

Ethics as Excess in Victorian Literature and Moral Philosophy

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*To Jerilynn, Karen,
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Introduction

Midnight shadows the South African plains as a small boy clings to the rooftop of a farmhouse, fuming with anger. He is trying to slip into the loft to read the books forbidden by the farm's cruel overseer. Suddenly, as he glances up at the night sky, the stars speak to him. Their sharp glittering laughter tears through the stillness: "So hot, so angry, poor little soul?" He falters in wonder as they continue questioning his moral outrage against injustice as alien, unnatural, excessive compared to their cosmic indifference. "Those stars that shone on up above so quietly, they had seen a thousand such little existences fight just so fiercely, flare up just so brightly and go out; and they, the old, old stars, shone on for ever." The indifferent, eternal stars pose the unanswerable question, whence and why ethical freedom, our incessant crying and praying and fighting for justice? The human experience of ethics is suddenly defamiliarized as an unnatural, anomalous thing, an excess in the context of the natural universe.

This scene appears in South African writer Olive Schreiner's first novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). It is just one of many such defamiliarizing moments in Victorian literature when one comes face to face with one's own ethical subjectivity—the inseparable experiences of consciousness, conscience, and freedom—as an uncanny excess in the natural universe (87). Furthermore, compounding such scenes throughout her novel, Schreiner implies a foundational normative commitment to the value of this ethical subjectivity as exceeding any other particular norms of moral conduct. In other words, who human beings are as ethical creatures stands outside of, is different in kind from, and is presupposed in any subsequent cultural norms they may ascribe to. The questions emerging from such scenes motivate my basic premise in what follows: that thinking about ethics also demands thinking about subjectivity. This may seem

surprising, given how much twentieth-century moral philosophy and literary theory and historicism and other discourses have critiqued the concept of subjectivity. The primary target in these critiques is the individual, implicitly white, straight, male Enlightenment subject, purporting to offer a stable, singular, sovereign, objective perspective on the world. Such a subject has since been dissected as a fiction that nevertheless continues to have tragic real-world effects, being ideologically complicit in the crimes of transatlantic slavery and global imperialism and totalitarian regimes. Against this compromised Enlightenment subject, I turn to the hindsight of twentieth-century moral philosophical reimaginings of subjectivity. They do not shut down as necessarily problematic any thinking about subjectivity, but rather offer vocabulary to critically revisit these moments in Victorian literature when ethical subjectivity appears as both a natural and normative excess.¹ More specifically, I focus on four Victorian literary writers, known for their often critical stances toward dominant Victorian culture and for their engagement with many of the ethical questions that attend being human—Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, George Eliot, and Olive Schreiner. I explore how these literary thinkers of ethics, with all their contradictions and potentialities, suggest a longer trajectory for articulating the excess of ethical subjectivity, often signaled through an affect of awe or wonder. My analysis suggests the continuing need for narratives that revalue, or inspire wonder toward, the excess of ethical subjectivity.

My work seeks to deepen the understanding of what each of these authors contributed to Victorian ethics and how these more complex contributions are relevant for current thinking about ethical subjectivity. The first two of these writers are chiefly known for shaping the nineteenth-century sage tradition of ethics, where the writer assumes a prophetic mantle of wise distance vis-à-vis the status quo and deploys a vividly idiosyncratic, even biblically apocalyptic,

prose style to critique the condition of England and call for reform.² Inaugurating this tradition, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) was a Scottish essayist and historian known for his excoriation of modern England's utilitarian ideology and competitive laissez-faire capitalism, "the dismal science" of political economy. He also decried the increasing mechanization of modern life, not only through literal industrial machines but also through the alienated social and labor relations that attended industrialization. English art and social critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) is often seen as Carlyle's disciple, though they also differed in temperament, scope of interests, and rhetorical emphasis. Ruskin likewise denounced utilitarianism and capitalist industrialization, but he prophetically added the critique of how such methods of production were destroying the natural environment to the point of climate change. He is best known for his defense of the interrelation of truth, goodness, and beauty: art is inseparable from ethics. In his famous chapter "The Nature of Gothic" from *The Stones of Venice*, he called out British industrialism for reducing human beings to laboring machines. He argued that only when people have the freedom to express themselves can they create beautiful art. He also sought to make art accessible to the working classes, seeing art as a crucial dimension of a moral education. While Carlyle and Ruskin represent the apocalyptic side of the sage tradition, English novelist Mary Anne Evans (1819-1880), better known by her pseudonym George Eliot, rounds out the wisdom side. Her realist novels participate in high moral seriousness, tracing characters' growth from egoistic solipsism to sympathy with others. Like Ruskin, she saw art's role as primarily ethical, essential to help people develop sympathy. In addition to these more familiar sage figures, I join the revitalized interest in South African novelist and activist Olive Schreiner (1855-1920). She is known for her progressive feminism and denunciation of British imperial injustice in South

Africa. Her writings combine the reforming purpose of the sage critique with protomodernist formal innovations that intensify the novelistic access to sympathy so well developed by Eliot.

While these authors' weighty contributions to Victorian ethics defended many causes that modern ethical standards still affirm as just, these same current standards also judge some of their views as morally compromised. Carlyle's defense of patriarchal "captains of industry" and his deployment of racist and classist rhetoric have been denounced as proto-fascist. Ruskin's attempt to establish a feudal guild demanding that all members implicitly obey the guild master shows his regressive class ideology. Eliot's moralism can seem overbearing to modern ears, especially when it edges into racial and nationalist rhetoric such as arguably appears in *Daniel Deronda*, or when her novels seem to avoid fully embracing their feminist potential. Schreiner, despite her comparatively more progressive stance on many issues of anti-colonialism and feminism, was still compromised by subscription to common Victorian assumptions about the biological evolution of different races. However, in engaging these four writers, I take a conceptual step back from the familiar methods of historical and ideological critique, which situates these authors in relation to how these problematic discourses permeated Victorian literature and culture.³ Instead, I ask how this literature can speak to the ethical assumptions we make when we engage in such evaluative critique, and what such critique implies about who we are—about human subjectivity as persistently ethical. I step beyond the accusative mode, but neither is my aim simply recuperative. Instead of repeating evaluations of the normative contents of these authors' ideas, I want to highlight textual moments that elucidate the difference between these normative *contents* of ethics, or culturally fluctuating interpretations of what counts as right and wrong, and their foundational normative commitment to the strange anomaly of ethical subjectivity—the experiences of consciousness, conscience, and freedom. That is, instead of

repeating the diagnosis of these authors' exclusionary ideologies, I show how judging these ideologies as exclusionary presumes a commitment to the value of human beings as thinking, obligated, agential creatures. Such ethical subjectivity stands precisely as the standard that judges any ideology as wrong that would deny its excess or limit its priority. While others have occasionally used the term *excess* in connection with Victorian literature,⁴ none has done so in the sense of ethical subjectivity I am exploring. Moments flash out in these texts suggesting that ethics is more than any given rule or custom, exceeding both natural causes and the given normative discourses otherwise named in the text. Ethics arises from the subjective experiences of thought, obligation, and freedom, an implicit standard of judgment inseparable from one's existence as a human being. These texts glimpse these shared experiences as ungrounded, meaning non-identical to, or eluding determinate grounding in, natural determination or particular cultural moral codes.

Twentieth-century and contemporary moral philosophy gives me language to better articulate the significance of these literary intimations of the excess of ethical subjectivity. While many recent theorists have expanded this vocabulary, four in particular have been most influential for me, often appearing as consistent touchstones for other ethical theorists.⁵ First is Hannah Arendt, a German-Jewish thinker most known for her political theory of the public sphere as a space for democratic dialogue and for her dissection of totalitarianism and of the banality of evil. However, less familiar is her late work that philosophically explores how good and evil depend not on cultural mores, which can change seemingly overnight as with the rise and fall of the Nazi regime, but on the simple human capacity for self-reflective thought, an internal plurality that shapes interactions with others in an external plurality. In company with Arendt's insight into thinking, I invoke another Jewish ethicist, Emmanuel Levinas, for how he

articulates this self-reflective *I* as inseparable from the experience of obligation when coming face-to-face with another person. He describes the experience of conscience as an obligation infinitely exceeding codes of comprehensive enforcement: the *I* is responsibility. French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy further develops the precarious freedom implicit in such obligation. He theorizes this freedom as an ungrounded grounding for ethics, showing how the *I* who is thus free is also inseparably constituted as *we*, always in company with others. Finally, the American writer Marilynne Robinson may seem the most unexpected figure to place in dialogue with these moral philosophers, since she is best known as a novelist and philosopher of religion. However, I want to increase attention to her work as an urgently valuable contribution to moral philosophy. Her non-fiction essays draw literature, history, and philosophy into dialogue through vivid and accessible language. Most of all, one of her primary purposes is revaluing ethical subjectivity. While all these thinkers touch on the affective response of wonder toward these subjective experiences, Robinson most overtly defends a foundational normative commitment, an orientation of reverent wonder, to ethical subjectivity as intrinsically valuable. Each of these thinkers in their own way contributes to the ongoing critique of Enlightenment models of the closed, sovereign subject. They animate a more expansive vocabulary for speaking about the strange anomaly of self-reflective obligation and freedom. Their insights enable me to better understand those provocative moments in nineteenth-century literature that intimate this excess of ethical subjectivity and how it undermines dehumanizing rhetoric and ideologies.

My approach resists broad Western assumptions, that the secular version of a morally indifferent universe, or the scientific version of a materially determined universe, have conclusively disenchanting subjective ethical experience. Such disenchantment narratives have been seen as foreclosing any serious questions about the strange exceptionality of ethical

subjectivity.⁶ However, as will become especially evident in my engagement with Robinson, such secularism and scientism open even more urgently the wonder that humans persist as ethical beings. As philosopher John Caputo puts it, with imagery uncannily reminiscent of Schreiner's, "You and I stand on the surface of the little star and shout, 'racism is unjust.' The cosmos yawns and takes another spin. There is no cosmic record of our complaint" (17). In the face of cultural secularism and material determinism, there is something about us that continues to insist that racism is unjust, to make ethical judgments on history and argue over different interpretations and means of pursuing justice. We protest hegemonic powers that marginalize others as subhuman, that deny their ethical subjectivity as thinking, responsible, morally free agents. What motivates such judgments? What justifies us in holding each other ethically accountable? Whatever this motivating standard is, it must also imply a conception of who human beings are. That is, a view of how humans should *not* be treated also implies an idea of how they *should* be treated, which in turn implies a conception of what is due or owed or proper to the human as such, which I submit arises from this ethical subjectivity that cannot be reduced to culturally specific categories that would determine degrees of humanness. Can we recover a wonder and reverence toward human life as such? Can we revalue ethical subjectivity as what implicitly motivates the critique of exclusionary Enlightenment assumptions about the stable Western male subject? I posit that approaching Victorian literature otherwise, looking not backward to claim narratives of historical influence but forward to trace out suggestive resonances through contemporary moral philosophy, opens the potential for more self-aware articulation of how this excessive ethical subjectivity continues to motivate the pursuit of social justice.

Critiquing Enlightenment subjectivity

The European Enlightenment has been castigated on multiple fronts, by conservatives for dispelling the enchantment of religious faith, and by liberals for its ideological accommodation of the era's racism and colonialism.⁷ More specifically, Enlightenment narratives of the human subject are often seen as perpetuating exclusionary ideologies that delimit what counts as human. Modern historical and cultural criticisms expose these assumptions as complicit in the dehumanizing imperial projects that resulted in anything but the ostensible Enlightenment values of equality and justice. The era also saw the growth of political narratives about stadial, progressive history and the legitimation of property and wealth resulting in oppressive capitalist regimes that still operate by exploiting and annihilating human difference (Arendt, *Origins* 453; Badiou 73; Fleischacker 6). These structures of oppressive history are aggravated in narratives of "the triumph of subjectivity," the sovereign, self-sufficient subject. This egoistic enlightened individualism may seem a step forward from violent or mystifying medieval forms of subjection, but it merely replaced them with rationalized forms of power, surveillance, and ideological manipulation for the even more efficient mastery of difference (Adorno and Horkheimer 20, 22-23). Theories of Enlightenment subjectivity established worldviews deploying predetermined criteria to dismiss the mental, moral, and agential capacities of marginalized peoples. Deeming the non-male, non-white, non-western other as irrational slid too easily into designating this other as subhuman (Tuhiwai Smith 26-29; Taylor 400).⁸ The problems that gained traction through Enlightenment ideology pervaded nineteenth-century Britain, which through imperialism and scientific racism became a quintessential scene for such oppressive logics.⁹

Modern critiques of the exclusionary Enlightenment subject claiming universal supremacy take many forms. Perhaps the dominant approach has emerged in what Paul Ricœur

calls the hermeneutics of suspicion, whose roots are solidly entrenched in the nineteenth century with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. These critics share the purpose of exposing “the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false’ consciousness” (Ricoeur 30, 33; cf. Scott-Baumann 3-4; Gadamer 313). Foucault and Althusser are major contributors to this strand, emphasizing how regimes of rationalized discipline and ideological interpellation depend on false consciousness to maintain their narratives of hegemonic dominance (Foucault, *Discipline* 55, 146, 222; Althusser 123). Foucault especially traces extensive histories of the subject as an ideological formation in response to new forms of epistemological, religious, and state power (“What is Enlightenment?” 318; “Subjectivity and Truth” 87; “The Hermeneutic of the Subject” 93). Such histories demonstrate how the totalizing logic of universal Enlightenment subjectivity operates through culturally exclusionary criteria determining who “counts” in the homogenized group and who does not, who controls the mechanisms of domination and who is subjected by their power. Building on this hermeneutics of suspicion that exposes how homogenizing assumptions erase difference, the recent turn to ethics is overwhelmingly a turn to particularity, toward respect for visible differences as more accurate descriptors of the multiplicity of human subjectivities. However, as these approaches address ethical issues through particular differences, they also run into the question of how such a focus on particularity over universality can be coherently joined with the universalizing imperative that respect is always due to difference.¹⁰

I posit that we can begin to address this incoherence and articulate a foundational normative commitment to ethical subjectivity from the hindsight of another key strand in the critique of Enlightenment subjectivity. The deconstructive work of poststructuralism dramatizes the collapse of the binary logic that defines this exclusionary, possessive, Western subject against other manifestations of human life. Deconstructive thinking eschews the closure of

definitive statements—it breaks open the limitations of the oppositional logic that historically positioned Western subjectivity against otherness. That is, it seeks to undo and not simply reverse these positions, since reversal would implicitly leave intact the binary oppositions of male vs. female, master vs. slave, white vs. non-white, straight vs. queer, civilized vs. uncivilized. In deconstructing such binaries, poststructural thought does not simply fall into nihilistic free play; it can be seen as an ethical procedure inasmuch as it opens space for thinking difference as what exceeds the circular reversals of any closed binary.¹¹ This is the perspective I want to invoke, to linger with literary moments exploring the excess of ethical subjectivity, moments that interrupt the exclusionary logic of the Western subject. Though the contemporary ethical thinkers I engage, excepting Nancy, may not have explicitly considered themselves poststructuralists, they still in various ways enact an interruptive approach that facilitates my own. They help me open the possibility of reimagining ethical subjectivity beyond the cynicism often pervading historical ideology critique, where there seems to be no outside to the regimes of power subjugating human life. This lack of space to think exteriority or excess makes it difficult to reflect on what unacknowledged imperatives are motivating critiques that affirm the inherent value of human plurality. Levinas perhaps best exemplifies the work I see these theorists initiating in different ways: his ethics of alterity posits both dimensions of universality and particularity: the face-to-face encounter founds an infinite commitment to a universally-obligating Other speaking through the particular face of the other person, destabilizing the self-sufficient ego with its resistance to assimilative comprehension and its demand for reverent generosity (*Otherwise* 10, 56, 76; *Totality and Infinity* 194).

The texts I examine articulate their commitment to three crucial dimensions of this excessive ethical subjectivity. First, the experience of self-reflective thought emerges as a given,

constitutive aspect of human experience, so utterly ordinary that people hardly stop to think about it, yet becoming utterly defamiliarized when they do, uncanny in its very homeliness—people cannot voluntarily step outside of their own *I*. Carlyle, Eliot, and Schreiner all explicitly address this strangely unique experience of self-conscious thought. Thought happens as an inexplicably given internal plurality, and though nothing can guarantee the similarity of one's own thought to that of others, others also claim this experience, so a space of freedom opens, the possibility of responding to others with imaginative wonder or exclusionary closure.¹²

Dismissing certain races or classes as having a subhuman or limited consciousness is profoundly unethical because it refuses this openness, presuming to foreclose infinite multiplicity by favoring a single embodiment. As nineteenth-century imperialism notoriously shows, such foreclosure has privileged white, male, upper-class subjects as the epitome of rationality. Second, the sense of moral obligation or responsibility or conscience emerges from this self-reflection as something not exclusively determined by any given social code. Its being undetermined by nature or by any other hypothetical imperative is what made Kant call the moral law's imperative categorical. Though the Victorian era famously offered multiple religious and socially-systemic codifications attempting to constrain what it meant to obey this obligation, the literature I examine suggests that this sense of obligation remains presupposed by and irreducible to such codification. To stay just, obedience must remain openly responsive to this ordinary obligation, not restricted to institutional pressures that seek to coopt the infinite demand for their own ends and guarantee obedience. Ruskin, Eliot, and Schreiner especially describe this moral law or obligation or conscience that is irreducible to any particular instantiations of law they may try to enforce. And the third facet of subjective excess that emerges in these texts is will, or agency, the freedom to choose that arises from the sense of obligation.¹³ Carlyle explores the inseparability

of freedom from consciousness. Eliot works through the challenge of agency that arises as self-reflective beings face what she calls “the hard press of human difficulties” arising from social and natural forces that seem to constrain freedom (*Romola* 532). Schreiner similarly explores the dizzying sense of moral freedom that attends finding oneself a conscious, morally responsible being despite such determining forces. This paradox of morally obligated freedom becomes most apparent in the leap from sheer obligation to situated decision.¹⁴ That is, no guaranteed prescription safely bridges the difference between experiencing oneself as an obligated being and actually acting within conditioned circumstances in obedience to that obligation. As in the scene I began with, Schreiner especially dwells with how characters encounter and navigate their own sense of ethical obligation and freedom in conflict with the imperatives violently enforced by colonial structures.

My goal is to find an approach to literature that opens the possibility of revaluing these experiences of excessive ethical subjectivity. I also seek an approach that enables more critical distance about our own evaluative practices, to enable thinking about the assumptions regarding ethical subjectivity presupposed in the universal call to value human life in all its difference and particularity.¹⁵ Poststructural methods show that there is no guarantee for ethics, no Archimedean standpoint outside of human experience, however it is narrated, whence to objectively define ethical subjectivity.¹⁶ Rather, subjectivity itself appears as a foundational normative commitment, an Archimedean point whence dehumanizing ideologies can be critiqued. Poststructural methods attend to the textual eruption of the irreducible; they offer a way of gesturing to the minimally universal ethical subjectivity that implicitly motivates ethical judgment. This subjectivity is not poststructuralism’s invention, nor am I arguing that Victorian literature was poststructuralist *avant la lettre*. Rather, I am seeking vocabulary and a way of

thinking that helps illuminate moments when past thinkers have intimated a longer trajectory of wrestling with the strange exceptionality of ethical subjectivity.

One of the key pre-Victorian inspirations for this project is Immanuel Kant, which may seem surprising, since Kant is often shorthanded as the representative Enlightenment philosopher of rationality and critiqued for his disparaging comments against women and aboriginal peoples (Mills 4; Loudon 99; Spivak 26-37). However, these manifestations of prejudice are deeply inconsistent with his whole ethical project, to articulate “the *supreme principle of morality*,” the foundational ethics that makes us human and that exceeds any particular “anthropology” manifested in different evaluative norms and tastes (*Groundwork* 4: 389/PP 44-45).¹⁷ Kant describes the moral imperative as formally categorical, whose matter is to universally treat human beings as ends in themselves, never as a means to an end (*Groundwork* 4: 428-29/PP 78-80). This would undercut any attempt to exclude those of a different race or gender as undeserving of the respect and reverence due to all human beings as bearers of this imperative. Kant acknowledges this human ethical subjectivity as unconditioned, simply a given dimension of consciousness that could not be proven as necessary or causally determined.¹⁸ At the conclusion of his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), he writes that how it is that we find ourselves obligated by “the moral law, that is, the supreme law of freedom,” exceeds our comprehension that would assign it to determined causes, “but we nevertheless comprehend its *incomprehensibility*” (4: 463/PP 108). Kant’s gesture toward this enigma at the very center of ethics forms a consistent touchstone throughout my exploration of ethical subjectivity in Victorian literature and contemporary moral philosophy.

Rather than making linear arguments for historical influence, I sound resonances across different times and genres, rather like philosopher Simon Critchley does when pointing to how

Derrida repurposes Kant's central insight. Derrida, that most representative of deconstructive thinkers, sees ethics as arising in the "undecidable," in the distance between the unconditioned categorical imperative and all other culturally conditioned imperatives (*Ethics of Deconstruction* 40).¹⁹ I will be spending more time with other moral philosophers besides Derrida, but this "undecidable" is another way of approaching the strangeness of how ethical subjectivity exceeds natural and normative determination. Contemporary moral philosophy sensitive to the dimensions of "post-deconstructive subjectivity" enables me to re-see Victorian accounts intimating self-reflective thought, moral obligation, and freedom as undetermined, inspiring wonder. Perhaps this re-seeing can approach articulating our minimal, implicit, foundational ethical commitment to the value of human life.²⁰ Such a minimal ethics would invite a comportment of openness, wonder and respect toward other people not because they fit some predetermined criteria of cultural norms or because they seem to have earned some kind of social capital through good deeds or because they are exotically different but simply because they are human. This orientation of wonder may perhaps be sparked by seeing how, despite so many philosophical and literary and scientific attempts at definition, ethical subjectivity remains beyond fixed definition, surging up, for instance, in encountering another's face. The paradoxical singularity arising from this ethical subjectivity constitutes, in Arendt's words, the "infinite plurality which is the law of the earth" (*Life of the Mind* 1: 187).

To summarize how I engage the prose writing of Carlyle and Ruskin and the novels of Eliot and Schreiner: I focus on their narratives of ethical subjectivity—the capacity to say *I*, to experience in this self-reflection a sense of moral obligation toward otherness, and to feel oneself free to obey or refuse this responsibility. I want to forestall the easy reading that would write off these narratives as doing nothing more than perpetuating problematic Enlightenment

assumptions about the sovereign ego, which approach risks remaining in the negative dialectic logic that leaves the initial structures intact. But I also acknowledge that, given poststructural critique of the stable, rational subject, there is no returning to these narratives “straight,” so to speak. Rather, I turn them against their oppressive uses and reimagine their ethical potential by revisiting them with the hindsight of contemporary moral philosophies that have reimaged ethical subjectivity otherwise, against the unjust discourses privileging white male Western identity. They can help us articulate our foundational investment in ethical subjectivity when we critique such exclusivity as wrong. This theory becomes more visible in dialogue with literature, which offers concrete opportunities to work through the implications of valuing ethical subjectivity. The theory helps me understand the moments where the literary text itself admits ethics as instability, undecidability, subjectivity that cannot be exhaustively grounded in received codes of identity and belonging.

Ethics in Victorian literature

Making such an argument about Victorian literature through contemporary ethical theory may seem counterintuitive, for in the broad history of moral philosophy, Victorian Britain is most often associated with utilitarianism, propounded in the late eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham’s *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) and in the nineteenth century by John Stuart Mill’s *Utilitarianism* (1861) and Henry Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* (1874). G. E. Moore modifies this conception into what has come to be called “ideal utilitarianism” in his influential *Principia Ethica* (1903) and *Ethics* (1912). Utilitarianism reinforced the Enlightenment’s stable subject as the action-oriented, naturally-determined mechanism that is still assumed in many discourses today. Charles Taylor shows how

utilitarianism along with “sociobiological” naturalism as the dominant ethical models articulated in the nineteenth century are incoherent as explanations of morality (9, 30-31), since they beg the question of the very given that their theory presupposes—“how human agents are inescapably in a space of such moral questions” (32; cf. 393, 406, 416). I resist this deterministic model by exploring the subjectivity that makes this moral space inescapable. My purpose is not to trace historical genealogies of subjectivity, which has already been done,²¹ but to focus on moments in Victorian literature that intimate that there is a qualitative “incomparability” in the constitution of human self-reflective ethical freedom (Taylor 20, 28-29).²² Utilitarianism is a model of evaluation that leads to closure, operating through calculable, foregone conclusions for particular ends. It does not allow space for encountering human subjects as other than their material contributions to society as an aggregate. The inadequacy of this view motivates my turning to twentieth-century thinkers who reimagine ethics beyond utilitarianism as more open and indeterminate, an irreducible subjectivity.

Further manifesting the logic of calculability and closure that motivated utilitarianism is the era’s rigid social codification of ethical behavior. The Victorian obsession with signifying rank betrays a reactionary effort to shore up classes that were becoming increasingly unstable through new mercantile-industrial methods for socioeconomic mobility. But many conflicting discourses contributed to the trends that shaped Victorian morality besides class instability. Chief among them may be the various inflections of religious piety, from the retrenchment of the high church Oxford movement to the intensive biblical study and self-discipline of Evangelicalism informing the sage tradition.²³ Such religious commitments motivated the many efforts to abolish slavery in the colonies, reform industrial labor conditions, and improve the plight of the poor (Altick 179-82; Philip Davis, *Victorians* 104-5; Taylor 399-401). But as with class issues, the

cultural policing of moral behavior tends to overshadow these improvements, making Victorianism often seem synonymous with how patriarchal rhetoric regulated alike female submission and the ruling of colonies abroad, or how the imperial quest to take up the “white man’s burden” became increasingly prevalent toward the end of the century. Such notions can be seen as hypocritical betrayals of both the biblical injunction to love all people, neighbors and strangers alike, and of the Enlightenment ideal of countering mythic destructiveness through rational equality.²⁴ The story of ethics in the nineteenth century is complex, and it is beyond the scope of this project to address every contributing strand. This is why my methodology focuses on the perspectives of four thinkers who especially register the paradoxes of these discourses. Carlyle and Ruskin challenge the dominant utilitarian ethos through experimental writing that explores the connections between self-reflective thought and ethical obligation. Eliot and Schreiner engage the competing discourses of science and religion to reimagine the ethical implications of thought and moral freedom. Even as these writers manifest the historically determined inconsistencies that haunted the religions and classes and other social systems of their era, they also open questions about the strangeness of ethical subjectivity, what it means to be a thinking human being experiencing ethical obligation beyond these systems.

Many recent studies of Victorian literature and ethics channel their approach to the era’s complexity through the novel. This genre in particular, taking forms such as social protest, satire, sensation, realist, and naturalist, yields fruitful ground for such investigations. Within contemporary studies of ethics and the Victorian novel, one approach focuses on how the formal features of novels convey and craft particular ethical commitments.²⁵ The New Historicist approach examines specific contents of ethically-inflected discourses, analyzing novels for their portrayals of particular cultural sites and practices through which moral ideologies hold sway,

such as aesthetics, colonialism, economics, gender, labor, medicine, religion, and science, to name a few.²⁶ In contrast to these dominant formal and historicist approaches, I orient my analysis through contemporary moral philosophy. In doing so, I build on several recent studies of Victorian literature that have broken trend to engage with modern ethical theorists such as Levinas and Derrida. However, they have taken up different themes such as empathy,²⁷ hospitality,²⁸ and moral perfection,²⁹ whereas I go a step deeper to consider the ethical subjectivity presupposed in such themes.

I make two additional observations about my methodology. First, I examine not just novels but also non-fiction prose. By including Eliot and Schreiner, I acknowledge the value of the novel's speculative realm, where even within the ostensible constraints of nineteenth-century realism, these authors go beyond simple transcription to create characters and frame situations according to their own moral vision, working through the ethical questions they see as urgent in their own cultural moment. Novels can use plot, setting, narratorial interjections, and other forms to memorably dramatize complex ethical ideas, while non-fiction prose and philosophical discourses may use other seemingly less vivid strategies. My concern, however, is that the ethical complexity of these novels may also become overlooked, the paradoxical edges worn off as the stranger scenes are forgotten while others gain interpretive currency and circulate as shorthand for certain ideas about Victorian morality. I posit that revisiting what Victorian literature contributes to ethical thinking needs to investigate not just novels but also non-fiction prose. Bringing these different genres together can help defamiliarize how they each approach the excess of ethical subjectivity, not only through the events and character growth of Eliot's and Schreiner's fictional plots, but also through the metaphoric, virtuosic, fragmented extravagance of Carlyle's and Ruskin's non-fiction prose. I also show overlapping strategies between these

different genres, bringing a greater variety of literary vocabularies and forms to bear on the question of ethical subjectivity as urgently relevant for modern reflection on the assumptions undergirding our own ethical judgments as academic critics.

And this is my second observation on my methodology: I look beyond historicism and ideology critique to examine the value and relevance of the idea of ethical subjectivity for its own sake. Andrew Miller uses a similar approach in his book *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2008). He engages accounts of the quest for moral perfection and individual transfiguration on their own terms, a stance not exactly fitting into the dominant trends of literary studies that historically situate texts or apply Foucauldian ideology critique (26-27). Like him, I go beyond these methods not because they do not produce valuable work in many instances, but because I want a method that poses the kinds of questions needed to articulate implications that might otherwise remain overlooked. We both seek an approach that opens a concept—perfection for him, subjectivity for me—as having ethical potential for contemporary thought, fostering a tone of “suggestiveness” instead of diagnostic exposure (29-30). We turn away from the distancing, “conclusive” mode of historical and ideological critique toward a philosophical “implicative” mode that resists predictable interpretations and opens multiple avenues for engaging the ideas of literary texts on their own terms (30, 32). I join Miller in employing this implicative methodology, but instead of examining perfection, I direct my trans-historical, interdisciplinary approach to examine how these texts signal through wonder their foundational normative commitment to the excess of ethical subjectivity.

Wonder as affective response to the excess of ethical subjectivity

My analysis foregrounds how an affect of wonder often signals when these writers explore ethical subjectivity. Kant exemplifies this when he describes how thinking about the “*incomprehensibility*” of the moral law inspires him to intense “admiration and reverence” (*Practical Reason* 5: 161/PP 269). Considering the cognates of the German here, “*Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht*” may be better translated as “wonder and awe.”³⁰ This wonder suggests an orientation of openness, a suspension of the logic of exclusion, and I view it as participating in the long and complex philosophical tradition of wonder (*thaumazein*).³¹ Such openness goes beyond curiosity or vague appreciation. Further, this wonder is not merely a naïve belief in some inherent goodness in human beings, much less simple approval of any particular good action they may pursue, which begs the question of the criteria for goodness.³² Such wonder responds instead to the ethical subjectivity that constitutes human beings as such, that deserves respect regardless of whether their actions are judged as good or bad, for it is the given precondition to any such judging. Wonder as a response to ethical subjectivity is an openness to the paradox that what universally constitutes human ethics also exceeds natural and cultural determinants.³³ Examining these moments of wonder signaling an encounter with the anomaly of ethical subjectivity may bring greater self-awareness not only to the motivations of critique but also to the affective orientations accompanying that critique, suggesting that the affordances of wonder lie precisely in its refusal of prescriptive closure.

Acknowledging this space of affective being resists a tendency to emphasize Victorian ethics as the fulfilling of dutiful action. Charles Taylor recounts in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989) how modern accounts of morality have largely shifted to evaluating action instead of modes of being (3). Victorian culture played a major role in this

shift, gaining a reputation for obsessively defining visibly dutiful action, which is not pure duty in the Kantian sense of the categorical moral law, but rather filled with norms, what Taylor calls the socially-determined “content of obligation” (3). With Carlyle’s gospel of work and duty setting the tone (*Sartor Resartus* 148-49; *Past and Present* 196), multitudinous novels, tracts, and handbooks specified religious and familial and vocational duties for particular classes and genders.³⁴ In contrast to such notions of Victorian duty, my readings examine not dutiful action but affective modes of being—open wondering attunement against narrow-minded closure—emerging in moments of narrating the experience of ethical subjectivity.

I also revise typical associations between subjectivity and wonder (or its loss) as narrated through a specifically religious tradition (or its loss). According to the dominant religious traditions in Victorian Britain, human subjects were grounded in a divine order, with bodies created in the image of God and souls that would be immortal after death. Such notions had been overtly challenged by Enlightenment concepts of rational human mortality and continued to be so on many different fronts as new disenchanted models of mechanistic individualism came to the fore. Nineteenth-century human subjects became dislocated from their coherent place in creation as they encountered German higher criticism,³⁵ geological discoveries,³⁶ biological theories of evolution,³⁷ and the formation of new disciplines for studying human materiality, empirical and evolutionary psychology.³⁸ Max Weber famously described this decentering of the human a “fate” caused by the “rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’” (155).³⁹ The challenges to traditional conceptions of human nature as meaningfully part of a divinely-unified cosmos were exacerbated by the dehumanizing industrial revolution and its expansion of capitalist imperialism. As the age exalted the scientific

models that prioritized causal explications of phenomena, these new epistemological frameworks destabilized human subjects from their grounding in a divine order.

Many nineteenth-century writers registered despair at the shifting rationalized landscape and reiterated a religiously-inflected wonder to resist the teleological narrative of disenchantment.⁴⁰ Moving in a different direction from strictly religious questions, I argue that writers also register, in bright flashes and glances, ethical subjectivity as itself meriting a wonder of interpersonal openness. Scholars have investigated the idea of wonder as persisting in Victorian literature despite the dominant narrative of disenchantment, though not in my sense specifically directed toward ethical subjectivity. They have focused on Romantic-inflected wonder and natural beauty,⁴¹ or on scientific-inflected wonder and natural and technological discoveries,⁴² or on colonial-inflected wonder and the assemblage of foreign novelties in Crystal Palaces and museums,⁴³ or on the wonder of childhood and fairy tales.⁴⁴ Some have considered the connection between wonder and Aristotelian virtue ethics, or wonder as arising from the content and form of novels,⁴⁵ but such work has not engaged how wonder responds to ethical subjectivity. I focus on wonder as an affective mode of being that partakes of openness, admiration and respect toward the excess of ethical subjectivity.

I thus affirm a minimal relationship between wonder and ethics. Critically attentive openness or unthinking exclusion—these diametrically opposed affects have the potential to shape how one acts in response to encountering the strangeness of ethical subjectivity in oneself and in others. Might an orientation of open wonder have a greater likelihood of prompting ethical action toward others than one of prejudiced closure? But wonder responds to the shared strangeness of ethical subjectivity, whose very excess means that no causal link can be guaranteed between affect and action. Arguing for any guarantee to action would impose too

mechanical a view on human experience, raising specters of the rationalized discipline Foucault and others critique in the Enlightenment.⁴⁶ Just action cannot be forced, but its possibilities may increase in an orientation of open wonder toward the uncanniness of ethical subjectivity.⁴⁷ This is what I mean by the relationship between wonder and ethics as being minimal—unenforceable, suggestive. Jane Bennett has posited their relation in her book *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (2001), where she argues that wonder can still be felt in contemporary life, and that it need not be confined to the vestiges of religion or even to nature (11, 14). I accord with Bennett's argument that "the mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life," that this affect holds open a space of optimism or generosity refusing cynical closure by fostering an attentiveness and even attachment to the strangeness of the quotidian (3-4). Like I do, she thinks of ethics as motivated by various modes of being or "affective dimensions," in contrast to the particular norms, "Codes and criteria," that without affect too often lack effect (3). However, Bennett's work on the enchantment of modern life does not engage Victorian literature, nor does she focus on ethical subjectivity. Instead she uses figures like Foucault, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Deleuze and Guattari in order to read modern culture, "literary, machinic, and electronic sites of enchantment"; her texts range from Kafkaesque bureaucracy to Marxist commodity fetishism in advertisements (11, 105, 111, 169-72). My analysis, by contrast, focuses not on the changing landscape of external objects that may continue to spark enchantment, but rather on human beings' relation to themselves and to others, the paradox of ethically obligated, free thought, the internal plurality that inspires wonder and turns one toward others as sharers in this plurality. I focus on how this ethical subjectivity flashes forth as wonder in the literature of the very era that yielded so many narratives of disenchantment's repercussions against human subjectivity.

Language of excess meets the excess of ethical subjectivity

Even as the authors of my study approach subjectivity, they also formally demonstrate the difficulty of following through with wonder—sustaining openness and respect against the pull of exclusion and closure. Ethical subjectivity exceeds the status quo, but this very indeterminacy also makes it vulnerable to cooption by over-articulated, definitive pronouncements. The simultaneous possibility of responding to difference with wondering openness or exclusionary closure paradoxically emerges in written language itself. The instability of language, a key insight from poststructuralist critique, makes me attentive to the literary forms enabling these moments of open wonder to flash forth. These authors gesture narratologically and formally to ethical subjectivity's uncanny otherness, its sheer givenness that cannot be codified or explained away but only signifies its irreducibility. Their formal experimentations include multivocality, metaphorical ambiguity, fragmentation, contradictory stylistic registers, intertextuality, trans-temporal juxtapositions, proto-modernist stream-of-consciousness, and surreal anthropomorphic dialogues. Such virtuosic forms attempt to compensate for the irony that language's encounter with the excess of ethical subjectivity risks definitional closure. Thus, even as language breaks open in confronting the impossibility of translating these experiences, this very opening creates an invitation to collaborate. Language is inherently communal, spoken to facilitate interaction between people, written to initiate conversation with an unforeseeable range of possible readers.⁴⁸ Writing the encounter with ethical subjectivity in oneself and others seeks to recreate it within language as a medium that refuses closure and dramatizes the infinite circling of difference as the condition of community. Language implicitly demonstrates the impossibility of the autonomous, stable, singular subject. It

dramatizes how the affect of wonder, respect, and openness implicitly destabilizes self-complacent closure, a destabilization repeated as the language registering that wonder provides a space for communal encounter with ethical subjectivity. Such a perspective enables critique of other moments when these texts betray themselves in problematic exclusionary notions of the subject signaled by the forgetting of wonder.

My first chapter, “‘Who am I?’ The Wonder of Thought in Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*,” examines Carlyle’s early sage text *Sartor Resartus* (1833), a strange, highly idiosyncratic mix of philosophy and fiction. Its Latin title means “the tailor retailed,” indicating the text’s controlling metaphor of clothes poetically and satirically deployed to evaluate the social condition of England. I analyze how the text dramatically fragments conscious identity, splitting it across a multiplicity of interwoven voices: Carlyle as author fashions a fictional Editor who collates and comments on the philosophical and biographical fragments of a fictional German transcendentalist, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. This narrative multiplicity mirrors the epiphanic revelation at the center of the text: Teufelsdröckh’s wonder at discovering himself as self-reflective, thinking, and therefore free. In *Sartor Resartus*, this wonder at conscious thought moves him from unethical denial and neutrality to ethical reverence and “infinite Love” for others (143). However, Carlyle forgets these ethical implications of wonder in brief asides that anticipate his offensive late pamphlets, whose rhetoric betrays ideologies of race and class such as Hannah Arendt would denounce in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Instead of pointing to these moments in dialogue with *Origins* to repeat the well-worn “Carlyle as proto-fascist” line of criticism, I examine *Sartor Resartus* in conjunction with Arendt’s less familiar late text *The Life of the Mind* (1971), where she explicitly describes self-reflective thought as the subjective experience enabling ethical freedom, and which she identifies as the motivating question behind

her interrogation of totalitarianism and the banality of evil: “Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?” (5). This dialogue between Carlyle and Arendt enables me to turn Carlyle back on himself, to follow out the implications of wonder at self-conscious thought as the very structure that condemns the refusal of its reality in others. Attempting arbitrarily to exclude certain groups of people from wonder and respect as conscious, thinking beings is inconsistent with the wondering openness toward reflective thought that pervades *Sartor Resartus*.

My second chapter, “Facing an Ethics of Obligation with Ruskin and Levinas,” considers obedience as a response to exceeding obligation. Ruskin’s conservative, classist ideas became most visible in his utopian communal project, the feudal Guild of St. George, where he insisted on all members’ obedience. This Guild is easily critiqued through the Foucault-Althusser strand of theory, which reads obedience through rationalized structures of power and ideology that discipline docile subjects. However, to argue that Ruskin’s account of obedience is more complex than this, I turn to Jewish moral philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who describes obedience as ethical when it responds to an infinite obligation speaking through the face of another person. Levinas’s theory helps me differentiate Ruskin’s conflicted accounts of obedience in his work of art criticism *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853) and in his late series of letters to workers published as *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1884), meant to be the mouthpiece of the Guild. In contrast to his conservative version of obedience, Ruskin also defamiliarizes obedience by routing it through the analogy of artistic inspiration, the paradoxical freedom from codified norms by means of obedience to an exceeding obligation irreducible to any determined codification or script of rules. For Ruskin, such ethical openness discovers the infinitely creative beauty of the world and a wondering reverence for something divine in every other person,

anticipating Levinas's locating of infinite obligation, which he also calls the divine or absolute Other, in the face of the other person. This alternate model of obedience becomes dramatized through the formally experimental, heterogeneous texts of Levinas's *Otherwise than Being* and Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera*, both of whose language performs a response of indeterminate openness to infinite obligation.

My third chapter, "Standing Apart from Oneself: Mind and Conscience in George Eliot and Marilynne Robinson," examines Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the story of a young country girl, Maggie, growing up and struggling to define her life against the determining circumstances in which she finds herself. The text sustains simultaneously two discourses that have since become culturally entrenched as mutually exclusive. The first is the scientific language of evolutionary psychology, whose emergence as a discipline Eliot closely followed. This field's discourse seeks to objectively describe human mental experience as biologically determined and mechanistically grounded. The second is religious and metaphysical language, which prioritizes a subjective perspective: it describes human mental experience as conscious mind or soul and conscience enabling freedom that exceeds biological determinism. *The Mill on the Floss* suggests that even as humans find themselves the products of a long evolutionary history, they simultaneously experience themselves as self-reflective and ethically obligated. This reflective obligation is precisely what renders them free: the perceived capacity to make willed choices implies a sense of obligation that gives one an alternative possibility, a better self, so to speak, that can be chosen over self-interest *and* over narratives of the evolutionary prioritization of self-interest. I invoke the modern essayist and novelist Marilynne Robinson, who has been called a "contemporary George Eliot" (O'Rourke) but who has not yet been featured in any extensive comparative analysis with Eliot. In her Yale lecture series *Absence of*

Mind (2010), Robinson critiques the simplistic popularization of contemporary evolutionary psychology that has uncritically inherited and amplified certain Victorian assumptions, especially the idea that such psychology could objectively account for mental phenomena and so effectively dismiss the subjectivity of mind and conscience. Robinson's call to revalue the wonder of this subjectivity motivates my renewed attention to a scene in *The Mill on the Floss* that is typically overlooked or minimized in readings emphasizing the novel's scientific investments in evolutionary psychology—Maggie's encounter with Thomas à Kempis, where she wonderingly discovers herself as a conscious soul, capable of reflecting and thus standing outside of herself, as a being whose ethical subjectivity exceeds the biological determination that feels so oppressive to her. Maggie's wonder at the strange experience of reflective conscience and freedom emerges as even more of an anomaly because it cannot guarantee what evolutionary psychology prioritizes—social success and evolutionary survival.

My fourth chapter, "Ethics as Excess in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*," further unites the dimensions of ethical subjectivity explored in the previous chapters—the self-reflective thought and infinite obligation that yield the freedom to respond to that obligation beyond determining circumstances. These experiences shape Schreiner's first novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which describes three children working on a South African farm and struggling to maintain their subjective uniqueness in the face of colonial abuse and male domination. Schreiner suggests that these dimensions of ethical subjectivity have the potential to expose what makes abuses of power so unethical: they are the very experiences that rationalized disciplinary coercions target for erasure. She describes the farm master's evil oppression as his refusal of wondering openness, denying thought, conscience, and freedom in the children he abuses. Schreiner protested such denial in British colonial policies and in the oppression of

women. Her exploration of ethical subjectivity can also be turned to critique the novel's own problematic marginalization of indigenous characters. To better illuminate how wonder at the excess of ethical subjectivity defies repressive colonial closure, I invoke Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Experience of Freedom* (1988). Here Nancy theorizes ethical freedom as a "groundless ground," an experience that is its own normative foundation, deeper than which one cannot go, exceeding derivative norms and discourses of significance such as those offered by institutional systems such as religion or politics (162). Nancy helps me analyze Schreiner's text as showing not simply that policing and denying ethical subjectivity in others is unjust, but more precisely that such denial is unjust because it refuses the undetermined excess of this subjectivity, seeking to assert its own derivative grounding as originary and to guarantee obedience. A negative mirror image emerges of the potential for justice that could result from sustaining wonder for ethical subjectivity, reverence for the irreplaceable, undetermined uniqueness of each human being as such. Schreiner's realist form, broken open by long, semi-stream-of-consciousness meditations, wonders at the inexplicable thinking *I*, obligation, and agency that defy a world of domination and closure.

I. “Who am I?” The Wonder of Thought in Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*

Thought without Reverence is barren [...] The man who cannot wonder [...] is but a Pair of Spectacles behind which there is no Eye.

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?

—Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

Scottish prose essayist, historian, and social critic Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) may seem at once a logical and controversial place to begin a project about ethics in Victorian literature. He has long been designated one of the quintessential prophets or “sage writers” of his era.¹ Though he was raised in a Scotch Calvinist family, he adamantly resisted the “cant” of organized religion and of the reactionary Tory press. He denounced the industrial mechanization of society, utilitarian ideology, and competitive individualism as aggravating the division between the two nations within Britain—those in extreme wealth or abysmal poverty. This denunciation set the terms of debate for the condition of England question that essayists and novelists such as Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, George Eliot, and William Morris would revisit throughout the century.²

Despite his progressive social critique, Carlyle was a product of his culture and era.³ Even as he resisted the competition of *laissez-faire* capitalism, he also defended such conservative notions as an unrelenting gospel of work and patriarchal labor relations. More problematically, he uncritically subscribed to contemporary assumptions about racial or ethnic others as inferior—Jewish people, Black Jamaicans, Irish Catholics. These assumptions motivated his offensive comments blaming them as less capable of voluntarily carrying out the

rigors prescribed by his gospel of work. Such comments severely discredited his reputation for some of his contemporaries and for modern readers. In his most notorious pamphlet, “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” (1849), he called for white governance in Jamaica and assumed that American slavery was the benignly paternalistic institution touted by many anti-abolitionists throughout the era (Morrow 125, 129).⁴ In another reactionary pamphlet, “Shooting Niagara: And After?” (1867), he prophesied doom from the expansion of the vote to more working-class men offered by the Second Reform Act.

Scholars have read Carlyle’s reactionary rants as anticipating the later rise of totalitarian ideologies, an association that peaked in late twentieth-century literary studies (Toremans and Gosta vi).⁵ Harold Bloom even claimed in 1986 that “It is Carlyle, and not his critic Nietzsche, who is the forerunner of twentieth-century fascism” (*Modern Critical Views: Thomas Carlyle* 14; also qtd. in Toremans and Gosta v). Though these older views of his work associate Carlyle with extreme conservatism to the overshadowing of his progressive critique, more nuanced recent scholarship acknowledges how his life and work remain full of paradox, resisting full alignment with either liberal or conservative narratives.⁶ Though Carlyle perpetuated the racial stereotyping prevalent in his era, he also criticized a society that would leave an Irish Widow to starve and that refuses to act with the nobility that a “poor Black Woman” does in helping a dying man and thus showing herself a “Lady” within whom there is “something of a God” (*Past and Present* 210-11). He also includes Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, as one of his exemplary historic heroes (*On Heroes* 41; Kerry and Hill 14), suggesting that, however much he belied this open-mindedness in his incendiary pamphlets, he could at times prioritize certain actions he understood as ethical over the particular identities of those performing them.

Carlyle's contradictory moral entanglement at once undermines and reinforces the nineteenth-century ideologies that still haunt the contemporary race and class divisions of late global capitalism. This makes him a crucial case study for my larger project to reevaluate resonances between speculations of ethics as excess in Victorian literature and contemporary moral philosophy. What Carlyle contributes to ethical theory needs to be more precisely articulated beyond his broadly recognized sage writer's critique of utilitarianism and capitalism. Simply diagnosing his prejudiced assumptions may miss a valuable opportunity to deconstruct them from within. The insights about ethical subjectivity emerging from his claims and inconsistencies also enable dismantling what is so problematic about those contradictions. I join the recent scholarly movement that resists the flattening move of cursorily dismissing Carlyle (Kerry and Hill 14). Toremans and Gosta extend this challenge in the introduction to a 2012 special issue of *Studies in the Literary Imagination* dedicated to Carlyle, writing that "there is at present an acute need to re-examine critically Carlyle's politics after the often uncritical assumption of his adherence to a totalitarian ideology that dominated the twentieth-century reception of his work" (v). Furthering this reevaluation, I focus less on political categorizations and more on how he describes subjective ethical experience. More particularly, I analyze how, in his semi-fictional prose text *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), Carlyle develops an ethics of wonder that arises in response to the experience of conscious thought. My transhistorical, interdisciplinary methodology suggests that this ethics of wonder reaches beyond *Sartor Resartus*, implicitly justifying our critique of racist ideologies as unethical.

Wonder may seem an unexpected concept through which to theorize ethics, especially in the context of Carlyle's work, where wonder seems most readily categorizable as merging spiritual mysticism with Romantic naturalism or distanced picturesque spectatorship. Wonder at

nature's sublimity may seem theoretically inadequate to provide a rigorous ethical model for critiquing injustice if it is thought of as nothing more than the isolated Romantic ego gushing over the wild beauties of nature. However, attentiveness to Kant's insights on the sublime demonstrates that the sublime happens within and has profound ethical implications. As that wild exterior natural world dwarfs and alienates the self, it serves as the occasion to affirm the unconditioned powers of the human reason capable of appreciating and transcending this destabilization.⁷ Kant shows that, confronting determined conditionality, whether manifest through the threatening precarity of the natural world or through one's own sensible inclinations, the self is placed in a position that affirms the immediacy and unconditionality of reason, the moral law as thinking freedom always already within oneself and others. Thus, whatever the occasion for the sublime experience, whether the object of admiration be nature beyond or one's own moral reason within, the moral sublime recognizes the unconditioned transcendence of that moral reason. Beyond any simple Romantic wonder at nature, Carlyle also explores this moral sublime, this wonder responding to the sublimity of ethical subjectivity—the moral law in oneself and in others.⁸ Ethical wonder is human-oriented, not only discerning one's own experiences of thinking moral freedom, but also following through on the logical implications of those experiences as constituting the plurality of human life. To better demonstrate how *Sartor Resartus* suggests thought as an object of ethical wonder in this sense, I look not only back to Kant, one of Carlyle's key inspirations, but also forward to Hannah Arendt, who likewise builds on Kant to investigate wonder, thinking, and moral freedom in her last text, *The Life of the Mind* (1971). Both of these philosophers contribute to the long history of resonance between wonder and ethics in Western philosophy, theorizing a wonder specifically directed to the exceptional

experience of thought.⁹ As Arendt specifies, thought is the “two-in-one” duality that gives rise to the experience of moral freedom.

Turning to Kant in a chapter on Carlyle makes sense, given the significant influence Kant exercised on Carlyle’s writings. Turning to Arendt, a twentieth-century German-Jewish theorist and critic of totalitarianism, is more unexpected. She mentions Carlyle only briefly in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), but she pushes against the trend to see him as nothing more than a forefather of the imperialism that would enable the conditions for fascism and instead connects him with the larger Romantic trend of hero-worship (180).¹⁰ Despite this slight overt connection between Carlyle and Arendt, however, I find her philosophical investigation of thought and freedom in *The Life of the Mind* useful to illuminate Carlyle’s ethical wonder. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt articulates the ethical theory motivating her critique of totalitarianism and of the banality of evil, which she defines as the suspension of thought (*Life* 4-5; *Origins* 474, 477). As part of this critique, she addresses some challenges to wonder’s ethical traction. Besides the mystical or natural sublime, the typical mode assigned to Carlyle, wonder can become fixated such that thinking ceases, devolving into ideology, as when Heidegger became entranced with the Nazi party and betrayed the critical work of thinking. Arendt suggests that wonder maintains its ethical edge against such misguided fixation when it opens attention to the free, conscious, self-critical work of thought.

In their own ways, these very different thinkers—Kant and Arendt framing Carlyle—suggest that when thinking moral freedom is the specific object of wonder, wonder can be freed from several things: first, from potential dismissal as uncritical immersion in romanticized nature, and second, from potential ideological fixation. Wonder needs ethical reconsideration as an orientation of openness toward otherness, specifically the uncanny otherness of thinking

moral freedom in oneself and in other people. Further exploring this otherness through form, Arendt also proposes a powerful theory of metaphor, Carlyle's primary literary method throughout *Sartor Resartus*. Metaphor formally dramatizes the two-in-one duality of thought, thus serving as an aptly self-reflexive vehicle for *Sartor Resartus* to theorize wonder at thought's exceptionality. Metaphor embodies a multiplicity of potential meanings, formally replicating the unfixed plurality of thought. Wonder that responds to this self-reflexive work of thought offers something more precise than effusion over nature. It has the potential to defamiliarize thought as an experience that exceeds those modes of rationality rightfully critiqued as complicit with racial and imperial oppression—logistical linearity, social and political definitions and exclusions, the teleology of technologized progress. Crucially, this ethics of wonder is not morally prescriptive; wonder at thought cannot be guaranteed as a response or harnessed to yield restrictive, positivist declarations of codified rules. Rather, wonder emerges as ethical when it responds with spontaneous openness toward the strange, metaphorical two-in-one otherness of thinking moral freedom in oneself and in others.

This chapter begins by offering a more detailed introduction to *Sartor Resartus*, how Carlyle uses humorous irony, juxtaposed voices, and the metaphor of clothes to accomplish his more recognized critiques against utilitarianism and materialism's extreme wealth inequality, as well as how the text betrays obvious ethical shortcomings, for instance racially stereotyping the Irish to critique the systems oppressing them. The scholarly focus on these elements of *Sartor Resartus*'s social critique, however, has either overlooked wonder in the text or associated it with mystical spirituality and Romantic nature, but not read it as ethically significant for being directed toward thought. I then provide philosophical context on this thinking moral freedom, examining how Kant, initially responding to Hume, theorizes his respect and wonder for this

experience that Arendt continues to explicate in *The Life of the Mind*. This philosophical context leads to my analysis of how *Sartor Resartus* explores this relationship between thought and moral freedom through two central metaphors: the metaphor of the stranger and the metaphor of conversion. I then turn to how *Sartor Resartus* explores wonder as a response to this experience of thinking freedom, suggesting that wonder is useful for ethics because it opens the self to attend to otherness in oneself and in others. I end with Arendt's theorization of metaphor to show how the primary formal method of *Sartor Resartus*—metaphor—is a particularly effective vehicle for exploring this ethics of wonder.

***Sartor Resartus*: re-stitching the seams of the world**

Carlyle wrote *Sartor Resartus* during the 1820s, revised it for serial publication in the 1833-34 issues of *Fraser's Magazine*, then published it as a unified text in 1836. It critiques modernity's utilitarian ideology and mercenary desire for nothing more spiritual or praiseworthy than "money's worth realised" (196). It denounces extreme wealth inequality, utilitarian ideology, and scientific mechanization expending human uniqueness.¹¹ In addition to critique, however, *Sartor Resartus* creates a formal "politics of *Bildung*" whose goal is to reform readers from the inside out by instilling reverence as the only foundation of interpersonal relationships that is resilient enough to sustain a modern community (Lamb 271, 282). The text manifests a deep interest in individual ethical and spiritual development, a concern that does not necessarily require the services of formal religion (George Levine, *Boundaries* 28). To facilitate this internal reform, *Sartor Resartus* both depicts the conversion process and formally offers itself as a model for readers to experience ethical or philosophical—though not necessarily overtly religious—conversion. Wonder will appear as a crucial facet in this metaphor of conversion.¹²

Though this moral purpose is not exactly subtly conveyed, Carlyle is still less heavily handedly didactic in *Sartor Resartus* than he is in later texts such as *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) because of the extent to which he places himself as author at several removes from the reader. The text's concern with authorship amplifies this distancing effect.¹³ He narrates this semi-novelistic text from the perspective of a fictional, unnamed English Editor, who is attempting to assemble and translate the fragmentary autobiographical and philosophical writings of an imaginary German philosopher, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. This name, from Greek and German meaning God-born devil's dung (Abrams 390), renders him a ripe candidate for humorous self-deprecation, further underscored by his position at the University of Weissnichtwo—"know not where"—as a "Professor of Things in General" (*Sartor* 14). This framing of Teufelsdröckh as a paradoxical figure inhabiting only an obscure corner of the educational apparatus undercuts any intimidating or presumptuous associations that readers may have about the difficulties of German philosophy. But despite, or even because of, this self-aware humor, *Sartor Resartus* sharpens its edge of moral earnestness.¹⁴ The self-deprecatory names and humorous temperamental differences between Editor and philosopher contribute to the text's moral investment in reader transformation.

Sartor Resartus's humor and irony have inspired excellent scholarship on how its formal complexities advance its moral argument.¹⁵ Its palimpsestic structure forms a triptych: in Books I and III, the Editor works through Teufelsdröckh's "philosophy of clothes" and its metaphorical implications for modern wealth inequality (6, 217). In Book II, he tries to assemble Teufelsdröckh's autobiographical writings, which he received mixed up "like Sibylline leaves" in six mystifying paper bags marked with zodiac signs (60). A historian and biographer himself, Carlyle's choice to create this narrative frame of source fragmentation reflects a self-aware jab at

historians' pretensions trying to make sense of incomplete and contradictory primary sources.¹⁶ These absurdly marked fragments humorously dampen the Editor's hopes that offering readers Teufelsdröckh's biographical context will enable them to better understand his philosophy (58). They also nudge the text into an even more contingent and imaginatively flexible space beyond the structured conventions of philosophical treatises such as Kant used. The Editor positions readers not as passive receivers of fixed truth, but rather as active participants interpreting and even constructing connections. He openly admits that the narrative traced through his intervention is assembled by "local glimpses, and by significant fragments" (42); and he often asks readers to think and discern possibilities for themselves. The fragmentation frees readers to collaborate with the Editor, to exercise both "intellect" and "imagination" in parsing Teufelsdröckh's thoughts (61; cf. 62, 141, 157, 204). This layering of voices increases authorial distance and offers an ethical space for readerly engagement.

The text's complex moving parts also open room for contradictory perspectives and shifts in tone, alternating between humorous irony and flights of wonder and praise. Some scholarship has attempted to parse which of the multivalent arguments can be credited as Carlyle's own in contrast to those he intended as ironic, especially when the English Editor takes issue with Teufelsdröckh's views (Baker 219-20). But a more interesting question beyond pinning down which of his characters Carlyle "really" sides with is how the text deliberately dwells in this ambiguity. Such formal self-consciousness has been described as Romantic irony.¹⁷ The text's humorous, ironic, and formal innovations facilitate its moral critique. As I will develop below, they also keep its crucial wonder from fixating into something reified and static.

The text sustains a continuous self-critical reflexivity that represents the very essence of conscious thought, the two-in-one dialogue with the self. The text's wonder at thinking freedom

amplifies Carlyle's critique of utilitarianism and instrumentalism, but it also facilitates critiquing those moments when he makes unethical assumptions. At this early stage of his career, Carlyle's assumptions about race are minimally present in *Sartor Resartus*, but they are hinted at in various moments that fall short of the ethical implications of wonder. For example, denouncing how wealthy society bestows more care on their horses than on paupers, Teufelsdröckh claims, "A white European Man, standing on his two Legs, with his two five-fingered Hands at his shackle-bones, and miraculous Head on his shoulders, is worth, I should say, from fifty to a hundred Horses!" (174-75). While the larger point stands, that the wealthy should value human life more than property, especially the lives of those living in poverty, the phrasing permits reading in the implication that men and, intersectionally, women of races other than white Europeans would be comparatively worth less. Instead of following through on the wonder due to every human being as having a "miraculous Head" capable of thinking and experiencing moral freedom, he limits himself through this unwarranted addition of a hierarchy privileging white European men. This hierarchy is unjustified by the text; it subscribes to cultural assumptions of racial superiority that in no wise logically follow from but in fact will be exposed as inadequate by his own text's defamiliarization of thought and moral freedom as deserving of wonder and respect.

Additional racial assumptions about the Irish contradict the openness of wonder as the text traces the social implications of Teufelsdröckh's philosophy of clothes. The controlling metaphor of clothes fits a text whose title—*Sartor Resartus*—is Latin for "the tailor retailed," and whose chapters continually rework and expand the metaphor's significance. This sartorial philosophy claims to be a theory of everything, including in its metaphorical reach "all that men have thought, dreamed, done, and been: the whole External Universe and what it holds is but

Clothing; and the essence of all Science lies in the PHILOSOPHY OF CLOTHES” (57-58). As clothes assume different forms on the living human bodies they describe to the world, so social structures and customs take shape from and characterize the people living within them.

Teufelsdröckh offers a historical and anthropological account of clothes, describing the various outlandish styles worn by cultures such as the “Grecian, Gothic, Later-Gothic, or altogether Modern, and Parisian or Anglo-Dandiacal” (28). Such descriptions often launch into social satire, whose pointed moral purpose becomes compromised by racialized descriptions of the Irish in “The Dandiacal Body” chapter. The dandy is he whose attention to his wealthy and stylish appearance has become a “*Self-Worship*” that ironically erases unique identity in a set of sectarian commandments for habiliment allowing no deviation (209, 211-12). He describes such obsessive style with fittingly extravagant irony to sharpen its contrast with the clothes worn by the “Irish Poor-Slave,” the race of “*White-Negroes*,” who constitute the predominant membership of the “*Drudge*” and “*Ragged-Beggar Sect*”; they wear rags that equally allow for no creative expression (212). This ironic contrast between the dandy and the Irish Poor-Slave participates in the nineteenth-century’s prevalent stereotyping and racializing of the Irish, besides collapsing the crucial differences between the experiences of poor Irish Catholics and those of Black Jamaicans and American slaves. Though racially inept, the contrast bitingly satirizes economic inequity; the clothes metaphor exposes the material dispossession and exploitation of the Irish. Additionally, its metaphorical weight depends on two-fold distinctions between visible forms and deeper hidden truths that sustain and exceed those forms.¹⁸ I will later return to how such duality emerges not only in the content of this clothes metaphor, but also in the duality inherent in thinking, represented in the formal structure of metaphor itself.

The tone of this chapter on the dandy and the Irish Poor-Slave further critiques economic injustice by satirizing the conventions of anthropology. This science rooted in the Enlightenment purports to objectively describe and comparatively evaluate those culturally marked as other, but in the process, it sacrifices an ethical capacity for wonder to objectification that cannot step beyond exoticizing otherness. Teufelsdröckh's critique suggests that such an objectifying anthropological perspective is dangerously akin to utilitarianism because both focus on the exterior "clothes" of use value alone—one defines happiness as an amassed total, the other defines progress as amassing ever more novel objects of study. Such utilitarianism ignores wonder as reverence toward something for simply being. Utilitarianism is perhaps the biggest enemy in *Sartor Resartus* because this worldview aims to totally instrumentalize the natural and social world, impoverishing conceptions of human life (32-33, 91, 167, 177-79, 216). Utilitarianism offers no space for looking beyond the *what*—the appearance, the exploitable clothes so to speak—to the *why*—the metaphysical, subjective experiences that inspire a wonder stubbornly useless for economic or ideological profit.

Carlyle has already been associated with the idea of wonder. In fact, quotes lifted from context in *Sartor Resartus* and *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*—"wonder is the basis of worship" and "worship is transcendent wonder"—circulate as kitsch objects of consumption on internet platforms such as brainyquote.com and devotional blogs. Aside from the flattening effect of such reproductions, though, the larger narrative about wonder associated with Carlyle appears firmly entrenched in his mystic-spiritual and Romantic traditions. Despite his Calvinist background, Carlyle directed wonder away from organized religion toward a broader mystical spirituality.¹⁹ Additionally, the association of wonder not just with mystical spirituality but also with the Romantic appreciation of nature is consistent with reading Carlyle as bridging the Romantic and

Victorian eras (Abrams 307; Baker 220; Haney 308; George Levine, *Boundaries* 20). The wonder in *Sartor Resartus* does resonate with the Romantic effusive turn to nature positioned against the disenchanted techno-secularity of modernity.²⁰ This Romanticism informs how he saw wonder's potential to motivate moral reform against such disenchantment, necessary to heal the modern wasteland left by the triumph of rational thought. His writing style eschews the predictable linearity of rational argumentation, instead indulging hyperbolic Romantic effusiveness; his long passages expansive with dashes and exclamation points dramatize an enthusiasm that participates in all the god-infused, spiritually-enraptured mysticism originally associated with that word.

My purpose is not to dismiss this well-trodden narrative of wonder as mystical spirituality or Romantic naturalism in *Sartor Resartus*, but rather to show how this text also contributes another possible way to understand the ethical traction of wonder. Restricted to this paradigm of mystical naturalism, wonder may seem theoretically inadequate to sustain a rigorous ethics, more likely to yield an orientation of awe-struck immobilization instead of motivation to ethical action. It may even be viewed as complicit with the aesthetics of the picturesque, available primarily to leisured and moneyed classes who gaze on landscapes and art while ignoring or aestheticizing the specifically human dimensions of labor. However, *Sartor Resartus* does suggest that the affect of wonder may be theoretically rigorous and useful for ethics precisely as it responds to the phenomenon of free, conscious, self-reflexive thought as something strange and exceptional. One cannot step outside of thought; there is no safe vantage point for the privileged, objective gaze. The inexplicable phenomenon of conscious freedom opens within one's own mind and within the mind of every other person.

Philosophical context of thought and moral freedom

I now offer some of the philosophical context and vocabulary needed to show how *Sartor Resartus* explores thought as the object of this ethical wonder. I look backward to understand its refusal of materialist Humean empiricism in favor of Kantian transcendentalism. Kant theorizes the exceptional nature of self-reflective thought as the experience of rational moral freedom, which inspires a response of wonder or respect. I then look forward to how Arendt explicates Kant's insights in *The Life of the Mind*, adding her own emphasis on the exceptional two-in-one nature of consciousness and explaining more directly how it yields the possibility of moral judgment against the banality of evil.

Kant offers a crucial philosophical context to theorize the response of wonder to thought and moral freedom in *Sartor Resartus*. Carlyle responds to Kant not only in *Sartor Resartus* but also in earlier essays such as "State of German Literature" (1827) and "Novalis" (1829), which contain extended discussions of Kant. Scholars have well analyzed the direct influence German thinkers exercised on Carlyle, including Kant and other philosophers such as Fichte and Novalis as well as literary authors, especially Goethe.²¹ Ellen Talbot summarizes Margaret Storrs' work on the key Kantian insights that Carlyle embraced: "(1) the doctrine of the ideality of space and time; (2) the distinction between reason and understanding; and (3) the conception of the moral law" (399-400). But it is generally acknowledged that Carlyle, with his fragmentary, declamatory methods, offers a less precise and at times homogenizing version of the German philosophers than is to be found in their writings, filtering them through his own interpretation (Talbot 400). Acknowledging this assumption of superficiality, Suzy Anger more closely analyzes Carlyle's work as interpretive, not simply derivative, of German Romanticism and transcendental idealism. She lists additional Kantian themes that Carlyle reimagines as

“foundational to his hermeneutic”: “the distinction between reality and appearance, the notion that the Infinite is revealed in the Finite, the conviction that humans can never do more than approximate to knowledge of this Infinite, and the significant role of the creative imagination in understanding” (“Carlyle” 79). Furthering these resonances, I draw on Kant but not for the linear argument of historical influence leading only to the tired conclusion that Carlyle’s work was a second-rate reiteration. Rather, I turn to Kant’s ideas for their own sake, to offer context that brings out more clearly how Carlyle’s text theorizes the ethical potential of wonder at thought and moral freedom. Kant describes 1) thought as transcendental apperception, or the capacity to say *I*, 2) moral freedom as constituted by the human experience of duality—finding one’s thinking *I* both obligated by an intelligible, categorical moral law and embodied in a physical world—and 3) wonder or respect as the affective response to these experiences that may potentially motivate obedience to the demand of the moral law.

The first of these points contextualizes how the question of self-consciousness recurs throughout *Sartor Resartus*. Teufelsdröckh poses the question thus: “there come seasons, meditative, sweet, yet awful hours, when in wonder and fear you ask yourself that unanswerable question: Who am *I*; the thing that can say ‘I’ [...] what is this ME? A Voice, a Motion, an Appearance;—some embodied, visualised Idea in the Eternal Mind? *Cogito ergo sum*. Alas, poor Cogitator, this takes us but a little way. Sure enough, I am; and lately was not: but Whence? How? Whereto?” (42). This capacity to say *I* is the capacity to think, to self-reflexively ask who one’s *I* is. To say as Descartes does, that one’s thinking is proof of one’s existence, circularly begs the question, simply acknowledging that thinking is happening but not offering an explanation of what thinking is or why he thinks or how it works. The problem with “Metaphysics,” Teufelsdröckh declares, is that it has not been able to explain the paradoxical

singular plurality of self-conscious thought. Furthermore, the very act of asking the question, “who am I,” implicitly acknowledges the *I* as something needing to be differentiated against a context of multiple other *Is*—the *we*. In plurality, the question of self-conscious thought remains: “WE are—we know not what” (43). We experience our embodied self-consciousness as singularly uncanny. From our perspective as thinkers, the body clothes yet remains irreducible to the thinking mind; they seem nonidentical. Mind exceeds its appearance in the world, inasmuch as it can reflect on its appearance in the world. But there is an even deeper duality than that between body and mind, for mind also exceeds itself, sees itself as multiple, is capable of stepping back and reflecting on itself (143, 155).

In accusing metaphysics’ inadequacy to explain the phenomenon of thought, Teufelsdröckh targets primarily empirical philosophers’ mechanistic perspectives on consciousness, classifying them among the narrow-minded “Enemies to Wonder” (53). Early in *Sartor Resartus*, he overtly jabs against those empirical philosophers who would claim the exterior or visible world of material appearances as preceding and causing the interior or invisible dimensions of thinking life. He writes, “Let any Cause-and-Effect Philosopher explain, not why I wear such and such a Garment, obey such and such a Law; but even why *I* am *here*, to wear and obey anything!” (28-29). The two italicized words imply that attention should prioritize not the instrumental, visibly exterior dimensions of life alone, but the invisible *I* that paradoxically knows itself to be *here*—a self-consciousness that finds itself always already existing in time and space. The representative “Cause-and-Effect Philosopher” that Carlyle references here could be the empiricist David Hume, who attempted to explain the activity of thinking as, at its most basic origin, receptive instead of active. He conceived of the mind as a receptacle for sense impressions, incapable of spontaneously creating any new thought whose

elements could not be traced back to an origin in the concrete world. Even imagination, with its capacity to posit worlds that do not appear and to seemingly transcend the boundaries of reality, takes its cue from experience, as he argues in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) (2.13). Hume describes how we should ask of even the most abstract philosophical concepts, “*from what impression is that supposed idea derived?*”, thus exposing the needless superfluity of jargon and acknowledging the exterior world as the shaping cause that results in the effect of thought (2.17). He claims that all sensible impressions can ultimately be organized under three categories that create the effect of a coherent identity or unified *I*; these are the “principles of connexion among ideas, namely, *Resemblance, Contiguity* in time or place, and *Cause or Effect*” (3.19). These modes of connection create the illusion of coherence between impressions, which he sees as sufficient to support the unity of thought; there is no a priori identity; all is derived through “experience” (4.1.23). Hume’s argument is also commonly called the “bundle theory of mind,” inasmuch as he describes, in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738), how “what we call a *mind*, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions” (1.4.2.39, 207). In the Appendix to his *Treatise*, Hume emphasizes how this cause-and-effect philosophy claims to locate all conceptions of self-conscious identity as originating outside of the thinking *I*: “When I turn my reflexion on *myself*, I never can perceive this *self* without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions. ’Tis the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self” (634). However, anticipating how *Sartor Resartus* claims the inadequacy of this theory, Hume ends by admitting that his cause-and-effect theory is “very defective,” inasmuch as this composition of impressions is no simple feat (635). He remains wrestling with two principles that persist as incompatible: one would posit “*that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences,*” while the other would suggest “*that the mind never*

perceives any real connexion among distinct existences” (636). In other words, there must be either a unified connective identity, a “simple and individual” mind that can serve as the ground in which these perceptions “inhere,” or some necessary external connection between things that causes us to perceive their connection, but he cannot claim to answer certainly regarding either, thus remaining in a skeptical position (636). Even at the end of his later *Enquiry*, Hume continues to acknowledge the inescapability of skepticism at the center of his empirical philosophy of sense impressions, inasmuch as claiming their exterior origin does not positively exclude the possibility of the mind’s original activity or even of an “unknown spirit” such as God or some other mysterious agency (12.1.119).

Despite Hume’s caveats, *Sartor Resartus* rejects Humean cause-and-effect empiricism. Instead it metaphorically elaborates Kantian transcendental philosophy, building to underscore the wonder that accompanies the inexplicable activity of self-conscious thinking. Kant famously acknowledged Hume as the one who awakened him from his “dogmatic slumber” (*Prolegomena* [1783] 4:260/TP81 57).²² However, he pushed against the implications of Hume’s philosophy in his Inaugural Dissertation (1770), where he describes how we can never experience noumenal things as they are, but only phenomenal impressions; our mind filters all sensible impressions through its own categories of space and time. These categories are a priori, meaning we cannot trace them to a prior cause—we simply find them always already shaping the sense impressions we receive. The physical body, immersed in a world sensed through these categories of space and time, thus clothes the *I*—the self-aware consciousness. But Kant would also clarify that the influx of sense impressions, thus spatiotemporally categorized, needs to inhere in a deeper substance. Thought is possible because there is something more that exceeds and is necessarily distinct in kind from these impressions and their categorical filters, that serves as the ground or

medium through which they cohere. An influx of discrete impressions would mean nothing beyond themselves if they were not assembled and ordered into thought by a singular identity. How else could these impressions be experienced as a cohesive flow in a unified consciousness? How else is it that we know that we who read one sentence are the same person who read the sentence preceding it? This unity of self-consciousness is what Kant explores when he describes the exceptional phenomenon of thought in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787).

For Kant, there is a crucial exception to our empirical separation in space and time from direct contact with things as they are, one single object to which we *can* have unmediated noumenal access in and of itself without these categories filtering our phenomenal impressions. This exception is the thinking *I*, our own self-consciousness, our “transcendental unity of apperception” (B139/CPR 250). Because our self-consciousness is immediate, we cannot know anything determinate or particular about it. The various faculties of cognition, feeling, and desire that we experience are simply powers exercised in relation to empirical impressions, as our self-conscious mind orders these impressions or objects of inner and outer sense (Wuerth 5, 70). Thus we cannot say anything specific about our direct access to this transcendental object, our thinking *I*, apart from the fact that, inasmuch as it is the ground allowing for coherent, unified thought, it exists (Wuerth 79). This lack of predicated specificity sets our thinking *I* apart from all other objects or impressions of inner and outer sense (A107/CPR 232; B132/CPR 246-47). In Kant’s words, “no cognitions can occur in us, no connection and unity among them, without that unity of consciousness that precedes all data of the intuitions, and in relation to which all representation of objects is alone possible. This pure, original, unchanging consciousness I will now name **transcendental apperception**,” which is what unifies our spatiotemporal “empirical apperception” (A107/CPR 232, emphasis original). Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception

is simply the thinking *I*, the noumenal unified self-conscious identity necessarily undergirding our phenomenal experience. Kant's emphasis on the strange exceptionality of thought likewise drives the central question of *Sartor Resartus* and stands as the root of its ethics—wonder toward this conscious moral freedom in oneself and in others.

Kant lays the groundwork anticipating how this experience of the self-reflexive *I* emerges as the object of ethical wonder in *Sartor Resartus*. Kant's account of the thinking *I* specifies that its exceptional duality—being both immersed in the phenomenal world as filtered through the categories of space and time and accessing the noumenal world of self-reflective apperception—is what renders moral freedom possible. The *I* thus experiences the tension of inhabiting two worlds at once. We find ourselves at once accessing our noumenal, intelligible, thinking *I*, and inhabiting a spatio-temporal body with physical needs conditioned by a sensible world. Freedom, then, is our ability to prioritize one over the other of these experiences in making decisions. This ability comes from our being a thinking plurality that seems to exceed both experiences. Kant spends much more time discussing the process of ethical decision and character development in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793). He describes how the thinking *I* is not determined by sensible inclinations, nor is its obedience to the moral law guaranteed. Instead, the *I* is free because it experiences these competing influences simultaneously. That is, the *I* feels respect for reason's intelligible moral law, which is nothing other than the demand for consistency within one's plural identity. This respect or wonder is undeniable: "there is one thing in our soul which, if we duly fix our eye on it, we cannot cease viewing with the highest wonder, and for which admiration is legitimate and uplifting as well. And that is the original moral predisposition in us, as such" (*Religion* 6: 49/RRT 93). But the *I* also experiences self-interested inclinations, the feelings of pleasure and displeasure and desire. We develop a moral or immoral

character as we choose which of these influences to subordinate to the other, self-interest or respect for the moral law (*Religion* 6: 31, 37/RRT 78-79, 83; cf. *Lectures on Ethics* 27: 347-48, 647-48/LE 127-28, 385-86). Through this work of thinking and judging between these experiences, we engage in a process that shapes how our ethical responsibility appears in the world: “The human being must make or have made *himself* into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil” (*Religion* 6: 44/RRT 89). This ethical work describes a gradual, deliberate formation, moral character as a course of development, not a predetermined given. But the thinking plurality enabling this development, constituting the moral law’s obligation to consistency, is always already there. In short, it is the dual, self-reflective structure of the thinking *I* poised between multiple options that enables moral freedom. Despite many assumptions scholars have since made to the contrary, Kant recognizes that ethics is not exclusively some formally abstract theory experienced in disembodied isolation.²³ In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), he defines the categorical imperative—the moral law of reason—as independent of the sensory tastes that motivate various cultural codes of conduct. But he also recognizes that every creature who thinks and thus experiences the moral law’s obligation is also embedded in contingent material circumstances. It is precisely this paradoxical plurality of the morally-obligated *I* joined with the spatio-temporal categories structuring thought’s appearing that enables freedom.

The moral obligation arising from this plurality of rational thought is Kant’s famous categorical imperative—“*act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*” (*Groundwork* 4: 421/PP 73). This imperative is a formal demand for internal consistency within one’s thinking *I*, refusing to make oneself an exception over others. Being creatures who experience this duality of thought, we are

inescapably free; we “cannot help *hearing*” the internal dialogue of thought by which we stand in judgment on ourselves: “Consciousness of an *internal court* in the human being (‘before which his thoughts accuse or excuse one another’) is **conscience**” (*Metaphysics of Morals* [1797] 6: 438/PP 560, emphasis original). This moral law does not in itself include motivational power; rather, the motivation to follow its demand comes from the feeling of respect or wondering admiration for its strange inseparability from thought. Against contemporary theories ascribing moral behavior to self-interested desires (for example, doing a good thing in order to gain social or religious or economic benefits), Kant suggests that such respect also goes beyond simple curiosity or vaguely effusive appreciation. He also clarifies that this kind of motivational admiration means not simply a naïve belief in some inherent goodness in human beings, much less being struck by any particular good action they may pursue. For Kant, such conditional situation- and culture-specific evaluations of action cannot form a consistent theory of ethics, which must go beyond “melting, tender feelings or high-flown, puffed-up pretensions.” Because the moral law’s consistency exceeds all such conditionality, it inspires “*respect for ourselves* in the consciousness of our freedom” (*Practical Reason* 5: 157, 161/PP 265, 269). Such respect does not depend on what different cultures may contradictorily define as particular goods, but rather motivates us to live in accordance with ourselves, our self-reflective thought’s moral freedom.

The ethically motivational power Kant thus ascribes to respect contributes to the ethics of wonder as it emerges in Carlyle’s thought. The passage at the end of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), where Kant most overtly and famously registers his response to the rational experience of the moral law, clarifies that it is not some detached mode of assent but rather a deeply affective orientation: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration

and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*” (5: 161/PP 269). Kant underscores that, though his extended career reflecting on self-conscious thought has heightened his wonder, this response is available to all inasmuch as all experience the phenomenon of consciousness. Not some enlightened few only who have the educational means to discern it as if “veiled in obscurity,” but every person faces these inescapable experiences and can say to themselves, “I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence” (5: 161-62/PP 269). Carlyle cites this passage to underscore these experiences as inspiring wonder: “‘Two things,’ says the memorable Kant, deepest and most logical of Metaphysical Thinkers, ‘Two things strike me dumb: the infinite Starry Heaven; and the Sense of Right and Wrong in Man’” (“Niagara” 32-33). Here Carlyle emphasizes Kant’s understanding of the sublime as wonder at one’s own mind, undetermined by the forces of the natural universe. However limited we may feel ourselves beneath the stars, we are inexplicably bearers of moral freedom. Carlyle translates Kant’s wonder and awe as being struck “dumb,” but this signals less passive immobilization than heightened attention, a receptiveness that stills phenomenal chatter enough to detect the noumenal silence of the inexplicable singing through the darkness. *Sartor Resartus* offers a more extended exploration of how this wonder may expand, though not guarantee, the motivation to obey thought’s moral law. We can allow this experience of wonder to inform how we interact with ourselves and with others; we stand apart from ourselves, evaluating the relation between our wonder for conscious freedom—the obligation to be unified with ourselves—and our contingent desires and feelings. Carlyle directly celebrates this key moment when Kant suggests an ethics of wonder in response to the incomprehensible excess of thought’s moral law.

This wonder at the moral law glances through even Carlyle's worst pamphlets, implicitly undercutting his own prejudices. Though in one breath he denounces the leveling effects of democratic "Swarmery" or mob rule that he thought would result from the extended franchise, and blames the inferior moral commitment to the gospel of work supposedly shown by Jamaicans, in the next he praises Kant's description of the metaphysical "Moral Sense" as an experience that exceeds utilitarian explanation and constitutes human life as a "perennial Miracle" inspiring wonder ("Niagara" 15, 27, 32). Such a conception of a miraculous human moral sense sits uneasily alongside his exclusionary assumptions about racial inferiority. Carlyle believes that "Men are *not* equal, except in their duty" (Campbell 283). However, believing all human beings are bound by the same duty also implies that all have the moral sense of justice and injustice that undergirds this duty. Whether that duty is followed through in action is a separate issue, and it was over this issue that Carlyle's assumption predominated, that racial others were less likely to work effectively.²⁴ This opens a paradox, for if this moral sense is such an inexplicable "miracle," by definition it exceeds the notions of limited evolution in supposedly inferior races that many of the scientists and anthropologists of Carlyle's day claimed. Much less could this moral sense be narrowed to depend on Carlyle's idiosyncratic conception of what constitutes a work ethic and which groups of people adequately practice it. In subscribing to such racist cultural assumptions, he denies the very meaning of the "Moral Sense," which Kant defines as universal to thinking beings, precisely *not* dependent on contingent distinctions such as religion, race, class, gender, or cultural traditions and labor practices. Carlyle's invocation of Kant to describe ethical freedom as a miracle beyond positive definition implicitly undermines his own exclusionary rhetoric.

Hannah Arendt likewise invokes Kant to examine the phenomenon of thought and its relation to moral freedom, indicating an investment in metaphysics that has often been overlooked. Arendt is better known for her work contributing to political philosophy, with the concepts of plurality and natality grounding her contribution to ethics. In *The Human Condition* (1958), she theorizes the *vita activa*—the experiences of labor, work, and action—and how action constitutes the political space of public speaking.²⁵ The *vita activa* describes how people interact with each other to change the exterior, social world. Throughout her work, she seeks a model of democratic political engagement that would resist totalitarianism. Arendt sees freedom as the greatest value appearing in the political sphere, and freedom depends on the spontaneous plurality of human togetherness, speaking and acting in ways that elude prediction and open potentiality beyond the status quo. She views totalitarianism as the political formation that most threatens this open spontaneity, or “natality”—the fact that with birth, each human being starts the world anew, bringing into it an excess such that the world can “never condition us absolutely” (*Human Condition* 11, 247; cf. Dolan 271). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), and other essays, she traces the historical developments of racism and imperialism out of which totalitarianism mutated to further stifle thought and freedom (*Essays* 150).

Though less familiar than her work on the *vita activa*, Arendt’s theorization of thought—the *vita contemplativa*—grew from her search to understand the sociopolitical formations that fueled totalitarianism and suppressed human plurality and spontaneity. She became increasingly aware of how extensively the external space of public, political appearance takes shape out of internal experience—what happens inside of people—and how they narrate and reflect on that experience. Plurality is an internal as well as an external reality.²⁶ As she writes in one of her

essays, “Crucial for a new political philosophy will be an inquiry into the political significance of thought; that is, into the meaningfulness and the conditions of thinking for a being that never exists in the singular” (*Essays* 445). Her questions about the interior experiences of thought and the will’s moral freedom and judgment’s decisions appear in various stages of development throughout her works, though this continuity is not often acknowledged because she most explicitly articulates them later in her career.²⁷ Arendt’s less-studied, last unfinished text that most extensively addresses the ethics of thought, will, and judgment, *The Life of the Mind*, builds on an extended lifetime of study and is not a departure from but rather integral to her critique of totalitarianism. In this text she also articulates how these experiences relate to wonder, which will help further illuminate the ethical significance of this relation in *Sartor Resartus*.

Arendt projected *The Life of the Mind* as three volumes, each dedicated to theorizing different elements of the *vita contemplativa*—the experiences of thinking, willing, and judging. She was able to finish only the first two before she died; the volume on judging remains a partial set of notes building on a 1970 lecture series about the political implications of Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment.²⁸ The preface to *The Life of the Mind* frames Arendt’s purpose as seeking to understand how these interior experiences relate to, and in fact enable, ethics. She explicitly positions this work as continuing to articulate and critique the banality of evil as the lack of thinking, the thoughtless complacency that found its most horrific manifestation in genocide. At the end of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she writes about how totalitarianism capitalized on atomized modern society, isolating individuals by destroying their relationships with others and, by extension, with themselves: “In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time” (477).

Similarly in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she describes how, reporting on the trial of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann, she was struck by how he exhibited not spectacularly evil motivations, nor extraordinary stupidity, but rather “sheer thoughtlessness” (287). The self-reflective thought inseparable from moral freedom that would forestall this “banality of evil” (252) is not some erudite skill refined only through an elitist education, but rather something that ordinary human beings do and hold each other accountable for. Arendt acknowledges that her report on the Eichmann trial only suggested this “strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil,” rather than explaining or theorizing it (288). Her quest to theorize this interdependence explicitly motivates *The Life of the Mind*. In its preface, after describing how the Eichmann trial sharpened these questions for her, she articulates her central question: “Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought? [...] Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually ‘condition’ them against it?” (5). This question motivates her investigation of thought and freedom.

Specifically, it is the duality of thought that enables moral freedom; to explicate this relationship, Arendt works through how Kant describes the rational moral law. She emphasizes his acknowledgement of what she describes as thinking’s anomalous strangeness, the “not-at-all ordinary experience of the thinking ego,” and how this extraordinary thinking duality gives rise to our experience of ethical freedom (1: 42). Arendt underscores how the moral law is not some exterior imposition of truth to which the *I* must inevitably assent. Rather, the demand for internal consistency arises from the dual structure of the mind. As Arendt phrases it, our “two-in-one” self-reflexivity gives rise to what Kant calls the categorical imperative, which demands that we

not be in contradiction with ourselves or make exceptions for ourselves (1: 95, 188; 2: 5, 59). At the end of the day, in the stillness of the night, we have to live with ourselves, answer to the judge—the consciousness or conscience—within ourselves (1: 190-91). She emphasizes that in thought’s self-reflexivity, we experience an *I* that stands apart from ourselves, appraising whether or not we could will any particular moral maxim as universal: “It is this *duality* of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers” (1: 185). Arendt further clarifies the relation between thought and moral judgment, and how the latter, interfacing with the material world, depends on the exceptional, invisible dual structure of the former:

The faculty of judging particulars [...] is not the same as the faculty of thinking. Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent; judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand. But the two are interrelated, as are consciousness and conscience. If thinking—the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue—actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self. (1: 193)

Moral freedom—what Arendt calls here “the ability to tell right from wrong,” thus arises from the very structure of thought. It does not require special educated knowledge.²⁹ Thought’s “two-

in-one” duality is like the wind, invisible in itself, yet having a phenomenological effect in the material world through the secondary operation of judgment. Self-conscious thought is the sole noumenal thing in itself that we experience, but it is also the unifier of phenomenal impressions received through the categories of space and time, thus manifesting itself as interaction with the material particularities of any given situation. The conscious, thinking *I* experiences both sensible desire and intelligible reason; we perceive ourselves as standing free between them, deliberating with our self and enabling the exercise of judgment and will in response to situations when moral “stakes” are at issue (2: 130, 141). The experience of moral freedom arises from the duality of the thinking mind—the strange, exceptional structure of the “two-in-one” (1: 180). Kant’s and Arendt’s theorizations of thought’s integral relation to moral freedom offer the philosophical context needed to discern this relation in *Sartor Resartus*.

Thought and moral freedom in *Sartor Resartus*

Sartor Resartus depicts the mysterious exceptionality of the thinking *I* through the metaphor of strangerhood, suggesting that the thinking self is a stranger on the earth, never quite at home, always in excess of its material circumstances. The metaphorical significance of Teufelsdröckh’s strangerhood demands more extended attention than is usually paid to it. His central metaphysical question, “who am *I*?” begins as a question with literal significance: his physical origins are unknown. A stranger brings him as a baby in a basket to a poor elderly couple, his name the only legible sign on the baptismal certificate tucked next to him (65). The sudden coming of the stranger bearing a burden of significance, the protagonist whose origins are unknown—these are key motifs in the hero’s journey. But instead of continuing in the vein of a romance or novel by following a journey of discovery that resolves the mystery of identity, the

text continues to layer strangeness around Teufelsdröckh. Not only his sudden appearance in the world, but also the Editor's physical description of him, underscores the baby's strangerhood: he is "a little red-coloured Infant" (65). His redness suggests less health or a sanguine constitution and more non-white racial origins; the Editor describes the elderly couple as setting themselves the task of "nursing it, though with spoon-meat, into whiteness, and if possible into manhood" (65). Coded as racially other and of unknown family heritage, raised in low class circumstances, and writing in formally fragmented German, Teufelsdröckh stands as markedly foreign to middle-class English readers, an easy target of discrimination within the hierarchy of race, class, and nationality that Carlyle himself all too often propounded. Nevertheless, Teufelsdröckh's is the central voice to wonder at thought and moral freedom. The very conditions of his literal and metaphorical strangerhood defamiliarize these experiences as exceptional objects of wonder.³⁰

Teufelsdröckh's strangerhood literalizes the strangeness of the thinking *I* that can self-reflexively wonder about finding itself in embodied existence. The text deliberately underscores the metaphysical significance of his advent as a stranger and his continuing alien status. As a racially ambiguous foundling, he may not have been much to look at from the perspective of utilitarian logic so prized by Carlyle's projected English readership. However, seen through the creative "eye of Pure Reason," he is "A Soul, a Spirit, and divine Apparition. Round his mysterious ME, there lies [...] a Garment of Flesh (or of Senses), contextured in the Loom of Heaven; whereby he is revealed to his like, and dwells with them in UNION and DIVISION; and sees and fashions for himself a universe" that is "worthy of a God" (51). This passage intensifies the exceptional nature of thinking, embodied human existence by associating it with divinity. Just as nature clothes the essence of God, so space and time serve as clothing enabling the apparition or embodiment of the "divine" mind. This thinking soul designates itself by nothing

more precise than the self-reflexive name *me* (44, 155, 193, 197, 203). Furthermore, the fact that such embodied self-reflexivity is “revealed to his like” suggests the inseparability of the *I* from the *we*—to name the former presumes the existence of the latter against which it distinguishes itself. Thus the consciousness of self-reflexive thought as anomalous and alien to the earth is something that human beings experience in common. Teufelsdröckh defamiliarizes the fact that we all say *I* and mean by it something singular and irreplaceable.

This deictic phenomenon of naming ourselves as *I* juxtaposes itself as exceptional compared to the familiarizing work of naming that happens in human community to lessen strangerhood and to distinguish among multiple *Is*. *Sartor Resartus* uses this practice of familiar naming to further underscore the strangeness of the capacity to name one’s own conscious identity as *I*. Leaving the scene of his sudden arrival in the basket, Teufelsdröckh, now grown, reflects on his unknown origins, recounting how he doubts that his name was his father’s inasmuch as he searched but could not find it in any official registers that document and maintain social visibility such as “Herald’s Books” and “Militia-Rolls” (67). His identity, in other words, remains an excess that social structures do not count as familiar or coherent. His unique name, being of unknown origin, reinforces both his physical strangerhood and the exceptional strangeness of his experience of thought. “The name is the earliest Garment you wrap round the Earth-visiting ME,” he writes, suggesting that this *me* is a being who is unearthly, whose need for an accommodating name during its short visit only underscores its irreducibility to such accommodation. In other words, the self is alien because conscious of itself as a divided creature capable of reflecting on its own strangeness (67). Teufelsdröckh emphasizes that his name does not resolve the anomaly of his existence in “this strange Universe where he had arrived” (68). In fact, he later emphasizes that the “potency of Names” can problematically create the illusion of

knowledge, for simply naming something does not explain it; in fact, names can do the opposite and further obscure the vertiginous sense of exceptional strangeness, cloaking us with the ease of habit, becoming “Custom-woven, wonder-hiding garments” (196). Philosophy engages in “a continual battle against Custom” as it investigates this unresolvable strangeness of identity (196). Adding names to distinguish, at the level of appearance, between different *Is* only creates a temporary space of belonging. Inhabiting the relationality of language cannot explain the strangeness of consciousness.

Arendt offers vocabulary that may more precisely clarify the ethical implications of the metaphor of strangerhood, routing it through these elements of name, language, and exceptional self-consciousness. As mentioned above, in *The Life of the Mind*, she expands on the idea that human beings change the world around them by the very fact of their unique “*natality*.” By *natality*, she describes how each generation, and more specifically each individual within each generation, arrives in the world with the spontaneous potential to shape the world anew (2: 217). One way this shaping happens is through language, the work of naming, a structural network of signifiers and signifieds. This linguistic network offers one way of attempting to cope with the fact that every new person born is a stranger to the world, in need of hospitality on the earth that is given to all in common. Language forges this hospitality through its semblance of continuity between each new generation: “The sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of *appropriating* and, as it were, disalienating the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and a stranger” (1: 100). This strangerhood has a priority that is acknowledged in the very necessity of naming; identity is reiterated as alien through the very attempt at disalienation. Recognizing this shared experience of strangerhood at the most minimal

level—the phenomenon of naming oneself *I*—invites an orientation of wonder and respect for the singular natality, the thinking moral freedom, of every human being.

This wonder at one's own thinking moral freedom prompts, though it cannot guarantee, wonder at others as likewise experiencing such thinking freedom. The middle autobiographical section of *Sartor Resartus* traces the multiple ways in which Teufelsdröckh attempts to understand and fashion his experience as a thinking stranger who lives in company with other thinking strangers on the earth. Such company contextualizes freedom's material manifestations. The text emphasizes the relationship between the thinking *I* and the experience of moral freedom through the metaphor of conversion. Teufelsdröckh's journey to understand "his mysterious ME" takes shape through the tropes of a conversion experience, an ethical transformation that enacts a pattern familiar to religious narratives. From his beginning in innocent strangerhood, he encounters a devastating fall, wanders with indifference through the lone and dreary world, and finally discovers hope in a transformation of perspective that orients him in ethical wonder toward others.

Teufelsdröckh's conversion narrative has long attracted scholarly attention, which is understandable given that it forms the dramatic center of the text. Some read it biographically, tracing parallels and contrasts between Teufelsdröckh's and Carlyle's sudden and gradual experiences of doubt and conversion explicitly in the context of religious faith in God (Carlisle Moore 663). Others edge away from literal religious interpretation, focusing on how *Sartor Resartus* creates a formal pattern of conversion as a "process" that applies not just to Christian but also to Romantic contexts of change (Reed 411-12).³¹ I underscore how Carlyle has in mind less a religious or Romantic and more a philosophically-oriented ethical conversion. Teufelsdröckh travels from the depths of depression to the heights of joy by discovering not God

explicitly, but a transcendental orientation of wonder toward ethical subjectivity—thinking moral freedom.

He begins in fear of determinism, calling this phase “The Everlasting No” (129). Such fear echoes the traditional disenchantment narrative of the death of God. He describes what sounds like an eighteenth-century form of deism that anticipates the later nineteenth-century narratives of a godless, mechanized universe: “Is there no God, then; but at best an absentee God, sitting idle [...] at the outside of his Universe, and *seeing* it go?” (124). But it is not simply the death or absence of God that troubles him; his depression deepens as life becomes increasingly “mysterious” and he fears that everything in the universe is predetermined, with no space for freedom, “void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility” (127). However, he begins to shake off this depression when he recognizes the implications of the fact that he can fear determinism in the first place—he is alien to it. Facing a universe that appears determined, his thought still appears to his experience as freedom—life, purpose, and volition. His very pain over the determinative “No” attests his freedom; the No would not be so depressing to him if his thinking identity, “my ME,” did not demand more of the universe in the moral freedom of its consciousness: “my whole ME stood up, in native God-created majesty, and with emphasis recorded its Protest. [...] The Everlasting No had said: ‘Behold, thou art fatherless, outcast, and the Universe is mine (the Devil’s);’ to which my whole Me now made answer: ‘*I* am not thine, but Free” (129). Recognizing the conscious *I* and the moral freedom resulting from plurality, the self-reflexive capacity to name one’s “whole ME,” initiates his transformation. This “Spiritual Newbirth” turns him from the devastating isolation he experienced in fearing a mechanized, determined universe toward the connection with others as likewise free and wonderful (127,

129). His experience underscores that the thinking *I* exceeds the deterministic models of the Humean cause-and effect school.³²

The process of fully recognizing the thinking freedom of others requires Teufelsdröckh to pass through the “Centre of Indifference,” a time where his *me* interfaces with the realm of appearances, “the NOT-ME” on the earth. He observes the arbitrariness of governments and the devastations of war in contrast to the “thaumaturgic” or wonder-inspiring wealth of books and sublimity of nature (130-39). Among these objects of wonder, nature stands as an especially Romantic trope, but in accordance with the Kantian sublime, the text amplifies their significance by suggesting how they reflect the thinking mind, affirming its moral freedom to value creativity and beauty and to condemn the injustices of war. He writes that even though “Our Life is compassed round with Necessity; yet is the meaning of Life itself no other than Freedom, than Voluntary Force” (140). The inner life of the free, conscious mind exists not in ideal and immaterial solitude, but rather profoundly shapes embodied appearance in the world even as it remains irreducible to that appearance. The *I*—the “me” as the strange, noumenal, excessive two-in-one, enables “a visible, acted Gospel of Freedom” (140). At this stage in the Centre of Indifference, Teufelsdröckh’s recognition of thinking, agential freedom still predominantly sees this otherness in himself. He is only in the beginning stages of the self-destabilizing effect of ethical wonder. Full wonder orients toward the plurality of others implicated in the strange, exceptional duality of thinking freedom, the capacity to say *I* and mean something by it.

Teufelsdröckh’s encounter with “the Everlasting Yea” turns the wonder at his own mind outward, recognizing free consciousness as experienced not just by himself but also by others. He faces the paradox that this exceptional thinking freedom is shared. This change comes suddenly, not through a forced decision of his own triumphant will, but quietly, destabilizing his

self-enclosed surety. One evening, he records that he “seemed to surrender,” and the next morning, he simply describes, “I awoke to a new Heaven and a new Earth. The first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self (*Selbst-tödtung*), had been happily accomplished; and my mind’s eyes were now unsealed” (142). It is crucial to specify that this self-annihilation does not mean denying the experience of conscious freedom. This is the interpretation Abrams seems to imply by introducing his discussion of Teufelsdröckh’s conversion with Carlyle’s essay “Characteristics” (1831). In this essay, Carlyle argues that modern alienation stems from an excessive reliance on rationalized “Consciousness,” which he associates with “Manufacture” and with “Logical, argumentative,” externalized structures that fragment the self (296-97). Healing comes through greater integration and unity with “Unconsciousness,” by which he means the creative, “Intuitive [...] Understanding” (297). Abrams invokes this binary to show how Teufelsdröckh’s conversion follows a pattern “of lost and recovered unity,” where he journeys from isolation to communal integration. (308). But when Abrams describes his annihilation of self as showing that conscious “divisive self-concern” has transformed into unconscious “affiliative love,” he glosses over how centrally awareness of the free self, this thinking, “mysterious ME,” features in this movement toward connection. He does not cite how Carlyle also describes unconsciousness in his “Characteristics” essay as follows: “Let the free, reasonable Will, which dwells in us, as in our Holy of Holies, be indeed free, and obeyed like a divinity,” not with calculating self-centered display, but silently, as a simple result of who we are as human beings (298). This is what *Sartor Resartus* means by consciousness, by its repeated gestures to the divine otherness of the free, thinking self that refuses both determinism and solipsism and prepares one to discern this divine consciousness in others. The passive voice narrating Teufelsdröckh’s transformation underscores that it exceeds any account of himself as a

strictly logical, autonomous agent, thus fulfilling unity's unconsciousness. Appearing from beyond the ego, the change cannot be forced or guaranteed. But his conversion suggests that discerning one's conscious freedom can initiate a sanctifying shift from a despairing to an indifferent to an open orientation toward others. That first moral act, annihilation of self, manifests not in the erasure of thought and freedom, but rather in following through their implications toward others. Now he sees other people "with an infinite Love, an infinite Pity" (143). He perceives that the "Infinite" in them remains irreducible to the "Finite" conditions of their appearance in the world; he discerns not only in himself but also in others the "Godlike [...] Strength and Freedom" that inspires wonder and respect and love (146). This conversion, opening the self in wonder toward others, dramatizes the ethical potential of valuing the strange experience of morally free, thinking consciousness in oneself and others.

Ethical wonder in *Sartor Resartus*

Wonder recurs as a touchstone throughout *Sartor Resartus*, breaking through the humor and dark irony, not only in middle autobiographical narrative but also in the philosophical segments that precede and follow it. The Editor comments that Teufelsdröckh is "a wonder-loving and wonder-seeking man," a slight touch of superiority betraying that he sees himself as a staid, rational Englishman, not quite so readily enthusiastic (157). Teufelsdröckh's first posing of the question, "who am I?" is asked with "wonder and fear" (42), a combination that never entirely separates and that evokes the solemnity of Kant's "wonder and awe." In the midst of the Everlasting Yea, this wonder celebrates the inexplicable conscious freedom in himself and others that exceeds fixed definition. He refers to thought as that "inscrutable venerable Mystery, in the meanest Tinker that sees with eyes" (52). This term *mystery* again evokes the stranger metaphor.

This is more than a mysticism that depends on a vague feeling of affirmation for humanity in general, an empty object that can be filled with exclusionary features such as “white European man.” Recognizing the ability to say *I* as meriting wonder opens space to also recognize that it exceeds the cultural codes defining any given person’s social standing. That is why violently denying this capacity is a staple of dehumanizing rhetoric, as seen in the long history of western imperialism.

The text itself underscores the danger of overlooking wonder’s ethical potential if it is interpreted only as a vague mystical aura. In keeping with his “Characteristics” essay, *Sartor Resartus* at times invokes an apparent binary between wonder and reason. For example, Teufelsdröckh expresses strong antipathy to what he calls “Logic-choppers” who cynically refuse to wonder; he denounces “That progress of Science, which is to destroy Wonder, and in its stead substitute Mensuration and Numeration,” as the Editor summarizes his argument (53). Furthermore, some lines sound like pure Romanticism, such as the claim that “not our Logical, Mensurative faculty, but our Imaginative one is King” (167). *Sartor Resartus* is clearly in dialogue with Romanticism’s rejection of instrumentalized rationality, but the wonder he seeks to recover is not simply the opposite extreme, mystical enchantment that erases any appeal to reason or thought. Rather, he describes a wonder that orients toward the strange exceptionality of self-reflexive thought. Reason can appear impoverished not only through unreflective instrumentalization, but also if it defines itself as nothing more than “Mechanism” (167). The proponent of such modern rationalized objectivism has “the Soul [...] nigh choked out of him, and only a kind of Digestive, Mechanic life remains” (167). In this description of mechanism, Carlyle anticipates the “physiological philosophies of mind” that became increasingly studied throughout the nineteenth century, which prioritized cataloguing the brain’s mechanisms as the

visible processes causing the invisible wind of thought (Jessop 646).³³ He suggests that no litany of mechanical functions can explain the strangeness of self-reflexive reason, the ability to say *I*, the excessive two-in-one thought that enables freedom. In making this experience the object of wonder, he offers a more nuanced perspective than the typical binary between enchantment and reason. He also offers a humanist revision of the modern disenchantment narrative. His concern is not so much with the death of God and the dispersal of mystical wonder as with what he calls the inattentive “purblinded [...] enchantment” that refuses to wonder at and value the strangeness of finding ourselves and others self-reflective and morally free (167).³⁴

Against utilitarianism, Teufelsdröckh argues that we most fully experience thought when we refuse to limit it to reductive instrumentalization and instead open it to wonder. In keeping with the passivity of his final stage of transformation, he suggests this wonder is ethical because it cannot be guaranteed or enforced: “Thought without Reverence is barren [...] The man who cannot wonder [...] is but a Pair of Spectacles behind which there is no Eye” (53-54). The clothes metaphor echoes here. As an item of clothing worn on the body, spectacles fulfil an instrumental function, just as the categories of space and time filter phenomenal impressions within consciousness, but they do not consciously reflect on what they see or unify these impressions into coherent thought. It is the Eye/I that works as the unifying ground of what enters through spatial and temporal lenses, that brings cohesive purpose to those impressions by means of its reflective capacities. Such reflection, in its simultaneous exceptionality and inseparability from moral freedom, is all that is needed for wonder. Every person—the “meanest Tinker” included—is simultaneously capable of giving and worthy of receiving wonder. Hence the ethical urgency of his message; he critiques those who thoughtlessly “live at ease in the midst of Wonders and Terrors” (45). His philosophy shakes such indifferent ease, inviting his readers

not to imbibe some obscure declaration handed down from the authoritative seat of some erudite philosopher, but to attune to a quotidian experience that is always already present to them and to those around them: “thou lookest, even for moments, into the region of the Wonderful, and seest and feelest that thy daily life is girt with Wonder, and based on Wonder” (204-5). When people unthinkingly pass through life, they miss reflecting on and appreciating not simply the sublimity of the natural world’s continuance around them but, more urgently, the strange improbable wonder of thinking moral freedom. He asks his readers to look beyond “Custom” and acknowledge the implications of self-reflective thought, which attests that, far from being “a mere Work-Machine,” every human being is “Miraculous” (196).

Such wonder is ethical because of how it orients the self toward otherness in oneself and in other people. This discernment that one’s “daily life is [...] based on Wonder” is precisely the opposite of “that primeval Superstition, *Self-Worship*,” in which reflective distance collapses. Teufelsdröckh describes the “Dandiacal Sect” to metaphorically dramatize this egoistic erasure of inner plurality (209). He again exaggerates anthropological conventions to recount the beliefs and customs of dandies as if they were a different species from the Irish Poor-Slaves. In doing so, he satirizes this science’s presumption to objectively describe this drastic wealth inequality as an inevitable social fact that cannot be changed. His satiric humor, juxtaposed with wonder’s call to look beyond the unthinking ease of custom, critiques the inequity of a society that categorizes dandies and Irish Poor-Slaves, the extremes of wealth and poverty, as those who profit from or are victimized by the systemic reduction of miraculous humans into machines for self-worshiping display or self-destroying labor. The fixated self-worship of the dandy cannot see in others morally free beings of infinite worth who implicitly merit reverence.

Such fixated self-worship is akin to the deceptive version of wonder or enchantment as unthinking, ideological fixation, which is what Arendt critiques in Heidegger. Though wonder is not familiarly associated with Arendt, she pondered its long history throughout her work, not only in *The Life of the Mind*, but also in early essays such as “Philosophy and Politics” (1954) and “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought” (1954, reprinted in *Essays*). In Plato’s *Theaetetus* dialogue, Socrates posits wonder (*thaumazein*) as the opening of self-reflective thought, claiming that “philosophy begins in wonder” (210). In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt agrees with Socrates to suggest the continuing relevance of this originary wonder (1: 141). This wonder, as the end of the dialogue suggests in true Socratic ethos, leads not to certain knowledge, but to an awareness of thought’s inability to be grounded in conceptual or empirical certainty. Such an awareness of the limits of knowledge and of the necessity for continual self-reflective thought entails an ethical stance that turns one outward, inviting an orientation that is “soberer and humbler and gentler to other men” (280). Socrates anticipates the affective characteristics of ethical wonder that we have seen suggested in *Sartor Resartus*.

Arendt specifies that wonder originates philosophy because it is “an *admiring* wonder,” thinking manifested in responsive language: “wonder has led to thinking in words” (*Life* 1: 141). More specifically, wonder leads to the kind of praise and reverence that infuses *Sartor Resartus* (1: 143-44). Teufelsdröckh’s suggestion that the human being stands as both receiver and giver of such admiring wonder bears out the implications of ancient philosophy. In his *Theaetetus* dialogue, Plato shows Socrates and his listeners as both capable of wonder and deserving of it: human beings are “not only wonderers of the first rank, but also true wonders in themselves” (Bollert 175). Arendt shows how philosophers have described wonder as arising from a sense of the harmony of the cosmos (*Life* 1: 143). However, we only sense this harmony—the fact that

things are at all and that they are the way they are—because we also simultaneously sense our own strangeness in contrast to it—our anomalous reflective freedom. As she writes in an early essay anticipating her critique of totalitarianism, “the speechless horror at what man may do and what the world may become is in many ways related to the speechless wonder of gratitude from which the questions of philosophy spring” (*Essays* 445). That is, self-conscious thought enables moral freedom, a conception not only of *is* but also of *ought*. Wonder comes when we try to think the strangeness of this capacity, its excess within this harmony, something whose “uncaused and ‘unconditioned necessity’” makes us not quite fit (*Life* 1: 145). We find ourselves manifesting natality in plurality, each of us a stranger, a new beginning whose origin cannot be determined. Arendt quotes Kant as a key contributor to the thinking of wonder when he writes that we ask ourselves, “*whence then am I?*” This experience of selfhood is ungrounded beyond itself; Arendt responds, “All support here fails us” (1: 146). The paradox is that such wonder at the experience of thought’s duality, our “two-in-oneness” that cannot leave the realm of the *ought*, can also lead to nihilistic despair, destabilizing the self-sufficient ego. Thus against the Greek immersion in wonder, some Roman stoics, Arendt shows, turned to the contrary mode of “*nil admirari*: do not be surprised at anything, admire nothing” (1: 152). Such refusal to wonder is also what Carlyle perceives as so problematic in the aspiring new Roman empire of modern Britain; Teufelsdröckh channels his urgent calls for wonder to shake off customary indifference and replace materialistic cynicism with reverent thought.

However, Arendt sees a more urgent danger than refusing to wonder in the misplaced fixation of wonder. The very nature of wonder is such that it cannot be guaranteed or prescriptively enforced. For Arendt, the representative philosopher whose fixated wonder led him astray from ethical plurality is Heidegger—a figure who, like Carlyle, became implicated in

fascist ideology, though with much more direct cause. In her essay “Martin Heidegger at Eighty” (1971), Arendt warns that the shock of wonder, though it can lead to language, also risks foundering in overwhelmed and extinguished thought, rendering one overly confident and obsessively fixated, neglecting to exercise the discerning work of thought and judgment. The flash of wonder is such that attempting to instantiate it as a permanent dwelling for its own sake betrays it.³⁵ Such fixation is all the more likely for those facing the disenchantment of modernity, who can be tempted to exercise “willful intensity [...] to regain the simple admiring and affirming wonder, *thaumazein*, which once, for Plato, was the beginning of philosophy” (*Life 2*: 21). While Arendt defends this admiring wonder for retaining its “plausibility” as the origin of philosophy, she sees any willful attempt to reify it as problematic (1: 141).

Ordinarily, though the shock of wonder may initially render the one experiencing it “speechless,” this immobile “rapture” quickly moves into the language of admiring praise. More specifically, though, this language asks questions about existence and identity (“Philosophy” 98). The initial speechlessness need not continue indefinitely. Through the “ultimate questions” it inspires, wonder jumpstarts the critical, relational work of language, itself escaping concrete linguistic definition even as it holds open the work of self-reflexive thinking (“Philosophy” 98). By ultimate questions, Arendt means those ethically-laden queries about human existence, such as “What is being? Who is man? What meaning has life? What is death? etc.—all of which have in common that they cannot be answered scientifically,” or, as Carlyle would say, mechanically (“Philosophy” 98).³⁶ We have seen how such are the central questions driving *Sartor Resartus*, and how Teufelsdröckh likewise distinguishes wonder, that which is “perennial, indestructible in Man,” as what eludes the fixation of mechanically objective scientific definition but nevertheless amplifies thinking moral freedom (53). Only when the shock of wonder refuses to ask these

questions does it becomes stifled, fixated, refusing to follow through with the self-reflexive, critical work of free thought.

Arendt's working through of this fixated wonder clarifies that the problem lies not with wonder per se, but with its closure, the refusal to ask the questions and follow through on their implications to prevent self-satisfied fixation and exclusion. She argues that privileging instrumental logic not only threatens to foreclose wonder's affective response, but also does violence to wonder's questioning openness by fixating on one reductive object or ideology that excludes difference. This is where Heidegger went wrong. If the philosopher seeks to restrictively define and permanently inhabit the fleeting wonder instead of self-critically engaging in wonder's prompting to think, to ask the ultimate questions, that person "destroys the plurality of the human condition within himself" ("Philosophy" 101). Arendt affirms that all branches of philosophy, including political philosophy, begin in wonder; therefore, attacking wonder as itself the cause of ideological entrancement with totalitarianism would miss the point. Rather, Arendt's analysis shows that "any unquestioning capitulation to ideology [...] is a matter not of too much wonder, but rather of too little" (Rubenstein 23). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt emphasizes that "Ideologies are never interested in the miracle of being" (469). Resisting the danger of closing down thought in fixated wonder, Arendt suggests that to be ethical, wonder must be true to itself by sustaining self-critical reflexivity; "wonder is only wonder when it remains open" (Rubenstein 10). Wonder directs thought outward, resonating between the plurality internal to the two-in-one individual consciousness/conscience and the inexhaustible plurality of other human beings ("Philosophy" 103). Arendt critiques the temptation to disregard wonder's refusal of guarantee or prescription, which in turn suggests that there is a strong ethical potential in the effort "to *stay with* the perilous wonder that resists final

resolution, simple identity, and sure teleology” (Rubenstein 23). Dwelling with wonder need not necessarily lead to Heideggerian obsession, but can in fact protect against it.

Arendt’s contrast between ethical wonder and unquestioning fixation connects both, respectively, to opening or closing thought. This relationship is one of excess because it is never guaranteed. Wonder responds to the strangeness of self-reflective moral freedom in oneself and in others, but it cannot be forced. Freedom is precisely that—the possibility of thinking or of refusing thought, in Arendt’s sense of the two-in-one living together with oneself, in Kant’s sense of being consistent with oneself. This context suggests that Carlyle’s wonder at the intertwined experience of thought and moral freedom is the very thing enabling critique of his unreflective prejudice against racial otherness. Consistent with this wonder, *Sartor Resartus* explores a literary method that formally forestalls the potential danger of fixation and obsession. This method keeps the text in motion by interspersing flashes of wonder and metaphysical meditations, varying tones of humor and irony, juxtaposing the different voices of philosopher and editor, and repeatedly invoking the dual structure of metaphor. It seems to formally enact the continual self-reflexive critical thought that holds open wonder against the fixations of habit and deception alike. In short, the ethics of wonder emerges not just in response to the sublimity of nature, and not just in one single moment to be frozen and idolized, but as an unfolding over time in response to thinking freedom. This dimension of ethical subjectivity cannot be reduced to ossified cultural customs and prejudices but moves in excess of them, implicitly justifying us whenever we undertake the work of critique.

Metaphor as a metaphor for the wonder of thought

Sartor Resartus's metaphorical, self-reflexive form provides a uniquely suited literary method to dramatize the wonder of thinking moral freedom in oneself and in others. Arendt synthesizes three crucial connections between metaphor, thought, ethics, and wonder: 1) metaphor is a linguistic embodiment of the duality of thought; 2) thought's self-reflexivity prevents the banality of evil; and 3) thought and wonder in an ongoing relationship create a grounding whence to critique fixated ideology.

I have already recounted multiple examples of metaphor's centrality to *Sartor Resartus*, not just the metaphor of clothes, but also the metaphor of the stranger and the metaphor of the conversion narrative, all of which point to the centrality of thinking moral freedom as an object of wonder. As he describes these content-focused metaphors, Carlyle's language employs metaphors that mix and continually build on each other. Metaphors in this text are fluid, disorientingly capacious portals of plurality rather than one-to-one equations. For example, invoking architecture and topography, Teufelsdröckh speaks of how modern science has never yet successfully read the "ground-plan of the incomprehensible All" of the universe; invoking bodies of water, this universe is an ocean "without bottom as without shore" (194). He speaks of the "Volume of Nature [...] written in celestial hieroglyphs," full of meaning which far exceeds materialist cause-and-effect philosophies (195). Yet somehow, we exceed this very ocean: "On the roaring billows of Time, thou art not engulfed, but borne aloft into the azure of Eternity"; ineffaceable from the universe's hieroglyphic mystery, we create meaning in our "Godlike [...] Strength and Freedom" (146). Beyond narrative content and philosophical declarations, Teufelsdröckh uses such metaphoric language to wonder at the "divine gift of Thought" that enables his own and others' moral freedom (196). Metaphor dramatizes the ethical wonder that

unfolds over time as it refuses fixity and sustains thought's plurality. This inherently self-reflexive, two-in-one multiplicity of the text's metaphorical language figuratively enacts wonder.

The text's self-consciousness about metaphor as its primary method even becomes a source of division between the characters, as the Editor becomes rather frustrated with how heavily Teufelsdröckh's text depends on the elusive suggestiveness of metaphors. He speculates on the disastrous results to literature if "this piebald, entangled, hyper-metaphorical style of writing, not to say of thinking" leads others to write and think in like fashion (221). This warning comes not without experience, for the Editor at times has to drag himself back from his own metaphorical elaboration of the philosopher's metaphors, "with which mode of utterance Teufelsdröckh unhappily has somewhat infected us" (204). The use of metaphor becomes one of the chief sources of humor that emphasizes the text's multiply-divided consciousness, not only between Editor and philosopher, but also between the layers of significance that constitute metaphor as such, the plurality inherent in language. Teufelsdröckh reflects on the structure and rhetorical persuasiveness of metaphor. Its connective, relational capacity gives space for the imagination and embodies the life of thought in the world of appearances:

Language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body, of Thought. I said that Imagination wove this Flesh-Garment; and does she not? Metaphors are her stuff: examine Language; what, if you except some few primitive elements (of natural sound), what is it all but Metaphors, recognised as such, or no longer recognised; still fluid and florid, or now solid-grown and colourless? If those same primitive elements are the osseous fixtures in the Flesh-Garment, Language,—then are Metaphors its muscles and tissues and living integuments. (57)

Metaphors can be so viscerally powerful not only because of the mind-stretching, creative work they require of those who engage them, but also because their very two-in-one form recreates the divided consciousness itself. As the Editor encourages readers to collaborate in constructing possible meanings, he warns them that if they are looking for easy access to material “use” value or advice on the accumulation of wealth (always at the forefront of acquisitive English habits), they had better look elsewhere. The point of the book rather asks readers to expand their perception and think critically about the ultimate questions of human life: “it costs thee somewhat” to change the reading habit that would see only ossified cyphers and instead to discern living metaphors (204).

This cost of attending to the plurality of metaphor, however, is well worth paying. Arendt, like Carlyle, describes metaphor as valuable for how it enriches thought. Metaphor allows thought to dwell in multiple dimensions at once, connecting the abstracted inner life and the concretely worlded life. As she writes in *The Life of the Mind*, “The metaphor, bridging the abyss between inward and invisible mental activities and the world of appearances, was certainly the greatest gift language could bestow on thinking and hence on philosophy” (1: 105). She also traces the figure’s aesthetic depth: “the metaphor itself is poetic rather than philosophical in origin” (1: 105). This is the value of reading wonder at thought’s moral freedom not just in the philosophy of Kant and Arendt, but also through the poetic metaphors of *Sartor Resartus*. The work accomplished for philosophy by metaphor’s original poetry emerges in how it paradoxically both enables and represents thought: as Arendt writes, “the language of thinking is essentially metaphorical” (1: 110). That is, thought is the two-in-one process that happens in our minds, alone; the self-conscious mind is the one thing we experience as exceptional, or as Kant would say, a noumenal thing in itself. It is different in kind from the impressions yielded by the

phenomenal world of appearances through the categories of space and time, inasmuch as it grounds and unifies all these impressions. Metaphorical language is the vehicle by which thought becomes voiced; it enables thought's exceptionality to appear in the world; it names and connects thought with physical reality in such a way as to "guarantee the unity of human experience" (1: 109). We habitually move between these registers so smoothly—the unity seems so complete—that we hardly think about what we are doing when we think and when our perceived moral freedom allows this thought to manifest itself in judgment, in choices that affect the material world where others also think and speak and act.

Carlyle and Arendt, each in their own ways, understand metaphor as a vehicle that invites us to pause and register the strangeness of what we do when we think, to perceive the excess or exceptionality of thought as something that we can ground in the world of appearance only by metaphorical language. The phenomenon of metaphor suggests this excess of thought, what Arendt calls "the extraordinary quality of thinking, of its being always out of order," capable of stepping back from the structures that order our experience to reflect on and judge between them (1: 109). Thinkers through the ages have acknowledged the ultimate inadequacy of language to thought, the slippage between the world of appearances in which language is grounded and the "ineffable" that escapes cognition and language (1: 113). But the activity of thought itself proves the most elusively inexpressible, even to metaphor:

[F]or thinking itself—whose language is entirely metaphorical and whose conceptual framework depends entirely on the gift of the metaphor, which bridges the gulf between the visible and the invisible, the world of appearances and the thinking ego—there exists no metaphor that could plausibly illuminate this special activity of the mind, in which something invisible within us deals with the

invisibles of the world. All metaphors drawn from the senses will lead us into difficulties for the simple reason that all our senses are essentially cognitive, hence, if understood as activities, have an end outside themselves; they are not *energeia*, an end in itself, but instruments enabling us to know and deal with the world. (1: 123)

Our sensory interactions with the world shape our thinking, but they remain inadequate, literally and metaphorically, to account for thought's exceptionality. As Arendt similarly acknowledges in *The Human Condition*, "life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth—can never 'explain' what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely" (11). Thus we are invited to pause in wonder at who we are, as creatures who experience this ineffable capacity to think and to wonder at who we are. In the breath of this pause to think, we meet with the potential to interrupt the indifference of habit, to reorient in wonder toward others. The banality of evil is not thinking, not wondering, not being open to otherness, to the incomprehensible, in others and in ourselves (*Life* 4-5). To return to Arendt's motivating question in the preface to *The Life of the Mind*: "Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?" (5). This is not some privileged or elite activity dependent on years of education, but something every human being can do simply by virtue their being human, by the way in which thinking works. Evil, then, is "not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*" (4). Thinking enables ethical freedom—consciousness enables conscience—because of the inexplicable sense of an enduring identity, a self that holds ourselves accountable, with whom we must always live (1: 189-93, 215; 2: 64). As Arendt specifies, "If there is anything in thinking that can prevent men from doing evil, it must be some property inherent in the activity itself, regardless of its objects"

(1: 180). Inherent in the exceptional structure of the mind, the “two-in-one heals the solitariness of thought; its inherent duality points to the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth” (1: 187). The wonder that responds to the experience of thinking moral freedom in oneself and in others cannot guarantee or prescribe ethical behavior—such an attempt would lead to the unethical fixation of wonder that Arendt critiqued in Heidegger and that we also critique in Carlyle’s obsessive hero-worship and exclusionary race and class prejudices. Wonder is more than a vaguely mystical affect, but it also is more than a mechanical code of conduct for regulating social organizations or prescribing reforms. Though it may not be instrumentally useful for ensuring the success of moral action in the public sphere, it is not therefore negligible. This essential ethical work begins with thought. To avoid reproducing the fixation with the exclusionary contingencies that fuel injustice, it depends on continual questioning, holding open an orientation of wonder toward human beings as such. *Sartor Resartus*’s metaphorical text offers a vivid invitation to think through the ethical potential of wondering at the experience of human thought and moral freedom. As beings who experience “the grand thaumaturgic art of Thought,” they are not wholly determined by any given societal status quo but rather can think new creative possibilities of being together: “Truly a Thinking Man is the worst enemy the Prince of Darkness can have” (*Sartor* 92).

II. Facing an Ethics of Obligation with Ruskin and Levinas

I take [...] Wordsworth's single line, 'We live by admiration, hope, and love,' for my literal guide, in all education. [...] What to admire, or wonder at!
—John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*

Ethics is the spiritual optics.
—Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

In May 1871, in the fifth installment of his monthly serial titled *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1871-84), Victorian art and social critic John Ruskin issued a call to people of all classes, whether they be “Landlords or Tenants,” “Employers or Workmen,” to join him in building a utopian society (27: 95).¹ This society, which Ruskin called variously St. George’s Company, Fund, or Guild, aspired to be a communal agricultural project modeled after the feudal artisanal guild system. *Fors Clavigera* was the platform where these aspirations found voice. Stoking his aging reputation as reactionary Tory and apocalyptic sage writer,² Ruskin paradoxically chose a historically conservative, hierarchical structure to counter the social, economic, and moral oppression aggravated by competitive industrial capital (27: 95-96). Ruskin’s contradictions become even more visible in the divided scholarship.³ Many invoke Ruskin’s work as prophetic in its condemnation of industrial pollution’s role in climate change,⁴ while others have traced his influence on late Victorian socialism and the formation of the British labor party.⁵ However, others emphasize Ruskin’s patriarchal authoritarian tendencies, the Guild being a chief offender.⁶ In *Fors*, Ruskin wrote that, as guild master, he expected of the members “instant obedience” (27: 96). Mark Frost has gone so far as to designate this requirement “slave-like,” though I think this is extreme when remembering that the Guild’s companions joined voluntarily, in contrast to historical

enslavements motivated by racial prejudice and imperial exploitation. Still, Frost describes the crux of the problem in terms of the “irresolvable tension” between the liberal and conservative elements in Ruskin’s project, how he advocated both the opposed values of “free creativity and obedience” structured by “an oppressive social order” (*Lost* 91). He sets up an obligation that quickly assumes an authoritarian tone in demanding obedience.

However, I wonder if there is a way of rethinking obligation otherwise, as something that can work against authoritarianism. Thinking only in broad strokes, the history of the West, from the execution of Socrates to the Inquisition, from slavery and imperialism to modern totalitarian states, emerges as one long succession of institutions of power invested in disciplining obedience to various sources of obligation. Foucault is perhaps the best-known anti-Enlightenment theorist exposing the ideological imbrication of rationalized power with discipline; he traces the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mechanisms of subjection in state apparatuses such as prisons, asylums, and clinics (Rabinow 7-11; Foucault, *Discipline* 138, 148, 166).⁷ Althusser has further traced how “Ideological State Apparatuses” such as religious, educational, and political systems coerce subjects into obedience through internalized assumptions, the interpellation of false consciousness that forecloses change (96, 105, 118-19). Such models of domination function by excluding the possibility of any “outside” or “other” beyond their structures; they are totalizing in their panoptical work of disciplining the obedient subject (Foucault, *Discipline* 201-3; Althusser 119).⁸ However, in contrast to this dominant historical narrative of obligation as synonymous with oppression, I want to highlight another anti-Enlightenment narrative, nascent in Ruskin and most fully exemplified by Emmanuel Levinas, that articulates ethical obligation not as a rationalized totality forcing obedience, but as a personal, face-to-face encounter with infinity, an encounter that in fact grounds the critique of homogenizing regimes and authoritarian

abuses. Engaging Levinas allows me to explore the possibility that the ethical relevance of Ruskin's message may be understood not on condition of excising his defense of ethical obligation, but by more closely examining the nuances and contradictions in how he himself conceptualizes obligation, especially through the Guild's mouthpiece, the letters of *Fors Clavigera*.⁹ My analysis offers a means of theorizing what obligations toward otherness we implicitly obey when we judge as unethical authoritarian narratives of obligation and coercions of obedience that erase otherness.

I explore how, throughout *Fors Clavigera*, obligation emerges as not monolithic, but paradoxical, at times assuming paternalistic obedience in authoritarian structures, at other times justifying resistance to an unjust status quo. The former dominates when Ruskin references the Guild and current debates over labor relations, using typical patriarchal discourse enjoining workers and masters alike to fulfil their duties within their respective spheres of influence. Stepping back from this class rhetoric, however, Ruskin also speaks of obligation as a personal relationship with what he variously calls God, truth, or eternal law that exceeds any religious or government structure, be it Christian, Jewish, or Muslim; feudal, democratic, or communist. Most significantly, for Ruskin, this obligation shapes how one faces the otherness of one's neighbor and of the earth both share. I show how this theoretically challenging conception of obligation draws deep roots from his analysis of art and architecture, and how he sees it as essential not just for original creativity but also for ethical relationships. This conception likewise emerges in the unique form he uses to speak about obligation throughout these letters—his complex imagery of encountering the faces of other people and his contradictory stylistic demands and aesthetic innovations. These innovations formally dramatize a model of obligation

that enables and justifies anti-authoritarian critique because it is experienced as exceeding foregone conclusions and transforming how one sees others.

Levinas is crucial to this analysis of *Fors* for several reasons. First, the emphasis he places on obligation sets him apart from the other twentieth-century moral philosophers whom he joins in critiquing totalitarianism and trying to rethink ethical subjectivity in the wake of the Holocaust—the direct outcome of European imperialist, authoritarian logic (*Otherwise* 10-12). Rather than affirming, like Habermas or Arendt, the democratic value of the reciprocal play of discourse in the public space, or, like Nancy, an egalitarian being-with and the priority of freedom, Levinas prioritizes obligation—or, as he calls it, “anarchical” obligation—as what constitutes ethical subjectivity (*Otherwise* 9-11). Unlike the typical notion of political anarchy that refuses any form of government, Levinas’s ethics is an “anarchy of responsibility” inseparable from one’s being as an *I* (*Otherwise* 26). Second, Levinas is even more distinctive in locating the site of infinite obligation, or Other, in the face of the other person. Despite his own skepticism about art, Levinas’s notion of this concrete embodiment of obligation resonates with Ruskin’s deeply material, artistically-inflected idea of transcendent obligation and with how Ruskin attempts to work out the implications of this obligation in describing his encounters with the faces of other people. Levinas shows that facing the obligation of the Other can be understood as an experience that would not blindly reinforce oppressive social structures, but rather enable ethical judgment against the totalizing ideologies that fuel them. And third, Levinas’s ethics of the face offers a particularly effective framework for illuminating our own ethical subjectivity, our implicit commitment to a sense of obligation when we judge authoritarian ideologies as wrong. This obligation appears as the ground implicit in any attempt to morally evaluate, critique, and seek to change social and relational structures.

My invocation of Levinas in reading Ruskin goes against the grain of the larger trend toward historicism in Victorian studies: readings of Ruskin tend not to engage at a primarily moral philosophical level with his ideas and methods, which is understandable given Ruskin's own ambivalence toward philosophy, particularly German transcendentalism, and his outright hostility to the primary British philosophers of his day—especially political economist Adam Smith and utilitarian J. S. Mill.¹⁰ My approach, therefore, turns not to Ruskin's contemporary philosophical context, but to Levinas's more recent ethical theory, also described as anti-utilitarian (Nuyen 411). While other studies of Victorian literature that invoke Levinas do so mainly to theorize questions of hospitality and empathy,¹¹ I do so in order to facilitate articulating the complexity in Ruskin's theorization of obligation beyond typical conceptions of his conservative moralism, and in order to suggest how critique continues implicitly to invoke ethical obligation as motivating the demand for social justice. Bringing Ruskin and Levinas together allows me to theorize an ethics of obligation as especially useful for critiquing authoritarian social models.

***Fors Clavigera*: overview and critical contexts**

As a series, *Fors Clavigera* extends to ninety-six open letters, many of which Ruskin addressed to "My friends." To some extent, they can be read as building on an epistolary periodical tradition established by publications such as William Cobbett's *Political Register* (1802-36), Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Friend* (1809-10), Thomas Carlyle's *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850), and Matthew Arnold's *Friendship's Garland* (1871) (Stoddart, *Ruskin's* 23-45; Birch, Introduction to *Fors* xxxiv). But the letters also participate in a wide variety of other genres; Cook and Wedderburn devote forty pages of their library edition introduction to defining

how *Fors* fits into not one but six generic categories: it is “a Miscellany,” “a treatise on Social Economy,” “an essay in social reconstruction, or a study in Utopia,” “the monthly organ of a Society, the St. George’s Guild,” “an Essay on the Principles of Education,” “a book of Personal Confessions,” and a “Confession of Faith” (27: xxxiii). These elements will become more apparent through my analysis below. However, even these six generic categories do not exhaustively describe *Fors*.¹² Though Ruskin ranges through a variety of tones, he often prioritizes the intimacy and familiar casualness of a face-to-face conversation, free associating on an expansive range of topics—people he encountered, current news, the popular serializations of Dickens and others, correspondence from friends and enemies, passages from the Bible and other classical texts, art prints and paintings, pie recipes, holiday traditions, weather patterns, annoying industrialized noises outside his window, and even his cat’s mischief in his study. He also shares intensely personal details about struggling through illness, mental breakdowns, and overworked despair. Many contemporary reviewers spoke for most readers when they said that they knew not how to read it, calling it “fantastic and paradoxical” and “entirely too fragmentary.”¹³

Other reviewers, however, were touched by *Fors* as Ruskin’s labor of love, discerning through its pages his “divine disinterestedness,”¹⁴ taking seriously its claim to be ethically motivated. His motivation for writing *Fors* went far beyond a desire for casual conversation with the working classes. Late in the series, he recognizes how he has slipped into more frequently addressing the upper than the working classes, and that in no uncertain terms of reproach, feeling himself responsible to urge the former to meet the physical and spiritual needs of the latter (29: 399-400). He backed his words with his own material support, devoting much of his inherited wealth toward others’ relief and education, as evidenced by the accounts of funds, his own and

the Guild's, published as "Notes and Correspondences" concluding many of the letters. *Fors* attests to Ruskin's frustration as he tried to translate what he saw as truth's obligation into concrete action. His friend E. T. Cook wrote in his biography of Ruskin that "He was not content to live in a world of the imagination; he strove to realise the conditions of the good and beautiful in the actual world—to build the Tabernacle of God among men," and nowhere did this purpose become more evident than in these letters (313). Yet, Cook says, for all their idealism, *Fors* is also full of vulnerable "self-revelation" (319). In the very first letter and at various points throughout the series, Ruskin claims that he writes out of an inescapable ethical obligation, wrestling with sharp guilt over the disparity between his own comfort as an upper middle-class art critic and the material and spiritual oppression of the morally impoverished, industrialized world (27: 13).

In keeping with Ruskin's own confession of his motivation for writing *Fors*—to attempt to discharge what he felt as moral responsibility—some scholarship has focused on how, even as he advocates paternalistic social structures, Ruskin dramatizes anxiety toward conceptions of his own authority in his writings, a questioning that belies his apparent confidence in the socially-visible authority that would demand of guild members "instant obedience."¹⁵ Picking up on Timothy Hilton's emphasis that "nothing is final" in this text (*Later Years* xi), I move from the broader concern over writerly authority to the more specific question of how Ruskin theorized obligation through different types of authority. I contribute a more specific moral philosophical focus: how Ruskin differentiates different sources of obligation, attempting to work through its implications—especially the challenge that people are morally free to choose how they will respond—both at the level of imagery and stylistic form. My reading theorizes how *Fors*

negotiates not simply authority, but more specifically, ethical obligation that exceeds codified authority.

The Guild's authoritarian model of obligation

Ruskin's Guild of St. George was one of many late Victorian reform schemes; others include F. D. Maurice's Working Men's College (1854), at which Ruskin also taught, and Stewart Headlam's high Anglican Guild of St. Matthew (1877) (Diniejkó). But Ruskin's endeavor has been described as among the more unrealistically utopian of such projects; in John Rosenberg's words, it was an "eccentric vision of a feudal kingdom, compounded of his prejudices and ideals" (*Darkening* 196). Stoddart pushes back against such dismissal, reading the Guild as joining with *Fors* in "a deliberate rhetorical strategy" of building an organically unified community in opposition to social evolutionist attempts to naturalize capitalist competition ("Ruskin's" 233, 237, 241).¹⁶ The Guild's purposes were threefold. The first was agricultural, to reclaim "barren or neglected districts" for the production of food (30: 45). Ruskin, feeling incredibly overworked—teaching at Oxford, funding a tea shop and crossing sweepers in London, traveling across Europe, and writing and publishing seven books at once being among the most time-consuming of his projects (28: 444, 460)—gave stewardship over the few plots of land donated to the Guild to several orders of landlords and tenants (28: 424, 539). The second purpose was educational, seeking to disprove the association of laboring classes with ignorance by providing the working classes with an accessible, richly-stocked museum and library (30: 45, 51, 53). Ruskin was much more personally involved in assembling and cataloguing its materials. The third was social, with the *potential* to blur class boundaries in relation to certain forms of work, inasmuch as Ruskin asked the higher classes to engage in agricultural labor as "more

honourable” than war (30: 45). Nevertheless, he still mirrored the Victorian class system in whom he appointed to different stewardships. Ruskin was frustrated over the upper classes’ lack of support for the Guild (Frost, *Lost* 58-59, 91-92), though their unresponsiveness seems not uncorrelated with his bitter critique of their injustice to the poor. When he insisted that on the Guild’s land, there should be “none idle but the dead,” he was reproving not the poor vagrants despised by the wealthy classes, but rather these wealthy classes themselves, blaming their idleness as the chief reason for the poverty of those who worked the hardest (27: 96; 28: 669-74; 29: 257, 294).

Through the monthly letters of *Fors*, Ruskin invited his readers, regardless of class, to respond according to their capacity, to donate land, money, or labor based on their individual desires and means; they could also become official “companions” by signing a resolution and contributing between one and ten percent of their income to the communal fund for building up waste places into gardens “beautiful, peaceful, and fruitful” (27: 96; 28: 419-20; 30: 47-48). However, as more members joined and disagreements arose between them, Ruskin became more detached from the individual politics of it all (Frost, *Lost* 13, 108). His inadequacies burdened his position as feudal master to direct the work and manage financial affairs (28: 22). However, he seems not to have critically reflected that the Guild’s feudal structure itself aggravated the burden both he and the companions faced (30: xxxiv); he still continued to reassert its patriarchal structure. The Guild’s land, he wrote, would be a communal utopia: “we will have no untended or unthought-of creatures on it; none wretched, but the sick; none idle but the dead. We will have no liberty upon it; but instant obedience to known law, and appointed persons: no equality upon it; but recognition of every betterness that we can find, and reprobation of every worseness” (27: 96). This vision captures the paradox in Ruskin’s self-description as both a “Communist” and a

“Tory”; the tension between these two contradictory political loyalties pervaded the Guild’s structure, splitting it between “hierarchical organicism” and “interdependent mutualism” (Frost, *Lost* 15). Ruskin idealized all people mutually caring for each other and laboring together, yet this communal care and work was still overlaid with a rigid structure (27: 116, 167).¹⁷

Ruskin’s emphasis on obligation through the Guild is thus emphatically and problematically class-based, even though he had no nostalgic fantasies that the upper classes had any special virtues; if anything, he “closely realizes the terrible defects of aristocracy in actual history” (Hobson 192).¹⁸ Ruskin registers this realistic perspective throughout *Fors*, openly calling the upper classes thieves and murderers (27: 41-43, 130; 28: 688). The Guild’s authoritarian class structure manifests his effort to demand that the upper classes take responsibility for their failure to humanely govern and care for the lower classes; he wants to hold them accountable for their idleness, to cease their exploitation and work to reverse the effects of capitalist dehumanization (27: 600). He wants not to abolish class structure itself, but to reform how the upper class fulfils its traditional responsibilities toward those they govern. This conservative view does not reflect on the possibility that class structure itself is one of the chief enablers of depredation, that this authoritarian model of obedience is less than conducive to ethical relationships.

Ruskin divided: codified vs. anarchic obligation

As resolutely as Ruskin insists on patriarchal class structure, even recommending “instant, finely accurate, and totally unreasoning, obedience” (28: 20), he paradoxically flips to advocate an opposed model of obligation at various moments throughout *Fors*. For example, in Letters 2 (February 1871) and 7 (July 1871), he argues that learning how to obey just laws is a

precursor to resisting unjust ones (27: 44). This critique and resistance to injustice presupposes a higher form of obligation, and those in authority must channel this “living, breathing, unblinded law” and not foreclose it (27: 131). In Letter 43 (July 1874), he summarizes these points as meaning that action in such socially-structured contexts must be thinking and deliberate, only “conditionally obedient” (28: 109). In Letter 16 (April 1872), he advocates outright civil disobedience to authority figures who do not meet a certain ethical standard, which standard is subjectively judged by what they decide for themselves to be good: “make up your minds [...] to honour and obey those whom you consider good ones; to dishonour and disobey those whom you consider bad ones” (27: 278). That the only standard of measurement specified here is entirely subjective, whatever “you consider,” appears diametrically at odds with the injunction to unreasoning obedience.

Ruskin further questions authoritarian obligation even at the heart of the resolution or “creed” he published in *Fors* for the companions to affirm when they officially joined the Guild. He distinctly conditions obedience to “appointed persons” and overt legal codes on a source of obligation that exceeds these visible structures. Introducing the resolution in Letter 58 of *Fors* (Oct. 1875), he laments how people have ignored larger ethical questions by obsessing over legalistic rigidity: “the laws of the world are the only code they care for” (28: 418). His main example throughout *Fors* is that just because *laissez-faire* economics and imperial wars are legal and culturally approved does not make them ethical (27: 247-48, 279, 385; 28: 126, 688). In this resolution, then, he gestures to a higher ethical standard, the possibility of a less culturally-determined modality of obligation not dictated by such codes. Even further, his resolution advocates the possibility of civil disobedience. The companions would promise to obey the laws of the country and of the Guild only conditionally, only “so far as such laws or commands are

consistent with what I suppose to be the law of God.” If one finds these determined laws to be inconsistent with what they feel God’s law to be, they are obligated to “oppose” these oppressive laws, not violently, but “loyally and deliberately”—that is, out of obedience to that divine source of obligation (28: 420). The import of these words is emphatically inconsistent with Ruskin’s authoritarian model. The only thing required to validate such civil disobedience is one’s *subjective* experience of obligation beyond legal codes, “what I suppose” the law of God means. In accordance with his increasingly wide-ranging religious sympathies, Ruskin explicitly words his resolution intending and indeed hoping that people from different cultural backgrounds, not just Christians, but also “Jews and Mahometans may sign it” (28: 420). He prioritizes a source of obligation that is not identical to any one culture’s legal or religious structures, an obligation that is paradoxically transcendent and subjectively discerned.

Ruskin here distinguishes between modalities of obedience that, in responding to different sources of obligation, are more likely than not to come into conflict, with one obligation extending the anarchic potential to override the legalistic norms of the other. This distinction, appearing at the center of his Guild’s governing document and apparently at odds with the class rhetoric elsewhere asserted for Guild members, is not an unconsidered slip; the distinction is fundamental to Ruskin’s perspective that ethics connects all facets of experience. In fact, he drew the distinction much earlier in his career as one means of evaluating the ethics implicit in different aesthetic methods and schools. More closely examining how deeply rooted this distinction is in Ruskin’s thought from his pre-*Fors* writings will help illustrate how it appears in *Fors*, how he consistently prioritizes a higher or exceeding source of obligation as the precondition for all other forms.

The most fully articulated early example appears in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), which analyzes the Byzantine, Gothic, and Renaissance architecture of that sea city, and creates a complex interplay between minute descriptions of the city's buildings, historical events recorded in the city's archives, and interpretations of the ethical significance of these materials. In the third volume, subtitled "The Fall," Ruskin opposes formulaic Renaissance architecture to the living creativity of Gothic. The Renaissance was plagued by its "Pride of System"—its adherence to rigid rules, mindlessly copied from classical antiquity. The creativity of philosophers and workers alike was extinguished under a fixed "code of laws [...] so that the whole mind of the world was occupied by the exclusive study of Restraints. The sound of the forging of fetters was heard from sea to sea" (11: 115). For example, Renaissance systems presumed five Greek orders as the end of architecture, suppressing the possibility that "a single inventive human soul could create a thousand orders in an hour" (11: 119). Ruskin here revises what he had argued in a shorter text published a few years earlier, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). In a chapter titled "The Lamp of Obedience," he posited that great architecture obeys a specific "code of laws" and manifests "Restraint" (8: 252, 250). Now in *The Stones of Venice*, he uses the same terms to show that the Renaissance's binding of human creativity to obey a repressive "code of laws" is ethically moribund, standing in sharp contrast to what he describes as the ethical life of Gothic aesthetics (11: 115). In the famous chapter "The Nature of Gothic," he argues that Gothic architecture manifests the value Christianity places on the creative imperfection of the individual person (10: 189-90). Instead of binding workers to obey a fixed code of laws ensuring some preconceived architectural perfection, Christianity opens a space of freedom where workers can exercise their own creativity as artists (10: 190). Obeying God's command to love others means curtailing the codes of materialist efficiency that

foreclose unpredictable individual creativity. Ruskin enlists Gothic architecture in his denunciation of contemporary industrial England, defending workers' freedom to exercise their own imagination in their work, though that means the work will be less than perfect (10: 191-92). Industrial England was too unthinkingly obeying the same "pride of system" that caused the Renaissance's oppression, stifling individual creative expression.

This contrast between free Gothic and restricted Renaissance architecture provides the context for Ruskin's explication of these two different types of obligation. He admits that no readers who remember his "Lamp of Obedience" from *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* would think that in critiquing the Renaissance's subjection to codes of law he means to dismiss law or obligation per se. Rather, he now distinguishes more clearly between two types of obligation. The first is structured and enforced at the institutional level; it is "reduced to form and system, and is not written upon the heart" (11: 116). This type can become formulaic and oppressive, as seen when carried to extremes in Renaissance architecture and British industrialism. He grants that in a religious context, this first type of obligation to a "formally expressible law" can function as a training ground of applied ethics to counter injustice in society. Normative laws clearly forbid or require specific actions, so one could conceivably obey them in a childlike way, without questioning or perhaps even understanding the larger purpose for these laws or developing a relationship with the divine source of obligation. Still, they are impersonal, not speaking directly to individual character (11: 116).

In contrast, Ruskin praises the second type of obligation as a less formal and inimitably unique response, valuable for being counterintuitively "emancipated from this written law, and invested with the perfect freedom which consists in the fulness and joyfulness of compliance with a higher and unwritten law; a law so universal, so subtle, so glorious, that nothing but the

heart can keep it.” This emancipation paradoxically obligates one even more strongly, because personally, to “Divine law” (11: 116). It could be critiqued as merely an internalization of the first type’s coded rules, the illusory freedom of self-policing that Foucault describes as resulting from surveillance, where the observed person “becomes the principle of his own subjection” (*Discipline* 203). However, such a reading would oversimplify Ruskin’s argument, for this second type of obligation is not a mere extension of the first, but stands in distinct creative contrast to it. This transformation is more accurately a reorientation from visible and predictable content-specific commands toward what is essentially the unstructured modality of obligation, which enables an unpredictable outpouring of creative expression unimaginable from the standpoint of codified rules. Foreclosing this individual encounter with divine law, merely internalizing the first type of obligation as an end in itself without moving beyond it, leads to uncreative stagnation, exemplified by the Renaissance architecture and industrial exploitation Ruskin critiques (11: 117).

Ruskin analyzes how these different types of obligation are available as possible orientations across aesthetic media, not only for architects but also for artists. His most famous work on artists, *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), defends the innovative, proto-Impressionist style of J. M. W. Turner against attacks privileging the non-transgressive neoclassical style of artists such as Claude and Poussin. This context of *Modern Painters* informs *The Stones of Venice*. Ruskin has such neoclassicists in mind when he describes artists who paint according to formulaic rules and fixed techniques without looking beyond them. They construct predictable academy pictures that inspire no spontaneous joy in viewers, subsuming any possibility of individual creativity through their obedience to “crabbed discipline and exact scholarship” (11: 118). In contrast, artists like Turner enact a different type of relational obligation that does not

erase but rather amplifies their individuality: “the true artist has that inspiration in him which is above all law, or rather which is continually working out such magnificent and perfect obedience to supreme law, as can in nowise be rendered by line and rule. [...] His science is inexpressibly subtle, directly taught him by his Maker, not in any wise communicable or imitable. Neither can any written or definitely observable laws enable us to do any great thing” (11: 117). Compared to the neoclassical painter, safely obedient to iterative rules, the true artist stands in a relationship of personal obligation to a divine source that exceeds “line and rule.” Such obligation exceeds determined rules that would enable imitation, thus preserving difference or uniqueness. Responsiveness to such obligation, leaping beyond existing art rules, can revolutionize art. Ruskin does still defend the need for beginning in a mode of training: the young artist learns to obey basic “laws of colour and shade.” However, he specifies that these laws are not ends in themselves, but tools that point beyond themselves. Trying to ignore that beyond and make the tools their own authoritative end is not only unartistic but unethical (11: 117). The first type of rote obedience to laws can become internalized, but it cannot account for leaping to the second type, a qualitatively different relationship to a different source of obligation. Thinking that the secret of creativity lies in law per se leads to building a panopticon of artistic laws, attempting to regulate and enforce obedience to practices whose artistic efficacy obtains only otherwise, as a direct, inescapably personal response to divine law. For Ruskin, the connection between the two types is not mechanically progressive. Though one cannot transform one’s work through liberatory inspiration without prior training, such training does not guarantee the leap into inspiration. The most creative paintings cannot be reduced to a codified set of laws; they exceed any attempt to safely predict a process of teleological fulfilment in a determined form (11: 118).

For Ruskin, as he works out this ethics of obligation in the realm of aesthetics, the second type cannot be made an objectified, codified presence without betraying its very nature, for it is not something that one can achieve and then rest easily in and enforce on others: it requires “continually working out,” holding open a dynamic, personally relational obligation (11: 117). The greatest creativity arises from a self-exceeding, inimitable relationship with an obligation that is irreducible to particular laws. Though it is personally experienced, such a relationship enables the creation of art that invites other people as well to witness the trace of this subjectively-discerned, infinite divine demand. The obligation, though experienced by the individual artist, does not remain enclosed in the artist’s mind, but becomes manifest through the act of art creation, which in turn invites viewers’ creative and ethical engagement. Not just between artwork and viewer, but also between artist and viewer, this trace of the divine enables broader ethical connection. Ruskin writes in the third volume of *Modern Painters* that such people as originally creative artists are “great” not because they are egoistic, all-powerful authorities enforcing the rules of art, but because they experience “a curious under-sense of powerlessness, feeling that the greatness is not *in* them, but *through* them” (5: 331). They have not instrumentalized or deified their own will power, but rather have entered into a relationship with a divine law that they feel to be both utterly subjective, “written upon the heart,” and yet utterly heterogeneous to them (11: 116). This obligation turns them outward in ethical relation to others, such that “they see something Divine and God-made in every other man they meet, and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful” (5: 331). This relational obligation manifests not in exclusionary domination over others, subsuming their difference, but rather in orienting a person in wonder, reverence, and openness toward others as manifesting the divine, an inassimilable uniqueness that obligates ethical conduct toward them.

Thus Ruskin articulates through the aesthetics of his pre-*Fors* texts, as a key element of his ethics, the distinction between different types of obligation, one mechanically enforcing rigidly authoritative codes, the other relationally irreducible to these codes and structures, an obligation that not only grounds the critique of these codes and structures, but also humbles the egoistic self to face others in generous interpersonal relationships. Erupting at various moments in the letters of *Fors*, this model implicitly critiques his own subscription to the class structure of his Guild. We have seen how the Guild's resolution, a statement of Ruskin's deepest ethical commitments, embraces this paradox: obeying socially-structured laws is conditional and to be continually evaluated against the standard of "what I suppose to be the law of God" (28: 420). As he further writes in Letter 36 (December 1873), this law or word of God is by no means restricted to religious codes or the "collection of books" as fixed in the Bible and preached from the pulpit. Rather, it is the energy of reality that charges how one faces the world and others with unavoidable ethical weight, and it is, emphatically, only subjectively experienced: "By that Word, or Voice, or Breath, or Spirit, the heavens and earth, and all the host of them, were made; and in it they exist. It is your life; and speaks to you always, so long as you live nobly;—dies out of you as you refuse to obey it [...]. It may come to you in books,—come to you in clouds,—come to you in the voices of men,—come to you in the stillness of deserts" (27: 669-70). This exceeding obligation exists independently of whether or not one assents to it, but one can become more or less receptive to it. Responding attunes to what is other than the self. Even quotidian interactions with others, such as eating and drinking, can be made holy if done in accordance with "the Word of God in your heart, [...] simply obeying the Word of God about it in your mind" (27: 670-71)—heart and mind as a subjectivity that also radically exceeds the self. The ethical potential in Ruskin's exceeding obligation for creating not just beautiful art but also

an ethical orientation toward what in the world is different from the egoistic, predatory self—especially attending to others’ “voices” and responding by creating “incredibly merciful” relationships—becomes more apparent in dialogue with Levinas’s ethics of alterity, one of the richest moral philosophical accounts of the subjective encounter with obligation that exceeds codified, enforceable laws.

Levinas on the obligation of the anarchic Other

As a Jewish Lithuanian and democrat who lost most of his family to the Nazis and was himself confined as a prisoner of war,¹⁹ Levinas is one of many twentieth-century philosophers who sought to theorize ethics in the wake of the Holocaust.²⁰ He positions himself against the closed, rationalized circle of self-authorization that fed an abusive totalitarian state bent on eliminating racial, religious, sexual, and ethnic otherness in the name of its own culturally determined moral codes (*Totality* 21; Robbins xv; Wehrs and Haney 16). He would certainly have disapproved of Ruskin’s Toryism and class-based version of obedience. Levinas’s ethics seeks not simply to point out how the politically-driven totalitarian enforcement of obedience is wrong, but also to understand how humans can step back from such totalitarianism and make the ethical judgment that it is wrong. He sets himself apart from other critics of totalitarianism not by directly affirming the Enlightenment rights of democracy, liberty, or equality, but instead by rethinking the relational implications of ethical obligation. He wants to make explicit what is implicit in ethics—the anarchic obligation—that holds history accountable, that can judge particular cultural structures as ethical or unethical precisely because it remains irreducible to particular cultures. He sees this anarchic obligation or absolute Other as manifest in the face of the other person. Working through Levinas will better illuminate Ruskin’s contribution to ethical

theory beyond his conservative moralism, and how their theorization of obligation enables ethical critique, thinking outside of rigid, totalizing structures that would seek to enforce conformity within the limits of their logic.

Levinas positions his ethics of alterity against the solipsistic Western Enlightenment subject, mirrored in totalizing state structures. He seeks to open an escape from the logic that reduces the other to the same, the autonomous sovereign self, enclosed in “its imperialism and egotism” (*Proper Names* 73; *Totality* 36; Wehrs and Haney 19). Levinas articulates subjectivity not as a closed self-referential totality but as a relationship with otherness—specifically, another face—that does not colonize him or her or usurp their uniqueness in totality (*Totality* 38). Levinas describes ethics as an inescapable responsibility experienced by every human when they encounter the face of another. The face extends an infinite demand for care, and in so doing, it resists the self-sufficient ego’s totalizing drive for comprehension, for grasping and thus containing the other: “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics” (*Totality* 43). He contrasts his locating of ethical obligation through the face with another influential theory of obligation—Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative—by claiming that “ethics arises in the relation to the other and not straightaway by reference to the universality of a law” (“Being-for-the-Other” 114).²¹ The sequence, emphasized by the term “straightaway,” is what he sees as primarily different from Kant: one does not first rationally theorize an abstract universal moral law, then emerge from this rational isolation to encounter other people and apply it conceptually to them. This sequencing or separation is actually a common misreading of Kant,²² but Levinas’s point is that in encountering other people one experiences oneself as constituted by inescapable ethical obligation (*Totality* 245). Levinas accords with Kant in preserving the universality of such obligation; he just seeks another way of

describing the subjectivity experiencing this universality. Levinas rejects egoism, where conceptual “thought in the first person” is projected outward as “Universal thought,” and instead affirms the responsibility experienced in consciousness, the *I*’s face-to-face encounter with the other, as phenomenologically universal (*Totality* 126, 201, 245, 305). He writes:

The I is a privilege and an election. The sole possibility in being of going beyond the straight line of the law, that is, of finding a place lying beyond the universal, is to be I. The morality called inward and subjective exercises a function which universal and objective law cannot exercise, but which it calls for. [...] To utter “I,” to affirm the irreducible singularity in which the apology is pursued, means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me. To be unable to shirk: this is the I. (*Totality* 245; cf. “Meaning and Sense” 97-98; “The Trace of the Other” 353)

This affirmation of the inseparability of consciousness from conscience, thinking from responsibility, is what Kant and Levinas share, as well as their characterization of this obligation as undetermined by nature or other practical norms. Bastera underscores how this “unconditioned and anarchic excess, [...] the incommensurable otherness of an obligation[,] both Kant and Levinas evoke as address” (16). This address is intrinsic to one’s subjectivity, but also felt as an excess, heterogenous to the self’s egoism, akin to Ruskin’s word of God whispering through the “voices of men” to one’s deepest heart and mind.

For Levinas, the encounter with the other exposes the self to an “idea of infinity,” the sense of the immediate endless demand of the absolute Other—sheer responsibility (*Totality* 41; “Being-for-the-Other” 114). This concept recalls the endless variety Ruskin sees as possible

when responding to the higher law's creative infinity, not limited to, say, only five Greek orders of architecture or the books of the Bible. This "idea of infinity" manifest through the other is completely beyond the self, incomprehensible, unable to be reductively grasped, exceeding rational categories (*Totality* 204-5). Levinas specifies that any attempt to articulate this moral law as enjoining action must be made in retrospect. When he locates the absolute Other as resonant in the face of the other person, he sees himself not as making some counterintuitive argument, but as describing the reality of a universal human experience (*Totality* 187). Coming face to face with another person challenges the egoistic self with the heteronomous demand of ethical responsibility (*Totality* 43; "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" 48). Responding to the other happens in conversation during that facing, in language, which is a universal that intrinsically "presupposes [...] a plurality" (*Totality* 73). In its assumption of multiplicity and asymmetry, the dialogic interaction "prevents the reconstitution of totality" (*Totality* 40). Ethical obligation takes discursive shape in two forms, the first negative—not to kill—the second positive, to respond with "generosity" that sustains the life of the other (*Totality* 50). These generous responses recall another article in Ruskin's Guild resolution in *Fors*: "I trust in the nobleness of human nature, in the majesty of its faculties, the fulness of its mercy, and the joy of its love. And I will strive to love my neighbour as myself" (28: 419). In such generous conversation, the ethical encounter is sustained without reverting to the erasure of difference in totality (*Totality* 73, 201, 205, 225; cf. Robbins 6). Conversation holds open the relationship of obligation, preventing the subject from collapsing the other into the enclosed space of his or her own thought and material existence. I will return to this resonance between Ruskin and Levinas's prioritization of generous action for the life of the other, showing how *Fors*' fragmented style

seeks to invite dialogue with its readers in a way that prevents the reconstitution of totality in the form of readers' existing assumptions.

Given the quiet, intimately personal, unenforceable nature of this response of generous conversation in facing the other, Levinas's ethics has been critiqued as a vague, apolitical morality that betrays the transformative potential of more explicit political theory. His non-overtly-political stance has been seen as a weakness in his thought, making it utopian, too idealistic to translate into practice.²³ Furthermore, his description of the absolute Other has exposed him to critiques of conservatism that echo those leveled against Ruskin, critiques that accuse Levinas of not writing philosophy but only regurgitating religion, of offering nothing new in his description of anarchic obligation but a masquerade for the traditional Judeo-Christian notion of God (Badiou 23, Caputo 15, 18, 32). The same could be said of Ruskin's theorization: describing an exceeding source of obligation as divine law or truth, he may seem to be simply repeating conservative religious platitudes, not offering anything unique or useful for the ethical judgment against authoritarianism. However, I suggest that Ruskin and Levinas do not simply repeat religious content, but rather seek to repurpose the religious as a description of the ethical relationship that goes beyond any specific religion's codified doctrines. This repurposing of the religious offers language to maintain a moral realist perspective of obligation as exterior to the self's own interests, an ethical subjectivity discerned as heterogenous to egoism.

Obligation as moral realist truth: beyond religions to the religious

Given the pervasiveness of religious influences throughout Ruskin's life, it can be tempting to read his ethics as not offering anything distinctive from this context. Ruskin describes his Evangelical upbringing in *Fors* and in his unfinished, self-critical autobiography

Praeterita.²⁴ He tells how he was raised by Evangelical parents and acknowledges how extensive Bible reading influenced his literary style (28: 101-2; 35: 13, 24, 41, 44). He reflects on how his parents instilled in his character the virtues of “Peace, obedience, faith,” but he also critiques their methods as giving him nothing to love, endure, or choose: “My judgment of right and wrong, and powers of independent action, were left entirely undeveloped; because the bridle and blinkers were never taken off me” (28: 350-52; 35: 44-46). Here in evaluating his earliest memories, he admits the ethical limitations of externally enforcing obedience, reducing it to an unthinking default. These life beginnings reinforced how Ruskin felt himself deeply morally obligated to dedicate himself to the role of ethical teacher. As a young child, he would stand on his family’s red sofa to deliver sermons exemplary in their brevity: “People, be good” (28: 298; 35: 26). His father wrote letters to him at ten years old urging him to use his talents “for the benefit of your fellow Creatures” (qtd. in Hilton, *Early Years* 16). Though he refused to fulfil his parent’s wishes that he become a clergyman (28: 296-97, 35: 24-25), his early works such as the first two volumes of *Modern Painters* and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* employ Evangelical rhetoric. Even beyond his overtly instructional manuals, such as *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), or his *Lectures on Art* (1870) delivered as Slade Professor of Art at Oxford, in all of his extensive writings Ruskin’s purposes and methods reflect the moral intensity of the dedicated teacher; he joins the perceptive attention of the artist with the hortatory admonition of the prophet. His contemporary Frederic Harrison called him “a spiritual and moral reformer” (194). He felt obligated to teach truth, and one of the strongest models influencing this perceived duty was his religious background (O’Gorman, ““Do Good Work”” 82).²⁵

However, though he continued his reformatory teaching for as long as he could write, Ruskin began to question the religion of his childhood. Unlike that other conservative Victorian

sage Carlyle, as Ruskin aged he also became more open-minded and self-critical.²⁶ For example, in prefaces and footnotes to reprinted editions of his earlier works, he unsparingly denounces and revises out what he calls his “pieces of rabid and utterly false Protestantism” (8: 15). At several points throughout *Fors*, he pauses to reflect on and admit his own prejudices and misconceptions (29: 86, 89-92, 512). He marks 1858 as the moment that confirmed his disillusion with Evangelicalism, narrating how he went into a chapel, heard a sermon of damnation against all the world except the favored few in that chapel, contrasted its narrow disregard for a sinful world with Veronese’s message of love for a beautiful world in his painting *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, and left the chapel “a conclusively *un*-converted man” (29: 89; cf. 35: 495-96). His choice to narrate this incident as a deconversion retains the fundamental structure of the conversion narrative, as discussed in the previous chapter on Carlyle: the recognition of solipsism as fundamentally erroneous leads to repentance or turning to stand face to face with otherness, a different source of light and grace beyond the self. Once seen, that light needs no further proof of its goodness—it is itself its own proof and obligates the lasting, real-world impact of good work that follows from this reorientation. Consistent with his change, throughout *Fors* he critiques the too-apparent lack of good work and abuses of organized religion, especially the apparent uselessness of the clerical institution to resist the depredations of industrial capitalism and even their apparent collusion with its ideology (28: 239, 363-64; 29: 77, 408).

Despite his turn from the institutional forms of the Evangelical tradition, Ruskin never declared himself an atheist (29:92), and he continued to feel himself under urgent divine command to help others (28: 425; Hilton, *Early Years* 16; O’Gorman, “Religion” 144).²⁷ Rather than cutting him off from religious experience altogether, this turn opened him to ever wider-ranging dialogue with other moral traditions from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, such that at

one point he even called himself a “wandering Arab” (24: 277; cf. O’Gorman, “Religion” 150, 152). Throughout *Fors*, he continues to cite Biblical ethics, especially the command to love one another, as a central premise for denouncing *laissez-faire* economic ideology, and he speaks of “a Spirit of Mercy and Truth, as the master [...] of the Law of Life,” that radically opposes what modern social evolutionists and political economists were asserting as the “Predatory and Carnivorous” laws of nature determining human behavior (27: 94-95; 28: 108; cf. 18: 288). This divine command need not be assumed to be restricted to the Christian God, for in keeping with his Guild resolution’s invitation to “Jews and Mahometans,” throughout *Fors* he refers not only to the Bible but also to the Koran, not only to God but also to Allah, calling himself alternately Turk, Jew, infidel, or Catholic in the most ecumenical sense (28: 420n, 543, 547, 593, 667; 29: 32, 89-92). Ruskin thus extends his thought beyond institutional Evangelicalism to broader religious contexts. This wide-ranging exploration suggests that he saw his core ethical commitments regarding truth’s subjectively-discerned excessive obligation as non-identical to any one of them.

In the service of this broader ethics, Ruskin continues throughout *Fors* to invoke terms resonant in religion such as God or eternal law or truth to describe an ethical obligation that exceeds or serves as a normative foundation for all other obligations. At first this broadening may not seem apparent; at one point he notes that, as *Fors* progressed, its language was becoming more “distinctly Christian in its tone” (29: 86). Stoddart calls this a “reconversion,” claiming it as consistent with the Guild’s foundation in “New Testament morality” (“Ruskin’s” 242). However, Ruskin’s religious language is more complex than simply reaffirming his faith in Christian creeds, for he follows this statement by explaining his motivation, that he wants the letters of *Fors* “to contradict the idiot teaching of Atheism” (29: 86). He uses “idiot” for its literal

Greek meaning, from *idios* meaning “private” or “one’s own” (*OED*; Liddell and Scott). Elsewhere in *Fors*, he defines it as “self-contained” (29: 200), which is akin to what Levinas would call solipsistic egoism. He untethers God’s obligating infinity from rigid dogmas that would restrict God’s word to the Bible as interpreted by the pulpit, instead suggesting that one can approach the traces of God “in books, [...] in clouds, [...] in the voices of men, [...] in the stillness of deserts” (27:669–70). I thus read his continued use of religious language as seeking to affirm an ethical worldview that is not exclusively Christian but more broadly moral realist: for him, truth’s obligation is independent and external to dogmatism; it prevents human beings from self-contained solipsism—the isolated self-satisfied ego that Levinas critiques—by constituting them as always already obligated.²⁸ Truth as divine moral law is an objective constant, a form more than any specific content, that renders humans inescapably obligated.

Beyond idiosyncratic Evangelical rhetoric, this moral realist model of truth as an externally real and inherently obligating check on self-interest also manifests Greek philosophical influences. Ruskin references Plato extensively throughout his writings; his often-daily practice of translating and studying Plato resulted in frequent citations throughout *Fors* (24: xliv, 27: xxxiv-xxxv, lix). Plato’s moral realism, where truth’s ideal forms exist independently of shadowy human opinions, strongly resonates with Ruskin’s ethical worldview,²⁹ which could further expose him to charges of conservatism from the modern perspective. Twentieth-century philosophers, in particular J. L. Mackie, have argued against Platonic objectivism as illusory, making it the prime target of moral error theory (23). Moral realism posits that the Good, or truth, or what Ruskin also calls the word of God felt in mind and heart and through the “voices of men,” is experienced not just as externally real but also as intrinsically obligating. Hence Ruskin’s focus on teaching people sight as a means to encounter truth; he explicitly references

“Plato’s lovely metaphor of the cave” from book seven of the *Republic* to illustrate his belief that the growth of a person’s capacity to see can extend equally to “natural” and “spiritual” truths (22: 527)—both the physical world of beautiful and life-sustaining materiality, and ethical ways of inhabiting that world. Once seen, truth’s obligation is enough to motivate responsiveness. Truth is thus a complex, multiply-signifying term for Ruskin that is not exhausted by typical Christian orthodoxy.³⁰ Only if truth is immediately experienced does its inherent obligation motivate obedience that opens instead of restricting creative growth. Levinas’s summary of his own ethics could just as easily describe Ruskin’s: “Ethics is the spiritual optics” (*Totality* 78).³¹ Ruskin’s use of religious language thus seeks not to reinforce religion per se, but to describe a broader ethics of learning sight, of coming face to face with relational, obligating truth.

Ruskin’s turn from Evangelicalism has been variously read in scholarship. Many emphasize the break, seeing his moral teachings as paradoxical in being at once “radically anti-capitalist, counter-revolutionary and rooted in the Christian tradition” (Hanley and Maidment 3). Others emphasize continuity, seeing Ruskin’s continued use of religious language less as paradoxical than as symbiotic with his progressive critique.³² I lean toward these latter views by emphasizing the continuing impact of religiously-inflected language in Ruskin’s late work, especially *Fors*, but argue more specifically that he uses it not to defend orthodox religion but to elaborate an unorthodox model of obligation that stands in tension with conservative politics. Arguing the degree to which Ruskin abandoned or retained his faith in religion is less important to me than exploring how his ambivalence toward it can be read as repurposing it, opening space for theorizing an ethics of obligation that exceeds any single religious structure. *Fors* especially signals ethics as irreducible to codified religions, as going beyond particular tenets to the deeper re-ligature or re-religious relationship of exceeding ethical obligation.

Levinas similarly repurposes the language of religion, beyond his own particular tradition of Judaism as an institutional structure, as a way of describing the relationship or ligature of obligation experienced in the face-to-face encounter with the other. As Derrida puts it, Levinas demonstrates that “[t]he ethical relation is a religious relation [...] Not *a* religion, but *the* religion, the religiosity of the religious” (“Violence” 119). Like Ruskin’s intertwining Judeo-Christian and Greek contexts informing his moral realist truth, these two overlapping influences, Jewish heritage and Western philosophy, also inform Levinas’s ethics. Though best known for his philosophical texts, he also taught lessons on the Talmud from 1960 to 1989; in both these spaces, he emphasizes an ethics of obligation and generous response (Morgan 185, 210). He uses language resonant with the Judeo-Christian tradition, for instance invoking the same injunction Ruskin invoked against laissez-faire capitalism: to love one’s neighbor (Strhan 146). The particular way in which he synthesizes these multiple influences renders him unique among twentieth-century philosophers (Bergo 6). Operating in a role resonant with Ruskin’s as prophetic sage writer, Levinas attempts to articulate the “elective affinity between prophetic speech and Greek Logos, between Jerusalem and Athens” (Vries, *Minimal* 351).³³ He sought to create this affinity to reimagine the possibility of ethical obligation in the modern world.

Levinas’s ethics opposes what Ruskin, hastily read, seems to support: the typically Western religious and philosophical model of objective truth that modern anti-Enlightenment criticism rejects as rationalizing the sociopolitical abuse of power to force obedience. Levinas positions himself as resisting the metaphysics of presence, of comprehension, of the Enlightenment’s quest to categorize objective truth, to render the opaque visible, to prioritize legibility over the complexities and contradictions of human ethical experience.³⁴ However, Levinas wants not to reject any conception of truth, but to suggest its different orientation, a non-

totalizing ethics of truth, to reimagine a relationship with truth that holds open ethical space for otherness.³⁵ In his essay “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” (1957), he describes two different conceptions of truth. The one that has dominated Western thought is the mode of rationality that prioritizes comprehension and seeks to bring all otherness under the domain of the autonomous all-knowing self (47-48). In contrast, the other truth emerges as heteronomous, a dimension of experience that leads humans beyond themselves, that exceeds comprehension, that holds in abeyance the impulse to conceptually grasp and control difference such as Ruskin saw in Renaissance codifications. In what may seem a surprising alliance, bringing Ruskin and Levinas closer in their conception of truth, Levinas invokes Plato’s *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and *Republic* to describe this excessive truth (47, 53). Plato appears throughout Levinas’s work in an “ambivalent” and selective manner (Sarah Allen 6), for Levinas does critique the assimilation of Plato into ideologies of essence and intelligibility (*Otherwise* 29-30, 133, 175). But he also repeatedly invokes Plato to support his gesture to this model of truth as an obligating ethics beyond being. In his essay “Meaning and Sense,” he describes his work as a “return to Platonism in a new way” (101). In *Totality and Infinity*, he writes that his work seeks what is akin to “the Platonic idea of the Good beyond Being. The transcendent is what cannot be encompassed” (293). In *Otherwise than Being*, he claims, “The beyond being, *being’s other* or the *otherwise than being*, here situated in diachrony, here expressed as infinity, has been recognized as the Good by Plato” (19; cf. 95, 190 n35).³⁶ Like Ruskin, Levinas gestures to Plato as he seeks to describe an ethics of obligation that transcends natural and cultural determinism. He sees such transcendence as essential for disproving the totalitarian ideologies that fed into the abusive authority of an imperial state bent on eliminating otherness in the name of its own culturally exclusionary morality.

What makes Levinas's intervention in ethics distinct from his contemporaries also opens him, like Ruskin, to critique from views suspicious of religious language. He invites readers to consider the absolute Other's obligation as a universally-constitutive moral realist truth that exceeds any single system's claims to rationalized, codified truth, as when he describes the encounter with the absolute Other as a "Truth [...] does not issue in totality. [...] the idea of exteriority which guides the quest for truth is possible only as the idea of Infinity" (*Totality* 60-61).³⁷ This quest for truth is sustained in "language," in the conversation described above as part of the obedient response to the absolute Other's obligation: "Truth arises where a being separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him" (*Totality* 62). The autonomous, self-interested ego that Levinas critiques instrumentalizes conceptions of truth, seeing it as something reducible to the self, capable of being rationally grasped and mastered—the typical Enlightenment model of truth. In contrast, Levinas repurposes the term to suggest another experience of truth that constitutes ethics as inescapably obligating, irreducibly heteronomous to the self, intrinsically relational.

Conversation with the other can happen anywhere people face each other, not just within the boundaries of a specific religion. But Levinas describes the obligation held open in the conversation of generosity as religious in the sense of relational ligature: "Rather than constituting a total with this other as with an object, *thought consists in speaking*. We propose to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality" (*Totality* 40). Religion becomes a non-delimited language to describe the experience of ethics, the obligation to the other, in whose face resonates the infinite or "absolutely other" which he also calls the "dimension of the divine" (*Totality* 39, 78). In describing this transcendent divine obligation, Levinas rewrites the Western ontotheological understanding of

God as Supreme Being (*Totality* 293; cf. Urbano 60; Vries, *Minimal* 533). Furthermore, he resists “autonomy orthodoxy,” the model of totalized self-sufficiency, by locating religion not in the philosophical discourse of being, but in how ethical obligation manifests in speaking, conversation, between people (Critchley, *Infinitely* 36). God cannot be theorized in the abstract apart from this relationship with the other (*Totality* 78). For Levinas, then, the face of the other is not identical to any one religion’s traditional conception of God, but it “reverberates” with a divine or unconditioned command, the ethical obligation of responsibility (*Totality* 204). This responsibility presents itself prior to rational thought and remains anarchic, infinitely uncontained (*Totality* 79; Minister and Murtha 1028; Robbins 38; Urbano 72). The absolute, infinite Other reverberating in the face of the other person checks autonomous self-sufficiency and extends the inescapable obligation of responsibility that constitutes the human.³⁸ Levinas thus uses religious language to gesture beyond the content-specific beliefs of any particular religion; he suggests that the absolute Other’s inescapable obligation and the response of generosity to the other cannot be fixed by rationalized structures such as religious institutions because this relationship precedes any such codification. Levinas’s method of challenging totalization by repurposing the religious to rethink obligation opens the possibility of discerning how Ruskin’s conception of uncoded obligating truth undermines his classist authoritarian notions.

Foreclosing the freedom to disobey: the temptation of authoritarianism

How this uncoded, anarchic obligation contravenes Ruskin’s authoritarian side may be more clearly seen by going the other way, understanding how authoritarianism tries to substitute such obligation with its own codified authority in order to guarantee obedience. Though Levinas

describes the absolute Other as prior to reason, rendering the one facing it inescapably obligated, he does not describe the response of obedience as necessarily determined. In other words, his theory leaves a space of freedom between obligation and obedience, even though that means this relationship remains susceptible to usurpation. Obligation's anarchic priority opens the possibility of anterior interpellation: whether obedience is ethically responsive or unethically forced depends on whether one is responding to that original, anarchic obligation or to derivative attempts at codification. The possibility remains that cultural structures, such as Ruskin's Guild instantiating conservative notions of class, may attempt to force a predetermined response to their own authority. Either by overriding or simply trying to enforce that initial call of obligation, they usurp the place of obligator. The grand temptation to such constraint is the fact of moral freedom, the possibility of disobedience: though people find themselves always already ethically responsible, an *I* constituted by the call of obligation, they may refuse to respond with generosity to this obligation. Such refusal enrages authoritarian ideologies, which often justify themselves as speaking in the name of culturally-instantiated, exclusionary notions of religion or nation or race or some other authorizing entity, attempting to close the gap and enforce obedience. Ruskin offers a prime example of such a struggle; he defends obedience under class structure as necessary, even as he implicitly undermines this claim by including that article in his Guild resolution that all such obedience is conditional and capable of being critiqued based on each person's encounter with divine obligation.

Levinas writes against the authoritarian attempt to guarantee obedience, even as he acknowledges that in his theory of ethical obligation, negative response or disobedience remains an inescapable possibility. Historical events plainly show that the infinite, absolute Other, however inescapably its extension of responsibility constitutes the human, cannot guarantee the

positive response enacted in generous conversation's justice. Even a benign desire to enforce obedience for the sake of justice betrays the unmediated truth of the face-to-face encounter. Moral freedom entails the possibility of both response or rejection, the fact that, faced with the absolute Other's obligation, "I am free to give or to refuse" (*Totality* 77). Authoritarian usurpation attempts to foreclose this freedom. An interviewer once asked Levinas about this gap between obligation and obedience: "*To discover oneself-in-debt: is that already to respond? Or, between 'discovering oneself' and 'responding,' is there not freedom? (A possibility of bad faith, of nonresponse.)*" ("Philosophy, Justice, and Love" 114). Levinas replied by underscoring this possibility of nonresponse as inseparable from the experience of ordinary obligation, which he here also calls "otherwise than being": humans embody "the possibility of not awakening to the other; there is the possibility of evil. [...] I am not at all certain that the 'otherwise than being' is guaranteed to triumph" (114). He nevertheless points out that acknowledging the possibility of both responses is what distinguishes the absolute Other's humanity-constituting obligation from coercive dehumanizing usurpations: "the human consists in acting without letting yourself be guided by these menacing possibilities. That is what the awakening to the human is" (114). Awakening to anarchic obligation is also awakening to freedom. The absolute Other's obligation, because its imperative is unconditioned, can never forcibly guarantee obedient response.

Such awakening need not necessarily be instantaneous; Levinas suggests that it may even require an extended educational process, facilitated through the expansive, hospitable action of conversation with difference:

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, [...] to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other,

or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. (*Totality* 51)

Here Levinas suggests responsiveness as capable of being not forced but shaped by growing attentiveness to original obligation. This teaching preserves freedom because it awakens the self not to the sameness of its own insights, as the maieutic or Socratic method does,³⁹ but to what is other than the self through an educational process of attunement to difference.⁴⁰ Ruskin likewise responds to the possibility of disobedience, or even just apathetic non-response, by returning frequently to questions of education throughout *Fors*. He suggests that non-response to divine obligation could be changed if people learn how to awaken, to come out of the ego's cave and encounter truth's responsibility beyond the self, to approach others with attention and reverence. But such teaching must not become fixed and dictatorial. Levinas repeatedly emphasizes that directly responding to the absolute Other's obligation does not coerce freedom because the Other is not a positive, codified presence, but a fleeting trace remembered in hindsight. The language of conversation through which ethical response takes shape in the material world is like the "said" that recalls the "saying" (*Otherwise* 12, 54, 105, 135, 138; Purcell 42). Authoritarianism attempts to codify obligation, to fix the "said" by coopting the educational process toward its own ends, to exclude certain groups from the discourse that it puts forward as the new morality, to turn just dialogue into unjust monologue (*Totality* 73).⁴¹ The work of education requires rigorous self-critique to effectively invite awakening and response to anarchic obligation while refusing the temptation to fall into the codified enforcement of obedience.

Substituting original obligation's infinity with a rationalized, constraining authority is the root of injustice. Such is the very thing Ruskin critiques on the aesthetic level, that academy art teachers attempt to reduce art to predictable rules, thus stifling the creative spontaneity of art that remains irreducible to "line and rule" (11: 117). Such stifling he perpetuated himself on the social level whenever he insisted on obedience based on class difference. Any such enforced system of morality, Levinas suggests, even if constructed not from conservative class notions but from the other extreme of valorizing the self's autonomous, rational freedom alone, fails to remember the primacy of the unfixed saying of anarchic obligation. Such forgetting of the saying impoverishes the said, "a reduction [that] refuses the irreducible anarchy of responsibility for another" (*Otherwise* 76). Against such fixity, Levinas emphasizes the unexpectedness and fluidity of the absolute Other whose fleeting traces cannot be codified but rather are experienced as "surprised and surprising" (*Otherwise* 90; cf. Purcell 43). These words bring to mind the liberated creativity, the paradoxical "perfect freedom" opened in Ruskin's view of obligation as a personal relationship with the divine, exemplified in the surprising spontaneity and variety of Gothic architecture opposed to the predictability of the Renaissance (11: 116). They also bring to mind his emphasis in *Fors* on the divine word as being nonidentical to any single religious form such as exclusionary sermons or the books of the Bible, but rather felt in one's mind and heart through unpredictable encounters with otherness—literary art and nature and, especially, the "voices" of other people (27: 669-70). The challenge, then, is how to theorize the relationship between the anarchic call of obligation—love, the good, truth as site of infinite responsibility, the saying—and responsive obedience, conversation, the said. Can one inhabit the politically-charged field of concrete action for the other, without turning away from that originary obligation, or attempting to force obedience, or replacing the religious with inflexible forms of

religion? Levinas is not interested in offering a “solution” to ensure this relationship, and when Ruskin tries to locate a solution in idealized structures of the feudal past, he betrays himself. Injustice lurks in the claim that any given solution can finally guarantee obedience.

Thus with varying levels of consistency, Ruskin and Levinas undertake this educational work of critiquing unjust usurpations of obligation while retaining the possibility of ethical responsiveness to anarchic obligation. Their gesture to originary responsibility as religious in the sense of relational ligature portrays obedience as just only when it responds to an obligation that exceeds or is unconditioned by any derivative discourses, and hence is capable of critiquing them as just or unjust. Levinas demonstrates that, given modernity’s understandable suspicion of prescribed moral outcomes, a primary concern facing moral philosophy is accounting for the implicit commitment to a foundational ethical obligation motivating any critique demanding social justice: Levinas “seeks the *condition*, rather than the result, of ethics. [...He] does not ask, ‘How are we to live?’ but rather, ‘How is it that we can be concerned with how we are to live?’” (Harold 79). In other words, while content-specific codes and norms can be debated as more or less just in the realm of being, the condition for these debates, the subjectively encountered obligation of the absolute Other, happens “*otherwise than being*” (*Otherwise* 7). Derrida puts it even more succinctly: “Ethics, in Levinas’s sense, is an Ethics without law and without concept [...] Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine *a* morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general [...] an Ethics of Ethics” (“Violence” 138). Paradoxically, the infinite demand of the divine, the absolute Other, the anarchic obligation, is what motivates the response to seek justice and prevent abuse, the work of evaluating and critiquing the realm of externalized, socially constructed norms. Ruskin struggles with the relationship between such obligation and obedience throughout *Fors*, further

undermining his authoritative claims, not just in those moments when he overtly describes truth as an obligation felt in mind and heart beyond given laws, but also in his complex imagery of encounter and in his formally innovative, contradictory stylistic demands. I will bookend my discussion of this imagery with analyses of the two elements that make his style so paradoxical in *Fors*—his claims for clarity and his performance of opacity as interdependent strategies for inviting readers to see and respond to truth’s obligation beyond the self.

Clarity of style: learning to face truth

Fors demonstrates that for Ruskin, what matters is not simply seeing truth’s obligation, but responding attentively, stepping beyond one’s own interests into, as Levinas would put it, generosity and open conversation. As Ruskin became ever more desperate over the dehumanizing progress of modern materialism and capitalist exploitation, he reacted in contradictory ways, doubling down on conservative authority against the emphasis on autonomous freedom justifying laissez-faire ideology, but also betraying authorial uncertainty in revising his own methods of teaching. His entire career as a writer was built on the assumption that language had the capacity to help people learn to see divine truth, and that once encountered, truth’s inherent obligation would inspire an affirmative response.⁴² However, to some extent his trust in language backfired. People certainly loved what they called his virtuosic “word paintings,” but this came to irritate him; in an 1874 letter he wrote, “it is the chief provocation of my life to be called a ‘word painter’ instead of a thinker” (37: 136; cf. 37: 491).⁴³ He felt that his readers became distracted with his aesthetic mediation, missing the message for the messenger, or to use Levinas’s terms, forgetting the saying in the said. He repeatedly laments that people praised the polished style of his prose without feeling motivated to transform their lives

according to the truths he intended to help them see through that prose (11: 231-32; 16: 126; 18: 146; 22: 302; 34: 667; 37: 136, 491).⁴⁴ He turns to irony, undermining his defense of class-based obedience toward himself as Guild master by insisting throughout *Fors* that readers look past him to an original source of truth. To facilitate such looking, he tries to minimize his mediation, dialing back his aesthetically pleasing language and repeatedly pointing past himself (27: 400).

Plainness of style is thus one of the main aesthetic strategies Ruskin claims to adopt in *Fors*. Beyond reading this choice as manifesting his desire to connect with his working-class audience, it also becomes significant on a moral philosophical level, manifesting his attempt to minimize his role in teaching readers to come face to face with truth's obligation. To forestall continued distraction from his message in its aesthetic vehicle, Ruskin deliberately refuses poetic virtuosity, claiming to use the plainest language possible, "the shortest English I can" (27: 13, 400). He tracks how some reviewers resisted this method in *Fors* by declaiming not only his thoughts but even his capacity for thought, urging his return to what they perceived as his proper role of eloquent art critic (28: 185, 199-200, 425).⁴⁵ His attempt to suppress his skill for aesthetic finish, seeking to convey truths as directly as possible to his readers, can be read as manifesting his moral realist assumption that if the truth he is trying to teach is not motivating responsiveness, it must be because it is not actually being seen. His plain style attempts to facilitate coming face-to-face with truth's obligation.

Ruskin's straightforward style drives concise declarations of what he sees as natural and spiritual truths. For example, he writes, "There are three Material things, not only useful, but essential to Life. No one 'knows how to live' till he has got them. These are, Pure Air, Water, and Earth. There are three Immaterial things, not only useful, but essential to Life. No one knows how to live till he has got them. These are, Admiration, Hope, and Love" (27: 90; cf. 27: 156; 28:

255, 656). The repetition, short sentences, and parallelism reflect his new style: as directly as he can, he invites readers to transform how they face the earth and other people, to change not only pollutive industrial practices, but also the abuses of the class system, where landlords idly exploit instead of care for their tenants, or governments measure national prosperity not by the production of things inherently valuable for sustaining life, such as food and clothing, but by the financing of things intended to destroy life, such as guns and other war machinery (27: 133; 28: 688; 27: 129, 142). Perceiving these truths should motivate resistance to the ideologies that uphold material abuses, especially the ideology of human nature as competitive and exploitative that had become enshrined in capitalist and imperialist logic (28: 509, 519). Such truths imply that the conditions colluding to oppress the poor classes are not natural or inevitable. They expose the rich governing classes' assumed right to benefit from the physical and spiritual impoverishment of the lower classes, an impoverishment that the rich have perpetuated in the first place (28: 374, 669-74). *Fors* asserts that this class-divided impoverishment is not determined, that anyone can learn how to perceive and respond to natural and spiritual truths in ways that would defy the authority of the unjust status quo. Truth here throws into question modernity's prioritization of competitive self-centered needs as the justification for industrial capitalism, the assumption that human nature inherently necessitates behavior akin to or worse than that of "Beasts of Prey" (27: 509; 28: 53, 102-103, 152, 154, 207, 212-13, 310, 438, 516). Truth's obligation, if only rightly discerned, would counter this prevailing utilitarian, capitalist, imperial ideology. For Ruskin, ethics is not about enforcing change on the level of social governance; it is about individual people facing truth as something that destabilizes their existing assumptions (27: 14, 16, 378). In thus plainly declaring truth's obligation and tracing out its implications for concrete social action, *Fors* invites readers to orient themselves toward truth as

other, beyond their current opinions as reinforced by the hegemonic moral codes of acceptable, enlightened, materialistic, “modern” progress. I use the term *other* here to describe Ruskin’s conception of obligating truth not just because it resonates with Levinas calling truth’s obligation the absolute Other in the face of the other, but also because throughout *Fors*, Ruskin repeatedly emphasizes truth as beyond conditioned opinion; it stands outside and puts in question self-centered, rigid, apathetic notions that are complacently satisfied with the way things are. This egoistic self is the primary target of Ruskin’s recurrent imagery of encounter.

Imagery of encounter: the difficulty of conversation

Throughout *Fors*, Ruskin invites his readers to step beyond self-centered apathy in discerning truth’s exceeding obligation, which stands in direct tension with his class-structured authority. Such an invitation becomes especially apparent in his vivid imagery of encounter. On a stylistic level, he often confronts his readers with choices that create opportunities for thinking through various possible responses to truth. Multiple ethically-charged thematic oppositions face off throughout the letters. Examples of these themes include temporality (past vs. present, present vs. future), creativity (artistic production vs. technological reproduction), historiography (mythic narrative truth vs. historically listed fact), production and value (intrinsically life-supporting food and clothing vs. intrinsically life-destroying guns and war machinery), education (spiritual growth vs. competitive memorization), and human nature (heartless competition vs. generous compassion). Ruskin seeks to articulate these oppositions in a clear style that opens room for readers to reevaluate how they face the world.

But beyond these thematic oppositions, Ruskin also dramatizes moments of facing other people in ways resonant with Levinas’s face-to-face encounter, rendering the readers of *Fors*

responsible to carry on the response of conversation. These moments of encounter can be grouped into two categories; I start with the more familiar, where the person encountered is in obvious need, demanding some form of life-sustaining obedient response—what Levinas repeatedly describes as “the stranger, the widow, and the orphan” (*Totality* 77-78, 215, 244-45, 251). Many letters include literal encounters with children in poverty. For example, he describes meeting a little boy selling half-rotten figs on the streets of Venice, whose “face brought the tears into my eyes, so open, and sweet, and capable it was; and so sad” (27: 336). This face sanctifies the rest of their encounter beyond the logic of capitalist exchange, as he gave the boy money without taking any of the figs, then asks his readers to meditate on what “signs” such an encounter charged against the egoistic self-satisfaction of the modern city. Beyond physical to spiritual poverty, he describes visiting an English cottage family and seeing their little girl as having nothing substantial to read besides a pile of Evangelical tracts whose vapid moralistic stories presumed a wealthy bourgeois self-satisfaction far removed from her own experience, stories which Ruskin ironically calls a “pound and a half of the best of the modern pious and picturesque” (28: 257). She embodies an intellectual and spiritual need that cannot be satisfied by clichéd religious platitudes. Yet another encounter draws more explicitly how the other challenges his own self-sufficiency: he describes how he was entering at the private door of Oxford’s university galleries when he met a little girl playing in the street, wearing cast-off shoes too large for her. The encounter shakes him. Though he goes on to offer an informative lecture to “worthy people” about Florentine art, facing this child makes him see the subject as useless to the real question at hand—her urgent need. His fellow Oxford scholars may even discourse more overtly about morality, “Responsibility, Free-will, and the like,” but no more than Florentine art

will such lecturing respond to the immediate demand she embodies (28: 13-15). The reader again shares the obligation to join this conversation of responsibility.

On one level, these and other such literal encounters throughout *Fors* resonate with sentimental scenes such as populate the pages of Dickens and other Victorian social problem novels: the often-middle-class protagonist encounters the suffering lower-class other, while the narrator apostrophizes readers and draws moral conclusions. What makes these encounters different in *Fors*, however, is that such moments are emphatically disconnected from any narrative interest; they serve no larger aesthetic purpose of plot development or character bildungsroman. Without relapsing into the comforting sense that the encounter serves a predictable formal purpose to forward the narrative plot or yield a safely moralized protagonist, the reader is asked to linger in the discomfort of feeling the self dislodged from its sovereignty by encounters that have no easy resolution, encounters that bring them face-to-face with a truth whose obligation extends infinitely beyond the form of the text.

Such a sense of unresolved obligation emerges even more clearly in the second category, the more extended encounters that recur in *Fors*, which assume a more complex form. Two such encounters occur in Letters 20 (August 1872) and 69 (September 1876). Both these passages take as their controlling image the train ride, a literal passage through space and time that becomes metaphorically suggestive of spiritual movement through a landscape whose face is contoured by morally obligating truths. The first describes a train ride Ruskin took from Venice to Verona, through a landscape enriched with Shakespearean associations and filled with “[e]xquisite midsummer sunshine” (27: 345). In the same train carriage sat two American girls who, assuredly not street orphans, supposedly represented the epitome of “western civilization,” “specimens of the utmost which the money and invention of the nineteenth century could

produce” (27: 345). Ruskin’s critique of Western civilization’s self-complacent assumption of superiority becomes sharp as he scientifically dissects the behavior of these “specimens”—they refuse to look out upon the beauty of the landscape, instead pulling down the blinds and passing the time in eating sugared lemons, impatiently leafing and ripping apart cheap novels, and complaining about the flies and dust; “And so they went their way, with sealed eyes and tormented limbs, their numbered miles of pain” (27: 346). Refusing to open the blinds and wonder at the light of natural, much less spiritual truth, they exemplify “tortured indolence, and infidel eyes, blind even to the things that are” (27: 347). Undesirous of seeing even natural truths, they also are unable to see spiritual truths, the breadth of life beyond the self. The “awakening” that Levinas describes as characteristic of the face-to-face encounter never has a chance to happen (*Otherwise* 164; “Philosophy and Awakening” 87-89).

In contrast to this solipsism of Western civilization’s selfish apathy, Ruskin emphasizes his own lifelong attempt to orient himself outward: “from my youth up, I have been seeking the fame, and honouring the work, of others;—never my own,” all with the goal of inviting others to similarly look beyond themselves in seeking “reverent judgment” (28: 648).⁴⁶ However, the process of how to actually go about such turning outward is more complex; its difficulty becomes crystalized in this train ride passage, sitting uneasily alongside his seeming confidence in his own trained perspective and role as teacher. Though Ruskin and Levinas hold education as capable of awakening the self to the obligation of otherness, each is ultimately responsible to face their own encounter and respond accordingly. Enclosed in their egoistic sufficiency, the girls of this first train ride seem unable to encounter truth beyond themselves, and Ruskin recognizes that this is not something he can force them to see. Rather, he tries to meet his own responsibility by moving the conversation within the space of his letters, asking his readers to

reconsider their own orientations toward what is beyond the shuttered windows of their complacent selves.

However, on the second emblematic train ride, though Ruskin seems about to make the same point, this time he becomes less confident and more ambiguous in his conclusions, as well as more self-critical. He recounts a much more quotidian train ride from Coniston to Barmouth, and instead of immediately diagnosing specimens of the complacency of Western civilization, he suspends analysis for several pages to simply describe the multiple people who board and leave the train or who wait alongside him at the stations. This time, thick rain obscures any view of the natural landscape for him as well as for the others; the truths of nature have, as it were, become more elusive; people's turning away from the window signifies now less as willful solipsism and more as an understandable response to the exigencies of conditioning circumstances (28: 691). With the windows onto nature thus veiled, the passage focuses more deliberately on the question of seeing spiritual truths, or more particularly, of *desiring* to see spiritual truths, being responsive to the encounter with infinite obligation. By the end of his journey, he has had time to encounter the faces of several hundred around him, and he is haunted by how poorly clothed and unhappy most of them appear to be. In contrast to the privileged Americans, these poor workers are the other products of Western civilization, invisible and uncared for by its privileged system of exchange value, specimens that even more decisively discredit its claims to superiority.

At one level, Ruskin feels defeated from any approach to conversation as instruction, impeded from his purpose to teach these people, the supposed audience of his *Fors* letters, to open themselves to truth's obligation, because he acknowledges his own ignorance of their perspectives and interests. He feels the obligation they extend to him and is humbled by his own inability to meet them in equal conversation, by his sense of "total isolation" from them (28:

694). But this lack of ability to converse with the working poor, resulting from class and educational differences, contrasts with the primary feature of other middle-class passengers. Conversation is limited here, too, not because of physical poverty, for they seem comparatively educated and financially stable, but because, like the Americans in the first train ride, they are “not happy” but also clearly “complacent,” careless of wonder (28: 695). For Ruskin, their lack of happiness results not from physical suffering, but from moral apathy and bourgeois mediocrity, a lack of desire to discern spiritual truths despite inhabiting the material circumstances that would facilitate such education, unlike the lower classes wholly occupied with fleeing imminent starvation. Their complacency betrays “a total inability to conceive any good or lovely thing in this world or any other” (28: 695), confined wholly to narrow utilitarian motives. For Ruskin, responding to what is good and lovely would manifest an ethical orientation of “admiration, hope, and love” toward others beyond the self (27: 90, 156; 28: 255, 656). Learning how to face these spiritual truths is the first condition to obeying them.

Another dimension of this responsiveness, however, which Ruskin illustrates through his own frustrated and self-accusatory sense of disconnection from the people around him, is the simple fact that conversation implies at least two, seeing in connection with others, not in isolation. He cannot be content to sit in his ivory tower of art criticism, enjoying alone the truths of nature apart from the spiritual truths of human ethical experience enacted in just relationships, and it will not work either for him to paternalistically preach from the heights. The train becomes a fittingly ambiguous setting for Ruskin’s meditations: this symbol of modern industrial capitalist progress, despite itself, facilitates his coming face-to-face with the implicit demands, the intense physical and infinite spiritual needs in other human beings, that remain unanswered and unanswerable by that technological progress. So again, though less self-assured this time, he

channels the conversation responding to the obligation extended through these faces into the pages of *Fors*.

Throughout *Fors* Ruskin returns to this question of shaking off apathy and learning how to face and respond to otherness, to truth that exceeds the horizon of the given status quo. In Letter 66 (June 1876), he describes his amazement over how modern modes of life have sought to eliminate the possibility of any vertical event, or as he calls it “miracle,” that would throw its flattened totality into question, that would challenge the complacency of modernity’s “careless,” “questionless,” “Desolate souls” (28: 613). Given his own deconversion from Evangelicalism, he recognizes that this problem of apathy needs an answer that goes theoretically deeper than typical conversion to a specific religion. He cares less whether people actually believe in God than if they are the kind of people who would desire to encounter God—manifestations of obligating holiness (28: 735). Ethics is not a matter of trying to make people believe certain contents of creeds; it is about responding with an orientation of wondering reverence and openness toward what is other than the self and so places responsibility on that self. Without this wonder, truth’s obligation cannot be truly felt and hence cannot motivate conversation: “No great truth is allowed by nature to be demonstrable to any person who, foreseeing its consequences, desires to refuse it” (28: 761).⁴⁷ Throughout *Fors*, Ruskin vacillates between his plain style’s attempt to approach truth as something “demonstrable,” that once seen inherently motivates obedience, and his difficult style that dramatizes how truth is radically elusive to codification, exceeding ready-made categories, inspiring of wonder, demanding a unique response from each individual.

Contradictory stylistic demands: the motivating opacity of truth's infinite obligation

Not only through this imagery of encounter, but also through its complex, contradictory style, *Fors* explores language as response to obligation. Both Ruskin and Levinas's late styles formally dramatize their theorization of anarchic obligation as requiring an ongoing conversation, the work of attending and responding to something fleeting, subjectively discerned, yet resistant to the ego's totalizing drive for comprehensive legibility. Especially in his late work *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's style verges on the dramatic or even poetic. Through literary methods of "apposition, parataxis, substitution, and seriature," reveling in rhetorical "performative contradictions," he circumvents positive declaration, attempting to evoke through his linguistic traces the experience of infinite ethical obligation, the encounter with the absolute Other (Vries, *Minimal* 503, 573). This crafted poetic style demonstrates Levinas's awareness of his paradoxical position, using philosophical concepts and vocabulary laden with millennia of codified meaning to bear retroactive witness to an anarchic obligation that is felt prior to the codifications of thought and language (Critchley, *Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity* 75, 184-85).⁴⁸ Both in form and effect, Levinas's stylistic innovations resonate with those of Ruskin, who, throughout *Fors*, explores a fragmentary exegesis in glancing dialogue with truth's obligating otherness, attempting to reorient readers' attention toward truth as erupting beyond their complacent assumptions.

Fors is a dramatic experiment, an aesthetic wager, that responding to truth's otherness can be facilitated by facing its opacity, by dwelling with how it resists comprehension, eludes conclusive definition, and remains non-totalizable. Though Ruskin claims to write *Fors* with a new plainness of style as necessary to most efficiently teach truths, *Fors* also paradoxically represents the height of his deliberate convolution of style, a vast, immersive textual wandering

through evasion and fragmentation, a deliberate ceding of authorial control. This experimentation was immediately recognized as peculiar to *Fors*, anomalous even in the context of his more tangential and conversational late style. Alongside the gleams of clarity in his declarative sentences, Ruskin juxtaposes extensive passages that wax allusive and self-reflexive, shifting across a range of tones—playful, bitter, grieving, nostalgic, litotic, hyperbolic, and ironic. Many blamed this elusive style for creating only more confusion. As one contemporary reviewer noticed, Ruskin essentially insisted too much on truth’s otherness beyond existing notions: “Mr. Ruskin [...], instead of converting us by starting from the points which we hold in common, ostentatiously exhibits his most amazing caprices”; sarcastically called “a kind of infallible Pope,” he leaves the reader impressed not with truth but with his skill as “an ingenious weaver of paradoxes.”⁴⁹ Other reviewers called the letters full of “grotesqueries,” “treasures and trumpery.”⁵⁰ His friend and biographer W. G. Collingwood wrote, “To read *Fors* is like being out in a thunderstorm,” immersed in “a coruscating play of wit, dazzling with side-glances of allusion” (*Life* 117, 120); Frederic Harrison described *Fors* as being written in “a style of unmeasured *abandon*, of surrender to any fancy, whim, association of the passing moment. Nothing so utterly inconsequent, so rambling, so heterogeneous exists in print”; still, some literary merit may be acknowledged in its uniqueness, its “utterly unexpected and incalculable sequence of ideas” (184, 186). Some of Ruskin’s contemporaries interpreted this fragmentation biographically, as symptomatic of the madness that literally interrupted his monthly output of these letters during 1878 and sporadically from 1880 to their termination in 1884 (27: xvii).⁵¹

In *Fors*, Ruskin notes these irritated responses, describing how even those who counted themselves his friends remonstrated that his confusing style flew above the heads of his working-class readers.⁵² He responds that it is wrong for him or anyone else to prejudge what the working

classes can or cannot understand; doing so would only entrench the educational divide too often assumed as natural and inevitable: “I cannot at all understand why well-educated people should still so habitually speak of you as beneath their level, and needing to be written down to, with condescending simplicity” (27: 182). In reality, it was the readers trained to prioritize logocentric, rationally structured argument who most protested at its incomprehensibility, while those who responded most enthusiastically were among the comparatively unempowered—self-educated workers and young women (Birch, Introduction to *Fors* xxxiv). He often forgets to address this more vulnerable audience, spending whole letters directly attacking capitalists and industrialists and the upper classes. Still, no matter his particular addressees in any given letter, the pattern overall emerges that, rather than making his readers depend on him as the paternalistic authority, he wants to step back so they can face truth for themselves, and switching between direct and evasive styles forms part of his essential strategy to keep them from becoming dependent on him. His primary purpose would fail if they went no further than simply accepting his word and so becoming comfortable with him as translator of truth trying to enforce obedience. Instead, his difficult methods attempt to initiate the work of facing and simultaneously to create space for the growth of their capacity to respond to this facing beyond their given assumptions:

I write in words you are little likely to understand, because I have no wish (rather the contrary) to tell you anything that you can understand without taking trouble. You usually read so fast that you can catch nothing but the echo of your own opinions, which, of course, you are pleased to see in print. I neither wish to please, nor displease you; but to provoke you to think; to lead you to think

accurately; and help you to form, perhaps, some different opinions from those you have now. (27: 98-99)

The reader encounters in *Fors* a text that resists easy comprehension, that requires a mode of attention inviting the encounter with ethical truth, interrupting the reverberations of their mental echo chambers, looking beyond their own habitual opinions. This orientation of responsiveness toward what exceeds the self is the deeper truth Ruskin wants to teach beyond the more thematic natural and spiritual truths that form the content of his stylistically direct passages.

Thus Ruskin formally dramatizes the evasiveness of truth, the non-totalizability of its obligation. While some have already pointed to the affordances of Ruskin's difficult style,⁵³ most emphasize its effect in relation to labor, as a means of tutoring the reader in doing good work.⁵⁴ My focus builds on these readings, adding the moral philosophical perspective that this difficult style is essential to how he theorizes obligation as exceeding the authoritative model visible in his conservative class views. Ruskin signals the paradox of truth's simultaneous obligating clarity and anarchic incomprehensibility as central to his work in the very title of the series, *Fors Clavigera*. The words are Latin, meaning literally *fate the nail bearer*, but early on in Letter 2 (February 1871), Ruskin multiplies its meanings, which then recur as touchstones throughout the rest of the letters. *Fors* can mean "Force, Fortitude, and Fortune"; the first two refer to human powers of action, "doing good work" and enduring well any "trial of patience." The last, however, refers to the power of eternal law, apparently incomprehensible in its exteriority to the human will, beyond human approval or disapproval: "the necessary fate of a man: the ordinance of his life which cannot be changed" (27: 28). As he later clarifies, the more commonly conceived "Fate" dimension of this third *fors* is subordinate to "the Moral Law" dimension (28: 109). *Clavigera* can mean "either Club-bearer, Key-bearer, or Nail-bearer." He aligns these

images with the three meanings of *fors* and illustrates them with the Greek figures of Hercules (strength of deed), Ulysses (strength of patience), and Lycurgus (strength of law) (17: 28).

These various meanings in the title alone embody the paradoxically ultimate and non-codified nature of truth's obligation. *Fors* contains many passages where Ruskin appears quite self-assured, even arrogant, claiming to speak of truths "positively, and with entire and incontrovertible knowledge of them,—as you and your children will one day find every word of my direct statements in *Fors Clavigera* to be; and fastened, each with its nail in its sure place" (28: 463). At one level, then, his text attempts to enact the regulative, enclosing, structuring work of clubs, keys, and nails, seeking to enforce, contain, and fix down truths, matching the tone with which he demands guild members' instant obedience. He asserts that he cares not to address anything "debatable," refusing to voice opinions and instead speaking "only what I know to be incontrovertibly true. [...] whatever is set down in *Fors* for you is assuredly true,—inevitable,—trustworthy to the uttermost,—however strange" (28: 108). Yet he claims such certainty not to assert his own superiority, but rather to promise its attainability by anyone who desires to seek it. He thus attempts to attest truth not because he is inherently more intelligent than anyone else, "but simply because I have taken the trouble to ascertain what they also may ascertain if they choose" (28: 107-8). Even his most patronizing, codifying tone is destabilized by the recognition that readers can face obligation only for themselves. His asseverations seem to protest too much, betraying the paradox at the heart of the imagery: the truth of law signaled by the third *fors* is a trace, unpredictable, breaking in on existing structures, perceived as in need of nailing down and shoring up but always eluding such fixture.

Repeatedly throughout the letters, Ruskin attributes their fragmentariness to this third *fors*' unanticipated influence, leaping to his next non-sequitur for no other given reason than that

“It chanced by the appointment of the third Fors, to which, you know, I am bound in these letters uncomplainingly to submit” (27: 270-71). Sometimes the third *fors*’ demand accords with his immediate purpose, bringing his attention to a relevant example in the moment of need (27: 360). Other times, however, it makes him feel the impossibility of ever meeting its demand, running to patch the “torn web” of his text but still feeling unable to catch up and “hold the pace” (27: 382, 553). To one of his friends who had asked him to write “an arranged book instead,” using the structured and aesthetically pleasing conventions of his early work, he replies that such a method would not sufficiently disrupt readers’ foregone conclusions. They think the possibility of change is “hopelessly Utopian”; he seeks to interrupt how they unthinkingly reject truth’s obligation simply because it is “inconsistent with the present vile general system” (28: 254-55). *Fors* has given him intimations from far beyond this system, a “thousand things flitting in my mind, like sea-birds for which there are no sands to settle upon” (28: 460). The multiplicity and lack of fixedness is his point. Even more than wanting his readers to arrive at contained meaning, he wants them to engage in the process of facing and responding to uncontainable obligation. His textual dwelling with uncertainty and ambiguity is paradoxically attributable to and characteristic of the very truths he is trying to teach. In Letter 49 (January 1875), he addresses the difficulty of trying to teach truths that inherently defy comprehensive teaching. Such truths depend on individual people becoming ethically motivated to better the world not according to a fully known, predetermined scheme imposed on them from the outside, but through their own tentative, transformative face-to-face encounter with truth, shaping their internal desires toward what is other than themselves:

I wonder if Fors will let me say any small proportion, this year, of what I intend. I wish she would, for my readers have every right to be doubtful of my plan till

they see it more defined; and yet to define it severely would be to falsify it, for all that is best in it depends on my adopting whatever good I can find, in men and things, that will work to my purpose; which of course means action in myriads of ways that I neither wish to define, nor attempt to anticipate. Nay, I am wrong, even in speaking of it as a plan or scheme at all. It is only a method of uniting the force of all good plans and wise schemes: it is a principle and tendency, like the law of form in a crystal; not a plan. If I live, as I said at first, I will endeavour to show some small part of it in action; but it would be a poor design indeed, for the bettering of the world, which any man could see either quite round the outside, or quite into the inside of. (28: 235)

He admits that truth can erupt at any moment from “myriads” of interactions with otherness, and that the contingency of such encounters is in fact an inseparable part of what he wants to teach. Here he moves away from the image of a nailed structure, instead invoking how a crystal’s form grows naturally, not imposed from outside, but remaining internally coherent as it expands and shapes the material around it. Breaking apart a crystal to dissect and codify its internal structure stops that growth, alters its appearing and influence on its surrounding world.

The truth Ruskin seems trying to witness is not its specific content, but rather its being paradoxically unconditioned and foundational. Even the attempt to gesture to it in teaching his readers runs the risk of falsifying or usurping it. Truth extends its continuous, transformative obligation, but people must come directly face-to-face with it, not rely on a mediator: “Fors herself must look to it, and my readers use their own wits in thinking over what she has looked to” (28: 62). Even as Ruskin’s passages of plain style attempt to define truth in an incontrovertible fashion, the effect of this third *fors* on the overall text is such that readers are

presented less with a neat resume of truths corresponding to a checklist of tasks, than with a rigorous demand on their own labor of attention, not simply for the labor's sake, but for the sake of looking beyond any codified synthesis to the larger truth that ethical obligation is inherently uncodifiable and unenforceable, inescapably a personal responsibility.⁵⁵ His fragmentary style—the unforeseen textual eruptions of *fors*, the contradictory images such as sea birds and crystals—has less the effect of synthesizing into an aggregated whole than of suggesting that truth's obligation is precisely what cannot be meaningfully assembled and enumerated. My reading of *Fors* troubles any attempt to read Ruskin's notion of objective truth as wholly complicit with the desire for totalizing, fixed legibility as inherited from the Enlightenment. His aesthetic form in *Fors* becomes increasingly broken, contingent, and even illegible as he seeks to recreate the difficult encounter with truth, suggesting that obligation's non-totalizability may be the key element motivating an affirmative response.

In his library edition introduction to *Fors*, E. T. Cook notes the trend in Ruskin's late work and in *Fors* especially toward describing truth as resistant to comprehension, as something that the artists and prophets of the ages have only hinted at through “irony and paradox”; in Ruskin's words, truth is such that its traces can be suggested only through “enigmas,” “dreams,” and “parables” (27: xxvi-xxvii). In *Fors*, Ruskin writes that he knows of nothing good that is “altogether intelligible” (28: 175). He suggests that parables reject intelligibility for opacity, resulting in “mysterious” forms that, approached egotistically, are even “deceptive,” mirroring back whatever assumptions people may project onto them (28: 319). Their form manifests truth as an indeterminate trace of obligation that simultaneously sustains the possibility of freedom, of non-response that would retreat to a culturally-determined rejection of otherness (28: 668). Even the turn away from truth's ethical demand signals how truth has already extended responsibility,

otherwise such refusal could not be ethically judged as a refusal. *Fors* recreates this elusiveness of parable form on a much more extended scale. Ruskin's fragmentary experimentations, like Levinas's "performative contradictions," dramatize how anarchic ethical obligation—the saying, truth, the absolute other—cannot be fixed or enforced, but only acknowledged as a trace in the said, the response of discourse, generosity, conversation ("Being-for-the-Other" 115-16). Both Ruskin and Levinas face the linguistic challenge of describing the non-totalizability of truth's obligation and the possible obedient response, the attempt to guarantee which could fall into the authoritarian usurpation of obligation such as appears in Ruskin's conservatism. They formally offer not a solution through legibility but an experiential dwelling with opacity, with what resists the ego's comprehending, totalizing grasp, through language that invites readers to face the infinite, open-ended response to otherness.⁵⁶

Finally, I hope that my analysis offers a new way of thinking about Ruskin's ethical relevance. Reading his late work as offering a nuanced site that puts language into play regarding obligation enables us to more deliberately reflect on how implicit normative commitments continue to undergird the work of social critique. My analysis offers a way of thinking more deliberately about the coherence of ethical critique, about how judging human interactions and cultural formations as just or unjust implicitly invokes a founding or original obligation exterior to these formations, intrinsic to human subjectivity. In Levinas's words, "Morality does not belong to culture: it enables one to judge it" ("Meaning and Sense" 100). The universality and infinity of the ethical demand enables judgment upon history's non-responsiveness to its call (*Totality* 21). Hent de Vries describes this phenomenon of judgment that Levinas articulates in his ethics: "The experience, event, and unprecedented 'novelty' and 'marvel' of the ethical relation makes plausible a 'disengagement' from the objective order of violence, its practices,

and its institutions, and confirms in that moment, as in every ‘now,’ a *judgment about history*” (*Minimal* 474). That is, though the contents of particular judgments change over time, the fact of ethical judgment persists; otherwise holding the past accountable would be incoherent.

Philosopher Vincent Descombes goes so far as to point out the “critical hypocrisy” of not acknowledging this implicit appeal to some minimal universal obligation, a hypocrisy that “takes the form of an incessant denunciation of superstition and of tyrannical acts” without reflecting on how such critique is possible: “Yesterday’s enlightened Philosopher and today’s ideological critic both denounce the abuses they observe around them. Yet there can only be *abuses* where there is also *legitimacy*” (39; cf. Harold 200-1). Ruskin and Levinas offer possible ways of gesturing to that legitimacy in anarchic obligation. Looking forward, the universality of this responsibility enables judgment not only of history but also of the ethics of current political situations: in Levinas’s words, justice begins in responsive obedience to that site of ordinary obligation: “it is in terms of the relation to the Face or of me before the other that we can speak of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the state. A state in which the interpersonal relationship is impossible, in which it is directed in advance by the determinism proper to the state, is a totalitarian state” (“Philosophy, Justice, and Love” 105). We can avoid hypocrisy and cynicism by becoming more self-aware of our foundational ethical commitment to the value of obligated subjectivity that implicitly motivates our critique of the resurgence of authoritarian, nationalist, exploitive ideologies and practices. We can recognize that such critique implies our response to an obligation that is unconditioned, exceeding any single religious or political or social structure, inextricably constituting what it means to be human, sharing a world with others.

III. Standing Apart from Oneself: Mind and Conscience in George Eliot and Marilynne Robinson

for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires—of taking her stand out of herself

—George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

we do indeed continuously stand apart from ourselves, appraising. Every higher act of the mind, intellectual, aesthetic, or moral, is, paradoxically, also an exercise in self-doubt, self-scrutiny.

—Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind*

Throughout her literary career, George Eliot closely followed the cultural debates attending the emerging field of empirical psychology. This science sought an objective explanation of mental activity as a cumulative assemblage of empirical data, as directly caused by the evolution of mechanical, neurological structures, attempting to bypass how human subjectivity colors accounts of the world.¹ Many opposed these claims, especially those in what we now call humanities—philosophy, creative literature, and religion. These discourses prioritize subjectivity, often describing the experiences of mind and conscience as inexplicable or divine. Traditional Christianity saw the human soul as divinely created with innate mental faculties; knowing the soul required introspection and self-reflection. Empirical psychology challenged such methods, seeking to replace introspection’s unreliable subjectivity with more objective methods of deterministic measurement.²

Eliot not only followed but also contributed to these debates when she finished and published the last two volumes of her partner George Henry Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874-1879) after his death. Over two decades before that, she signaled her growing interest in the field when she wrote that evolutionary psychologist Herbert Spencer would be remembered for giving “a new impulse to psychology” and for thus ensuring its advancement as a science

(letter to Sara Hennell, July 10, 1854, Cross 1: 234).³ These interests also influenced Eliot's novels, which were prominent among Victorian novels that contributed to "popularising the science of the mind" (Nestor, "Science" 267; cf. George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists* vii).⁴ An overwhelming amount of scholarly work has documented Eliot's investments in psychology and other scientific developments and how they influenced her writings. *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) most frequently appears in these studies, acclaimed as the "most scientific" of Eliot's novels. Its narrator assumes an objective stance to document with intense realism the social web of provincial life; its language invokes scientific concepts and imagery; and it overtly contrasts different scientific pursuits in the natural historian Farebrother and the natural scientist and physiologist Lydgate (Postlewaite 99, 114; Rylance 149, 151, 192-93; Logan ch. 7; Michael Davis 11-13). Many approach Eliot's perspectives on psychology by tracing connections between *Middlemarch* and Lewes' *Problems of Life and Mind*.⁵

This scholarly interest in Eliot and science fits comfortably with Western secularism, but largely overlooks how Eliot sees a less definite divide between science and its perceived opposite, religion, than is often assumed. This gap is partly understandable given Eliot's early turn away from Evangelicalism. Some scholarship has revisited her continued religious investments;⁶ however, with a few exceptions,⁷ it often tends not to engage with Eliot's definite interests in science, further perpetuating a division that Eliot herself did not maintain. I want to show how Eliot sustains these interests as part of her multi-discourse approach to writing, where alongside the scientific language of evolutionary psychology, religiously-inflected language intimates the irreducible wonder of ethical subjectivity.⁸ For text and method, I expand on Eliot's own cue in how she describes her novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) to her publisher John Blackwood: she sees it as offering an "ethics of art" that seeks to "correspond with a widening

psychology” (Cross 2: 190). I suggest that *The Mill on the Floss* offers Eliot’s most balanced exploration not just of scientific but also of religious language to speak to the ethical implications of the cultural debate attending psychology. Instead of rehashing the already extensive body of scholarship on *Mill*’s investments in science and evolutionary psychology, I focus on revaluing a crucial scene of the novel that such scholarship frequently overlooks or dismisses—Maggie’s reading of the religious divine Thomas à Kempis. This religious perspective offers Maggie language capable of articulating the excessive ethical experience that empirical psychology was finding itself inadequate to define without remainder: self-reflective mind or soul and conscience. This scene suggests that Eliot did not see psychology as an infallible objective authority necessarily invalidating subjective experience. Rather, even as she acknowledges Maggie’s materially and socially determining circumstances, Eliot emphatically retains a religiously-inflected language to describe the introspective, subjective account of mind and conscience as something exceeding scientific discourse.

Underscoring this religious language as part of Eliot’s multi-discursivity is important for several reasons. First, it resists retrospectively imposing modern entrenched disciplinary divisions onto the nineteenth century, when these disciplines were still fluid and only in the early stages of formation. Second, the questions that psychology debated then continue unresolved, despite phenomenal advances in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, and despite the self-assured claims of modern evolutionary psychology (Rylance 2).⁹ We need language that can address these questions—the experience of consciousness and its relation to the experience of conscience or ethical freedom. We need to deliberately reflect on how different discourses value, interpret, and shape these experiences. To better show how Eliot’s valuing of religious language acknowledges this persistent excess of ethical subjectivity, I invoke a thinker from our own day:

novelist, religious philosopher, and essayist Marilynne Robinson, who has been called “a contemporary George Eliot” (O’Rourke).

Like Eliot, Robinson’s novels demonstrate extraordinary intellectual range, employ an acutely realist method, and invite readers into sympathetic imagination. To my knowledge, no studies have thoroughly examined Eliot and Robinson together, besides these swiftly pointed affinities in their novelistic aims and methods.¹⁰ Much work remains to be done fleshing out these comparisons between Eliot’s and Robinson’s fiction. For my purposes of examining the implications of how Eliot consistently values ethical subjectivity, though, I turn to Robinson’s non-fiction essays, where she most explicitly argues for the need to revalue these old questions of subjective experience. I focus especially on *Absence of Mind* (2010), her series of essays for Yale University’s Terry Foundation Lectures on Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy. The very title of this lecture series suggests its inheritance from the Victorian era of the perceived tension between these discourses. Here Robinson critiques how assumptions and arguments from these nineteenth-century debates have become uncritically reified in modern popularized evolutionary psychology, which she calls “parascientific” (66). She outlines the pervasive binary that labels humanist and especially religious defenses of subjective introspection as reactionary while labeling scientific defenses of objective psychological mechanism as progressive. She argues that this politicized binary is not inevitable, that it is a historically constructed opposition with unfortunate implications for ethics. She critiques how evolutionary psychology remains compromised by racist assumptions, and how its parascientific popularizers make exaggerated claims about its social implications unjustified by actual science’s modesty and rigor. She advocates recovering a language capable of taking seriously the wonder of ethical subjectivity, the experiences of mind and conscience. By *mind* she means the

experience of self-reflexively saying *I*, perceiving ourselves as free and responsible. This consciousness is also *conscience*, which means that we in our perceived freedom are capable of standing apart from our own needs to evaluate others' needs and choose altruism. Not simply reacting to external stimuli, we perceive our interior experience as multiple and ethically obligated.

For Robinson, recuperating language that adequately values how such ethical subjectivity exceeds objective explanation can shape how we see and treat others as sharers in this paradoxically unique and universal human experience of mind and conscience. She highlights various humanistic discourses, including that of the aesthetics of language and art, but she most often argues for religious language as especially capable of contributing to this revaluing of mind and conscience. Rather than simply repeating Victorian religious reactions against evolutionary psychology, she, like Eliot, humanizes religion, underscoring how its language values ethical subjectivity as real and worthy of wonder and respect, not as an illusion to be dismissed by overreaching parascientific polemics, but as something that would offer ethical traction against dehumanizing, oppressive ideologies. The clarity of Robinson's argument helps me show how Eliot models such language in *The Mill on the Floss* and why it still matters to acknowledge it. Adding to the studies already showing how *Mill* manifests Eliot's investments in science, I highlight a perspective that has not received enough emphasis: even as she engaged with evolutionary psychology, Eliot continued to invoke language and imagery specific to religious discourses to describe the wondrous excess of ethical subjectivity: mind and conscience.

I will first review Eliot's interest in social and psychological evolution, then focus on the primary critiques debated over evolutionary psychology's account of subjective experience, as Robinson shows. Next showing how Robinson and Eliot intervene in this debate by challenging

the explanatory sufficiency of psychology and affirming humanized religious language will serve as a basis for my close reading of how *The Mill on the Floss* uses such language to value the excess of ethical subjectivity.

George Eliot and science: “social & psychological evolution”

Many have studied how Eliot’s interest in science influenced her own essays and novels, often engaging with various evolutionary models.¹¹ Such scholarship demonstrates that Eliot’s literary interests focused on the humanistic questions and social implications attending science (McDonagh), but it overlooks her continued investment in religious discourse about ethical subjectivity. Even if scholarship briefly acknowledges such discourse, or more often describes it as metaphysical, it mostly narrates Eliot as moving away from religion toward biological materialist language. This oversight is perhaps understandable because Eliot is not known for overtly invoking orthodox religious arguments, given her rejection of Evangelicalism. As early as 1883, George Willis Cooke claimed that Eliot found in Darwin’s and Spencer’s evolutionary theories “perfectly satisfactory” answers to her metaphysical questions, which in turn determined her view of human subjectivity, that “Man is not only the product of nature, but, according to this theory, nature limits his moral capacity and the range of his mental activity” (219-20). Much scholarship follows this cue. However, Eliot’s position is more nuanced; she remained alert to the ethical implications of scientific theories in ways that suggest she did not assume these theories conclusively limited or discredited ethical subjectivity.

A mid-1870s notebook not published until 1966 offers a fascinating range of entries showing how integrated her interests were. “Ethics is a mixed science,” she writes, “to which conduct is the corresponding art.” Moral discourse’s traditional focus on conduct or action

should be accompanied by “the scientific point of view,” which studies the material forces and energies that enable action. She underscores the urgency of bringing these advances to bear on ethical questions: “it seems an unfruitful attempt now to consider ethics apart from social & psychological evolution,” she ponders. “Of what use is it to consider ‘ends’ & the motives for seeking them, unless we can assure ourselves that the motives (or forms of force) in question will continue to be generated?” (Pinney 364). At first this may sound like orthodox physiological psychology—that motives for ethical action are traceable to forces that can be objectively analyzed. But she does not specify that these forces are necessarily exclusively material. Simon Calder explicates this notebook entry as indicating that Eliot invites readers to alternate between scientific objectivity and “anthropocentrism” or the “sympathetic impulse,” a balance he sees as borne out in *The Mill on the Floss* (63). The two extremes are historically exemplified by figures such as Comte and Mill on the one hand and Aristotle and Feuerbach on the other (70). Eliot leaned more toward the latter; in contrast to positivist rationalism—Auguste Comte’s “religion of humanity” that envisions science as the teleological end of all human endeavor—Eliot’s “anthropocentrism” privileges how Feuerbach reimagined religion in *The Essence of Christianity*, which she translated and published in England in 1854. In a letter from that year, she wrote, “with the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree” (*Letters 2*: 153, qtd. in Anger, “George Eliot” 79). For Feuerbach, religion projects and idealizes ethical human qualities as divine, especially sympathy (*Essence* 54, 82, 158, 184). Thus while Eliot rejects the literalness of specific Christian doctrines, she retains the centrality of ethical subjectivity as a religious orientation (Cooke 221; Halder 11). Building on this context, to balance out the scholarship focused on scientific discourses in *The Mill on the Floss*, I focus on religiously-inflected descriptions of the experience of mind and conscience. I show how Eliot suggests not conflict

but collaboration between two simultaneously available and not necessarily exclusive methods of approaching questions about human psychological experience. When in this notebook entry she asks “Of what use is it,” she is not saying that the old ethical questions of ends and motives are no longer relevant, but rather that all available discourses with ethical implications should be integrated: any insights psychology may offer about how cultural and physical embodiment impacts ethical experience should be accepted as part of understanding such experience.

In this notebook entry, Eliot specifies two scientific fields whose bearing on ethics she particularly considered, both connected through evolutionary models. The first is “social evolution.” Much scholarship prioritizes Darwin’s model, and she did recognize his *Origin of Species* as making an “epoch” in the field, though she also thought its style unimpressive and found its lack of “illustrative facts” troubling (Dec. 5, 1859 letter to Barbara Bodichon, Cross 2: 108; cf. Beer, *Darwin’s* 146). But Eliot was also familiar with other evolutionary models propounded throughout the nineteenth century. For example, she knew Comte’s theory of the evolution of society toward a positivist or scientific end, though she hesitated to endorse it as a new religious system.¹² She read and responded to Spencer’s work building on Darwin with varying degrees of approval and resistance.¹³ But Eliot’s sense of social evolution is more specific than Spencer’s application of Darwinian evolution to human societies to justify the competition that ensures the “survival of the fittest” (*Principles of Biology* 444, 455-57, 468, 474). Rather, she prioritized the cumulative effect of human actions as inescapably impacting any given individual’s range of choices and capacities for future action; this is less a narrative of origins than of current processes. For Eliot, society is a living organism that evolves over time and constitutes human life as an “organic form” within itself.¹⁴ So in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot describes the social web of Maggie’s family and neighbors as cohering less through consciously-

held religious beliefs and more through “hereditary custom”; their environment is such as “science” shows to be a “unity,” since such science links “the smallest things with the greatest” in its “large vision of relations” and sees everything as embodying “a vast sum of conditions” (*Mill* 273). Eliot well conveys how the inhuman natural forces and pitiless social webs around the single person can seem overpowering. Such materially-bounded organicism connects with her view of perception as physically limited, as in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) when the narrator asks, “who can all at once describe a human being?” (91), or in *Middlemarch* when the narrator describes the fortunate physiological filtering system that preserves us from being psychologically overwhelmed by the growth of the grass and the beating heart of the squirrel and “that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (124).¹⁵ These limitations on human perception can facilitate or hinder communication and inevitably impact social evolution.

The second form of science with a bearing on ethics that Eliot specifies in her notebook entry, building on social evolution, is “psychological evolution.” At one level, this could simply refer to a type of sociology, tracking the psychological changes in society over time. But it could also refer to the emerging field of evolutionary psychology, which applies principles of evolution to understand the materiality of human mental and emotional experience as the product of biological adaptations over time. Eliot closely followed as this field sought to define itself against older accounts of psychological experience.¹⁶ Before she wrote *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot was reading work like Franz Joseph Gall’s foundational text on phrenology, *Anatomy and Physiology of the General Nervous System and of the Brain* (1810), and William Carpenter’s *Comparative Physiology* (1839), as she wrote in an October 16, 1855 letter to Sara Hennell (Cross 1: 279).¹⁷ She was also reading and corresponding with Spencer about his work *The*

Principles of Psychology (1855), an early attempt to bring a Lamarckian evolutionary model to bear on empirical psychology.

Spencer interpreted psychological concerns through a biological evolutionary model to extrapolate human nature, dismissing the deceptive, imprecise subjective methods of introspection. For example, he concludes his work by explaining how “freedom of the Will” is an “illusion” because, from the objective scientific view, it is simply “determined by those psychical connections which experience has generated” (*Principles of Psychology* 500). Some have argued that Eliot subscribed to such determinism,¹⁸ but a closer look shows there is greater distance between Eliot and these Spencerian assumptions.¹⁹ Scholarly disagreement about the extent to which Eliot supported or rejected Spencer’s arguments suggests that, while she was clearly familiar with his contribution to evolutionary psychology, she also was not his unthinking disciple.

Besides Spencer, another major figure in developing evolutionary psychology with whom Eliot closely interacted is, of course, G. H. Lewes. After publishing *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot followed Lewes through his years of writing *Problems of Life and Mind*, a series running to five volumes that likewise asserts the physiological basis of the mind but more ambiguously alternates between Lamarck and Darwin and places more emphasis than Spencer did on the social situatedness of mental life (Postlewaite 107; Rylance 223, 260, 262, 284, 299). Lewes’s last two volumes especially emphasize the physiological and social interconnectedness of mental experience and envision thought as a metaphorical “stream of Consciousness,” an image more frequently credited to William James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890) (Lewes 5: 366; James 1: 224, 239; Holland 37-38). Eliot defended Lewes against critics, and as she edited these final two volumes for publication after his death, she further exhaustively studied the psychologists that

Lewes was responding to, not just Spencer but also figures such as Grant Allen, Alexander Bain, Henry Sidgwick, James Sully, T. H. Huxley, and others.²⁰ Many of them read Eliot, too; James Sully praised her writing in two articles published by the psychological journal *Mind*, “Art and Psychology” (1876) and “George Eliot’s Art” (1881).²¹ These figures shaped the developing field of evolutionary psychology that would resurface with Neo-Darwinism in the later twentieth century (Rylance 80).

Given that Eliot shared an interest in evolutionary psychology with Lewes more closely than with Spencer, scholars often emphasize the continuity between their thought.²² As Eliot edited and revised Lewes’s last two volumes of *Problems of Life and Mind*, she sought to be true to his intentions, but she also signaled her own humanistic priorities.²³ De Saily suggests that Eliot’s manuscript edits indicate that her attention gravitated toward “aesthetics and metaphysics rather than biology” (145). However, she argues that her revisions also led Eliot to depart somewhat not only from Lewes but also from her own meliorist views of morality familiar in her fiction. The case is built on a passage in the fifth volume of *Problems of Life and Mind* that describes how evolution makes people more dependent on each other and hence more sympathetic by force of habit, but such sympathy can be exposed as only a subjective illusion masking a manipulative survival mechanism, enabling “more elaborate forms of egoism, and civilised man is still a beast of prey directing murderous artillery for the satisfaction of his more highly differentiated greed” (Lewes 5: 387; qtd. in De Saily 148-49). This passage, De Saily claims, shows a pessimistic turn in late Eliot that also emphasizes the “dark side” of Lewes’s work (147). I think the lack of corresponding pessimism in Eliot’s own published work, along with her effort to study Lewes’s sources to preserve his intellectual context and intentions in these volumes (Collins 463-65), suggest that this claim of a pessimistic turn is too strong. I want

to emphasize how Eliot retained a more wondering openness toward subjective ethical experience, and how in her refusal of total cynicism, she distinguishes herself as more than simply a follower of Lewes or Spencer or any other empirical psychologist. The distinctness of her perspective in this area has not been sufficiently acknowledged; I agree with Paxton that too often arguments prioritizing historical influence depict Eliot “as a passive vessel into which the ideas of Darwin, Spencer, Lewes, Comte, Bain, and others were poured” (4). To resist this passive model of historical scientization is one reason I look forward in time, placing Robinson as a modern interlocutor alongside Eliot. Robinson will help me emphasize how Eliot can be seen as challenging evolutionary psychology’s flattening of ethics. Specifically, she resists how the field rescripts self-reflective will and conscience as illusions, as self-flattering names compromised by reactionary religion that only mask the evolutionary, materially-determined, self-interested drive for survival.

Critiquing evolutionary psychology: ethics and polemics

Eliot’s religiously-inflected defense of ethical subjectivity—mind and conscience—is not acknowledged like her more familiar advocacy for the cultivation of sympathy. But they are related: she defends sympathy not as an illusion but as an authentic and ethically valuable subjective experience. Sympathy is one of the best-known elements uniting her aesthetic and ethical purposes, most clearly outlined in *Adam Bede* (159-62) and in her review “The Natural History of German Life” (110-11, 128).²⁴ One key link between Eliot’s understanding of sympathy and the experience of conscience is altruism—the channeling of sympathy into beneficial action for others, making, as she says at the end of *Middlemarch*, the world a little less sorrowful because we have lived in it, benefiting others through faithful and generous if

“unhistoric acts” (515).²⁵ Such altruistic placing of others’ needs before one’s own crucially manifests the subjective experience of conscience, the moral sense of obligation toward others. Altruism thus became and still remains a touchstone in the larger debate whether mind and will are realities or determined illusions. As various proponents of evolutionary theory, from Comte to Darwin to Spencer, wrestled to explain altruism, they increasingly narrated the experience of conscience as a subjective illusion.²⁶ For example, in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin argues that, as unique and anomalous as conscience seems to his theory, it is still a natural product of evolution; that a combination of “social instincts,” memory, a sense of “the public good,” and “habit” would gradually evolve the moral sense in any species because these instincts facilitate group survival; and that conscience is therefore nothing more than a modified form of self-interested utilitarianism, privileging the welfare of one’s own immediate group (72-73, 97-98, 390-91, 393-94). Darwin cites Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and associationist psychologist Alexander Bain’s *Mental and Moral Science* (1868) to support the claim that sympathy is based on recalling our own “pain or pleasure” (*Descent* 81), or, as Bain more specifically argues, on our “selfishness”—the desire of receiving a return of sympathy from others (*Descent* 82). Thus Darwin unmasks the experience of mind and conscience through his evolutionary model as determined by the ultimately self-interested instinct of survival.

Robinson references Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism as reinforcing Darwin’s attempt to explain the persistence of altruism through evolutionary theory’s mechanisms. Spencer further entrenched this paradox that still, Robinson points out, persists as “a classic problem in the tradition of Darwinist thinking” (*Absence* 44). Against the competitive struggle for survival as the chief motivation for action, the moral sense seems anomalous—how could a model of competition that depends on the elimination of the weak as unfit to survive yield conscience, a

sense of responsibility toward others that contradicts this mechanism of competition? For evolutionary psychology, any subjective account of sympathetic altruism as selfless would have to be explained as an illusion, subsumed to evolution's claim to a more objective account that would expose it as only the "more elaborate forms of egoism" that Lewes describes, a pack mentality or evolved sense of tribalism that is simply another version of self-interest ensuring the survival of the species (Lewes 5: 387). Like Darwin, Spencer narrates altruism as an illusion that in reality is nothing more than an evolved form of selfishness, and he also overtly aligns himself with both utilitarianism and competitive, laissez-faire political economy (Robinson, *Absence* 44; Rylance 221, 225). Robinson calls Spencer "an important earlier contributor to parascientific literature"; that is, he shaped the arguments that would become reified as unquestioned assumptions in popularized Neo-Darwinist evolutionary psychology (*Absence* 42). This influence has proven so strong that the *OED* provides a definition of altruism directly reflective of it: "Behaviour of an animal that benefits one or more others (typically of its own species), but which carries a cost for the individual concerned." This definition explicitly invokes the utilitarian logic of cost-benefit analysis, and the parenthetical interjection emphasizes the interpretation consistent with the evolutionary narrative that such behavior is in reality only another form of self-interest for one's own group survival.²⁷

Robinson shows how these nineteenth-century arguments still persist today: figures on variously conservative and liberal, humanist and religious and scientific sides still engage in polemic and reinforce the assumption of scientific discourses as the only authoritative, because ostensibly objective, accounts of human experience. Acknowledging the persistence and forms of these debates contextualizes Robinson's approach and the Victorian interlocutors whom she engages—Comte and Spencer, Darwin and Huxley. Rylance underscores how extensively

modern popular evolutionary psychology continues to invoke the aims, methods, and key arguments from these decades that saw Eliot's greatest literary productivity, 1850-1880:

A good deal of recent popular scientific writing displays a fascination with concerns that are recognizably convergent with those of the Victorians [...]. Indeed, some of this writing (for example, that of Richard Dawkins) shows the same polemical drives and crusading need to persuade that are familiar from the immediately post-Darwinian climate of debate. Often this writing deals with identical topics, such as the issue of teleological purposes, or the elimination of wonder by what is perceived as "scientific meddling," or—very popular presently—the understanding of consciousness. (80)

At least three key similarities emerge between Victorian debates and modern "popular scientific writing," especially evolutionary psychology. First, the goal: persuasion, or, in keeping with the image of "crusading," conversion, asking of the reader not detached objectivity, but enlistment on one side and rejection of the oppositional side. Second, the method: the use of polemic, consistent with the goal of persuasion, argument aimed to popularize and interpret, in terms readily available to the average reader, the cultural implications of scientific findings (Schwartz 134-35). Third, the content: the questions about whether mechanical descriptions of mental activity can sufficiently account for the subjective experience of consciousness, or whether biologically determined, evolutionary models of life discredit subjective accounts of human moral agency, or, most significantly for my analysis of Eliot and Robinson, whether such evolutionary and physiological claims about how the brain works erase the possibility of wonder toward these experiences.

Many of the Victorians' objections to physiological and evolutionary psychology elaborated these concerns, arguing not only that psychology could not adequately account for these elusive experiences of consciousness and will or moral agency, but also that its inadequate account resulted in a disenchanting, even dehumanized and demoralized, dismissal of these experiences (Nestor, "Science" 268). These were not unfounded accusations, at least in the charge of dehumanization, for the ideology of enlightened scientific objectivity was manifestly suspicious toward subjective, personal views.²⁸ As psychological methods shifted from introspection and first-person accounts to laboratory settings and physiological documentation of the nervous system, not just conscience and its manifestations in sympathy and altruism but also the mind became suspect, seen both as subject to illusion and as itself a subjective illusion, not to be trusted in its own account of itself. Nevertheless, consciousness and conscience are the key dimensions of human mental experience that Victorian evolutionary and experimental physiologists consistently found themselves incapable of sufficiently explaining (Rylance 57-58, 75, 178).²⁹ They inherited the problem from Enlightenment empirical philosophers such as Hume and Locke: how does material, sensory input not just heap up in an undifferentiated mass? How do signals in the nervous system and brain yield this *I* that seems to order them all? How does one leap from passive reception and mechanical stimulation to active, apparently intuitive, coherent thought experienced as utterly unique to oneself and as nevertheless entailing a sense of responsibility toward others?

In light of these persistent questions, some Victorian psychologists acknowledged the limitations of their approach, gesturing toward the continuing elusiveness of consciousness and conscience. For example, in *Problems of Life and Mind*, Lewes does call altruism the "ideal of human action" (4: 137), and he admits that the "moral and higher intellectual functions of man"

resist mechanical explanation (4: 143; cf. Newton, *Modernizing* 15-18). Lewes supplements the physiological narrative of biological inheritance with a sociological account of mind and conscience. But even with this social context, Lewes writes that science still has its limitations; with questions of ultimate causes and origins, the researcher inevitably comes up against an “eternal mystery” that remains ungrounded in any known cause (2: 7, 9). Similarly, Huxley admits in *Lessons in Elementary Physiology* (1866), “what consciousness is, we know not” (193). He analogizes consciousness as the magical legend of Aladdin’s genie, as an “ultimate fact of nature” that exceeds causal explanation, though with this analogy he implies literary narrative’s role in marveling at it. Further, in his essay “Science and Morals” (1886), reprinted in *Evolution and Ethics* (1895), he responds to a critic by asserting the standard claim of physiological psychology, that “material changes are the causes of psychical phenomena” (136); however, beyond such materialism’s focus on “matter and force,” he also admits that “there is a third thing in the universe, to wit, consciousness, which, in the hardness of my heart or head, I cannot see to be matter, or force, or any conceivable modification of either” (130).

Consciousness remains a subjective excess, a mystery. Such examples show how some key Victorian psychologists briefly admitted the limits of their approach, acknowledging that describing mechanical functions may not necessarily explain how humans continue to experience mind and conscience as irreducible to their historical and material circumstances.

The Neo-Darwinist popularizers of evolutionary psychology in our own time have not been so modest, Robinson argues. She points out that William James, who built on but also critiqued figures such as Lewes and Huxley, had set an excellent example of modesty in his *Principles of Psychology*, where he “proposed an open epistemology, using the kind of language available to psychology before the positivist purge, appealing to experience, to subjectivity”

(*Absence* 53; cf. Michael Davis 9). But instead of crediting these glimmers of language still open to subjectivity's excess, modern parascientific popularizers selectively read their Victorian psychological heritage. They make overly confident claims to expose conscience and altruism as illusions, dismiss the work of introspection as invalid and untrustworthy in its own account of itself, and elide the reality that consciousness remains far from conclusively explained. Robinson critiques these unexamined assumptions as she defends the wonder of human subjectivity. Though this defense recurs throughout her nonfiction essays, her most extended consideration appears in *Absence of Mind*. These essays engage a polemical tone, but her critique is not against the actual sciences that have since the nineteenth century developed more sophisticated methods of investigation. Rather she targets the evolutionary popularizers and psychological interpreters whom she sees as entrenched in oversimplified Victorian-era arguments, who tenaciously cling to key assumptions made in those polemical days when the discipline was still in formation, when psychologists often wrote with popularizing aims (*Absence* 36-39). She sees these modern parascientists as taking these assumptions even further than the Victorians did, not admitting limitations but simply reiterating their arguments as if conclusively proven, and with much less excuse in light of actual scientific developments that are, if anything, discovering ever greater complexity in the quantum-entangled fabric of the universe that yielded human psychological experience.

The modern parascientists Robinson critiques are figures such as Stephen Pinker, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Edward O Wilson. They invoke Victorians such as Darwin, Lewes, Huxley, and Spencer as apostles in an orthodoxy of unexamined assumptions, overlooking any acknowledgments of limitations and reifying as incontestable their early arguments in order to conduct an extended "polemic against the mind" (*Absence* 32, 74). For

example, Dawkins is known for his “selfish genes and selfish memes” theories, which are contradictory in his attempt to straddle Lamarckian cultural and Darwinian biological inheritance. Similarly, Wilson asserts that “Soft-core altruism ... is ultimately selfish” (qtd. in *Absence* 64-67, 55). Such claims studiously overlook the mind’s own account of itself as morally reflexive, as capable of ethical choice, as anomalous in its ability to conceptualize generosity and justice as alternatives to nature’s mandate of competitive self-interest (*Absence* 22). Such oversimplification assumes conscience’s work of altruism to have been conclusively exposed as masquerading evolutionary self-interest, while mind is assumed as identical to the mechanical structures of the brain, explicable once its evolved genetic inheritance can be objectively measured (*Absence* 111-13).³⁰ These claims that amount to dismissing the subjective account of mind and conscience as self-deceptive cannot answer the question why the language of altruism would even have come into existence: “why are these seductions necessary? Why are they lovely to us? Why would nature bother to distract us with them? Why do we stand apart from nature in such a way that the interests that really move us should be concealed from us?” (*Absence* 114). Here Robinson invokes an image of ethical subjectivity as standing apart from determined nature, an aloofness or excess that remains anomalous and unexplained but very real to personal experience. She argues that actual scientists—psychologists and cognitive- and neuro-scientists—are often much more modest in making interpretive claims about what their findings prove or disprove; their quest to objectively analyze function need not necessarily replace the subjective witness of introspective, ethical experience. Science offers one among multiple available accounts of the human, but its language should not be deployed as the sole authority to disprove other accounts of ethical subjectivity, as parascientific popularizers seem to think. For her, it is in literature and the arts and religion that “human nature, in its wholeness and

complexity, is restored—as an unsolved problem, but as a phenomenon endlessly offering a very burdened testimony” (*Absence* 132). Literature, especially in the realist form Eliot and Robinson privilege, is one discourse that values the introspection of the human mind, where readers encounter not a scientifically transparent, cynical exposure of others under the omniscient narrative gaze, but rather the excess, the mysterious wonder, of other minds.³¹ But such realist literary form is not the only means to revalue these subjective experiences; Robinson argues for religious language as another crucial discourse to revalue the experiences of mind and conscience. This is the discourse that I want to illuminate as an overlooked dimension of *The Mill on the Floss*.

Wonder at mind and conscience: re-centering the human in the religious

Defending the mystery of mind and conscience against reductive dehumanization was a familiar argument Victorians leveled against evolutionary psychology. Rylance surveys many of these arguments, ranging from philosophical idealism put forward by such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, J. C. Shairp, and T. H. Green, who was a major critic of Spencer and Lewes, to explicitly religious rhetoric from such as R. H. Hutton, James Martineau, St. George Mivart, and others who authored anonymous reviews of psychologists’ publications (63-65, 155-59, 230, 232-35, 239, 241-49). This survey of critiques contextualizes Robinson’s argument and supports her claim that the questions raised then still persist today, specifically those about the elusiveness of consciousness and conscience (Rylance 2, 75, 79-80). However, much of the religious rhetoric was also often aligned with reactionary, conservative views upholding a providentially-determined, hierarchical status quo (Rylance 159). This alignment has discredited religious arguments against evolutionary psychology, facilitating their erasure or consolidation into a

religious strawman that has not changed much since the nineteenth century and that can easily be dismissed by modern popularizers—as author of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins may be the most recognizable in this role. However, Robinson posits that the deeper questions about mind and conscience that still have not been answered are worth returning to through humanistic and especially religious language. She pries this language apart from the problematic politics with which it was associated and suggests that it can be turned to challenge such problematic politics, including any “collective pathology” that would deny these subjective experiences in human beings of another race or gender or sexual orientation as a pretext for oppression (*Absence* 81, 94).³² She critiques conservative religious short-sightedness in aggravating the perceived opposition between religion and science and in falling short of religion’s radical potential to insist on all human life as intrinsically, irreducibly worthy of wonder and reverence.

Thus, to some extent Robinson can be read as inheriting and working within this polemical tradition that invokes religious language against evolutionary psychology, but she also does more than simply reiterate the arguments and assumptions of reactionary Victorian (or modern) religious rhetoric. Robinson’s argument is more sophisticated and worth considering on its own terms. What sets her apart from this reactionary rhetoric is what makes her most akin to Eliot—her own deliberate historicizing and humanizing of religion. She steps back from it to highlight not an exclusionary set of dogmas and practices, but a historically-specific metaphysics whose discourse profoundly values the experiences of mind and conscience. For her, the fact that religion has historically been aligned with conservative politics and anti-intellectualism is a tragedy to be deplored. Christianity loses faith, hope, and, most damningly, charity when it forgets or, even worse, represses the humanistic ethics at its core—the story that God, divine multiplicity, inexplicable generosity, becomes physiologically embodied in Christ, a type of all

humans as physical, thinking, morally-responsible, ensouled beings. The value of this narrative comes from its prioritizing of soul and conscience as divine experiences—its acknowledgment that there is a universal excess, a miracle, a wonder in the subjective experience that constitutes a human being as intimately as does its mechanical physiology, rendering it irreducible to this physiology: “there is the odd privilege of existence as a coherent self, the ability to speak the word ‘I’ and mean by it a richly individual history of experience, perception, and thought”; this experience theology describes as *soul* (*Absence* 110). She distinguishes what she wants to highlight as valuable about this language from the anti-intellectualist, anti-evolutionist jargon used by mainstream Christianity (*Absence* 62, 110, 133). She unsparingly critiques how religion has been politicized and weaponized and enlisted in anti-scientific obfuscation. Such cultural deformations can exist only by rejecting the altruistic action she sees as enjoined by this deepest truth of the excess of ethical subjectivity in all human beings—defending the powerless, welcoming the stranger, loving the other person as the divine image of God—the evolution, through interpersonal relationships, of all the beauties of mind and conscience that make human beings who they are. This human dimension, this space of interpersonal ethics, Robinson sees as most valuable in Christianity as it should be, and it is this centrality of the human that she shares with Eliot’s view of religion.

Robinson’s turning of the human center of this religious tradition against its abuses echoes Eliot’s own critique of Evangelical Christianity.³³ Eliot not only rejects oppressive Victorian moralism and organized religion, but does so because, in keeping with her support of Feuerbach, she seeks to re-center the human essence of religion that had been lost in such systematization. For example, in her review “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming” (1855), Eliot excoriates Cumming as a representative Evangelical minister who undervalues other minds,

forestalling listeners' thinking for themselves by providing them with "a foregone conclusion" for every situation (45). He thus perpetuates a division "between intellect and morality," which Eliot calls a "pernicious fallacy"; her rejoinder to this false binary argues that mind and conscience are united in ethical experience: "morality, which is specifically human, is dependent on the regulation of feeling by intellect" (44). Eliot's gesture to morality as an experience "specifically human" recurs in her critique of the limitations of evolutionary psychology, which I will return to below. Cumming also undervalues not only the mind but conscience itself when he argues that any good action is illusory unless done explicitly for the "glory of God" (64). For Eliot, such a claim deploys religion as an exclusionary and reductive weapon against the human conscience. In contrast, true religion gives space for every altruistic manifestation of these "holy dispositions" offered to other human beings (59). As in Feuerbach, God is not some abstract taskmaster tallying up the glory for himself, but an "idea" that encompasses all the sympathy and generosity toward others that constitute human ethics (66). Fortunately, Eliot concludes, this "human nature is stronger and wider than religious systems" (65). She returns to this same critique and re-centering of the human essence of religion in another review, "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young" (1857). Here she criticizes the prevalent assumption that the religious promise of reward or threat of punishment in an immortal world is the only motivation for right action, and that without this extra-worldly coercion all morality would be destroyed (201). This was a common theme in many of the reactive polemics against evolutionary psychology, the claim that replacing an immaterial with a material conception of mind and conscience would overthrow any motivation for moral action. Not so, Eliot argues: human beings have an inherently "sympathetic nature" that receives "extension and intensification" through altruistic action, which she believed would continue as long as humans

exist, through “an active participation in the joys and sorrows of our fellow-men” (203). She asserts the same in another notebook entry immediately following that already quoted about social and psychological evolution contributing to the “mixed science” of ethics. Here she describes how human beings continue to extend “right action” toward those who are weakest among them, the sick and dying, motivated not by utilitarian ideology nor by selfish interests in their own improvement nor by the stereotypical religious promise of heavenly rewards, but by purely inherent “sympathetic impulses” (Pinney 364). If anything, the thought not of human beings’ immortality but of their mortality—their materiality and finitude—can motivate the “interaction of human souls” in a process of ethical “evolution” toward ever greater expansions of sympathetic generosity (“Worldliness” 203). Mortality only highlights the unique present experience of the soul. Eliot places human beings, who for her are materially and socially embedded but also rife with “holy” ethical capacities, at the center of her conception of what remains beneficial in religion.

Eliot’s revaluing of the human in religion implicitly frames her other critiques of scientific reductiveness in accounts of human subjectivity. Perhaps one of the better-known examples comes from her response to Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in her letter to Bodichon cited above; after praising his work as making “an epoch,” she offers this pointed reservation: “But to me the Development Theory, and all other explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes” (Cross 2: 108).³⁴ Even as she sees evolutionary theory and its implications for psychology as an advancement in the scientific pursuit of “brave clearness and honesty” (Cross 2: 108), she still acknowledges a mystery in human life that exceeds the reach of evolutionary, physiological narratives. To return to Eliot’s notebook, a few pages after the entry that considers

ethics in light of social and psychological evolution, she wrote another note that she titled “Science subordinate as experience.” Addressing an unseen interlocutor, this paragraph begins mid-argument: “As if the rod & cone structure of the retina were more important to my action than the fact of my using my eyes to see with! As if the question whether personal identity can be proved were more weighty than my experience that what my past self felt & did is affecting my present self!” (Pinney 370). Physiological explanations of mental experience—here, the mechanics of how an eye sends neurological signals to the brain—offer one kind of knowledge, which may be not just interesting but also useful for practical care. However, they cannot “prove” the nuances of “personal identity,” which she here describes as the self’s own account of its experience in time, the self-reflective *I* emphatically invoked in the doubled pronoun “my using my eyes.” Implicitly raised with the question of importance is how this personal account emerges as most significant, or “weighty,” for ethical “action”—the capacity to evaluate her past actions as they affect her present sense of identity.

Eliot makes this argument at greater length in a Dec. 10, 1874 letter to her friend Mary Elizabeth Ponsonby.³⁵ Ponsonby had lost her faith in the religious dogmas of the immortality of the soul and of God as an all-powerful entity external to human beings. She had also concluded that this loss of faith therefore devastated the possibility of ethical relationships, or as Eliot summarizes, “fellowship” between people, “pity [for] your suffering fellow-men.” Eliot remonstrates with Ponsonby’s cynical conclusion by underscoring that such a loss of faith need not result in a dehumanized void, but rather can be replaced by the Feuerbachian religion that Eliot taught in her novels, that “the idea of God” is simply “an exaltation of the human” (Cross 3: 176-77). Crucially, Eliot recommends subjective introspection as a reliable witness to the continued validity of ethical experience:

on a closer examination of your feelings, should you find that you had lost all sense of quality in actions, all possibility of admiration that yearns to imitate, all keen sense of what is cruel and injurious, all belief that your conduct (and therefore the conduct of others) can have any difference of effect on the well-being of those immediately about you (and therefore on those afar off), whether you carelessly follow your selfish moods, or encourage that vision of others' needs which is the source of justice, tenderness, sympathy in the fullest sense—I cannot believe that your strong intellect will continue to see, in the conditions of man's appearance on this planet, a destructive relation to your sympathy. (Cross 3: 177)

What stands out first is Eliot's emphasis on the methodology for answering this ethical question: a "closer examination" of one's own feelings. Others reading this letter have placed more emphasis on what she also goes on to say about continuing choice in quotidian choices such as taking a bath, seeing in this an invocation of the force of habit as the origin of ethics (George Levine, "Determinism" 274, 278-79 and "Intelligence as Deception" 405-6). This emphasis is much easier to align with that passage from *Problems of Life and Mind* describing the role of the "habitual outrush of the emotional force in sympathetic channels" that accumulates as a mask for the "more elaborate forms of egoism" inevitably motivating even "civilised man" (5: 387). Eliot does refer to habit as influencing moral development in *The Mill on the Floss*, which I will return to below, but here I see her invocation of the capacity for choice in such mundane action as analogical, not causal; she is saying that just as fears of "hideous fatalism" need not paralyze daily actions that support physical life, they also need not paralyze ethical actions that support spiritual life (Cross 3: 177). The methodology of perceiving the reality of ethics here is not

simply habit, but subjective introspection. The double negatives add a layer of complication, but of the different affects or qualities of feeling that add ethical depth to action, she enumerates wonder, or “admiration,” as the first—a reverence that recognizes what is worthy of emulation in others nearby and “afar off”; such feelings and their effects exceed finite expectations, extending far and unanticipated. She then affirms these feelings, or conscience, the internal ethical sense of what is just or unjust, altruistic or selfish, as a legitimate and specifically human experience, one that can resist cynicism with sympathy and positively affect others sharing the earth.

Eliot ends her letter by more explicitly addressing Ponsonby’s concern that mechanist models of the human, such as were central in evolutionary psychology, discount ethical experience as illusory and expose life as utterly determined by “hideous fatalism” (Cross 3: 177). In response, Eliot writes that such objective, physiological accounts cannot sufficiently account for the richness of subjective ethical experience:

the consideration of molecular physics is not the direct ground of human love and moral action [...] One might as well hope to dissect one’s own body and be merry in doing it, as take molecular physics (in which you must banish from your field of view what is specifically human) to be your dominant guide, your determiner of motives, in what is solely human. [...] pain and relief, love and sorrow, have their peculiar history, which make an experience and knowledge over and above the swing of atoms. (Cross 3: 178)

As in her review “Evangelical Teaching,” Eliot here again affirms that “love and moral action” constitute what is “specifically human,” and she affirms this ethical experience as a powerful, credible force in the world—a more reliable “guide” than physiological descriptions of the body’s mechanisms—by again invoking the mind’s self-reflexive capacity for introspection, for

its own unique perspective and “knowledge.” This method of focusing attention on the inner life resonates with her novelistic realism, the usual context in which scholars have discussed it.³⁶

Pointing to Eliot’s humanist investments is not unique; others have noted how she pushes back against absolute materialist determinism.³⁷ The most convincing piece of evidence cited in such discussions is Eliot’s notebook entry on “Moral Freedom,” where she argues for prioritizing the conscious will as subjectively felt in practice over the determined universe propounded by scientific theory (Pinney 365). But analyses of this passage often contextualize her perspective on free will and agential action by drawing on comparisons with philosophical ideas or figures such as Kant, not explicitly on the religiously-inflected language of a divine mind or soul and conscience. My analysis of *The Mill on the Floss* accords with the end goal of these philosophical analyses of Eliot, to show how her humanism kept her from total reductive materialism, but I wish to highlight an additional language Eliot uses as part of this humanism, to more specifically explore how her claim for the priority of subjective will over objective determinism emerges through religious language of the self-reflective soul and conscience, and to further highlight the affect opened up in that language, which Robinson also offers—the response of wonder, respect, and reverence. Such an affective response to the experiences of self-reflective mind and how it manifests in moral will or conscience emerges as a crucial dimension of ethical being in a world with others.

The Mill on the Floss: the wonder of standing apart from oneself

The Mill on the Floss asks that question central to religion and philosophy and the arts and sciences alike: “What does it mean to be human?” (Birch, Introduction to *Mill* xvii).

However, most scholarship has focused on how scientific discourses shape the text’s exploration

of this question, including the pressures of physiologically deterministic accounts of life. *Mill* was published in 1860 just after Spencer's *The Principles of Psychology* (1855) and Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) and just before Lewes's *The Physiology of Common Life* (1862). One strand of readings places the novel in dialogue with natural history and evolutionary theories of natural disaster and selection.³⁸ For example, the flood that ends the novel drastically prioritizes nature's overpowering forces, a culmination foreshadowed by how Maggie is "conditioned" through the culture of a family whose livelihood depends on the river (Olivier 42). In more overtly evolutionary language, Eliot's imagery extensively invokes animals, grounding characters' hereditary relation to a long biological history. Throughout the novel, people are likened to dogs and cats or young, amphibious, small, hole-boring, quiet, "intelligent dumb," woolly, "lovely wild," or parasitic animals; Maggie is repeatedly described as a "Skye terrier" and is also likened to a duck and a Shetland pony. Eliot also evokes the language of animal breeding, which can be seen as attempting to deliberately manipulate evolution (Jonathan Smith, "Charles Darwin" 19). Furthermore, Maggie's father and brother, constantly competing with their neighbors and the lawyer Wakem, eventually experience defeat in bankruptcy and humiliation, suggesting that the "Tullivers are not a 'favoured race'" (Birch, Introduction to *Mill* xvii-xxi); no more than Maggie are they fit to compete and survive the onslaught of competitive natural and social forces beating them down. Nestor contrasts two ethical codes embodied by Tom and Maggie, which she calls "endogamous and exogamous"—solipsistic exclusion and outward-looking hybridity—and shows how the novel describes, in accordance with Darwinian evolution, the latter as imperative for survival ("Ethical Evolution" 100-1, 103). Not all studies of science in this novel address ethical questions to the extent that Nestor does, but they usefully show the extent of Eliot's interest in scientific developments, that she was not interested in

reactionary polemic against science, but in imaginatively working through its implications for human life.

The ethical implications more acutely emerge, I suggest, through the questions about subjectivity raised by psychology. Some have tried to address these concerns by psychologizing and pathologizing the novel's characters, especially Maggie's internal struggles and frustrations.³⁹ While these psychological readings offer interesting perspectives on characterization, they are not the chief point of contrast to my approach. Rather, I am speaking to the historical approaches that show how Eliot's interests in psychology impacted the form and content of her novel. For example, Postlewaite analyzes how *Mill* uses scientific methods to ask psychological questions and conduct its own experimental approach; she analogizes the genre of autobiography, which *Mill* is often seen as participating in, as a type of natural history, "a geological expedition into the interior of the human psyche which stakes out new territory for empiricism" (113). Michael Davis likewise examines Maggie's interiority, but he focuses more on the evolutionary question of psychological adaptation, showing how in *Mill* and in *Daniel Deronda* Eliot examines how one's subjective history, psychological experiences, memories, and heredity all contribute to the work of adapting to present circumstances (50).

These contingencies shaping mental experience are what Philip Davis further explores, tracing how Maggie and the novel itself inhabit a liminal space of latent, emerging thought that represents the human psychological condition as well as Eliot's own space of creative expression (*Transferred* 260). In working through this threshold of consciousness, Eliot sought "to extend the range of the human," both socially and internally, according a pre-Freudian attentiveness to "the subliminal and the hidden subconscious" (*Transferred* 267). This power of the subconscious mind as physiologically and hereditarily determined emerges especially in the scenes of

Maggie's temptation. In keeping with her lifelong suppression under the male authority of her father and brother and with a long family heritage of women lacking access to the diversifying survival advantages of education, she gives in to Stephen "without any act of her own will"; her psychological interaction with the world becomes an "enchanted haze" where "thought did not belong" (*Mill* 464). I appreciate the insights an emphasis on Eliot's interest in psychology brings to such passages, not least because these scholars do seek to avoid reductive readings. Philip Davis especially demonstrates how Eliot inhabits both sides at once, showing mind as inseparable from embodied physicality even as she dramatizes "the mind as a separate, discrete entity which deserves analysis in its own right" (*Transferred* 5-6). Though these excellent readings of the novel's interest in evolutionary psychology have acknowledged its humanist dimension, its more specific use of religious language to affirm the wonder of ethical subjectivity has not received the scholarly emphasis I see the novel itself according to it.

This religious language and the response of wonder it invites emerges most strongly at the literal center of *Mill* in book 4 chapter 3, where Maggie discovers the divine Thomas à Kempis and receives his text *The Imitation of Christ* as a new course of ethical conduct for her life. I first want to acknowledge the many usefully suspicious interpretations of this scene and its relation to the rest of the novel. This scene is often either overlooked or briefly acknowledged as secondary, as describing a mere phase that Maggie soon outgrows or fails.⁴⁰ It has also often been diagnosed as symptomatic of ideological repression. Read as nothing more than a dogmatic lesson in renunciation, it can easily be critiqued as problematic, as a defense of religious quietism that upholds an oppressive status quo. Critics have been slow to acknowledge any good that might attend the work of renunciation, any possibility that the novel might see some moral benefit in "Maggie's martyrdom" (Yeoh 18). For example, Dinah Birch emphasizes moments of

textual hesitancy toward renunciation by connecting the music imagery describing Maggie's response to Kempis to that describing Stephen's tempting influence over Maggie (Introduction to *Mill* xv).⁴¹ George Levine characterizes Maggie's turn to renunciation in terms of insanity and regression, as indulging "in a frenzy of self-denial" that backfires when, inevitably in accordance with evolution's determining forces, her "passions returned upon her 'like a savage appetite'" ("Hypothesis" 2; cf. *Mill* 329); altruistic renunciation seems a mere illusion in the face of heredity's self-interested, competitive, savage history. Renunciation is also heavily gendered in the novel, as feminist criticism has pointed out (Fraiman 137-38); it can be blamed for inducing Maggie into behavior that upholds the patriarchal status quo represented by her father, her brother Tom, and her lovers; she represses her desire for love, rejecting both Philip and Stephen; then her rejection is in turn rejected by a society that thinks she should have married Stephen to cover her sexual indiscretion.

Kempis's preaching of renunciation can easily be read as a convenient tool to police women's bodies, an indictment that Philip levels when, ironically enough, he tries to persuade Maggie to renounce her renunciation and satisfy his desires, blaming her choice as a "stupefaction" that is "unnatural" (*Mill* 328-29). Elizabeth Ermarth usefully shows how Maggie internalizes "sexist," "crippling norms," joining Philip in lamenting her "long suicide" ("Maggie" 587; *Mill* 329). These readings usefully interpret the novel's depiction of renunciation as a repressive ideology that facilitates the tutoring of docile subjects. John Hagan summarizes how this argument forms one side of two opposed trends in reading this novel. One side sees the novel as "a tragedy of repression and regression," where Maggie is unhappily restricted from following her legitimate and healthy desires. The other, citing Eliot's endorsement of Maggie's earnestness in trying to renounce her self-interest, sees it as a legitimate defense of the moral

struggle against “egoism,” a frequent theme in others of Eliot’s novels as well, a standard creed in her “moral norms” (53, 55, 56). To me, the first seems more liable to projecting on the novel modern, post-psychoanalytic models of what counts as liberated and healthy desires, while the latter seems closer to Eliot’s own prioritization of sympathy-based, interpersonal ethics. Hagan argues that the novel itself does not sustain this “polarization,” and that the whole debate distracts from the real point of the novel—the relationship between Maggie and Tom (57). While their relationship is undoubtedly crucial to the plot, I think there is room to revisit how we interpret this scene where Maggie encounters the moral question of renunciation, whose articulation at the formal center of the text and recurrent invocation throughout suggests its importance in the novel’s larger contribution to ethical thinking.

The novel prepares for this crucial reading scene by indicating that even when she is very young, Maggie is drawn to books: some serve as a source of escapism or as a screen for imaginary projections; others offer the potential power of education. Maggie has a reciprocal, living relation with these books: they “absorb” her even as she “refashions” them, and they “give us insight into her characterization, develop themes, and foreshadow the plot” (Golden 80). Maggie lives, the narrator says, “in the triple world of Reality, Books, and Waking Dreams” (*Mill* 276). The boundaries between what she reads, what she creates in her own mind, and how she perceives and interacts with her social and material environment, are significantly fluid. This mode of reading sets the stage for her holistically experiential discovery of *The Imitation of Christ*, the text that occupies more of the novel’s space than the other books mentioned and that has by far the most dramatic and lasting impact on her.

One way of reading this section is to nuance the religious content of Kempis’s message: he defends not simply renunciation, but the human *capacity* for renunciation, regardless of the

outcome. Whether Maggie actually succeeds or fails at renouncing her own desires is a separate issue from her desiring to renounce them. The dramatic relevance of this message depends on first understanding her desire for knowledge about her social and material circumstances. Before Maggie reads this text, the narrator describes how she had begun to chafe under the exterior limitations that also restricted her interior creative life, to feel that only so much could come of the facility with which she could slip between her interiority and her narrowly-constricted experience. She turns to desiring concrete, objective reasons for her existence: “She could make dream-worlds of her own, but no dream-world would satisfy her now. She wanted some explanation of this hard, real life” (286). This last phrase uses words familiar from the ethos and aim of the scientific quest, the drive to offer a concrete “explanation” of life by stepping beyond the limited and questionable space of porous subjective introspection into the impersonal reality of hard-edged objective facts and reasons. But this scientific approach never becomes Maggie’s conscious pursuit, nor will it offer the means by which she finds resolution.

The narrator cues a comparison of the relative affordances to be gained from imaginative introspection or from the pursuit of scientific objectivity by suggesting that Maggie is limited in the latter direction: she is “unhappily quite without that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her, which, governing the habits, becomes morality, and developing the feelings of submission and dependence, becomes religion” (288). Here Eliot directly reflects one of the common arguments, already briefly invoked by some interpretations of her letter to Ponsonby cited above, that psychologists put forward to explain the human will or moral agency as neurological impulses shaped through the acculturated force of habit, “a ‘developed reflex,’ a process achieved through restraint, education and directed attention” (Nestor, “Science” 268; cf. Judge 158-60). Kristie M. Allen examines *Mill* through such psychological conceptions of habit,

claiming Eliot's unqualified belief in this physical genealogy of the emotion of moral sympathy: "George Eliot believed from her knowledge of contemporary studies by physiological psychologists, [that] emotional connections are based on associations in the brain" (831; cf. 834). However, Eliot had a more complicated view of psychology than strict associationism, and the gesture to habit the narrator invokes here is not put forward as the final answer or chief source of moral development and identity, which if only Maggie could understand all would be well. Instead, the narrator's specification that Maggie's perspective is precisely unaware of any supplementing scientific knowledge or detached awareness of the force of habit invites us to pay attention to her own subjective perspective about her experience of moral growth. Like any other human being, she cannot willfully step outside of her subjective point of view, and she lacks the capacity to even imagine stepping away from it, to attempt to assume an impersonal, objectified, scientific view of life as a series of inevitable forces shaping her habits and by extension her will. She is no psychologist, and she is no omniscient narrator, either. It is not this depersonalized psychological view of habit, but Maggie's subjective perspective of her own identity and ethical development, that is the mystery Eliot finds worth further exploration.

Partly because of her intense interiority and lack of personal detachment, Maggie feels, before her epiphany reading Kempis, somewhat isolated from others on a personal level. She does not realize that her asking such questions, her feeling such a disjunction between her internal life and exterior circumstances, is part of what makes human beings human. She does not know that others also have wondered and sought, so she feels devastatingly "lonely in her trouble" (288). For even as she desires the understanding of "this hard, real life" (286) that could ostensibly be provided by objective, factual explanations, she is nearly overwhelmed by a longing for transcendence of those facts, by a "wide hopeless yearning for that something,

whatever it was, that was greatest and best on this earth” (288). She wants a transcendence that at once materially and ethically situates her. Those last three words indicate that hers is not necessarily a dogmatic religious desire for a reward beyond this earth or after this life; she simply has a sense that there is some deeper ethical dimension potential to her even as she remains an embodied creature “on this earth,” even as she finds herself embedded in material circumstances as the hereditary product of a long evolution (287). Though the novel’s concluding flood can be seen as the ultimate unsparingly objective fact of nature that obliterates such human longing as naïve and illusory, Maggie finds another answer by discerning what evolutionary psychology saw as one of the most anomalous facts of embodied nature and what Kempis gives her language to understand—the self-denial or altruism possible to the human self-reflective conscience, the possibility of acting otherwise than nature’s conditioning, and of attuning to shared ethical longing in others instead of objectifying and competing against them.

This message of renunciation, as Maggie reads it, encompasses multiple facets that can too easily be overlooked or collapsed into each other, especially in readings that revert to evolutionary psychology’s chief assumption, that altruistic renunciation of self for others is an illusion masking self-interest. The primary assumption Kempis challenges is the benefit of competitive self-interest, which psychologically asserts one’s “own will and pleasure” and socially seeks material wealth; such pursuits Kempis describes as ephemeral (289-90). He also challenges the assumptions that the suffering endemic to a natural world can be escaped by such self-interested pursuits, or that one is somehow uniquely condemned to suffer while others escape it (289). His acknowledging the universality of suffering does not lead in the typical doctrinal direction Eliot critiqued in her “Worldliness and Other-Worldliness” review—the invocation of an easier life and reward in heaven. Rather it references heaven not as another

appeal to self-interest promising great rewards or endless punishments, but as a grounding or standard against which to measure one's becoming, one's evolutionary development from walking through the "journey" of "all earthly things" (290). And finally, after delivering a list evocative of 1 Corinthians 13 of all the good deeds that are vain if done from the stance of self-interest, Kempis's passages end with a vivid image of internal multiplicity to dramatize the renunciation of the will. Speaking of the self, "if he should be of great virtue, and very fervent devotion, yet is there much wanting; to wit, one thing, which is most necessary for him. What is that? That having left all, he leave himself, and go wholly out of himself, and retain nothing of self-love" (290). Implicit in such movement is self-reflexive multiplicity: the self who can evaluate and choose otherwise than self-interest, and the self who would coopt or silence such evaluation and affirm self-interest. The narrator adds a further layer to these different facets of renunciation, a layer that the narrator says is not immediately apparent to Maggie but implies that she will learn through much turmoil by the end of the novel: "that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow borne willingly" (291). Against evolutionary psychology's narratives about the priority of self-interest, the narrator emphasizes that renunciation is not just another strategy, disguised as morally motivated, for satisfying a self-interested desire for happiness; it literally means choosing to renounce the priority of the self, even of that self-interest that would take the shape of desiring a sacrificial sainthood.⁴² Given the different facets of renunciation that can be gleaned from this scene of Maggie's reading, Kempis's message and Maggie's response are both more complicated than any inverted self-aggrandizement; the nuances of its message are often lost in criticism that reads this scene simply as a dogmatic religious lesson in renunciation.

A careful reading of this scene where Maggie reads Kempis reveals another available perspective beyond the perceived binary between the unhealthy repression of good desires and

the commendable repression of problematic egoism. It can even potentially check repressive ideologies of renunciation. This perspective is a more precise understanding of *will*. What is so strange about this scene is that, even as Kempis advocates renunciation of the will, such renunciation is simultaneously conceived as a distinctive action or choice uniquely capable of being performed by the will. What is renounced, therefore, is not will per se, but will reductively conceived exclusively as “self-love” (290), the assumption that will is identical to the action of prioritizing one’s own benefit over that of others. When critics invoked, and some evolutionary psychologists admitted, the difficulties of trying to physiologically explain the will, they meant something larger than self-interest, which for psychologists already enjoyed the status of a naturally-determined given. In contrast, it was will as moral agency or conscience that resisted explanation. This is the conception of will that Kempis’s passage emphatically defends, valuing it as the ethical condition for all other goodness.

It is not the injunction to renounce self-interested will alone that so encourages Maggie, much less her self-interest in some future happiness or glory of sainthood as a reward for such renunciation. Rather, it is her recognition of her *capacity* to renounce, the reality of her ethical subjectivity. The point is not whether she actually succeeds, but the fact that she can try.⁴³ As Maggie ponders in free indirect discourse, “here was a sublime height to be reached without the help of outward things—here was insight, and strength, and conquest, to be won by means entirely within her own soul, where a supreme Teacher was waiting to be heard” (290). The wording of this sentence yields a profound ambiguity, for it seems that the “supreme Teacher” could be Kempis, or Christ; but in keeping with the book’s being *The Imitation of Christ*, this agent of wisdom could also be seen as uniquely interior to herself, “within her own soul,” which makes her, like Christ, an embodied divinity, in the image of God, a multiplicity in one. Around

the middle of the nineteenth century, that word *soul* came to be used less in psychology, replaced by *mind* (Rylance 24), but these terms describe precisely the phenomenon of moral consciousness that the empirical psychology of Eliot's day was having such difficulty explaining.

In this passage, then, Maggie recognizes described in this term *soul* a phenomenon that she suddenly reflects on: experiencing herself as multiply self-reflective and free. There is more here than the typical body-mind dualism targeted in critiques of the Enlightenment subject, more than the faculty psychology that hierarchizes reason over the lower passions of the body. It is a multiplicity of identity within her mind itself, recognizing which fills her with wonder. From Maggie's subjective perspective, there seems to be something "within" her, standing alongside her yet also inseparable from her identity, that gives her the capacity to act otherwise than the pressures of "outward things" would seem to determine. She recognizes that natural and cultural circumstances inevitably exert force, but that they do not exclusively define her. She exceeds them. This something more, this subjective multiplicity within her, inspires an intense affective response of wonder, signaled by that key word "sublime"—this is clearly not the natural sublime but rather the Kantian moral sublime.

Perhaps this moment of wonder has not received attention because it is easy to simply focus on the injunction to renunciation that weaves itself into Maggie's thoughts, as she also recognizes that her past suffering has come from unreal expectations fixated on "her own pleasure, as if that were the central necessity of the universe," and she resolves to change (290). Perhaps the wonder of experiencing the soul has also been minimized because of the long history of comments that sentimentalize Maggie's response as typical of religious enthusiasm, primarily representing an early- to mid-twentieth-century secularized approach skeptical of religious

language. For example, Leslie Stephen writes, “The whole theme of the book is surely the contrast between the ‘beautiful soul’ and the commonplace surroundings. It is the awakening of the spiritual and imaginative nature and the need of finding some room for the play of the higher faculties, whether in the direction of religious mysticism or of human affection” (*George Eliot* 102). This interpretation can become heavily gendered and misogynistic, inasmuch as he claims that Maggie’s mystical nature offsets her womanly “error,” which can be excused as “natural” (102). F. R. Leavis perpetuates this tone when he cites Stephen in *The Great Tradition* and further adds that Maggie’s “soulful side” should not be accepted straight, as it does not justify its “relevance” to the story or prevent her “weakness” in falling for Stephen’s temptations. She is blindly “addicted to Thomas Kempis,” and though she “has an exalted spiritual nature” (41), this does not keep her from missing how far Stephen’s character is antipathetic to this nature (44). Moving from novel to author, Leavis claims that Eliot herself was blinded by her own “satisfaction [...] from imaginative participation in exalted enthusiasms and self-devotions,” mental and spiritual activities that Leavis stereotypically characterizes as lacking any analytic power (45). Such sentimentalizing and dismissal, though not carried to such extremes in more recent scholarship, can make any earnest revisiting of this passage difficult. George Levine entirely overlooks the Kempis scene in his reading of Maggie’s progress toward Feuerbachian religion (“Intelligence as Deception” 407-9), as does John H. Mazaheri in emphasizing the religious allegorical significance of the novel’s ending (104); while Saswati Halder’s equally Feuerbachian reading joins with Bernard J. Paris’s in seeing this scene only as a historical example of how the long past of Christianity can invigorate the present though its outward forms may change (Halder 14).⁴⁴ Such readings miss how this scene’s wonder attends the specific experience of the soul’s moral freedom.

What so thrills Maggie is not a vaguely “soulful” religious mysticism from a long past, or an unthinking and pathological addiction to Kempis, or simply the content of his injunction to renounce her self-interested desires. Rather, she is thrilled by the recognition of her soul or will as capable of doing such a thing as renouncing them, as not letting herself remain in a reactive, determined relation to them: “for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires—of taking her stand out of herself, and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely-guided whole” (290). This capacity of standing outside of oneself, finding already within oneself the distance to self-evaluate and listen to the “invisible Teacher” or soul that echoes within her, is part of the meaning potential in this gesture to divinity (290). The feeling of insignificance signals not a literal lack of worth but that dimension of awe at feeling oneself constituted by an experience that far exceeds bounded methods of explanation or rationalized comprehension. To take a stand outside of oneself partly fits the work of renunciation—stepping away from the self-interested will, decentering its imperative drive to compete against others. But it more profoundly fits the work of will as conscience, the internal tribunal that Kant famously described as “the moral law within me” that inspired him with wonder akin to that of looking at the starry sky, of which he said that we can only “comprehend its *incomprehensibility*” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5: 161/PP 269; *Groundwork* 4: 463/PP 108). This is the center of Robinson’s argument, that regardless of parascientific debunking of illusions, the experiential reality is that “we do indeed continuously stand apart from ourselves, appraising. Every higher act of the mind, intellectual, aesthetic, or moral, is, paradoxically, also an exercise in self-doubt, self-scrutiny” (*Absence* 115-16). The self feels itself accompanied by another moral “self that stands apart from itself, that questions, reconsiders, appraises,” in religious language called “conscience” (*Absence* 118). This

experience seems, from the subjective perspective, precisely in excess of, and even opposed to, the narratives of masked self-interest privileged in evolutionary psychology.

This distinction between the renunciation of self-interest and the capacity to ethically appraise oneself and choose renunciation is what Philip and Stephen miss when they spend so much time trying to persuade Maggie out of her renunciation for the satisfaction of their own patriarchal desires. Since they focus exclusively on the first, she responds mostly in kind. Not just Philip, but Stephen also blames her for being “unnatural” in repressing will as self-interest, arguing that following her (or his) desires should be inevitable (329, 448-49, 465). Stephen’s arguments show less nuance than Philip’s as he repeatedly asserts versions of the claim for prioritizing this self-interested will: “natural law surmounts every other; we can’t help what it clashes with” (475). Philip at least tries to put more emphasis on how her course of renunciation is negatively affecting her as well as him; he wants her to grow into her “real self,” which from his perspective is naturally self-interested, to give up the illusion of altruistic self-sacrifice. In thus implicitly defending one of the key assumptions of evolutionary psychology, he also anticipates subsequent scholars’ psychoanalyzing of Maggie’s neuroses: “What you call self-conquest—blinding and deafening yourself to all but one train of impressions—is only the culture of monomania in a nature like yours” (335). Yet the men are implicitly arguing not simply against renunciation, but against her having made what she perceives as an ethical choice to renounce. She prioritizes a choice she deems required by her conscience even in the face of arguments that designate such a choice as somehow unnatural and anomalous, especially according to the definition of nature presumed as foundational in evolutionary psychology. Maggie even at one point explicitly defends renunciation in language acknowledging natural determinism, telling Philip, “Our life is determined for us—and it makes the mind very free

when we give up wishing” (302). But the real point at issue is that she is holding fast the one place where she can assert herself as *undetermined*—free to choose to give up wishing, to choose a course of action that she deems right and not simply in reaction to self-interested, circumstantially determined wishes.

Through Maggie’s wonder at her soul, other more temporal and relational dimensions emerge, showing how her experience of ethical subjectivity exceeds the stereotypically solipsistic, autonomous reason of the Enlightenment subject. For this message about the capacity within her soul to choose a perceived non-determined course of action comes to her as “A Voice from the Past,” as the chapter is titled. The past plays a crucial role throughout the novel, beginning in nostalgia when the narrator is “dreaming” of how the river Floss and Dorlcote Mill looked long ago (9), or when the narrator describes the ancient legend of St Ogg’s kindness that gave the town its name (116-17). But beyond nostalgia, invoking the past becomes increasingly ethically charged after Maggie’s encounter with this voice from the past. To resist Stephen’s insistence that they break faith with Lucy and indulge each other’s love because it is natural, she aligns past memory with other moral qualities: “Love is natural; but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too” (450). She returns to this argument when she finally breaks with him: “If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie?” (475).⁴⁵ Maggie’s continued value for her soul discerned through this voice from the past counters any dismissal of her discovery of Kempis as merely a phase, a temporary religious obsession that she either grows past or should have grown past, like Eliot grew out of her early Evangelicalism.

Furthermore, this voice from the past gains lasting significance for Maggie because it is not singular, but multiple, not isolated, but relational: Kempis’s words are shaped by the presence of an unknown previous reader who has marked the passages that Maggie remarks

when she reads them consecutively. Maggie encounters in this text not a series of impersonal maxims, nor a moral system imposed by some wealthy hypocrite lounging “on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are treading with bleeding feet on the stones” (291). Rather, she encounters a distinctively communal human presence, a “quiet hand,” a gentle, loving, “low voice,” confirming “the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and suffered and renounced, [...] under the same silent far-off heavens, and with the same passionate desires, the same strivings, the same failures, the same weariness” (291). No longer is she isolated. Eliot herself can be seen as adding yet another presence, performing the same work for readers that Kempis and the past marker of the text perform for Maggie.⁴⁶ In contrast to Maggie’s previous isolation, she now finds that others have felt the same yearnings she has, engaged in the same work of self-evaluation, intuited that they too experienced a subjective sense of obligation or demand of conscience or *ought* otherwise than what *is*. The gesture to the silent heavens is particularly telling, not only echoing Kant’s juxtaposing of the starry heavens above and the moral law within, but also evoking that Nietzschean image that captures modernity’s sense of the anomalous nature of human ethics in an indifferent universe that will return so powerfully in Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*. Maggie’s repeated gestures to the ethical community of the past keep this Kempis scene’s voice from the past in play throughout the novel, implicitly affirming her stand outside of herself, her soul’s ethical capacity to evaluate and make decisions otherwise than nature and her hereditary past would seem to necessitate. This soul or mind remains a radically subjective phenomenon that appears in the natural universe, a persistently questioning wonder under the bright stars.

Against misinterpreting Maggie’s experience of soul as isolated egoism, a familiar enemy in Eliot’s ethics, the narrator further underscores the interpersonal universalism in this

experience of conscience, standing outside of and evaluating oneself as more than one's self-interested desires. Juxtaposing the complacent rich against the laboring poor, the narrator acknowledges that the latter, driven by "deepest need," are more likely to seek, without the motivation of reward, "something, clearly, that lies outside personal desires, that includes resignation for ourselves and active love for what is not ourselves" (292). This can easily be read as ideological rhetoric, an upper-middle-class fantasy about the masses reconciled to their hard lot. However, another option could read it as critiquing such repression, affirming what universally constitutes human beings as intrinsically valuable, overturning the stereotype of the poor as morally inferior humans. The fact is that even when people find themselves in material circumstances painfully determining, they still find within themselves a freedom not dependent on self-interest, as practically legitimated as that self-interest might be in seeking not "velvet carpets" but simple survival. This freedom maintains their dignity as human beings, and justice requires recognizing this dignity (291-92). This freedom does not depend on religious teachers as enforcers of the status quo, for though reading Kempis initiates Maggie's new course of action, the narrator underscores that she goes on "making out a faith for herself without the aid of established authorities and appointed guides" (292). She imperfectly develops this new position vis-à-vis herself and others, throwing "some exaggeration and willfulness, some pride and impetuosity, even into her renunciation" (292). But again, the point is not whether she succeeds with absolute perfection. The narrator is implicitly inviting readers to respond with wonder toward the fact that humans can act, even imperfectly, even in extraordinarily unjust circumstances, from a position they perceive as ethical, that they are not inevitably determined by the self-interested will. It is admirable, in the wondering sense of that word, that, from her own perspective, Maggie has in herself this distinctively human capacity of working to stand

ethically in relation to herself and others. The particular content of that relation emphasized here is renunciation of the will as self-interest, but the deeper layer of ethical work accomplished by this scene is its affirmation of the human capacity to choose to act in a way perceived as ethical. And that capacity is universally worthy of regard in all human beings.

Eliot's own response to Kempis's text, echoed in the narrative voice, further supports this interpretation. Far from treating it with nostalgia or condescension as an object long outgrown, the narrator emphatically praises the text: in contrast to the modern "expensive sermons and treatises" that are singularly ineffectual, this little book, found in its modest dull covers on the shelves of second-hand bookshops, "works miracles to this day" (290-91).⁴⁷ The narrator's praise echoes that which Eliot herself accords when, writing to her friend Sara Hennell on February 9, 1849, she mentions that she has been reading *The Imitation of Christ*: "One breathes a cool air as of cloisters in the book—it makes one long to be a saint for a few months. Verily its piety has its foundations in the depth of the divine-human soul" (Cross 1: 144-45). Here she does not explicitly mention renunciation. The desire "to be a saint" makes a strong impression on her, but she also recognizes that she could not sustain the implicit renunciation it would require of her beyond "a few months"; furthermore, she is writing seven years after she stopped believing in Evangelicalism and had refused to attend church with her father. Instead, what stands out to her as the unqualified "piety" of this text is its affirmation of "the depth of the divine-human soul." In context with Maggie's reading of Kempis, this soul becomes specified as the experience of self-reflexive mind and conscience, that subjective feeling of standing outside of oneself to ethically evaluate oneself. That humans make that internal distinction between the multiple will as conscience from the singular will as self-interest is worthy of wonder.

This is the ethical dimension too often overlooked in readings of Maggie's discovery of this text: it reveals to her the depth of her own divine-human soul, and it gestures outward to the universality of this depth, suggesting a ground on which to regard every human being with wonder and respect. Some have briefly come close to acknowledging this ethical excess, but usually in vaguer terms of spirituality, less the excess of ethical subjectivity that erupts in this scene. For instance, Paxton suggests that *Mill* shows how characters "respond psychologically to the mystery of the Unknown and find in it a source of the outward and inward laws which determine religious feelings and morality" (98). With a similar gesture to this mystery impacting psychological and lived experience, Dolin writes that Eliot explores a paradox in the lives of the novel's narrow-minded people who ignore religion to pursue mundane, "materialistic" concerns, and who are yet not entirely oblivious to a sense of desire for something more, for an unknown significance that transcends them (208). This yearning after a transcendent unknown reaches dangerous proportions in Maggie, who sustains a deep psychological tension between "the irrational and unconscious" and the "ethical and spiritual dimensions" of human life (208). This tension can also, with overlap, be framed epistemologically, as imagination vs. reason, or scientifically, as subjective vs. objective perspective (211). While I agree with the overall direction of these characterizations, what I emphasize is more specific, not simply a vague "mystery of the Unknown," or "transcendence" implicitly reproducing the traditional figure of divinity, but the experience of ethics that is uniquely subjective, "divine-human." What so strongly stirs Maggie's soul, "as an unquestioned message," is first and foremost, before any specific urging to renunciation, "the direct communication of a human soul's belief and experience" (*Mill* 291) that awakens her to the same divinity in herself.

This ethical subjectivity renders every human being as such worthy of wonder and respect, a radical humanity that precedes judgment about whether or not they choose behavior worthy of themselves. For this divine humanity does not inevitably guarantee one's rightness, nor is its value predicated on infallibility. Eliot demonstrates this through Maggie's ongoing struggles between her sense of conflicting duties to others and her own desires. The priority of conscience explicitly reappears late in *The Mill on the Floss*, after Maggie's "great temptation" and ultimately successful renunciation of Stephen, when she meets with Dr. Kenn, the vicar of St. Ogg's (379, 435, 493). He suspends his advice and allows Maggie to choose her own path forward, respecting her choice to do what she intuitively feels to be right, recognizing that, all social pressures and consequences aside, "her conscience must not be tampered with" (495-97). The narrator reflects on his respect for her conscience: "moral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot. [...] the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims [...] to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy" (498). Conscience is not reducible to abstract maxims, depersonalized cultural artifacts ready-made to regulate and, in the process, oversimplify any situation. Rather, conscience is utterly unique, responsive with "growing insight and sympathy" to each individual's circumstances (498). Eliot thus expands her familiar championing of sympathy by resisting formalized morality and instead defending the individually unique, material and social situatedness of subjective ethical experience. But she also uses religious language that would not register as significant but as merely imprecise and even regressive from the perspective of scientific objectivity. Evolutionary psychology would

speak not of “divine promptings” but of physiological nervous signals conditioned by heredity and by habitual encounters with material circumstances.

Eliot’s paradoxical attention to both material situatedness and the divine excess of self-reflective conscience turns away from free-wheeling relativism toward language that values both the circumstantial particularity and the excess of ethical subjectivity. Eliot’s ethics can also be described by language approaching moral realism, but this should not lose sight of her religious language about subjectivity as mind, soul, conscience. For example, Suzy Anger points out that Eliot is “an objectivist in ethics,” which means that she believes that “there are moral facts, which are not independent of humans, but objective all the same, and these can be known through intuition” (“George Eliot” 80). This centrality of intuition emerges not through the biological proofs of evolutionary psychology, but rather through “*assuming* that certain traits are inherently moral,” the most notable being for Eliot “sympathy and altruism.” She shared this intuitionist assumption with others such as Comte and Lewes, but unlike Comte, Eliot saw this intuition of objective moral facts as defying systematization. She realized, as the narrator affirms in *Mill*, the impossibility of establishing moral codes to regulate every particular situation that may arise (80-81). These ethical intuitions provide the crucial motivations in her fiction, especially manifest in “the moral struggle between altruism and egoism” (81). Anger usefully describes Eliot’s ethics, but an additional dimension is how Eliot continues to rely on religious language’s affordances in conveying these ideas. Maggie’s response to Kempis shows how religious language also describes ethical experience as inseparable from subjectivity. Ethics emerges not just through intuitions in general, but through intuitions that illuminate the wonder of the “divine-human soul.” Following up this scene with Dr. Kenn, the narrator again characterizes Maggie’s intuitions as the promptings of her conscience toward the altruism she

perceives as uniquely required of her in her situation—what she feels due to the people around her. Chief in the “mysterious complexity” (*Mill* 498) of life is conscience, manifest as unique and circumstantially particular, yet also as something over and above circumstances, capable of stepping aside from and judging them, from the standpoint of a priority that “must not be tampered with” (497). The narrator claims that conscience exceeds impersonal maxims and social codes of propriety that regiment lived experience, joining liquid and organic metaphors to describe how it “spring[s]” from “growing insight and sympathy.” But beyond organicism, its “promptings and inspirations” are “divine”: religious language highlights this subjective conscience as an excess worthy of wonder (498).

Stepping back to emphasize the importance of Maggie’s reading of *Kempis* for the novel as a whole, then, this scene does more than argue for or against renunciation as a doctrinal injunction. Rather, it remarks the strange fact that the self-reflective deliberation and failure and renewed efforts at renunciation that Maggie goes through are possible to human beings, a possibility described in the language of mind, soul, conscience, divinity. The novel invokes the language of evolutionary psychology in Maggie’s hereditary weaknesses and struggle with unconscious impulses determined by a long history of patriarchal repression and psychological habit. But it also invokes language familiar to religion, not simply advocating the subordination of egoism to altruism, but dramatizing the wonder of the fact that human beings can reflect on their actions to conceive of such things as egoism and altruism and, from their perspective, choose to subordinate one to the other. Our subjective account of ethical experience is a strange yet real fact. We seem to stand apart from ourselves, appraising; living in a universe materially the result of natural laws and socially shaped by others’ choices, we still seem to ourselves to be free to choose how to act in it; we can act contrary to what would seem naturally determined.

This is a marvel worth pausing over, remarking, admiring, especially as it does not always guarantee moral success or evolutionary survival. Maggie falters in a way she deeply regrets, is rejected by society, and then drowned by the floods. But the point is the invitation to wonder at her human capacity of self-reflective choice. Tom himself, portrayed as a foil to Maggie in his unreflecting, naturalistic, self-interested domination throughout the novel, undergoes his own encounter with wonder when, just before they drown, he comes “face to face” with Maggie and finally sees in her “the depths of life that had lain beyond his vision,” an ethical subjectivity that far exceeds his simplistic norms; he sees her for who she is as an ethically striving human being, and the insight makes him pause in wonder and humility (520). Similarly, Philip, Stephen, and Lucy all are transformed through her ethical influence, even after her death (502-4, 510, 522; cf. Yeoh 12-13). *The Mill on the Floss* attests the human experience of mind or soul and conscience as a reality that deserves wonder, and responding to such wonder is portrayed as a crucial dimension of ethical growth.

Language adequate to the wonder of mind and conscience

My broader purpose in the above reading is not to urge religion as a cause but to reflect on its capacity as a discourse to invite attention and wonder toward the experience of mind and conscience. *The Mill on the Floss* uses language and imagery familiar to evolutionary psychology to describe Maggie’s natural and hereditary circumstances, but it invokes religiously-inflected language as most adequate to describe the key turning point in her moral development: her wonder at intuiting herself as nonidentical to and hence not wholly determined by these circumstances. Such attentiveness to the value of discourse adequate to these experiences is what Robinson calls for. Though, unlike Eliot, she personally remains actively religious, she is not

interested in trying to convert readers to the dogmatic claims of any particular religion. Also, unlike the religious fundamentalists she critiques, she is not anti-intellectualist; she bolsters her rejection of unexamined parascientific assumptions about human consciousness with strong affirmations of rigorous scientific theories and discoveries. The methods being employed in neuro- and cognitive science to investigate human psychology today are much more sophisticated and technologically precise than those used in the nineteenth century. But she argues that a holistically ethical perspective of human consciousness has not yet been adequately explained away by science, however much parascientific popularizers of evolutionary psychology insist on perpetuating this narrative. She asks for increased nuance in the account made of human beings' subjectivity, which religion has historically described with the language of soul and conscience. She returns to this argument throughout her work, not just in *Absence of Mind*. In her most recent essay collection, *What Are We Doing Here?* (2018), she explicitly addresses this question of finding language capable of revaluing these subjective experiences:

The ways we think do themselves deserve thought. For example, if concepts with religious history such as soul and conscience can be sufficiently redescribed in other language, this in no way diminishes their reality. If they might be redescribed and are not, then we should wonder why they are not, how their exclusion from the vocabulary of self-declared humanism is rationalized, and what the effects of the exclusion might be. If they cannot be redescribed in a nonreligious language, then we need to consider what is threatened or lost when religious language is lost. (204)

She points out that as valuable as science is—this constantly “growing sum of whatever we can observe, test, describe, derive, or know in any meaningful sense”—as versatile as is the language

such methods offer us for making sense of many facets of human material experience, it nevertheless cannot “yield a metaphysics. Yet we need a metaphysics, an unconfirmable parallel reality able to support essential concepts such as mind, conscience, and soul” (*What* 204). Such a space for metaphysics, for seriously crediting these subjective experiences, is crucial for ethics, for such crediting affects how we perceive and treat each other as beings worthy of wonder. As poststructuralism has irreversibly shown, language is constructed, there is no outside. So, fairly embedded within it, we are asked to be all the more deliberate about what constructions we shape and use. Robinson suggests that retaining space for languages that value and credit as real the subjective facets of human experience is necessary to avoid a devastating impoverishment of thought and ethics. The language of religion is one such construct for talking about these experiences of mind and conscience that she sees as worth continued acknowledgement. It was Robinson’s posing of these questions that made me pay closer attention to how the religious language and imagery of subjectivity in *The Mill on the Floss* furthers Eliot’s humanist vision. I suggest that both authors offer serious contributions to ethical theory because of how they inhabit language that attests the excess of human ethical subjectivity, that reopens wonder at mind, soul, conscience.

Finally, this dialogue with Eliot and Robinson suggests that language thus resonant may offer a means of critiquing deterministic ideologies whose oppressions crush the wonder and reverence due to humans as ethical beings. As Robinson writes of the subjective experiences of mind and conscience, these concepts “can shape and create institutions, and they can testify against them when they fail” (*What* 204). It matters very much that we retain or develop language, historically- and culturally-inflected as it inevitably is, to value these aspects of human experience, to afford scope for who we are as “thinkers and perceivers, participants in a singular

capacity for wonder as well as for comprehension” (*Absence* 72). Comparing Eliot with Robinson as a writer from our own day highlights how they respectively value the subjective account of mind and conscience. But it also shows the urgency of defending a humanist perspective of these experiences as intrinsically valuable in a world facing increased aggression from technologized, self-interested neoliberal economies that marginalize those they exploit as less than human. More than ever, Robinson suggests, we need to defend the response of wonder to ethical subjectivity against the self-interested, competitive, deterministic ideologies defended in popularized evolutionary psychology, ideologies that uphold the status quo of economic, political, and social exploitation as natural and evolutionarily inevitable. Eliot anticipates what Robinson reconfirms: the urgently ethical implications of defending subjective introspection, of recording its activity in the mind’s own “peculiar history,” of crediting and wondering at the reality of ethical experience’s irreducible motivation to action. They both invoke language capable of exploring how human ethical yearning is a wonder in its own right, creating an imaginative space that invites readers to resist cynicism and open wonder for others as sharers in thinking ethical freedom.

IV. Excessive Ethical Subjectivity in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*

In the end experience will inevitably teach us that the laws for a wise and noble life have a foundation infinitely deeper than the fiat of any being, God or man, even in the groundwork of human nature.

—Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*

Decision is the empty moment of every ethics, regardless of its contents and foundations. Decision, or freedom, is the ethos at the groundless ground of every ethics.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*

Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) was an influential South African writer who lived and worked in both South Africa and England. She wrote that she felt herself “born with a kind of constitutional mandate” to work for justice in behalf of people oppressed by power.¹ Her work led the New Woman movement as she invested in the research of leading contemporary sexologists and advocated for women’s rights to vote and pursue new careers.² She also wrote as a political activist committed to socialist reforms,³ vehemently criticizing the “injustice & greed riding rampant” in South Africa.⁴ Such injustice, she saw, arose from compounding capitalism with imperialism; she denounced the exploitation of labor in the diamond mines, the oppressive administrative policies of Cecil Rhodes, and the second Boer War, fought mainly between the Boers, or Dutch colonial settlers, and British governance (1899-1902).⁵ Though Schreiner was well-recognized in her own time for her outspoken activism, Victorian scholars now primarily remember her for her experimental first novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which follows the lives of three children—Waldo, Lyndall, and Em—as they grow up on a South African farm.

I explore how *The Story of an African Farm* articulates excessive ethical subjectivity—especially the moral freedom that my other chapters have shown as enabled by the experiences

of self-reflective thought and obligation—and how it implicitly motivates the critique of injustice. Schreiner’s invocation of subjectivity’s excess emerges as she denounces abusive colonial and patriarchal powers for seeking to coerce and deny this excess. The novel dramatizes its commitment to ethical subjectivity as irreducible to norm-producing and norm-enforcing structures such as religious institutions or political and economic ideologies. These norms do not ground ethical subjectivity but rather presuppose it, and indeed are judged by it. This ethical subjectivity can appear strange in light of the modern view of nature as determined and indifferent to human claims of justice or injustice. That the experience of ethical subjectivity persists despite this dominant view of the indifferent universe, that it implicitly justifies any critique of injustice, suggests that ethics cannot be grounded in nature or culture or in anything deeper than this given experience itself. It appears causally groundless, simply a fact of experience. The novel’s characters experience this ethics as excess in a variety of ways. Waldo discovers moral freedom in the experience of outrage over evil represented by the domineering imperialist. Lyndall seeks an obligation that exceeds herself as much as it exceeds religion and gender norms. A late-comer to the farm, Gregory, responds to ethical obligation by orienting himself toward the other through a genderbending ethics of care. These and other encounters with ethical subjectivity in the novel depict the experience of ethics as anomalous, not to be explained as caused by Victorian cultural morals on the one hand or by the natural universe on the other. Ethics in Schreiner’s novel emerges as a wondrous personal and inter-relational experience that appears to exceed natural causes just as it exceeds the nineteenth-century social structuring of morality, specifically organized religion, patriarchy, and capitalism as deployed by colonial power structures.

To better examine the novel's portrayal of the excess of ethical subjectivity, and how this excess is the implicit ground motivating the critique of injustice, I bring it into dialogue with the twentieth-century ethical philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy is a prominent contemporary French thinker whose interdisciplinary work engages many fields beyond philosophy and ethics, including political theory, religious studies, aesthetic theory, and social theories of community. Nancy's description of ethical freedom as a "groundless ground" offers vocabulary to help me illuminate how ethics appears in Schreiner's novel, adding another layer to the subjective excess implied in Arendt's two-in-one thinking, in Levinas's infinite obligation, and in Robinson's account of mind and conscience (*Experience* 162-63). Furthermore, I examine how, like Carlyle and Ruskin, Schreiner's experimental form dramatizes these ethical encounters and resonates with the poetic opacity that forms Nancy's primary mode of writing: both authors use a fragmented, suggestive language that avoids totalizing argumentation. Invoking Nancy's insights amplifies new, unexamined dimensions of the moral philosophical implications of Schreiner's novel, while allowing me to imagine how literature enables Nancy's theory to speak beyond its opaque allusiveness to concrete ethical concerns, the problem of injustice.

My methodology contrasts with the historicism that has dominated the scholarly resurgence of interest in Schreiner's work since the 1970s. Recent scholarship often contextualizes Schreiner with other South African, postcolonial, and diasporic writers such as Isak Dinesen, Katherine Mansfield, Sarojini Naidu, Jean Rhys, and Una Marson (Horton 5; Lewis 4-5; Snaith 1, 65). These studies prioritize a detailed historical approach, examining colonial events and political developments along with Schreiner's responses to them through her correspondence, fiction, and nonfiction. Scholars have at times also acknowledged Schreiner's awareness of philosophical discourses, most frequently by pointing to Emersonian

transcendentalism as influencing *The Story of an African Farm*. Schreiner admired the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson; his name informed her pseudonym, Ralph Iron, as well as the naming of characters Waldo and Em in *The Story of an African Farm*.⁶ Besides Emerson, though, Schreiner studied many moral philosophers, including Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer as well as closer contemporaries like John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Eduard von Hartmann, whose *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1869) influenced Freud and Jung. She deliberately read philosophy alongside literary texts to understand contemporary issues; on 17 November 1884, she wrote to Havelock Ellis, “I only care for philosophy & social questions & poetry now.”⁷ She was a deep thinker who united these methods of inquiry for social critique. Some Schreiner scholars have briefly acknowledged questions with moral philosophical resonance, such as subject formation, but they do so by way of the historical, material processes shaping her identity as a White South African female writer moving between colonial South Africa and metropolitan England’s imperial center (Snaith 35; Lewis 17-18, 35).⁸ These historical analyses from Carolyn Burdett, Anna Snaith, Simon Lewis, and others offer a useful foundation for understanding Schreiner’s life and work. However, the moral philosophical import of her writing, and of *The Story of an African Farm* in particular, remains unexplored. I supplement this excellent historicism with my trans-historical, interdisciplinary approach to more explicitly show how *The Story of an African Farm*’s innovative exploration of the strange excess of ethical subjectivity remains currently relevant for articulating the ethical commitments motivating the critique of injustice.

My turn to Nancy posits that understanding Schreiner’s ethical complexity requires more than returning to her direct philosophical influences. Nancy and the other twentieth-century thinkers in my project seek to reimagine ethical subjectivity otherwise than the sovereign white

male subject that so permeated the imperial and patriarchal forces Schreiner denounced. The nineteenth-century scientific assumptions driving these forces even impacted Schreiner's writing, for though she overtly opposed imperialism, she also held some of the assumptions of racial evolution that many used to justify imperialism (Lewis 18; Snaith 39). The contradictions in Schreiner's writing, I argue, emerge more clearly by expanding analysis beyond historical influence through the insights of post-structurally-aware ethical philosophy. Nancy critiques any unqualified return to the philosophical terms for speaking about ethics that have become increasingly problematic since the Enlightenment, exhausted of meaning or loaded with baggage through deployment in dehumanizing discourse (*Gravity* 14-15). Instead, resisting the teleological mode of return or its inverse, dismissal, he repurposes these philosophical terms—*freedom, meaning, and being-with*—the first as the “groundless ground” of ethical subjectivity, the second two as features of how this groundless subjectivity appears in the world. His work to reopen language for these subjective experiences creates space, first, to wonder at the strangeness of existing as ethically accountable human beings that Schreiner's novel dramatizes, and second, to critique how the novel falls short of its own ethical imagining.

I begin by examining how Schreiner's novel critiques forms of injustice that seek to erase and deny ethical subjectivity in others. I also more precisely situate Nancy's work as resisting these oppressive, totalitarian logics that fueled the catastrophic injustices of the twentieth century. This context then facilitates my analysis of how the novel explores ethics as excess in dialogue with Nancy's articulation of freedom, meaning, and being-with. My analysis seeks not to resolve the novel's ethical contradictions, but to demonstrate how Nancy's ethical theory helps illuminate its primary tension between two orientations toward the excess of ethical subjectivity. The ethical orientation is one of wonder toward freedom, meaning, and being-with,

acknowledging how these experiences remain in excess, inexplicable by natural causes and irreducible to cultural norms. In contrast, the unethical orientation seeks to foreclose or refuse this excess, a refusal most clearly manifest in institutional systems of exclusion and erasure that attempt to ground and delimit moral codes in something other than subjective excess. Such closure tries to determine in advance of spontaneous human life the cultural scripts for what counts as just or unjust, human or subhuman, worth making live or letting die. Against such totalizing scripts, exploring Schreiner's and Nancy's open ethical thinking suggests their continuing relevance for articulating the persistent, if too often implicit, commitments to ethical subjectivity that motivate critique.

The Story of an African Farm's critique of totalizing systems of oppression

The plot of *The Story of an African Farm* follows some recognizable forms of realist fiction, though set not in London or the English countryside but on the South African veldt. Three orphaned children of English and German descent grow up on a farm, struggling with abuse from sadistic overseers and repressive gender norms. The two who most suffer from this injustice—Waldo and Lyndall—travel to and from the farm and eventually die without attaining social success, while the third, Em, stays and ends in a traditional marriage. But Schreiner also steps beyond the bounds of strict realism as modeled by other nineteenth-century novelists such as Eliot, Trollope, or Thackeray. *The Story of an African Farm's* preface situates the novel in opposition both to the romanticized “stage method,” which depends on type characters and artificially convenient endings, and to the imperial tales of “wild adventure” in Africa (xxxix-xl). In contrast to these late Victorian genres, Schreiner defends her impressionistic method, one where the novel-artist seeks to “paint what lies before him” (xl) in a way that registers not an

epistemologically stable reality, but the fragmentary and unpredictable flux of experience, the “strange coming and going of feet” (xxxix). Schreiner’s novel emerges as protomodernist, quite anomalous compared to other late Victorian novels that share its publication space.⁹ Its form is punctuated by philosophically troubled, surreal meditations, fragmentary narrative interruptions, juxtaposed genres such as letters, dreams, and allegories, and sudden shifts between tones such as wry humor, bitter anger, sorrowful sympathy, and awestruck wonder.¹⁰ These forms intertwine with the story’s searing critique of the institutions whose narratives about morality dominated the late Victorian social scene, particularly organized religion, patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. As readers confront the novel’s experimental form, they are also asked to confront their investment in structures of oppression, without the transparent “dear reader” moralism that many modern readers find artificial and off-putting about much Victorian fiction. Schreiner’s critique is still relevant against many of the persistent oppressions inherited from these late Victorian social structures.

Perhaps the top priority of Schreiner’s critique would now be described as feminist: *The Story of an African Farm* targets patriarchal oppression with scathing outrage. The novel argues that any ethical reform worthy of the name should acknowledge women’s existence as equal to that of men. As a prototypical New Woman, Lyndall leaves the farm to pursue education on her own terms (152), refuses to be “tied” by marriage (206), and discourses on the rights of women to pursue “earnest work” (162). Increasingly toward the middle and end of the novel, Lyndall voices many of the arguments that Schreiner would also articulate in her allegories and non-fiction essays, fighting for the rights of women to seek an education and vocation beyond the typical confines of Victorian middle-class female gender roles. Lyndall is furious, for instance, that her time at an English boarding school should be wholly occupied with petty tasks meant to

finish or refine women as ornaments in a male-dominated world—excellent embroiderers of cushions and weak-minded flatterers of their masters. Her vision of equal education drives her to demand time and space away from such frivolities to think deeply about science, literature, and philosophy. Lyndall goes beyond verbal argument to enact her resistance to such societal expectations; she rejects the schedule of the finishing school to read her own selection of books, becomes pregnant out of wedlock but refuses to marry the father of her child, travels with him for a time but continues to reject his demands for marriage, and finally forces him to leave her and her child to die alone. She emerges as the outspoken and tragically “fallen” New Woman who, for seeking her own education, rejecting marriage, and bearing an illegitimate child, dies misunderstood and outcast from the society of the imperial center. Schreiner celebrates her courage. Lyndall’s story dramatizes the advocacy for women’s rights that Schreiner would return to throughout her writing, particularly in her socioeconomic polemic *Woman and Labour* (1911).

Even as she advocated for women, Schreiner also advocated for the just treatment of native African peoples, fearlessly criticizing the imperial and capitalist powers that oppressed them. The insidious ways in which nineteenth century Europeans exploited and marginalized non-white, non-Western races took many forms, from outright massacres to the rationalizations of pseudoscience. Late nineteenth-century racialized science deployed utilitarian and evolutionary models as comparative evaluations of moral capacity between different races. Herbert Spencer was a leading proponent of this theory, attempting to varnish it with philosophical clout by opposing it to the Enlightenment thinker whose critiques of reason and contributions to ethical theory still reverberate, Immanuel Kant. In an essay called “The Ethics of Kant,” published in the July 1888 issue of the *Fortnightly Review*, Spencer rejects Kantian ethics in favor of his own evolutionary interpretation of ethics. He claims that Kant’s “awe” before the

starry heavens and the human moral law is naïvely optimistic, its claim to universality inadequate. More realistic, Spencer thinks, is his social Darwinist view supposedly confirmed by the imperial surveillance of globally-diverse cultures and their conflicting value systems (192). In support, he quotes contemporary banker and scientist Sir John Lubbock, who claims “that the lower races of men may be said to be deficient in the idea of right.” Spencer follows this claim with various assertions from explorers and anthropologists illustrating the supposed moral barbarity of non-Western peoples, including Fijians but primarily Africans (192-93). Although Spencer does admit that “a few Eastern tribes” act more Christian than Europeans do (193), the import of this contrast still holds the West as the standard of civilization against which other peoples’ moral codes are measured, even when Western people themselves are not living up to that standard. Because Kant was not aware of the radical differences in various cultures’ moral codes, Spencer claims, Kant’s ethical model is naïve and provincial, not registering that the evolution of generations yields “widely different degrees of conscience in different races” (198).¹¹ Such assumptions drive Spencer’s pseudoscientific, racially partial account of morality. Spencer must oversimplify and dismiss Kant, the most iconic of Enlightenment thinkers of ethics, in order to defend a racist model of moral evolution that depends on the very particularities of race and culture that Kant saw as inadequate to determine a grounding source for the moral law.¹² This insight did not prevent Kant from his own share of offensive racist and misogynistic comments, but it does make them all the more problematic as incompatible with his ethics.¹³ His description of the moral law, if taken at its word, would rule out the practice of judging such particularities as race and gender as determining moral capacity, because ethics—the moral law—exceeds all such particularities. It is comprehensible only in its “*incomprehensibility*” (*Groundwork* 4: 408-9, 463/PP 62-64, 108). In short, in order to argue for

a race-based utilitarian account of moral capacity, Spencer must misinterpret and reject Kant's conception of ethics as excess. Though in a lengthy footnote he cavalierly admits that he read hardly any of Kant's works beyond their first few pages, he refuses Kantian ethics in favor of his own interpretation of utilitarian evolution, even presuming to insinuate that Kant could be reduced to utilitarianism in spite of himself (216). Spencer's is just one representative text in the discourse of pseudo-scientific racism that became increasingly dominant toward the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

Schreiner read Spencer's essay on Kant and, in a letter to Beatrix Potter from the summer of 1888, mentions that she found it troubling: "The end of Herbert Spencer's article in the Fortnightly hurt me a great deal. Couldn't he be made to go off somewhere to Italy, or Egypt" (lines 13-15). Her description of Spencer's article as hurtful implies that she found his account of evolutionary utilitarian ethics troubling and reductive.¹⁵ Perhaps in this letter she wishes Spencer could be made to go off to Italy or Egypt because within the imperial context, Italians and Egyptians were among the groups who figured strongly in the British imaginary as exoticized foreigners: he needs to see the diversity of the world beyond his narrow view. More likely, though, perhaps she wishes he could be made to see the oppressive consequences of the racial and utilitarian logic driving imperialism; throughout the 1880s, Britain and Italy colluded in increasing imperial control of Egypt and what is now the Sudan (Green). Racialized evolutionary thinking justified imperialism, especially in Africa, by displacing blame for the annihilation of non-Western races and cultures away from colonial violence to the perceived natural processes of evolutionary change.¹⁶

Schreiner resisted such erasure and re-enactment of violence by explicitly racialized models of discrimination, recognizing the cultural environment in which she grew up as coercive

and toxic. Her essay collection *Thoughts on South Africa* (1923) self-critically recounts her racist childhood fantasies about pretending to be Queen Victoria and banishing the Black South Africans behind a wall in the Sahara Desert, and how she came to recognize such attitudes as wrong, driven by “insular prejudice and racial pride” (15-16; cf. Snaith 36-37). Her essays in this collection track the logical results of such discriminatory attitudes—especially the imperial administration’s turn to the armed conflict of the Anglo-Boer war. Schreiner was also highly progressive for her time in pushing for voting rights for all women, including Black women. She withdrew her support from the Women’s Enfranchisement League when they refused to advocate for extending the vote to Black women (First and Scott 262; Snaith 38; Lewis 24-25). She wanted legal equality for all races.

However, though Schreiner overtly resisted the political oppression of Africans, her work manifests contradictions, critiquing imperialism even as she reproduced some of the problematic assumptions driving it. For example, in *The Story of an African Farm*, the native African people who work as servants on the farm are hardly fleshed-out characters, instead remaining on the textual margins without scope to act out their own narratives (Lewis 49; McClintock 271). Though Lyndall advocates for better educational opportunities for women, she neglects to defend her Black sisters or to acknowledge that such reforms would benefit primarily White women. Mark Sanders points out that Schreiner did not actively envision Black people intellectually contributing to colonial culture; they often remain unacknowledged or operate under a model of assimilation (82). In the novel, they do not contribute to the plot’s main action or overtly engage in the complex ethical questioning of colonial authority that Waldo and Lyndall enact. Though the White farm overseers, the usurper Bonaparte Blenkins and the self-centered Boer woman Tant’ Sannie, likewise lack interiority, acting out their tracks of narrow-minded oppression, they

still hold more privileged narratological positions, occupying more text-time, in relation to the native African servants.

In addition to such marginalization, Schreiner's feminist arguments at times reproduce racialized evolutionary assumptions, though she does not go nearly as far as Spencer does in explicitly claiming racial evolution as the explanatory grounding of ethics. For example, in *Woman and Labour*, Schreiner channels the claims of leading sexologists Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, claiming that women are the bearers of the race, and that, having passed through stages of oppression both "primitive and semi-barbarous," they should take the lead in the search for a "higher development of sexual life" (15, 27). Schreiner's model of racial sexual evolution opens her text to some offensive assumptions about the passivity of non-European races in the struggle to hasten evolutionary progress toward emancipation for women (14). Schreiner's perpetuation of such rhetoric in her feminist arguments does not appear as overtly in *The Story of an African Farm*, though some of the imagery Lyndall uses hints at such thinking (195). Such evolutionary thinking yields contradictions: even as Schreiner imagines future warless societies no longer racked with oppression based on race, class, or gender, her work overlooks many of the intersectional challenges arising from South African history (Lewis 155). Even beyond passive forgetting, the evolutionary model actively marginalizes non-European races. For example, in another passage in *Woman and Labour*, Schreiner argues against sexual union between Europeans and Bushmen because of their evolutionary differences, claiming that the men and women of each race must evolve alongside each other (131). However, Snaith points out that Schreiner's hesitancy toward racial mixing was only partly for evolutionary reasons; more immediately urgent was her concern for the "social issues—primarily the abuse of Black women by White men—which she saw as concomitant with a mixed-race population"

(39). According to this reasoning, Schreiner rejected one of the more pervasive narratives against miscegenation—the positioning of White women as victims of predatory Black men—thus showing her awareness of the oppressive intersectionality of colonial power structures against all women. Such are some of the complicated ways in which Schreiner’s feminism paradoxically manifests both problematic and, for her time, progressive relations to race. While she did not go to the same extreme of overtly extending racial evolution to moral philosophy, as Spencer did in rejecting Kant and claiming that certain races were intrinsically less morally developed than others, Schreiner’s invocation of the evolutionary model for her feminist argument jars with her broader activism against patriarchy, imperialism, and capitalism. This is why my exploration of how Schreiner explores ethical subjectivity will offer yet another method of turning her critique of injustice against her own inconsistencies.

Advocating for legal gender and racial equality, Schreiner attacked the political and economic structures she saw as perpetuating inequality: imperialism and capitalism. The racial marginalization in *The Story of an African Farm* appears most frequently in scenes that also critique exploitive economic practices, especially the farm’s system of servitude dominated by Bonaparte and Tant’ Sannie. Bonaparte, as colonial master, usurps the role of farm administrator from Waldo’s gentle father Otto, then launches pointed aggressions against Waldo, crushing his creative invention of a sheep-shearing machine, restricting him from reading books, falsely accusing him of pilfering food, and beating and isolating him (74, 79, 89, 92). Bonaparte’s code of conduct is narrowly utilitarian. Judging everything as evil that he cannot capitalize on and exploit, he seeks to erase otherness, justifying himself by the following maxim:

Whenever you come into contact with any book, person, or opinion of which you absolutely comprehend nothing, declare that book, person or opinion to be

immoral. Bespatter it, vituperate against it, strongly insist that any man or woman harbouring it is a fool or a knave, or both. Carefully abstain from studying it. Do all that in you lies to annihilate that book, person, or opinion. (79)

Bonaparte's maxim epitomizes all that the novel depicts as evil—the foreclosing of difference, the stifling of creative action that manifests another's freedom and capacity for thought and communication. It is little wonder that the narrator sums the result of such a crushing approach to life as yielding a pointless struggle that ends “in nothing” (74). The utilitarian calculus eliminates anything that it cannot comprehend or, in the literal sense of that word, grasp and exploit.

Similarly oppressive and marginalizing of otherness, Bonaparte's fellow overseer of the farm, the Boer woman Tant' Sannie, mistreats Waldo and the native servants. She also cycles through husbands as she does servants (70, 161, 262). While she invokes religious rhetoric about their deaths being God's will, she also participates in the capitalist logic that views the systemic role of labor to be filled as more important than the person filling it, resulting in that person's alienation and eventual death. The reversed gender roles overlaid on this exploitation make it all the more visibly ludicrous. Schreiner dramatizes how the problem of injustice is aggravated by economic systems that privilege those in power. These characters' domination yields devastating consequences for those they oppress, consuming the native servants as well as Waldo—he loses his invention, his chance to manage the farm in a more humane manner, and his education.

Schreiner underscores the value of those marginalized by such systems of oppression through her characterization of Waldo as the one who, himself brutally abused and racialized, is most appreciative of the artistic voices of the subjugated African peoples. He closely examines Bushman rock paintings, imagines the delight these people found in creating these images, and laments that “the Boers have shot them all,” leaving only the stones to bear their inscriptions (15-

16).¹⁷ On one level, Waldo's entrancement with the Bushman paintings as traces left by a supposedly extinct race manifests the nineteenth-century assumption mentioned earlier about African races as vanishing, an assumption overlooking the continued presence of these peoples. However, he also resists the dominant narrative that would naturalize their erasure as an evolutionary inevitability, clearly pointing blame at the colonizers for shooting them (15-16). Furthermore, by aligning himself with these echoes of silenced voices, even as he blames those who silenced them, Waldo's voice likewise becomes voided from the perspective of the oppressors. For example, Gregory Rose, an Englishman who leases the farm after Bonaparte leaves, criticizes Waldo for "muttering to himself like an old Kaffir witch-doctor" (198), calling him "a low, vulgar uneducated thing, that's never been to boarding-school in his life" (141-42). Even the omniscient narrative voice admits at the end of the novel that Waldo was "an uncouth creature with small learning, and no prospect in the future" (268), at least as defined by the dominant colonial logic. Lyndall's understanding of Waldo begins to articulate a space for valuation beyond the colonial forces that oppress or overlook the margins. For example, when Gregory tries to insinuate himself into Lyndall's favor, he denigrates Waldo, saying that he is weak-minded and so will never "have anything in the world" (197). Deliberately, she agrees: "I think I *should* be rather astonished if he ever became a respectable member of society [...] I don't expect to see him the possessor of bank-shares, the chairman of a divisional council [...]. He would rather astonish me if he came to such an end" (197). Gregory is confused by her approval of Waldo's inability to inscribe himself in these capitalist structures (198). Bonaparte and Tant' Sannie, the self-centered colonial bullies of capitalist administration, occupy the "respectable" materialistic positions of institutional power in opposition to the marginalized stance of respect for otherness embodied in Waldo.¹⁸

Besides complicity with capitalism, another way that colonialism propagates its injustice in the novel is through the apparatus of organized religion. Bonaparte's maxim is essentially utilitarian social Darwinist—as the strongest, he frequently gloats over the vulnerability of those he takes advantage of (41, 47, 52). But he also deploys the institutionalized rhetoric of religion, capitalizing on Otto's sincere commitment to Christianity's ethical injunctions—specifically, to welcome and care for the stranger—to facilitate his take-over of the farm (31-32, 36-39). For example, Otto believes in treating with equal kindness and love all people around him regardless of race, gender, or economic status, but Bonaparte misappropriates this Christian belief for his own ends when he ostentatiously moralizes to Otto, “Do we not love the very worm we tread upon, and as we tread upon it? Do we know distinctions of race, or of sex, or of colour? *No!*” (51). Bonaparte's dehumanizing image of the crushed worm joins with his hyperbolic *No!* ominously to imply an impending torrent of abuse against all creatures, human and otherwise, that he considers as equal objects of subjugation. Otto is too ingenuous to pick up on Bonaparte's ironic perversion of his Christian stance of love and equality toward all. Bonaparte continues to instrumentalize religious rhetoric in the service of oppression when he usurps Otto's treasured role of delivering the Sunday sermon, even appropriating the clothing he uses (31-32, 35). The institutional structure of the sermon and dress enables Bonaparte ritualistically to instantiate his colonial dominance over the farm's labor power and means of production.

These scenes with Bonaparte demonstrate just one of the many critiques Schreiner levels at organized religion throughout the novel. Born in South Africa to English and German missionary parents, she knew the scripts of institutional Christianity, and she witnessed how religion could be instrumentalized by imperialist agendas. Furthermore, for many in the nineteenth century, the work of science became perceived as opposed to traditional religious

faith, a conflict that Schreiner likewise experienced. One of the challenges animating *The Story of an African Farm* is the need to articulate a basis for ethics not dependent on institutional religion. Waldo dramatizes the late Victorian narrative of the loss of faith. His trajectory, along with Lyndall's and Gregory's, presents, I suggest, the question that Schreiner repeatedly poses throughout the novel: if institutional religion no longer offers a coherent ethical narrative, if its methods of redressing oppression are inadequate, such that those very totalizing structures of patriarchy and imperialism can so effectively coopt religion as a means of grounding their power, then where can ethics lie? In positivist science?¹⁹ In self-centered individualism? In learned or innate feelings of sympathy? What happens when ethics is suddenly exposed as excess, institutionally groundless, radically other than the structures of societies and institutions inasmuch as it can judge them as more or less just?

Jean-Luc Nancy: re-imagining a philosophy of ethical subjectivity

Nancy inherits these questions from the nineteenth century, participating in the twentieth-century's post-structuralist critique of philosophy that emerged in the wake of the wars and genocides perpetrated by the "enlightened" Western world. He joins his voice to the critique of totalitarianism launched by political, literary, and ethical theorists, figures as different as Deleuze and Foucault, Derrida and Levinas.²⁰ This critique, crucial to the works of other twentieth-century ethical theorists as well, notably Aimé Césaire and Hannah Arendt, extends beyond targeting particular political regimes such as Nazism.²¹ These thinkers expose totalitarian ideology as the erasure of difference, of anything that exceeds its predetermined narrative. Such erasure then serves as the self-affirming mechanism of oppressive political structures. Post-structuralist thought exposes the fictionality of the binary oppositions through which such

founding ideologies attempt to mask their construction and pass themselves off as given and natural. Such post-structuralist thought can also be described as “post-foundational,” an idea that Todd May explores through the work of Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze (3-4). By post-foundational, he means not simply the more technical epistemological terminology regarding justified beliefs, but a method of thinking that works against the closed or founding structures of totalizing logic. Oliver Marchart, in his study *Post-Foundational Political Thought* (2007), offers an extended discussion of Nancy’s work as “post-foundational” in this anti-totalitarian sense (78). Michael Lackey, reviewing Nancy’s work *The Experience of Freedom* (1993), clarifies that as Nancy points to ethics’ absence of foundation or grounding in anything other than itself, he affirms this absence as the only possible founding principle. That is, ethics paradoxically finds itself on “the impossibility of establishing foundations” (Lackey 166). Nancy’s contribution to the post-structural reimagining of ethical subjectivity offers valuable vocabulary for teasing out the ethical complexity of Schreiner’s work. Nancy theorizes ethics as excess in a way that shares affinities with her text’s modernist literary fragmentation, far from the form of the traditional philosophical treatise and even farther from the formalist logic favored by Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Indeed, at the beginning of *Being Singular Plural* (2000), one of his main texts about the multiplicity of existence, he even admits that “The form of the ontological treatise ceases to be appropriate as soon as the singular of Being itself, and therefore also of ontology, is in question” (xv). The questioning of ontological claims about subjectivity and of rigid totalizing forms alike characterizes his post-structuralist thinking. In content as well as in form, Nancy attempts to resist the danger of reproducing a totalizing, closed orientation toward the world.

Nancy describes in *The Sense of the World* (1997) some of the totalizing discourses that structure sense or significance, that attempt to ground and delimit the multiplicity of life.

Totalization poses such a threat to life because it tries to foreclose the experience of ethics in constructed moral codes, denying the excess of ethical subjectivity by seeking to ground subjectivity in a predetermined system without remainder. Such systems Nancy describes as ideological and methodological “fearful traps,” such as the demands for “security, identity, certainty, philosophy as distributor of values, worldviews, and—why not? beliefs or myths” (*Sense* 12). It is against such demands for secure explanatory grounding that Nancy positions his philosophy, seeking to suggest the inexplicable givenness of ethical experience as something that human beings cannot subsequently found because we are always already immersed in it: ethics “precedes us, warning and surprising us at once” (*Sense* 2). Nancy’s work attempts to gesture to ethical experience without formally reinstantiating totalizing methods, using a fragmentary, evocative literary form verging on poetic opacity.

I focus on just three of the interrelated experiences that Nancy deconstructs and rearticulates as the excess, or “groundless ground,” of ethical subjectivity, by which he means that they are originarily given in human experience prior to any perceived causal foundation: freedom, meaning, and being-with (*Experience* 162-63). Nancy follows through the implications of their priority for concrete ethical critique. He seeks to witness to the strange openness or anarchy of ethical experience that exceeds attempts to totalize or index it to traditional notions of freedom, meaning, and being that have become overladen with culturally-specific signs: for example, which bodies are more or less capable or deserving of freedom, how different gender identities signify in legal structures, whose racial being is more or less precarious in public evaluative settings. Against such culturally predetermined systems of signification restricting human experience, Nancy reimagines freedom, meaning, and being-with as constituting the open excess of ethical subjectivity (*Gravity* 23). In critiquing closed Western systems of signification,

he seeks to witness to human beings as the spatio-temporal locus of *freedom* and *meaning* that is always already “in excess of all signification” (*Gravity* 67). This excess appears because *being* is not isolated and self-sufficient: Nancy questions the totalizing prioritization of abstract Being over any singular concrete being, and in turn the prioritization of the individual autonomous subject over the with-ness or relationality of beings. He argues that being is always already being-with, that every *I* presupposes an originary *we*. In other words, it would make no sense to designate oneself as *I* if there were no other people from whom one needed to distinguish oneself. In that very speaking of *I*, “*We co-appear*” (*Gravity* 62). Any attempt to ground the *we* in exclusionary particularities forecloses this being-with in as violent a manner as the attempt to overdetermine freedom as something to be arbitrarily granted to, or rescinded from, human beings categorized by socioeconomic political systems.

Nancy’s literary-philosophical fragmentation attempts to model the work of maintaining a stance of openness toward others as meaning in their free co-appearing ethical excess (*Gravity* 62). Such openness resists the totalization that would seek to ground freedom in particular subjective categories such as race or gender that can be deployed for social and political oppression. Schreiner’s novel critiques those characters whose codes or maxims of behavior are oppressively grounded in patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and the imperial cooption of institutional religion. Nancy’s work offers a framework for further discerning how the characters experience ethics as excess, an excess not adequately registered in the language of feminist or postcolonial or anti-capitalist critique alone. Something more complex is happening here in Schreiner’s exploration of the strange anomalous excess of ethical subjectivity.

Encountering the excess of ethical subjectivity in *The Story of an African Farm*

The excess of ethical subjectivity emerges in multiple ways throughout *The Story of an African Farm* as characters encounter and respond to different situations. The novel's spreading of these encounters across multiple people suggests the impossibility of identifying any single manifestation as sufficiently representing or prescribing ethics. It also suggests the inter-relational nature of ethical experience. First, Waldo seeks for meaning through several dominant Western systems of signification, including Judeo-Christian religion, romanticized progress narratives, and material capitalist labor, finding each inadequate to his longing for meaning. His search emerges more clearly through Nancy's distinction that meaning exceeds signification. Waldo's search marks his longing for ethical meaning as a negative excess, an absence not grounded by Western signifying structures. But his sudden encounter with himself in his moral freedom further marks ethics as a positive excess, an unquantifiable reality that is anomalous in the face of the indifferent natural universe. The paradoxical nature of this excess gains added resonance through Nancy's analysis of freedom. While Waldo's search for meaning and encounter with the strangeness of ethical freedom happen more interiorly, through long meditations and narrative allegories, Lyndall's happen in ways that underscore the limitations of the isolated self and the inescapable human togetherness of ethical excess—we are not the atomized, sovereign subjects associated broadly with the Enlightenment and repackaged today as neoliberal ideology. Her experiences resonate with Nancy's insight that human subjectivity is being-with: we witness each other's lives as the locus of excessive ethical meaning. Furthermore, the novel's asking readers to witness the deaths of both Waldo and Lyndall dramatizes how Nancy would describe as death marking the horizon where human being-with finds its strongest witness, extending beyond the singular individual. Finally, Gregory undergoes the most drastic

transformation of all the characters; he leaves behind his petty marginalization of Waldo and selfish sexualization of women to nurse Lyndall through the last weeks of her life, growing into a concrete ethics of interpersonal care, a being-with whose excess is marked as spontaneously generated outside explicitly religious motivations and in defiance of patriarchal gender norms. Gregory's deliberate physical action dramatizes the strangeness of ethical experience, concretizing Waldo and Lyndall's metaphysical exposure to the excess of ethical subjectivity.

Waldo's search for meaning and encounter with ethical freedom

Throughout the novel, Waldo's quest for meaning confronts and exposes as inadequate different systems of signification, systems that Nancy's poststructural perspective also critiques as exhausted of meaning (*Gravity* 48). Signification, Nancy explains in *The Gravity of Thought*, forms the project of Western philosophy, a project always disoriented in the literal sense that it cannot step outside of its own system to narrate the dawning, inauguration or founding of that system (29). The Socratic shift from myth to concept is the prototype for how structures of signification presume a gap between the accessible real and the inaccessible ideal, groping after an absent meaning that is often narrated as remaining mythically beyond conceptualization (23). The regime of signification projects or fantasizes about, but cannot return to, a mythical time prior to signification, when no gap yawned between present signifier and absent signified (28).²² Nancy claims that this fantasy haunts Western systems of signification, yielding religious, philosophical, political, sociological, and other narratives of a loss or fall from an idealized originary unity between meaning and sign. Driven by the impossible "*desire for meaning*" (30), the process of signification projects its own constructions onto this blank, empty center, which projections can then form the grounds to justify oppressive political formations and ideologies

(23, 35). The project of signification forms a vast solipsistic regime that, like the ideologies it catalogues, cannot critique its own origin (20).²³ Nancy's critique of this project contextualizes his reimagination of human subjectivity. In their experience of ethics, humans are themselves, in their plurality, the exterior meaning that systemic signification cannot approximate in its projective model that sees only itself.

Both Schreiner and Nancy, in their own ways, recognize that religion, philosophy, politics, scientific empiricism, and other such structures, with their models of the sovereign self-sufficient subject, form signifying systems that remain inadequate to the human search for meaning. In the novel, Waldo begins with religion, juxtaposing its formal apparatus with his troubled ethical questions. In the opening scene, he is crying and praying in the middle of the night over a problem that appears hugely impersonal, even more so because he stands as everyman since he is not yet named. He agonizes over the inexorable march of time and how it hastens human beings to death; he envisions streams of people falling over "the dark edge of the world" to be lost in oblivion (3). The primary figures in this stream are those whom the typical narrative of Christian salvation designates as beyond God's mercy, heathens from ancient Greece and Rome, China and India, but he judges this exclusion as unjust and prays for God to save them anyway (4). This opening scene exposes the inadequacy of a religion that claims to offer a meaningful interpretation of moral existence to only a certain group of people, spatially and temporally exclusive of "millions" of other human beings (4). He is troubled by what he sees as the unjust partiality of this religious interpretive framework. In so judging, he implicitly demonstrates that he inhabits ethical excess, experiencing some sense of how things ought to be that places him outside this religious framework to judge it as unethical. His continuing to cry on the ground implies that he has received no response from God. This lack of response becomes

cruelly personal when the next day, still unnamed, he sacrifices his dinner meat on a tiny altar of stones, futilely asking God to send down fire and burn it as a sign of acceptance (6-7). Having unsuccessfully tried to validate his first attempts at Christian-inflected prayer by this return to Judeo-inflected sacrifice, he concludes that God has excluded him because he is “wicked,” and in despair he decides to pray and sacrifice no longer (8-9). The narrator suggests that it is his “intense loneliness” and “intense ignorance” that causes Waldo’s suffering; in other words, to be isolated knowing nothing other than an exclusionary model of religion is hardly how to find ethical meaning (9). His struggle for meaning against signifying systems has just begun; feeling abandoned by the Judeo-Christian God merely spurs his ongoing quest. With his deep sense of loss, alone in a world fallen from God’s presence, Waldo inhabits the iconic space of modern secular thought, rejecting overt religious narratives, yet still searching for redemption through unmediated meaning. He exposes the prayer and the altar as signs embedded in the Judeo-Christian system of signification that are inadequate to account for the excessive ethical meaning of human life departing over the edge of the world or left praying over dry stones.

Waldo’s search for lost meaning through the Western systems of signification prepares him to register the strange excess of ethical freedom when he encounters it in himself. This quest takes most emphatic shape through the two central chapters of the book, “Times and Seasons” and “Waldo’s Stranger.” The former begins with a series of short emblematic scenes, the “seasons” of the “soul’s life” (101), picking up from the struggle and loss of religious faith that Waldo suffered in the opening chapter. The narrator mentions Waldo by name only once, then shifts the narrative voice to speak from a first-person plural perspective that creates an intensely personal tone, including the reader in its internal questioning. The first scene describes “infancy” as the soul’s sheer impressionistic exposure to the beauty of the world (102-3). Such unnamed

impressions then become intertwined with thought, joining purely physical impressions with “spiritual and intellectual” interpretations of existence (102). Here, from the originary undifferentiated unity that encompasses all of existence—animals, sky, earth, people—the human experience of self-reflective thought emerges as a sudden shock: “One day we sit there and look up at the blue sky, and down at our fat little knees; and suddenly it strikes us, Who are we? This *I*, what is it? We try to look in upon ourselves, and ourself beats back upon ourself. Then we get up in great fear and run home as hard as we can. We can’t tell any one what frightened us. We never quite lose that feeling of *self* again” (103). This moment resonates with the epiphanies of self-reflective thought in Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* and Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*. Somehow, in distinction to the mythic unity of nature, the soul encounters itself as free, thinking and agential, an encounter that also renders it excessive and uncanny to itself.

The encounter with the self as strange in its thinking freedom also highlights the self as inescapably inhabiting a space of ethical obligation. This moral freedom becomes clearer in light of Nancy’s theory that finding oneself thrown into freedom means that one also finds oneself simultaneously confronted with the experience of obligation, a sense of what one ought and ought not to do. In *The Experience of Freedom* (1993), Nancy describes freedom as a fact of existence that exceeds any definable origin (8, 12). Moral freedom, irreducible to traditional Western notions prioritizing rationality over responsibility, is a feature of being that is “groundless” (133; cf. Lackey 166).²⁴ In other words, it cannot be traced back to some other cause. Or as he puts it later, freedom is simply the “groundless ground” of ethical experience, meaning both that freedom is not determined and that it serves as the ground or starting point for the possibility of ethics without thereby in turn determining any specific contents of that ethics (*Experience* 162-63; cf. Derrida, *On Touching* 113; Heikkilä 54; Marchart 77). Such freedom

resists as unjust any subsequent attempt to re-establish a signifying ground, since freedom exceeds any order of signification; it is the *a priori* condition that makes meaning possible. From this experience of freedom arises the possibility of ethics, since the very categories of good and evil, justice and injustice, presuppose the self-reflexivity of thought, decision, choice (*Experience* 16). Nancy argues that freedom by definition positions the self between different possible responses to freedom, where good is the holding open of freedom, while evil is the attempt to shut it down. Human beings by definition are creatures who face both possibilities simultaneously; as Nancy clarifies, “freedom cannot present itself without presenting the possibility, inscribed in its essence, of a *free renunciation of freedom*. This very renunciation directly makes itself known as *wickedness*” (16). Inscribed in freedom, definitive of its very possibility, is the inescapable potential of evil, which seeks to destroy or refuse freedom, and hence life or existence itself (129).²⁵

Nancy’s perspective on freedom’s inseparability from ethics, and the danger of refusing freedom through attempts to ground it in anything other than itself, including definitive systems of signification, helps make sense of the novel’s next scenes that follow the encounter with that distinctly embodied, little fat-kneed self as strangely agential and singular. For this little soul, finding itself self-reflexive and so free, also finds itself ethically obligated. It wrestles with the gap between this ethical experience and the religious code that claims priority over it, constructed through the Bible and church sermons and admonitions of “grown-up people” (103-4). This code’s constructedness, exposed through internal inconsistency, sparks intense doubt, possible only in light of some other implied ethical experience irreducible to these constructs. The soul racks itself asking questions such as, “Is it right there should be a chosen people? To Him, who is father to all, should not all be dear?” (106). Whence this soul’s sense of *right*, of

should, that stands external to the codified religious system to judge it? This type of questioning driving the chapter implies that ethics is not a product of religion; rather, religion builds its structure on top of an *a priori* ethics, overlaying the experience of good and evil with its own culturally-inflected significations. The soul's spiritual wrestle continues for the rest of the chapter, cycling through the constructs of the hated wrathful God and the romanticized all-loving God, then throwing them aside in despair at a universe ruled apparently by "blind chance" and, paradoxically, by evil (113-15)—paradoxically because blind chance is by definition indifferent to human perceptions of good and evil.

At the end of this chapter cataloguing its wrestle with ethical freedom that exceeds religious narratives, the soul finally turns to a material embrace of the natural world that softens extreme "blind chance" through the experience of wonder at nature. This acceptance offers a temporary respite from the vertigo of moral questions (116). Seeing "reverentially," as if for the first time, the soul accepts the strange complexity of life: "This thing we call existence; is it not a something which has its roots far down below in the dark, and its branches stretching out into the immensity above, which we among the branches cannot see?" (118). Being confronted with material existence as simply there, framing our existence yet not causally explaining it, yields finally not existential horror but a sense of "intense satisfaction, we cannot tell why" (118). There is no *why*, no visible, causal reason for why this acceptance of our excess as a real if inexplicable phenomenon in the universe seems righter than alienated despair, no more than there is any explanation for why we experience ethical freedom. But the narrator does not linger with this question, instead concluding the chapter with a vision of transcendental unity: "Nothing is despicable—all is meaning-full; nothing is small—all is part of a whole, whose beginning and end we know not. The life that throbs in us is a beginning and end we know not. The life that

throbs in us is a pulsation from it; too mighty for our comprehension, not too small” (118; cf. 259). Human life is meaning that drastically exceeds natural causes and systems of signification. The natural cosmos can no more be grounded in causal explanation than can human ethical experience. We cannot except ourselves from the material world, even as the sudden encounter with our ethical freedom persists in rendering us so anomalous and strange to ourselves.

Naturalism attempts normalization but twists in hand to underscore difference. The gesture to excessive meaning as the heart of this transcendental vision of natural unity loads nature with undue burden: designating the domain of material nature as a refuge from the excess of ethical experience only highlights our haunting strangeness. This constant awareness emerges even more clearly in a similar meditation the narrator voices earlier in the novel:

After struggling to see the unseeable, growing drunk with the endeavour to span the infinite, and writhing before the inscrutable mystery, it is a renovating relief to turn to some simple, feelable, weighable substance; [...] Whether there be or be not a hereafter, whether there be any use in calling aloud to the Unseen power, whether there be an Unseen power to call to, whatever be the true nature of the *I* who call and of the objects around me, whatever be our meaning, our internal essence, our cause [...], whatever be the nature of that which lies beyond the unbroken wall which the limits of the human intellect build up on every hand, this thing is certain—a knife will cut wood, and one cogged wheel will turn another.

This is sure. (72)

This passage clarifies the ending of the “Times and Seasons” chapter: both seek refuge from the excess of ethical freedom in the “sure” truth of materiality. However, such material truth gains its significance only in contrast to the encounter with the strangeness of freedom. This

materiality cannot forget, but rather is constituted in opposition to, the uncomfortable work of confronting the ungroundedness of subjective ethical experience. Finding oneself an *I* whose “true nature” remains elusive, humans are haunted by the sense that self-reflexive freedom renders them ethical beings strangely unlike the material world around them. As ethical freedom exceeds natural causes, so it exceeds the systems of signification by which we attempt to explain it. By definition, ethical experience, because it exceeds cultural moral codes, cannot yield a safe habitation for ideological dwelling, but rather renders human ethics uncanny, anomalous, not at home in the world. When materiality is claimed as ontologically “sure,” this very concept of surety presupposes an ontological question like a negative mirror image, two sides of the same coin. The “unbroken wall” built at the “limits of the human intellect” takes its contours from the excess that it attempts to exclude at that limit. In short, the novel suggests that when religion’s attempt to ground ethics in an integrated signifying structure proves inadequate to resolve our haunting questions about freedom, the challenge may temporarily be taken up by secular materialism. However, this restructuring of signification, by defining itself in opposition to the ungroundedness of human ethics, implicitly still witnesses to the priority of this ethics.

This priority further develops in the second of the chapters central to Waldo’s quest for meaning, titled “Waldo’s Stranger.” This chapter builds on the previous chapter’s transition from the signifying structure of religion to a “sure” materialist model, but this time it explicitly narrates both as inadequate to ethical excess. In this chapter, the narrator leaves the first-person philosophical meditative mode of the “Times and Seasons” chapter to resume the story in the third-person. The chapter narrates Waldo’s search as an allegorical romance quest for an elusive, lost meaning—the narrative that Nancy suggests dominates Western thought (*Gravity* 28, 30).²⁶ The scene begins with Waldo carving a grave marker for his dead father Otto when a stranger

approaches him. Though Waldo initially resists the stranger's questions about his carvings, he suddenly stammers out their significance "with broken breath" and "short words"—he is intensely emotionally invested in his art, but he lacks the capacity to eloquently convey its meaning (123). In contrast, the stranger appears objectively detached, responding "blandly" to Waldo's initial description; nevertheless, he picks up where Waldo leaves off, explicating the carvings allegorically (123).²⁷ He recounts how a hunter one day sees in water the momentary reflection of "a vast white bird" that immediately vanishes from sight (124). An old man aptly named "Wisdom" tells him that the bird's "name is Truth. He who has once seen her never rests again" (125). Truth falls on him unforeseen, an eventual obligation inexplicable by any of his existing narratives. This inexplicability is underscored when the hunter sets traps to catch truth, but instead catches birds who represent the creeds that were already exposed as inadequate in the soul's wrestle with religion: "a human-God," "Immortality," and "Reward after Death" (125). When he realizes that these signs are not the same as his longed-for truth, he breaks the cage he had constructed to hold them, to the indignation of the inhabitants of the "valleys of superstition" who refuse to question their religious constructs (126). Wisdom finally tells him the secret to capturing truth: he must weave a net from a feather fallen from the "wing of Truth," for, as he says, "*Nothing but Truth can hold Truth*" (127). Truth is paradoxical; like Nancy's freedom, it cannot be grounded in anything other than itself. Of course, the hunter never succeeds in his quest; he spends his entire life building a scientific path to climb the highest mountain of "Dry-facts and Realities" (130), and though he does find a single feather from the wing of truth, he dies before he can figure out how to turn it against its own excess. He comforts himself by hoping that others will be able to mount by the path of signification he has prepared, suggesting an evolutionary model of progression. However, recalling how the people in the valley of

superstition rejected his quest, whether others actually will follow him remains far from certain (133). The quest seems linear, teleological, bound to fall short of the self-exceeding and paradoxical. Truth may seem a positive object to be finally accessed if the elite individual hero invests enough time and effort in constructing a system of signification to ground it. But truth is actually its own elusive grounding, an event of obligated freedom that falls upon human beings unaware and always exceeds their best efforts to account for it.

Tension emerges between form and content as well: the allegorical romance quest is a genre defined by its prioritization of symbolic meaning, the structure of signification paradigmatic of Western thought. But the story demonstrates how far symbolism falls below ethical experience, which exceeds signification. This tension is not always appreciated. Carolyn Burdett, citing Schreiner's investment in evolutionary science, has argued that the stranger's allegory goes beyond a simple artistic elaboration of Waldo's carvings, instead embodying "a parable of the triumph of a positivist, or scientific, worldview to set against the false dreams and lures of a human God and immortality" ("Here" 104). Since Waldo is exhausted by his quest for meaning under the sign of religion, the allegory seems to invite him to resume the quest under the sign of secular positivism, which promises "salvation-by-scientific truth" ("Here" 104). Burdett also admits that Waldo's new terms for defining his quest amount to nothing materially meaningful ("Here" 108). That is, toward the end of the novel, after a brief sojourn of labor in the world outside, he makes no grand discovery of objective truth, instead returning to live and die under the farm's oppressive hierarchy. Burdett highlights the different narratives of "bourgeois enlightenment and modern progress" as complicit with imperialism; redress for the oppressed subjects of colonialism is forthcoming neither through "realism nor romance" ("Here" 108). Waldo's quietist return to the farm can even be read as a fulfilment of what the stranger

tells him after he finishes the allegory: “you are happy to be here! Stay where you are” (*African Farm* 137). Zarena Aslami reads the stranger’s admonition that Waldo rest contented on the farm in light of the colonial project; the stranger, as “an imperial administrator,” manipulates Waldo by bringing him under his “hypnotic sway” (17). Cherry Clayton calls him “a ‘decadent’ stranger who despises Waldo’s roughness” (51). Some of the language used in the allegory and to describe the stranger do lend themselves to this positivist model that proves inadequate to materially improve his living conditions.

However, something more also seems to be happening here; Waldo’s response to the allegory is deeply affective, imbued with ambiguous tears, not the clarity of positivist triumph: he cries as his “eyes flashed” with “mystic wonder” (128, 130, 133).²⁸ This response even surpasses the stranger’s expectations, prompting his further engagement. The interpretation of the allegory as affirming a positivist, scientific quest for objective truth does not quite account for Waldo’s affect nor fit the nature of his questioning. It is the story’s gesture to ethical excess that moves him, as becomes even clearer in the stranger’s outburst after speaking the allegory into existence. In this intense passage, the stranger’s bland, detached mask falls, and he speaks with a wonder that undercuts the reading aligning him with the positivist logic enabling imperial hypnotic quietism. His outburst underscores the anomalous ethical excess haunting the allegory—why did the hunter encounter truth as obligation, though it appeared so unexpectedly and briefly? What means that human longing that radically exceeds all known structures of signification? Why do we experience it as an ethics, as an inexplicable demand of obligation that falls upon us as a feather from the empty sky? Why does this obligation exceed comprehension’s grasp? In this passage, the stranger witnesses to ethical excess, utterly beyond the systems of signification that seek to appropriate and ground it:

We have never once been taught by word or act to distinguish between religion and the moral laws on which it has artfully fastened itself, and from which it has sucked its vitality. [...] We have been taught that all right and wrong originate in the will of an irresponsible being. It is some time before we see how the inexorable “Thou shalt and shalt not,” are carved into the nature of things. This is the time of danger. [...] In the end experience will inevitably teach us that the laws for a wise and noble life have a foundation infinitely deeper than the fiat of any being, God or man, even in the groundwork of human nature. (136)

This eruptive speaking does not last long; the stranger becomes suddenly “ashamed at his own earnestness” and reassumes “his automaton smile” and skeptical detachment (137), and years later, Waldo even becomes disillusioned with him by discovering his cynical immersion in high society (228). Thus, even on a narrative level, this sudden outburst about human ethical excess stands as an anomaly, not to be explained by reference to the rest of the stranger’s behavior or by any colonial agenda he may have, because it is the very insight that would actually disrupt the colonial agenda and its cooption of religion. Though the stranger does not use this unanticipated outburst to explicate any particular content within the allegory, they are parallels, implying that truth is precisely not any particular content of moral norms, but the fact that humans encounter ethical freedom as inseparable from the fact of their existence: “human nature” thus experienced is the only “groundwork,” an ethics that is itself not grounded elsewhere, extending “infinitely deeper than the fiat of any being.” Ethics constitutes human existence at a level that cannot be causally accounted for by religious or scientific constructions.

Just as these structures of religious and positivist signification prove inadequate to Waldo’s search for meaning, so even more drastically do the socio-political and capitalist labor

scripts that dominate his material conditions. He leaves the farm for a time to sell his labor power, finding cruelty and oppression wherever he goes. Schreiner acknowledges the enormous challenge injustice poses to freedom. In the “Times and Seasons” chapter, the narrator describes how, if one looks no further than structures of signification, such as the comforting dream of religion, it becomes too easy to ignore the problem of evil, to justify inaction by assuming that “Injustice and wrong are a seeming; pain is a shadow” (113). Yet religion remains inadequate to account for why such ignoring is not our default, why we are morally outraged to see “evil men walking sleek and fat” (113). The passage anticipates one of her later, shorter essays, “The Dawn of Civilisation,” from the second edition of *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1924). Here Schreiner again asks the series of deeply troubling questions driving her novel: “Why did everyone press on everyone and try to make them do what they wanted? Why did the strong always crush the weak? Why did we hate and kill and torture? Why was it all as it was? Why had the world ever been made? Why, oh why, had I ever been born?” (142). Schreiner’s questions escalate in paralleled intensity and scale. The intensity of oppression moves from coercing the action and restricting the physical freedom of living bodies to obliterating those bodies through torture and murder. The scale of oppression moves from the grammatically singular noun “everyone” to the widest scope of human action: “all [...] the world.” The last question, however, can appear strangely anticlimactic, even pathetic, as the intensity and scale suddenly collapse back into the singular subject: the *I* laments both that it was born into the capacity to know evil, and that its assumed purpose inaugurated by such birth remains unknown. But implicit in these are other metaethical questions: why is it that we can ask these kinds of ethical questions in the first place? Why do we position ourselves as beings meant to be meaningful even in the absence of clearly signifying meaning, even in the face of the apparent

meaninglessness of evil? Perhaps asking such questions *is* our meaning, our ethical excess. These same questions implicitly motivate Nancy's insight that the human is the place where meaning happens, an insight that emerges most clearly when people are confronted with evil's absence of meaning (*Gravity* 56, 59, 62). Why do we experience moral outrage?

This paradox, where the demand for meaning and justice reveals itself simultaneously with the exposure to meaninglessness—a sense of injustice, outrage at evil—informs the encounters in *The Story of an African Farm* that most clearly dramatize the anomalous excess of ethical subjectivity. The problem is that such oppression happens in the midst of freedom, in fact witnesses to freedom as inescapably constituting existence. A conception of evil presupposes a conception of good, and both together presuppose freedom, which is simply given as experience (Nancy, *Experience* 16, 129). In other words, characters like Bonaparte and Tant' Sannie can be judged as unjust precisely because they are free, because they could have done otherwise than oppress others, could have chosen not to close themselves off to the surprising contingency of freedom that springs from being with others who are different from themselves.

In *The Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner builds on the “Times and Seasons” chapter to further defamiliarize the human experience of moral freedom, showing this capacity as a strange, uncanny excess in the context of the indifferent universe. This scene comes just after Bonaparte has banned Waldo from reading some books stored in the loft. That night, furious at the injustice of this scheme to keep him in ignorance and subservience, Waldo climbs on the roof to defy Bonaparte and claim his right to read the books. At that moment, he glances up at the night sky and suddenly feels that the stars share no sympathy but rather wonder at his protest:

Those stars that shone on up above so quietly, they had seen a thousand such little existences fight just so fiercely, flare up just so brightly and go out; and they, the old, old stars, shone on for ever.

“So hot, so angry, poor little soul? [...] We,” said the stars, “have seen the earth when it was young. We have seen small things creep out upon its surface—small things that prayed and loved and cried very loudly, and then crept under it again. But we,” said the stars, “are as old as the Unknown.”

He leaned his chin against the palm of his hand and looked up at them. So long he sat there that bright stars set and new ones rose, and yet he sat on. (87)

Waldo pauses in his quest for justice, immobile on the rooftop, staring up at the night sky. The distant stars pose the unanswerable question, whence and why human moral outrage at injustice, our praying and loving and crying? In the face of these questions, his sense of ethical obligation suddenly becomes strange to him, defamiliarized as an unnatural, anomalous thing, an excess in the context of the natural universe. Schreiner's passage succeeds by two years Nietzsche's defamiliarization of moral experience in *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (1881), where he asserts that humans are at their most bizarre when they fight with each other over what good and evil mean on this speck of terrestrial dust in the midst of “the great cosmic stupidity” (80). Schreiner also anticipates by five years Nietzsche's similar description in *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) of human beings' sheer weirdness as constrained to participate in an ethical project that exceeds their capacity to explain: “We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers: [...] We remain strange to ourselves out of necessity” (3). This strange ethics Nietzsche briefly gestures to is distinctly not identical to his notion of traditional Judeo-Christian “slave morality.” He dismisses that whole project of morality in favor of the ego's free, joyful,

life-affirming will. However, Nancy suggests that, in his motivation to dismiss slave morality, Nietzsche ends up inadvertently affirming a “moral exigence,” in the form of “notre probité”—“our justice” or “our uprightness” (*L’impératif* 63, 66, translation mine). As if in negative mirror image, judgments of right and wrong reappear, implicitly founding his dismissal of religious codes as inadequate. Twentieth-century philosopher John Caputo would articulate a similar defamiliarization of ethical obligation in nearly the same imagery Schreiner used; in his polemic *Against Ethics* (1993), with a gesture to Nietzsche, he writes:

The stars pay us no heed. “Racism is unjust” is a bit of noise tinkling in the midst of “the great cosmic stupidity,” a complaint lodged against an indifferent world, under stars twinkling in a void. The call of unjust suffering, of little, ontic, concrete disasters, falls on deaf ears. It is just part of the whole, of an absolutely innocent game that knows only greater or lesser discharges of energy, only self-accumulating and self-destructive forces, but does not know about the call of justice. (17)

Such is the impression of cosmic indifference to ethical freedom that overwhelms Waldo. After sitting under the stars for a while, apparently disoriented and appalled, he gives up his insurrectionary quest for the books, and the narrative turns to free indirect discourse as he asks himself, “What did it matter about the books? [...] It was a very little thing. Why hate, and struggle, and fight? Let it be as it would” (87). His initial response to his encounter with a morally indifferent universe seems to be apathetic quietism, giving up on the work of ethics as ludicrous in its anomalous excess.

However, the outcome of the scene can be analyzed as more complex than simply endorsing nihilistic quietism. Unlike Nietzsche and Caputo, Schreiner projects some human

features onto the stars. Paradoxically, for their impassivity to expose the strangeness of ethical freedom, they must transgress total impassivity and call attention to their otherness. Partially anthropomorphized, the stars speak a language Waldo understands; they speak directly to him, recognizing his reflectivity as a “soul” that is hot and angry; and they speak in the plural—there is no *I* among them; they are all *we*. Like his soul, they also are not causally founded in any definitive, scientifically measurable source, but “are as old as the Unknown” (87). But what makes the stars distinctly not human, despite this partial anthropomorphization, is their lack of what makes Waldo most quintessentially human in this moment: ethical freedom. Despite their plurality, they are not free because they are not presented to good and evil. In speaking *we*, the stars defamiliarize human ethical experience because their being presents something impossible to be imagined from the human perspective: essence as *a priori* reflective thought without existence as freedom facing good and evil. In dialogue with Nancy’s affirmation of good and evil as inseparable from freedom in human experience (*Experience* 16), the outcome of this scene becomes less overdetermined as a quietist surrender to injustice. Indifference is only discernible by beings who find themselves anything but indifferent. Looking up at the stars throws Waldo into a state of wonder that yields no decisive change to his oppressed situation. But the point is that the freedom affirmed in this wonder is not dependent on the successful outcome of any particular line of action: it persists regardless. Though he pauses his revolt for that time, he recognizes that he cannot leave the space of ethical obligation—the stars’ indifference affirms how the strange anomalous reality of ethical freedom constitutes his very existence.

The implicit question haunting Waldo’s subsequent ethical struggles with religion and with colonial oppression is *why*? If he saw by the stars’ light the strangeness of ethical freedom and temporarily left that particular fight over the books, why does he continue to enact human

meaning in his resistance to evil? Thereafter, as Waldo continues to face oppression from Bonaparte, rather than ceding the work of ethical judgment, his capacity for such judgment grows. In contrast to his childish desperation in the opening scenes of the novel, he develops a deliberate calmness in his search for meaning irreducible to religious or secular structures of signification. He inevitably continues to inhabit this ethical space. He cannot escape his free exposure to good and evil, his phenomenological experience of ethical obligation that appears strange and inexplicable in the face of an indifferent universe. What matters, suggested by his response to these situations of oppression, is the stance one chooses within that space, one of openness or of closure to freedom. His meaning is inseparable from his ethical freedom.

Schreiner certainly did not advocate quietist surrender, but remained highly committed to fight against evil, embracing the anomalous exposure to ethics that forms the heart of freedom. In “The Dawn of Civilisation” essay cited above, she summarizes her trust in the multivalent resistances to evil that are possible to human freedom, which she also calls the will. Her response to the escalating questions culminating in the despairing cry, “Why, oh why, had I ever been born?” (142), comes as the following thought suddenly breaks through:

You cannot by willing it alter the vast world outside of you; [...] you cannot even remake your own soul so there shall be no tendency to evil in it; the great world rolls on, and *you* cannot reshape it; but this one thing only you can do—in that one, small, minute, almost infinitesimal spot in the Universe, where your will rules, there, where alone you are as God, *strive* to make that you hunger for real! No man can prevent you there. In your own heart strive to kill out all hate, all desire to see evil come even to those who have injured you or another; what is

weaker than yourself try to help; [...] This is all you can do; but do it; it is not nothing! (143)

The earnest tone of this passage counters deterministic despair with hope over the anomalous personal experience of will, or presentation in ethical freedom. Good and evil are inescapable dimensions of freedom—no one can “remake [their] own soul” otherwise. But the wonder is that human beings can “hunger for” the good and work to make it “real” for other people whose freedom power has attempted to erase. This hopeful passage invites readers to hold open wonder and reverence for the ethical freedom that makes humans “as God.” Such responsibility extends beyond a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis that would only selectively value people according to the ostensibly exclusionary natural standard of competitive survival. It is also a fact of nature, however seemingly anomalous, that when humans hold each other accountable, they implicitly recognize each other as beings who are equally ethically free.

Recall that for Nancy, freedom entails its own precarity; its holding open of ethical experience is always haunted by the possibility of attempting to refuse and deny that experience. Faced simultaneously with both possible responses to freedom, society and politics can either hold open or shut down the space-time of freedom’s “sharing” and “surprise” (*Experience* 86, 92, 114; *Being* 89).²⁹ Nancy clarifies that politics can be judged as unjust if it ignores this ethical excess of sharing and tries to forestall its surprise. The unjust closure of freedom ignores the priority of its undetermined spontaneity, deploying particular cultural temporalities to attempt prescriptive control. Injustice scripts freedom and associated notions such as justice, equality, and fraternity as “regulative Idea[s]” safely contained in systems of signification (*Experience* 76; cf. 82, 142). In contrast to such regulative closure, Nancy argues that freedom by its very nature is not “*assured* in advance (founded, guaranteed, and self-assured)” but rather is always open to

the possibility of its own opening or closure, good or evil (47). Just politics seeks to approximate forms open to the excessive, surprising phenomenon of ethical freedom, an openness that allows for spontaneous creativity with others (79, 160, 162-63).³⁰ For example, such openness makes possible the creativity of thought and language, a dialogue that in turn implies not the individual, autonomous *I*, but rather the *we*, or what Nancy calls originary being-with.

Schreiner and Nancy enable a deeper thinking of how the strange anomaly of freedom is precisely what enables ethical judgment, the work of critique. The paradox, they suggest, is that in judging those who act despicably as unjust, we affirm the priority of ethical freedom, assuming that they were not determined in such evil actions but could have chosen otherwise because they also have wills and experience freedom. Critique affirms the ethical freedom of both the just and the unjust. Holding each other accountable affirms the universal assumption of this ethics that exceeds the particular moral codes of any given situation. Waldo and, as I will now show, Lyndall, both embody different types of such striving against evil, the former on an intense internal scale that defies predetermined religious scripts, the latter on an external social scale that critiques overdetermined conventions of marriage and childbirth. Nancy's exploration of human meaning and being-with emerges in both these characters' struggles within ethical freedom. Waldo and Lyndall both strive for meaning against restrictive systems of signification. Their narratives affirm that meaning is not to be found in some esoteric space of social privilege, or recovered from a lost ideal, or regulated by social institutions of religion or colonial patriarchy, but rather in how they themselves embody ethical freedom in company with others.

Lyndall's encounter with the priority of being-with as ethical meaning

In contrast to Waldo's primarily internal process of encountering the excess of ethical freedom, the quest for meaning that Lyndall undertakes by defying various systems of signification appears more overtly in relation to other people. Waldo meets his own ethical excess alone under the stars; at least in that moment, he does not explicitly think through its implications for his relation to others. However, Lyndall begins by feeling defensive antagonism toward most people she encounters, seeing them as perpetuating the religious, educational, and political systems that would confine her within socially determined gender roles. She denounces such systems, arguing that women as human beings ought to be socially free. She determines to seek power in order to confront power and "help everything that is weak" (60). Though the defamiliarization of ethical freedom that she encounters echoes Waldo's in happening under the stars, this time it is interpersonal—they are there together. Talking outside late into the night, they agree that the greatest human success can be measured only ethically, not by material accumulation or social power. But then she looks up at the stars and is startled by their sudden breach of impassivity: "'They—the stars!' she said, softly. 'Do you not see? there is a little white, mocking finger pointing down at us from each one of them! We are talking of to-morrow and to-morrow, and our hearts are so strong; we are not thinking of something that can touch us softly in the dark, and make us still forever. They are laughing at us, Waldo'" (185). Unlike Waldo's experience, where the stars spoke directly to him alone, she articulates the astral perspective in their interpersonal space: the anomaly of human agency ethically shaping its tomorrows in a vast determined universe. Waldo finally responds by saying that he never prays. By this point in the novel, he has agonized for pages over the inefficacy of prayer as constrained by a religious structure that seems inadequate to his moral sense. His next image powerfully

evokes, in contrast to any systemic attempt to ground ethics, wonder at the utter ungroundedness of ethical freedom: “If there were a wall of rock on the edge of a world, and one rock stretched out far, far into space, and I stood alone upon it, alone, with stars above me, and stars below me,—I would not say anything; but the feeling would be prayer” (185). Prayer is wonder, an affect of ethical openness beyond language. He imagines embracing this wonder that intensifies when surrounded by a universe where human ethical subjectivity seems so tenuous and uncanny, with stars above and below, an excess rounded by the death that touches “softly in the dark.”

This scene emphasizes how they experience this wonder together. Lyndall first invokes their shared position of strangeness under the stars—they are laughing not just at her, but at “us” (185). Even as Waldo describes being “alone” in wondering prayer, he breaks this isolation through the temporal duration of his description, creating an imaginative space where Lyndall as well as readers stand with him, equally exposed to this wonder. The connection between ethical freedom shared in human togetherness becomes clearer in dialogue with what Nancy calls the singular plurality of being-with, which he invokes throughout his account of freedom. In contrast to the isolated individual being, Nancy underscores that “*freedom withdraws being and gives relation*” (*Experience* 68). Challenging the West’s privileging of the autonomous individual as the subject of freedom, he articulates an alternative vision of free ethical subjectivity as inescapably constituted by the co-existence of others—the fact that we are both ethically free and never alone. Nancy describes originary plurality, or being-with, as irreducible to religious, political, legal, scientific, or other social systems of signification. Humans find themselves always already constituted as being-with, not first isolated individuals that must be subsequently socially aggregated (*Being* 34, 69). Instead of some primordial originary Being whence beings derive, being by definition is always already being-with. Being-with is how ethical subjectivity’s

freedom and meaning appear in the world. As Nancy puts it, “There is no difference between the ethical and the ontological: the ‘ethical’ exposes what the ‘ontological’ disposes” (*Being* 99). In other words, one’s ontology or being appears in the world through the experience of finding oneself inhabiting an ethical position, at once free and co-existing, faced with the necessity of making choices in the time and space that others also inhabit (*Being* 83). Human subjectivity is the ethical locus of freedom, meaning, and being-with.³¹ Nancy resists traditional notions of community as contractual or utilitarian. He attempts to speak of a plural *we* without grounding it in logic that privileges a particular group of people or even anthropocentrism, “without transforming this ‘we’ into a substantial and exclusive identity” (Devisch). Such partiality is a primary target of the critique leveled against classical and Enlightenment philosophy, its notion of a universal human subject implicitly loaded with the qualifications of certain modes of rationality, whiteness, maleness, and socioeconomic status.³² The problem haunting any speaking of the human or of a collective “we” arises from such grounding or defining of a community by exclusionary material particularities.

In his concept of being-with, Nancy offers a way of thinking beyond this exclusivity that has so long haunted Western thought about possible foundations for community (*Inoperative* 1). He emphasizes that the *I* can have no sense of itself apart from others, for the very need to define a self presupposes the existence of others from whom it can be distinguished. To demonstrate this inextricability of the *I* from the *we*, he invokes the universal phenomenon of death. Nowhere is this constitutive togetherness more visible than in death, since people can never experience their own death, but only witness that of others departing shared time and space. The self is exposed to its own finitude only through others; death enables an “impossible communion” (*Inoperative* 15). Community becomes visible in death. Birth can be understood in the same way

(*Being* 78, 89). Birth and death cannot be experienced for oneself alone—from beginning to end we are being-with others. It is thus intensely significant that death forms such a haunting presence in Lyndall and Waldo's conversation under the stars. They feel that the stars are mocking them for how their ethical freedom drives their intensely human desire for meaning, their striving that is out of all proportion to their finitude, bounded as they are by, as she says, the darkness that can "make us still forever" (185). This shared bounding by death underscores their togetherness.

However, though she is with Waldo, Lyndall seems more resistant to recognizing being-with beyond this relationship. Highly skeptical of everyone besides him as imbricated in structures of signification, she despairs over the possibility of ever finding meaning in an ethical community that reaches beyond her friendship with him. She names this meaning as *love*. Since love is the one thing Lyndall cannot find in the world around her, it forms the metaphysical object of her quest for meaning: "I want to love! I want something great and pure to lift me to itself!" (209). Her rejection of social structures is motivated by her sense that the love she is seeking constitutes an ethics—"something great and pure"—that exceeds not just those around her but herself as well. Her seeking exhausts her because even as she cannot find such ethical communion in the social structures around her, she also recognizes that it would be impossible for her to assert herself as an isolated ethical individual, for isolation is a suffocatingly unethical state: "I am so tired. [...] why am I alone, so hard, so cold? I am so weary of myself! It is eating my soul to its core—self, self, self! [...] Will nothing free me from myself?" (209). Significantly, ethical freedom here is constituted not by the absence of restraint on the autonomous self, but by an obligation that liberates from the restraints implicit in this very autonomous self, a ligature of love that exceeds the self. This exceeding obligation is distinct from the duties that Lyndall's

social condition attempts to hold over her, such as, most oppressive in her eyes, traditional gender roles that dictate female submissive self-sacrifice to maintain male dominance. And she does not even consider the claims of religion, too far compromised by its complicity in perpetuating these roles. Rather, she senses an ethical obligation to look beyond herself that cannot be reduced to these gender roles or other societal expectations she unhesitatingly defies. In her loneliness, she turns away from her isolated self. Her turn to exceeding obligation implicitly recognizes that ethical being is inescapably being-with.

As death is invoked in Waldo's carving of his father's grave marker that occasions the stranger's allegory, and as death underscores the stars' questioning of human ethical endeavor as so anomalous, so here again death frames how Lyndall articulates her sense of an ethical obligation exceeding the patriarchal structures that seek to constrain her. She utters the above thoughts while bending over the grave of Waldo's father, further suggesting death as what exposes the meaning of existence as being-with. Left with nothing but what is "within," she at first feels utterly alone (209). However, even when others are not physically beside her, she also recognizes herself as incapable of stepping outside being-with, finding even within herself an obligated plurality. This paradox becomes even more visible when, after crying over the grave of Waldo's father, she returns to the house, looks at herself in a mirror, and evaluates herself thus: "One day I will love something utterly [...] We are all alone, you and I [...] We shall never be quite alone, you and I [...]; we shall always be together" (210). This contradictory moment of self-apostrophe, attesting her desire to love beyond herself, to give some shape to her reflective excess, becomes clearer when read through Nancy's articulation of the ethically free self: "*Freedom renders the self to the self outside of all presence*" (*Experience* 91). The inimitable experience of self-reflective thought enables us to evaluate our own presence to a degree that we

cannot evaluate in others. But this self-rendering evaluation is inseparable from being rendered to others; it would be meaningless otherwise: “There is no appearing to oneself except as appearing to one another” (*Being* 67). In other words, Lyndall’s claim that we are never alone draws attention to the strangeness of the fact that human beings are creatures who, presented to ethical freedom, standing apart from and evaluating themselves, inevitably also presuppose the ethical freedom of others. Prioritizing isolated “presence”—the traditional notion of autonomous unitary identity—remains inadequate to the plurality of freedom.

Lyndall’s own death witnesses that her quest for meaning, caught in tension between her defiance of social systems and her longing to love beyond herself, ultimately cannot reject other human beings, for it is only in being-with that the ethical subjectivity of freedom and meaning, as presentation to good and evil, appears in the world. Near the end of her painful illness, she admits that “holiness is an infinite compassion for others” and that “happiness is a great love and much serving” (249). Her language resonates with the Christian value of self-sacrifice, but she has long stood outside the consolations of organized religion (249). The narrator likewise resists categorizing her final insights as religiously-inflected morals, instead increasing the ambiguity of the meaning witnessed through her death through a series of rhetorical questions, leading with her sense of exceeding obligation: “Had she found what she sought for—something to worship? Had she ceased from being? Who shall tell us? There is a veil of terrible mist over the face of the Hereafter” (253). More is happening here than religious speculation on the immortality of the soul. The questions evoked at this moment of her death remind us that her quest for meaning sought a wonder and obligation beyond the self. The ambiguity also underscores ethical being-with by gesturing to the community of readers as those who still experience being—“Who shall

tell us?” Readers are plural, implicitly attesting their togetherness through the act of witnessing her death’s opacity to explanatory signification.

The being-with evoked in Lyndall’s death gains an additional witness from Waldo, who learns about her death only after it has happened (231). He dreams a vision in which he voices his own witness to her meaning. He rejects the transcendentalist view that would make Lyndall an idealized angel after death by erasing every trace of materiality or flawed humanity. Instead, he affirms her singularity as remaining uniquely human (258), even as he feels intensely that there is “[n]o ground anywhere”—no religious foundation—on which to base his hope to continue being with her after her death: once again, death emerges as the trace of purely given, ungrounded being-with (259). Waldo dwells with her in this “impossible communion” (*Inoperative* 15). He finally settles into an acceptance of “the Universal Whole” in which each singular being is preserved in the togetherness of plurality: “That abides—we abide” (259).³³ Waldo’s insight accords with how Hannah Freeman has pointed out that Lyndall’s death becomes figuratively dispersed into the witness of the earth, her meaning intensely local but also extended in time and space.³⁴ Lyndall’s death, far from being a hopeless crushing of the feminist New Woman as “fallen” under the patriarchal system, instead imagines her as affirming another possible mode of being in relation to the earth and in relation to others, not just Waldo but readers as well (253, 256).

The affirmation of human plurality emerges not only in Lyndall’s death but also in Waldo’s, which even more explicitly extends its plurality beyond human life. Nancy emphasizes that being-with is not exclusionary; he situates human plurality in the broader multiplicity of existence. He writes in *Being Singular Plural*, “This thinking is in no way anthropocentric; it does not put humanity at the center of ‘creation’; on the contrary, it transgresses [*traverse*]

humanity in the excess of the appearing that appears on the scale of the totality of being, but which also appears as that excess [*demesure*] [*sic*] which is impossible to totalize” (*Being* 17). Being-with encompasses all of existence, whether it be “another person, animal, plant, or star” (*Being* 20).³⁵ Waldo encountered the strange anomaly of his ethical freedom through a kind of being-with the stars and with Lyndall, and during his brief sojourn on the capitalist labor market, he uses this freedom to defend animals suffering from cruel exploitation (221, 225-26). But his return to the farm seems not the most promising move to effect radical change in the colonial structures he has struggled under all his life. The apparent quietism extends to the very end of the novel, when he goes out one day to sit on the ground in the sunshine and, inexplicably, dies. However, the promise of the scene emerges in the way his death is narrated, for his death is never named as such, but rather witnessed through the co-presence of other life forms—baby chickens, “tiny sparks of brother life,” who nestle against him after he has died (269). The human witness to his death comes again from readers, for when Em comes out to the yard, she assumes Waldo is just sleeping and sits down by him, thinking he will wake soon, “But the chickens were wiser” (270). With this line the book closes. As with Lyndall’s death, this ending can be read as politically quietist if focusing only on its absences: there is no visibly successful overturning of the patriarchal colonial system that has oppressed Lyndall and Waldo and the silenced voices of the Bushmen with whom he identifies. However, Nancy’s concept of being-with witnessed through death and reaching beyond the human opens another possible interpretation of the ethical potential of this scene. In death, Waldo’s body becomes part of the earth—the earth “enfolds” him (268). The final image of the chicks nestling him suggests that his life is inseparable from the witness of other lives, even the tiniest “sparks of brother life,” and that this life persistently exceeds colonial surveillance (269).

This being-with witnessed through the deaths of Waldo and Lyndall reframes their quest for meaning beyond the systems of signification that attempt to define them. This reframing emerges more clearly through Nancy's insight that, in contrast to the nostalgic lost meaning Western signification searches for, meaning remains within and between human beings. As dramatized in Waldo's weary return to the farm after his futile search through the systems of religion, positivist progress narratives, and capitalist labor, modernity faces "*the exhaustion of significations*" (*Gravity* 48). Nancy recognizes that religion, philosophy, scientific empiricism, and the different models of the autonomous self-sufficient subject that these systems of signification have proposed remain inadequate to account for human existence. Against such exhaustion, Nancy names human beings as meaning because they are creatures who experience ethics as excess prior to all signification (56, 59). Their meaning is their ethical freedom, their plurality, their constitutive being-with (62). As embodied cohabitants of an earth filled with multiplicity, "we are meaning" (62). The *we* Nancy invokes to analyze this being-with does not represent some totalized regime where difference is erased. On the contrary, Nancy acknowledges the singularity of each person, but he distinguishes this singularity from traditional concepts of isolated individuality, instead emphasizing that "*We co-appear [comparissons], and this appearing [parution] is meaning*" (62). Such is the incommensurable excess witnessed through Waldo and Lyndall. Their journeys end in paradox: they have sought meaning all their lives, while they themselves are meaning.

Recognizing meaning as being-with, coming face to face with the fact that the *I* is not possible without the *we*, gives cause for what Nancy calls "wonder" (*Gravity* 51-52). This wonder toward the co-appearance of human meaning is open and "welcoming" (67). It has the potential to intervene in how political and other structures respond to freedom as they negotiate

the regimes of signification that distribute and regulate human life.³⁶ Wonder recognizes the withness of existence, the paradoxical excess of ethical experience that always returns us to the world, its strangeness underscored even in refusing the distance of anthropocentric exceptionality. We are meaning, in excess of the orders of signification that rule the Western world, a meaning that cannot be exclusively grounded in any particular identity such as race, ethnicity, class, or gender, but remains always already “being-with,” co-existent with other human beings in an infinitely diverse world bounded by death.

Gregory’s transformative ethics of care: the spontaneity of ethical excess

How wonder at the strange uncanniness of ethical excess enables critique and concrete change becomes most clearly dramatized through the character of Gregory. He is the character who undergoes the most drastic change over the course of the novel. The text initially presents Gregory as the foppish, self-centered new farm administrator, his behavioral code one of wheedling self-indulgence. He obsessively pursues Em, finally convincing her to agree to marry him, only to cut off the engagement because he desires Lyndall upon her return from Europe. Lyndall, incisive in her perception of character, describes Gregory as having been “a fine baby,” suggesting an immature level of ethical development focused only on the self’s needs (149). This immaturity is reinforced in how he contradictorily codes as participating in multiple nineteenth-century gender stereotypes. On the one hand, like a Victorian middle-class woman, he writes vaporish letters to his sister on pink crested paper and moons bored about the house which he nevertheless keeps tidily dusted (139-40). On the other hand, like any domineering Victorian patriarch, he keeps Em at his heel during their temporary engagement, insisting that he cannot “believe in a man who can’t make a woman obey him” (174). His approach to both Em and

Lyndall prioritizes his male sexual desire, which the novel codes as intensely selfish and oppressive. His patriarchy does not take advantage of religious rhetoric, perhaps because such rhetoric has already been coopted by Bonaparte earlier in the novel. Gregory seems much more distanced from religion, simply not caring to engage with it. He is too consumed with fulfilling his sexual desires, objectifying and trying to control both Em and Lyndall.

Gregory's initial moral self-centeredness undergoes a drastic transformation to an ethics of selfless interpersonal care. His discovery of being-witness happens not only outside of institutional religion, but more dramatically beyond typical gender norms associated with an ethics of care. His selfishness encounters its first destabilization when he meets Lyndall, who refuses to cater to his white male privilege (199). After she leaves the farm, Gregory's change begins in a scene where, immediately after the narrator says that "He had forgotten that it is man's right to rule," Gregory finds in the loft (the same loft Waldo was trying to access when the stars first spoke to him) a box of women's clothes and tries them on (212-13). This initial relinquishing of his male sovereignty, marked by covert crossdressing, occasions his decision to find Lyndall. At first the reader is unsure about his motivations for following her, wondering if he has reverted to the script of male sexual domination that would persuade or force her to accept his will, to subsume her to his needs. However, it quickly becomes clear that his ethical understanding has radically shifted from being grounded in his own material needs to a more open respect for her as another human being, not as a sexual object or as a religious duty. Disguised as a woman, Gregory makes great personal sacrifices to discover and care for Lyndall through the last weeks of her life, as she is confined to her deathbed after having given birth to another man's child who lived only three hours (238-41, 246). His caregiving is emphatically non-sexual and non-monetary. It does not benefit him in any way he can brag about on pink

crested paper. He refuses payment for his service until Lyndall's pride forces him to accept it "humbly," overturning stereotypes of men as monetary providers (241), and he performs services such as dressing and carrying her without taking sexual advantage of her weakness (243, 250). The novel describes his care as both ethical and highly transgressive of traditional social codes. For example, after he dresses in women's clothing before entering the hotel where she is dying, he looks for a way to hide his male clothing, "Like a sinner hiding his deed of sin" (239). He tells "a deliberate lie" and is ready to tell "fifty" more to be accepted as her nurse (239). As a male body performing the self-sacrifice typically expected of female gender roles, he destabilizes the ethics of care from the ways in which institutional Christianity and Western patriarchal culture have codified female self-sacrifice, transforming it into a situation of human being-with, witnessing her approach to death. His gender-bending care exceeds both utilitarian self-interest and codes of Victorian duty. His motivation is love, which this transgressive space prevents from becoming coopted by religious rhetoric or by the societal gender norms teleologically constrained toward marriage.

Gregory's ethical transformation suggests Schreiner's insight that one need not wait for the metaphysical event, the disorienting encounter with one's freedom under the stars, to enact a concrete ethics of care toward others. As seen with Waldo and Lyndall, ethics does fall on human beings as excess—we are free, presented to good and evil, always already meaning in our being-with. But this excess is only further expanded by the fact that consciously recognizing it is not prerequisite to ethical action. As seen with Gregory, ethics is also witnessed in human beings' potential to transform themselves and their orientation to others, to act in ways that, consciously or not, distinguish *is* from *ought*, and to make right choices that exceed not only self-interest but also legible, institutionally-sanctioned scripts of moral conduct. We can ease each

other's being-with in this world bounded by death, and the spontaneously unpredictable forms this care may take further affirm our ethical subjectivity and merit a quiet wonder.

The philosophical-literary invitation to wondering openness

Through Waldo's, Lyndall's, and Gregory's different encounters with the strange excess of ethical freedom and meaning as being-with, *The Story of an African Farm* deconstructs the structures of signification that inform Western religious, philosophical, and scientific thought. The novel's circularities, fragments, and extended meditations also create alternative formal methods of thinking about ethics besides the linearity of positivism. It is far from the argumentative treatise's coherent, additive structure of logical points establishing an epistemological foundation to guarantee a set of conclusions.³⁷ The characters' meditations, anticipating formal stream of consciousness, present a subjective alternative to the positivist model privileging empirical objective certitude that nineteenth century science increasingly opposed to the claims of religion. The tension between these structures of signification permeates the novel, which dramatizes the impossibility of finding epistemological models that can posit themselves as capable of "signifying truth" without remainder or excess (Nancy, *Sense* 19). Nancy's post-structuralist fragmentary style resonates with Schreiner's experimental forms, both seeking expression fluid enough to evoke, without shutting down, the ungrounded excess of ethical subjectivity. They creatively use language to gesture asymptotically to this experience without seizing and rigidly defining it. Nancy at times does claim philosophy, implicitly in its post-structural form, as most suited to his project, but he also acknowledges the perspectives of literature and art.³⁸ Philosophy is only one option among the creative modes of witnessing to the experience of ethics. Thus he asks, "Is this not the testimony of the arts and literature? Is not the

first and only purpose of their strange existence the presentation of this strangeness?” (*Being* 10).³⁹ With this openness toward multiple creative modes of thought in the suggestive fluidity of his philosophy, Nancy’s work offers vocabulary for discerning Schreiner’s literary presentation of the strange excess of ethical subjectivity.

Through both form and content, Schreiner’s novel models a literary approach to moral philosophical thinking that seeks to articulate without overdetermining or restricting ethical excess. By moving between different characters to ask its questions, the text voids and avoids claims of stable grounding in any single system. The narrator also resists “dear reader” moralizing so frequent in other Victorian novels, more often dwelling with paradoxes. One such moment echoes the stranger’s sudden wonder about the moral law being beyond legible “fiat” (136); it comes at the end of the chapter narrating Waldo’s vision of Lyndall’s death. The narrator says that ethics cannot be exhaustively founded in any historical moment, since forms of belief change over time, morphing as “dreams and phantoms”; however, human beings also “cannot exist” without these phantoms (206). This paradox calls for thinking that seeks to bridge the gap between ethical subjectivity and how it plays out across different registers of life (260). The novel formally attempts such a bridge, weaving its exploration of ethics across extended meditations that slip between different voices, registers, and genres, a weaving especially visible in the “Times and Seasons” chapter. It blurs the distinction between the narrator’s and the characters’ meditations, which are dispersed across a multiplicity of forms: voiced and felt prayers, exterior and interior monologues, spoken and silent affective exchanges, as well as letters, rhetorical questions, allegories, dreams, and visions. Even as these various forms of thought and communication generate the contours of the story, they also open thought beyond each discrete instance to generate an ethical philosophy that is more fragmentary and minimalist,

not grounded in any one of these forms. They create an orientation of wondering openness that defamiliarizes subjective and interpersonal grappling with injustice.

Such generative dramatization of this ethical excess creates a space to articulate the assumptions motivating readers' own meditations and evaluative interventions or critiques. As they witness Waldo and Lyndall wrestle with ethical freedom, seek for meaning, and finally enact meaning as being-with in their deaths, readers can defamiliarize and reflect on their own participation in the strange work of ethical experience. These characters' struggles confront readers by destabilizing traditional structures of signification, especially religious interpretations of good and evil, positivist narratives of objective access to empirical truth, and patriarchal colonial models of a successful life. Readers can also turn the text's critique back on itself, marshalling these destabilizations, these gestures to the strange experience of ethics, as a means to critique the contradictions when Schreiner's text falls short of its own openness.

The novel's dramatization of ethical subjectivity implicitly motivates the critique of how the text marginalizes native South Africans and thus perpetuates problematic assumptions about race. The novel exposes systems of signification as constructed and provisional, as excluding othered bodies and voices. In Nancy's words, such exclusion operates by determining "some unit of measure" against which to assess human beings, privileging a logic of the "commensurability of subjects" (*Experience* 71). Even attempting to define and defend equality according to such a logic of calculability cannot yield justice. The danger of such logic is that structures of signification can manipulate any conditioned unit of measure for exclusion, yielding anything but equality. In contrast, equality implicitly depends on the excess of ethical subjectivity; justice is "the equality of singularities in the incommensurable of freedom" (71). The meaning that is free-ethical-being-with is what marginalization overlooks in those it deems other. This

overlooking can scale to outright oppression, which actively denies the experience of ethical freedom or rationalizes freedom as measurable and restricted to different bodies. Such were the imperial agendas Schreiner protested. But it can also be more subtle, affecting how novels populate the centers and margins of their narratives.

I want to give the last word, then, to one of these marginalized characters, an African woman. The novel's fragmentary modes of thinking ethics as excess turn against the implicit grounding of different levels of readerly attention in particularities of race. For this woman also participates in the novel's heteroglossic exploration of ethical freedom, the eruptive encounter of moral judgment against injustice. She meets Waldo's father Otto before his death. Her husband who worked on the farm had made off with some sheep and left her and her child behind. Now dismissed by Bonaparte and Tant' Sannie from work herself, she is sitting on the side of the road, "like Hagar" (54).⁴⁰ The woman's moral outrage at the injustice of her situation is registered through her "sullen silence" that persists even in the face of Otto's giving her food and the coat off his back. He does not demand, and she does not offer, thanks of any sort—she maintains her angry silence, and he is simply glad that now they will sleep slightly more comfortably than they would have otherwise (54).⁴¹ He does not inflate his gesture of care for circulation in an economy recognizable by the colonial system of master and servant, land owner and dependent, that would seek to delegitimize her anger as unwarranted. Her persistent anger opens a space of tension that the text refuses to resolve. It invites readers to critique the colonial labor system that would make a man feel he needed to run off with the sheep he was hired to watch, and to condemn the patriarchal system that would then punish his abandoned wife and child for his actions. Otto narrates his care for her as consistent with the Christian injunction to care for the poor, yet beyond his narrative there is room to critique the forms religion can take

when operating within the colonial complex. Here it assumes the form of the White male savior figure extending charity to the Black female oppressed figure but not doing anything to substantially overturn the system that oppressed her in the first place. So her anger persists, attesting her ethical freedom, but the scene is brief compared to the other characters' much longer meditations on ethical questions.

In critiquing this scene, we take as meaningful and demanding this woman's ethical freedom and persistent being-with—her judgment of anger against injustice. We implicitly acknowledge our own investment as ethical beings: in condemning the racial injustice oppressing her, we experience our judgment as urgent and valuable. It does not matter how anomalous it may seem in the modern conception of the universe as indifferent to the judgment that racism is unjust. This text articulates a readerly space in which we experience ethical judgment that protests the way things are in favor of the way things ought to be. As Nancy writes, this ethical demand “is no longer a matter of interpreting the world, but of transforming it” (*Sense* 8). This leap from interpretation to transformation, this decision—whence its mechanism, its motivation? Such is the aporia of ethical subjectivity, the ethics as excess to which Schreiner and Nancy gesture. As readers we can wonder with Waldo and Lyndall at the strangeness of our ethical freedom under the indifferent stars, attested as we critique the injustice that the text both overtly critiques in Bonaparte's cruelty and implicitly reproduces in narratively marginalizing this African woman. We recognize how her moral outrage exceeds the colonial system of signification, the excess of her freedom's judgment, her refusal to be placated according to the system's terms. Critique affirms that our sense of *ought* is a wonder that exceeds what *is*; it suggests that the way the world appears, dominated by the closure of freedom in unjust, exclusionary systems of signification, should be transformed.

Endnotes

Introduction Notes

¹ The collection *Who Comes After the Subject?* (1991) is representative of the difficulty of returning to think about subjectivity after its critique. Here, prominent French philosophers such as Alain Badiou, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Rancière trace various critiques of subjectivity and explore possible ways of rethinking subjectivity post-critique. My work brings these questions to bear on how Victorian literature explores the excess of ethical subjectivity.

² For a classic study of the Victorian sage tradition, see John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (1953). See also George Landow's *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (1986).

³ See for example how Justin Prystash, in "'The Grand Still Mirror of Eternity': Temporal Dualism and Subjectification in Carlyle and Dickens" (2010), analyzes how these two authors contribute to the exclusionary logic of the Victorian subject, which "attempts to construct women, the working classes, savages, and abject humanity in general as satellites of a universalized male power. Representations of the eternal subject support a paternalist politics that reaches from the drawing-room to heaven, enabling the ideologies of the separate spheres, working-class reform, and empire" (90). For some broader examples analyzing such exclusionary rhetoric about Victorian subjectivity, see Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1988); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995); Radhika Mohanram, *Imperial White: Race, Diaspora, and the British Empire* (2007); Pablo Mukherjee, "Victorian Empire" (2012); Patrick Brantlinger, "Imperialism" (2018); and Sukanya Banerjee, "Transimperial" (2018).

⁴ The collection edited by Jürgen Schläeger, *Representations of Emotional Excess* (2000), examines a wide range of literature from different time periods, with Jana Gohrlich's chapter focusing on the Victorian era: "Familiar Excess? Emotion and the Family in Victorian Literature." Karen Leigh Tongson, in *Ethical Excess: Stylizing Difference in Victorian Critical Prose from Carlyle to Wilde* (2003), focuses on style as character and "ethics as form," showing "how the ethical appeal in Victorian prose relies on a superabundance of style and 'personality' to promote an idiosyncratic and exceptional mode of ethical living" (1-2). Sarah C. Alexander, in *Victorian Excesses: The Poetics and Politics of Street Life in London* (2010), focuses on the competing extremes of "[e]xcess and lack" in London due to capitalism (ii). Nathan K. Hensley's *Forms of Empire* (2016) examines "form and excess" through Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866) alongside the 1866 Morant Bay Jamaica rebellion repressed by Governor Eyre. His analysis exposes the excess of violence enabled by what ostensibly should contain excess, the force of law, showing how Swinburne and accounts of the violence in Jamaica both engage in "formally mediated political thinking" (137-39). Michael Tondre, in *The Physics of Possibility: Victorian Fiction, Science, and Gender* (2018), includes a chapter on "George Eliot's 'Fine Excess': *Middlemarch*, Energy, and Incalculable Diffusion," which focuses on the scientific meaning of the diffusion of "'excess' energy" and emotion as Eliot applies it to gradual social and moral improvement (126-27, 130), a model that offers what Tondre calls a "postsubjective logic of development, in which individual influence could circulate throughout the social web" (131).

⁵ Following are some of the additional contemporary theorists of excessive ethical subjectivity who have influenced my thinking.

Jacques Derrida, in an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy for the collection *Who Comes After the Subject?*, says that any return to subjectivity after the Western critique of the subject can come only by way of deconstruction. That is, ethical subjectivity opens through a process of thinking, not the fixity of a concept, for “there neither can be nor should be any concept adequate to what we call responsibility. Responsibility carries within it, and must do so, an essential excessiveness. [...] I believe there is no responsibility, no ethico-political decision, that must not pass through the proofs of the incalculable or the undecidable. Otherwise everything would be reducible to calculation, program, causality, and, at best, ‘hypothetical imperative’” (108).

Alain Badiou, in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001), describes an ethical subject as created by fidelity to an event, which happens when truth exceeds and cuts across the situation of knowledge: “The ‘some-one’ thus caught up in what attests that he belongs to the truth-process as one of its foundation-points is simultaneously *himself*, nothing other than himself, a multiple singularity recognizable among all others, and *in excess of himself*, because the uncertain course [*tracé aléatoire*] of fidelity *passes through him*, transfixes his singular body and inscribes him, from within time, in an instant of eternity” (45).

Simon Critchley, in *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (2007), clarifies how ethics is inseparable from questions of human subjectivity. His goal is, “first, to outline a theory of ethical experience based on the concepts of approval and demand; and second, to show how this theory presupposes a model of ethical subjectivity” (9). Ethics is an excess that renders the ethical subject “divided,” constituted “by commitment or fidelity to an unfulfillable demand,” which can also be described as “the experience of conscience, which is a concept that I want to place back at the heart of ethics” (11). As I will do, Critchley invokes Levinas as one of his key interlocutors defining this excessive ethical subjectivity.

Molly Anne Rothenberg, in *The Excessive Subject: A New Theory of Social Change* (2010), emphasizes that acknowledging excessive ethical subjectivity is necessary for any coherent efforts toward social justice: “Every subject is an ‘excessive’ subject. [...] We could say that the excess produced by the extimate cause of subjectivity is both the obstacle to our knowing our meaning as social beings and the necessary ingredient of the social field within which we obtain the only meaning that we will ever have, however uncertain. [...] the excess is ineradicable. Hence any theory of social change must either find a way to include it or doom itself to rehearsing the same problems again and again” (10).

Like Critchley, Judith Butler, in “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation” (2012), references the “Levinasian undercurrent” in this excess of ethical subjectivity: “something impinges upon us, without our being able to anticipate or prepare for it in advance, and this means that we are in such moments affronted by something that is beyond our will, not of our making, that comes to us from the outside, as an imposition but also as an ethical demand. I want to suggest that these are ethical obligations that do not require our consent, and neither are they the result of contracts or agreements into which any of us have deliberately entered” (135). This exceeding obligation constitutes what it means to be human.

Gabriela Bastera, in *The Subject of Freedom: Kant and Levinas* (2015), compares how both these moral philosophers create theories of “unconditioned subjectivity” (48). She traces out the gap between this experience of unconditioned formal obligation as excess and the conditioned site of rationality, where

abuses have the potential to arise but where justice also seeks to trace out concrete action for the other: “since ethical excess is not translatable to consciousness, it is only too easy to distort ethical obligation by recasting its alterity as an authoritarian threatening agency that judges and condemns and inflicts guilt. Guilt fills the lapse left by the absence from representation of the ethical demand, and gives obligation a ‘content’” (129). “And the problem that emerges—that is constructed retroactively—with the third and self-consciousness is no other than the subject. And with the subject come to light philosophy, knowledge, science, reciprocity, rationality, representation, and political agency” (132).

Dominik Finkelde, in *Excessive Subjectivity: Kant, Hegel, Lacan, and the Foundations of Ethics* (2017), further emphasizes the gap between ethical subjectivity’s excess and sociocultural morality: “Excessive subjectivity, being predicated upon a noncoincidence of prevailing norms with the unintelligible certainty of personal morality, cannot be negotiated through any power of judgment—and it is precisely because of this, its impenetrability by reason, that excessive subjectivity is capable of realizing a utopian potentiality that lies outside both reality and possibility” (12).

⁶ Victorianist and cultural critic Amanda Anderson, in *Psyche and Ethos: Moral Life after Psychology* (2018), describes how ethical subjectivity has been dismissed on multiple fronts. On one side, literary and cultural critics in the tradition of Freud and Foucault “see morality as a front for ideology, as something in need of critique. [...] the prominence of ideological critique has resulted in a situation in which moral frameworks are typically seen as conduits for ideology, or in the service of the status quo” (4). On another side, evolutionary psychology and cognitive science likewise approach ethical subjectivity with “evasion and suspicion” (7). The moral claims extrapolated from these sciences argue that thought and moral judgments are automatic and conditioned rather than deliberate and free; their primary ethos is “deflationary,” claiming that the subjective account of moral experience can be debunked by objective methods (21-23, 31). But the irony is that even these remain moral claims.

⁷ Samuel Fleischacker, in *What is Enlightenment?* (2013), articulates more broadly the ambivalence with which the Enlightenment is regarded on both ends of the current political spectrum: “Critics on the right accuse the Enlightenment of indifference to the importance of tradition and community, and a thoughtless hostility to religion; some religious fundamentalists are indeed literally waging war on the heritage of the Enlightenment, especially as that is manifested in an emphasis on individual freedom. At the same time, critics on the left say that Enlightenment individualism provides ideological cover for the most oppressive aspects of capitalism” (6). I accord with how Fleischacker redresses this hostility by distinguishing certain “minimal conditions” for Enlightenment subjectivity in Kant’s thought from the overdetermined “maximalist” conditions of the entire system (6-7), arguing that the former minimal conditions of thinking for oneself are still valuable for contemporary ethics (7).

⁸ See for example the section “On Being Human” in Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012), where she details how “Ideas about what counted as human in association with the power to define people as human or not human were already encoded in imperial and colonial discourses [...] Imperialism provided the means through which concepts of what counts as human could be applied systematically as forms of classification, for example through hierarchies of race and typologies of different societies” (26).

⁹ See for example Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, 1855 (325-26, 328, 368-69, 422, 461-62, 471, 581-83); Thomas Huxley, *Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature*, 1863 (94, 158-60, 166-67, 180); James Hunt, “On the Negro’s Place in Nature,” 1864 (3-4, 11); Charles Darwin, *The Descent of*

Man, 1871 (35, 97, 106-7, 214); Francis Galton, "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims," 1904 (4-6). Mukherjee overviews more examples of such racist theories (646-48).

¹⁰ *The Turn to Ethics* (2000), a key essay collection summarizing the ongoing ethical turn, demonstrates in its range of topics the shift away from universals toward historical and cultural particulars, even as a recurring question is the relation between them. Modern ethics is an ongoing critical process that questions the self-sufficient rational subject and existing normative expectations, culminating in a respectful reorientation toward the other as difference (Garber et al. viii-ix). Going even further, ethics has also become a vaguely disciplinary modifier that can be attached to any political category or ideal of "professional conduct" (Buell 3, 9). A brief search for "ethics" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* captures the dispersal of the term across entries for African ethics, business ethics, Chinese ethics, environmental ethics, feminist ethics, and public health ethics, to name a few.

I join Beatrice Hanssen in asking one of the central questions ethical theory faces today: "how to combine a commitment to the universal recognition of others—whether it be a matter of ethical, cultural, or legal recognition—with a respect for the concrete particularism, difference, or asymmetry of others?" (130). Hanssen analyzes Frantz Fanon as one theorist who seeks to answer this question: "His was a philosophy animated by the sincere, albeit utopian, belief that it might be possible to recapture a new concrete, universalist humanism that would once and for all supplant its earlier, abstract parody, or farce" (144). Similarly, in his article "Ethics and Subjectivity: A Reversal of Perspective" (1995), Johan Taels speaks of "Isolated subjectivity," writing, "How might we accommodate its chaotic attitudes and perceptions under the same roof with the demand for a universal ethics?" (165). He describes the reified conception of subjectivity as "the autonomous consciousness that objectivises the world, brings it to a standstill, makes it into an object of its explanatory representation and thereby keeps it in its grasp" (165). This stereotypical Enlightenment subjectivity has no place in ethics. Yet there is a possibility for openness within a conception of subjectivity that is not exclusively dependent on idiosyncratic particularities of time and space, though it is inextricably embodied: "objectivity and universality are not to be found outside or above the singular subject, but only in the particularity and concreteness of the ethical 'I'. Put more succinctly, the concrete ethical 'I' makes the objectivity and universality of ethics possible" (166). Similarly, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in *Shadows of Ethics* (1999), writes about "the apparent underdetermination of the *ought*" (28), arguing that both universal ethics and moral particularity are needed to keep each other ethical (26-30).

¹¹ As Critchley writes in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1999), deconstructive reading "articulates the unconditioned ethical conditions of possibility for the interruption of ontological or logocentric closure" (31); "what interrupts the closure of a determinate context, making that context an open structure, is an unconditional affirmation that intervenes in this context and motivates deconstruction" (32).

¹² See Thomas Nagel's famous article "What is it Like to Be a Bat?" (1974), where he explores the resistance of self-conscious thought to understanding by anyone other than the person experiencing it; this irreducible subjectivity is precisely what evades all attempts by fields such as evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience to objectively account for consciousness.

¹³ In her study *Wonder and Generosity: Their Role in Ethics and Politics* (2013), Marguerite La Caze likewise recognizes that the language of ethics inherently relies on an assumption of the universal capacity for will and hence responsibility (2). Extending her claim, I add as equally important for ethics,

and inextricable from will, the experiences of self-conscious thought and of conscience or a sense of unconditioned obligation.

¹⁴ For an excellent account of Derrida's naming of this leap as undecidability, and his working through of decision's wager in the face of conflicting demands in *The Gift of Death* (1992), see chapter four of Mary-Jane Rubenstein's *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (2008). The whole book provides a philosophical account contrasting closure and rejection with wonder's potential as an ethical comportment of openness toward otherness. I revisit this work at greater length in chapter one.

¹⁵ Amanda Anderson defends the possibility of such critical distance that is not immediately dismissed as ideology in her book *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (2006). She seeks to "draw attention to the underdeveloped and often incoherent evaluative stance of contemporary theory, its inability to clearly avow the norms and values underlying its own critical programs. In particular, I contest the prevalent skepticism about the possibility or desirability of achieving reflective distance on one's social or cultural positioning" (1). We can never achieve a neutral, objective, wholly exterior view. She affirms as valuable for ethical thought "the resources of the Kantian and liberal traditions" (5), and the possibility of rethinking "agent-centered ideas of character and self-cultivation" (9).

¹⁶ Charles Taylor writes of the impossibility of defining ethical subjectivity in the way that science seeks to objectively define any other natural object (33-34): "We are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. [...] these things have significance for me, and the issue of my identity is worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues. To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn't in principle be an answer" (34). See also Marilynne Robinson's primary argument in *Absence of Mind* (2010) against reductively extrapolating from the physical sciences, especially in popularized evolutionary psychology, the idea that our conceptions of ourselves are subjectively biased and therefore not to be trusted as accurate representations of who we are (22, 35-36). I engage Robinson at greater length in my third chapter.

¹⁷ Throughout my work, all italics in citations are original.

¹⁸ For Kant, self-reflective thought and the moral law are inseparable, and they are also simply given dimensions of human experience, undetermined by any natural cause or hypothetical purpose. In his book *Kant on Mind, Action, and Ethics* (2014), Julian Wuerth examines all of Kant's works, lesser-known as well as more familiar, to demonstrate the extent to which Kant saw the given faculties of the mind as interrelated (13). Bastera explores this ungroundedness of ethical subjectivity at greater length: Kant's "unconditioned subjectivity" works as "a dynamic system which is not stable or self-contained, but rather contingent and in progress" (48). Eli Friedlander's analysis *Expressions of Judgment* (2015) likewise highlights how Kant's account of morality acknowledges "the tension between living in time and the timelessness of the unconditioned demand" (58).

¹⁹ Similarly, Rubenstein writes, "Unless decision undergoes what Derrida variously calls 'the test of the antinomy' or 'the aporia' or 'the undecidable,' decision is not decision at all, but rather the unthinking execution of a program. [...] the undecidable can name that which 'remains heterogeneous both to the dialectic and to the calculable.' It is Derrida's insistence that undecidability understood in this last sense,

far from abandoning us to some apolitical and anethical zone of complacency, indifference, or ‘complete freeplay,’ actually opens the space of ethics, politics, and responsibility itself” (137-38).

²⁰ See Critchley’s essay “Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity?” in *Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity* (1999). Here he writes, “the anti-humanist critique of subjectivity clears a place for the subject conceived in terms of subjection, substitution and hostage [some of Levinas’s terms for infinite obligation]. [...] Levinasian ethics is a humanism, but it is a humanism of the other human being” (67). He further explains how Levinas sustains the critique of stable Enlightenment subjectivity while reimagining ethical subjectivity: “Although the human being is undoubtedly and massively determined by the contexts—sociohistorical, psychobiographical, linguistic, biological—into which he or she is inserted, this in no way negates the unconditional priority of the ethical moment which rends those contexts. Thus, the insights of anti-humanism and poststructuralism might well be necessary conditions for the determination of subjectivity, but they are not sufficient to explain the extraordinary event of my responsibility for another, what Levinas calls, in a key word of his later work, the holiness or saintliness (*la sainteté*) of the human being” (69-70).

²¹ For a useful account of subjectivity in the western philosophical tradition, see *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self* (2006), where Martin and Barresi trace the changing conceptions of the phenomenon of human self-awareness from the ancient unified soul through the enlightened rational self to modern fragmented bodies (5). See also *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (2004) by Dror Wahrman; and *Self and Subjectivity* (2005), a collection of philosophical texts addressing issues of subjectivity, introduced and edited by Kim Atkins.

²² I thus take a different perspective from other studies such as J. Hillis Miller’s classic *Victorian Subjects* (1991). This set of essays works through how Victorian authors touched on various inflections of the concept *subject*, “as topic, as subjectivity, and as one who is subjected or subaltern,” interpellated by ideology (vii). Throughout, Miller’s deconstructive stance privileges the latter interpretation. Unlike Miller, I examine more closely how Victorian authors engage the language of self-conscious thought, conscience or obligation, and agency or freedom to describe ethical subjectivity in a way that highlights these experiences not as stable reinforcers of the status quo, but as exceeding foregone conclusions and determinate causes. Closer attention to the language of these moments shows how they defamiliarize subjectivity against typical narratives of the Enlightenment subject.

²³ For overviews of Victorian religion, including Evangelicalism, the Broad Church, and the Tractarian Oxford movement, see for instance chapter three of Philip Davis’s *The Victorians* (2002); Elisabeth Jay’s chapter “Spirituality” in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature* (2012); and Ilana M. Blumberg’s article “Religion” in the recent special issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2018).

²⁴ See for example how Ruskin critiqued the oppression of the poor for being profoundly unbiblical; true believers in both Judaism and Christianity would check such exploitation (27: 94-95). See also Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which reads the modern project of disenchantment not as a product of the Enlightenment value of reason, but as a refusal of reason through the mystification of the culture industry; true enlightened rationality, if arrested in its “self-destruction,” would likewise check such exploitation (xvi, 20). In his book *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (2001), J. M. Bernstein explains that for Adorno, “the meaning deficit caused by the disenchantment of the world is equally a rationality deficit. Only an expanded conception of reason which derives from a reinscription of conceptuality can lead to a restoration of ethical meaning” (4).

²⁵ See for example William J. Scheick's *Fictional Structure and Ethics: The Turn-of-the-Century English Novel* (1990); Adam Zachary Newton's *Narrative Ethics* (1997); Rae Greiner's *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (2012); Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015); and Jesse Rosenthal's *Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel* (2016).

²⁶ See the range of articles on these and other topics covered in the recent "Keywords" issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2018). Following are a few other representative sources that prioritize this New Historicist approach, in addition to those cited in notes above and below: **Aesthetics:** Linda M. Shires, "The Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel: Form, Subjectivity, Ideology" (2000); Jonah Siegel, "Victorian Aesthetics" (2016). **Colonialism:** Kristine Kelly, "Aesthetic Desire and Imperialist Disappointment in Trollope's *The Bertrams* and the *Murray Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine*" (2015); Florence Labaune-Demeule, "The Novel in Post-Colonial Literatures: Re-Mapping the Genre" (2016). **Economics:** Mary Poovey, "Economics and Finance" (2012); Ilana M. Blumberg, *Victorian Sacrifice: Ethics and Economics in Mid-Century Novels* (2013); Eleanor Reeds, "The Ethics of Risk in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*: The Role of Capital in an Industrial Romance" (2013). **Gender:** Gretchen Braun, "'Untarnished Purity': Ethics, Agency, and the Victorian Fallen Woman" (2015); Kirby-Jane Hallum, *Aestheticism and the Marriage Market in Victorian Popular Fiction: The Art of Female Beauty* (2015). **Labor:** Chinnie Ding, "'Myriad-Headed, Myriad-Handed': Labor in *Middlemarch*" (2012); Joshua Gooch, *The Victorian Novel, Service Work, and the Nineteenth-Century Economy* (2015). **Medicine:** Lisieux M. Huelman, "Medical Ethics in Victorian Fiction" (2013). **Religion:** Emily Walker Heady, *Victorian Conversion Narratives and Reading Communities* (2013); John Kucich, "Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel: Religion and Science" (2013); Richard Hughes Gibson, *Forgiveness in Victorian Literature: Grammar, Narrative, and Community* (2015). **Science:** Cannon Schmitt, "Science and the Novel" (2012); Anne DeWitt, *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel* (2013); Anna Neill, *Primitive Minds: Evolution and Spiritual Experience in the Victorian Novel* (2013); Jonathan Smith, "The Victorian Novel and Science" (2013); Allison Easley, "Human Evolution: A 'Deadly War ... between Flesh and Spirit'" (2016).

²⁷ In *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference* (2011), Rebecca Mitchell uses Levinas's ethics of alterity as her philosophical lens to argue that an "ethical expansion" is facilitated through reading literature. Such an expansion comes not by literature's offering a lesson on the accessibility of the human other to sympathy, but by its demonstration, especially through novelistic content and form, that the other is always ultimately inaccessible to the self. This mysterious "alterity" serves as the very condition for ethics (x, 18, 19). I build on Mitchell's argument by dwelling more deliberately not just on how Victorian literature shows the idea of unknowable alterity, but more precisely on how it imagines the alterity of the subjective experiences of thought, conscience, and freedom as intrinsically valuable and deserving of wonder.

²⁸ Rachel Hollander, in *Narrative Hospitality in Late Victorian Fiction: Novel Ethics* (2013), cites Levinas and Derrida to trace a shift in how late Victorian novels narrate ethics, from a self-bound sympathy to an other-oriented hospitality that entails opening oneself, both individually and in one's domestic and even national space, to the unpredictable demand of the other (15; cf. Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 75, 125; *A Certain* 451). This opening enables critical thought, questioning the limits of existing social structures (Hollander 18). I also analyze moments when Victorian literature encounters an ethics of obligation that opens the self toward the other. However, I read the open response to exceeding

obligation less as hospitality than as obedience, and I emphasize this obligation as signaling the excess of ethical subjectivity in oneself and in others.

²⁹ See Andrew Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2008), which analyzes Victorian formal narratives of “moral perfectionism”—the motif of finding in another person an exemplar, an inspiration to improve and morally develop one’s better self (3). Miller engages figures such as Roland Barthes, Stanley Cavell, Eve Sedgwick, Bernard Williams, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

³⁰ The German Academy Edition of Kant’s works may be accessed online at <https://korpora.zim.uni-duisburg-essen.de/Kant/>. The citation from the *Critique of Practical Reason* 5: 161 referenced here may be found at <https://korpora.zim.uni-duisburg-essen.de/Kant/aa05/161.html>.

³¹ As different philosophers have analyzed wonder, various affordances and challenges in relation to ethics have also emerged. See my account of the relation between ethics and philosophical wonder extending from Plato through Descartes to Luce Irigaray, Hannah Arendt, and others in the footnotes of chapter one.

³² For Kant, such situation- and culture-specific evaluations of actions cannot form a consistent theory of ethics, which goes beyond “melting, tender feelings or high-flown, puffed-up pretensions” and instead operates through “the *respect for ourselves* in the consciousness of our freedom” (*Practical Reason* 5: 157, 161/PP 265, 269). There are two senses of wonder inherent in Kant’s respect for the moral law, “*Achtung as attentio* and *Achtung as reverentia*” (Basterra 94). Wonder encompasses both these senses of attentiveness and reverence. Such respect, as Silvia Jonas describes in her study *Ineffability and its Metaphysics* (2016), allows us also to infer such consciousness of freedom in others.

³³ Such wonder at ethical subjectivity is different from the typical aesthetics of the sublime, where the self-sufficient Romantic ego maintains its stable ground of safety whence to stand in terror and delight at awe-inspiring natural landscapes or events evocative of “pain and danger” that are separate from the self (Burke 13-14, 32; Merritt 38). Wonder at ethical subjectivity entails the realization that one cannot step outside of oneself; there is no safe vantage point—the ground opens beneath one’s very feet. This wonder transforms how one sees oneself and others. Paul Crowther analyzes how Kant, in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), distinguishes between the natural sublime, such as he had described in his early *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), and “that feeling of respect which arises from sublime moral consciousness”; that is, in his later critical work, Kant sought to “reserve the term sublime exclusively for the moral domain” (26-27). Paul Guyer and Melissa McBay Merritt also clarify this distinction, how “Kant insists on the moral source of the sublime” (Merritt 38, 49; cf. Guyer, *Values* 224-25, 229, 234). See Kant, *Practical Reason* 5: 75-79/PP 201-4; and *Power of Judgment* 5: 257-58, 268/CPJ 140-41, 151.

³⁴ For example, see Sarah Stickney Ellis’s popular book *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839), or the ending of Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), a novel “Inscribed to Thomas Carlyle” (2), with its exemplary lesson in the familial “duty to be done” and its injunction to the readers to deliberately engage in their own “fields of action” (222).

³⁵ Many Victorians lost their hold on religion as a comforting stability through German and French higher criticism of the Bible. David Friedrich Strauss and Ernest Renan wrote lives of Jesus historicizing him as a human being, not as God; Ludwig Feuerbach wrote of God as a projection of idealized human qualities.

George Eliot translated both Strauss and Feuerbach; their arguments infiltrated English thought through her own writing (Altick 219-21; Philip Davis, *Victorians* 147; Jay 305).

³⁶ Challenges to organized religion emerged with scientific discoveries such as the geological insights that would throw doubt on literal views of the Bible's account of creation, considered in works such as Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) and Hugh Miller's *The Testimony of the Rocks* (1857) (Altick 222-26; Philip Davis, *Victorians* 66-67). Wietske Smeele has explored nineteenth century geological and paleontological discoveries as among the factors dislocating the human subject; she theorizes this dislocation as the Victorian posthuman.

³⁷ Evolutionary theories put forward by such as Erasmus Darwin, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, and Charles Darwin led to particularly negative implications for conceptions of the human as a divinely-grounded moral being. Such implications were made explicit in the subsequent theories of social Darwinism, articulated most prominently by Herbert Spencer, which in turn reinforced liberal capitalist ideologies of competition and self-interest as fundamental determinations of human identity (Altick 226-32; Philip Davis, *Victorians* 59-66; George Levine, Forward x; Beer, *Darwin's Plots* xix-xx, xxi-xxii; Beer, "Science and Literature" 477-81).

³⁸ This late nineteenth-century empirical psychology was perhaps perceived as most explicitly disenchanting of the human capacity for thought. Rick Rylance, in *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880* (2000), articulates the conflicting views surrounding the formation of this new scientific discipline to study the mechanical workings of the human mind. He indicates psychology's efforts to reground in new models what it destabilized, a common motif resounding throughout the disenchantment narrative: "Psychology was, for Victorian culture, a way of reflecting upon the formation of its *own* mind as it loosened itself from the traditions of the past; it was a staging of a debate about its own identity" (4). See also Philip Davis's overview of Victorian psychology in chapter four of *The Victorians* (2002) and Helen Small's chapter "Subjectivity, Psychology, and the Imagination" in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature* (2012). William James directly applied empirical psychology's assumptions about human thought as materially explicable to religion in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Yet James also resists the impulse to carry the disenchanting implications of his materialist explanations too far (14), acknowledging how subjectively real the experience of ineffability is to those whose emotional constitution leads them to interpret it religiously. He argues that, despite secular narratives, religious feeling for those people who still call it such "adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else" (47). The loss of enchanted wonder is not complete; it has just been decentered, confined to particular traditions that continue to be practiced.

³⁹ See also the opening lines of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944): "Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge" (1). Weber insists in a highly gendered manner that one must not retreat from this chilly modern wasteland: one must act "like a man" and choose "the plain duty of intellectual integrity" (155). In line with the title of his essay, which defines science as a new "vocation" that summons courageous intellectual elites, modern disenchantment is often thought about in terms that oppose science and religion, or more precisely set up science as a new code of values, requiring the virtuous sacrifice of naïve metaphysical enchantment and comforting religion alike in the service of objective truth (Daston and Galison 53, 185, 203). Weber condescendingly allows that those who cannot

bear the pressure of their new scientific vocation are welcome to make a “sacrifice” of their intellect and retreat to atavistic religious vocations (155).

⁴⁰ Matthew Arnold, “purged” of his old traditional “faith” and enjoined to seek instead the rationalized, “high, white star of Truth,” nevertheless finds himself in the lone and dreary wilderness, “Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born” (“Stanzas” 67-70, 85-86). He despairs on the shores of the world, hearing “The Sea of Faith” ebbing away, sounding ever more faintly its “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” (“Dover Beach” 21, 25). Similarly, in Olive Schreiner’s novel *The Story of an African Farm*, Waldo becomes alienated from the faith of his father after many long internal struggles (9, 33, 101-18, 254-60). Tennyson struggles through the many stanzas of *In Memoriam* to reconcile at last the “wonders” he believes Arthur Hallam has found in a traditional Christian heaven with “all the secular to-be” that the modern believer in these wonders must face (41.22-23). Gerard Manly Hopkins even more fervently retains his belief that though the world has been “seared with trade,” it still is “charged with the grandeur of God”; an ungrounded “mystery” still resonates through “the world’s splendor and wonder” (27, 14).

⁴¹ See for example Eric Lindstrom, *Romantic Fiat: Demystification and Enchantment in Lyric Poetry* (2011); Matthew Robert Lorenz, *Wordsworth’s Philosophy of Wonder: Epistemology, Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology* (2012); and Louise Economides, *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature* (2016).

⁴² See for example George Levine’s focus on enchantment with the wonders of new scientific discoveries in his book *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* (2008). Along similar lines as Levine’s work, Michael R. Page analyzes how early science fiction registered this scientific wonder; his study “‘Continual food for discovery and wonder’: Science and the Nineteenth-century British Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H. G. Wells” (2008) examines how works by such as Mary Shelley, S. T. Coleridge, Charles Kingsley, and H. G. Wells manifest fascination with “the wonders of modern science” (126), implicitly continuing the Socratic model of wonder, whose posing of questions and seeking of answers lead not to closure but to ever more questions and growing awe at the inexhaustible complexity of existence. See also Jude V. Nixon, “‘Lost in the Vast Worlds of Wonder’: Dickens and Science” (2005); Iwan Rhys Morus, “Worlds of Wonder: Sensation and the Victorian Scientific Performance” (2010); and Nadja Durbach, “‘Skinless Wonders’: Body Worlds and the Victorian Freak Show” (2014).

⁴³ For an example of the Victorian use of wonder in this sense, see Richard Horne, “The Wonders of 1851,” in *Household Words*. See also Geoffrey Cantor, “Emotional Reactions to the Great Exhibition of 1851” (2015); and Jo Briggs, *Novelty Fair: British Visual Culture between Chartism and the Great Exhibition* (2016).

⁴⁴ See for example Anita C. Wilson, “The Shining Garb of Wonder: The Paradox of Literary Fairy Tales in Mid-Victorian England” (1993); Caroline Sumpter, *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale* (2008), which challenges some Victorian assumptions that the periodical press posed a disenchanting threat to fairy tales or “tales of wonder” (2-3); and Greta Gwen Gard, *The Free Market and the Fairy Tale, 1823-1857* (2014). Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, in *Fairy Tales, Natural History and Victorian Culture* (2014), examines overlap between the “wonders of nature” and the “wonders of evolution” in Victorian fantasy and children’s authors such as Charles Kingsley and Arabella Buckley (15, 47).

⁴⁵ William Vander Lugt's *Debating Disenchantment: The Victorians and Modern Ethics* (2008) defines Aristotelian virtue ethics, which is character-focused, as enchanted, finding it in Victorian literature and arguing that it still informs modern assumptions about particular ethical behavior; his argument is informed by Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (2). Kara Elizabeth Wittman's *States of Wonder in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (2008) argues that, on the level of both content and form, Victorian novels portray and theorize the experience of "wonder *per se*" (13). Wittman pushes against readings by Lukács and other twentieth-century theorists who see the nineteenth-century realist novel as manifesting the dominant narrative about the rationalist disenchantment of the age (3-4), where characters became lost, "transcendentally homeless," in a world where science prioritized what was concretely visible to the senses over the ineffable that exceeds the horizon of the senses (3, 5). Wittman provides a useful survey of literary studies that resist the "disenchantment thesis" (11-12). Among these are Simon During's focus on magic and nineteenth-century spiritualism in *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (2004); and David Payne's focus on the fictional form of serialization in *The Reenchantment of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot and Serialization* (2005).

⁴⁶ Kant explicitly refutes the moral sense philosophers' view that feeling can determine ethics; he argues instead that the moral law is experienced *a priori*, in other words, that it exerts its demand categorically, that it is not conditioned, and that it precedes all other affectively-grounded considerations: wonder is simply a response to this categorical ethical subjectivity, not a conditioning determinant to goodness. Kant does not therefore deny that affect plays a role in how people choose to respond to the categorical imperative in any particular instance as they navigate sensible experience, but he merely posits that such affect, because conditioned by circumstance, is qualitatively different from, because it follows after, the unconditioned moral law (Wuerth 277; Crowther 25-26; Guyer, *Values* 225-26).

⁴⁷ Hanssen writes, "the ethical [...] betokens the place of a radical openness, a holding open of the realm of possibilities" (165).

⁴⁸ Taylor writes, "A self exists only within [...] 'webs of interlocution'" (36), and Jean-Luc Nancy extends the simultaneity of language and communal existence to ethics: "Ever since there have been human beings, there has been language. And could we not say that language really is the most just thing in the world? For language to arise, for us to be able to talk to each other, there has to be mutual recognition" (*God* 53). For a classic account of the impossibility of separating the development of language and of society, see Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (96-97). For a twentieth-century discussion of literary language as having its being only in community, see Sartre, *What is Literature?* (1948). Derrida deconstructs the Western privileging of speech over writing in *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Writing and Difference* (1967).

Chapter One Notes

¹ For classic studies on the main Victorian authors who became designated as sage writers, see John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (1953) and George P. Landow, *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (1986).

² See John Morrow 33, 88-89; George Levine, *Boundaries* 17.

³ Morrow writes that interpreting Carlyle as an unusually bigoted outlier for his time “rests on a misreading of racial discourse in mid Victorian Britain. While pro-emancipation sentiment was strong in the late 1820s and 1830s it was not universal. [...] Claims about the natural and permanent inferiority of blacks—advanced in some cases by reference to decline of the British West Indies—were becoming commonplaces, sometimes endorsed by influential figures in anthropology and science. These accounts were contested, but opposition often reflected disagreement over the causes of inferiority, rather than the fact of it” (130-31).

⁴ John Stuart Mill offered a sharp reproach to Carlyle’s diatribe in his essay “The Negro Question,” published in *Fraser’s Magazine* (vol. 41, January 1850, pp. 25-31). He criticizes Carlyle’s refusal to question the “human tyranny and injustice” of slavery and his obsession with the “gospel of work,” which Mill finds insufficient as a maxim of conduct: “There is nothing laudable in work for work’s sake. To work voluntarily for a worthy object is laudable; but what constitutes a worthy object? [...] While we talk only of work, and not of its object, we are far from the root of the matter” (87, 90-91). Howard W. Fulweiler, in “The Strange Case of Governor Eyre: Race and the ‘Victorian frame of mind’” (2000), analyzes Carlyle’s and Mill’s opposition over questions of race, showing how it demonstrates “the fundamental dilemma in the larger mind of Europe itself so imperfectly being brought into consciousness, a choice between an organic sense of belonging and purpose, which seemed to be draining away, and a freer sense of individual autonomy, which seemed to result in alienation, between a sense of connection to the past, and a rejection of it in favor of utilitarian problem solving” (141). Amrita Ghosh, in “Carlyle, Mill, Bodington and the Case of 19th-Century Imperialized Science” (2009), further analyzes this Carlyle-Mill face-off over race. Ghosh shows how Mill also ends up reinforcing “normative racial ideologies of the period” (26), especially as perpetuated through evolutionary and phrenological narratives (27-28).

Most scholarship on Carlyle’s attitudes toward race focuses on his late pamphlets, “Occasional Discourses,” “Shooting Niagara,” and *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (Frye, “This Offensive” 115; Kinser 139; Sorensen 45; McCollum 187-88). Vanessa D. Dickerson, in “Performing Blackness: Carlyle and ‘The Nigger Question’” (2004), traces various outraged responses to Carlyle’s racism, then, reworking Zora Neal Hurston’s critique of Carlyle, argues that he “reinvests ‘cheque words’ with value in the ‘Nigger Question’ by using dramatic, hyperbolic, and metaphorical devices that resemble black performance style” (153). Julie M. Dugger, in “Black Ireland’s Race: Thomas Carlyle and the Young Ireland Movement” (2006), examines Carlyle’s complicated racial intersections between the Irish and Black Jamaicans, as well as his questionable skirting of his own Scottishness.

⁵ For scholarship on Carlyle’s appropriation by fascism, often through misreading that ignored much of his nuance and contradictoriness, see Jonathan McCollum, “The Nazi Appropriation of Thomas Carlyle: Or How *Frederick* Wound Up in the Bunker” (2010); and David R. Sorensen, “‘The Great Pioneer of National Socialist Philosophy’? Carlyle and Twentieth-Century Totalitarianism” (2012).

⁶ Paul E. Kerry and Marylu Hill describe his contradictoriness in their introduction to *Thomas Carlyle Resartus: Reappraising Carlyle’s Contribution to the Philosophy of History, Political Theory, and Cultural Criticism* (2010): “He is a communitarian who prefers a curmudgeonly solitude; a political thinker who prefers to avoid actual politics; a revolutionary and rebel who longs for the stability of a good and noble tradition; and a stubborn egoist who yearns for someone greater and wiser than he to whom he could bow his head” (14).

⁷ Longinus’ classic text *On the Sublime* designates the first source of the sublime “grandeur of thought,” by which he means “a certain lofty cast of mind” or “greatness of soul,” though not the experience of

thinking per se (13, 15). Still, this may be seen as anticipating the understanding of the sublime that emphasizes not just emotive responses to vast, overpowering natural scenes, but more precisely the mind's transcendence of itself in such situations. Carlyle participates in this gesture toward the mind in the tradition of the sublime that so powerfully informed Romanticism. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), and Friedrich Schiller's "On the Sublime" (1793) all were hugely influential in shaping the Romantic sublime, as Thomas Weiskel shows in his analysis of the Romantic poets. He summarizes the sublime as a transcendence of the human, a three-stage experience where familiarity gives way to alienation or indeterminacy, which then resolves in the natural or egotistical sublime, a process of sublimation, as Freud and Lacan would say (Fischer 93-94). Neil Hertz has also offered a psychoanalytic interpretation of the sublime as the mental fascination with gaps that resist expected logical clarity. He analyzes this fascination in that genre typically thought of as the champion of clarity, the realist Victorian novel; he emphasizes the sublime as "points of opacity which, borrowing Burke's expression, I call 'the end of the line'" (219-20). Hertz defines this opaque line as the satisfactory experience of "blockage and compensatory affirmation of the self" (Culler 981). Adam Potkay analyzes "The British Romantic Sublime" (2012), which scholars have defined as "the mind's transcendence of a natural and/or social world that finally cannot fulfill its desire. Revealed in the moment of the sublime is that the mind is not wholly of the world, but this revelation may be triggered by a particular setting in the world"—typically natural (203). For a more recent analysis of the counterintuitive ways in which theories of the sublime and beautiful influenced novelistic portrayals of gendered Victorian subjectivity, see Stephen Hancock's *The Romantic Sublime and Middle-Class Subjectivity in the Victorian Novel* (2013).

⁸ Potkay describes this dimension of the British Romantic sublime as something that scholars have tended to overlook: "the *moral sublime*. That is, one transcends one's immediate environment and one's self-interested relations in order to emerge a fully moral being, recognizing that the most awe-inspiring thing is either great virtue, pervading love, or the category of morality itself" (205). He describes Wordsworth as envisioning that "the experience of sublimity awakens us to our moral being [...] defined by its capacity for love" (206). Most tellingly, though, he cites Kant praising the sublimity of consistently acting according to duty (205), and he centers the moral sublime on Kant's declaration from the *Critique of Practical Reason* that is also central to my analysis: his "admiration and reverence" for "*the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*" (207). A few other scholars have also emphasized Kant's contribution to this moral sublime as wonder at ethical subjectivity. Paul Crowther, in *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (1989), describes how, in contrast to his early *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), Kant's later work in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) even further distinguishes between the "fear and admiration or astonishment" when nature is the occasioning force for this reflection, and the "feeling of respect which arises from sublime moral consciousness," which, Crowther suggests, may signal that Kant "now wishes to reserve the term sublime exclusively for the moral domain" (26). This feeling of respect or reverence is what I mean by wonder responding to the excess of ethical subjectivity. Paul Guyer, in his chapter "The Symbols of Freedom in Kant's Aesthetics" from *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (2005), and Melissa McBay Merritt, in "The Moral Source of the Kantian Sublime" (2012), further develop this Kantian moral sublime.

⁹ This note offers a brief overview of the broader philosophical context of wonder, focusing on key points at which wonder intersects with ethics. First, wonder as the origin of philosophy yields a paradox. On the one hand, it opens up the work of thinking and questioning, breaking self-enclosed assurance, sparking the endless work of self-critique. On the other hand, this very work of questioning has been interpreted as

also seeking the end of wonder, the closure provided by answers, the instantiation of rational grounding. Wonder is further paradoxical because sometimes the experience of the ineffable can be so overwhelming that it does not even reach the end point of answers, but rather suspends the work of thought altogether; that is, wonder not only serves as “the occasion for philosophical thinking” but also risks being “its extinction” (Gasché 363). Wonder at what is beyond comprehension sometimes remains precisely incapable of condensing itself into the critical work that would be required to apprehend this beyond.

The paradoxical narrative of wonder as unable to be sustained, as eventually extinguished by rationalized structures and “sure teleology,” has been challenged by Philip Fisher’s study *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experience* (1998). Fisher analyzes various temporal models of staying with wonder. He theorizes an aesthetics of wonder that is not unidirectional nor temporally confined to the fleeting encounter with the ineffable. The scientific fantasy of wonder leading to thought which in turn progressively leads to the rational resolution of wonder is not inevitable, since wonder does not necessarily disappear but rather opens ever new directions for the process of reflective thought. Not just flashing up in the eventual encounter, wonder also grows through the “slow unfolding of attention and questioning” that can happen when facing challenges ranging from rational scientific problems to creative works of art (6). I suggest extending this slow process of wonder to consider an ethical orientation of continuous openness to others. Unlike the singular eventual encounter with the ineffable that happens unwilling and unforeseen (Jonas 178), slow wonder holds the most resonance with how Carlyle and Arendt lead me to theorize its ethical potential.

But there are other risks and possibilities attending philosophical conceptions of wonder beyond the risk of being epistemologically foreclosed in a teleology of rational progress, risks that take up more explicitly ethical questions. One such risk is the interpretation of wonder as prior to ethics. Descartes posits wonder as “the first of all the passions” (52), but he considers it as therefore neutral in terms of ethical judgment: it is simply a mode of attending to an object, not yet an evaluation as to whether that object is “good or evil” (57). I would respond that this attending is itself ethical inasmuch as it orients the self toward otherness, whether that otherness appears within or beyond the self. Wonder is a response of pause and reflection, but it cannot be forced. Expanding the ethical implications of Descartes’s view of the pre-evaluative neutrality of wonder, Luce Irigaray, in her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), posits wonder as ethical precisely because of its unique standing outside of predetermined judgment and closure. For her, “Wonder is not an enveloping. [...] It constitutes an *opening* prior to and following that which surrounds, enlaces”; it is an enduring opening, a dwelling within that enables one to be “faithful to the perpetual newness of the self, the other, the world” (81-82). Wonder holds open a state of being that is ethical because it resists the closure of prejudicial, exclusionary categories.

Marguerite La Caze uses Irigaray’s essay as the inspiration for her book *Wonder and Generosity: Their Role in Ethics and Politics* (2013). While Irigaray focuses on applying this idea of ethical wonder to sexual difference, La Caze seeks to extend the discussion to other categories of identity: “Ethnic, cultural, and racial differences are all grounds for wonder” (2). In expanding the list to include more specific objects of wonder, she senses the need to channel the energy flowing from wonder’s neutral openness through an ethics of generosity to avoid the danger of unethical othering through exoticizing rhetoric (2). She defines generosity through Derrida’s and Levinas’s conceptions of hospitality and generosity (108, 124). I find Irigaray’s and La Caze’s philosophical analyses of wonder useful as a starting place, but I want to take them a step further, to go beyond locating wonder as arising from the grounds of any particular differences. While respect for difference is a crucial component of ethical action, I argue that a coherent ethics also presupposes a certain assumption of universality in ethical subjectivity. One of the larger arguments that emerges from my analysis of Carlyle and Arendt is that the openness of wonder

toward others as thinking, ethically free human beings does not depend on how different they may be sexually, culturally, racially, and ethnically; in fact, it condemns the move to discriminate based on racial distinctions that Carlyle too often perpetuates. La Caze does acknowledge one of these dimensions by which thinking manifests in the world—will or agency. As she puts it, generosity is possible through the recognition that “we share a common basis for action and responsibility—that is, free will” (2). I add to freedom thought and conscience, or obligation, as crucial universals implicit in the imperative to respect all forms of human difference.

Finally, another philosophical study besides Arendt’s that resonates strongly with *Sartor Resartus* in its examination of the relationship between thought and wonder is Sylvia Jonas’s *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics* (2016). Jonas argues that the experience of ineffability, being struck with wonder at the sense of an experience beyond language, is not dependent on the particulars of any exterior religious, artistic, or philosophical situation, but rather occurs when one suddenly makes “acquaintance” with oneself, becomes suddenly self-conscious, strange to oneself (167). Ultimately, we can only ever know our own experiences. Every exterior contact with the world is filtered through the senses to the ordering *I* principle that constructs them into a coherent identity. However, *Sartor Resartus* adds more emphatically the importance of taking seriously the turn outward from the self; literature persistently describes the experience of wonder both as responding to the otherness in one’s own subjective experiences of thinking and moral freedom and also as surpassing the self by wondering at such experiences in others. Jonas hints at but does not develop this orientation beyond the self, writing, “It is reasonable to assume that the Self that constitutes the object of Self-acquaintance for one individual resembles the Self that constitutes the object of Self-acquaintance for other individuals sufficiently to assume that the phenomenology of an ineffable insight is similar or even the same in different subjects” (179). Jonas acknowledges that the sudden experience of wonder before the ineffable cannot be willed, or “voluntarily induced” (178). But here is where I want to invoke the idea of slow wonder as a mode of being or an orientation of openness. It is not necessarily to be expected that attuning to these dimensions of human experience will make one able to will a constant state of sudden astonishment at every person met. There is some use, as George Eliot implies, to a certain amount of “stupidity” that keeps us from being overwhelmed by the “keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life” (*Middlemarch* 124), some use in not constantly feeling as overwhelmed as Teufelsdröckh does during his most intense moments of wonder (*Sartor* 56, 200, 205). But this is not to discount how we may grow in wonder over time, as Teufelsdröckh also shows through his conversion narrative.

¹⁰ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, describing nineteenth-century imperialist and racial ideologies, Arendt focuses on Benjamin Disraeli’s ambiguous position as a Jewish man who considered himself as the one exception from a race of pariahs; he became the prime minister and forwarded the crowning of Queen Victoria as Empress of India (*Origins* 74). She then footnotes how Carlyle was critical of Disraeli and called him “a cursed Jew” and “the worst man who ever lived” (*Origins* 72). She sees this disdain as paradoxical because Disraeli essentially filled Carlyle’s description of a strong leader. Arendt describes Carlyle’s most extensive influence as coming less from his overtly racist pronouncements about white governance in “Occasional Discourses” and more from his conception of hero-worship:

Carlyle’s ideas on the genius and hero were really more the weapons of a “social reformer” than the doctrines of the “Father of British Imperialism,” a very unjust accusation, indeed. His hero worship which earned him wide audiences in both England and in Germany, had the same sources as the personality worship of German romanticism. It was the same assertion and

glorification of the innate greatness of the individual character independent of his social environment. (*Origins* 180)

Arendt thus resists accusations of Carlyle's being the "Father" or instigator of imperialism, rather situating him in the nineteenth century's larger trend of celebrating powerful individuals who concentrated characteristics of leadership. Such hero-worship could be channeled into social reform and imperial expansion alike, and those who came after Carlyle did both.

¹¹ As Morrow writes, *Sartor Resartus* presents an "account of the anxieties felt by modern humanity and how they might be confronted" (51). Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor summarize the human experiences Carlyle defended from modern disenchantment in *Sartor Resartus*: "What is needed is a restoration to its rightful kingly place in the human personality of Reason, Fantasy, Intuition, and Wonder. Love, Duty, and a sense of the sacred nature of social bonds can only flourish in the light of the [*sic*] Reason, which can give man a saving sense of the infinite within the finite, of the religious nature of human life, and of the miraculous potential of any aspect of creation" (xxvi).

¹² To anticipate briefly some of the work on the conversion motif in *Sartor Resartus*, see Carlisle Moore, "Sartor Resartus and the Problem of Carlyle's 'Conversion'" (1955); Walter L. Reed, "The Pattern of Conversion in Sartor Resartus" (1971); Lee C. R. Baker, "The Open Secret of 'Sartor Resartus': Carlyle's Method of Converting His Reader" (1986); and, more recently, though not explicitly using the term "conversion," John B. Lamb, "'Spiritual Enfranchisement': *Sartor Resartus* and the Politics of *Bildung*" (2010). By way of philosophical context beyond religion, Kant offers his own model of conversion in his discussion of "disposition" and of the "revolution of disposition," the transformation of the will as one chooses to follow the intelligible moral law instead of the dictates of sensible inclinations; such a choice is possible because we experience ourselves as free. Dominik Finkelde offers an excellent analysis of how Kant discusses the revolution of disposition, clarifying that its very possibility depends on our inhabiting an "aporetic subjectivity in line with the image of a split subject of moral agency" (8-9; cf. 39-49).

¹³ Chris R. Vanden Bossche, in *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* (1991), examines Teufelsdröckh's development in *Sartor Resartus* as reflecting Carlyle's search for his own voice and authority as an author (15). More recently, Richard Salmon, in the chapter "Carlyle and the Luminous Author" from his book *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession* (2013), recounts Carlyle's concern with authorship and the status of *Sartor Resartus* as an inspirer of multiple other "novels of literary apprenticeship" (66).

¹⁴ Sidney M. B. Coulling argues that Carlyle distinguishes sympathetic humor from dismissive satire, and that overall, *Sartor Resartus* deflects from ironic satire toward the visionary, prophetic, and transcendental (741). Abigail Burnham Bloom similarly demonstrates how Carlyle's humor ultimately reinforces, rather than discounts, his larger ethical argument; he harnesses humor's visionary power to teach readers how to become self-critical of their previously unexamined assumptions and prejudices (153).

¹⁵ Scholars have well examined the formal complexity of *Sartor Resartus*. Leonard W. Deen, in "Irrational Form in Sartor Resartus" (1963), suggests that Carlyle worked "to find a literary form which would express his complex beliefs and purposes," finally settling on "symbolism, apparent disorder, and above all fictional 'personality' or biography as methods of correcting a rationalistic organization or interpretation of reality" (439). G. B. Tennyson, in *Sartor "Called" Resartus: The Genesis, Structure and Style of Thomas Carlyle's First Major Work* (1965), focuses on the text's literary forms over its philosophical ideas, calling it "an unorthodox novel by an inventive and original mind" (6). Like

Tennyson, George Levine, in *The Boundaries of Fiction: Carlyle, Macaulay, Newman* (1968), analyzes *Sartor Resartus* for its novelistic qualities, arguing that its fictional forms increase its ethical exemplariness: “We can see through the example of Carlyle how fiction tended to open experience, not close it; to increase tolerance, not diminish it; to transcend moral conventions, not succumb to them” (24). Tom Toremans, in “*Sartor Resartus* and the Rhetoric of Translation” (2011), argues that the formal divide between philosopher and Editor makes this text “first and foremost a work on and of translation”; he analyzes how the text navigates the “relationship between aesthetics, rhetoric, and translation” (61). Toremans also, in ““One Step From Politics’: *Sartor Resartus* and Aesthetic Ideology” (2012), pushes back against “the bulk of Carlyle criticism as it systematically divorces the aesthetic and rhetorical from the political and ideological dimensions of his work” (25). Though he admits *Sartor Resartus* does not offer prescriptive political interventions, nevertheless “it is precisely to the extent that it is this one step removed from politics that it allows itself to occupy a place from which to investigate thoroughly and incisively the rhetorical machinery that drives the construction of ideologies and marks them as in essence linguistically conditioned in their totalizing tendency” (28).

¹⁶ For more on Carlyle’s work as a historian, see John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (1985); Kerry and Hill’s Introduction to *Thomas Carlyle Resartus*; and more specifically within this same volume, Lowell T. Frye, “History as Biography, Biography as History,” and Paul E. Kerry and Laura Judd, “Temporality and Spatial Relations in *Past and Present*: New insights into Carlyle’s Philosophy of History.”

¹⁷ Janice L. Haney, expanding G. B. Tennyson’s formalist analysis, shows how Romantic irony does more than simply disrupt “representational illusion”; it is the pervasive context that marks *Sartor Resartus* as a historically and philosophically significant text inaugurating Victorian Romanticism (308). George Levine likewise reads *Sartor Resartus* as a representative transition text between the Romantics and the Victorians, examining its formal fictional elements as effectively deploying satire for morally instructive purposes (*Boundaries* 22). Margaret Rundle reads *Sartor Resartus*’ Romantic irony as having not only moral but also metaphysical implications, as demonstrating that the human self, embedded in company with others, is paradoxically at once finite and infinite (171).

¹⁸ Morrow describes how Carlyle uses “the metaphor of ‘clothing’ [...] to convey the relationship between ‘forms’ and ‘realities’ . [...] The history of clothes is represented as an account of the different ways in which human beings express, signal and confirm their, and their society’s, perception of universal truths that underlie human existence” (67-68).

¹⁹ M. H. Abrams, whose book *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) owes its title to one of *Sartor Resartus*’s chapters, describes how in this text Carlyle develops a secular “mythus without a creed” whose new form of “salvation [...] is the stage of mature consciousness” (129). Frank M. Turner shows how wonder features in Carlyle’s secularization and internalization of religion as spirituality: “More than any other popular writer during the first half of the century, Carlyle had conceptually separated religion and spirituality from their contemporary institutional and dogmatic incarnations. Religion for Carlyle was wonder, humility, and work amidst the eternities and silences. The true realm of religion and the spirit was the inner man; all else was unessential externality” (334).

²⁰ Walter L. Reed emphasizes that the central conversion narrative in *Sartor Resartus* not only turns away from institutional religion toward mysticism but also enacts a transformation evocative of Romanticism (412). Abrams addresses wonder in *Sartor Resartus* as participating in the Romantic “formulae” that celebrate the wonder of the natural and mundane world (384). George Levine writes about how Carlyle’s

direction of wonder toward the everyday was essentially Romantic, a poet's quest for "reinstating wonder in a cynical and spiritually empty world" (*Boundaries* 14). William R. Vander Lugt examines Carlyle's resistance to the disenchantment of modernity (vi), and Kara Elizabeth Wittman includes Carlyle in her study of how nineteenth-century British novels explore the experience of wonder in contrast to modernity's "rationalism, materialism, and secularism" (v).

²¹ For example, as Chris R. Vanden Bossche emphasizes, Carlyle's literary reviews and biographical sketches heavily informed *Sartor Resartus*: "Virtually every detail of the biography of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh—himself a German writer—may be found in the sketches of the lives and works of German writers—Musaeus, Fouqué, Tieck, Hoffman, Richter, Werner, Heyne, and Novalis as well as Goethe and Schiller—that Carlyle composed between 1823 and 1830" (20).

The first wave of scholarship on how German philosophy and literature influenced Carlyle emerged early in the twentieth century; see W. Morgan, "Carlyle and German Thought" (1916); Charles Frederick Harrold, "Carlyle's Interpretation of Kant" (1928), "Carlyle and Novalis" (1930), and *Carlyle and German Thought: 1819-1834* (1934); Margaret Storrs, *The Relation of Carlyle to Fichte and Kant* (1929); René Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England: 1793-1838* (1931) and *Confrontations: Studies in the Intellectual and Literary Relations between Germany, England, and the United States during the Nineteenth Century* (1965); and Hill Shine, "Carlyle and the German Philosophy Problem during the Year 1826-27" (1935). For more recent studies on this subject, see Anthony J. Harding, "Sterling, Carlyle, and German Higher Criticism" (1983); and Elizabeth M. Vida, *Romantic Affinities: German Authors and Carlyle: A Study in the History of Ideas* (1993). Vida offers a detailed account of Carlyle's resonances with German literature in contrast to philosophy and provides an excellent bibliography on the above and other studies. Kit Andrews focuses on both literature and philosophy in "Fichte, Carlyle and the British Literary Reception of German Idealism" (2012), where he analyzes how Carlyle agrees with Fichte that philosophical abstractions should be grounded "in individual moral action"; more specifically, the Editor in *Sartor Resartus* enacts "Carlyle's Fichtean effort to work through the correspondences of [Teufelsdröckh's] biography and philosophy" (721).

²² For a more detailed discussion of Kant's awakening and relation to Hume, see Julian Wuerth, *Kant on Mind, Action, and Ethics* (2014) (28).

²³ Finkelde outlines two major trends in Kant scholarship. One emphasizes his "monologic" and "purely formalistic morality that tries to protect itself as carefully as possible from contingency"; the other emphasizes Kant's other writings on virtue, duties, and common sense to read him as an "ethical constructivist" (34-35). She pushes against the limitations of isolating either interpretation, focusing instead on how Kant "positions 'the ethical' as incommensurate with ethics," an incommensurability arising from "the noncoincidence of the central theorem of the categorical imperative in Kant's ethics and the agent's self-imposed duty to act morally" (35). In other words, there is no motivational guarantee to ensure that the ethical demand or obligation that characterizes the categorical imperative will result in obedience to that demand; as agents, we experience ourselves as free to obey this demand or not because we inhabit both intelligible and sensible worlds.

²⁴ Dugger shows how Carlyle's racial prejudices, most apparent in his discussions of Ireland and Jamaica, aligned less with skin color and more along a binary between "savage and civilized" (467-68). His "imperialist progressivism depended on exclusion: some races were destined for leadership; some were not" (470). However, his case also shows cracks and inconsistencies; in "Occasional Discourse," Carlyle compares the races of Ireland and Jamaica and describes how a "poor Black" can, by hard work, earn his

liberty, the means to “prove[] the ‘freedom’ of his soul”; building on this and other examples, Dugger shows how Carlyle “is compelled by the force of his rhetoric to make a concession to African potential—no matter how little he wants to do so” (470).

²⁵ In a future project, I may spend more time on the contrast Arendt draws in *The Human Condition* between labor’s necessity for producing materials for daily consumption and work’s comparatively greater freedom for producing more lasting artifacts that persist in the world. She argues that modern capitalism prioritizes the model of constantly necessary labor for objects viewed not as lasting but as meant to be consumed at increasingly fast rates. Her analysis would usefully offer a more nuanced reconsideration of how Carlyle pitted his gospel of work against the capitalist model of exploitation and wealth accumulation.

²⁶ For an admirable examination of Arendt’s concept of plurality, see Sophie Loidolt, *Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity* (2018).

²⁷ As philosopher Richard J. Bernstein writes, “it is commonly believed that Arendt started thinking about thinking only late in her career. But the truth is that Arendt’s concern with thinking always exerted a powerful influence on the character of her own passionate thinking. The more closely one examines her writings, the more striking it becomes that thinking is a pervasive theme in her entire corpus” (277).

²⁸ For an excellent reconstructive analysis of Arendt’s analysis of judgment, see Maurizio Passerin D’Entrèves, “Arendt’s Theory of Judgment” (2000). This article outlines how Arendt alternates between two models of judgment that “seem to pull in opposite directions, the Aristotelian toward a concern with the particular, the Kantian toward a concern with universality and impartiality” (246). Not only does she have a dual conception of the activity of judging, but she also has a dual conception of the perspective from which judgment is possible: “the actor’s—judging in order to act—and the spectator’s—judging in order to cull meaning from the past” (246).

²⁹ Arendt also discusses thought’s plurality in the essays collected as *Responsibility and Judgment*, where she again highlights thought’s moral universality: “The precondition for this kind of [ethical] judging is not a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself which, since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking” (44-45). Being ethical is seeking the self-consistency that Kant’s categorical imperative enjoins, and that is available to all regardless of educational status: “all men are two-in-one, not only in the sense of consciousness and self-consciousness (that whatever I do I am at the same time somehow aware of doing it), but in the very specific and active sense of this silent dialogue, of having constant intercourse, of being on speaking terms with themselves” (92).

³⁰ The facing and welcoming of the stranger have become key motifs deeply embedded in ethical theory. The moral action of welcoming, not rejecting, the stranger, resonates with the biblical injunction to “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13: 2). Kant, in his essay “Toward Perpetual Peace” (1795), claims that the right to hospitality “belongs to all human beings by virtue of the right of possession in common of the earth’s surface,” which is not infinite (8: 358/PP 329). The implicit question arises, how this common possession gave way to personal and national ownership. Does the idea of hospitality only reinforce the sovereignty of the benevolent host in a position of power and advantage over the stranger? Derrida underscores the radical ethical implications of welcoming the stranger, questioning the idea of hospitality as something that reinforces sovereign

ownership. In his late lecture titled “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event” (2007), he writes of the stranger whose advent is not foreseen and prepared for, but is rather an event wholly unexpected, interrupting and rendering utterly vulnerable the one asked to extend hospitality: “In the arrival of the *arrivant*, it is the absolute other who falls on me. [...] The event falls on me because I don’t see it coming” (451). Such vulnerability features centrally in Levinas’s view of ethics, whom Derrida also references in his further explication *Of Hospitality* (2000) (109). For Levinas, an overwhelming sense of dispossession undermines self-satisfied sovereignty when facing the other, extending the call not only not to kill, but also to shelter and sustain the widow, the orphan, the stranger (*Totality* 38-39, 41, 50). This “surplus of responsibility,” as Levinas calls it, is another dimension of what constitutes ethics as excess that I explore at greater length in my other chapters (*Otherwise* 100; cf. 143). For example, my chapter on John Ruskin features a more detailed analysis of Levinas’s ethics of obligation when facing the other, an obligation that exceeds cultural codes of conduct that would claim universality or priority: “Obligation calls for a unique response not inscribed in universal thought, the unforeseeable response of the chosen one. This identity is pre-original, anarchic, older than every beginning. It is not self-consciousness attaining itself in the present, but the extreme exposure to the assignation by the other, already realized behind consciousness and freedom” (*Otherwise* 143). Furthermore, my chapter on Olive Schreiner explores the novel’s scene of the advent of a stranger who bears the transformative gift of an allegory about encountering truth as an obligation irreducible to cultural customs, attesting to the paradoxical inexplicable reality of ethical subjectivity.

³¹ Abrams combines the secular Romantic narrative with the biographical approach to analyze how *Sartor Resartus* is a “crisis-autobiography represented in a fictional form” (123), an interpretation that John D. Barbour returns to in his *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (37). Lee C. R. Baker continues with this more secular interpretation of conversion; he intervenes in the debate on whether the Editor becomes converted to Teufelsdröckh’s clothes philosophy (older views) or remains critically distant such that the two of them reflect Carlyle’s “divided consciousness” (more recent views) (219). He argues that the dialogue between philosopher and Editor looks beyond either and even beyond Carlyle to readers: the text’s divided approach helps readers discern the world as full of “symbolic and divine significance,” inviting them to experience conversion in how they orient themselves toward that world (220). Most recently, John B. Lamb, while not explicitly calling it conversion, focuses on Carlyle’s “politics of *Bildung*,” showing how *Sartor Resartus* invites readers to question assumptions and learn “Reverence” as the central “goal of *Bildung* and the spiritual principle on which to found a modern polity” (271).

³² Ralph Jessop analyzes how *Sartor Resartus* critiques “mechanistic and physicalistic theories of mind,” which were “the fruits of a profound shift of modernity within Enlightenment thought towards the increasing dominance of an agency-eradicating instrumentalism or depersonalising system” (633).

³³ *Sartor Resartus* anticipates critiques of late nineteenth century empirical psychology, which became seen as perhaps the most explicit threat disenchanting the experience of thought. Rick Rylance, in *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880* (2000), articulates the conflict surrounding the formation of this new scientific discipline to study the mechanical workings of the human mind. He indicates psychology’s efforts to reground in new models what it destabilized, a common motif resounding throughout the disenchantment narrative: “Psychology was, for Victorian culture, a way of reflecting upon the formation of its *own* mind as it loosened itself from the traditions of the past; it was a staging of a debate about its own identity” (4). I return to the debate over psychology in my chapter on George Eliot. William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-1902) directly applies to religious contexts empirical psychology’s assumptions about human thought as materially explicable. Yet James

also resists the impulse to see the disenchanting implications of his materialist explanations as totally negating religious transcendence (14). He acknowledges how subjectively real the experience of ineffability is to those whose emotional constitution and personal experiences lead them to interpret it religiously. He argues that, despite secular narratives, religious feeling for those people who still call it such “adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else” (47). The loss of enchanted wonder is not complete; it has just been decentered, confined to particular traditions that continue to be practiced.

³⁴ For a study that pushes against the disenchantment narrative, see Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (2001). Bennett argues that wonder can still be felt in modern contemporary life, and that it need not be confined to the vestiges of religion nor even to nature (11). My work accords with Bennett’s argument that wonder as a “mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life” (3) because it holds open a space of optimism or generosity that refuses closure. She thinks of ethics as opening upon various modes of being or “affective dimensions” that exceed any particular moral “code” or “criteria” (3). See also Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (2004).

³⁵ Other philosophers have responded to Arendt’s critique of the danger of fixated, restricted wonder. Tama Weisman, in her book *Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx: On Totalitarianism and the Tradition of Western Political Thought* (2014), analyzes Arendt’s discussion of wonder as she further connects it with Plato’s allegory of the cave from *The Republic*. Working through Arendt’s essay “Philosophy and Politics,” Weisman emphasizes as the primary take-away that the strength to escape the unthinking entrancement of the cave comes from “the ability to endure wonder, i.e., not to be overcome by the anxiety of not knowing in the face of awe” (50). This enduring of wonder resists the rush to security that closes down ethical possibility. Weisman concludes that Arendt’s critique of wonder should not be interpreted as meaning that wonder is inherently suspect, as if it could be seduced by totalitarianism to turn away from the plurality of life in favor of falsely constructed ideologies of exclusion. Instead, true wonder prevents such seduction: “*thaumazein* so far from being separate from lived activity is actually inextricably bound to it. Out of life comes wonder” (154).

Mary-Jane Rubenstein, in *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (2008), even more strongly qualifies Arendt’s critique of the danger of fixation attending wonder’s inability to be guaranteed. Rubenstein examines the problematic passive refusal or active closure of wonder, in contrast to wonder’s potential to inaugurate an ethical comportment of openness to uncertainty and mystery. She summarizes Arendt’s critique of Heidegger’s stint with National Socialism as resulting from problematic passive wonder. She identifies four challenges raised by Arendt’s critique: that wonder offers “escape from reality”; that it makes for an “uncritical openness”; that it has a “tendency to alienate” one from others; and that it suspends thinking, in effect “disabling decision making”; all these blockages to thinking and spontaneous possibility enable the takeover of totalitarianism (21). Rubenstein takes Arendt’s critique a step further, however, suggesting that these dangers result not from wonder per se, but from its too hasty closure in fixed and enforced interpretations (188). She offers a rigorous analysis of wonder, specifically through the philosophical problems of “repetition, openness, relation, and decision,” by way of Heidegger, Levinas, Nancy, and Derrida to suggest that wonder is not to blame for, but in fact offers a way of resisting, totalitarian closure (23).

³⁶ In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor points to these same questions, building his analysis of moral being, which turns with “awe” to “the universal good,” on the question, “What induces us to talk about moral orientation in terms of the question, Who are we?” (22, 28). Rubenstein describes how wonder

depends on continuing to ask these questions: “To the extent that thinking remains with wonder, it is not inimical to all propositions, but rather keeps propositions provisional, open-ended, and incomplete. This is because wonder wonders at the strangeness of the most familiar: at that which, *within the possibilities of determinate thinking*, still remains indeterminate, unthinkable, and impossible. Wonder wonders, therefore, at the opening in which all determinate thinking takes place. And insofar as Socrates tells us that wonder opens the possibility of thinking itself, we can risk the tautology: wonder wonders at wonder” (8).

Chapter Two Notes

¹ All citations from Ruskin’s complete works come from the library edition edited by Cook and Wedderburn (1903-1912).

² Ruskin’s reputation as a conservative sage writer, with all its connotations of rigid Victorian moralism, was partly invented by modernist caricatures; see Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls’ introduction to *Ruskin and Modernism* (2001) (xi-xiii). The essays in this collection highlight many ways in which Ruskin anticipates modernist tropes and methods; see also Rachel Teukolsky, “Modernist Ruskin, Victorian Baudelaire: Revisioning Nineteenth-Century Aesthetics” (2007). For Ruskin as sage writer, see George P. Landow, “Ruskin as Victorian Sage: The Example of ‘Traffic’” (1981).

³ Teukolsky points out that “[c]ontemporary scholarship” continues to find its own “moral concerns” in Ruskin, specifically in “principled anxieties about the environment, gender roles, and political economy” (*Literate* 26). These and other themes are addressed throughout the essays of the *Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin* edited by Francis O’Gorman (2015).

⁴ For more on Ruskin and environmental studies, see for example Michael Wheeler (ed.), *Ruskin and Environment: The Storm-cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1995); Sara Atwood, “‘The Earth-Veil’: Ruskin and Environment” (2015); and Mark Frost, “Reading Nature: John Ruskin, Environment, and the Ecological Impulse” (2017).

⁵ For more on Ruskin and political and economic studies, including arguments for his continuing relevance, see Judith Stoddart, *Ruskin’s Culture Wars: Fors Clavigera and the Crisis of Victorian Liberalism* (1998) (22); Willie Henderson, *John Ruskin’s Political Economy* (2000) (i, xiv); David M. Craig, *John Ruskin and the Ethics of Consumption* (2006); Gill G. Cockram, *Ruskin and Social Reform: Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age* (2007) (3-4, 12); Stuart Eagles, *After Ruskin: The Social and Political Legacies of a Victorian Prophet, 1870-1920* (2011) (2); Eagles, “Political Legacies” (2015) (250); and Marcus Waithe, “Cultural Legacies” (2015) (263).

⁶ Critiques of Ruskin’s patriarchal conservatism are especially visible in gender studies; see for example Helen Pike Bauer, “Ruskin and the Education of Women” (1985); Hilary Fraser, “Gender and Romance in Ruskin’s ‘Two Boyhoods’” (1999); Lesley Higgins, “‘Chameleon’ Words: Gender Inflections in Ruskin’s Aesthetic and Sociological Discourses” (2002); Dinah Birch and Francis O’Gorman (eds.), *Ruskin and Gender* (2002), which reprints Birch, “Ruskin’s ‘Womanly Mind’”; and Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen: Gender Subversion in Victorian Culture* (1998) and *Performing the Victorian: John Ruskin and Identity in Theater, Science, and Education* (2007).

⁷ In *Discipline and Punish*, writes Mark Brown, “what Foucault did was to reduce the analysis of power from that of a tripartite division to a binary. What defined the economy of power he designated a governmentality of police was the ‘relationship of obedience’ (p. 65) that defines the subject of law or of disciplinary regulation. Later he referred [*sic*] to these as ‘the bonds of individual subjection’, which might take either ‘the feudal form of ... allegiance’ or ‘the form of a total and exhaustive obedience in their conduct’ (p. 356). But there was something more also. What defined each of these strategies was a form of power that sought control through an exhaustive project of domination, whether the object of that control was the economy (reflected in techniques such as price fixing) or individual subjects. [...] Liberal governmentality thus harbours within it a modality of domination to be recruited in the face of disorder or to shore up the mechanisms of freedom when the normal levers affecting free action, those lawful mechanics of self-interest and sociality, either fail or are found absent” (25-26).

⁸ Closer analysis of such arguments suggests the incoherence of absolutely denying any outside to historical determinism. Even in his essay “What is Enlightenment?” responding to Kant’s essay of the same title, Foucault repurposes Kant to suggest the continued relevance of an enlightened stance, which Kant defined as the process of critically thinking for oneself, as necessary to critique the axes of “knowledge,” “power,” and “ethics” that constitute modern subjects: “it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life [...] of diverse inquiries” (318-19). Christopher Norris points out how his response to Kant shows that Foucault became increasingly aware of how his own critical approach presumed some continued outside perspective such as motivated Enlightenment values: “Foucault found himself in the awkward position of one who sought to maintain a strongly oppositional or counter-hegemonic stance, yet whose outlook of extreme epistemological and ethical skepticism left him at the last with no ground on which to stand in advancing these dissident claims” (166); “what Foucault came to recognize as his work went on — notably his detailed researches into ethics, sexuality, and the modes of self-knowledge entailed by these emergent disciplines of conduct and thought—was that they made sense only from a critical viewpoint informed by certain distinctively ‘enlightenment’ values and presuppositions” (178).

⁹ For more perspectives that defend Ruskin’s continuing relevance, see for example Birch’s essay from a popular venue, “Clarity is Poetry” (2017). For an example of a more generalist and almost caricatured oversimplifying of Ruskin’s relevance, see Redmond Bacon, “5 Ways John Ruskin Shaped the Art World Today” (2017) which claims that among other things, he “invented the blog” through *Fors*’ “monthly mix of personal detail, literary references and social critique.” O’Gorman’s essay “‘Influence’ in the Contemporary Study of the Humanities: The Problem of Ruskin” (2012) offers a much more nuanced consideration, addressing many points of continuing interest in Ruskin while also stepping back to question the modern assumption that relevance, or ongoing influence, is “the whole, or even the *principal*, measure of history’s significance” (6).

¹⁰ Ruskin’s critique of English political theorists recurs throughout his work; for references in *Fors* alone to Adam Smith, see 28: 516, 519, 664, 764; and to J.S. Mill, see 27: 33, 64-66, 180, 208, 211-12, 567-68, 658, 669; 28: 405, 699; 29: 243. Linda M. Austin, in “Labor, Money, and the Currency of Words in *Fors Clavigera*” (1989), has nuanced Ruskin’s rejection of contemporary political philosophy, arguing that he still ascribed to some of its most prevalent assumptions: “despite his hatred and sometimes willful misreading of J. S. Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) and his vague knowledge of contemporary writings on economics, Ruskin had internalized Malthus’s notion of scarcity, Ricardo’s law of diminishing returns, and prevalent ideas about currency as promise by the time he began writing *Fors*

in the 1870s” (209-10). Austin returns to this argument at greater length in *The Practical Ruskin: Economics and Audience in the Late Work* (1991).

For Ruskin’s skepticism of German philosophy, see for example *Modern Painters Volume III*, wherein he satirizes an abstract and convoluted discussion of subjectivity and objectivity (5: 334), as well as this same volume’s Appendix II, wherein he suggests that, though German philosophy may have a certain “value and power,” its difficult language presents an expenditure of time better spent in practical, as in artistic, pursuits (5: 424-26). British philosopher R. G. Collingwood, son of Ruskin’s artist friend and biographer W. G. Collingwood, argues in his book *Ruskin’s Philosophy* (1922) that though Ruskin never wrote a “treatise” or “philosophical essay,” he nevertheless can be read as participating in the broad philosophical trend of his day that moved away from Enlightenment rationalism, which deductively subordinated facts to universal laws, toward historical particularity, which inductively prioritized facts and a more “supple” and tolerant perspective (1-13).

¹¹ For studies placing Levinas’s ideas in dialogue with other nineteenth-century authors, see Donald R. Wehrs and David P. Haney (eds.), *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature: Ethics and Otherness from Romanticism through Realism* (2009); Rebecca Mitchell, *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference* (2011); and Rachel Hollander, *Narrative Hospitality in Late Victorian Fiction: Novel Ethics* (2013).

¹² Brian Maidment describes *Fors* as “a work which steps beyond traditional literary genres” (199), and Birch, in her introduction to reprinted selections from *Fors* (2000), specifies that *Fors* differs from previous epistolary periodicals and other genres, both in its extreme range of subject matter and in its paradoxical “intimacy of tone” (xxxiv). She describes these letters as “a unique work: a radical innovation in literary structure” (xxxiv).

¹³ “Mr. Ruskin’s *Fors Clavigera*,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, vol. 31, no. 793, 7 Jan. 1871, pp. 13-14; Untitled review of *Fors Clavigera*, *Daily News*, no. 7701, 4 Jan. 1871, p. 4.

¹⁴ “Notes and Comments,” *Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, no. 9573, 7 April 1877, p. 4.

¹⁵ In *Ruskin and the Rhetoric of Infallibility* (1985), Gary Wihl writes against critics who dismiss the fragmentary, contradictory methods of Ruskin’s works as “unreadable”; Wihl’s goal is not to resolve Ruskin’s works into a single clear interpretation, but to revalue them as meriting further study precisely because of their contradictions, because for all their insistence on infallibility, they also betray “an intense uncertainty” (xii). Birch focuses on this ambiguity in Ruskin’s methods of teaching in “‘Who Wants Authority?’: Ruskin as a Dissenter” (2006). She writes about how his educational ideal consists of both a “defiance of the traditions of institutional learning” and an adherence to an “uncompromising moral imperative” (66); his works are torn between these models. O’Gorman examines Ruskin’s ambiguity toward authority in terms of his sense of failure to influence others; he writes that Ruskin’s late work came to reflect a “dispirited sense of his own authority” that “was not ego or madness or provinciality or smugness, as other critics have variously suggested, but a theological conception of authorship”—his feeling that his own life, his writing, and his relationships with others were responsible to a source of obligation larger than himself, requiring “trust in divine intention,” which made all the more devastating his sense that his life and writing had seemed to come to nothing (“Influence” 13). *Fors* manifests how his authority as an author comes into question through his “anxiety” that protests too much in claiming it (23). Similarly, Timothy Hilton writes of its open-endedness, “*Fors* seeks authority and continually

discusses authority, yet we feel that nothing is final, that there is always more to be thought and said” (*Later Years* xi).

Stoddart also examines Ruskin’s anxiety over authority in *Ruskin’s Culture Wars*. She demonstrates how *Fors* undermines his own authority as he deliberately “showcases the limitations of personal perspective”; he claims authoritative knowledge even as his form belies epistemological stability (45). Stoddart examines how Ruskin’s views of his own authority against the current academic community are paradoxically assumed and undermined throughout *Fors* by his stylistic “shift from the seeming transparency of speech to the opacity of writing” (47). I will return to this point later to show how the letters, assuming a conversational tone, simultaneously spin out stylistically complex writerly passages. Stoddart situates the letters historically to demonstrate how their “impressionistic manner” mirrors contemporary debates over authority between literature and science (47).

¹⁶ Though the Guild features in biographies and other studies of Ruskin, for some key scholarship that focuses mainly on the Guild, besides Frost’s *The Lost Companions and John Ruskin’s Guild of St. George* (2014), see Margaret Spence, “The Guild of St. George: Ruskin’s Attempts to Translate his Ideas into Practice” (1957); Judith Stoddart, “Ruskin’s St. George and the Cult of Community” (1992); James Dearden, *John Ruskin’s Guild of St. George* (2010); and Atwood, “‘A world-wide monastery’: The St. George’s Guild and Ruskin ‘To-day,’” in her book *Ruskin’s Educational Ideals* (2011). Volume 30 of the library edition of Ruskin’s works contains many of the Guild reports and museum catalogues that Ruskin curated to help fulfil the Guild’s educational intent.

¹⁷ The ebb and flow of the Guild’s companions—probably never more than eighty (Frost, *Lost* 5)—and resources may be traced in Ruskin’s Master’s Reports and Accounts (1877-1885), as well as in the Notes and Correspondences attached to *Fors Clavigera*. After a difficult process, the Guild gained legal standing in 1878, and it did meet some of its goals (30: xxv). Some agricultural enterprises found more traction than is often granted, and though the museum fell below Ruskin’s intentions, it still has been called “an abundant success” resulting from his devoting so much of his own labor and resources to it (30: xli; Frost, *Lost* 3).

The Ruskin Collection remains in the modern Sheffield Museum, and the Guild still functions in altered form as a charitable trust, with wide-ranging influence in “sustainable land management, environmental protection, crafts and the arts, practical social interventions, ethical retail and production, education, public policy debate, and scholarship”; such influence has come by updating Ruskin’s ideas, and chief among the adaptations in Frost’s mind is this: that Ruskin’s “commitment to authoritarian solutions to political ills has been quietly dropped” (*Lost* 223). Such is the hope of modern reform, however gradual; the Guild’s distasteful authoritarian elements have been rejected, and Ruskin would be proud to see people more liberally “reimagining his central message” in defense of the environment and the poor (*Lost* 223). The Ruskin Collection may be viewed at the Sheffield Museum Online (<http://collections.museums-sheffield.org.uk/view/objects/aslist/359>) and at the virtual recreation project led by Marcus Waithe (<http://www.ruskinatwalkley.org/>). See also the Guild’s current website at <https://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/>. For a *Times* article reviewing a Ruskin bicentenary exhibition of the materials from his museum recently on display at Two Temple Place in London, see Nancy Durrant, “Ruskin: Sex-averse, Squeaking Pedant or Radical Political Influencer?” (2019).

¹⁸ As the famous critic of imperialism J. A. Hobson summarized in his 1898 study *John Ruskin: Social Reformer*, “Order, reverence, authority, obedience, these words are always on his lips [...] Liberty and equality he scornfully repudiates as the negation of order and government” (185). Jon Roper argues that

in contrast to contemporary reformers such as Henry George and Edward Bellamy, who critiqued capitalism because it “denied equality and liberty” to all classes, Ruskin critiqued it for “degrading” human beings into machines, for creating unjust economic conditions that aggravated suffering and prevented them from finding joy in their labor; he turned for solutions not toward modern democratic ideals, but toward pre-modern labor relations (184). Paul Guyer nuances this account by pointing out that Ruskin’s push against dehumanizing mechanism, especially as described in the famous *Stones of Venice* chapter “The Nature of Gothic,” does prioritize creative freedom as “the most fundamental moral value” and as the motivation for his critique against industrial capitalism (*History* 225; cf. 10: 191-6). I will return to this point about creative freedom.

¹⁹ Levinas was imprisoned 1942-1945 in the Fallingsbotel labor camp. See Seán Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas* (2009) (17); and Bettina Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas” (2015) (1.2).

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1988) (107-27); Hent de Vries, “On Obligation: Lyotard and Levinas” (1998) (83-84); Bob Plant, “Is the Other Radically ‘Other’? A Critical Reconstruction of Levinas’ Ethics” (2012) (979). For work situating Levinas as post-structural ethicist, see Drucilla Cornell, “Post-Structuralism, The Ethical Relation, and the Law” (2005) (136-75); and Madeleine Fagan, *Ethics and Politics* (2013).

²¹ For comparisons between Kant and Levinas, see for example John Caputo, *Against Ethics* (1993) (14); Jere Paul Surber, “Kant, Levinas, and the Thought of the ‘Other’” (1994) (295); Catherine Chaliier, *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas*, (2002) (4-8); Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (2005) (481, 489-91); Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (2007) (39-40); Joshua James Shaw, *Emmanuel Levinas on the Priority of Ethics: Putting Ethics First* (2008) (107-20); and Gabriella Bastera, *The Subject of Freedom: Kant, Levinas* (2015) (4).

²² How Kant theorizes as different in kind the intelligible moral law and sensible interpersonal experience does not mean that he has any fantasies about actual lived experience as sequentially divided between them. If anything, he specifies that humans experience moral freedom precisely because they can never be abstracted into the realm of pure rational intelligence; it is their constant immersion in the sensible world interacting with others that makes them always already morally responsible. See his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793).

²³ Philip J. Harold, in *Prophetic Politics: Emmanuel Levinas and the Sanctification of Suffering* (2009), provides a summary of this critique as articulated by thinkers such as Paul Ricœur and Gilliam Rose (206). Shaw also counters this critique with “a pragmatic reading of Levinas” (142-68). See also Alain Badiou’s critique in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001) (18-22). For a study of Levinas specifically in relation to the figure of God, see for example Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (2006).

²⁴ Elizabeth Helsinger goes so far as to call his autobiography “strangely self-destructive” (“Structure”).

²⁵ Much has been written on Ruskin’s educational aims and methods; see for example Francis X. Roellinger Jr., “Ruskin on Education” (1950); Judith Hicks, “The Educational Theories of John Ruskin: A Reappraisal” (1974); Helen Pike Bauer, “Ruskin and the Education of Women” (1985); David Thiele, “Ruskin, Authority, and Adult Education” (2006); Weltman, *Performing*; Birch, *Our Victorian Education*

(2008) (esp. 68-75); Atwood, *Ruskin's Educational Ideals*, which includes a whole chapter on *Fors*; and Valerie Purton (ed.), *John Ruskin and Nineteenth-Century Education* (2018).

²⁶ Ruskin did claim Carlyle as his “master” in many things (28: 568), but they also differed significantly both in temperament, style, interests, and, perhaps most significantly, appreciation of art. For a useful comparison of Carlyle and Ruskin, see George Allan Cate’s introduction to *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin* (1982).

²⁷ For more in-depth analysis of Ruskin’s changing views of God and religion across his writings, see for example Stephen C. Finley, *Nature’s Covenant: Figures of Landscape in Ruskin* (1992); Wheeler, *Ruskin’s God* (1999) (esp. 213, 278-79); and O’Gorman, “Religion” (2015). Ruskin leaned back toward much wider-reaching religious language after the dark decade of the 1860s following his deconversion, a trend he himself notes in *Fors* (28: 647; 29: 91-92; cf. 28: xv), though he continues antagonistic to Evangelical versions of religion (28: 603). Compare also his two accounts of his deconversion in *Fors* and in his autobiography, the first focused more on ironic rejection, the second articulating more of the later faith that he replaced it with, or more precisely, expanded beyond its narrow confines (29: 89; 35: 495-96). Finley questions the decisiveness of his deconversion, describing “the almost inevitable distortion that results from having to see Ruskin’s religious life and his own refracted reading of his sources across the horizon of a necessarily modern and secular reception of his work” (11).

²⁸ For another example of Ruskin’s expanded use of religious language in describing his moral realist ethics, see the following passage from *Deucalion* (1875-1883), written concurrently with *Fors*. Here Ruskin summarizes the ethics that he claims to be more fragmentarily spread throughout *Fors*: “the moral philosophy which underlies all the appeals, and all the accusations, made in the course of my writings on political science, assumes throughout that the principles of Justice and Mercy which are fastened in the hearts of men, are also expressed in entirely consistent terms throughout the higher—(and even the inferior, when undefined)—forms of all lovely literature and art; and enforced by the Providence of a Ruling and Judging Spiritual Power, manifest to those who desire its manifestation, and concealed from those who desire its concealment. These two Faiths, in the creating Spirit, as the source of Beauty,—in the governing Spirit, as the founder and maintainer of Moral law, are, I have said, assumed as the basis of all exposition and of all counsel, which have ever been attempted or offered in my books. I have never held it my duty, never ventured to think of it even as a permitted right, to proclaim or explain these faiths, except only by referring to the writings, properly called inspired, in which the good men of all nations and languages had concurrently—though at far distant and different times—declared them. But it has become now for many reasons, besides those above specified, necessary for me to define clearly the meaning of the words I have used—the scope of the laws I have appealed to, and, most of all, the nature of some of the feelings possible under the reception of these creeds, and impossible to those who refuse them” (26: 334-35). He also adds that he plans to write notes clarifying how this ethics infuses his late works, especially *Fors Clavigera* (26: 335). In *Fors* Letter 78 (June 1877), he again describes the main ethical argument of each of his works and claims that *Fors* synthesizes them all together (29: 237-38).

²⁹ As early as 1883 William Smart published *A Disciple of Plato. A Critical Study of John Ruskin*, which was accompanied by a note from Ruskin. Smart argues “that Ruskin has adopted, *in toto*, some of the great Platonic conceptions as they stand in the Republic and the Laws, and has worked them out under the new conditions of modern life and society” (9). For a more recent example examining Plato’s influence on Ruskin’s aesthetics, see Atwood, “Imitation and Imagination: John Ruskin, Plato, and Aesthetics” (2010); and for a discussion of Plato’s influence on *Fors* particularly, see Atwood, *Ruskin’s Educational*

Ideals (125, 141-48). Birch, in *Ruskin's Myths* (1988), writes that for Ruskin, "Plato is seen as the most valuable ancient philosopher because he is closest to the Christian spirit" (25).

³⁰ Wihl assumes a big project when he seeks "to define the nature of truth in Ruskin's writing" (xi), but, unlike my work, he focuses more on natural and artistic conceptions of truth, such as "sense-perception," "memory," "mimesis," and "allegory" (xi-xii). Paul Guyer also approaches Ruskin's concept of truth through his aesthetics; he recognizes the difficulty of articulating the "variety of forms of truth and truthfulness" that Ruskin occupies (*History* 193). However, his reading is closer to mine because he emphasizes that for Ruskin, truth's multiple dimensions reach beyond aesthetics to a moral question of relational immediacy, where in response to truth, "our focus should [...] be on the experience that is produced and not on the device that produces it" (200). Reification of obligation is dangerous, since, as already shown in Ruskin's critique of the Renaissance, codifying art forms can replace truth's originary obligation and restrict creative freedom: "art forms [...] can be directly used for the lies and pretenses of an insincere or self-deceitful regime, religion, or individual" (220). This anticipates Levinas's critique of art; see below.

³¹ Much scholarship has explored Ruskin's desire to teach sight, but like Wihl, most focus on the natural sight necessary for art creation and appreciation. See for example Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye* (1976); Helsing, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (1982); and Atwood, "The Soul of the Eye: Ruskin, Darwin, and the Nature of Vision" (2011). Birch writes in her introduction to Oxford's *John Ruskin: Selected Writings* (2009), "Accurate looking is the foundation of Ruskin's critical thought" (x); and O'Gorman writes in his introduction to the Cambridge companion to Ruskin (2015), "Ruskin is adept at identifying the gifts, however modest, of individual men and women. [...] He enriches the act of looking with the gifts of his own exceptional sight" (10).

³² David M. Craig, for example, "works against the grain of readings that would make Ruskin's religious roots a liability for his often progressive views of labor and working conditions" (Stoddart, Review 107). Wheeler points out that Ruskin's religious language has been too often overlooked or misunderstood by the "agnostic liberalism of the twentieth-century mind" (*Ruskin's God* xiv); and O'Gorman writes that Ruskin "makes little sense without an understanding of his religious commitments" ("Religion" 144).

³³ For more on Levinas's joining Hebrew and Greek contexts, see Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" (1967) (191-92); Michael Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (2011) (183); and Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas* (2015) (1-8).

³⁴ James Magrini writes that Levinas is "critical of this modern Platonic-Cartesianism, which manifests in terms of the *metaphysics of presence*. As the logic runs, when things are revealed, they are brought into the clarifying light of truth, and when things are understood, they are possessed, as one might possess a *present-at-hand* object; they have been made manageable. [...] truth is viewed as a form of possession, or ownership, and truth is then wielded as a scepter for control and domination. Foucault reminds us that we must be cautious about approaching truth in this manner. For within the relationship between knowledge (truth) and power, power depends for its effectiveness on knowledge with respect to those claiming possession of it, and knowledge engenders and legitimizes power" (429).

³⁵ Critchley describes Levinas's approach as "a series of *palaeonymic displacements*, where the ancient words of the tradition are repeated and in the iterability of that repetition semantically transformed: ethics signifies a sensible responsibility to the singular other, metaphysics is the movement of positive desire tending towards infinite alterity, subjectivity is pre-conscious, non-identical sentient subjection to the

other, and so forth. The Levinasian text is swept across by a double movement or logic of ambiguity” (*Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity* 75).

³⁶ For a study of Levinas and Plato, see Peter C. Blum, “Overcoming Relativism? Levinas’s Return to Platonism” (2000), which focuses on Levinas’s essay “Meaning and Sense.” Blum “seeks to clarify (1) what Levinas retains and what he rejects in returning to Platonism ‘in a new way,’ (2) the sense in which this return constitutes an ‘overcoming’ of relativism, and (3) the nature of the phenomenological warrant that he offers for his position” (91). See also Sarah Allen, *The Philosophical Sense of Transcendence: Levinas and Plato on Loving Beyond Being* (2009), which acknowledges how “Levinas claims that his thought is a ‘return’ to Platonism and Greek wisdom, and he refers, time and time again, to the Platonic Good beyond being as inspiration and guarantee of philosophical sense for his own approach to transcendence” (6). Allen spends the majority of her analysis, however, on “Levinasian Desire and Platonic eros as affectivities of transcendence” (8).

³⁷ Shaw works through J. L. Mackie’s critique of moral realism in context with Levinas, writing, “We can read Levinas [...] as advancing an extremely thoroughgoing form of moral realism. He invites us to assume provisionally the existence of genuine moral facts, facts that blur the entire fact/value distinction. Suppose for the sake of argument that there exist entities such that the very act of acknowledging them makes practical demands on one’s life—obligates one to, say, treat them with a certain respect. Levinas finds in reflecting on the challenges involved in acknowledging the presence of such entities that their reality is oddly immune to doubt. He is concerned to show, then, that a thoroughgoing moral realism is self-justifying” (48).

³⁸ Levinas writes, “the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity” (*Totality* 213). As he also says in “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” (1983), “The humanity of consciousness is definitely not in its powers, but in its responsibility: in passivity, in reception, in obligation with regard to the other. It is the other who is first, and there the question of my sovereign consciousness is no longer the first question” (112). See also M. Jamie Ferreira, who explains in reference to this passage, “The question is not how to explain a human being’s becoming ethical, but rather to explain a being’s becoming ‘human’—humanity is not a precondition of the ethical, but identical with it” (477n13).

³⁹ *Maieutic* comes from the Greek term for obstetrics or midwifery; in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Socrates uses the term to describe his method of questioning to help people draw forth answers from their own mouths, to discover and produce the truth already “latent” in themselves (*OED*).

⁴⁰ For Levinas’s more detailed description of this process of education with the other as “Master,” see the section in *Totality and Infinity* on “Language and Attention” (98-100). The master extends “the appeal addressed to my attention. Attention and the explicit thought it makes possible are not a refinement of consciousness, but consciousness itself. But the eminently sovereign attention in me is what *essentially* responds to an appeal” (99).

⁴¹ Conversation presupposes a common language or reference point, and without that, it could devolve into a one-way affair. Without the absolute Other as foundational obligation speaking to each through the other, the danger arises of prioritizing one person’s language over another’s, rendering the other oppressed and unable to speak. Thus, conversation alone cannot guarantee justice—it must be conversation as obedience, responding to originary obligation. To judge human interactions as just or unjust must be in obedience to an obligation that remains irreducible to rational discourse—an anarchic

obligation (cf. Harold xxix, 86). Such an insight offers a way of balancing out Arendt's prioritization of conversation in the public sphere as ensuring democratic justice.

⁴² I would like to thank Francis O'Gorman for his comments during a panel Q&A at the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies conference on June 14, 2018, which helped me synthesize the direction of this chapter in its early stages. He described how Ruskin saw his life's mission as teaching people how to see, and suggested that his life's trouble came from wrestling with the fact of people not seeing or refusing to see what seemed so apparent to him.

⁴³ For additional use and discussion of Ruskin's word painting, see much of the scholarship cited in the note above on his desire to teach sight.

⁴⁴ Despite the noticeable shift occurring between Ruskin's earlier and later methods, Teukolsky has suggested that even his early methods were never extremely static; see the first chapter in *The Literate Eye* (2009).

⁴⁵ Such criticism of Ruskin for stepping beyond his reputational authority as art critic is apparent in an 1878 review of *Fors* in the *Dundee Courier*: "It is a pity that Mr Ruskin, with all his marvellous acuteness as an art critic, and all his benevolence and many good social qualities, should let his aesthetic faculty run away into fields where it must be subordinate" ("Mr Ruskin on the Depression of Trade"). The *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle* from that same year concurs: "his mistake consists in judging political and social questions from an art standard" (3). Ruskin deals with the same remonstrations in his correspondence with Harvard professor Charles Eliot Norton (Bradley and Ousby 133, 298, 325).

⁴⁶ O'Gorman cites this as a key passage in his essay "Ruskin and Fame" (2008), suggesting Ruskin's ambivalent relationship to his growing reputation as an authority figure (96).

⁴⁷ See also what Ruskin writes in *Modern Painters Volume V*: "to a being undesirous of it, revelation is impossible" (7: 260).

⁴⁸ Vries compares Levinas's rhetorical "performative contradictions" with those of Adorno (*Minimal* 494, 515, 573). Lyotard also describes the paradox Levinas faces: "Doesn't writing—even your writing about liability—weave a mastery, an experience, a text together with what has no text, no experience, and no mastery?" (113). Critchley writes, "Whereas *Totality and Infinity* writes about ethics, *Otherwise than Being* is the performative enactment of ethical writing" (*Ethics of Deconstruction* 8). As Derrida describes Levinas's approach, "the attempt to achieve an opening toward the beyond of philosophical discourse, by means of philosophical discourse, which can never be shaken off completely, cannot possibly succeed *within language*—and Levinas recognizes that there is no thought before language and outside of it—except by *formally* and *thematically* posing *the question of the relations between belonging and the opening, the question of closure*. Formally—that is by posing it in the most effective and most formal, the most formalized, way possible: not in a *logic*, in other words in a philosophy, but in an inscribed description, in an inscription of the relations between the philosophical and the nonphilosophical, in a kind of unheard of *graphics*, within which philosophical conceptuality would be no more than a *function*" (138).

⁴⁹ “Mr. Ruskin’s *Fors Clavigera*,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, vol. 31, no. 793, 7 Jan. 1871, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁰ Untitled review of *Fors Clavigera*, *Daily News* 7731, February 8, 1871, p. 4; Untitled review of *Fors Clavigera*, *Daily News* 9750, 21 July 1877, pp. 4-5.

⁵¹ See Frederic Harrison’s biography *John Ruskin* (181, 402); E. T. Cook’s *Life of John Ruskin* (319); Leslie Stephen’s “Mr. Ruskin’s Recent Writings” (689); and Jeremy Tambling “*Fors Clavigera*: Outside Chances, Posthumous Letters” (2008). Stoddart pushes against overly biographical and psychological readings of *Fors* that emphasize its author as the lone Romantic, the tormented genius. Most connections between Ruskin and Romanticism focus on the art and nature writing of his early works, especially *Modern Painters*, though Stoddart emphasizes that these readings of Romanticism influence interpretations of all his late works in addition to *Fors*: “most modern treatments of Ruskin’s late work leave him isolated as one of ‘the last Romantics’” (*Ruskin’s* 18). See Helsinger’s *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* and John D. Rosenberg’s *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin’s Genius* (1961) and *Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature* (2005). Rosenberg writes that “*Modern Painters* is the last great statement of the English Romantic renovation of sensibility as the *Lyrical Ballads* is the first,” and describes how “Ruskin is faithful both to his personal experience and to his Romantic heritage” (*Darkening* 7, 14, 19). Finley discusses how Ruskin was one of the “romantic typologists” who value the “perception of a natural world infused with sacred meanings” (27); he describes “Ruskin’s capacity to ‘re-mythologize’ the secularized Christian elements of the romantic program, wherever he sensed their threat to his own faithful Wordsworthianism” (167). Waithe, in “Hill, Ruskin, and Intrinsic Value” (2011), summarizes Ruskin’s conception of truth in *Modern Painters* as influenced by “Wordsworth’s natural theology, namely his conception of nature as a book wherein one may read eternal truths” (134). However, Peter Garratt, in “Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* and the Visual Language of Reality” (2009), teases out another reading of Ruskin’s early art writing that steps away “from the cultural legacies of romanticism (intuitive psychology, transcendental order, mysticism)” toward an “associationist” psychological tradition (53).

⁵² Years after Ruskin finished *Fors*, critics continued to blame its eclecticism; see the 1898 review in the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*: “Whether the ‘workmen and labourers of Great Britain’ will give much heed to its teachings we know not. The professor, we fear, fires far over their heads, notwithstanding all that has been done for popular education in the last 20 years” (“Literary Notices” 2).

⁵³ One reason for *Fors*’ recent comeback in scholarship may be precisely its difficulty. Given its fragmentariness and complexity, *Fors* has historically been among the least studied of Ruskin’s texts; it defies the wholeness of the well-wrought urn. Raymond Williams, in his 1960 study *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, calls Ruskin the most “difficult to approach” among nineteenth-century figures, not just because, regarding his overall outlook, “So moral an emphasis became unfashionable,” but because all of his writing—let alone *Fors*—had resisted consistent scholarly interpretation, generating a “mass of irrelevant material and reactions” (147, 143). Paul L. Sawyer, in *Ruskin’s Poetic Argument: The Design of the Major Works* (1985), describes the difficulty of assigning *Fors* to any existing genre (292). Hilton called *Fors* Ruskin’s “masterpiece,” his “best and most extensive work,” and noted that nevertheless it “was ignored in his lifetime and has scarcely been studied from that day to this” (*Early Years* ix-x). It was largely poststructural interest in deconstructing difficult texts that contributed to a reevaluation of the ambiguities and complexities of *Fors*. In his study *Ruskin’s Maze: Mastery and Madness in his Art* (1981), Jay Fellows makes a larger psychological argument about Ruskin’s divided consciousness, as demonstrated across his works, including the “apparently desultory performance in the Maze of *Fors*

Clavigera,” through which “Ruskin wanders” in a manner that is “almost purposeless” (234-35). Fellow’s argument is not just about *Fors*, but about Ruskin’s divided psychology as demonstrated through all his works. For example, following is one passage where he relates *Fors* to *Modern Painters*: “What Ruskin has done—especially in the three volumes of *Fors Clavigera*—is to create a syntactical topography which is an enclosed, but potentially *ad infinitum*, version of the recessional space of *Modern Painters* that, knowing no bounds, moves toward the infinity of a focal point that is also a vanishing point. Infinity has been contained by three volumes whose cross-referencing might never end” (72). J. Hillis Miller, in *Ariadne’s Thread: Story Lines* (1992), uses Ruskin’s own description of the labyrinth symbol in *Fors* (Letter 23, November 1872) as the point of departure for his analysis of labyrinthine fictional narratives, “knotted, repetitive, doubled, broken, phantasmal” (17), but he does not spend time analyzing how Ruskin’s own non-fiction text engages in such formal fragmentation.

⁵⁴ Scholars have examined how the difficulty of Ruskin’s text demands engaged labor from his readers. Austin interprets this labor negatively, arguing that this formal demand for labor is problematic by analogizing words with economic currency: “There is a problematic of labor in the language of these late letters, evident in their form as well as in their treatment of money, labor’s circulating signifier” (“Labor” 210). In contrast, more recent scholarship focuses on the positive potential arising from the labor-intensive formal demands of *Fors*. O’Gorman writes in “Ruskin and Particularity: *Fors Clavigera* and the 1870s” (2000) that *Fors*’ “fragmented form and its deep concern with alienation” embodies Ruskin’s “deployment of purposive difficulty, [...] a strategic resistance to readers themselves” that anticipates high modernism (125) in how it creates a “sometimes inhospitable” space for readers (133). O’Gorman further develops this argument in “‘Do Good Work Whether You Live or Die’: *Fors Clavigera*, Usefulness, and the Crisis of the Commune” (2001). Here he argues that Ruskin, rather than simply resisting his readers, invites them to collaborate in the labor necessary to produce meaning, and thus develop a stronger work ethic: “*Fors* required its readers to work arduously intellectually; it placed, at times, considerable challenges for them to overcome before they could attain Ruskin’s meaning. [...] It was a requirement coherent with part of the whole political programme of *Fors* which, apart from anything else, was a series dedicated to telling its readers of the duty of work itself for the maintenance and sustenance of the social body. [...] And doing good work was also an inescapable, and appropriate, demand of reading *Fors Clavigera* properly. [...] Ruskin’s political ideology of labour in *Fors* purposefully saturated the business of reading it” (84; cf. 88). See also Atwood’s essay “‘Riveder le Stelle’: *Fors Clavigera* and Ruskin’s Educational Experiment” (2008), wherein she writes, “The diffuse structure of *Fors* reflects and enacts Ruskin’s educational philosophy, synthesizing the teaching found throughout his books. [...] Ruskin transforms his readers into active learners. For the reader, theory becomes practice through the very act of penetrating Ruskin’s richly allusive, associative, multi-layered text” (130). See also Atwood’s chapter version of this article in *Ruskin’s Educational Ideals*. Jesse Cordes Selbin, in “‘Read with Attention’: John Cassell, John Ruskin, and the History of Close Reading” (2016), likewise singles out *Fors* as offering resources whereby readers could develop portable methods of close attention: “Ruskin promoted reading methods designed to unmoor seemingly settled cultural precepts; [...] he situated critical reading and thought as central to a more equitable form of common life [...] and] charted a path to close reading as it is usually practiced in the wake of post-structuralism, emphasizing a textual fecundity that affords the proliferation of heterogeneous readings and interpretations” (497).

⁵⁵ O’Gorman writes that the labor Ruskin requires of readers in *Fors* mirrors his own and is ultimately constructive: “Aggregating details into wholes, assimilating ‘chance’ occurrences into the web of his own argument hinted that there were patterns beneath the surface of things, that ‘chance’ events were in fact guided by higher powers, and ‘accidents’ were in the hands of a greater fate, a higher *Fors*. Drawing such elements into meaningful wholes was fundamental to Ruskin’s purposes in *Fors* altogether, as indeed the

synthesizing imperative was continually central to Ruskin's whole life's work" ("Fors Clavigera" 87-88). I see Ruskin not only attempting to synthesize truth, but also attempting to think through its unsynthesizability.

⁵⁶ Highlighting this similarity may also suggest one way that Levinas responds near the end of his career to his early suspicion that the aesthetic distracts from the ethical. In his early essay "Reality and its Shadow" (1948), Levinas describes art in Platonic terms as a shadow of reality, as mythic "evasion" and "irresponsibility" that distracts from the ethical; philosophical criticism is needed to return art to the "true homeland of the mind." However, the benefit of such a return would not just be the saving of art from its irresponsibility, for criticism also finds its "source of philosophical truth" in mythic art (142). That is, if schematized, philosophy could be seen as an articulate center, with art and the absolute Other's obligation both outside and in excess; criticism affirms these dimensions of otherness against which it defines itself even as it critiques their incomprehensibility. Vries sees Levinas as structurally aligning "the *otherness* of art and the *alterity* of ethics," where each does not stand alone, but mirrors the other in a negative dialectical movement with philosophical discourse (*Minimal* 414). Seeing *Otherwise than Being* as itself engaging in aesthetic strategies to avoid the totalization liable in philosophical discourse suggests that art can contribute to the sustaining of ethical conversation. For more on Levinas's conflicted view of the ethics of art and literature, see Seán Hand, "In a Strange Land: Levinas and Literature" (2006); Carolyn Forché, "Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art" (2011); Knut Brynhildsvoll, "The Role of Ethics in Literature: An Approach" (2014); Harold 71-72; Robbins xv, 75-90; Vries, *Minimal* 409-42; and Wehrs and Haney 16. Critchley has examined Levinas's writing as drama in *Problem* (10-11).

Chapter Three Notes

¹ For a history of the concept of scientific objectivity, see Daston and Galison, *Objectivity* (2010) (17, 125, 228-32).

² For an excellent overview of the arguments put forward by Victorian psychologists and their critics, see Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture 1850-1880* (2000) (4, 26-27, 40, 70).

³ For broad intellectual histories of Eliot's wide-ranging studies and how they impacted her work, see Valerie Dodd, *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life* (1990); Avrom Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (2010); and Philip Davis, *The Transferred Life of George Eliot* (2017); for one that emphasizes how Eliot anticipated future literary innovation, see K. M. Newton, *Modernizing George Eliot: The Writer as Artist, Intellectual, Proto-modernist, Cultural Critic* (2011). Newton also argues here that Eliot "deserves to be considered as a moral philosopher in her own right" (5).

⁴ Pauline Nestor points out that Eliot was not just a passive observer, but an active contributor to the developing science of the mind, inasmuch as the Victorian novel was one of the primary methods whereby thinkers, and Eliot especially, "grappled with the same fundamental problems as the emerging science of psychology," which prioritized the questions of will, conscience and moral agency ("Science" 268). In *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (1988), George Levine writes, with occasional references to Eliot, about how "The project of the Victorian novel increasingly appeared

to me as a cultural twin to the project of Victorian science; even the great aesthetic ideals of fiction writers—truth, detachment, self-abnegation—echoed with the ideals of contemporary science” (vii).

⁵ See, for example, how Peter Melville Logan examines *Middlemarch* in connection with Victorian narratives of the physiological nervous system in “The Story of the Story of the Body: Conceiving the Body in *Middlemarch*,” chapter seven of *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in 19th-Century British Prose* (1997). In addition, following are some of the main studies that explicitly connect *Middlemarch* and psychology: Michael York Mason, “*Middlemarch* and Science: Problems of Life and Mind” (1971); K. K. Collins, “G. H. Lewes Revised: George Eliot and the Moral Sense” (1978); Michael Davis, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (2006); Victoria Mills, “The Museum as ‘Dream Space’: Psychology and Aesthetic Response in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*” (2011); Ian Duncan, “George Eliot and the Science of the Human” (2013); Daphne M. Grace, *Beyond Bodies: Gender, Literature and the Enigma of Consciousness* (2014) (especially chapter four); and Clinton Machann, “Teaching *Middlemarch* with a Focus on Theory of Mind” (2014).

⁶ For a Victorian account of Eliot and religion, see George Willis Cooke’s chapter “Religious Tendencies” in *George Eliot: A Critical Study of her Life, Writings and Philosophy* (1883). Bernard J. Paris, in “George Eliot’s Religion of Humanity” (1962), traces how Eliot projected “a religion not of God, but of man” as the inevitable course of future development (420). For more recent accounts of Eliot’s complex relation to religion, see for example John Rignall, “Religion” in *The Oxford Reader’s Companion to George Eliot* (2001); Barry Qualls, “George Eliot and Religion” (2001); Tim Dolin, “Eliot and Religion” in *Authors in Context: George Eliot* (2009); and Oliver Lovesey, “Religion” in *George Eliot in Context* (2013). Marilyn Orr, in “Incarnation, Inwardness, and Imagination: George Eliot’s Early Fiction” (2009), examines the how Eliot’s fiction shows “faith and imagination” as interconnected “hermeneutical mindsets” (452). Hina Nazar, in “The Continental Eliot” (2013), contextualizes Eliot’s interest in Strauss and Feuerbach, key humanizers of Christianity, with other continental influences such as Hegel. Simon During, in “George Eliot and Secularism” (2013), argues that Eliot displaces the spiritual from religion to literature (430), which is in keeping with Eliot’s observation that her readers considered her books to be like “second Bibles” (*Letters* 6: 340, qtd. in Qualls 136). See also Peter C. Hodgson, *The Mystery Beneath the Real: Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot* (2001), which reads her novels through a lens of what their religious insights can offer to “postmodern theology” (148); and John H. Mazaheri, *Essays on Religion in G. Eliot’s Early Fiction* (2018), which more generally examines her poems and novels to show how throughout “religion is a fundamental theme and a positive phenomenon” (8).

⁷ Michael Davis breaks the trend to separate science and religion, addressing both in the chapter “The Science of ‘Spirit’: The Mind and Religious Experience” from *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*. While I wholly agree with his analyses showing Eliot’s integrated interests in psychology and religious experience in relation to mind, he focuses on *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*, both of which overtly address broader religious questions—Catholic reform, Judaic Zionism—while I will be focusing on *The Mill on the Floss* and how it invokes religious language to describe the intimate wonder of mind and conscience.

⁸ Rylance underscores how much debates over psychology can be understood in a larger sense as debates over the evolving cultural value of multiple discourses, and suggests that Eliot can be read as participating in this multiplicity: “it is possible to see the quarrels in liberal intellectual circles over the new psychology in the late nineteenth century as quarrels about the purchase rival languages might have on, in particular, the description of the inner life and moral choice. It is possible, for instance, to understand George Eliot’s

fiction in this way. Her novels are formed from a complex, multi-vocal discourse in which the competing languages of the period vie for descriptive adequacy” (232). Though Rylance turns to *Middlemarch* as the primary text exemplifying such multiple discourse, he still places emphasis on its language of psychology, while I turn to *The Mill on the Floss* to emphasize its religious language about subjectivity.

⁹ The Center for Evolutionary Psychology at UC Santa Barbara offers a basic overview and bibliography of this field, outlining its beginning with Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) and William James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and summarizing its essential principles, which include the following: “The brain is a physical system”; “Our neural circuits were designed by natural selection”; “Consciousness is just the tip of the iceberg; most of what goes on in your mind is hidden from you”; and “Our modern skulls house a stone age mind” (Cosmides and Tooby). For another broad overview, which ends by claiming this field as “the fulfilment of Darwin’s vision,” see David Buss, “Evolutionary Psychology” (2006). For a general history that focuses on the field’s early roots in the work of Lamarck, Darwin, Spencer, and others, especially in how they saw it influencing moral behavior, see Robert J. Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (1987). For an overview of different models within evolutionary psychology, and the field’s close relation to cognitive science, see Ben Jeffares and Kim Sterelny, “Evolutionary Psychology” (2012). For a more popularly-oriented recent defense of evolutionary psychology, see Andrew Goldfinch, *Rethinking Evolutionary Psychology* (2015). Among the more famous of such popularizing defenses are Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002). For work placing evolutionary psychology in dialogue with religion, see *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology and Religion* (2016- [ongoing online publication]). For an overview addressing some of the ongoing controversies surrounding this field, see Confer et al., “Evolutionary Psychology: Controversies, Questions, Prospects, and Limitations” (2010). A useful critique similar to Robinson’s may be found in Howard L. Kaye’s *The Social Meaning of Modern Biology: From Social Darwinism to Sociobiology* (2009), which dedicates a chapter to “The Popularization of Human Sociobiology.” He shows that Dawkins and others such as David Barash, Richard Alexander, and Robert Wallace are in the business of “popularizing [...] not ‘objective science’ but their own metaphysical assumptions, philosophical positions, and social visions,” as they “share [E.O.] Wilson’s belief that sociobiology can at last answer truthfully such metaphysical questions as who are we? and why are we here?” (137-38).

¹⁰ In one scholarly essay that briefly compares them, Jennifer L. Holberg writes that Robinson “reminds me of the great English writer, George Eliot—and not only because of her level of erudition and wonderful attention to detail. Like Eliot, Robinson is involved in the fulsome cultivation of narrative sympathy, in helping the reader develop the ability to see the world through others’ eyes—what Augustine might have called ‘charitable reading,’ a reinscription of ‘loving your neighbor as yourself.’ Eliot and Robinson both seem to agree that a profounder sense of neighbor comes concomitant with a novelistic allegiance to representing the full spectrum of human existence” (286-87). Both O’Rourke’s *NYT* review and Holberg’s article compare Eliot and Robinson as fiction writers, only briefly mentioning their non-fiction essays.

¹¹ In *Darwin’s Plots* (1983), Gillian Beer shows how Eliot integrated scientific imagery and language in her writing to such an extent that some contemporary readers found it off-putting (139; cf. Shuttleworth, *George Eliot* ix). Beer reads *Middlemarch* as enacting evolutionary narrative patterns through its interconnected “web of affinities” (156). Similarly, Sally Shuttleworth, in *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science* (1984), examines how Eliot’s novels engage with evolution and organicist theory. Building on these studies, Diana Postlewaite argues that Eliot not only addresses current scientific debates, but that she also employs its methods in her writing. She summarizes the three main points of her

argument: “If *literary realism* is the correlative of scientific observation in George Eliot’s fiction, and *necessitarianism* the product of scientific generalization, then *organic form* is the definitive attribute of that distinctively Victorian ‘medium’ in which George Eliot’s fictional organisms live and breathe and have their being” (111). Dolin also examines how Eliot’s writing uses the scientific methods of “close observation, comparison, and prediction”; her interest in science leads her to reconceive the traditional domain of metaphysics, broadly interpreted as the quest to transcend material circumstances, by returning to that materiality in the language of “organicism” (193). Leaping beyond this literary form and content to lived experience, Eliot sought to cultivate in herself and in her readers the acute observational comportment so valued by scientific objectivism; George Levine, in “George Eliot’s Hypothesis of Reality” (1980, 2008), argues that Eliot sought to embody the ideal of “impersonality” that both science and moral justice idealized (2-3).

¹² Rignall, “Religion of Humanity”; Paris, “George Eliot’s Religion of Humanity” 418-19.

¹³ Byatt 22-23; Cameron 63-64; Correa, “Herbert Spencer”; Paxton 4-5.

¹⁴ Ermarth, “Determinism”; Ermarth, “Incarnations” 273; Shuttleworth, “Science”; Postlewaite 111; Dolin 207-8; George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists* 162.

¹⁵ Further addressing these physical limitations, Pearl Brilmyer emphasizes a psychologically materialist Eliot, arguing that she saw literature not just as inspiring sympathy, but as a literal means for readers to experience “sensory enhancement,” a way of evolving or expanding the range of embodied perception beyond its typical limitations (52). Brilmyer posits that Eliot conceived of humans as dense material objects, always bounded by sensory and perceptual limits (35).

¹⁶ For studies of Eliot and psychology in addition to Michael Davis’s *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*, see for example Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (2007); Beth Tressler, “Waking Dreams: George Eliot and the Poetics of Double Consciousness” (2011); Vanessa L. Ryan, *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (2012); Pauline Nestor, “The Science of the Mind” (2013); and Meegan Kennedy, “‘A True Prophet’? Speculation in Victorian Sensory Physiology and George Eliot’s ‘The Lifted Veil’” (2016).

¹⁷ A more extended study of Gall’s influence on Herbert Spencer and other psychologists can be found in Robert M. Young’s *Mind, Brain, and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century* (1970).

¹⁸ Paris argues that Eliot was a “thorough determinist” who nevertheless ceded the experience of will and moral responsibility as an illusion necessary for social evolutionary improvement (“George Eliot’s Religion of Humanity” 439-40). George Levine points to *The Mill on the Floss* as betraying Eliot’s “complex mode of self-deceit”—her reluctance to admit the implications against moral agency of her subscription to a scientifically determined existence (“Intelligence as Deception” 402).

¹⁹ Scholars have disagreed about the degree to which Spencer impacted Eliot’s work; for example, Lauren Cameron attempts to sidestep the gap between Eliot’s progressive views and Spencer’s problematic reputation as “mechanistic, misogynistic, dogmatic, and socially regressive” (63). While not denying these problems, Cameron analyzes *Daniel Deronda* to highlight how Eliot’s Darwinian elements could also be interpreted as influenced by Spencer’s Lamarckian evolutionary psychology, emphasizing characters’ inherited mental traits (64). In contrast, Nancy L. Paxton’s feminist approach emphasizes how Eliot often implicitly pushes against many of Spencer’s problematic views, for example his notion of

woman's subordinate place in evolution, or his dismissal of religion (5). Paxton's reading of *The Mill on the Floss* underscores how Maggie rejects Spencerian "biological determinism" (82, 98), a reading which I agree with, though I focus less on gender than on ethical subjectivity as mind and conscience.

²⁰ Dolin 191; De Saily 148-49; Rilett 4, 9; Collins 464-65; Hone 93; Beer, *Darwin's* 142.

²¹ For scholarship on Eliot and Sully, see Vanessa L. Ryan, "Reading the Mind: From George Eliot's Fiction to James Sully's Psychology" (2009); Helen Groth, "The Mind as Palimpsest: Art, Dreaming and James Sully's Aesthetics of Latency" (2014); and Penelope Hone, "Muted Literary Minds: James Sully, George Eliot and Psychologized Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century" (2014).

²² For example, Postlewaite's primary methodology in her essay "George Eliot and Science" is to cite Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind* and then invoke examples from Eliot's novels as illustration (108-9). Rylance employs the same method, referencing primarily *Middlemarch*; however, though Eliot first inspired his work, he is more transparent about his purpose to focus on Lewes along with Bain and Spencer (2). As useful as such comparisons are, I want to emphasize how Eliot balanced empirical psychology with a religiously-inflected approach to value the subjective account of mind and conscience.

²³ For example, Collins examines the manuscripts to suggest that Eliot joins Lewes in seeking to bridge the conflict between subjective intuitionism and objective utilitarianism, but that she emphasizes a moral philosophical language of duty to offset Lewes's emphasis on morality as a product of natural evolution (466). See also George Levine, "Hypothesis" 4.

²⁴ Following are some representative studies engaging Eliot on sympathy. Elizabeth Ermarth, in "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy" (1985), invokes Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* to articulate Eliot's view of "the psychic conditions for sympathy," which emerge through the "self-division" felt in one's conscience, or in prayer to the otherness of God or divine humanity (23-24, 42). Forest Pyle, in "A Novel Sympathy: The Imagination of Community in George Eliot" (1993), argues that sympathy for Eliot resolves the separation between self and community opened by the solitary romantic imagination: "Sympathy is the imaginative impulse that, transcending the egotism and renouncing the desires of self, promises to bridge the epistemological and ethical gap between self and world" (6). Andrew H. Miller, in *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (2008), shows how Eliot and other authors explore and create forms of sympathy and other modes of ethical "responsiveness" related to moral perfection in Victorian literary discourses (18). Rae Greiner, in *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (2012), seeks to pry formal sympathy apart from unruly emotion, countering the larger critical trend toward affect studies (1-2). Doing so allows her to highlight "the intentional and evaluative aspects of sympathy" (2), its "cognitive demands" (3).

²⁵ Many have examined Eliot's defense of sympathy in connection with motivating altruistic action against self-interest. See, for example, John Crombie Brown's early account, *The Ethics of George Eliot's Works* (1879), wherein he argues that Eliot's chief ethical contribution is precisely her argument against competitive self-interest, consisting "In largeness of Christian charity, in breadth of human sympathy, in tenderness toward all human frailty that is not vitally base and self-seeking" (13). Frank Christianson examines Eliot's novels in the context of a specifically Victorian version of altruism: philanthropy, whose growth paralleled that of capitalism (140-41). Emily Coit examines how Eliot shares with Ruskin an aesthetic perspective on the moral question urgent to her conception of the "interconnected web" of society: "how are we to balance our own needs and desires with those of others?" (215). Athanassia Williamson draws on Levinas to analyze how Eliot's earlier works are more "grounded in sympathy and

compassion for others,” while her later works shift toward a more philosophical “experimentation with different ethical modes of being” (35). Anna Lindhé pushes Nussbaum’s argument for Eliotic narrative empathy—that novels moralize readers—to argue that novels do not necessarily guarantee altruistic behavior, but that they are valuable for implicating readers’ responsibility in the failures as well as successes of empathy (35-37). I find these explorations of Eliot’s defense of sympathy and its implications for altruistic action persuasive; however, my argument adds and further underscores the perspective that Eliot found the experience of mind and conscience undergirding sympathy and altruism worthy of wonder, intrinsically valuable.

²⁶ *Altruism* comes from the French for “others,” *autrui*, and the *OED* designates altruism as a term entering English through translations of Comte and his followers from about 1830 on, citing his 1852 *Catéchisme positiviste*, or *Catechism of Positive Religion* (cf. George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists* 102). Comte envisioned a teleological model of three-stage human progress, from the theological to the metaphysical, culminating in the positive. In this last stage, science dominates all other discourses, even the structure for morality, by systematizing logical thought to keep the conflicting human feelings properly balanced between egoism’s seven competitive, socially-divisive functions and altruism’s three socially-cohesive functions (Bourdeau 5.4). In *A General View of Positivism* (1848), Comte writes that altruism is difficult to maintain, since “the benevolent emotions have in most cases less intrinsic energy than the selfish”; however, he also asserts his positivist faith that “social life” can foster the growth of these weaker benevolent emotions by providing a natural “check” on self-interest: surrounded by other people, one’s conditions of survival change such that the need for cooperation outweighs the need for self-indulgence (16-17). Comte’s model of positivist reason considers sympathetic altruism as a legitimate feature of human experience, but explains its persistence as sustained by the evolving needs of social life.

Eliot read Comte and also encountered his ideas through others such as Lewes and Frederic Harrison, Comte’s English popularizer, so she would have been familiar with his views on altruism. Comte’s account resonates to some extent with Adam Smith’s conception of the opposition between public, competitive self-love and private moral sympathy and benevolence, which the invisible hand maintains in balance, though Comte posits both as possible in the public, social sphere, while Smith sees their coexistence as possible only by separating them into public and private spheres (Christianson 39; Werhane 670-71, 673-75). The point is that Comte and Smith are representative in conceiving of altruism as the polarized opposite of competitive self-interest, but in doing so they at least continue to acknowledge altruism as an authentic, if comparatively weaker or private, experience in the human psyche. For a more extensive account of the polarization begun in the nineteenth century between altruism as private, subjective, and illusional in contrast to biologically-determined self-interest claimed as objective, especially as it emerged from Scottish enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith, along with a discussion of the nineteenth-century’s emerging dialogues between sympathy, altruism, and their permutation into philanthropy as a form reactionary to capitalism, see Christianson, *Philanthropy in British and American Fiction* (2007), esp. pp. 31-63.

Explaining the persistence of altruism as one of the more visible, socially-beneficial manifestations of the sympathetic promptings of conscience toward others would be more directly challenged by other evolutionary accounts of human social interactions. Darwin generally avoids the question of conscience and its manifestation as altruistic behavior in *The Origin of Species*, but, together with mind, he takes it up in *The Descent of Man*. He argues that the facets of human mental and moral experience are traits perhaps more evolved in humans, but still shared to various degrees with animals, manifesting their ultimate grounding in self-interested competition (*Descent* 34, 70). George Levine points out that Eliot

and G. H. Lewes both resisted wholesale acceptance of Darwin's "bleakly competitive" model in how they cautiously "assimilated Darwin's thought into their altruistic ideal of morality" (*Darwin and the Novelists* 11). Their example shows that Darwin did not monolithically coopt all narratives of morality, though he was incredibly influential (Burdett, "Sexual Selection" 27-29). I agree with Levine and Burdett here, though my analysis goes the extra step of more explicitly examining how part of Eliot's opposition to the bleak Darwinian narrative of altruism as utilitarian self-interest can be located in her continuing to use religiously-inflected language valuing the experiences of mind and conscience.

²⁷ The persistence of these assumptions as unquestioned knowledge is further described, to take a contemporary example, in an *Atlantic* review, "Does Capitalism Work if Humans are Altruistic?" (2009). This article begins by describing the notion that self-interest masquerades as generosity: "Altruism, or selfless acts that benefit others, have long been a mystery of human behavior. The closest thing to conventional wisdom has been that selflessness is only an illusion of self-interest; we act altruistically because we expect reciprocation." The article then goes on to review Frans de Waal's book *The Age of Empathy* (2009), which supposedly pushes back against this entrenched assumption, but to my mind ultimately reinforces it from a traditional evolutionary direction. As de Waal writes in the introduction to his book, "True, biology is usually called upon to justify a society based on selfish principles, but we should never forget that it has also produced the glue that holds communities together. This glue is the same for us as for many other animals. Being in tune with others, coordinating activities, and caring for those in need isn't restricted to our species. Human empathy has the backing of a long evolutionary history" (ix-x). De Waal's argument essentially rehashes Darwin's *Descent of Man*; its attempt to remind readers that biological evolution also yielded empathy, not just self-interest, and that humans share altruistic behavior with other animals, at least seeks to credit empathy as a real emotion, but it still begs the question, or leaves open the paradox, how the competitive struggle for survival as the foundational mechanism of evolution could produce a self-consciousness that sees itself as not inevitably determined to such behavior, as responsible to stand apart from its own needs and act for others in ways that are ultimately at odds with this struggle. The authoritative trump card is still evolutionary theory's objective, scientific account, not the subjective account of the anomalous strangeness and wonder of mind and conscience with which humans feel themselves laden, as attested in *The Mill on the Floss*.

²⁸ Peter Garratt writes of the growing awareness in the nineteenth century that the subjective account of the senses was not to be trusted because it gave a falsified view of the world. He invokes Daston and Galison's extensive study of how the nineteenth century's quest for objectivity turned increasingly to mechanization and technology as supposedly capable of sidestepping the unreliability of "all-too-human intervention in the transcriptional task" (*Victorian Empiricism* 27).

²⁹ As Thomas Nagel famously writes in his essay "What is it Like to Be a Bat?" (1974), the problem of subjective consciousness still remains, precisely because it is subjective. We may know all the objective facts, or "truth propositions," about how consciousness functions neurologically, but it is fundamentally different than the experience of consciousness (441). It would be more honest to admit that consciousness is one of those "facts that do not consist in the truth of propositions expressible in a human language. We can be compelled to recognize the existence of such facts without being able to state or comprehend them" (442); despite the best efforts of science, "it is a mystery how the true character of experiences could be revealed in the physical operation of that organism" (442). To seek the continuing boon of science, objectivity, is precisely not subjectivity: "any shift to greater objectivity—that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint—does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it" (445). Anticipating Robinson's critique of parascience, he also critiques "the magical flavor

of popular presentations of fundamental scientific discoveries, given out as propositions to which one must subscribe without really understanding them” (447).

³⁰ Though Robinson’s *Absence of Mind* dates from 2010, her critique has become only more relevant since then. One among many possible examples comes to mind in the recently published essay collection *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience* (2018), which claims unequivocally that “the mind is the brain” (4) and argues that this conclusion can send people into a new kind of existential crisis. Reviewer Markus Gabriel calls out the reductiveness of this argument, as well as its “disanalogy,” arguing that while previous models of existentialism associated with Kierkegaard and Sartre emerged from confrontation with the excess, the lack of grounding for human will and thought, neuroexistentialism actually asserts a definite grounding for these experiences in the materiality of the brain, which ignores what is most characteristic about these experiences: their subjectivity.

³¹ As Rebecca Mitchell writes in *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference* (2011), “The lesson of Victorian realism is that we *cannot* know the other” (xii). She explores this opacity in connection with Levinas’s ethics of the other as unable to be totalized by the self, quoting his claim in *Time and the Other* that “The relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery” (19). Similarly, Hina Nazar, in “Facing Ethics: Narrative and Recognition from George Eliot to Judith Butler” (2011), writes that for Eliot, “ethical ‘recognition’ does not invoke an innate or unchanging humanity. It does not trade in essences or objective truths but summons instead a perspectival world of multiple subjects. On this understanding, other people are not empirical objects to be known; they are other subjects or bearers of distinct points of view” (443).

³² The use of evolutionary logic to justify racist prejudices comes directly from the Victorians. Darwin saturates *The Descent of Man* with references to “the immorality of savages” as less fully evolved than white Europeans; he uses a racist and ableist spectrum extending “from the mind of an utter idiot, lower than that of the lowest animal, to the mind of a Newton” (97, 106), a spectrum most fully described as determined by the course of natural selection in the chapter titled “On the Development of the Intellectual and Moral Faculties during Primeval and Civilised Times” (107). He revisits in the conclusion this notion that “the Negro and European” are differently evolved “sub-species” (388). Thus he deploys his theory to reinforce the common racial and imperial prejudices of his day.

Like Darwin, Spencer perpetuates narratives of the racial and gendered inferiority of “savages” and women (*Principles of Psychology* 325-26, 328, 368-69, 422, 461-62, 471, 581-83; Rylance 207, 221). See for example his explicit discussion of morality as determined by evolutionary advancement in this representative comment from *The Principles of Psychology*: “Among most of the lower races, acts of generosity or mercy are incomprehensible. That is to say, the more involved relations of human actions in their social bearings are not cognizable. We must therefore conclude that the complex manifestations, intellectual and moral, which distinguish the large-brained European from the small-brained savage, have been step by step made possible by successive complications of faculty” (369).

Questions over psychology and race persist today, though with comparatively more self-awareness in academic circles; in “Cognitive/Evolutionary Psychology and the History of Racism” (2017), John P. Jackson Jr. outlines the current issues in the different histories of racism offered by social constructivists and evolutionary psychologists, concluding that racial thinking is more rigorously explained by the former than the latter (296).

³³ Newton argues against common conceptions of Eliot as a heavy-handed Victorian moralist, citing her antipathy to rigid forms of moral systematization (“George Eliot and the Ethical” 314-15).

³⁴ U. C. Knoepfmacher claims that this comment should not be “overestimated,” that it was a temporary regression to the “deep spiritual misgivings” that had once haunted Eliot’s Evangelical youth. He then claims that Eliot accepted the new faith of evolutionary science that “reduced the salvation of the soul to the survival of the species,” that asserted a determined universe, and that replaced the religious and metaphysical methodology of “close introspection” with the new psychology’s exposure of man’s “innate egoism,” which could nevertheless in high states of civilization be directed in “altruism and self-denial” for the survival of the species (29-32). In contrast, I accord with Newton’s reading of Eliot’s comment in context with other indications of her resistance to Darwinism, especially her concern with its prioritization of egoistic self-interest over altruism (*Modernizing* 7-8).

³⁵ Wife of Henry Frederick Ponsonby, who was private secretary to Queen Victoria (Martin 106-7).

³⁶ Logan ch. 7 sect. 3; Machann 79; Nestor, “Science” 267-68; Paris, *Psychological Approach* 165; Philip Davis, *Transferred* 267.

³⁷ Ermarth, “Incarnations” 274-75; George Levine, “Determinism” 268; Newton, “George Eliot, Kant, and Free Will” 441-42; Nemoianu 65-66; Lallier 66; Markovits 788-89; Anger, “George Eliot” 89-90.

³⁸ Ashton 30; Byatt 11-12, 19-20; Rylance 28-29; Burdett, “Sexual Selection” 26, 30.

³⁹ For example, Paris diagnoses Maggie’s “inner conflicts”—her unhealthy codependence, her chronic feelings of inferiority, and her “compulsive” obsession with self-effacement (*Psychological Approach* 166-67, 171, 182); Peggy Johnstone examines Maggie’s wrestle with “narcissistic rage” (45); such readings often emphasize Eliot’s autobiographical identification with Maggie (61; cf. Byatt 9-11; Birch, Introduction to *Mill* viii-ix, xxviii).

⁴⁰ See for example Barbara Guth, who sides with Philip against Kempis’s “philosophy of renunciation” and describes the narrator’s tone toward it as that of one recalling something “one has outgrown” (357). John Hagan, while spending more time on debates over the novel’s tone toward Kempis, claims that Maggie’s quest to renounce is a “self-deception” that, though it temporarily triumphs in her renunciation of Stephen, ultimately “fails” to help her in her real quest for love (58, 61-62).

⁴¹ Birch here emphasizes phrases that associate music with the risks of unconscious psychological influence: reading Kempis, Maggie is “hardly conscious that she was reading—seeming rather to listen” (290); listening to Stephen, “all her intentions were lost in the vague state of emotion produced by the inspiring duet” (416). I think there is another way of interpreting it, though, for when Maggie is reading Kempis, she also feels not stupefied, but more alert, “as if she had been wakened in the night by a strain of solemn music, telling of beings whose souls had been astir while hers was in stupor” (*Mill* 289); and again after hearing Stephen sing, she says that music “seems to infuse strength” into her and relieve her of “a weight” (386). William J. Sullivan has also analyzed how music impacts Maggie emotionally in “Music and Musical Allusion in *The Mill on the Floss*” (1974).

⁴² Paris argues that Maggie cannot avoid this version of self-interest disguised as self-sacrifice. However, he takes the narrator’s gentle critique of Maggie’s imperfect application of renunciation to her lived experience much further than I believe is warranted, claiming that even at the end of the novel, Maggie is

still obsessed with “a neurotic search for glory” and that she fantasizes renunciation “as an exalted glamour” (*Psychological Approach* 184).

⁴³ As I wish to, Paul Yeoh also pushes against readings that interpret Maggie’s renunciation as a failure, merely a psychological delusion masking self-interest, though he does so by invoking the religious language of hagiography to argue for her success (2). He shows that, though she may initially struggle with “the self-deluding attractions of the martyr’s role” (4), she changes to such an extent that her subsequent “practice of saintly altruism” exerts a moral influence on Tom and Lucy, and, even after her death, on Philip and Stephen (12-13). Though Yeoh describes this maturation in Maggie’s renunciation as a successful “modern hagiography” (2), in contrast to my focus on her experience of the subjective wonder of self-reflective conscience regardless of whether her renunciation succeeds, we both share a similar goal: to harness different uses of religious language in the novel to reopen a means “to admire Maggie as a moral agent,” not merely a “hapless victim of unjust ideological formations” (3). He explains how his hagiographic reading redeems Maggie’s death at the end of the novel: “As we come to appreciate the worthy issue of Maggie’s ‘life writings,’ some of the frustration generated by her untimely demise is removed: as in the miraculous tales of medieval hagiography, ‘sudden death’ cannot destroy the life story in which Maggie has invested so much [...]—and in fact serves to augment the rhetorical power of her textual life” (3). Yeoh’s reading of *The Mill on the Floss* as a modern hagiography contributes to the debate over genre, for he sees the novel as moving beyond the individual *Bildungsroman* or “anti-Bildungsroman” debate (18) as carried on by Marianne Hirsch (37), Susan Fraiman (138), and Jed Esty (*Unseasonable Youth* 13, 56). Instead, Yeoh offers the hagiographic interpretation of *The Mill on the Floss* as suggesting a more ethical because interpersonal “narrative of multiple *Bildungen*. Predicated on the notion of ‘strong sympathy’ and ‘the gift of transferred life’ [...], the *Bildung* of an individual must ultimately be measured in terms of the degree to which individual development stimulates and facilitates the progress of other individuals along the steep highway of moral improvement” (18).

⁴⁴ In “The Clue of Life: Translating Feuerbach in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*” (2018), Halder traces connections between Feuerbach and this novel, focusing mainly on suffering and human fragility: “Maggie is exemplifying Feuerbach’s ‘suffering of love’” (17).

⁴⁵ Michele Moylan connects the idea of memory to time through a psychoanalytic reading in “The Moral Imperatives of Time and Memory in Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*” (1990): “Although George Eliot wrote several decades earlier than did Freud, and although she was firmly established in a Western logic system, in *The Mill on the Floss* she posits a role for memory and time which is strikingly similar to the role these play in the ‘oceanic’ feeling or in non-Western paradigms of knowing. Through Maggie, Eliot seems to suggest that there is an alternative to our linear, subject-object method of deciding moral issues” (370).

⁴⁶ Philip Davis points out, “What Thomas à Kempis is to Maggie is what George Eliot would want to be to equivalent strugglers who have no other form of humane education in the deeper secrets of existence. Her hand points to her own text” (*Transferred* 257).

⁴⁷ Yeoh writes, “The narrator might ironize Maggie’s attempts to practice the teachings of Thomas à Kempis, but her irony clearly does not extend to the *Imitatio* itself. In fact, the narrator represents Thomas à Kempis as providing Maggie a moral and spiritual sustenance that neither nineteenth-century Anglicanism nor secular knowledge can give her” (10). Patricia Anders concurs in emphasizing Eliot’s endorsement of Kempis, citing the narrator’s emphasis that his text’s “miracles” are still, “to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness” (*Mill* 291; cf. Anders 12).

Chapter Four Notes

¹ Letter to John X. Merriman, 26 February 1907, line 43. All letters of Olive Schreiner referenced can be found online at the *Olive Schreiner Letters Project Transcription*.

² *The Story of an African Farm* is widely recognized as the first New Woman novel (Heilmann 4; Bristow viii-ix). Schreiner's short fiction likewise takes up woman's cause, often using allegorical stories. One such is "Three Dreams in a Desert" from her compilation *Dreams* (1890), which details the struggles of "woman" as she shakes off the burdens of "Ancient Customs" and crosses the "banks of Labour, through the water of Suffering," to reach the "Land of Freedom" (68-69, 76-77). Schreiner even intersperses her most overtly feminist text, *Woman and Labour* (1911), with poetically written allegories because she wants to convey the persuasive emotion that she believes abstract argumentation lacks (16). Her text thus creates space for more typically feminized forms of communication, independent of masculinized linear logic. For some of the main works of scholarship positioning Schreiner's feminism in the context of the New Woman movement, see Ruth Parkin-Gounelas, *Fictions of the Female Self: Charlotte Brontë, Olive Schreiner, Katherine Mansfield* (1991); Carolyn Burdett, *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender, Empire* (2001); Robin Hackett, "Olive Schreiner and the Late Victorian New Woman," in her book *Sapphic Primitivism: Productions of Race, Class, and Sexuality in Key Works of Modern Fiction* (2004); Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (2004); and Liz Stanley, *Imperialism, Labour and the New Woman: Olive Schreiner's Social Theory* (2013).

³ Schreiner was well aware of the economic and political problems aggravating gender and race inequities in South Africa; she strongly invested in socialism's challenge against the capital-imperial complex. See Ruth Livesey, "Olive Schreiner and the Dream of Labour," in her book *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880-1914* (2007), which shows how Schreiner crafted her own version of socialism, "redefining the movement in her own terms" (75).

⁴ Letter to John X. Merriman, 26 February 1907, lines 19-20.

⁵ Schreiner witnessed Cecil Rhodes' power increasing from his ownership of the monopolistic De Beers Consolidated Mines Company to become Cape Colony's prime minister in 1890. Carolyn Burdett speaks of "Schreiner's ongoing, often difficult and conflicted, attempt to produce a convincing narrative of opposition to imperialism" ("Costs of Modernity" 131). Schreiner saw imperialism as dependent on "the development of monopolistic and speculative capitalism in South Africa. She concluded that racism would flourish most tenaciously under a capitalist economic system" (137). *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) both critique imperialism, though Schreiner also lamented that her writings of protest were ineffectual to stop its war and devastation (Lewis 25-26).

⁶ For discussions of Schreiner's admiration of Emerson, see for example Gerald Monsman, *Olive Schreiner's Fiction* (1991) (75, 79, 101); Mark Sanders, "Towards a Genealogy of Intellectual Life: Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*" (2000) (81-82); and Burdett, "Here with the Karroo-bushes" (2000) (106, 109, 111) and *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism* (28, 40, 45).

⁷ For instances of Schreiner's mentioning some of the different philosophers she was reading, see her letters to J. H. Philpot, 12 August 1889 (Kant and Hegel), to Beatrice Potter, 17 November 1884 (Herbert

Spencer), to John T. Lloyd, 29 October 1892, and to Betty Molteno, 24 May 1895 (John Stuart Mill), and to Havelock Ellis, 2 March 1885 (Schopenhauer).

⁸ Anna Snaith, in *Modernist Voyages: Colonial Women Writers in London, 1890-1945* (2014), analyzes Schreiner's subjective self-construction alongside the work of multiple colonial women writers to demonstrate how, as they negotiated the "voyage in" from the colonies to London as the heart of empire, these women resisted "conventional constructions of colonial or British womanhood" (35). Far from advocating a unitary nationalist identity, Schreiner and others register the too often unspoken and contradictory "multiple processes" that contribute to the shaping of identity (35). Simon Lewis, in *White Women Writers and Their African Invention* (2003), likewise examines the literary construction of colonial subjectivity. His study examines both Olive Schreiner and Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen) through the three components in the opening phrase of the latter's novel *Out of Africa* (1937), "I had a farm in Africa." That is, he analyzes the ways in which selfhood, colonial farming juxtaposed with landscape, and conceptions of Africa all formed interrelated nodes of invention by White female South African writers (2), with *invention* entailing the multiple valences of imaginative fabrication, discovery of something already existing, and the construction of "something usable" (17-18). In the first section, then, Lewis examines "the invention of the 'I'" (17), exploring how Schreiner negotiated her personal identity through the conflicting demands of her activist concerns. She was in many ways a product of her time, her originality always inflecting "particular sets of social circumstances and necessarily constrained by contemporary mind-sets with regard to race, class, gender, and so on" (18). Nevertheless, her feminism was integral to her antiracist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist arguments (29, 31). Rather than addressing subjectivity in its metaphysical and philosophical dimensions, Lewis focuses on how Schreiner's personal life and work as a writer demonstrate her activist commitments; for her, the "'I' is almost always a creation of immediate circumstance" (35). Though Lewis briefly acknowledges that she "turned to male philosophers to ground [her] inventions of [herself]" (32), much more could be done to unpack how philosophical implications played out in Schreiner's writing. Rather than following through with this glance toward philosophy, Lewis focuses on how Schreiner's material conditions and historical context informed the personal construction of her self-identity as a White female South African writer.

⁹ For commentary on Schreiner as protomodernist, see Jade Munslow Ong's *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism: Allegory, Empire and Postcolonial Writing* (2017), which resists scholarly assumptions of Schreiner's works as "failed examples of realist texts," analyzing instead how she uses "modernist techniques to refuse normative, hegemonic communicative networks, and thereby articulate postcolonial resistance" (13-14). See also Stephanie Eggermont's chapter "'The method of life we all lead': Olive Schreiner's Short Fiction as Challenge to the Stage Method" (2012), where, analyzing Schreiner's short stories, she demonstrates how Schreiner privileges "Open-endedness, multiple perspectives and a focus on the moment," all forms which also enable her critique of "the patriarchal gender ideology that is ingrained in traditional narratives" (44). Some realist novels that share publication space with *The Story of an African Farm* are Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), George A. Moore's *A Modern Lover* (1883), Margaret Oliphant's *The Ladies Lindores* (1883), and William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885).

¹⁰ As Jed Esty describes the novel in "The Colonial Bildungsroman" (2007), "[I]t is one part South African *plaastroman* (farm-novel), one part New Woman fiction, one part Dickensian farce (featuring pale sentimental orphans and ruddy sadistic adults), one part naturalist tragedy (with a merciless rising sun and a pitiable fallen woman), one part colonial Gothic, one part Victorian melodrama (featuring hopeless love and missed letters), one part allegorical tale, one part satire of provincial manners (with a dusty Boer wedding scene), one part spiritual autobiography, and one part neo-Transcendentalist novel of ideas"

(407). Since it partakes in all these genres yet eludes categorization with any one of them, *The Story of an African Farm* remains a singular text, formally *sui generis* (407). Esty's argument extends the novel's flexible, mixed forms to embrace a new generic category—the history of the bildungsroman genre.

¹¹ If Spencer had read Kant's *Lectures on Ethics*, however, he would have seen that Kant was well aware of cultural differences in the moral codes of different parts of the world, even citing similar travelers' tales about acts forbidden in Europe apparently permitted to Africans, Chinese, Eskimos, and Brazilians. Any such culturally-specific differences, giving rise to varied systems of "education" and "government," Kant indicates as insufficient to provide an account of the experience of ethics, the moral law, inasmuch as such empiricism provides only "contingent grounds" (*Lectures on Ethics* 27: 253-54/LE 49). He argues precisely the impossibility of seeking to ground ethics in any one of these cultural structures as better than another; rather, ethics—the moral law—inspires such wonder in him precisely because by definition it exceeds, or stands outside of, the contingencies of cultural difference (*Lectures on Ethics* 27: 254-59/LE 49-53).

¹² Problematically, in citing such instances to support his critique of Kant's ethics as naïve to different levels of moral progression between races, Spencer focuses on the specific contents of moral codes, which was precisely what Kant rejected as inadequate to account for the human experience of finding oneself morally obligated inasmuch as one also finds oneself thinking. Different cultures instantiate, through various signifying structures, the moral law that constitutes all rational beings, that is experientially always already present to thought. Kant is trying to describe how human beings are creatures capable of self-reflective thinking, and how, present in this capacity for thought, is a sense of obligation, a demand for self-consistency. Humans inhabit an inescapable sense of justice and injustice, however differently cultures may articulate and define those categories. Regarding how problematic it would be to attempt to base a universal ethics on particular cultural practices and taboos, he writes in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785):

For, by what right could we bring into unlimited respect, as a universal precept for every rational nature, what is perhaps valid only under the contingent conditions of humanity? And how should laws of the determination of *our* will be taken as laws of the determination of the will of rational beings as such, and for ours only as rational beings, if they were merely empirical and did not have their origin completely *a priori* in pure but practical reason? (4:408/PP 62-63)

Kant radically opens the scope of moral thinking even beyond anthropocentric claims to rationality. The *Groundwork* aspires to be just that, an attempt to think the grounding, *a priori* rational nature of the moral law that is not grounded in anything other than itself. However, even here and in much more detail in his other works, Kant clarifies that the moral law operates in a worlded space; we do not remain isolated in abstract pure reason. But the point is that the *Groundwork* debunks claims that the moral law can be explained as determined by sensible inclinations shaped by any one particular society's culture, such as their categories of utility or of racial purity or of socioeconomic hierarchy.

¹³ Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* discusses more generally how during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "Although the philosophes were generally against slavery, many of them toyed with racist theories" (400). Kant was no exception, despite his account of the moral law that, from our perspective, would expose such theories as ethically impoverished. For more extended discussion of Kant's problematic comments in respect to race and gender, see for example Robert B. Loudon, *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (2000); Charles W. Mills, "Kant's Untermenschen," in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy* (2005); and Dilek Huseyinzedegan, "For What can the Kantian

Feminist Hope? Constructive Complicity in Appropriations of the Canon” (2018). This latter offers a useful overview of different ways in which feminists have struggled with Kant, for example trying to reclaim his good ideas by downplaying his misogyny and racism as merely peripheral to his critical work, or dismissing him as altogether irredeemable. Following Spivak’s *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a Vanishing Present* (1999), Huseyinzadegan argues for a methodology of “constructive complicity” (2, 14), in which Kant’s contradictions over his central question, “what is the human being?” would be acknowledged as useful for diagnosing ongoing discrimination in academia and in the modern world more broadly (20-21).

¹⁴ For some representative accounts of evolution and scientific racism, see Pat Shipman, *The Evolution of Racism: Human Differences and the Use and Abuse of Science* (1994), which traces the consequences of such thinking into the twentieth century; and the collection edited by Back and Solomos, *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* (2000). For an analysis that includes the Australian context, see Kay Anderson, *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* (2007). For an article condensing much work on the American context, see William H. Jeynes, “Race, Racism, and Darwinism” (2010). See also the sources listed in notes to my introduction and to my chapter on Eliot and evolutionary psychology.

¹⁵ Schreiner does not specify exactly why the ending of Spencer’s article “hurt” her so much, but that her troubled reaction was one of disagreement with Spencer becomes even more probable in light of her own ignoring of utilitarianism as an ethical model. Granted, she admired John Stuart Mill, calling him “the purest & greatest soul” (letter to Betty Molteno, 24 May 1895, lines 15-16). However, she did not imbibe Mill’s utilitarianism; a search for “utilitarian” and “utilitarianism” in her complete letters published online yields no results; she never advocated the system (Berkman 70).

¹⁶ For an analysis of the visual culture manifesting this rhetoric, Rachel Teukolsky analyzes various aspects of modernist art that look back to Victorian assumptions about South African Bushmen: “Romanticized as a vanishing race, the Bushmen were seen to leave behind Ozymandias-like rock paintings silently representing their dying culture. They occupied the Victorian imaginary as a mythic symbol of all primitive cultures, low on the evolutionary chain, which are swept away by modern progress” (*Literate* 215).

¹⁷ Waldo’s respect for Bushman art mirrors Schreiner’s own fascination with the language spoken by the Bantu (Sanders 82). In *Thoughts on South Africa*, she describes their language as vivid and powerful, “of a perfect construction, lending itself largely to figurative and poetical forms, yet capable of giving great precision to exact thought” (110). Waldo offers less explicit reasons for his appreciation of Bushman artistic expression than those Schreiner offers for the Bantu language, yet his earnest attention to it still sets him apart from the other White characters.

¹⁸ Scholars have elaborated on Schreiner’s sympathy for the marginalized. Cherry Clayton writes, “Her varied artistic strategies, stories, and voices constitute an attempt, within the boundaries of fiction, at a temporary integration of all the possible selves called into being by a fractured and oppressive reality [...] Writing was her way of making space for an alternative voice to be heard” (xii). Waldo’s is perhaps the most resistant, if quiet, voice by the end of the novel. Gerald Monsman further explores how Schreiner’s novel operates at the margins of realist representation for transformative effect: “She strove not just to represent but to reform society through art. Thus, her fiction does not merely include historical and social reality; it combats historical injustice and oppressive social orthodoxy. And it does so within

these texts in terms of narrative patterns, imagery, characterization, and structural organization” (xii). Schreiner thus strove to re-imagine how power assigns different groups to centers and margins.

¹⁹ George Levine provides an excellent analysis of the tension between nineteenth-century science and religious faith in *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* (2008), analyzing how many Victorians came to believe that “The true God is nature, the true worship, science [...] the secular is the religious” (100). He cites, among others, Thomas Huxley’s claim that “The man of science has learned to believe in justification, not by faith, but by verification” (100). Levine also analyzes the Victorians’ perspectives on positivism as a major “philosophical movement” whose influence is still felt today (136).

²⁰ Nancy finds himself extensively in dialogue with philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Lacan, and Heidegger. He also adds another dimension to the ideas about ethical togetherness that emerge in the writings of his contemporaries in addition to Levinas and Derrida, such as Blanchot and Bataille, who also respond in various capacities to Heidegger.

²¹ Césaire, in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), overturns the binary of savagery and civilization that justified imperialism, claiming that the barbarism of the Nazis directly followed from the degradations of colonialism (36-37). Similarly Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), explicitly links capitalism and nineteenth-century imperialism with twentieth-century totalitarian regimes (123-26).

²² For another description of such mythic unity as suggested through the exceptional function of proper names in language, see Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (1916) (69).

²³ As Nancy writes, this circulation of signifiers, inasmuch as it turns on loss, is an endless process: “Curiously, the man of humanism can never be where he is, but only in his project and as project. He has to *become* what he is, through education, intention, effort, transformation, progression, anamnesis. This becoming may be accomplished through the succession of generations, or through the individual act of the project and the aim, but never in the present of existence. For the man of humanism, his present and his presentation (his meaning) cannot coincide” (*Gravity* 34-35). One thinks of how Schreiner in *The Story of an African Farm* frames the stranger’s allegory of striving for truth with his jaded cynicism toward such striving, and his surprise at Waldo’s finding this story of striving so moving.

²⁴ Michael Lackey, in a review of *The Experience of Freedom*, claims that Nancy rewrites the Kantian legacy: “Kant, as Heidegger has already shown, reduces freedom to necessity and causation, a move which thereby denies freedom its freedom. Consequently freedom, which seeks its own freedom, repeatedly problematizes Kantian thought” (167). He continues by explicating the ethical implications of Nancy’s intervention in the relationship between freedom and thought: “Since freedom is ontologically prior to thought, and since thought cannot reduce freedom to necessity, causality, a natural right, or anything else, thought must abandon itself to freedom, and not vice versa. But when thought does try to subject freedom to necessity, when it tries to systematize or conceptualize freedom, then thought, as an emissary of evil, denies existence, it refuses to acknowledge existence as such. In this instance, thought usurps freedom and fashions itself the groundless ground” (168).

²⁵ To further demonstrate what he means by good and evil being simultaneously presented to freedom, Nancy also invokes the old term “grace” in opposition to the “fury” that denies freedom (*Experience* 133). He elaborates his use of these terms by aligning them with the opposing concepts of existence and essence. Existence means the being-with or co-appearing of others in the world, while essence means the

isolated unitary self-identical being. Good, “the ‘grace’ of existence,” opens toward the plurality of others, while evil seeks to erase this multiplicitous grace, to appropriate its “infinite freedom,” in the totalizing “fury of essence” (*Experience* 139; cf. 146, 161, 169). Yet the possibility of grace being erased by fury or evil cannot be eliminated, inasmuch as fury is precisely this move to eliminate or foreclose possible responses to freedom. Thus, an ethical paradox opens: “Freedom is precisely what is free for and against itself. It cannot be what it is except by remaining, at every moment, freedom of ‘grace’ and of ‘fury.’ This chasm is its ‘foundation,’ its absence-of-ground” (*Experience* 161). Evil would seek to fill in the chasm, to assert a ground other than freedom that would qualify or determine existence.

²⁶ Schreiner felt especially fond of the allegorical form; Joyce Avrech Berkman and Ann Heilmann both point to the way in which Schreiner “secularised *Pilgrim’s Progress*” (Heilmann 120; cf. Berkman 215). Allegory may seem a closed genre, with one-to-one symbolic correspondences and moralistic lessons; yet in Schreiner’s hands it freed her imagination. Ong offers a more extended argument about the role “politicized allegory” plays for Schreiner in privileging African over European aesthetic forms (11).

²⁷ Schreiner removed this framing when she excerpted and included this allegory as “The Hunter” in her collection of stories titled *Dreams* (1891). Rachel Hollander has written of this moment, “Although this might be read as an extreme act of appropriation, since the stranger literally tells Waldo’s story for him, I’d like to suggest that the interruption of the novel—as a sub-narrative disrupts the story of the characters’ lives—actually serves to reinforce at the level of form the intimacy and exchange that has developed between Waldo and the stranger. [...] for Waldo the stranger’s allegory is a translation or adaptation of his own work, rather than a new invention” (141).

²⁸ Another possible interpretation of Waldo’s response, which lies beyond the scope of my reading, focuses his fascination not on the story but on the stranger himself, suggesting the possibility of Waldo’s transgressive homoerotic attachment to him (Sanders 78).

²⁹ Nancy’s discussion of freedom as surprise, as well as his discussion of birth and death as the moments when the singularity of a person is made visible as always already in community, resonates with Arendt’s notion of the spontaneity of natality, developed most extensively in *The Human Condition* (8-9, 247).

³⁰ As Nancy puts it, “we are responsible for the freedom of the world. [...] we cannot avoid detouring through the freedom of the world in order to come to our own freedom. This is a necessity of thinking, a political and ethical exigency” (160). Describing thought as inextricable from the ethical responsibility of freedom finds similar articulation in Arendt’s question at the beginning of *The Life of the Mind*, which posits the intertwined relationship of ethics and thought, a relationship again presumed in her critique of the banality of evil and of totalitarianism (*Life* 5, 193; *Eichmann* 287-88; *Origins* 470, 474, 477).

³¹ Nancy explicitly engages with Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* as coextensive with *Mitsein*, positing that Heidegger did not follow through on this gesture toward the co-originary of being and being-with. Nancy is in a sense correcting and finishing Heidegger’s project (*Experience* 33-43; *Inoperative* 14; Fynsk x).

Nancy also implicitly expands Levinas’s model of the ethical encounter, the face-to-face demand not to kill but to preserve life, by positing that being-with includes all the beings that co-exist with human beings in the world, animate and inanimate. To make his argument about the destabilizing experience of encountering the other face to face, Levinas imagines a time antecedent to the call of the infinite demand, such that the egoistic self, sailing along in its pride and self-sufficiency, finds the call of the Other a

challenge that overthrows its isolated individuality and places it in the realm of ethics. In contrast, Nancy's prioritization of being-with suggests that even imagining any possible time of prior isolation presupposes an understanding of being-with.

Even Descartes, Nancy demonstrates, presupposes the presence of others and of a material world against which he can enact his skepticism as he posits the isolation of the thinking ego (*Being* 19). His discovery of the *cogito ergo sum* implicitly admits that this thinking is possible to every human being; hence, "*Ego sum = ego cum*" (*Being* 31).

Nancy also situates his concept of being-with alongside Kant: "if pure reason is practical *by itself* (and not by reference to [...] some transcendental norm), this is because it is essentially 'common reason,' which means the 'with' *as* reason, as foundation" (*Being* 99). He offers a much more extended discussion of Kant's analysis of freedom in *The Experience of Freedom* (21-32).

³² For example, in *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt points out how the term "humanity" has been deployed in the service of imperial agendas: "When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy. The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism. Here one is reminded of a somewhat modified expression of Proudhon's: whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat. To confiscate the word humanity, to invoke and monopolize such a term probably has certain incalculable effects, such as denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be an outlaw of humanity; and a war can thereby be driven to the most extreme inhumanity" (54).

³³ This vision of transcendent unity returns throughout Schreiner's writings; for example, in her 1892 letter to John T. Lloyd, she describes her struggle to reconcile her childhood feelings of universal togetherness with what she had been taught about religion: "If you ask me what is my religion, it is hard for me to answer [...] I would say the Universe is one, & it lives: - or if you would put it into older phraseology, I would say; - there is nothing but God" (lines 47-51, underlining original).

³⁴ Freeman analyzes the political ramifications of Lyndall's death as a dispersal into the earth in "Dissolution and Landscape in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*" (2009): "Lyndall's narrative, which concludes with her death and the physical dispersal of her body in an attempt to experience the landscape more directly, performs an aesthetic politics; that is, her bodily dissolution is a fantasy through which Schreiner challenges colonial hegemony and explores the possibilities of eradicating physical characteristics, such as race and gender, which limit personhood. In the dissolution of Lyndall's body, Schreiner offers a metaphor for a more fluid, emergent, and symbiotic relationship between people and the South African landscape, an alternative to the abusive, hierarchical, colonial structures put in place by nineteenth-century Victorian empire" (18).

³⁵ For a more explicit analysis of how Nancy's concept of being-with contributes to environmental criticism, see, for example, Mick Smith, "Ecological Community, the Sense of the World, and Senseless Extinction" (2013).

³⁶ For example, Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), explicates the potential for wonder to effect political change in feminist orientations (182-83).

³⁷ Such forms of linear, logical argument have been critiqued by Derrida and by feminist theorists as “phallogocentric,” privileging male-dominated forms of discourse. Schreiner was interested in creating forms of expression more open to spontaneity and imagination; see the note above on her purpose for including allegorical passages in her polemical text *Woman and Labour*.

³⁸ For example, Nancy writes, “Philosophy is, in sum, the thinking of being-with; because of this, it is also thinking-with as such” (*Being* 31). Or put another way, “In philosophy the logic of freedom merely rejoins incessantly the practical axiom that inaugurates it: thinking receives itself from the freedom of existence” (*Experience* 65).

³⁹ For texts where Nancy thinks more specifically about aesthetics, especially literature and art, see, for example, “Art, a Fragment” in *The Sense of the World* (1997), *The Muses* (1997), *The Ground of the Image* (2005), and *Multiple Arts: The Muses II* (2006). For additional scholarship on Nancy and aesthetics, see, for example, Ian James’s chapter “Art” in *The Fragmentary Demand* (2006); Stephen Barker’s “De-monstration and the *Sens* of Art” and William Watkin’s “Poetry’s Promiscuous Plurality: On a Part of Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Muses*,” both in the essay collection *Jean-Luc Nancy and Plural Thinking* (2012); Marie-Eve Morin’s chapter “From Body to Art” in *Jean-Luc Nancy* (2012); Martta Heikkilä’s “Doing Justice to the Particular and Distinctive: The Laws of Art” in *Jean-Luc Nancy: Justice, Legality and World* (2012); and Ginette Michaud’s “Extended Drawing” in *Nancy Now* (2014).

⁴⁰ This reference to the concubine or “bondwoman” Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, cast out from Abraham’s household so as not to interfere with Isaac’s patriarchal inheritance, underscores the moral judgment dramatized in this native South African woman’s situation. The biblical story features an angel delivering God’s promise to Hagar that he would make a “great nation” of her descendants, suggesting a valence of ethical justice exceeding the patriarchal scripts of expediency by which Abraham’s household justified turning her away (Genesis 21:18). However, the allusion is only brief, for this woman is comforted by no such overt future promises—her ethical judgment is not assuaged through a narrative of divine intervention but persists as opaque anger.

⁴¹ The woman’s “sullen silence” foreshadows Waldo’s identical response to Bonaparte’s abuse—another suggestion that Waldo orients himself closer to the native South Africans in contrast with Lyndall’s more visibly occidental leanings (70, 79, 81, 91).

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