, whose critical pronouncements are so wide-spanning and indiscriminate they could never live up to them themselves, and whose pronouncements therefore could never be sincerely believed. The New Sincerity is thus an apt term for this awakening to an old hypocrisy.

Many further examples could be listed, but these few instances should suffice to make the point about the ubiquity and unequalled utility of *internal critiques*, and their entailing epistemological criteria of logical coherence and pragmatic “internal realism” (Putnam 123). All these examples of an emergent internal critique within the post-critical discourse can be heard as a silent cry for help against that tired oscillation between fideism and skepticism, between the virtuous performance of pure ideological commitment and the relativizing denial of any rational ground to such commitments. The result of this faux dialectic, between relativism and dogmatism, is a situation best described as self-cannibalizing: a never-ending critique without limits, to use Felski’s terms, as each critic must ‘expose’ the arbitrary ideological ground of those with different commitments while dogmatically obscuring the lack of rational justification for their own (or else hiding behind the cloak of ‘neutrality’ and ‘impersonality’). The arbitrary irrationalism at the root of all belief, leveled as a critical weapon against *other* epistemes, crashes against the necessity to legitimate one’s *own* critical thought and ethical action. Critique has become so epistemically indiscriminate that, in its carpet-bomb approach, its own grounds of legitimacy (alongside literature’s) have become collateral damage. Rampant logical circularity and hypocrisy are the result. Such a viciously circular discourse is not at all the root of progressive change or political action, I argue, but resembles rather a closed uroboros, a snake after its own tail, and the circularity of academic inwardness. But because critique must go on, this self-devouring self-absorption can never be wholly successful. There is hope for a way out, in oblique and suggestive passages of criticism, a few of which I provided in the preceding chapters. The notion of an *internal* critique, while appearing so often as a third way out of this false dialectic, has thus far, and to my knowledge, only survived in suggestive notes, gestures, and opaque pronouncements, never being codified into an explicit epistemology. I end this

section by at least gesturing to such a codification, attempting to unearth the epistemic assumptions that so many of the ethical critics have been enacting all along.

Final Thoughts

Whether one finds this literary-critical work “of worrying consciously about contradictions and inconsistencies” interesting or not, novel or old hat, is somewhat beside the point (Booth *Company* 444). I have only sought to demonstrate a continuum between the following things: a philosophical supposition about the necessity of normative judgments, with its entailing critiques of external moral skepticism and the lack of ethical integrity in such skepticism; and a critical reading practice which pays attention to inner contradictions, inconsistencies, and performative ironies between text and subtext, content and form, as flaws of *formal* integrity. What these elements have in common is the suggestion of a holistic, paradigmatic mode of criticism in which a thing is not critiqued on the basis of some external and ad-hoc standard of evaluation but on the basis of whether it can practically hold up to its *own* internal standards: whether it offers an *ethos* characterized by integrity or else by hypocrisy. What is at stake, in other words, is a coherence-based epistemology that steps outside the dialectics between dogmatic foundationalism, with its arbitrary and irrational faith commitments to a given system of thought, and a skeptical antifoundationalism that denies the possibility for any rational ground altogether. Rather than oscillate between dogmatism and skepticism in this way, and rather than lapse into the hermeneutic circle of evaluating a work of art or system of thought by how it matches up to some arbitrary standard imposed on it by the critic, such a critique assesses its object on the basis of the *internal* congruity and self-consistency of its ethos, at various levels of analysis.

There is thus an alignment between something so philosophically basic as an affirmation of the principle of non-contradiction (assumed axiomatically by Booth, Nussbaum, and Hale alike) and an aesthetic and literary criticism attentive to the unities or disruptions between content and form. Somewhere along that continuum from general commitment to specific practice is likewise an ethos committed to that same integrity as a way of life: an avoidance of hypocrisy and contradiction. Implied is a reasoned ethic or a coherent ‘rationale’ for ethics, one that is not hopelessly prey to the duplicities and double standards of arbitrary fideism and irrationalism, to special pleading (‘rules for thee but not for me’) or to circular question-begging. Such a pursuit of ethical and epistemic integrity is what accounts for Booth’s frustration with “the great gap between theory and practice” in the “distressing contortions critics must exhibit if they both rely on the dogma [that moral knowledge is impossible] and attend to their own sense that some narratives are indeed worth more than others” (*Company* 29). Booth’s belief in rational consistency makes him frustrated at the “astonishing number of critics” who argue that “incoherence, incongruity, uncontrolled dissonance, an unfinished surface are inherently superior to whatever ‘holds together’” (108). The same pursuit of epistemic and ethical integrity concerns Nussbaum, who affirms “at least one principle” at “the rock-bottom level,” “the Principle of Noncontradiction – to which any thinking, speaking being is committed just in virtue of being that” (*Love’s* 223), “the most fundamental law of the intellect, the principle of noncontradiction” (*Love’s* 250) “as necessary for all thought and discourse” (*Love’s* 225): the “vital prop” of rational argument (*Love’s* 222). This ‘vital prop’ for discursive disagreement is knocked away by the pluralist’s appeal to “ethical incommensurability without disagreement” (*Hale Novel* 130), for if competing moral claims do not contradict, if they are not exclusive, then we indeed have Wimsatt’s autonomous islands of discourse, “parallel, discrete, and aloof from one another,

rather than ... overlapping in an attempt upon common problems” (even an abandonment of ‘common problems’ altogether) (57). Finally, for Hale, the “frequently contradictory notion of otherness” (*Novel* 11) that makes up “the complexities and constitutive contradictions” of alterity (*Novel* 99), its “uneasy logic” and “the larger instability and contradiction” it invites (229), bottoms out at a commitment to “virtuous ideological inconsistency” (*Novel* 124). This “conflicted or even contradictory” ethics (*Novel* 25) prescribes “a lived state of paradoxicality, the sense of being alive within a contradiction” (*Novel* 153). And yet, in the final analysis, this is simply the expression of an underlying ethos and episteme that has been in play since modernity: an *absolute relativism* in which “subjectivity itself” (*Social* 7) is the “objective footing” (*Novel* 46). An overriding relativism in which the incapacity to lay claim to any general truth outside of one’s contingent positionality is itself *absolutized*, held up as a universal ahistorical objective truth, is perhaps the most distilled denial of the principle of non-contradiction that one could posit within an ethical system.

And so, the paradigmatic commitment to a logical, rational, realist criterion for ethics and epistemology (whose intellectual tradition, in the case of Booth and Nussbaum, is traceable to Aristotle) is set against a countertradition that sees ethics as essentially arbitrary, irrational, its many values autonomous and incommensurate: ethics as always already *incoherent* in its basic impulse. Thus, Stanley Fish claims that “contradiction” is “emblematic of a necessary condition of human life” (Nussbaum *Love’s* 106), and Booth, too, in a poststructuralist mood, asserts “hypocrisy” is not so bad, after all (*Company* 252). This countertradition holds that no value judgment has any rational leg up over other equally valid judgments, which defuses ethics into the unintelligibility and incommensurability of value relativism (or its friendlier restatement in pluralism, “incommensurability without disagreement”) (Hale *Novel* 130). Full consistency to

this countertradition leads one to suppose that ethical judgment might *itself* be the very root of irrationality, in fact, so that it is value judgments which ought to be judged away, in order that we might avoid the totalitarian trappings of blind-faith fideism. But this is something of a self-fulfilling belief, since it is the antecedent ejection of rational justification from the domain of ethics (the undue opposition of “reason and ethos”) that renders such judgments as arbitrary expressions of fideism to begin with, making value judgments seem like an irrational threat we ought to resist (Anderson 12).

Remote as this may seem to the question of literary ethics, the acceptance or else the denial of the principle of non-contradiction, as either axiomatically true or a reification, as an *a priori necessity* or as constructed, Kantian, *contingent* category of the mind, is at the root of these incommensurate views of value judgments. In the end, we might be dealing not only with different ethics or epistemologies but entirely different theories of the ‘real,’ different ontologies (different “commonwealths, religions, ontologies”) (Booth *Company* 335). Those who assent to the principle of non-contradiction as an axiomatic verity do not see a substantial difference between ontological *reality* and epistemic *necessity* in the strict sense (a possibility which Kant had foreclosed by severing any “preestablished coincidence” of his necessary ‘categories of thought’ with the *noumena*) (Burdman 8). Such thinkers view *reality itself* as non-contradictory, and thus the legitimating grounds for logic and non-contradiction, ensuring a certain realism to the operations of logical thought and categorical thinking. According to such an outlook, it would be unintelligible to say that reality contradicts itself: that “*p* and then again not-*p*” can be true at the same time and place (Nussbaum *Love’s* 250). The alternative view, however, does not take the principle of non-contradiction to be so binding: neither as an epistemic necessity of thought nor as an ontological truth of reality’s structure. In fact, contradiction itself might be the

constitutive fact of existence: a view of existence as “inherently, inescapably multivalent, poly-storied, pluri-mythic” (Booth *Company* 348), the “universal truth” that “everything is doubled, everything is various” (Hale *Novel* 129), “a lived state of paradoxicality, the sense of being alive within a contradiction” (Hale *Novel* 153). Hegel is one thinker who might be invoked in this context, deeply influenced as he was by the hermetic tradition and occult mystery schools,⁷⁸ and whose evolutionary dialectics of progressive history works precisely through the engine of a *contradiction*: a “negation of the negation” (Hegel *Science* 603).⁷⁹ A view of reality as contradictory evokes what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, in their essay on “Surface Reading,” refer to as the essentially “Gnostic concept of truth as too complex to describe ... as antilogos, as what cannot be immediately understood” (an unconscious mysticism which Best and Marcus identify as the precritical assumption of Althusser, Derrida, and much of the postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion) (5). While overtly denying any access to a ‘transcendent’ truth, such a denial subsists on an implicit avowal of a truth so transcendent it is utterly unknowable, inaccessible, apophatic (tacitly avowing the existence of “a truth to be distorted”) (Lundeen 84). This mysticism obscures how it depends on an implicit and precritical assumption that this unknowability, this unverifiability, can be affirmatively *known* by the believer in an absolute way. One who would adopt such a contradiction in thought, rather than rectify the paradox in their own thinking, is by now a familiar trope for the fideist: the choosing of piety over rationality. The faith placed in paradoxicality recalls, again, Best and Marcus’s description

⁷⁸ Glenn Alexander Magee provides a masterful treatment of this topic in his work *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (2001), with persuasive evidence that Hegel “is not a philosopher” (1) but must be understood primarily as a hermeticist and esotericist, influenced by such contemporaries as Jakob Böhme, Meister Eckhart, and other proponents of German mysticism (4-5).

⁷⁹ While I shouldn’t draw Hegel into this project at its tail end, section §93 from *The Logic* will suffice to highlight the striking resemblances that exist between Hegel’s hermetic ideas and the language used in the legitimization of contemporary literary ethics, with its apophatic appeals to ‘otherness’ and ‘endless change’: “Something becomes other; this other is itself somewhat; therefore it likewise becomes another, and so on *ad infinitum*” (149).

of the Gnostic form of mysticism, which, “in contrast to Greek philosophers who defined reason as *noncontradiction*, posited truth as secret, deep, and mysterious, and language as inadequate to meaning” (5). In these broadest possible strokes, we have the dilemma between ethical criticism and poststructuralist criticism realized in stark relief: two views of ethics, two views of the world, two bids about reason and faith, an utterly incommensurable “fault line” in 20th century literary criticism (Paul 497).

Across this project, I have identified a host of epistemic and ethical circularities within contemporary literary ethics that I have argued are unavoidable, given the basic terms and parameters in which these projects have been set and, most of all, the reigning view of normative ethical categories as themselves *unethical* impositions: acts of categorial violence. I have sought to explain how *nominalism* can provide a helpful heuristic for bringing these contradictions to light, conceived as a general privileging of the particular or the categorial denial of categories. Whether the contradictions I have highlighted are taken to be lethal to literary ethics, thus prompting us to look for alternatives, or whether such circularities are taken to be the very point and purpose, the very end of such ethics, will come down to the more paradigmatic, ethical, ontological commitments I have outlined above. In other words, whether or not the ‘ethical turn’ in literary studies will continue to turn in place, or whether these observations help to reach a turning point and the beginning of something new, depends entirely on what readers take this turning to mean: are these the wheels of the dialectic spinning, spirations into the promised end of history, a real revolution, or is the circle, in fact, a closed one?

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