

Bad Logic:  
Reasoning about Desire in the Victorian Novel

Daniel Wright

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## **Abstract**

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How do Victorian novels, those detailed imaginative records of psychic interiority and social life, put into language the aspect of our interior lives that seems most stubbornly nonlinguistic: that is, the insistent claims and impulses of erotic desire? If Victorian culture valued reason and accountability over sheer erotic fulfillment, and at the same time represented love and desire as important social experiences, then how did the Victorian novel represent the process of reasoning about desire without diluting its intensity or making it mechanical? In “Bad Logic,” I argue that a surprising array of novelists, including Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, George Meredith, and Henry James, registered the troublesome opacity of erotic life by experimenting with forms of “bad logic,” from hasty conclusions to contradictions to tautologies, and finally to the ethical and erotic possibilities of vagueness. These forms bring into view the limitations of logic as a rubric for moral accountability, while at the same time they work as ironic and tacit ways of speaking and thinking about erotic desire.

In other words, in the Victorian novel, the singular, embodied feelings of erotic life are imagined not as ineffable, nonsocial, or fully beyond the explanatory powers of logic and the rational mind. Rather, erotic desires represent a profound depth of psychic and affective life that, even in its resistance to sound propositional language, wants to be understood. The resurgence of interest in theories of logic in nineteenth-century England was in fact intimately related to the philosophical problem of the deep, idiosyncratic self that seems to exceed scientific knowledge about thought and its structures, but which nonetheless guides so much of psychic, ethical, and

erotic life. Philosophers and social critics as diverse as Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, George Boole, and George Eliot took up the stubborn problem of logic and its complex relationship to character. But it was the realist novel, I argue, that allowed for the fullest development of this problem through its own strategies for developing fictional character and representing the fullness of psychic and affective life and its often difficult social expression.

That the Victorians talked and wrote endlessly about sex and sexuality, in a variety of medical, scientific, sociological, and psychological vocabularies, has been taken for granted since Foucault provided us with our most enduring account of the Victorian “logic of sex.” With “Bad Logic,” I enter into an ongoing reappraisal of Foucault’s influence on the study of sexuality by suggesting that the Victorian impulse toward talking about and representing sexuality and desire may have had a more complex rationale than a utilitarian desire to manage and regulate sexual behaviors. Foucault’s late work turned to sexual practice or ethos as a potentially utopian alternative to the “discourse” of sexuality, and yet I argue that novelistic representations of eroticism in language can extend well beyond issues of social power and regulation. Rather, they insist upon the ethical significance of erotic life and upon the importance of balancing the imperatives of rationality against the imperatives of idiosyncrasy. They take seriously, in other words, the difficulties of registering the impulses of the body in language. In addition, “Bad Logic” takes a new approach to a very old question in the study of the novel: how does this genre balance idiosyncrasy with social compromise, or assimilate the individual consciousness to the historically specific social pressures that necessarily shape it? Many critics have answered this question either by detailing the ways in which the novel form itself habituates the individual to ideology (Bersani, Armstrong, D. A. Miller), or on the other hand by showing that some normative models of social intelligibility, such as the liberal ideal of detachment or the ethical

ideal of perfectionism, are not incompatible with a powerful model of individual agency (Anderson, Hadley, A. Miller). In "Bad Logic," I propose that in the Victorian novel, even the opacity of erotic life finds its way into models of sociability. Moreover, I show that novelists struggle to make their theories of ethical responsibility capacious enough to accommodate the insistent pressure of erotic desire as it tries to make itself heard

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Dedication	iv
<b>Introduction</b>	
Touching—Acknowledging—Admitting	1
<b>Part I</b>	
Formulations	
<b>Chapter One</b>	
Intimate Abstraction: Brontë’s Contradictions	32
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
I Do Because I Do: Trollope’s Tautologies	93
<b>Part II</b>	
Forms	
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
Illimitable Wants: Eliot’s Vagueness	149
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
Groping Knowledge: Everything in James	200
<b>Afterword</b>	
Truth Claims: Logic, Sex, and the Law	248
Bibliography	253

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*For my parents,  
Brian and Lisa Wright*

## Introduction

### *Touching—Admitting—Acknowledging*

#### 1. The Whole Truth

At the climactic moment of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), Harriet Smith tells her friend Emma Woodhouse that she loves Mr. Knightley and hopes to marry him, and as easily as that, and just as suddenly, Emma becomes, as the narrator puts it, "acquainted with her own heart": "A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth. ... It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!"<sup>1</sup> The language here wavers between the mind and the body. Emma understands the state of her heart only at the moment when her mind opens and begins to make "rapid progress" as if pursuing an argument or solving a puzzle. She is put into possession of truth, indeed "the whole truth," which seems to put us in the province of logic, but that truth pierces her as if bodily and passes "through her" in an instant. Indeed, the temporality of the passage wavers as well, with the language of rapidity, progress, and speed combining with the instantaneity or punctuality with which "the whole truth" is touched—admitted—acknowledged. Austen gestures, in other words, to thinking, to logic, and to reason in this moment of erotic epiphany, only to leave their forms suspended, emptied of definite content. What can we understand Emma to be reasoning *about*? All we have are the affective, embodied, and erotic effects of that reasoning—or are they the motives for reasoning? Does the acknowledgement of desire—touching it, admitting it, feeling it puncture her like an arrow—cause Emma to turn to reason in order to know more about that desire, to understand it

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<sup>1</sup> Austen, *Emma*, 382.

more clearly, to begin to account for it to others, particularly to Harriet, her friend turned erotic rival? Or does the rational realization come first, with the mind opening to the possibility that desire can carry with it its own kind of truth, a truth perhaps more “whole” than the truths of logical reasoning? Logic, after all, only arrives at a judgment of truth after the construction of an argument, which is then tested according to laws of soundness and validity. Desire’s truth, it seems, arrives all at once and already whole; it’s a kind of reasoning without reasons, which includes no discrete premises, but only hasty conclusions. The process of reasoning about desire, in other words, poses two problems: first, what do we take to be the *object* of reasoning, or that which we’re reasoning “about”? and second, if that object cannot in the end be made intelligible as an object of good logical reasoning, then how can we get at the emptiness, suspension, or opacity “about” which reason, perhaps futilely or perhaps productively, revolves? If the “truth” of desire, at least for Austen, can only be absorbed or understood as a whole, all at once, then can our relation to it ever be what we would call rational, let alone logical?

Later in the century, Matthew Arnold raises a similar set of questions in his lyric poem “The Buried Life” (1852). The speaker of the poem is worried about that opaque nugget of selfhood that we often think of as “deep” within ourselves, somewhere at the “core.” This fact of depth is double-edged: on the one hand, the deep self is a nucleus, the center around which our identity is structured; on the other hand, this nucleus is invisible, lodged so deeply within the self that I can’t see it or know it, much less describe it to someone else. In Arnold’s poem it is variously “a nameless sadness”; “nameless feelings”; “a something in this breast”; the “hidden self”; “airs, and floating echoes”; “life’s flow”; or finally “the mystery of this heart which beats /

So wild, so deep in us. ... But deep enough, alas! none ever mines.”<sup>2</sup> Only when one manages to “read” the deep self of another in a moment of erotic intimacy, in the “rare” moment when “a beloved hand is laid in ours” (78) and “a bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast” (84) is one’s own deep self laid open and made legible: “The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain, / And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know” (86-87). Even here, the question of content is elided or simply suspended: what we mean, we say, but what is it that we mean? What is it that we would know?

The question of the poem is: can there be a philosophy of the buried life? How might that enterprise, by which erotic life becomes a question of philosophical reflection, shift our understanding of logic and epistemology? If we can’t quite know the buried life, or if our knowledge of it is somehow non- or pre-linguistic, then what is it *for*? Arnold’s speaker describes an erotic epiphany much like the one that Austen’s Emma experiences, and like her, understands the “truth” of that desire to be both inaccessible to language and also somehow more whole or genuine than logical truth: “long we try in vain to speak and act / Our hidden self, and what we say and do / Is eloquent, is well—but ‘tis not true!” (64-66). No matter our eloquence, or our facility with a turn of phrase—those won’t help us if what we want is “truth,” a concept the evaluation and testing of which seems to be the domain of logic. Indeed, if some objects of knowledge appear to be unavailable to logical thinking—such as the “hidden self” that Arnold’s poem associates so strongly with erotic desire, since it’s a true self that is only activated or made a problem in the moment of erotic intimacy—then we need to think about other versions of “truth” aside from the logical, which may or may not be as lucid or as straightforward.

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold, “The Buried Life,” 3, 62, 6, 65, 75, 88, 52-56. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

This dissertation is about the various forms of “bad logic” that appear in the Victorian novel as ways of representing the opacity, the impulsiveness, and the idiosyncrasy of erotic life. Contradiction, tautology, vagueness, and the elusive concept of “everything”: these comprise a handful of logical problems that preoccupied Victorian novelists and philosophers, particularly insofar as these “bad” forms seemed to register the difficulty, for better or for worse, of reasoning about desire. For better or for worse: the wavering qualification is crucial. If making intelligible the meaning and social force of our erotic lives seems to Victorian novelists to require an embrace of contradiction or a wielding of opaque tautological propositions, or if heeding the moral “claims” of our desire seems to lead us only into the murkiness of vagueness, then we and the Victorians might evaluate this entanglement of desire and language quite differently. To us there is little surprise in the idea that erotic desire wouldn’t be fully amenable to logical syllogism, or at a more fundamental level, we wouldn’t be surprised to hear that erotic desire isn’t “truth-functional” at all. What is surprising, in other words, about the bad logic that Victorian novelists use to describe erotic desire, isn’t its “badness” at all, but its tenuous and lingering attachment to logic itself. Or, to put it differently, the “badness” I’m after isn’t always that of outright rebellion or misbehavior, but perhaps the badness of decay—of a shape softening at the edges and susceptible to impression and manipulation. Or indeed the badness of the bad penny—the counterfeit that somehow passes for the real thing.

While logic seems to us firmly entrenched in esoteric academic philosophy, allied more closely with computer programming today than it is with the more humanistic branches of philosophy, the same was not true in nineteenth-century England, a period which saw an unprecedented efflorescence of philosophical interest in logic, a field that had lain largely dormant since the Middle Ages, but which was reinvigorated by the development of what we

now call symbolic logic. The idea that the “laws of thought” might be something like the laws of algebra, and that logical deduction might in fact be structurally analogous to the solution of a complex algebraic equation, led to a massive reevaluation of the proper scope of logic. Thinkers such as Augustus de Morgan, George Boole, and John Venn pointed to a deep and sudden uncertainty, in other words, about what constitutes logical truth, and about how much it necessarily leaves out. The idea that in fact there may be many forms of truth aside from the logical and that we might require many different theories of knowledge and its structures in order to account for them characterizes the intellectual history of this moment in the study of logic in a way that is strikingly unique to Victorian philosophy.

My aim in “Bad Logic” is to connect this historically specific sense of uncertainty about language, truth, and logic to the project of the realist novel, which sought more and more sensitive methods for the representation of character in language. But as I’ve already suggested, this isn’t a picture of the realist novel as a discourse of empiricism or positivism, which would turn even the vicissitudes of erotic desire into an observable and predictable field of knowledge; rather, this is a picture of the realist novel as a discourse of ordinary language—its limitations and its frustrations, but also its possibilities and its many shades of truth. Nineteenth-century debates over symbolic logic were in many ways an initial foray into the issues that would define mid-twentieth-century debates over the rise of ordinary language philosophy, and in the Victorian context the realist novel, that preeminent genre of the everyday, provided a fertile ground for the testing of ideas about language in all its ordinariness.

The longing to accommodate desire to logic and to its mechanisms of social intelligibility—a longing which often seems to be implicit in the forms of “bad logic” that I analyze—does not necessarily equate, in other words, to a longing for rationalization or

mechanization, not what Michel Foucault describes as an insidious “Logic of Sex” or a search for the “truth of sex,” but rather as part of an open-ended, pragmatic, and intimate reasoning *about* sex and desire that invokes logic without fully participating in its systematization of reason or its binary conception of truth.<sup>3</sup> In his late career, Foucault turned to the theorization of an “ethos” of sex that focused on sexual practice above all, particularly the utopian social possibilities of gay sex. But I argue that thinking and speaking about our erotic lives, and representing those lives as part of a fictionalized interiority, need not always lead us into a harmful or impoverishing abstraction of sexuality. Rather, these practices of reasoning about desire might themselves be part of an ethos of sexuality, or more specifically, an ethos of sexual self-understanding. In other words, while the Foucauldian model is always wary to some extent of connecting sex to formal systems of knowledge, I suggest that an attention to the variety of ways in which that connection might be drawn, or indeed the variety of ways in which we might imagine the drawing of that connection as difficult or disorienting or even painful, might help us to better understand the history of erotic self-understanding rather than foreclosing such a study as an insidious project of turning sex into discourse. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, persists as one of our dominant models for the ways in which desire takes shape in language, and it often provides me with an important theoretical vocabulary in what follows, and yet as I’ll argue more fully later on, its model of the “talking cure” and of developmental stages of sexuality often prevents it from registering the vibrant obstinacy of erotic desire and the way that that very obstinacy, that muddle and that blur, can be given form or meaning.

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 78.

## 2. A Brief History of Victorian Logic

The central literary examples of “Bad Logic” cover a period from 1833 and Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* to 1904 and Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*, a period was that also saw enormous shifts in the field of logic. From the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, logic had been dominated by what we call the “textbook tradition,” in which works on logic usually aimed to explicate the principles of Aristotelian syllogism in different ways, but never challenged the idea that the syllogism is the basic structuring form of propositional logic. Mathematical logic—the first real challenge to the centrality of syllogism—began to take shape as a philosophical project in England in the mid-nineteenth-century with Augustus De Morgan’s *Formal Logic* and George Boole’s pamphlet, “The Mathematical Analysis of Logic,” both published in 1847. These field-shifting works did not, of course, arise out of a vacuum. Rather, particularly in the case of De Morgan, they arose out of a growing spirit of experimentation and fierce debate in the fields of mathematics and logic, exemplified by the slightly earlier work of philosophers such as William Whewell and William Hamilton (the latter the subject of a book by John Stuart Mill). These thinkers in turn had picked up on the work of several philosophers who at the turn of the century began to wonder about the connection, or lack thereof, between mathematics and logic, or indeed between mathematics and reason more generally. Dugald Stewart, for example, makes a brief excursion into this question as he attempts to define the scope and the nature of human reason, and the structures of its reasoning activities, in the second volume of his *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, first published in 1814.

Whewell’s 1835 pamphlet “Thoughts on the Study of Mathematics as Part of a Liberal Education” was, perhaps surprisingly from our vantage point, controversial in its defense of the importance of mathematics as a crucial part of a university curriculum. By now many of us will



readily accept his argument that the study of mathematics allows for the exercise of certain important faculties of abstract logical reasoning, and may even be *better* at exercising those faculties than the study of Aristotelian logic. But at the time, this was far from accepted wisdom, and the pamphlet prompted an anonymous and scathing review by Hamilton in the January 1836 number of the *Edinburgh Review*, in which he insisted that mathematics was threatening to displace logic rather than strengthening our understanding of its formal mechanisms: he appeals to unnamed authorities who have demonstrated to his satisfaction “that the tendency of a too exclusive study of these sciences is, absolutely, to disqualify the mind for observation and common reasoning.”<sup>4</sup> But Whewell was not alone in his sense that mathematics captured something of the essence of logical reasoning—particularly its pure formalism, its deductive precision, and the self-evident truth of its basic axioms—in a way that Hamilton’s idea of “common reasoning” could never do. In other words, we might say that nineteenth-century debates over the nature of logic were in part debates over its potential for ordinariness. Would logic be understood as a science of everyday reasoning or “common sense” that could formalize and regularize all kinds of deductive and inductive language and thought? Or would logic be a purely formal enterprise, less tightly connected to the actual content of language and more narrowly focused on the mathematical laws that ground deductive reasoning in cases of objective or scientific knowledge? If logic suddenly narrows its scope, then we seem to be left floundering, without a way to account for the truth of all those other kinds of thinking and knowing that now seem to fall outside the purview of logic.

In 1854, Boole expanded his theory of logic as algebra in the book-length *An Investigation of the Laws of Thought*, which would stand as the most thorough, influential, and

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<sup>4</sup> Hamilton, review of “Study of Mathematics,” 412.

groundbreaking elaboration of the concept of symbolic logic until the early twentieth-century work of thinkers such as Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. But despite Boole's radical innovations in the field of logic, it was Mill's more traditional 1843 text, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, that remained the most widely read and often cited work on logic during the second half of the nineteenth century, and which carried on the tradition of Stewart's and Hamilton's defenses of logic against total mathematicization. Today, it's perhaps the work of Mill's that is least often read, perhaps because it is so far afield from our contemporary understanding of logic, in which the mathematicians have already won the day. The sections that continue to be anthologized are those elaborating Mill's theory of "ethology," or the science of character-formation, a concept that so clearly goes on to ground his arguments for liberal individualism. On a first reading of Mill's argument for ethology, however, it appears to be surprisingly out of step with the ideas about individual freedom and self-expression that we find in *On Liberty*. His controversial idea was that because of the objective structures of logic, the thoughts and the actions of any given person are, at least theoretically, determined in advanced. Mill qualifies this logical mode of determinism, however, by pointing out that in order to predict a person's thoughts and decisions, one would need comprehensive knowledge of all of the factors that went into the formation of his character, and would also need to devise a set of laws describing how different factors consistently direct the formation of character in particular ways. Only once we have these building blocks of a true empirical science of character-formation—an ethology—can we grasp the totalizing potential of logic as a science of human rationality.

Mill, in short, insists upon the sheer capaciousness of logic, at least in theory. As he puts it, "By far the greatest portion of our knowledge, ... being avowedly matter of inference, nearly

the whole, not only of science, but of human conduct, is amenable to the authority of logic” (10). Mill is concerned with making even human character an object of empirical science precisely in order to avoid the anxieties about the unknowable “genuine self” that occupy Arnold’s poetic speaker. What if the kernel of *a priori* truth that grounds logical deduction somehow includes that buried life that makes me, inexplicably, who I am? What if that kernel can never in fact be rationalized or “ethologized” but is simply *there*, both deeply hidden and irresistibly compelling? Mill’s logic maintains a conception of the idiosyncratic self, but he wants to make that idiosyncrasy the object of its own scientific domain congruous to logic and continuous with it. On this view, Arnold’s image of the “genuine self” would get in the way of the transparency of reasoning and of right judgment that logic promises. I should emphasize that this is not an insidious project. Mill’s liberal individualism relies to some extent upon such a theory of right reasoning, since logic and ethology as twinned sciences provide the guarantee that a philosophy of individual freedom is not the same thing as a philosophy of “anything goes.” As far as restraints on liberty go, logic seems less controversial and more inevitable than, say, government legislation. It can be understood as a structure intrinsic to human consciousness rather than imposed from without. Logic also fits seamlessly into the liberal ideal of reflective, rational self-cultivation. As he argues in *On Liberty*, “If the cultivation of understanding consists in one thing more than another, it is surely in learning the grounds of one’s own opinions” (41). We’re now in a position to understand the double-meaning here—both logic and character are grounds for our opinions in their different ways, but each is rule-bound, learnable, and intelligible.

However, Mill’s account of the rational self in *A System of Logic* is eerie in its unexpected flirtation with solipsism, and this shows us that he seems to realize to some extent that logic is untenable unless it’s to some extent abstract and ethereal rather than context-

sensitive and concrete. “If there were but one rational being in the universe,” he argues, “that being might be a perfect logician; and the science and art of logic would be the same for that one person as for the whole human race” (6). The sentence is strained by its accommodation of two contradictory impulses, one toward the pure abstraction of logic and the other toward the idea of logic as a mechanism of social intelligibility and collective truth-seeking. Mill’s real point in this passage is that logic is a science of reflective thought, not of rhetoric. Even in the absence of other people, logic would still exist and would be complete and perfect. And yet the universality of logic—mine is necessarily the same as yours—can only be a really useful or explanatory fact in the context of a social world where truths might need to be shared and communicated. The perfect logician would still be doing logic, but to what end, and with what materials? In the end, his status as the perfect logician relies upon his being no one in particular, or more accurately, both someone and potentially anyone. Mill was above all concerned with maintaining logic’s connection to “common reasoning,” but that connection always seems to threaten logic’s status as a pure science—it introduces too many variables that we find ourselves unable to account for, and of course our nagging desire for freedom and individuality tends to make us turn up our noses at the idea that we’re bound to the rules of logic even in the kinds of thinking and reasoning that seem most personal, private, or pleurably irrational.

Intuitively, it would seem that to make logic even more abstract than Mill does, to reduce it to an algebra complete with functions and square roots, would only exacerbate the problems we’ve identified. But in specializing logic and making it entirely mathematical, Boole also narrowed its intended scope. His *Laws of Thought* is, for this reason, both one of the most influential works of modern British philosophy and one of the least well-known outside of the

field of logic.<sup>5</sup> It is because Boole was so particularly a logician, even a mathematician-logician, that he doesn't have the renown of a figure like Mill, whose philosophical work was so much more wide-ranging. And yet exactly this feature of Boole's thinking, which relieved him of the impulse to connect logic intimately with other domains of philosophy, especially ethics, makes him revolutionary. Boole imagined logical deduction as a pure mathematics, abstracted even further away from the textures of everyday language than the simple variables of Aristotelian syllogism. Imagine working through a complex equation in algebra. For many of us, it's been a very long time indeed. The solution of the equation usually requires many steps, which we write out in sequence. "Show your work!" None of these intermediate steps are expected to "make sense," so to speak. They can include, for example, what we call "imaginary" numbers such as the square root of -1. The important thing is that we eliminate these unreal numbers by the time we reach our solution. At that point, we can see the preceding work as simply the strange, abstract route by which we got there.

Boole believed that logical deduction could be imagined in the same way (67-69). One begins in Boolean logic by converting language into algebra—a process much too complicated to go into here—and then one proceeds step-by-step to solve for  $x$ . Just as in algebra, it is not

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<sup>5</sup> There seem to be very few exceptions to the way in which the Victorian innovators of symbolic logic are strangely excluded from or underrepresented in its history, in favor of positioning twentieth-century thinkers as the pioneers of the field. For one important recent overview of this period in the history of logic (and it seems the only thorough and comprehensive overview available at all), see Gabbay and Woods, eds., *British Logic in the Nineteenth Century*. For a more detailed account from the point of view of the history of mathematics, see Cohen, "Reason and Belief in Victorian Mathematics." Cohen also points the way to a host of questions beyond the scope of this dissertation that might be illuminated by an attention to the development of mathematical logic in the Victorian period: in particular, he notes that almost all of the leading figures in this movement were disillusioned by Anglicanism and moved toward "more ecumenical expressions of spirituality," and that their social views tended disproportionately toward "liberalism, cosmopolitan internationalism, and pacifism" (142). A special session on "Logic and Victorian Literature" at the 2013 convention of the Modern Language Association seems to indicate at least a tentatively growing interest in logic among scholars of Victorian literature, and it also indicates that literary critics may in fact be more game than philosophers for the project of reviving interest in the broad cultural significance of this nearly forgotten corpus of philosophical work.

required that any intermediate step of the solution be translatable back into language, and this is the most radical innovation of Boole's theory. It's an element of his theory, in fact, that persists all the way through to Whitehead, who at the end of the century explained the "formal" quality of "formal logic" with reference to just this strange abandonment of particular content: "The reasoning is formal," he argued, "in the sense that the meaning of the propositions forms no part of the investigation. The sole concern of mathematics is the inference of proposition from proposition."<sup>6</sup> Boole is, of course, aware that this is a difficult concept to take on, since we are attached to the idea that while reasoning does happen in steps, each step takes the form of a proposition in language that has some relationship of reference to the actual world. But Boole insists that this insight of mathematics might represent a wider insight about positive knowledge: indeed, it "seems to deserve a place among those axiomatic truths which constitute, in some sense, the foundation of possibility of general knowledge" (69). Can this take us back to Arnold's buried life and to Austen's reasoning without reasons? To what extent might all structural systems, mathematics and logic included, require the operation of some empty remainder—in this case the imaginary number in its function as placeholder—around which the structure organizes itself, but which the structure can never quite assimilate?

Boole's understanding of the problems of logic as essentially problems of mathematics brings us back to his most important challenge to Mill, and that is Boole's assumption that logic deals with a very particular kind of positive knowledge that is not clearly linked to practical reason, affect, desire, and so on. If Mill looks to logic as part of what we might call a unified field theory of human psychology, Boole imagines a highly organized network of different kinds of knowledge, some of which overlap with or illuminate one another, but not predictably or

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<sup>6</sup> Whitehead, *Treatise on Universal Algebra*, vi. For a further analysis of Whitehead as a figure who links symbolic logic to advances in pure mathematics, see Cohen, "Reason and Belief."

consistently, something like what Richard Rorty would describe as “the ‘contingency of language’—the fact that there is no way to step outside of the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of all possible vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, aside from Boole, Rorty’s argument has another Victorian precedent in Henry Sidgwick’s *Methods of Ethics*, with its guiding conviction that one never chooses one ethical method to follow consistently at all costs, but rather that we’re guided by “a mixture of different methods, more or less disguised under ambiguities of language” which can be understood as “alternatives” between which we constantly choose, so that a clarification of the complex relationship between these various ethical methods and their vocabularies might be more useful than a rigorous polemical argument on behalf of only one of them.<sup>8</sup> Logic, Boole argues, provides us with a foundation of positive knowledge about thought and its structures, and yet it might leave out as much as it explains: “As the realms of day and night are not strictly coterminous, but are separated by a crepuscular zone, through which the light of the one fades gradually off into the darkness of the other, so it may be said that every region of positive knowledge lies surrounded by a debateable and speculative territory, over which it in some degree extends its influence and light” (400).

Boole’s specialization of logic, in other words, allows him to disentangle it from what he and Mill both agree to call “common reasoning,” or what I’ve been describing more specifically as the problem of practical or ethical reasoning, particularly when it comes to erotic desire: “To supersede the employment of common reasoning,” he argues, “or to subject it to the rigour of technical forms, would be the last desire of one who knows the value of that intellectual toil and

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<sup>7</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xvi. See also chap. 1, “The Contingency of Language.”

<sup>8</sup> Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 12.

warfare which imparts to the mind an athletic vigour, and teaches it to contend with difficulties, and to rely upon itself in emergencies” (12). Boole responds here to an important gripe with a logical system like Mill’s. Even if logic describes a kind of thinking, many of us want to insist that this isn’t the way the mind works much of the time, not least when its concerns are concerns about *me*, or when my “genuine self” insists in its opaque way upon its own interests. Boole imagines this aspect of thought as something of the body, muscular, vigorous, and improvisatory. It may be that it’s an object not of precise knowledge but of *use*, of strengthening exercise and repeated practice.

In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams diagnoses a problem with social analysis that resonates with the problem of logic and the buried life, and which simultaneously brings us back to the relationship between logic and literary theory. What Williams identifies as “the reduction of the social to fixed forms” leads to a devaluation of lived, present experience: “if the social is the fixed and explicit—the known relationships, institutions, formations, positions—all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active, ‘subjective.’”<sup>9</sup> Structuralisms, in other words, including the structuralist Marxism that Williams is most directly engaged with here, use forms and structures as hermeneutic devices, but in doing so they tend to efface the lived experience that shapes those structures, presses against them, and makes them either plastic or resistant. Williams’s idea of “structures of feeling” addresses this problem not by insisting that “feeling” is ineffable or nonsocial, the antithesis of form and structure or somehow outside of it. On the contrary, what his opponents would call merely “personal” experience has a deep relationship to social structures. Williams defines structures of feeling in various ways

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 129, 128.



throughout his short essay: as “emergent” or “pre-emergent” structure; as “a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate”; as a “structured formation . . . at the very edge of semantic availability.”<sup>10</sup> For Williams, in other words, a structure of feeling is something akin to Arnold’s buried life—it’s the kind of thing we usually think of as fundamentally personal, interior, nonsocial or even antisocial, and yet it’s always pushing itself insistently into some kind of incipient social visibility. It may be hidden from me at any or every given moment, but it’s nonetheless flowing like the river that Arnold imagines it to be, and it may come into view only in that most elemental of social exchanges—the erotically charged glance exchanged with a lover, in which I am laid open, made intelligible, and for a moment unearthed.

### **3. Language, Sexuality, and the Novel**

The turn of the twentieth century, with which the historical period covered by “Bad Logic” ends, was a turning point for all of the disciplines with which this dissertation is concerned: 1) the theory of the novel, which in its movement toward modernism began to focus even more intensively than it had before on consciousness, psychology, or interiority as the central object of novelistic realism and experimentalism alike; 2) the theory of sexuality, which was transformed both by a growing cultural discourse surrounding homosexuality, the closet, and feminism, and psychoanalysis; and 3) philosophy, a field within which logic finally disconnected itself from ordinary language and from ethics, and turned almost exclusively to mathematics, particularly with the publication of Russell and Whitehead’s co-authored *Principia Mathematica* in 1910. Of course, as the brief history of Victorian logic that I’ve already outlined suggests, the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 132, 131, 134.

Victorian period had not yet seen the elaboration of the very wide-ranging discipline that we call “the philosophy of language.” They called this kind of philosophical enterprise simply “logic,” and that subtle difference in terminology helps to account for the fact that compared to us, the Victorians considered logic to have quite a wide scope, and also for the fact that problems of logic could often be understood as including problems of ordinary language, albeit in an often under-theorized or tenuous way. It would be a long time before these two areas of inquiry—the law-bound field of logic and the seemingly messy and unpredictable field of ordinary language—would be so closely aligned as they could be in the Victorian period, before the logical positivists had decisively rejected the vagaries of ordinary language in favor of mathematical precision.

Two twentieth-century thinkers who have thoroughly critiqued the jettisoning of logic from ordinary language (and ordinary language from logic) have been crucial to this project: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell. We often divide Wittgenstein’s career into two phases that correspond to the two sides of a disciplinary rift between symbolic logic and the philosophy of language: in the early phase of 1921’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, this story says, Wittgenstein was a thoroughgoing logical positivist; in the later phase of 1953’s *Philosophical Investigations*, he launched a critique of logical positivism that helped to found the discipline of ordinary language philosophy. I read these aspects of Wittgenstein’s thinking as two sides of the same coin, and suggest that our frequent inability to think of these two major works as intimately connected or continuous is a result of our forgetfulness about the debates over logic that preceded Wittgenstein in the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> It wasn’t until Cavell’s field-defining apologia

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<sup>11</sup> As I imply, I am by no means the first person to read the two “phases” of Wittgenstein’s career as continuous rather than disjoined. This is in fact a claim central to the work of many philosophers, Cavell included, who have identified with what has been called the “New Wittgenstein” studies. Other important

for ordinary language philosophy, the 1969 collection of essays entitled *Must We Mean What We Say?*, that we recovered a way of talking about ordinary language as itself strangely rule-bound and indeed ethically accountable, not a free-for-all in which anything can be made to mean anything, but rather a kind of language governed by its own kind of logic. Cavell is of course one of Wittgenstein's most dedicated exegetes, and his defense of ordinary language is essentially a development of Wittgenstein's claim in *Philosophical Investigations* that there are many kinds of language, that we learn them in different ways because they're defined by different sets of rules, and that the best way to understand the relationship between these many different "language-games" is not through the idea of a single shared feature or governing law, but rather by the looser concept of "family resemblance."

Cavell makes the ramifications of Wittgenstein's claims more explicit in his own argument that even in ordinary language, "we are ... exactly as responsible for the specific implications of our utterances as we are for their explicit factual claims."<sup>12</sup> Even utterances that don't appear to be logically meaningful or precise, in other words, still obey pragmatic rules of entailment to which we're constantly held accountable. The difficulty, however, is that we sometimes seem not to know, or not to be able to know in the first place, what these rules are. They seem elusive and vague in a way that logical rules of entailment can never be; or it may be that whatever it is we're trying to express seems to exceed the scope of the rules as they currently exist. And this failure to know often prompts in us a kind of improvisatory process of talking things out, trying to find our way back to what we do know in order to expand its reach:

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thinkers in this group include Alice Crary, Cora Diamond, and Hilary Putnam. For a collection of essays that defines this new approach, see Crary and Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein*.

<sup>12</sup> Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say?," 12.

It sometimes happens that we know everything there is to know about a situation—what all of the words in a question mean, what all of the relevant facts are; and everything is in front of our eyes. And yet we feel we don't know something, don't understand something. ... Socrates says that in such a situation we need to remind ourselves of something. So does the philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language: we need to remind ourselves of *what we should say when*. ... And the point of the question is this: answering it is sometimes the only way to tell—tell others and tell for ourselves—what the situation *is*. ... When you have more facts than you know what to make of, or when you do not know what new facts would show. When, that is, you need a clear view of what you already know.<sup>13</sup>

If Wittgenstein is primarily interested in descriptive problems of ordinary language—how do we describe its rules, and how do we learn them in the first place so that we can apply them so deftly in new and unexpected situations?—then Cavell is primarily interested in the ethical problems of ordinary language—how can we become accountable for ourselves and our everyday utterances? “Tell others and tell for ourselves”: there is a kind of intimate codependence here. Indeed, it seems that telling for ourselves is a prerequisite for telling others, or indeed it might be that telling others is a way of telling it for ourselves out loud and then awaiting either approval or rejection, the nod of recognition or the furrowed brows of failed meaning. Cavell insists that both of these goals are worthy and tightly interconnected. Telling for ourselves and telling others “what the situation *is*” does not equate for Cavell with already *knowing* what the situation is, or in other words it doesn't require that we already have that knowledge in advance. This is, rather, a question of reminding ourselves what it is by connecting it to what we do know, getting “a clear view” of what we already know and applying that knowledge—those hard-won rules of ordinary language—to what we don't or can't know. Telling “for” myself: it's as if I'm meant to speak on behalf of someone who can't yet speak for himself, or on behalf of some part of myself, buried very deeply, that's struggling to make itself heard.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

In “Bad Logic,” I take erotic desire to be a particularly difficult object of knowledge (regardless of our historical period), and an even more difficult object of language, and Cavell (along with Austen and Arnold) helps us to see why that is. Our erotic impulses, desires, feelings, and convictions seem especially resistant to being given form in language. Or at the very least, being given linguistic form threatens to impoverish desire, to deaden it or mechanize it, or to hollow it out by making it socially useful and intelligible above all. But this does not necessarily relieve us of the imperative of ethical accountability when it comes to erotic life—it’s only that we need to seek out more sensitive or labile models of accountability in trying to “tell” about our desire, both for ourselves and to others. And of course I suggest that the concepts and problems of “bad logic,” in all their difficulty and opacity and indirection, provided just such a model for Victorian novelists. In making this argument, I am making an implicit argument about practices of detachment, irony, or critical self-reflexivity in relation to erotic life: to what extent, after all, can we ever “get outside” of our desires in order to be able to reason about them, or even to *know* that they might be reasoned about, if they are so deep, so idiosyncratic, so irreducibly *there*?

In thinking through these questions, I share with Amanda Anderson’s *The Powers of Distance* (among other recent works) a focus on the tenuous relationship in Victorian culture, and particularly in the Victorian novel, between practices of abstraction or critical detachment on the one hand, and practices of particularity or idiosyncrasy on the other. Despite the “polemical thrust” of Anderson’s defense of detachment as politically viable and enabling, we often forget that her argument focuses largely on detachment in the Victorian period as an unsteady, temporary, ambivalent state of mind that represents “the *aspiration* to a distant view” rather than

a claim that anyone ever “fully or finally inhabits any given practice of detachment.”<sup>14</sup> In her acknowledgment of “the characterological dimensions of detachment” as a kind of limit to genuine or achieved impartiality, Anderson draws upon a long history of novel theory that understands the genre as attempting to control or contain (with varying degrees of success or failure) the idiosyncratic and anti-social desires of individual characters in the service of some abstract model of bourgeois subjectivity (often seen to be epitomized by distant, totalizing, omniscient perspective of high novelistic realism).<sup>15</sup> Anderson argues, however, that for the Victorians the development and representation of individual character was often bound up with a capacity for moments of critical detachment, or that idiosyncrasy and detachment exist in a dialectical rather than an antagonistic relationship.

Indeed, an interest in maintaining this kind of dialectical (or even paradoxical) relationship between abstraction and embodiment characterizes much recent work on liberalism and Victorian literature, as well as work on ethics and Victorian literature. Elaine Hadley, for example, points our attention to practices of “liberal cognition” by which the Victorians managed the difficult link between a politics of critical detachment and the embodied acts and spaces (the ballot box, for example) that sustain it as a “lived” politics.<sup>16</sup> Andrew Miller, on the other hand, has argued that Victorian concepts of “moral perfectionism” offer us an example of an ethics grounded upon everyday practices of intimacy, particularly through eroticized relationships of mentorship and identification. “Bad Logic” draws upon the insights of this debate into the complex relationship in Victorian literature between idiosyncrasy and detachment, or to put it

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<sup>14</sup> Anderson, *The Powers of Distance*, 5-7; original emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Some of the most important and influential works in this tradition are Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*; Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*; Moretti, *The Way of the World*; and D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*.

<sup>16</sup> See Hadley, *Living Liberalism*, especially chap. 2, “A Body of Thought.”

more simply, the relationship between “the individual” and “the social.” But as in Williams’s powerful conceptualization of “structures of feeling,” my aim in “Bad Logic” is not to “humanize” or “personalize” structures and ideologies that would seem to be abstract and impersonal. Rather, it’s to show how these ideological apparatuses (logic included) are in the first place too enmeshed with what we call “the personal” to make the distinction meaningful at all, at least if the distinction is imagined only or merely as a punishing or disciplinary opposition. We don’t only sustain or carry on or reproduce a social structure like logic through our personal, everyday uses of it—we might also contest its demands, experiment with the kinds of affordances it unexpectedly offers, and through our idiosyncrasies try to make it elastic or forgiving. The forms of bad logic that I analyze often presuppose in their strategic and creative uses a kind of critical detachment from norms of logic, and from the ways in which logic is understood to structure practical reasoning. At the same time, these uses of bad logic are attempts to communicate not about abstractions like culture and society, but rather about what seems most irreducibly singular or opaque in human experience—the buried life of erotic feeling and impulse. There’s a kind of impossibility or strangeness to this idea of “unearthing” the buried life, or of understanding it as an object of critical self-reflection. Isn’t its burial, after all, to some extent its essence? In communicating it, giving it form, or taking it as an object of rational knowledge, don’t we risk spoiling it? These aren’t questions to dismiss, and as we’ll see, they were active and pressing questions for the Victorian novelists who experimented with the representation and formalization of erotic interiority and erotic intimacy alike.

Psychoanalysis provides us with one powerful way of answering these questions about the opacity of erotic life and the potential means by which we might make that opacity available or give it intelligible form in language, and throughout “Bad Logic,” I enter into an ambivalent

kind of dialogue with psychoanalytic theory. On the one hand, its concern with the problem of putting desire into language echoes the central concerns of this project. And this is where Foucauldian and psychoanalytic analyses of sexuality tend to part ways—the former suspicious of language as an instrument of power and discourse, and the latter dependent on thinking and talking as the basis of its promised “cure.” I part ways with psychoanalytic accounts of desire in wanting to maintain the kinds of meaning already available to the moments in which desire and language seem to fail to cooperate with each other. Rather than understanding bad logic as essentially symptomatic—as an epiphenomenon of the Victorian “repression” of erotic life—I try to think through its varied and messy, but intentional and strategic, uses as novelists work to feel out the capacities and incapacities of language for representing character. In the novelistic representations of erotic confusion, indecision, passion, or attraction that this dissertation analyzes, repression is rarely what’s at stake; in place of repression we find a yearning to make desire meaningful, to understand it better, and to give it a form that nonetheless respects its electric charge, its disorienting effects, and its throbbing pulse. Lacanian theory represents in many ways the “bad” kind of psychoanalysis that this project aims to avoid, invested as it is in the full interconnection of erotic desire and the mathematical symbolization of logic, which for the Victorian novelists I analyze is both impossible and impoverishing. And yet Lacan himself perhaps captures the general problem best in his own description of the kind of self-knowledge for which psychoanalysis aims:

*Kern unseres Wesen*, “the core of our being”—it is not so much that Freud commands us to target this, as so many others have done with the futile adage “Know thyself,” as that he asks us to reconsider the pathways that lead to it.

Or, rather, the “this” which he proposes we attain is not a this which can be the object of knowledge, but a this—doesn’t he say as much?—which constitutes my being



and to which, as he teaches us, I bear witness as much and more in my whims, aberrations, phobias, and fetishes, than in my more or less civilized personage.<sup>17</sup>

But where Lacan (by way of Freud) directs our attention to pathological symptoms or careless, thoughtless “whims,” bad logic directs our attention to other ways of “bearing witness” to erotic life. These strange “pathways” around and behind the clear forms of logical language are still indirect, or they seem to become covered over with dust as soon as we’ve followed them, but they’re not accidental or mistaken, not logical “fallacies” but rather logical problem-cases, not phobic or exceptional but rather intimate and ordinary. We don’t need to look behind them for the repressed causes that would give them clear, narrative (logical) form; they have their own meanings, as opaque and hazy and empty and “bad” as those meanings may be.

In other words, in “Bad Logic” I engage in varied and often implicit ways with the nascent movement in literary methodology toward “surface reading,” a concept that has been most fully articulated by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in their introduction to a special issue of *Representations* on “The Way We Read Now.” Because the problem-forms of bad logic seem bound up with twisted or confused or opaque ways of explaining or thinking to oneself about erotic desire, they can easily be understood as errors that need correcting, or evidence of tormented repressions that need revealing, or to use those standbys of the critical vocabulary, tensions or ambiguities in the text that call out for resolution. My suggestion is that they solicit a different kind of attention—to the formal structures and norms that enable thought and language in the first place, and which logic as a field of inquiry works to describe. Some of these instances of bad logic, particularly tautology, seem to be nothing but opaque surface, with no depth behind them. Contradiction seems equally opaque in the apparent impossibility of its meaning anything, going anywhere, or entailing any other proposition. And yet it may be that there are different

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<sup>17</sup> Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter,” 528.

varieties of opacity, and different ways in which opacity can signify. In “Bad Logic” I rely on the idea that the opaque, confusing, and vague forms of reasoning about erotic desire depicted in the Victorian novel might simply represent an argument for the idea that erotic desire is essentially opaque, confusing, and vague, and that even logic might carry within itself the potential for an equal amount of opacity and confusion and vagueness. Rather than search for the monolithic truth about desire that the novel seems to avoid, I assume that novelists often positioned desire in relation to a different kind of truth, indeed many other kinds of truth, than the version of classical logic.

#### **4. Overview of Chapters**

The four chapters of “Bad Logic” are divided into two parts, and these two parts correspond to two general kinds of logical problems—indeed, we might even say two subfields of logic—that it’s important to sort out at this point in order to make clear the range of logic as a field, which can often seem unfamiliar to those of us with only a passing acquaintance with what has by now become the most esoteric of philosophical disciplines. The first part, “Formulations,” focuses upon a familiar kind of logical problem, that of the structure of a proposition and its ways of entailing other propositions. Contradictions and tautologies are, as we’ll see, strangely meaningful kinds of propositions when they’re used as ways of thinking about and formalizing problems of identity and desire. Tautology provides us with a way of setting axiomatic ground rules in logic, particularly the rule of self-identity—no matter what “A” actually is, it’s irrefutably true in all cases that “A is A.” Contradiction, on the other hand, sets an absolute limit to logical intelligibility: again, no matter what “A” stands for, it can never be true that “A is not A.” These forms, in setting two foundational axioms, the law of identity and the law of

noncontradiction, are particularly indifferent to content. The point, in these cases, is in the form itself—tautology being in some sense the very form of irrefutable truth, and contradiction the very form of irrefutable falsehood.

In the first chapter, I analyze Charlotte Brontë's major first-person novels, *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853), in order to establish the fundamental logical problem of "reasoning about desire." Desire is essentially idiosyncratic, embodied, or "first-personal," while logic and its mode of ethical reasoning is essentially impersonal, abstract, or "third-personal," and we tend to think of ethical life as bound up with both of these points of view: on the one hand, my way of moving through the world has something to do with my own personal investments, attachments, feelings, erotic affinities, and intimacies, or with what psychoanalysis would call more generally my libidinal cathexes; on the other hand, to be reasonable about ethical life seems also to require an act of at least temporary self-negation, by which I take on the perspective of omniscience and impersonality to which the rule of good logic appeals. In other words, when desire comes into play as a potential object of ethical reasoning, we become caught in a basic contradiction by which one must be able to say "I am not I," or perhaps "I should not be I, at least for a moment," and therefore to waver painfully between singularity and abstraction. Brontë's novels aim not to resolve this contradiction by embracing one or another of its poles—in other words by celebrating erotic liberation or by mortifying erotic life in favor of pure and unforgiving moral objectivity. Rather, Brontë thinks through the problems inherent in representing the affective and erotic experience of this very contradiction; in the end, her solution is to understand erotic life itself as necessarily self-negating—as a state of being caught between oneself and another, or a practice of extending oneself beyond oneself.

In Chapter Two, I turn to tautology as an obstinate mechanism of what I call erotic essentialism. I focus in this chapter on Anthony Trollope, in whose novels tautology takes on a variety of uses and meanings, some of them merely comic and aphoristic, but many more of them strategic and richly meaningful. Even if it's necessarily true that "I am what I am," this still leaves many questions open, particularly through the haziness of that crucial "what." What is it that I am? In Trollope's fiction, the answer often lies in the stubborn insistence of erotic desire, which seem to claim a kind of apodictic sense of conviction. I may not know what I am, but I know what I desire, and that seems somehow irrefutable, necessary, beyond the realm of debate and argument. I take *Can You Forgive Her?* (1865) and *The Way We Live Now* (1875) as my central examples from Trollope's extensive oeuvre partly because they offer us two very different pictures of how this kind of essentialism of desire—its obstinacy, its transparency, its apparent easiness—might be represented at the level of character and in terms of female characters' structural position within the novelistic marriage plot. Is it a "good" thing or a "bad" thing to trust absolutely the self-evident "truth" of erotic desire? Does that kind of obstinacy promise a potential release from the rationalizing structure of the heterosexual "exchange in women," or does too easily following the dictates of desire only threaten to entrap women further in an ideology of sexual coercion? These two novels provide us with a range of potential answers to these questions in the variety of potential relationships that they represent between female characters and tautological erotic conviction.

The second part, "Forms," takes us into a different province of logic, that of the category or the set. We often forget that logic is a kind of set theory, concerned as much with problems of naming and sorting as it is with forms of argument and deduction. After all, figuring out what is what, and how to arrange the objects of our language into categories, is a prerequisite to the

construction of propositions in the first place. “All A is B” or “some X are Y” are familiar to us as some of the rudimentary kinds of propositions that populate logic textbooks, and they’re equally familiar to us as the kinds of propositions that inspire Venn diagrams, an invention of the Victorian symbolic logician John Venn, and a crucial form of logical diagramming that we’ll return to. But the problem of vagueness always threatens to undermine the concept of the set and its coherence as a fundamental apparatus of logical reason. It’s not in fact possible to draw sharp lines between many concepts, and when we try to do so we often find ourselves faced with a troublesome host of “borderline cases” which seem impossible to sort into “this” or “that.”

Vagueness is an ancient philosophical problem, the first elaboration of which is attributed to a contemporary of Aristotle named Eubulides, but it becomes reactivated in Victorian debates over logic. One of the motivations behind the development of symbolic logic is to isolate the kind of logical thinking in which vagueness ceases to be a problem—there isn’t any vagueness, after all, in math—whereas in the case of Mill’s brand of capacious logic, the goal is not to eliminate vagueness but to take it as a starting point for reasoned debate over the necessarily provisional definitions that we ascribe to important concepts and categories.

In Chapter Three, I look to George Eliot’s engagement with the problem of vagueness in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch* (1872-73), two novels that often revolve around the complex problem of distinguishing erotic desire from logical reason. On the one hand, we might understand these two domains of psychic life as themselves divided by a boundary that is vague at best, so that at many moments we’re unsure where desire ends and where reason begins. But more importantly, if vagueness is in fact intrinsic to language—an inescapable and enabling fuzziness out of which our forms take shape—then logic and desire might be more structurally analogous than we’d at first assume. Eliot represents vagueness as a kind of ethos or affective

mood in which desire and reason can be understood as overlapping or interchangeable, but this doesn't mean that she celebrates erotic desire as the fundamental basis of our practices of ethical reasoning. Eliot is above all ambivalent about the productivity of vagueness. It's necessary, her novels suggest again and again, to understand vagueness and to remain open to it, aware of its consequences and of its implications for our strivings toward logical clarity. And yet at the same time, our social and ethical life, and indeed our erotic life, is dependent upon the boundedness of form, upon intelligibility, and finally upon the sharing of meaning, so that what's most important is that we make use of vagueness, always returning from its murky depths to the forms and categories that we need in order to get by and in order not merely to give in to what Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* calls "the seductive guidance of illimitable wants."

Finally, Chapter Four takes us to the turn of the twentieth century and Henry James, from *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) to *The Golden Bowl* (1904). In this chapter, I point our attention to James's complex fictional representations of the widest and vaguest set of all, the set that we call simply "everything." In logic, "everything" is a kind of background concept, the set by which all other sets are defined. And yet it presents us with a fundamental problem of reference: what exactly does it denote, and is "everything" something we can know or understand on its own terms? If it isn't, then how do we know anything at all? In other words, "everything" can be understood to represent the entire field of meaning and reference that logic covers, and so it returns us with particular acuity to the problem of logic's scope as a kind of philosophy of language. What would it mean to stand outside of the logical "space" that "everything" makes available, or to orient or reorient ourselves, even if painfully, within that space? What would it mean, finally, to linger with everything, to refuse the kind of specificity and indexicality that it opposes? Erotic desire, after all, is most often understood as directional and pointed—it attaches

us to somewhere, to someone—and yet in James's fiction, this kind of narrowness of reference or attachment is often an object of anxiety, of disorientation, and regret.

# **Part I**

## *Formulations*



## Chapter One

### *Intimate Abstraction: Brontë's Contradictions*

#### 1. I Am Always A Pleasure to Myself

Bernard Williams frames the contradiction intrinsic to ethical impartiality through a pair of rhetorical questions: “How can an *I* that has taken on the perspective of impartiality be left with enough identity to live a life that respects its own interests? If morality is possible at all, does it leave anyone in particular for me to be?”<sup>1</sup> Williams’s critique of a Kantian ethics that relies on the idea of an abstract, impartial, or in Kant’s language “noumenal,” self, forces us to wonder about the kind of rational agent who performs the deliberations and reflections that we define as ethical. Is the ideal of self-negation or self-effacement that grounds so many moral systems fundamentally inconsistent with what Williams describes as the “radically first-personal” perspective of practical reason?<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I argue that Charlotte Brontë’s fiction represents the contradictory imperatives of erotic and ethical experience—to be an embodied and idiosyncratic self with interests and desires and also to be a morally accountable and intelligible self, divested of those very interests and desires—not as an impossible double-bind, but as a potentially productive opportunity to renegotiate the terms and the goals of social belonging. If Brontë’s endings are famous for being at best dubiously happy, it’s because they often involve a sense of diminished expectations. Her protagonists end not by acceding to the broad social community partly defined by logical, universal norms of reasonability and intelligibility, but by limiting themselves to small, intimate worlds defined by affection, emotional investment, and

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics*, 69-70; original emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

erotic affinity. Of course, this doesn't sound particularly surprising when described in this way—who would want to become an interchangeable face in a crowd rather than a loved, loving person defined by the comforts of intimacy? But in fact, this intimate mode of social belonging is often defined in Brontë's fiction by its very limitedness, or in other words by the pointed refusal through which a protagonist closes herself off from the wide world in favor of a small world. “Contradiction,” after all, has a pragmatic sense in addition to its logical sense. It describes a strategic move in social interaction: simply saying no, disagreeing, or pointedly refusing. Intimacy is not pursued in Brontë's fiction so much as it is imagined as a place to which to escape—a last resort.

In other words, Brontë's idealization of modes of intimate sociability does not aim entirely to resolve or transcend the contradiction of the impartial perspective—the perspective in which I am both myself and not myself, or what Thomas Nagel famously described as “the view from nowhere.”<sup>3</sup> The final chapter of *Jane Eyre* presents us with a scene of Jane in happy communion with her husband Rochester, in which Jane is simultaneously herself and not herself:

No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking.<sup>4</sup>

Jane describes a complex interplay of togetherness and separateness. She and Rochester have hearts that beat in “separate bosoms” and yet they are “ever together”; she is “bone of his bone

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<sup>3</sup> See Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*. Nagel's argument goes far beyond the problems of ethical reasoning to an analysis of the very concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, but it is an obvious point of reference for Williams's critique of ethics. For his appreciative review of *The View from Nowhere*, see Williams, “A Passion for the Beyond.”

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 519. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

and flesh of his flesh” and yet even in their togetherness that are “as free as in solitude.” Finally, their dialogue is congruent with thought, but still different from thought in its substance, “animated” and “audible” rather than inward and silent. Jane goes so far as to imagine herself as “gazing for his behalf” as Rochester recovers from blindness: “I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand” (519). It is precisely because this relationship makes practices of self-negation erotic and intimately embodied that these practices become liveable, intelligible, and knowable.

The ambiguous final chapter of *Villette* begins by describing a communion-at-a-distance that is very different from Jane and Rochester’s intimate togetherness, but which plays similarly upon the contradiction by which love can seem like a kind of limited abstraction of the self beyond the self: as Lucy Snowe recounts in describing her long-distance relationship with M. Paul, “The spring which moved my energies lay far away beyond seas, in an Indian isle. . . . [h]is letters were real food that nourished, living water that refreshed.”<sup>5</sup> And of course this chapter ends with Lucy strongly hinting at M. Paul’s death by shipwreck before concluding with a pair of performative utterances that bring into being a kind of ghostly, abstract self who might have a happy ending after all: “Trouble no kind, quiet heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life” (546). There is no person here, and certainly no Lucy Snowe, not even in the “picture” that she has consigned to us to “conceive.” There are only feelings and events given over to us as readers: delight, terror, rapture, wonder, union, a happy life. In various ways, Lucy pictures the fulfillment of desire as both embodied and abstracted: M. Paul is the “spring” that moves Lucy and the source of “real food” and “living water” even across a great distance; seen

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<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, 544. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

in this way, his death seems to be of little consequence. Their romance might continue just as well in imagination. Indeed, for Lucy that might be preferable.

If Brontë's ideal of intimate romantic communion doesn't actually resolve the troubling contradiction at the heart of erotic experience and its ethical dimensions, then what is its use? Why refuse one kind of impossible self-negation only to replace it with another? As I've been suggesting, for Brontë, the culmination of the romance plot often presents an opportunity to complicate the notion of self-negation and its role in sociability, and to elaborate its embodied, affective, and phenomenal dimensions. When we imagine the kind of self-negation required for accession to an abstract social world, and when we conceive of that social world as monolithic and defined by transcendent rules of intelligibility and communication that pre-exist the individual, there are a severely limited number of ways in which we can understand that self-negation as felicitous. Brontë, on the other hand, recognizes that we can't avoid the abstraction of the self (which we can also picture as the extension of the self beyond the self) when we want to become social beings. At the same time, she asks us to wonder about how that abstraction might be made less painful and even less ascetic—how abstraction might look without the total evacuation of the particular self idealized by so many ethical theories.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For alternative readings of Brontë's engagement with the idea of "abstraction," see Marcus, "The Profession of the Author"; Kreilkamp, "Unuttered"; and Price, *How to Do Things With Books*. Price's reading of *Jane Eyre* focuses on the tension between the abstraction and absorption of the act of reading on the one hand and the materiality and opacity of the book-as-object on the other, identifying Jane as a figure who more often interrupts the act of absorbed reading than indulging in it herself. My analysis of Brontë's fiction agrees with Marcus's reading of *Jane Eyre* insofar as we both insist that Brontë links the abstraction of the self to forms of self-fulfillment rather than to total self-negation. Yet while Marcus's textual examples link abstraction to Jane's writing and self-advertisement, and more generally to her assumption of the professional identity of authorship, arguing that "scenes of writing in the novel depict Jane as being most successfully herself when she suppresses, evacuates, or commodifies her material being" (209), I analyze what happens when abstraction arises out of the desire to make that very material being intelligible to others. How, I ask, might practices of abstraction change in order to accommodate this kind of contradiction?

We might imagine Brontë's varied interest in moral self-negation and its vexed relationship to erotic intimacy as an extended response to that iconic line of dialogue from her sister Emily's novel *Wuthering Heights*, in which Catherine Earnshaw declares to Nelly Dean, "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff." We often isolate this protest as an exclamatory outburst, or as an endlessly expressive description of the feeling of passionate love, rather than as an assertion followed upon by explanations and re-workings of the original statement, punctuated by dashes rather than full stops: "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff—he's always, always in my mind—not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself—but as my own being; so don't talk of our separation again—it is impracticable; and—...."<sup>7</sup> The passage ends not with a bang but with a whimper, faltering immediately upon the sudden intrusion of the decidedly dispassionate question of impracticability. The force of the initial, bold, impossible contradiction—I am not in fact myself at all, I am another—takes on shades of meaning as Catherine tries to explain what she means. Is it that she's always thinking about Heathcliff, so that he seems to inhabit her entire mind? Or is it that her pleasures are thoroughly indistinguishable from his, so that to do good by him is the same as to do good by her? This scene, after all, finds Catherine justifying an ethical decision: she has decided to marry Edgar Linton, for what Nelly Dean insists are all the wrong reasons, not because of any deep feeling of love, but rather because through such a marriage she might indirectly "aid Heathcliff to rise" and thereby do good to the man she truly loves.

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<sup>7</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 82-83. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text. A note about publication history is important here. We find this stuttering punctuation in the first edition, but it seems that one of Charlotte Brontë's several editorial changes for the novel's reissue following Emily's death was to radically alter this sentence, adding the exclamation point and changing several dashes to colons or even periods. Since we have no manuscript, and since Charlotte insisted that much of the punctuation of the first edition was in error, we can't conclusively identify a correct version. But we do have to wonder why Charlotte seems to have altered this passage much more thoroughly than any other—a suspicion borne out by comparing the first edition to subsequent editions based on Charlotte's revised version. Most modern editions return to the punctuation of the first edition.

On the one hand, “I *am* Heathcliff,” spoken by someone who is in fact not Heathcliff, is literally a contradiction—“I am not I”—and so it violates a sacrosanct rule of logic. On the other hand, Cathy’s declaration is most intuitively read not as a rational proposition amenable to logical parsing, but as a powerful metaphoric description of the feeling of loving someone as much as you love yourself: “I’ll explain it,” says Cathy to Nelly earlier in the same scene; “I can’t do it distinctly—but I’ll give you a feeling of how I feel” (80). Of course Catherine isn’t *really* Heathcliff, nor does she believe that she is; that emphatic *am* is simply a more aggressive, more expressive way of saying *it is as if I were* or *I feel as though I were*, or *let us assume that I am*. Contradiction in this case enacts a particularly concise elaboration of a fictional world, only really meaningful if framed by the kind of implicit performative utterance that must frame all fictional assertions: let’s pretend; let’s imagine. But even when we take this fictional frame into account, the contradiction remains. Can I be an omniscient narrator of my own life? Would I want to be?

At the same time, the moral language of Cathy’s speech prevents us from ignoring the rationalizing aims of the sentence. How else does “impracticable” enter into her train of thought? In other words, we cannot easily separate the two registers in which these lines are spoken (the erotic and the rational), and so we have to think more carefully about contradiction in order to understand what kind of experiment in moral accountability Cathy pursues here. What does it mean to account for a moral decision under an assumed identity? Our sense of the opacity of her speech arises out of an ideal of reflective rationality that would test beliefs, intentions, and decisions against norms of logical thinking by which norms and moral rules can be deduced by the laws of reason. This ideal presupposes that a person can and should occupy, if only temporarily or fitfully, the detached and impartial moral perspective that we’ve been analyzing.

Catherine, on the other hand, seems to lose her way. She leaves the perceived selfishness of the first-person behind, but replaces it with a doubled first-person, echoing the split first-person generated by the novel's complex frame-narrative. In her preface to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë notes that Catherine's "honesty" shines through even "in the midst of perverted passion and passionate perversity," in a chiasmic turn of phrase that shows us an ideal of honesty caught between two warping libidinal impulses (liii). And this seems to lead us into tragedy rather than moral enlightenment—sacrificing oneself and one's own interests, or imagining how a situation would look if one were not really, not only, oneself, is a moral good, but only if one does it properly. Only if one doesn't get too mired in the sticky attachments of desire.

If a novelist like George Eliot seems to us to be devoted to the endless theorization of how one might occupy such a perspective responsibly or productively, then Emily Brontë seems equally committed to an emphasis on how excruciating—how difficult and disorienting—the attainment of such a perspective can be when our erotic lives enter into the picture. And we might understand Charlotte Brontë as charting a kind of middle path, imagining the ethics of self-negation as bound up with the erotics of embodiment, attachment, and investment, rather than at odds with the idiosyncrasy of erotic life. I present this set of resonant but contrasting scenes not to suggest that Emily is wrong in her representation of the psychic contradictions of erotic life and that Charlotte is right. Rather, they help us immediately to apprehend the variety of ways in which a basic contradiction between self-identity and self-negation might structure the novelistic representation of erotic desire, whether tortured or happy, unrequited or fulfilled, socially deviant or legally validated. Moreover, they demonstrate the equally various ways in which which this contradiction of erotic experience aligns with the similar double-bind that

confronts the individual who attempts to become ethical or merely intelligible, who must both be herself and also see herself from a position of abstract detachment.

This chapter begins by situating contradiction as a philosophical and literary-theoretical problem, whether for twentieth-century thinkers in the field of logic, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein; or for theorists and literary critics from Foucault to Sedgwick; or for Victorian thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill, who offer us very different, though mutually illuminating, models of self-negation as a moral good. I then move on to explore some of the ways in which Brontë's fiction problematizes our usual ideas about the first-personal perspective and its strictly limited knowledge. *Jane Eyre* features a first-person narrator who hungers for a transcendent moral vision that might guide her decisions about erotic life. This arc fits with theories about first-person narrators who long for omniscience, but it doesn't tell the full story of Jane's ethical development.<sup>8</sup> I argue that far from narrating the story of Jane's eventual accession to a set of transcendent ethical and erotic norms that preexists her—the "I" learning to see from the perspective of the "not-I"—the novel emphasizes scenes of intimate exchange in which Jane learns that intelligibility is not only an abstract, rational enterprise, but rather that it also has meaningful performative and affective dimensions. *Villette* presents us with the same problem in reverse: Lucy Snowe is a first-person narrator who often fetishizes rationality and represses the unintelligible impulses of desire, but I'll argue that Brontë nonetheless complicates Lucy's practices of social withdrawal and self-negation by relating them to erotic experience and the dynamics of intimate exchange.

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<sup>8</sup> See Jaffe, *Vanishing Points*, 18-20. I will return to Jaffe's argument later on, but it's important to note that despite her focus on Dickens's uses of narrative omniscience, her analysis of first-person narration relies heavily on examples from Brontë. See also Bodenheimer, "Jane Eyre in Search of Her Story." Bodenheimer argues that Jane's development follows the development of her voice as a storyteller, and ends in her marriage to Rochester with Jane "in sole command of the narrative field" (393).



Having established some of the philosophical and narrative problems of form and intelligibility that arise when we consider the social dimensions of erotic life in Brontë's fiction, I conclude with an analysis of the psychic experiences of contradiction that structure erotic life itself in these novels and that issue in the resolutions I described at the outset. Erotic desire has both material and abstract dimensions: it is a feeling of and in the body, but it is also a way of entering into the abstractions that define social belonging. Erotic experience can be sexual, but it can also attach to immaterial social currencies such as money and authority. I zero in on two forms of psychic contradiction that structure broad thematic patterns in both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*: jealousy, which simultaneously represents a guarded possessiveness toward people and things and also a jockeying for an immaterial kind of erotic authority; and "domestic dissipation," a self-contradictory figure from *Jane Eyre* that balances the erotics of intimate belonging with the abstraction of economic circulation. Although the bulk of my argument emphasizes the contradiction at the heart of ethical practices of self-effacement, this concluding section suggests that such a contradiction is never simply resolved or evaded. Instead, Brontë's protagonists learn to sacrifice the sort of social belonging usually understood as the goal of the novel of development—the abstract sociability predicated upon shared norms of reason and morality—in favor of the intimate belonging that offers new possibilities for the social intelligibility of erotic life. Moreover, even this intimate belonging might represent not only an affirmation—of one other person, or of intimacy itself—but also a refusal of everyone and everything else.

## 2. The Civic Status of a Contradiction

“It is not the business of philosophy,” claims Ludwig Wittgenstein, “to resolve a contradiction by means of a mathematical or logico-mathematical discovery, but to render surveyable the state of mathematics that troubles us—the state of affairs *before* the contradiction is resolved. (And in doing this one is not sidestepping a difficulty.)”<sup>9</sup> It would be easy to replace “philosophy” here with “literary criticism,” and “mathematical” with “formal” or “historical.” Tension and contradiction are the bread and butter of huge swathes of literary theory, and all of the divergent uses of these concepts tend to draw upon a broadly conceived idea of the Hegelian dialectic. (I will return briefly to these Hegelian origins later on.) A brief representative survey would include Leo Bersani’s psychoanalytic argument that the realist novel presents us with a contradiction between “structured desires” and “fragmented desires,” and that the “psychic coherence” demanded by novelistic form “involves a serious crippling of desire”; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s foundational feminist argument that women novelists of the nineteenth century, including Brontë, struggled to break out of a patriarchal, socially enforced “contradiction between their status as human beings and their vocation as females”; Fredric Jameson’s Marxist argument that the social function of literary texts is to effect imaginary resolutions to material-historical contradictions; the Foucauldian arguments of critics such as Nancy Armstrong and D. A. Miller according to which the novel both represents the functioning of an already formed ideology, and simultaneously participates in producing that very ideology; and finally Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s queer-theory argument that Western culture is structured by an imagined but obsessively reproduced contradiction between the homosexual and the

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<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §125.

heterosexual.<sup>10</sup> Of course, this survey extends from the late 1970's through the early 1990's, covering the heyday of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and New Historicism as the major methodologies of literary criticism. Where are we now with respect to contradiction? Surely we don't want to throw away all of these theories, humming with all of those vibrating tensions, and heroically exposing contradiction as the master form of bad logic that animates ideologies, bad consciences, and oppressive regimes.

But if these theories have said so many powerfully liberating things about the ways we're duped into believing in contradictions, or blinded to their insidious worming into our everyday lives, then they also leave us with a feeling that this project must by now be exhausted. We've so thoroughly debunked the contradictions that appear to structure our everyday lives, and indeed the literary representation of those everyday lives, that we're left yawning at the introduction of yet another aporia to be interrogated, yet another contradiction to be confronted and effectively dissolved. The question for literary criticism today is, has contradiction run out of steam?<sup>11</sup> As Wittgenstein's argument on contradiction continues, we get some further insight into the kinds of questions about language, norms, and community that contradictions compel us to ask:

Here the fundamental fact is that we lay down rules, a technique, for playing a game, and that then, when we follow the rules, things don't turn out as we had assumed. So that we are, as it were, entangled in our own rules. ...

It throws light on our concept of meaning something. For in those cases, things turn out otherwise than we had meant, foreseen. That is just what we say when, for example, a contradiction appears: 'That's not the way I meant it.'

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<sup>10</sup> Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 5-6; Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 155; Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*; Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*; D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

<sup>11</sup> I allude, of course, to the title and the argument of Bruno Latour's iconoclastic critique of the available forms of social critique itself, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?"

The civic status of a contradiction, or its status in civic life—that is the philosophical problem.<sup>12</sup>

For Wittgenstein, a contradiction asks us to take a survey of the rules of the game, to step back for a moment for a wider view, and most importantly to negotiate the rules of the game with other people. If contradiction as an everyday act of thinking or speaking has a “civic status,” this is only the result of a deeper contradiction in the philosophy of language.<sup>13</sup> We all, of course, make do with a language that operates according to a set of norms of rationality and intelligibility; at the same time, each of us contains something wildly unpredictable and unintelligible that presses against the limitations imposed by those norms, and causes us to become “entangled in our own rules.” We try to think and speak by the book, but there are always “those cases,” in which “things turn out otherwise than we had meant, foreseen.” And then we have to retrace our steps: if it’s true that “That’s not the way I meant it,” then what, if anything, did I mean, and how can I communicate it to you in a form that can mean something to you? The point might not be to “resolve” contradiction by mathematically reworking our logical theory, but to use contradiction as a way of keeping the structuring edges of that normative system in view.

Rather than signifying a failure of reasoning or perception, or a rebellious and outright rejection of rationality in favor of sheer affective response, contradiction in Brontë is, as I have suggested at the outset, always bound up with the idea that ethical reasoning and erotic desire simply take time, and happen over time. Brontë’s novels of development, in other words, insist upon an unresolved question about this subgenre and its relationship to that capacious term, “the

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<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §125.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed reading of the relationship between Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and the tradition of “social contract” philosophy, see Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 3-36.

social”: to what extent can the novel of development ever be about a subject’s accession to, or compromise with, a set of social norms (or in this case norms of rational thought) that always preexists her?<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, how might an inverse conception, in which these norms are elastic and experimental, developed through an eclectic practice of dialogue, reflection, and affect, offer a better account of the power of the individual to subject those norms to critique, or perhaps more accurately, to alteration or customization?

In asking these questions I am both inspired by, and to some extent dissenting from, broadly Foucauldian arguments that describe the novel as a disciplinary instrument meant to habituate the individual to just such a changeability of social norms. D. A. Miller, for example, argues that the social effect of the traditional novel is not (“or not just”) “the doomed attempt to produce a stable subject in a stable world”; rather, (“or in addition”) it is “the more successful task of forming—by means of that very ‘failure’—a subject habituated to psychic displacements, evacuations, reinvestments, in a social order whose totalizing power circulates all the more easily for being pulverized.”<sup>15</sup> Franco Moretti links this view—the novel as habituation to social

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, the relationship between social norms and the more specific subset of norms of rationality is less straightforward I am implying it to be, particularly with respect to gender. In a certain sense, rationality was understood as a social “norm” for nineteenth-century women only insofar as they were seen as essentially incapable of achieving it, and therefore unqualified for participation in the public or civic life that we might see as one dimension of the broadly construed idea of the “social.” I have a more intimate scale of social life in mind, in which norms of reason are prerequisites not to participation in particular institutions or in civic life generally, but simply to communication with other people—this is reason and its logical norms as mechanisms for being understood, or for justifying oneself. Joan W. Scott, for example, in *Gender and the Politics of History*, has argued influentially for an understanding of the social construction of gender roles that would be attentive to the way that historically specific exclusions, such as an exclusion of women in nineteenth century England from norms of “public” rationality in this case, are never monolithic or predetermined historical facts, but are necessarily contingent and contested. As far as “bad logic” goes, we might understand it as a way of elaborating alternative forms of social rationality that operate best at an intimate scale of social life, and which would contest the norms that operate at the properly “public” or political scale of social life.

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, xii.

changeability—to the specific features of the novel of development, which he argues acts as the “symbolic form” of modernity and puts forward the idea of youth as “the new epoch’s ‘specific material sign’ because of its ability to *accentuate* modernity’s dynamism and instability. Youth is, so to speak, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past.”<sup>16</sup> Like Miller, Moretti argues that instability cannot be the only function of the genre but that the novel requires a careful balance between movement and containment. On the one hand, “it was impossible to cope with the times without acknowledging their revolutionary impetus: a symbolic form incapable of doing so would have been perfectly *useless*.” On the other hand, “if it had been able to do *only this*, . . . it would have run the risk of *destroying itself as form*.” Finally, Armstrong takes perhaps the most radically constructionist view of all in her refusal to accept “the idea that sexual desire exists in some form prior to its representation and remains there as something for us to recover or liberate.”<sup>17</sup> This is the novel as pure ideological instrument, constructing even what seems to be the most unmediated aspect of our individual identities, our very experience of sexual desire.

While I draw from these texts, and from Foucault, a way of talking about the realist novel as a genre well-suited to representing the everyday functioning of social norms and the linguistic and cultural guises of ideology, my argument differs from them in insisting upon the idea that critique can be internal to a text, rather than only an operation that a critic performs upon a text whose goal is to habituate us to ideology. If Foucault laments that in following the Victorians, “We have placed ourselves under the sign of sex, but in the form of a *Logic of Sex*, rather than a physics,” I insist that a logic of sex need not be oriented toward the “truth of sex” about which

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<sup>16</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 5; original emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 7.

Foucault is rightly skeptical; rather, it might in fact be oriented toward open-ended reasoning *about sex*, and communicating about sex, even about its most stubbornly nonlinguistic and unintelligible insistences, which is not at all the same thing.<sup>18</sup> In other words, I agree with Foucault that beginning with Victorian culture, “One had to speak of sex; one had to speak publicly and in a manner that was not determined by the division between licit and illicit;” but I depart from him insofar as this initial argument leads him to insist that “one had to speak of it as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum.”<sup>19</sup> This is certainly accurate in many cases, and in many kinds of discourse—science and medicine spring to mind, or the statistical moralism of Thomas Malthus—but I suggest that many kinds of discourse, such as the novel, provide us with ample and powerful counterexamples in which speaking and reasoning about sex arises out of a desire for intimate belonging and understanding, rather than out of a public conception of the “greater good” or abstract goals like optimum efficiency.

But of course one might insist that all of this is thoroughly at odds with the dominant models of rational persuasion and ideation that so dominated Victorian political and moral theory, with their insistence upon fixed and transcendent norms of intelligibility, and indeed it’s the Victorian discourse surrounding the contradiction of moral self-negation that would have been most immediately relevant to Brontë, especially as it came to her through her reading of Thomas Carlyle. In *Utilitarianism*, for example, John Stuart Mill gestures to logic as an irresistible and transcendent source of consensus as to the ethical truths that ground utilitarianism

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 78, original emphasis. For “the truth of sex” see 53-73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

as a philosophy. He speaks of propositions so logically forceful that “any mind” would assent to them, of the judgments of the “general mind,” of collective deductions about the relative value of different kinds of pleasure.<sup>20</sup> Logic, on Mill’s account, provides a normative structure for thinking, and more importantly it extends to the moral thinking that revolves around states of mind like conviction, belief, and attitude rather than only the empirical knowledge that we associate most readily with logic.

Perhaps more accurately, Mill’s theory of logic combines the two kinds of thinking that the logical positivism of the twentieth century would later separate into the categories of the expressive and the cognitive.<sup>21</sup> If later thinkers in the field of logic would insist that moral thinking is entirely non-truth-functional, Mill’s desire to arrive at a unified field theory of reason leads him to subsume both ethical and empirical assertions under the rubric of logical argumentation. As he insists in his *System of Logic*, “nearly the whole, not only of science, but of human conduct, is amenable to the authority of logic.”<sup>22</sup> But as a result of this strong linkage of logic and ethics, learning to obey the moral rule of good logic also seems to require a particular kind of abstraction both of the self and of the collective. My ideas only take proper shape insofar as they can be tested against abstract formulas of consistency and deduction, and only gain real persuasive force insofar as they never belong to one particular mind, only to a “general mind,” to “any mind” at all: “If there were but one rational being in the universe,” Mill declares, “that

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<sup>20</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 131-204.

<sup>21</sup> For the foundational version of this argument, see Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Ayer responds implicitly to Mill’s insistence upon the logical irresistibility of utilitarian propositions by insisting that normative ethical propositions are “not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false” (103).

<sup>22</sup> Mill, *A System of Logic*, 10.



being might be a perfect logician; and the science and art of logic would be the same for that one person, as for the whole human race.”<sup>23</sup> Mill’s invocation of logic (or, more broadly, rationality) as a ground for the justification of an ethical theory raises two related problems, one having to do with logic and the other having to do with ethics. By the phrase “the moral rule of good logic” I mean to indicate the fact that many moral theories, such as Mill’s utilitarianism or Kant’s notion of the categorical imperative, rely on the rational deducibility of moral truths (Mill) or on the idea that moral convictions arise inevitably out of the structure of rational thinking itself (Kant). I also mean to indicate the fact that the ability to account for one’s beliefs and actions in sound logic is itself often understood as comprising a moral virtue.

Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* offers us a different account of the third-personal perspective of ethical thinking, and in aligning his ideas about transcendent moral truths with Mill’s, I mean to emphasize that Victorian thinkers of a variety of political stripes actually agree that some version of self-negation is required for the proper functioning of moral reason. Moreover, the fact that Carlyle develops these ideas as part of an experiment with the genre of the bildungsroman will resonate with my readings of Brontë’s novels of development. For Mill, self-effacement manifests itself in the disinterested perspective idealized by liberal models of public debate, which requires one to step back from personal attachments, investments, and opinions in order to test received wisdom. It’s this very kind of detachment that Mill appeals to in *Utilitarianism* in referring us to a normative structure of reason and persuasion whose results are almost mathematically predictable. In *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle presents moralized self-effacement as a much more literal, and therefore much more mystical, process. The famous set of chapters that follow the fictional German philosopher Diogenes Teufelsdröckh from “The

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 6.

Everlasting No,” through “The Centre of Indifference,” and finally to “The Everlasting Yea,” narrate the individual’s progress from neurotic self-interest to religious self-negation.

The story begins with frustrated erotic desire, following as it does upon Teufelsdröckh’s failed attempt to woo the beautiful Blumine and his subsequent wanderings over the globe: “All that the young heart might desire and pray for has been denied; nay, as in the last worst instance, offered and then snatched away.”<sup>24</sup> All seems meaningless if desire can no longer be understood as a worthwhile guide to action, until “The Everlasting No” asserts itself as a “Protest” by which the individual insists that despite being “fatherless, outcast,” he is nonetheless radically “Free” (129). Teufelsdröckh then passes through “The Centre of Indifference,” which stands for the sinking feeling of the individual’s (even the world’s) utter smallness and insignificance, even despite his freedom:

*Ach Gott!* when I gazed into these Stars, have they not looked down on me as if with pity from their serene spaces; like Eyes glistening with heavenly tears over the little lot of man! ... Pshaw! what is this paltry little Dog-cage of an Earth; what art thou that sittest whining there? Thou art still Nothing, Nobody: true; but who then is Something, Somebody? (139)

So far Teufelsdröckh has left behind embodied, situated desires as guides to action, insisting upon an ideal of individual freedom unfettered by the nagging insistences of erotic investments, only to find that the individual and his worldly actions don’t seem to mean much at all when considered from an omniscient point of view. What we see is Teufelsdröckh’s dawning awareness of the difficulty—the sheer distance—of the third-personal, “serene,” “heavenly” point of view, which seems to diminish the individual perspective to a mere “Nothing, Nobody.”

When we arrive at “The Everlasting Yea,” we see Teufelsdröckh transcendent, becoming aware of “the Godlike that is in man,” or in other words the idea that “there is in man a HIGHER

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<sup>24</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 123. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

than Love of Happiness: he can do without Happiness, and instead thereof find Blessedness!” (146). Teufelsdröckh finally imagines a state that bridges the “Godlike” and the human even within the structure of human desire—it’s simply that instead of desiring pleasure, one must direct one’s desire toward God himself, and in doing so forget the disappointments and limitations of the body. The conviction that “the Self in thee needed to be annihilated” along with the self’s attachments, desires, and particular motivations, leads him to the Everlasting Yea, “wherein all contradiction is solved” (146). Carlyle, then, imagines contradiction as a constitutive feature of erotic desire, and also as a fraught and painful existential state that asks to be “solved.” How does one reconcile two modes of human existence—situated desire and impersonal reflection—that seem bound up in different ways with the contradictory imperative that “I must not be I” or the moral claim that “I should not be I,” or at the very least that “I should not *always* or *only* be I”? Paradoxically, while Teufelsdröckh believes he has solved “all” contradiction, he has really traded one contradiction (the contradiction of embodied desire, its frustrating failures, and its broken promises) for another (the contradiction of disembodiment, of annihilating the self in oneself, and of “I” leaving “I” behind).

Carlyle’s version of this problem seems familiar to us because it draws so heavily on the familiar model of dialectics developed in German idealist philosophy, especially by Hegel, in which contradiction is in fact the motor of consciousness and of its processes of ideation. In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel abandons the Aristotelian principle of noncontradiction, and instead posits contradiction itself as the self-evident ground that structures thinking, especially insofar as thinking must always be imagined as a temporal process of “becoming.” Indeed, part of the inadvertent comedy of Hegel’s writing to a contradiction-phobic sensibility is that he revels in contradictions at the most impossibly abstract level of thought, populates the bare idea of

contradiction with meaning, and tries to show us that we can't do without it. In writing an origin-myth of thinking, he describes the "beginning" in just this way:

As yet there is nothing, and something is supposed to become. The beginning is not pure nothing, but a nothing, rather, from which something is to proceed; also being, therefore, is already contained in the beginning. Therefore the beginning contains both, being and nothing; it is the unity of being and nothing, or is non-being which is at the same time being, and being which is at the same time non-being.<sup>25</sup>

Hegel resolves contradiction through an incantatory practice of repetition and rearrangement—each of these sentences finds new ways to link being to non-being through a variety of syntactical and logical mechanisms: predication, causality, identity, tangency. There is not actually a coherent or conclusive model in Hegel of the relationship of being and non-being aside from the intuitive assertion that they must be codependent; rather, there's a simple willingness to imagine the dimensions of this relationship as more complicated than the dualism of its terms.

This mode of dialectical thinking, which so impressed Carlyle, and through him finds its way to Brontë, both provides us with a line of philosophical thought about the potential productivity of contradiction, and at the same time foregrounds the fundamental difference between the idealist theory of dialectics and the realist novel's interest in the everydayness of the psychological and erotic manifestations of contradiction. Both Hegel and Carlyle follow the idealist tradition that defines "logic" as any general theory of pure reason, rather than only as a set of normative laws and mathematical formulae for right reasoning. Indeed, for Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*, it's the impoverished tradition of the dim "chink-lighted ... underground workshop of Logic" in which "man's mind become[s] an Arithmetical Mill" (52), blind to the fact that he stands "in the centre of Immensities, in the conflux of eternities" (51). The tradition of idealism is interested above all in the spiritual, the metaphysical, and the transcendent

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<sup>25</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 51.

consciousness above all else, and even if Carlyle's philosophical novel flirts with psychological realism, its primary goal is ironic theorizing.

### 3. Thinking in Emergencies

In order to move away from a view of the novel as a contest between ideology and individuality, between the normativity of logic and the unintelligible rebelliousness of sexual desire, or between transcendent consciousness and the severe limitations of the first-person perspective, we can begin by looking to Brontë's consistent interest in the dynamics of intimate dialogue, through which she suggests ways in which norms of moral thinking might be challenged or newly elaborated in intimacy, or in eroticized linguistic play and experimentation, rather than in the abstract public sphere imagined by liberal theories of reasoning, debate, and persuasion. Jane Eyre describes her relationship with Rochester as an ongoing dialogue of teasing, provocation, and pushing the envelope, and as we will see later on, this eroticized tension often accompanies debates over the performative effects of speech. In this case, Jane describes the sheer pleasure of observing the kinds of erotic effects (often effects that contradict one another) that language can accomplish when it is played with:

I knew the pleasure of vexing and soothing him by turns; it was one I chiefly delighted in, and a sure instinct always prevented me from going too far; beyond the verge of provocation I never ventured; on the extreme brink I liked well to try my skill. Retaining every minute form of respect, every propriety of my station, I could still meet him in argument without fear of uneasy restraint; this suited both him and me. (183)

Jane's description mixes the "pleasure of vexing" with "respect" and "propriety"; or more accurately it describes a situation in which "provocation" can occur within the boundaries of these social forms, flirting with the "extreme brink" without surpassing it. We'll see that this kind of asymptotic approach to contradiction—or more accurately, to the point at which

something becomes its opposite—allows Brontë to play with the idea of contradiction without always putting pure logical contradictions into the mouths of her characters. Jane follows the “sure instinct” that ensures she’ll never venture “beyond the verge,” even if she brings that verge fully into view. Of course, we could easily read this passage as a particularly acute example of Jane’s capitulation to Rochester’s mastery, especially given her extreme care not to compromise the “propriety” of her “station.” And yet even while it maintains a particular organization of power in reality, Jane’s flirtation finds pleasure in the make-believe play by which she can reverse relations of power, if only erotic power.

My argument that Brontë’s fiction elaborates a theory of flexible or even performative moral reasoning is not meant to imply that Brontë rejects rational decision-making and ethical intelligibility in favor of an anything-goes moral relativism, a Nietzschean anti-foundationalism, or even an uncomplicated feminist rejection of patriarchal language.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, one of the most enduringly striking features of Brontë’s protagonists is that they strive to balance intense moral earnestness, and a belief in the self-evident value of traditional virtues and ethical norms, with an insistence upon a radical individual freedom that must continuously subject those norms to a kind of immanent critique. Jane Eyre is on one hand the character who, in a state of moral emergency upon discovering Rochester’s marriage, decides that despite her isolation from anything like a social world, “The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man” (365). She is also, on the other hand, the character whom we associate with a feminist rebellion against

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<sup>26</sup> For the most enduring account of Brontë as desiring to escape from the patriarchal norms of male authorship, and constantly narrating that attempted escape in various ways, see Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 311-442. While Gilbert and Gubar’s reading highlights Jane’s desire not to be treated like a slave, it can’t quite account for the sheer eroticism of Jane’s and Rochester’s jockeying for power through language.

social convention, as in her insistence that once married to Rochester she will continue to work for him as a governess in order to earn her room and board—what Rochester calls the “peculiar terms” that seem to call for a “private marriage ceremony, besides that performed at the altar” (311). In order to accommodate idiosyncrasy to accountability, one must, above all, be flexible.

Even the Victorian logician George Boole, one of the innovators of algebraic logic, didn't believe that his theory of the “laws of thought” could “supersede the employment of common reasoning”; this, he argued, would be “the last desire of one who knows the value of that intellectual toil and warfare which imparts to the mind an athletic vigour, and teaches it to contend with difficulties, and to rely upon itself in emergencies.”<sup>27</sup> If Boole's laws of thought stop short at describing the ways we think in emergencies, or the ways our mind makes itself strong and lean in the “athletic” training of everyday ethical life, then what kind of thinking do these laws describe? And how much of our psychic and erotic lives must necessarily exceed this narrow formalization of thought? It's not, after all, that logic is wrong or fatally limited; we seem to need a language in which to describe the formal rules of language and of thought. And yet traditional logic tends to conceive of these formal rules as static, transcendent, and oriented toward empirical knowledge, rather than as dynamic, performative, and oriented toward ethical or psychological knowledge. Boole, of course, only says that algebraic laws of reasoning shouldn't “supersede” other kinds of reasoning, and in doing so leaves open the possibility that thinking has many more dimensions than the one his theory aims to formalize.

Our most well-worn theoretical vocabulary for analyzing the pursuit of psychological self-understanding comes, of course, from psychoanalysis, and my reading of Brontë draws upon a psychoanalytic understanding of “desire” even while it questions some of the moralistic

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<sup>27</sup> Boole, *Laws of Thought*, 12.

assumptions that underwrite the ideal of the “talking cure.” Psychoanalysis imagines the process of individual development as the attempt to resolve or to bridge the fundamental contradiction (for better or for worse) between idiosyncratic desire and intelligible communication. Moreover, psychoanalytic theory describes a phenomenal and affective experience of contradiction rather than a logically pure, abstract kind of contradiction, which is an important distinction in thinking about contradiction as a mechanism of temporally extended moral thinking, as well as a mechanism for connecting this kind of moral thinking to the frustrating opacities of one’s own erotic life. Finally, psychoanalysis gives us useful terms for thinking about the sheer psychic labor involved in giving structure to something (erotic desire, for example) that seems intrinsically to resist structure. The psychoanalytic model is one of internalized and barely contained conflicts, whether between the pleasure principle and the death drive, or between the id and the ego.

Contradiction in this sense might be understood as a compact metaphor for the novel form itself: a form characterized by an abiding, buzzing tension between, on the one hand, a shared set of structural protocols that transcends any individual novel, and on the other hand, a sense that each novel nonetheless communicates something ineffable—some kind of human obstinacy—that resists assimilation into this structure. Adam Phillips has described this tension as a consistent feature of psychoanalytic technique that often goes under-theorized; he describes it as “the antagonism between the already narrated, examined life of developmental theory and the always potential life implied by the idea of the unconscious,” or in other words as “The conflict between knowing what a life is and the sense that a life contains within it something that makes such knowing impossible.”<sup>28</sup> And Leo Bersani has used this basic paradox of

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<sup>28</sup> Phillips, *On Kissing*, 7.



psychoanalytic theory as a way of describing what he argues is a similarly constitutive feature of the realist novel, and its distinctive tension between ideology/structure and idiosyncrasy/desire. But while Bersani insists upon a fundamental antagonism in the realist novel between “structured desires” and “fragmented desires,” with the result that the “psychic coherence” demanded by form and structure themselves “involves a serious crippling of desire,” Brontë often tries to accommodate a precarious balance between these contradictory impulses—the idiosyncrasy of erotic life and the social intelligibility of reason—without pressing us relentlessly toward resolution, toward the dissolution of contradiction or the containment or “crippling” of one of its terms.<sup>29</sup>

Brontë’s notion of desire’s “resolution” is, indeed, not a resolution at all, but rather a tense holding-together of formalized abstraction and idiosyncratic situatedness. And so it gives us a model of the individual’s libidinal development that both resonates with the psychoanalytic model, and also departs from its rule-bound, structuralist account of how we think and speak about desire. As Slavoj Žižek argues in describing the fragility inherent in psychoanalytic and Marxist conceptions of transcendent “law”: “What we call ‘social reality’ is in the last resort an ethical construction; it is supported by a certain *as if*. ... As soon as the belief (which ... is definitely not to be conceived at a ‘psychological’ level: it is embodied, materialized, in the effective functioning of the social field) is lost, the very texture of the social field disintegrates.”<sup>30</sup> For Žižek, it is not as if becoming aware of the fictionality or groundlessness of one’s own delusional image of social reality could ever shatter that reality; at best, the “texture

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<sup>29</sup> Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 36.

... disintegrates,” or in other words the embodied relationship by which one “feels” norms is reconfigured or reoriented. This is why we can understand Brontë’s fraught critique of logical norms as informed by something akin to an attitude of anti-foundationalism, and yet somewhat less radical than that, much like Žižek’s hesitant appeal to a disintegrated “texture” as opposed to a total demolishing of ethical norms.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. Tottering and Plunging

The complex contradictions implied by the limitations of the first-person perspective are borne out by several examples from *Jane Eyre* in which Jane confronts existential crises about futurity.<sup>32</sup> We all remember Rochester’s telepathic cry for help, Jane Eyre’s tingling reception of his call, and her urgent response. We don’t often think very carefully about the scene that precedes it, in which Jane stands momentarily on the point of giving in to St John Rivers’s beleaguering series of marriage proposals. St John touches Jane, and this touch is enough to set her moral compass spinning, in search of the path that might take her from “here” to “there,” from “impossible” to “possible”:

I stood motionless under my hierophant’s touch. My refusals were forgotten—my fears overcome—my wrestlings paralysed. The Impossible—that is, my marriage with St John—was fast becoming the Possible. All was changing utterly with a sudden sweep.

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<sup>31</sup> For another way of understanding Brontë’s political representation of something like anti-foundationalism (or at least radical transgression), see Lane, *Hatred and Civility*, 85-106.

<sup>32</sup> For a different reading of Brontë’s treatment of temporality in its psychic dimensions, see Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*. Dames argues that Brontë’s engagement with the popular science of phrenology, which excises memory from its set of distinct mental faculties, allows her to conceptualize a “psychological model that prefers the progressive, the active, the forward-looking to the backward-turned visages of retrospect” (90). The absence of memory from phrenological models of psychology is, he argues, “an enabling absence, for it permits the sudden changes of scene that keep Brontë’s narratives vital” (92). I agree with Dames’s reading, and expand upon it to argue that we can similarly understand the absence of transcendent moral truths as paradoxically enabling, since it allows the individual to become an agent of moral practice and experimentation rather than a rote follower of pre-formulated moral rules.

Religion called—Angels beckoned—God commanded—life rolled together like a scroll—death’s gates opening, showed eternity beyond: it seemed, that for safety and bliss there, all here might be sacrificed in a second. The dim room was full of visions.  
(482)

Brontë uses the past continuous tense to its full paradoxical effect here by combining it with the language of speed, punctuality, and completion. What seems to be happening “fast” and “utterly,” “with a sudden sweep,” is nonetheless never accomplished. The impossible doesn’t become the possible, but it “was becoming”; all doesn’t change in the end, but it “was changing.” Indeed, time seems to collapse in the series of punctual, simple-past-tense religious images of the next sentence: Jane is “called,” “beckoned,” “commanded,” and her life “rolled together like a scroll” rather than being laid out in the book we’re now reading. It seems for a moment that a simple exchange might be possible: sacrifice “all here” for “bliss there” and resolve the set of contradictions that put Jane in a state of bad conscience. But how, after all, can one get from the “here” of profound doubt to the “there” of absolute certainty? “I could decide if I were but certain,” Jane tells St. John, before crying to the heavens, “Show me, show me the path!” (482-3).

The scene neatly echoes the similar existential crises of Jane’s adolescence, in which she faces a future about which she finds she is radically uncertain. As she awaits the morning on which she’ll finally depart Lowood School to take up her post as a governess at Thornfield, she loses sleep in trying to observe the phenomenon of change itself: “A phase of my life was closing tonight, a new one opening to-morrow: impossible to slumber in the interval; I must watch feverishly while the change was being accomplished” (107). This wonder at the turning of new leaves develops out of an anxious certainty that nothing endures—that nothing remains certain. While still a student at Lowood, worrying about her dying friend, Helen Burns, Jane describes the process by which

my mind made its first earnest effort to comprehend what had been infused into it concerning heaven and hell: and for the first time, it recoiled, baffled: and for the first time glancing behind, on each side, and before it, it saw all round an unfathomed gulf: it felt the one point where it stood—the present; all the rest was formless cloud and vacant depth; and it shuddered at the thought of tottering, and plunging into that chaos. (94)

In other words, one doesn't only totter and plunge on the brink of death; rather, the tottering and the plunging are happening all the time, if one would only take notice. What *is* now may *not be* in a moment, whether in heaven and hell, in impossible and possible, in repulsion and desire, or finally in right and wrong. Jane has fully taken on Helen Burns's grave insistence that "nobody can be sure of the future" (66). If that is true, then it does seem that one is constantly, anxiously tottering on the edge and plunging into chaos—what are the self-evident, transcendent forms and principles that bind "here and now" to "there and then"? The surprise of reading these scenes together—the scene of Jane's adolescent existential crisis and the scene of her adult struggle with the ethics of erotic life—is that so little seems to have changed. The "formless cloud" surrounding the present moment gives way to the adult Jane's "inward dimness of vision, before which clouds yet rolled" (482).

In the latter case, however, an answer does arrive—it is in response to Jane's morally anxious entreaty of Heaven—"Show me the path!"—that she hears Rochester's own entreaty as if in her own mind. And yet in our tendency to remember Rochester's plea—"Jane! Jane! Jane!"—as a kind of radio-transmission scene of telepathy, it's easy to forget how physical, erotic, even orgasmic this scene of communion is:

My heart beat fast and thick: I heard its throb. Suddenly it stood still to an inexpressible feeling that thrilled it through, and passed at once to my head and extremities. The feeling was not like an electric shock, but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling: it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor, from which they were now summoned and forced to wake. They rose expectant: eye and ear waited while the flesh quivered on my bones. (483)

Even here, there's something of a repetition: we can't help but compare the young Jane who "must watch feverishly" as her life changes with the adult Jane who waits on Rochester's response with flesh quivering. The important difference is that in the moments between St John's touch and Rochester's equally embodied penetration, Jane has traded religious supplication for erotic conviction, and the inscrutable calls of angels and commands of God for the equally inscrutable imperatives of sexual desire.<sup>33</sup> It's not that those formless clouds have rolled away, in other words; it's that one conviction, about the force of transcendent rules of moral reasoning that always seem uncertain and unknowable, has given way to another conviction, about the force of desire, that utmost "inexpressible feeling," as itself a rule of moral reasoning.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of dualistic thinking operates along similar lines, asking us to privilege spatial models in which concepts cluster in multiple and unpredictable ways "beside" one another rather than a system in which contradiction would imply a radical anti-foundationalism: "*Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who's shared a bed with siblings."<sup>34</sup> The principle of noncontradiction is, for Sedgwick, an oversimplification when it comes to thinking about the living textures of thinking, affect, or erotic experience, in which power dynamics are often much more complicated than a simple antagonism of the dominant and

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<sup>33</sup> For a useful survey of early critical responses to this scene, see Yeazell, "More True than Real." Yeazell suggests that far from being an awkward and unrealistic supernatural plot device, the scene of telepathy is "true to the internally consistent laws" by which the world of the novel functions: "Like all romantic literature," Yeazell argues, "*Jane Eyre* is part dream, but this dream has integrity, coherence, and a logic of its own. Its truth is the truth of the psyche" (128).

<sup>34</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8; original emphasis.

the submissive. But beyond its critique of the dualistic language of logic, Sedgwick's argument also offers us useful ways to think about performativity as a dimension of language not bound by the rule of noncontradiction. The performative is, after all, supposed to be a productive, action-oriented kind of language: it "constructs or affects reality rather than merely describing it."<sup>35</sup>

And yet in reading some of Brontë's complex scenes of performative utterance, and in theorizing the kind of moral thinking they accomplish or aim to accomplish, I want to put pressure on Sedgwick's somewhat overhasty opposition of performative language to the "linear logics" it is supposed not to be beholden to. What happens when performative utterance is used as part of a practice of moral accounting, in a dialogue of ethical communication and persuasion?

In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester imagines marriage to Jane as a route to blissful isolation in a set of images that resonates with the radical anti-sociality of Catherine Earnshaw's moral community of two. But at the same time, Rochester stops short of the kind of pure contradiction that underwrites Catherine's appeal or the stalwart individualism that characterizes Jane's and Lucy Snowe's differently contradictory ideals of the romantic fusion of souls and bodies. There is, of course, the famous image of the invisible "cord of communion" that Rochester feels attaching him to Jane, which he threatens may be "snapped" by too much distance (291), as well as Rochester teasing Jane that "'once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I'll just—figuratively speaking—attach you to a chain like this' (touching his watchguard). 'Yes, bonny wee thing, I'll wear you in my bosom'" (312). Later, in *Villette*, Brontë will rework this image in Lucy's idea that Ginevra Fanshawe's magnetic hold over Graham Bretton is like "an electric chord of sympathy between them, a fine chain of mutual understanding, sustaining union through a separation of hundreds of leagues" (175). Despite Lucy's consistent conviction of Ginevra's

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 5.

vapidity—Lucy has earlier said that “her liking and disliking, her love and hate, were mere cobweb and gossamer” (93)—she takes this model of distant communion to heart as an ideal: “Ginevra gradually became with me,” Lucy says, “a sort of heroine” (175).

Rochester’s images of cords and chains are, of course, far more jealously possessive than Lucy Snowe’s, and in order to allay the anxiety roiling underneath these images of possessive love—the anxiety that Jane might escape from him into the wide world—Rochester elaborates a fantasy in which they’ll live as a married couple on the moon. This is the story he uses to explain the engagement to his ward Adèle: “I am to take mademoiselle with me to the moon, and there I shall seek a cave in one of the white valleys among the vulcano-tops, and mademoiselle shall live there with me, and only me” (308). Adèle is skeptical, and insists, “But you can’t get her there; there is no road to the moon: it is all air; and neither you nor she can fly,” to which Rochester responds with a tall tale in which he meets a fairy in the woods who promises to fly him to the moon if only he puts a magical golden ring on the fourth finger of her left hand (308). There is, indeed, no road to the moon; Adèle penetrates to the heart of the matter by insisting on the impossibility of getting away from the world, even in a story: it is all air. And Rochester dismisses her argument with an appeal to the performative power of the marriage ceremony that elevates it to a kind of magic capable of bridging the impassable gap from *here* to *there*, earth to moon, social to anti-social. The basic contradiction here is in the idea that a social and legal institution might itself effect one’s release from the constraints of social and legal norms. If Catherine Earnshaw insists upon the “passionate perversity” of pure desire and its claim to ethical relevance even outside the bond of marriage, then Rochester imagines ways of elaborating the same kind of anti-social moral universe of two by experimenting with marriage, bending it to his will. This marriage is, after all, an illegal, bigamous one, and yet Rochester

believes that its validity can or should arise out of mutual love rather than being dictated by law. At least on the moon.

Although Rochester's allegory of marriage refers to the material symbols of the wedding vows (the ring and its placement on a particular finger) rather than to their enunciation, many of his earlier conversations with Jane exemplify the linguistic and dialogic dimensions of performativity, and in fact test the limitations of the power of the performative utterance to legislate ethical norms or to create contingent exceptions to preexisting moral rules. In their first extended private conversation, Jane responds to Rochester's allusions to his moral failings and painful memories by insisting on an attitude of earnest moral perfectionism: "you said you were not as good as you should like to be, and that you regretted your own imperfection; ... if from this day you began with resolution to correct your thoughts and actions, you would in a few years have laid up a new and stainless store of recollections, to which you might revert with pleasure" (161). Rochester responds with what seems a more liberated, if also a more radically anti-social, solution effected through a simple performative utterance: "I don't doubt myself; I know what my aim is, what my motives are; and at this moment I pass a law, unalterable as that of the Medes and Persians, that both are right. ... unheard-of combinations of circumstances demand unheard-of rules" (161). The performative is, for Rochester, a mechanism with which to deal with the sheer unpredictability about the future that so worries Jane as a student at Lowood confronting the reality of death. It seems to him that moral thinking must be idiosyncratic, performative, and flexible if it is to accommodate this kind of unpredictability.

Jane is more cautious, however, and her response to Rochester's legalistic performative is to modify it into a kind of supplication. "That sounds a dangerous maxim, sir," she says; "because one can see at once that it is liable to abuse. ... The human and fallible should not



arrogate a power with which the divine and perfect alone can safely be entrusted. . . . That of saying of any strange, unsanctioned line of action, ‘Let it be right’” (161-2). Rochester teases Jane by invoking the apparently charm-like power of the performative utterance to effect its end simply by being spoken: “Let it be right,” he responds, “the very words: you have pronounced them” (162). Jane corrects herself: “‘*May* it be right then,’ I said, . . . sensible that the character of my interlocutor was beyond my penetration; at least, beyond my present reach; and feeling the uncertainty, the vague sense of insecurity, which accompanies a conviction of ignorance” (162). If Jane likes to play at the verge in her teasing provocations of Rochester, then he ignores the verge altogether and positions himself “beyond . . . penetration.” But of course Rochester’s “character” is only beyond Jane’s “present reach,” and her sense of “uncertainty,” “insecurity,” “ignorance” help us to see that her response is not moralizing, but merely hesitant and reflective. “*May* it be right” is at once a refusal to “arrogate” an authority that one is unequipped to wield—a kind of humble prayer directed toward a transcendent moral authority, whether God or simply the social world—and at the same time retains the idea that moral norms are precisely *not* transcendent and stable. That they are subject to change Rochester and Jane agree, but their disagreement arises out of the questions that arise from this changeability of norms: changed by whom? and from where? Both characters are aware that moral certainty involves the individual in a contradiction unless one is willing to abstract oneself entirely, for example into a position of divine impartiality—and both experiment with ways of confronting that contradiction, jockeying for different kinds of moral authority in limited versions of self-transcendence.

The self-centeredness and anti-sociability of Rochester’s claim to authority is flagrant; but of course, we might also understand Jane’s “uncertainty,” “insecurity,” and “ignorance” as defining characteristics of the first-person narrator confronting the limitations of her knowledge.

Jane's inability to penetrate Rochester's character represents precisely her non-omniscience in contrast to the third-person narrator who would be able to enter into the complex motivations behind Rochester's strange moral attitude. But more importantly, Jane's discomfort does not spur her on to techniques of more forceful interrogation, but rather to a kind of religious tribute to an imagined omniscience whose authority she is loath to usurp. She utters a prayer that we can read as being directed either at God (may Rochester's "law" be right, pending divine approval) or at an omniscient narrator (may Rochester's law be right, pending the full exploration of his consciousness and/or the end of this novel). While Audrey Jaffe has argued that first-person narrators typically situate themselves "in epistemologically superior positions with regard to other characters" and thereby "reveal a desire for superior knowledge and power similar to that which an omniscient narrator possesses in relation to characters," moments like this one, in which performative power rather than matters of fact are in question, complicate Jaffe's picture.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Jane-as-narrator knows a great deal about Rochester's motivations that she chooses not to disclose in the interest both of psychological realism and of narrative suspense.

That questions about narrative omniscience are at heart epistemological questions has often been taken for granted; but it is clear that one of the uses of performative utterance as a technique of narration (and especially of first-person narration) is to upset the centrality of knowledge and omniscience in our conception of the potential sources of a narrator's power, and thereby to destabilize the perspective from which ethical claims could be tested against logical norms of practical reason and impartial detachment. We might then understand characters as beholden not to the knowledge of a narrator, but only to the knowledge that they have at hand, a

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<sup>36</sup> Jaffe, *Vanishing Points*, 19. For other arguments that problematize the relationship between first-person narration and the concept of narrative omniscience, see Culler, "Omniscience"; and Royle, "The 'Telepathy Effect.'"

problem that becomes especially fraught when, as in the case of *Jane Eyre*, narrator and character can be the same person separated only by time and hindsight. Rochester's fantasy is one of ethical omnipotence rather than narrative omniscience, while Jane's supplicating performative expresses a desire for neither of these. Rather, her "*May it be right*" seems to capture the way in which ethical thinking depends upon a kind of creativity in trying to make one's immediate social world fit one's idiosyncratic desires and exceptional circumstances, rather than making one's desires fit a static and universal set of moral rules. Rochester is accustomed to ruling by fiat: upon first meeting Jane, he says, "Excuse my tone of command: I am used to say, 'Do this,' and it is done" (145). Jane, on the other hand, insists upon a negotiation between desire, with its limited intelligibility but insistent urging, and ethical accountability, which may be more flexible in response to desire than one would at first imagine.

For Rochester, in other words, the answer to all of these questions tends to be simple: norms should be determined by him, and from his perspective. On the other hand, his protracted and teasing marriage proposal to Jane incorporates instances of performative speech—"I summon you as my wife" (293); "I entreat you to accept me as my husband"—while combining them with a complex tension between individual feeling and the force of moral norms. Rochester murmurs to himself, "It will atone—it will atone. . . . Is there not love in my heart and constancy in my resolves? It will expiate at God's tribunal. I know my Maker sanctions what I do. For the world's judgment—I wash my hand's thereof" (295). Rochester seems to have responded to Jane's "*May it be right*." Here, we see a moral reasoning that refers hopefully to a future time—"it *will* atone"; "it *will* expiate"—and to a divine authority higher than the human law against bigamy. Following the engagement, of course, we see Rochester try to effect a balance between

the everyday life of a married couple and his need to get outside of earthly moral obligations in his fantasy of love on the moon.

All of these scenes in which performative speech combines with moral thinking and intimate dialogue present themselves as partial solutions to the problem of radical uncertainty about the future and about the nature of change, and a related uncertainty about the self-evident or “third-personal” grounds of moral reasoning. It is terrifying to totter on the edge of the present, there is no road to the moon; and often we’re left to our own devices in identifying the right course of action, unable to square our own peculiar circumstances with the rigidity of the law. Sedgwick’s spatial model asks us to consider the “periperformative” utterance that merely refers to a performative, and which can be “the site of powerful energies that often warp, transform, and displace, if they do not overthrow the supposed authorizing centrality of that same performative.”<sup>37</sup> But while Sedgwick’s prefix can complicate the self-sufficiency of the performative’s social authority, Stanley Cavell’s concept of “passionate utterance” asks us to consider with greater specificity the ways in which the affective and erotic dimensions of communication are excluded from consideration by an exclusive focus on performativity in the philosophy of ordinary language. Cavell distinguishes the passionate utterance from the performative by suggesting that “a performative utterance is an offer of participation in the order of the law” while “passionate utterance is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, if the philosophical questions about language often limit themselves to “what we should or ought to say” or “what we may and do say,” then an account of passionate utterance would be equally rigorous in thinking about the social efficacy of “what we must and

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<sup>37</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 75.

<sup>38</sup> Cavell, “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” 185.

dare not say, or have it at heart to say, or are too confused or too tame or wild or terrorized to say or to think to say.”<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, this is messy. These are, after all, the “disorders of desire.” On the other hand, Cavell’s argument expands our understanding of what kinds of experiences can claim a position in the realm of the ethical and the intelligible; if we don’t take passionate utterance seriously as a meaningful kind of communication, then “we are stopped short in the obligation to make our desires, hence our actions, intelligible (and to ourselves) and hampered in our demand and right to be found intelligible in those desires and actions, to ask residence in the shared realm of reason.”<sup>40</sup>

Cavell’s argument itself plays upon a set of contradictions in order to emphasize the opacity of passionate utterance, which, in its association with disorder and affective response, seems antithetical to the values of intelligibility and reason. One way out of the contradiction between the first-personal and third-personal imperatives of ethical thinking, in other words, is simply to grant that the contradiction exists, but to insist that contradiction might be a structure rather than a dissolution of structure. More specifically, these two dimensions of ethical thinking might come together productively in the context of what Cavell calls “passionate exchange,” a kind of conversation in which “there is no final word, no uptake or turndown, until a line is drawn, a withdrawal is effected, perhaps in turn to be revoked.”<sup>41</sup> In such a scene, the imagined third-personal view of moral omniscience recedes in order to make way for a dynamic, intimate, and most importantly open-ended power-play. Cavell’s theory of passionate utterance asks us, in other words, to reconsider what a “shared realm of reason” might look like. Rather than being

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 183.

structured by and beholden to an abstract, ordered set of logical norms, its goal of making our lives “intelligible” might require it to comprehend other dimensions of psychic life such as the idiosyncratic imperatives of erotic desire. It might also be a realm that changes shape, texture, and composition in response to demands for intimate recognition, not only in response to reasonable consensus. Indeed, even the clumsiest and most accidental of our expressions of desire or repulsion make us accountable in ways we do not intend. When Jane implies that she finds Rochester ugly, for example, she attempts to absolve herself: “it was only a blunder,” she tells him. “Just so: I think so,” he replies: “and you shall be answerable for it” (154).

## 5. Venturing Out, Going Beyond

In *Villette*, Brontë imagines a very different solution to the problem of self-effacement than those we find in *Sartor Resartus* or *Jane Eyre*, despite the fact that all of these texts are characterized by the Protestant religious commitment to inwardness and earnest self-examination. The difference lies in the fact that in her last novel Brontë positions affective life, largely defined in *Villette* as the life of erotic desire, not as a limitation to such a practice, but rather as the impetus for this kind of self-examination. It’s not that Lucy Snowe starts out as overly invested in reason and ends with sexual liberation—it’s that she learns to trade the punishing, externalized, even highly allegorized figure of reason for the dynamic, open-ended, human practice of “intellect.” And so while *Villette* stands in stark contrast to *Jane Eyre* in its narrator’s apparent achievement of the kind of detached rationality that would consider the idiosyncrasy of erotic life an irrelevance to ethical thinking, it also dramatizes the kind of social isolation required by such a position of total self-effacement.

Critics have had much to say about the complexity of Lucy Snowe's position as a narrator. On the one hand she seems to ape narrative omniscience: she is detached, socially withdrawn, self-effacing to the point of virtual invisibility, and has an interest in the cool and secretive practices of surveillance exemplified by the character of Mme. Beck. On the other hand, her evasions, withholdings, and fugue states mark her out as the apotheosis of the unreliable and limited first-person narrator. And no matter what her pretensions to detachment, she is, after all, a first-person narrator rather than an omniscient one. Amanda Anderson insists that we should be sensitive to this "rejection of omniscience," in order to understand the ways in which Brontë "uses the first-person narration of Lucy Snowe to stage a reflective engagement with questions of detachment."<sup>42</sup> Like Anderson, Nicholas Dames emphasizes the novel's tenuous balancing of the systematizing and scientific scrutiny of the "phrenological gaze" with the erotic energy implied by that very scrutiny: "a new kind of eros," he suggests, "one that is crucially not founded on childhood cathexes but rather on an adult process of reading, counter-reading, attribution, and denial."<sup>43</sup> If both of these critics show us *Villette*'s rich middle-ground between rational abstraction and situated engagement, then John Kucich complicates matters by arguing that self-negation is not a tactic of omniscient detachment in *Villette*, but rather that Brontë's "eroticizing of repressive solitude is most fully expressed in the heightened inwardness of her reticent protagonist-narrators."<sup>44</sup> For Kucich, the first-personal becomes all-encompassing as Lucy Snowe's inwardness eroticizes interiority and expands it. But importantly, from here Kucich argues that Lucy and Brontë's other protagonists turn this kind of "self-enclosure" into a

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<sup>42</sup> Anderson, *Powers of Distance*, 53n25; 48.

<sup>43</sup> Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 120.

<sup>44</sup> Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction*, 77.

form of power, “and formulate it as a bulwark of the self against others rather than as a means either of interpersonal unity or of complete self-negation.”<sup>45</sup> Despite their different approaches and methodologies, however, Anderson, Dames, and Kucich share the conviction that in *Villette*, Brontë purposefully resists easy oppositions of first-personal and third-personal perspectives; abstraction and engagement; reason and affect; or self-effacement and erotic experience.

Broadly speaking, then, I agree with these assessments of *Villette* and its exceedingly complicated critique of such oppositions. But more specifically, these arguments share a submerged line of thinking that is worth teasing out, in their different ways of implying that the idiosyncrasy of erotic life might have some necessary relationship to what Cavell would call the “shared realm of reason.” What we still want to determine is what precisely this relationship looks like. For Kucich it is an antagonistic relationship—Brontëan desire is essentially “solipsistic” on his view—and my reading will challenge this presumption.<sup>46</sup> For Dames, on the other hand, the erotic potential of phrenological reading arises out of the fact that “Lucy and M. Paul share the phrenological language and can therefore reach a position of relative parity.”<sup>47</sup> Anderson emphasizes Lucy’s balancing of idiosyncrasy—“a detachment she can call her own”—with her interest in the socially intelligible models of detachment presented by characters such as Mrs. Bretton (“maternal impersonality”) or Mme. Beck (“institutional and familial surveillance”).<sup>48</sup> Although I group myself with Dames and Anderson here in insisting upon the importance of shared vocabularies and social intelligibility to erotic life, I also argue that for

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>47</sup> Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 119.

<sup>48</sup> Anderson, *Powers of Distance*, 47.



Brontë desire is often the impetus for, rather than an epiphenomenon of, this kind of community-building. While Dames suggests that Brontë elaborates a “new kind of eros,” I wonder whether we might also think of her as elaborating new kinds of practices for making eros socially viable or intelligible—practices that draw upon “first-personal” inwardness rather than “third-personal” detachment, self-negation, or abstraction.

*Villette* provides plentiful descriptions of Lucy Snowe as a cool and detached observer of the world around her. Early on in the novel, Lucy describes with arch disdain the young Paulina Home’s emotional engagement in watching passers-by through the window: “These sudden, dangerous natures—*sensitive* as they are called—offer many a curious spectacle to those whom a cooler temperament has secured from participation in their angular vagaries” (16). When she arrives in London she describes her “homeless, anchorless, unsupported mind” (57). And as she describes her early days at Mme. Beck’s *pensionnat*, she emphasizes the purposeful self-splitting that is required to maintain such a position of social withdrawal and invisibility: “I seemed to hold two lives—the life of thought, and that of reality; and, provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency of the strange necromantic joys of fancy, the privileges of the latter might remain limited to daily bread, hourly work, and a roof of shelter” (85). Here we see that Lucy’s status as a semi-omniscient observer of other people is actually far from being limited to direct observation. While Lucy often secretes herself in shadows and dark corners in order to observe unseen, such withdrawal can allow her to indulge those “strange necromantic joys of fancy” rather than scrutinizing the real and living world around her: “While wandering in solitude,” she tells us, “I would sometimes picture the present probable position of others, my acquaintance” (175).

Lucy's practices of withdrawal, then, take two different forms that sometimes overlap: literal moments of social and spatial withdrawal that are aligned with the exercise of visual scrutiny, and also moments of withdrawal into the interior self that are aligned with the exercise of imagination and rigorous self-examination. Although it often seems as if Lucy's powers of scrutiny are unrealistically omniscient, she is actually quick to admit their limitations. Despite her claim that Graham Bretton "laid himself open to my observation" (107), Lucy goes on to make an important qualification as she puzzles over his attachment to Mme. Beck's establishment: "For what *he* waited I do not know, nor for what he watched; but the peculiarity of his manner, his expectant, vigilant, absorbed, eager look, never wore off: it rather intensified. He had never been quite within the compass of my penetration, and I think he ranged farther and farther beyond it" (112-13). Lucy does not make confident judgments based on her observations of his behavior; rather, her position of invisibility makes her "free to puzzle" and "wonder" about them. Imagination picks up for Lucy where the powers of observation and "penetration" meet their limitations.

In other words, a focus on Lucy's detachment calls attention to the novel's preoccupation with visuality, scrutiny, and empirical data-collection, but recognizing the limitations of that detachment points us to the interior psychic life that Lucy often exalts. It's easy to see Lucy's tendency to retreat into inwardness as the most deeply anti-social feature of her character, closely linked to her tendency toward self-seclusion and harsh asceticism. Early on in her time at Mme. Beck's *pensionnat*, for example, Lucy considers the possibility of supervising a class in light of her unease with social interaction:

It seemed to me a great thing to be without heavy anxiety, and relieved from intimate trial; the negation of severe suffering was the nearest approach to happiness I expected to know. Besides, I seemed to hold two lives—the life of thought, and that of reality; and, provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency of the strange necromantic joys of

fancy, the privileges of the latter might remain limited to daily bread, hourly work, and a roof of shelter. (85)

Lucy figures “the life of thought” as a place of retreat from the “trial” that intimate social exchange represents to her. But the life of thought itself seems to be a place of virtual death, fueled by “necromantic joys” rather than living (and lived) experiences, at best cancelling out pain rather than cultivating pleasure. Here we see Lucy’s interior life as part of an ideal of eremitic, melancholic, repressive self-discipline, but we also see a hint that this inwardness could develop from a tactic of phobic and anti-social avoidance into a source of pleasure. In other words, there’s a difference between an unnoticed withdrawal—simply choosing to be alone, not being missed by anyone—and a positive or tactical refusal, in which one refuses the company of someone who might care. Indeed, later on, once Lucy has become somewhat accustomed to the intense and extended social interaction required of her as a teacher, we see her begin to represent the “life of thought” in a much different register: she describes a day spent wandering alone in the garden, “finding warmth in the sun, shelter among the trees, and a sort of companionship in my own thoughts. I well remember that I exchanged but two sentences that day with any living being: not that I felt solitary; I was glad to be quiet” (145). While it’s tempting to condescend to Lucy’s declarations of pleasure in solitude as mere defense mechanisms against acknowledging her depressive character, it seems more reasonable and productive to pay attention to the nuanced way in which her descriptions of solitude and of inwardness change in response to the “intimate trial” that she undergoes at Mme. Beck’s. In going beyond herself, Lucy also learns to be a companion to herself, and a pleasure to herself. We can’t help but hear echoes of Catherine Earnshaw and her description of the life of the mind: “I *am* Heathcliff—he’s always, always in my mind—not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself.”

When Lucy does represent her “life of thought” directly, it’s often as an allegorized duel between painfully divided aspects of the self rather than as productive intellectual reflection, but here too we should pay attention to these scenes as providing an important barometer of personal development. One of the most extended and most harrowing of these scenes arises out of Lucy’s growing attraction to Graham Bretton, and her intense desire that he write to her frequently. Allegorical “Reason” steps in to dampen these hopes and to exhort Lucy to reject any intimate relationship with Graham: “He may write once,” warns Reason; “So kind is his nature, it may stimulate him for once to make the effort. But it *cannot* be continued—it *may* not be repeated. ... [G]rant no expansion to feeling—give holiday to no single faculty: dally with no friendly exchange: foster no genial intercommunion” (255). But Lucy does not understand herself as freely submitting to the dictates of Reason: indeed, this allegorical character is decidedly monstrous and violently coercive: she is a “hag,” “vindictive as a devil,” and “envenomed as a step-mother”; she commands “the obedience of fear, not of love” and “she could not rest unless I were altogether crushed, cowed, broken-in, and broken-down”; Lucy is the victim of Reason’s “ill-usage: her stint, her chill, her barren board, her icy bed, her savage, ceaseless blows” (255-6). Reason’s warm and loving opponent in this scene is “Feeling,” “that kinder Power who,” Lucy tells us, “holds my secret and sworn allegiance. ... A spirit, softer and better than Human Reason, has descended with quiet flight to the waste—bringing all round her a sphere of air borrowed of eternal summer. ... My hunger has this good angel appeased with food, sweet and strange” (256). Of course, the effect of the allegory is to spectralize and externalize what should be a deeply interior psychological conflict; these are not voices in Lucy’s own head as much as visitors who descend from another world to war for Lucy’s “sworn allegiance.”

There's a set of complicated paradoxes here. Lucy represents reason as a distant and inscrutable agent of coercive power, which demands realism and asceticism in place of the eroticized pleasures of desire, longing, and imagination. But although reason seems to descend from without, it demands that Lucy retreat to the psychic realm within—the very interior realm that Lucy so often identifies with escape from reality and the cultivation of fantasy. At the same time, Lucy often understands abstraction—the limited projection of the self beyond the self—as a risky, eroticized pleasure prohibited by reason. Lucy tells us that stormy weather “woke the being I was always lulling, and stirred up a craving I could not satisfy. . . . I did long, achingly, . . . for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards” (121). And yet this self-transcendence, the movement out of the self, “upwards and onwards,” is always squelched, and the description of that squelching is one of Brontë's most gruesome images:

This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did, figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core. (121)

The extended simile turns on that obtrusive and redundant modifier, “figuratively.” Of course figuratively—how else? In other words, the excessive marking of this metaphor deflates its brutality. Although the attempt to abstract oneself into a social world is like the pain of twisting that impaled head on its stake, this is not literally a case of pain mortifying pleasure. It's a case of being nailed in place, stuck within one's head—within that brain that sits between those bleeding temples—and therefore grotesquely immobilized.

In short, Lucy upsets our expectations about the contradiction of abstraction and embodiment: it's reason that crushes and cows us; and it's desire that abstracts us. Reason keeps the self inside the self; desire carries the self beyond the self, not in the body touching another

body, but in a limited form of self-abstraction. When M. Paul enlists Lucy to perform in the theatrical at Mme. Beck's fete, she discovers "a keen relish for dramatic expression" only to chastise herself that this kind of thrill is inappropriate for "a mere looker-on at life" (156). At the ball that follows the theatrical, Lucy re-emphasizes the double-movement of retreat in which withdrawal from the crowd aligns with withdrawal into the self: "it was time I retired into myself and my ordinary life. . . . Withdrawing to a quiet nook, whence unobserved I could observe—the ball, its splendours and its pleasures passed before me as a spectacle" (156). Once again, Lucy's escape into a dark corner is about both the self-negation of invisibility and spectatorship, and the self-aggrandizement suggested by the idea of retiring "into" oneself.

But Lucy's retirement is fleeting. Full of the excitement of her dramatic performance, she is soon entering into the fray of conversation: "For the second time that night I was going beyond myself—venturing out of what I looked on as my natural habits—speaking in an unpremeditated, impulsive strain, which startled me strangely when I halted to reflect" (167). Lucy's discovery of the pleasure of "going beyond" herself in intimate social exchange, and the painful difficulty of sustaining this deviation from her "natural habits," foreshadows the mental breakdown that concludes the novel's first volume. Lucy, left nearly alone for the long summer vacation, devolves into a feverish fugue state that ends with her confession in a Catholic church, described once again in terms of a particular kind of self-abstraction: "the mere relief of communication in an ear which was human and sentient, yet consecrated—the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel whence it could not again be diffused—had done me good" (179). Here Lucy finds a more nuanced image for the pleasure of communication—not merely a "going beyond" that threatens to dissolve the self, but a controlled and directed extension of the self toward and into another. After her breakdown, as she awakens

in the home of the Brettons, she describes the experience by which her soul “re-entered her prison with pain, with reluctance, with a moan and a long shiver. The divorced mates, Spirit and Substance, were hard to re-unite: they greeted each other, not in an embrace, but in a racking sort of struggle” (185). The metaphor of divorce and reconciliation signals the way in which all of these experiments in intimacy and solitude bear upon the development of this novel’s marriage plot, which at this point begins to dominate: the second volume focuses on Lucy’s unrequited attraction to Graham Bretton, and the third volume narrates her courtship with M. Paul.

These volumes also include an account of Lucy’s development of complex ideas about art and theater—first in her account of a visit to the art museum and then in her passionate appraisal of the actress Vashti—and these episodes inform Lucy’s negotiation of the complex entanglements of introspection with sociability, and materiality with abstraction. At the art museum, left alone to ponder the paintings, Lucy describes yet another allegorized “misunderstanding and consequent struggle” between “Will” and “Power”: “The former faculty exacted approbation of that which it was considered orthodox to admire; the latter groaned forth its utter inability to pay the tax; it was then self-sneered at, spurred up, goaded on to refine its taste, and whet its zest. The more it was chidden, however, the more it wouldn’t praise” (222). Will mimics Reason, prodding and mocking Lucy coercively into submission to social consensus. But if that previous skirmish of Reason and Feeling seemed like an externalizing projection of interiority, this one ends differently, with a relaxation into a kind of passive and unreflective pleasure in lived experience: “Discovering gradually that a wonderful sense of fatigue resulted from these conscientious efforts,” Lucy continues, “I began to reflect whether I might not dispense with that great labour, and concluded eventually that I might, and so sank supine into a luxury of calm before ninety-nine out of the hundred of the exhibited frames”

(222). No more shuttling back and forth between contradictory perspectives, or between the self and the not-myself; Lucy arrives at a practice of easy companionability with her own thoughts.

The devilish magic of Vashti's performance, on the other hand, lies in its aggressive and explosive holding together of the body and the social self. Later in the art museum scene, Lucy seems to search for a middle-ground between the set of paintings depicting the ascetic "vie d'une femme" and the over-sexed fleshiness of the "Cleopatra." The former depict women "grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with! insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities!" (226). No one, of course, could "live with" these women, just as no one can live with the reclusive, withdrawn, ascetic Lucy. They barely exist, or at best move in burglarish, ghostly stealth. But at the same time, these women are only "as bad in their way" as the "gipsy-giantess" Cleopatra (226), with her "wealth of muscle" and "affluence of flesh" is in hers (223). Vashti seems designed to provide an alternative, but one that so revels in the contradictory combination of muscle and abstraction that her example is impossible to process:

To her, what hurts becomes immediately embodied: she looks on it as a thing that can be attacked, worried down, torn in shreds. Scarcely a substance herself, she grapples to conflict with abstractions. . . . The strong magnetism of genius drew my heart out of its wonted orbit; the sunflower turned from the south to a fierce light, not solar—a rushing, red, cometary light—hot on vision and to sensation. (287)

Again Lucy is pulled out of herself, and out of the habitude of her "wonted orbit," by an intimate and erotic "magnetism." But what's even more pertinent here is the way in which Lucy's description of Vashti combines sensuality ("embodied," "thing," "torn in shreds," "grapples," "heart," "hot") and immateriality ("what hurts," "scarcely a substance," "abstractions," "light"). Vashti represents an impossibly distant spin out of orbit, toward a "cometary" light, and yet this rushing expansion somehow increases the heat on Lucy's "vision" and "sensation." The whirling



and dizzying energy of the Vashti scene arises out of this fever-pitch litany of contradiction, which so densely exemplifies the painful feeling simply of existing with others, of going tentatively beyond oneself without disappearing into thin air.

And yet as we've already seen in limited ways, Brontë's marriage plots tend not toward abstract accession to a broad social world, but rather toward a local and intimate kind of self-abstraction. Even as her love for M. Paul is acknowledged, Lucy offers the caveat, "I knew what I was for *him*; and what I might be for the rest of the world, I ceased painfully to care" (533). Of course, as always, "painfully," although the ambiguous placement of the adverb suggests that either the caring or the ceasing might have been the painful thing, and that Lucy only trades the excruciating effort of social belonging for the excruciating effort of giving up that belonging in favor of something smaller. This is after all a purposeful self-containment within the kind of community-of-two that so fascinates both Emily and Charlotte Brontë, even while it's still an effacement of the self. Lucy knows what she is—"for *him*," which implies both that Lucy's self-examination is a prerequisite for romantic fulfillment (I am doing this for you), and also that her self-knowledge is ultimately routed *through* him (I know what you want from me). Lucy's romantic plot doesn't feature the sheer volume of scintillating and barbed conversation that we see in Jane Eyre's relationship with Rochester, or even in her debates with St. John Rivers—M. Paul learns about Lucy largely through his surreptitious searches through her desk, and when he tries to persuade her to convert to Catholicism, she is pointed about her clumsiness at debate: "He pleaded, he argued. *I* could not argue—a fortunate incapacity; it needed but triumphant, logical opposition to effect all the director wished to be effected; but I could talk in my own way—the way M. Paul was used to—and of which he could follow the meanderings and fill the hiatus, and pardon the strange stammering, strange to him no longer" (463). Lucy's achievement

of intelligibility is intimate, and also limited—she has not learned to reason logically and triumphantly about her religious investments, her idiosyncrasies, her desires, and yet she has learned how to do it “for *him*.” This is a kind of communication that’s as much about silence as it is about speech—M. Paul understands Lucy partly because he can “fill the hiatus” in her meandering account of herself, which neatly echoes the mysterious hiatuses of *Villette* itself.

And speech, moreover, isn’t equipped for making love and desire intelligible: even as Lucy confesses her love to M. Paul, stammering and incoherent, she tells us, “In such inadequate language my feelings struggled for expression: they could not get it; speech, brittle and unmalleable, and cold as ice, dissolved or shivered in the effort” (537). In other words, even at the supposed culmination of Lucy’s transition into adulthood, we hear an echo of Jane Eyre’s lament at the confusions of childhood as she tries to tell the doctor what has caused her fit in the red room at Gateshead: “Children can feel, but they cannot analyse their feelings; and if the analysis is partially effected in thought, they know not how to express the result of the process in words. Fearful, however, of losing this first and only opportunity of relieving my grief by imparting it, I, after a disturbed pause, contrived to frame a meagre, though, as far as it went, true response” (29). It seems that this is not merely a childhood affliction, but a lifelong struggle that one must learn to accommodate. To go beyond oneself and yet not to lose oneself along the way; to impart one’s griefs, pains, desires to another; to analyze what resists analysis; “to express the result of the process in words,” in “speech, brittle and unmalleable”; to be oneself and another, or more accurately to be oneself *for* another: what more challenging set of contradictions could one imagine negotiating?<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See also Boone, *Libidinal Currents*. Boone’s argument is similar to mine in his suggestion that part of the goal of *Villette*’s experimental narrative form and its frequent invocation of dreams, fugues, and fantasies, is “to convert ... psychosexual currents into narratable story” (35). But because Boone wants to

## 6. This is Solid

The poet and classicist Anne Carson, reading a lyric by Sappho about a love triangle, offers a brief analysis of jealousy and its function as a literary figure:

The word comes from ancient Greek *zelos* meaning ‘zeal’ or ‘hot pursuit.’ A jealous lover covets a certain location at the centre of her beloved’s affection only to find it occupied by someone else. If jealousy were a dance it would be a pattern of placement and displacement. Its emotional focus is unstable. Jealousy is a dance in which everyone moves.<sup>50</sup>

Carson’s suggestive reading indicates the complex interplay of materiality and immateriality at work in the experience of jealousy. On the one hand, it is about covetousness, location, occupation, the choreographed physical movement of a dance. On the other hand, it is about the blurring of focus, affect, and displacement. Even on a less poetic reading than Carson’s, “jealousy” carries two related but distinct primary meanings: first, the usual erotic use of the word, which describes “fear of being supplanted in the affection ... of a beloved person”; and second, the use of jealousy to describe “vigilance in guarding a possession from loss or damage.”<sup>51</sup> Both senses define emotional states attached to particular persons and things, but one corresponds to an intersubjective, erotic relationship in which one jockey for an abstract kind of erotic authority and claims ownership at a distance, while the other corresponds to a relationship between a person and a material possession.

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position *Villette* as “protomodernist” in its representation of sexuality, he amplifies his argument with the claim that the novel aims for “a radical reenvisioning of subjectivity that ... is as radically decentered, as unmoored from the commonplaces of a stable or coherent identity, as is the narrative form itself” (37). My argument, on the other hand, presupposes that Brontë’s concern with making desire socially intelligible is eminently Victorian, and that it demonstrates a deep investment in concepts like sociability, citizenship, and religious and ethical self-examination.

<sup>50</sup> Anne Carson, *Decreation*, 160.

<sup>51</sup> “jealousy,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

The set of contradictions at play here, between embodiment and abstraction, are by now familiar to us as partly determining Brontë's way of representing what happens when the individual tries to understand herself as social, or to abstract herself into what we would call a "social context." But if I've been suggesting all along that Brontë replaces the ideal of abstract sociability with an ideal of intimate sociability, what makes this new model more workable than the old? Doesn't it also seem that for Brontë even our most intimate relationships replicate the contradiction that structures the enterprise of social intelligibility, requiring us to inhabit that fraught conjunction between "I" and "not-I"? Indeed, the contradiction may look different as we narrow the scale of representation, but it remains at work. As I insisted at the outset, Brontë doesn't kid herself that the psychic experiences of contradiction that come with self-abstraction can be resolved, but she does seem to insist that there are, roughly put, relatively "bad" or "good" versions of such contradictory experience, and that like anything, abstraction can be limited and controlled. And Brontë dramatizes this limited form of abstraction as a middle ground between the possessive hoarding of jealousy and the self-evacuation of "dissipation."

In her childhood life at Gateshead Hall, Jane Eyre notices Eliza Reed's zeal for finance in a tangential description that both reinforces and further complicates the system of meaning surrounding value and jealous possessiveness in Gateshead Hall. Eliza has a hobby of selling eggs from the chickens she tends, "and hoarding up the money she thus obtained" (36). Eliza has a "turn for traffic," "a marked propensity for saving," and a skill for driving "hard bargains"; and Jane asserts that she "would have sold the hair off her head if she could have made a handsome profit thereby" (36). Eliza's remarkable greed, and her knack for turning things into money, are characterized by a savvy for exchange and inflated pricing, and also by a tendency to hoard and

thereby remove from circulation the profits of her business ventures. “As to her money,” Jane continues,

She first secreted it in odd corners, wrapped in a rag or an old curl-paper; but some of these hoards having been discovered by the house-maid, Eliza, fearful of one day losing her valued treasure, consented to intrust it to her mother, at a usurious rate of interest—fifty or sixty per cent.—which interest she exacted every quarter, keeping her accounts in a little book with anxious accuracy. (36)

Again, the jealousy of Gateshead sets the tone for the novel’s complex twinning of material and abstract concepts of selfhood and erotic attachment. Even Eliza, the consummate hoarder, learns that she can more effectively protect her treasure by expanding it in the abstract credit economy rather than merely secreting the material stuff of it. Of course, Brontë revisits the idea of hoarding in *Villette* with Lucy’s description of the minor character of Zélie St-Pierre (whose name itself gestures to jealousy as “zeal”), and again connects the practice of hoarding with the image of a chicken and her eggs: “In her reigned the love of money for its own sake. . . . She once, as a mark of high favor, took me upstairs, and, opening a secret drawer, showed me a hoard—a mass of coarse, large coin—about fifteen guineas, in five-franc pieces. She loved this hoard as a bird loves its eggs” (139). In Brontë’s fiction, hoarding is motivated by an abiding sense that these eggs might hatch. We can’t help but think of one of the more famous hoarders of Victorian fiction, George Eliot’s Silas Marner, whose attachment to his hoard of coin comes to be replaced by love for an adopted child.

Jane Eyre’s reaction to an absorption of the jealous tendencies of Gateshead is ambivalent, and is itself implicated in the problem of what “individualism” might come to mean in this novel. I mean for the term “individualism” to stand out here as a marker of the kind of contradiction I’ve been circling around—this is above all a concept that combines idiosyncrasy with accountability, and the individual’s unintelligible impulses with the social mechanisms

through which we speak about them. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously problematized the reading of *Jane Eyre* as a novel of feminist individualism by drawing out the ways in which the novel's model of achieved individuality derives from a liberal feminism that itself operates by racialized exclusion: "what is at stake," she argues, "for feminist individualism in the age of imperialism, is precisely the making of human beings, the constitution and 'interpellation' of the subject not only as an individual but as an 'individualist.'"<sup>52</sup> In other words, the ideology of imperialism foists upon feminists a certain model of liberal individualism that may in fact be contradictory to their own interests. Elaine Freedgood has usefully supplemented Spivak's assertion with the argument that "although socially, legally, politically, and economically women were not recognizable individuals throughout most of the nineteenth century, they were still free to subscribe to the ideology of individualism and therefore could be individualists. ... They could aspire ... to a condition that they could not attain."<sup>53</sup> Freedgood gets at the matter-of-factness of the paradoxes or false consciousnesses that ideologies like imperialism, patriarchy, or individualism must contain and enforce, and the way that the mastery or covering-over of these paradoxes at the individual level can come to be understood as a condition for admission into a social world. Sharon Marcus links Brontë's treatment of subjectivity and social abstraction more closely to language itself and to the material practices of writing, publishing, and advertising, and in doing so claims that the alienation that attends such abstraction may be understood as part of a strategy of self-development rather than total self-negation: "When Jane advertises for governess work," Marcus points out, "she alienates her embodied existence into abstractions (printed texts, truncated names) and thus arrogates to herself the normatively

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<sup>52</sup> Spivak, "Three Women's Texts," 244.

<sup>53</sup> Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 44.

masculine conditions of agency in a capitalist political economy, which simultaneously limit and enable agency by subordinating it to the abstract laws of the marketplace.”<sup>54</sup>

It seems that the figure of jealousy, however, requires us to complicate these critical models somewhat. If they describe Brontë’s protagonists as individuals negotiating an entrance into an abstract social world, a focus on jealousy allows us to represent the place where materiality and abstraction meet. The ominous red room at Gateshead Hall, the scene of Jane’s harrowing childhood memory, figures as a vault or safe in ways that echo the novel’s interest in the erotics of hoarding and jealous possessiveness. Part of the room’s eerie effect comes from its being over-stuffed with things that remain inert and unused: “festoons and falls” of drapery; “the piled-up mattresses and pillows of the bed”; the “ample cushioned easy-chair” (17). The room is in fact primarily used for safekeeping: it contains the “secret drawer” in which Mrs. Reed keep “divers parchments, her jewel casket, and a miniature of her deceased husband” (17). The room’s feeling of “dreary consecration” arises both out of its association with the late Mr. Reed’s death, and out of its status as a place for the safe storage of stuff. The red room acts as an emblem of the doubled jealousy of Gateshead; that is, an intense guardedness over material possessions which in turn tempers or obfuscates the threat of loss.

But Jane, as John Reed has pointed out, has no money and no stuff—nothing, in short, to lose. Her response is the development of a fierce individualism that turns in upon the self as its own object of jealous solicitude. This allows Jane a sense of material ownership of something, and at the same time figures herself as an object of value for someone, if not for the Reed family, who see her as at best “a useless thing” (19). The subject-object, owner-owned dualism that prevails at Gateshead means that Jane tends to follow the same script even in keeping jealous

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<sup>54</sup> Marcus, “The Profession of the Author,” 208.

guard over her own person. Upon being sent to the red room as punishment, Jane says, “I resisted all the way: a new thing for me. . . . The fact is, I was a trifle beside myself; or rather *out of* myself, as the French would say” (15). Jane imagines a limited form of abstraction—similar to what Lucy Snowe describes as “going beyond myself”—as a model of self-preservation, and yet at best this resistance positions her as, in Jane’s words, “like a rebel slave” (15). Jane’s devotion to her doll similarly develops from the conviction that “human beings must love something, and, in the dearth of worthier objects of affection, I contrived to find a pleasure in loving and cherishing a faded graven image, shabby as a miniature scarecrow” (35). “Something” stands out as an especially jarring word here, ringing with its denial of the more obvious “*someone*,” and yet this is the first time in which “love,” “affection,” and “pleasure” figure as motivations for the kind of jealous solicitude that has so far in the novel been described only in terms of material wealth. Jane’s doll is, of course, an externalization or material reflection of the self, and Jane’s description of her way of holding the doll close to her will later find an echo in Rochester’s desire to attach Jane to a watchguard and keep her in his pocket and in Brontë’s many scenes of romantic inseparability: “I could not sleep,” she says, “unless it was folded in my night-gown; and when it lay there safe and warm, I was comparatively happy, believing it to be happy likewise” (35).

We see in this instance how the two senses of jealousy—the economic and the erotic—overlap in significant ways, and the way in which Brontë parallels hoarding and inwardness with exchange and desire sets into motion an even broader set of meanings. Jane’s education in material ownership sets up the way in which Jane’s erotic life expresses itself in metaphors of economic value. As she surreptitiously watches Rochester entertain Blanche Ingram at Thornfield, she described her looking as a distorted form of ownership and consumption: “I



looked, and had an acute pleasure at looking—a precious yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirst-perishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless” (202-203). Pleasure, figured here as “precious” and “pure gold,” is worth having even despite the alloy of pain, figured as non-precious steel. Consumption becomes an end in itself rather than the means to the satisfaction of a goal. In other words, the goal is a controlled deferral of desire that allows Jane the sense of control and ownership that Blanche Ingram’s perceived superiority threatens. Jane has learned that pleasure can be prolonged and intensified through distance, and desire held open. Jealousy becomes a way of reconciling the contradictory twist of Jane’s conviction that “I must . . . repeat continually that we are forever sundered—and yet, while I breathe and think, I must love him” (204). Desire registers here as an irrefutable impulse, one that does not respond to the imperatives of reason and realism. Even more importantly, desire may in fact be intensified by this ongoing, tense reverberation against reason—here, in fact, Jane conceives of desire as its own kind of duty: not “I will always love him because I have no control over my desires” but “I *must* love him.”

For Jane, erotic desire structures an alternative model of the abstract social world, this one defined by the intimate energies of desire and love rather than the forms of capitalist exchange or ownership. As far as erotic authority goes, Jane believes she beats out even the aristocratic Blanche. After admitting that the reader might find “much . . . to engender jealousy” in Jane’s witnessing of the flirtation between Blanche and Rochester, she goes on with the caveat, “if a woman in my position could presume to be jealous of a woman in Miss Ingram’s. But I was not jealous: or very rarely; the nature of the pain I suffered could not be explained by that word. Miss Ingram was a mark beneath jealousy: she was too inferior to excite the feeling”

(215). Jane's "or very rarely" betrays the shakiness of her self-assurance, but she eventually upsets our expectations of the kind of "position" that she describes at the outset. The reader can only assume that Jane, with "presume," meekly accepts her inferior class position; but the whirling energy of desire allows an incisive and ironic reversal in which Blanche end up in the abject position. The "social world" of desire is one in which rules, or values, bend.

If jealous desire tends toward a protective solicitude of the self, along with its belongings and its attachments, then dissipation threatens just the opposite. John Reed tragically grows up to be "such a dissipated young man" (108); and when Rochester describes his period of travel after his abandonment of his wife, he says, "I tried dissipation—never debauchery: that I hated, and hate. That was my Indian Messalina's attribute: rooted disgust at it and her restrained me much, even in pleasure. Any enjoyment that bordered on riot seemed to approach me to her and her vices, and I eschewed it" (358). Rochester figures dissipation as a way of "eschewing" the erotic temptations of debauchery, and it is of course significant that the responsible channeling of pleasure is supposed to happen through the spending of money. Dissipation is a form of distraction, which allows one to spend money wastefully without wasting one's self; and yet "dissipation" also carries the sense of a solid material becoming dispersed and thinned. In other words, for Rochester, dissipation is an economic privilege that allows for the experience of pleasure without the shame of bodily pleasure. Dissipation narrates the transition from material to immaterial, and from financially full to financially empty.

In contrast, when Jane Eyre discovers her relation to the Rivers family after coming into her inheritance, she renovates Moor House, and when the Rivers sisters return to see her work, they spend the week, much to St. John's ire, not in "settled employment," but rather in "a sort of merry domestic dissipation" (455). This figure of controlled spending, limited to the intimate

world of domestic attachment and emotional affinity, epitomizes Brontë's careful navigation of the line that divides solidity and abstraction. And it also emblemizes Jane's conviction that only through the giving away of her money can she use it as a tool of intimate sociability, while by keeping all of it she would be forced into the "actual world" that she so resists. Her emotional reaction to the news of the inheritance emphasizes the over-materiality of the burden: "*This is solid: an affair of the actual world, nothing ideal about it: all its associations are solid and sober, and its manifestations are the same. . . . One begins to consider responsibilities, and to ponder business: on a base of steady satisfaction rise certain grave cares, and we contain ourselves, and brood over our bliss with a solemn brow*" (441). "We contain ourselves": for Jane, an excess of wealth only calcifies. It forces one into the heavy and ponderous dealings of capital, those "solid" and "grave" forms that refuse to yield to feeling, desire, pleasure, or attraction. Jane makes the metaphor of over-fullness even more pointed when she observes, "I again felt rather like an individual of but average gastronomical powers sitting down to a feast alone at a table spread with provisions for a hundred" (442). The image is one of grotesque consumption, and of equally grotesque social isolation. When Jane finds out that the Riverses are her cousins, her anxieties are soothed: "This was wealth indeed!—wealth to the heart!—a mine of pure, genial affections. This was a blessing bright, vivid, and exhilarating;—not like the ponderous gift of gold: rich and welcome enough in its way, but sobering from its weight" (444). For Jane, the creation of an intimate and hermetically sealed economy based upon principles of affection, domesticity, and love replaces her entrance into the opaque economy of socially defined wealth.

This is a carefully controlled dissipation that consolidates the connectedness of a family circle, facilitates Jane's newfound intimate social rootedness, and de-materializes the cumbersome social armor that too much money signifies to Jane. She goes on: "I looked at the

blank wall: it seemed a sky thick with ascending stars—every one lit me to a purpose or delight. . . . Now the wealth did not weight on me: now it was not a mere bequest of coin—it was a legacy of life, hope, enjoyment” (445). This dazzling constellation, which leads Jane in many directions and to many a “purpose or delight,” stands in powerful contrast to Jane’s two previous encounters with intense and singular points of light: first, the mysterious beam of light in the red room, which Jane describes as “a herald of some coming vision from another world”; and second, the “ignus fatuus” that she sees across a lake in her period of destitution after fleeing Thornfield, which she describes as eerily still and steady. “I expected it would soon vanish,” she says; “It burnt on, however, quite steadily, neither receding nor advancing. . . . I watched to see whether it would spread: but no; as it did not diminish, so it did not enlarge” (380). The breaking up of the contained and static sphere of light, arriving from “another world,” into the multiplicity of a bright and easily intelligible field of stars emphasizes the way in which controlled abstraction signifies for Jane a positive expansion with a sense of connectedness.

Of course, it’s ultimately marriage that comes to represent the fruition of this model of intimate abstraction: and so we revisit Jane with Rochester, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh; his right hand, seeing and feeling on his behalf; ever together; talking all day long. St. John Rivers ends the novel as a kind of vexed cautionary tale: admirable in his religious dutifulness and his extreme self-sufficiency, and yet somehow unspeakably tragic in his refusal of the kind of erotic intimacy that defines Jane’s and Rochester’s marriage: “St John is unmarried: he will never marry now. Himself has hitherto sufficed to the toil, and the toil draws nearer its close” (521). For St. John, what has been will always be—what “has hitherto” sufficed must continue to suffice as the end of his life “draws nearer.” He represents a kind of social withdrawal much more radical because much more determined and deterministic than Lucy Snowe’s. She and Jane

do not have uncomplicatedly happy endings, nor do they end by any gestures of radical rebellion. They end in a kind of lived-in and comforting contradiction, simultaneously alone and in company; withdrawing and desiring; retreating within the self and venturing beyond the self, if only tentatively and with careful, feeling steps.

## Chapter Two

### *I Do Because I Do: Trollope's Tautologies*

#### 1. Can You Read Her?

“Diamonds are diamonds, and garnets are garnets; and I am not so romantic but what I know the difference.”<sup>1</sup> So declares Glencora Palliser in a tour-de-force of tautology in Anthony Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?* (1865). And Trollope’s novels are peppered liberally with comic, seemingly meaningless tautologies like this one, each of which, perhaps surprisingly for such a “stupid” form, serves different social strategies and takes on distinct meanings. In *Phineas Finn* (1869), the worldly and cynical Madame Max Goesler makes an observation about the tautological rationale of aristocratic power: “It isn’t necessary—is it—that a Duke of Omnium should do anything except be Duke of Omnium?”<sup>2</sup> In *The Eustace Diamonds* (1873), Mrs Greystock breaks it to her governess Lucy Morris that she’s an unsuitable match for her son Frank; despite her love and admiration for Lucy, Mrs Greystock must insist that “a governess is a governess.”<sup>3</sup> In the same novel’s second volume, Lizzie Eustace seems both to deflate the entire plot and to problematize its seemingly economic stakes in her pithy (and disingenuous) insistence that “after all, a necklace is only a necklace” (II, 122).<sup>4</sup> In *The Way We Live Now*

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<sup>1</sup> Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 824-25. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

<sup>2</sup> Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, II, 84.

<sup>3</sup> Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, I, 271. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

<sup>4</sup> For a different analysis of the concept of tautology in *The Eustace Diamonds*, see Briefel, “Tautological Crimes.” Briefel examines the notion of “tautological crime,” i.e., the unintelligible idea that a woman could steal what already belongs to her, as an expression of cultural anxiety over changing women’s property laws.

(1875), a debate pitting Catholicism against Protestantism seems to stall when Mrs. Yeld, the bishop's wife, interjects to insist that "Protestants are Protestants and Roman Catholics are Roman Catholics," and that furthermore, "religion is religion." The Bishop responds that "it ought to be."<sup>5</sup>

We may have an abiding sense that tautology is for Trollope little more than a kind of comic flourish, not to be looked into too deeply, particularly as a form that seems to have no depth at all to look into. But tautologies rarely stand alone—indeed, when they do, they might operate as unexceptionable, if uninteresting, statements of self-identity: a governess is, indeed, a governess. Rather, the sheer variety of the examples I've presented show us that tautology in Trollope's fiction (and in our own everyday language) can serve many different social strategies, from the spurious justification of a moral claim (it would be wrong you, a governess, to marry my son *because* a governess is a governess) to processes of classification and comparisons (a diamond is a diamond, and a garnet is a garnet, therefore they are different things with different values, and aren't interchangeable) to stealthy diversions of attention (don't worry about it, a necklace is *just* a necklace). Tautologies, in other words, can be inflected, and in that inflection can become surprisingly nuanced in their meanings and in their social uses. What Trollope tends to be interested in, in other words, is not tautology as an expression of logical self-identity, but in tautology as a form of ordinary language, which we use to persuade, to solicit, to evade responsibility, to account for oneself, and to make justifications and moral arguments.

In this chapter I pursue two arguments, one literary and one theoretical, both of which attempt to link tautological form in Trollope's fiction (and in the realist novel more broadly) to the particular problems raised by attempts to reason about erotic opacity and idiosyncrasy—the

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<sup>5</sup> Trollope, *The Way We Live Now*, I, 156. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

idea that erotic desire “is what it is,” and that a desire or complex of desires can somehow feel as if it grounds the essentialist conviction that “I am what I am.” The literary argument will proceed largely through readings of *Can You Forgive Her?* (1865) and *The Way We Live Now* (1875), although my survey of literary tautology will at times reach beyond Trollope, and beyond the novel, to include illustrative examples from figures like George Meredith, Christina Rossetti, and Henry James. I argue that in Trollope’s fiction, instances of tautology and of tautologically-inflected attitudes of self-possession (I am what I am, it is what it is) tend to cluster around psychological dramas of erotic desire, especially those enacted by female characters. But far from presenting a unified novelistic, moral, or psychological theory of tautology, these clusters register profound ambivalence about the self-evidence of erotic feelings and about the capacity of tautology to express the seemingly indisputable and unchangeable nature of those feelings. Sometimes, as in *Can You Forgive Her?*, the easiness of tautology represents a troublesome foreclosure of the idea that love and marriage should be socially, politically, and morally useful, and in this case tautology seems to figure as a difficult obstacle—a suspiciously easy evasion of the duties of moral and political personhood—in the novel’s marriage plot. If Alice Vavasor marries the person whom she instinctively and irrefutably wants (whom she wants just because she does), then she might potentially be flouting a host of internalized imperatives that tell her to be reasonable about her choice of mate, to make herself useful, or in other words to make a choice that she might account for with some sound logical argument. And to complicate matters, Alice is well aware that whether she compromises her desire for the sake of pragmatic considerations, or compromises her political ambitions for the sake of erotic considerations, there seems to exist for her no middle path—no choice that offers her both political engagement *and* erotic excitement.



On the other hand, in *The Way We Live Now*, Trollope often represents tautological self-possession as part of an attitude of sexual empowerment, or at least a partial resistance to the sexual instrumentalization of women, even if as a way of reasoning it remains resistant to the notion that pragmatic considerations have any purchase when it comes to desire. Here, the obstinacy of tautology, which allows no possible rebuttals, seems to offer an opaque grammar of erotic desire in which the body trumps good logic, and the anti-social trumps the social. This use of tautology harnesses what seems to be its most superficially conservative quality—the way in which it commands assent to the status quo by asserting its fixity—in the service of resisting (at least partially and unevenly) the instrumental reasoning that usually fuels the heterosexual marriage economy, and in turn, the novelistic marriage plot.<sup>6</sup> My chronological ordering of these two novels is an accident of structure—my argument is not a biographical narrative of Trollope’s feminist awakening, and in fact Trollope’s own commitment to or rejection of feminism is not my primary object of interest. Often Trollope’s narrators resist or mock women who invest themselves in the paradoxical power of tautology (or indeed in the power of feminism), and we need remain constantly aware of the give-and-take between anti-logic as a source of power and anti-logic as an easy target for derision. Moreover, it’s obvious that tautology comes with intrinsic limitations. Although it might allow one to perform an ostentatious display of enforced muteness about sexuality that implicitly criticizes the conditions of that muteness, it is nonetheless essentially mute. While it may bring into view the limit at which logic becomes

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<sup>6</sup> At this point I run the risk of suggesting that Trollope, and by extension his female characters, are able fully to “see through” the ideological assumptions of ideals of logical accountability, or that they take an omniscient attitude toward them that therefore represents an omnipotent capacity to manipulate ideology. I will have more to say on this later when I connect tautology in *The Way We Live Now* to Amanda Anderson’s description of the figure of “aggrandized agency,” which she argues is a problem for feminist literary criticism of the 1980’s.

useless—when it is expected to account morally for erotic desire—tautology, as we will see, is nonetheless a structuring part of the system of abstract propositional logic.<sup>7</sup> And of course, the use of tautology in Trollope as a way to insist upon the ethical significance of desire, even at its most opaque, idiosyncratic, and seemingly self-evident, is quite different from Brontë’s sensitivity to the imperative to efface or negate oneself, or to take an impartial point of view, in thinking ethically. Brontë, in other words, represents characters who find ways to work within that contradiction—the contradiction of being both myself and not myself when I try to reason ethically and intelligibly about erotic desire—by making self-effacement into an eroticized and intimate practice. Trollope, on the other hand, wonders how the very “first-personal” insistence of erotic desire might in fact trump, challenge, or evade the “third-personal” perspective of ethical reasoning that is conducted according to the rules of good logic. In both cases, the “solution” to the seeming impossibility of reasoning about erotic desire carries with it the risk, or sometimes the guarantee, of social exclusion even as it aims to make desire socially intelligible. This is a stubborn paradox that is common to both Brontë’s and Trollope’s ways of thinking through this problem.

The second and more implicit argument that I pursue in this chapter is that a reading of Trollope’s tautologies allows us a unique opportunity to reflect upon and revisit methodological debates about the hermeneutic practices through which literary criticism operates, debates which have been recently reanimated by several critics’ explicit turn away from the “hermeneutics of

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<sup>7</sup> On the paradox of Trollope’s realism, which seems to reflect social and political conventions neutrally even while it sometimes registers the limitations of those conventions, see Levine, “Can You Forgive Him?” “There are, in Trollope’s world,” Levine argues, “certain ways to play the game, and though one is allowed a great deal both of sophistication and cynicism about the game itself, one is not allowed to violate the rules, either as a novelist writing, or as a character acting.” On my reading, tautology encapsulates the idea of a cynicism toward logical accountability that nonetheless technically plays by logical rules.

suspicion” and toward a hermeneutics of the textual surface. One theoretical aim of this chapter, in other words, is to pose the taking-seriously of tautology as a particularly powerful test-case for the methodology currently gaining traction under the name of “surface reading,” and the relationship of this concept to the discipline’s broader turn to a historically-inflected formalism. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have recently argued for surface reading as a useful alternative to the program of “symptomatic reading” that so dominated literary criticism when Marxism and psychoanalysis were its dominant metalanguages, and which as we saw in Chapter One are often based upon an interest in the discovery and resolution of contradiction rather than in the tightly knotted form of tautology. One reason that my approach has something to add here is that it yokes together the idea of surface with the idea of critique particularly tightly. As Best and Marcus point out, symptomatic reading was (and is) appealing because it forwards the idea of literary criticism as a kind of political activism, and the forceful extraction of the “hidden” meanings of a text as a powerful practice of ideology critique.<sup>8</sup> One potential argument of surface reading, on the other hand, is that the surface meanings of the text might themselves represent “an affective and ethical stance”; in other words, this “embrace” of superficiality means “accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects, and refuses the depth model of truth, which dismisses surfaces as inessential and deceptive.”<sup>9</sup>

My reading of Trollope extends this concept to its potential limit. Tautologies, so the conventional wisdom goes, are superficial, logically meaningless, and logically meaningless *because* superficial. In a particularly compact way, they seem to present us with the apotheosis of surface meaning—we cannot even try to look to the “depth model,” it would seem, because

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<sup>8</sup> Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

there is no linguistic depth there to be plumbed. (Still, the idea of one's desire as a self-evident, irrefutable fact seems to be something straight out of psychoanalysis, which would teach us to look to the depth model for a narrative that explains the intractability, repetitiveness, and circularity of desire; I will return to the place of psychoanalytic theory in this discussion later on.) My reading allows us to see the way in which texts can simultaneously represent both ideology *and* its critique, perhaps even in the same kind of language.<sup>10</sup> We simply need to notice the rich meaningfulness of the kinds of language we usually dismiss as hopelessly dumb. Indeed, even Roland Barthes, whose structuralist theory of descriptive criticism in *S/Z* is an obvious point of reference for many advocates of surface reading, had mounted, in his first book *Mythologies*, a thoroughgoing critique of tautology as a form that represents a kind of fearful escape-attempt from language itself: "One takes refuge in tautology," he argues, "as one does in fear, or anger, or sadness, when one is at a loss for an explanation. . . . Tautology testifies to a profound distrust of language, which is rejected because it has failed. Now, any refusal of language is a death. Tautology creates a dead, a motionless world."<sup>11</sup> Against Barthes's suspicion that tautology can only be dead, anti-intellectual, and antisocial, I argue that it might represent a

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<sup>10</sup> See also Plotz, *The Crowd*. Plotz offers a particularly eloquent description of the capacity of literary criticism to register ambivalence and reconciliation around competing ideologies, and frames his description in terms of the problem of logical coherence or incoherence. "Literary criticism," he argues, "has a great power to shed light on the communicative structures that explain the apparent paradoxes of a society shaped by several ideological matrices not logically reconcilable with one another. One of the abiding merits of literary analysis is that it can uncover not simply a single pervasive ideology, but a buzz of discord within a single text" (12). Plotz connects our ability to "shed light" on structures of meaning with our ability to "uncover" ambivalence in a pair of metaphors all the more powerful for being mixed. To shed light on already existing structures in literary texts *is* to uncover what is already there.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, 267. See also, in the same volume, "Racine is Racine," trans. Richard Howard, 106-108, in which Barthes describes tautological reasoning as a "petit-bourgeois predilection" (106) and a form of "anti-intellectualism" (107) that he explains with reference to a naïve critical approach to Racine which would attempt to get to the essential "truth" of his work, or to locate "Racine degree zero" (108).

desire to reorient language and its potential social uses, to return to a kind of zero-point at which the establishment of apodictic truths is still an open question.

Of course I'm not the first to argue that Trollope, traditionally understood as a kind of comfortable or comforting author, might have a nuanced understanding of critique. But while critics such as Amanda Anderson and Elaine Hadley have recently begun to notice Trollope's complex narrative treatment of broadly liberal models of critique, these readings tend to focus on a model of liberal proceduralism, fueled by detachment and debate, in which tautology seems out of place. Tautologies seem incompatible with liberal understandings of critique, and arguments about the ways that this mode of critique functions in the realist novel, largely because tautologies are often radically opaque, and their use can frustrate our abilities to read and interpret characters in novels, while liberal critique assumes a certain kind of moral and intellectual transparency best represented by the Habermasian ideal of communicative ethics or the novelistic practices of omniscient narration and free indirect discourse.

Used stealthily, however, tautologies can also cover up the failures of psychological insight that they actually represent by making psychology itself appear to be fundamentally inexplicable. Just as *Can You Forgive Her?* begins to draw to a close, and readers begin to crave narrative moves like disclosure, resolution, and explanation, the narrator stubbornly repeats the language of unintelligibility that has haunted the novel's eponymous "her," Alice Vavasor, as she rebuffs the marriage proposals of the upstanding John Grey: "She could not analyse the causes which made her feel that she must still refuse the love that was proffered to her; she could not clearly read her own thoughts" (730). The novel thus far has documented Alice's prolonged indecision as to her choice of mate: should she make the reasonable choice and marry the righteous—if unexciting—John Grey? Or should she marry her dark, reckless, and unpredictable

cousin, George Vavasor, who needs her money in order to further his political aspirations? After seven-hundred-plus pages, and with the final hundred pages beginning to fall away, we cannot help but wonder—if a moment of clarity doesn't come now, then when? And how?

The difference in this instance, however, is that the narrator steps in to offer Alice—and us—assistance, immediately elaborating after a semi-colon's breath, “but the causes were as I have said, and such was the true reading of her thoughts” (730). Never mind the content of the narrator's psychological analyses throughout the novel, which are mostly flip dismissals of Alice's over-thinking of marriage. What is more important is the logical trick of the sentence—we have a conclusion repeated twice (both clauses can be rephrased as “my description of her psychology is accurate”) without substantive premises as evidence. The narrator seems purposefully to avoid telling us how he knows what he knows—what matters is that he knows it, and therefore really does know it. In other words, this is a classic example of begging the question, formulated in a particularly compact way, as a mere tautology in which repetition substitutes for deduction. (I use the term “begging the question” as it is used in the study of logic, to refer to a claim in which the conclusion to be proved is actually assumed in a premise, and not in its colloquial usage as a synonym for something like “raising the question.”) The “but . . . and” structure of the sentence cannot perform any real syntactic function because the content of the argument is so manifestly circular. In other words, the narrator's formulation—I have described Alice's psychology accurately, and therefore the description that I offered was an accurate one—is logically true no matter what the content of the psychological description. In the case of Alice Vavasor, the problem is that narrative resolution seems to require that she be decoded, and if she is not up to the task, then the narrator must act as her representative. But the narrator merely apes resolution. Alice's motivations are what I have said they are, he insists, because I said so.

The language borders on the performative, as if truth can be brought into being by the retroactive power of a phrase like “such was,” and it becomes immediately clear that tautology often has an implicitly performative function, in which the ritualism of repetition seems to form a proof of a proposition’s *a priori* truth.

It also becomes clear that narrative authority in the realist novel must often be declared by a kind of performative operation of fiat rather than operating through slower processes like persuasion or explanation or solicitation. And of course it’s important to compare Trollope’s use of performativity at the level of omniscient narration to Jane Eyre’s much more tentative or suspicious attitude toward performativity as a way of assuming moral authority, or as a way for a first-person narrator to assume the privilege of omniscience. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick gets at this form of narrative authority in her description of what it’s like as a reader to enter into a fictional world: “The inexplicit compact by which novel-readers voluntarily plunge into worlds that strip them, however temporarily, of the painfully acquired cognitive maps of their ordinary lives (awfulness of going to a party without knowing anyone) ... creates, especially at the beginning of books, a space of high anxiety and dependence.”<sup>12</sup> Of course, as Sedgwick indicates, we choose to undergo this loss of orientation, and choose therefore via an “inexplicit compact” a submission to the narrator’s air of “worldly” authority. Sedgwick goes on to point out that this assumption of “worldliness”—an air that I’ve been associating with an assumption of performative power—in fact necessarily implicates the reader, who is assumed to be “similarly entitled—rather than, what in truth she necessarily is, disoriented.”<sup>13</sup> As one anonymous early reviewer of the novel put it in a tautological formulation that captures this readerly complicity,

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<sup>12</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

“Alice wins our forgiveness because she is Alice.”<sup>14</sup> What we find in this novel is that the project of arriving at a “true reading” of Alice’s psychology actually amounts to a suppression of her obstructive unintelligibility, which another reviewer seizes upon in describing her as the “faint and misty centre” of the novel.<sup>15</sup> Trollope’s narrator, in an instant, sweeps Alice’s opacity under the rug and replaces it with nothing but an opacity of his own.

The crucial feature of tautology is that it is, by its very structure, unfalsifiable. In other words, a premise like “Protestants are Protestants” is necessarily true, no matter what the term “Protestant” actually refers to. We can’t debate the argument by means of empirical data-gathering, since to find a Protestant who isn’t a Protestant is a logical impossibility. Tautology is, in this sense, pure logical form: it fails to communicate anything; it collapses in on itself; and yet, somehow, it means something. In his *Science of Logic* (1812-16), Hegel describes the entire science of logic as based precisely on the paradoxical proposition that something purely formal and lacking in all content could ever be meaningful, or the object of philosophical inquiry: on the one hand, logic “can give only the formal conditions of genuine knowledge, but does not itself contain real truth; ... logic is only the *pathway* to real knowledge, for the essential component of truth, the content, lies outside it”; on the other hand, the science of logic itself does have content, and that content is precisely “thinking and the rules of thinking.”<sup>16</sup> As we will see later, one of the potential meanings of tautology as a purely formal conceit has to do with attitudes of erotic essentialism, which claim the sheer irreducibility of the idea that one is what one is and desires whomever one desires, as against versions of erotic constructionism, which seek to undo the

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<sup>14</sup> Unsigned review of *Can You Forgive Her?*, *The Month*, Sep. 1865, reprinted in Smalley, 243.

<sup>15</sup> Unsigned review of *Can You Forgive Her?*, *The Spectator*, 2 Sep. 1865, reprinted in Smalley, 245.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 24, original emphasis.



seeming determinacy of essentialism by arguing that our desires are social and rational constructions and that we can therefore imagine debating, subverting, or reconstituting them. The term “tautology” is in this way somewhat wide-ranging: tautologies have many potential features and uses, many of which contradict one another. Tautology is easy to understand, transparent, and accessible; but it is also difficult to parse, obdurate, and opaque. “It is what it is” strikes us as a phrase that is both lazily meaningless and meaningfully capacious. If affective expression rather than logical meaning is our primary concern, on the other hand, “it is what it is” could represent either resignation to the intractability of the status quo or a defiant attachment to a fact that is being positioned outside of the jurisdiction of rational debate.

For much of history, tautology was a synonym for unnecessary repetition or circularity in a rhetorical sense; only with the advent of rigorous mathematical systems of logic did it come to have another sense in which it refers to a logical formulation that is unfalsifiable. The logical sense of tautology is usually dated to Immanuel Kant’s *Logic* (1800), which puts forth the concept of an analytic truth—a statement that is logically true simply by virtue of its form. As Kant puts it, “Tautological propositions are virtually empty, or void of consequence; for they are of no use whatever. Such is, for instance, the tautological proposition, A man is a man. For if we can say nothing more of a man, than that he is a man, we know nothing more of him at all.”<sup>17</sup> Kant gives us everything here that we usually associate with the tautology: circularity, uselessness, an incapacity to expand our knowledge about the actual world. But of course, even Kant hints at something more, in that admission that tautology is only “virtually” rather than literally empty. Henry James, in his review of *Can You Forgive Her?*, describes Trollope’s superficial, repetitive art in strikingly similar terms. For James, the novel is emblematic of the

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<sup>17</sup> Kant, *Logic*, 118.

interchangeability of Trollope's characters and situations across his entire oeuvre—"Take any of his former tales, change the names of half the characters, leave the others standing, and transpose the incidents, and you will have 'Can You Forgive Her?'"—and so it "has nothing new to teach us ... about the complex human heart."<sup>18</sup> Of course, Trollope's fiction is often repetitive in a much more literal way, as a result of his devotion to the Balzacian multi-novel series in which characters reappear again and again, here as a protagonist, there as a mere blip.

If Kant defines the logical sense of tautology as describing an argument that is irrefutably true by virtue of its logical form, then it is not until Ludwig Wittgenstein that the mathematical significance of tautology is explored more fully. Despite its practical uselessness, Wittgenstein argues that tautology (along with contradiction) structures the abstract system of propositional logic; tautologies and contradictions "lack sense," but they are "not, however, nonsensical. They are part of the symbolism, much as '0' is part of the symbolism of arithmetic."<sup>19</sup> He goes on to distinguish tautologies, whose truth is "certain," from ordinary propositions, whose truth is merely "possible" (42):

A proposition, a picture, or a model is, in the negative sense, like a solid body that restricts the freedom of movement of others, and, in the positive sense, like a space bounded by solid substance in which there is room for a body. ... A tautology leaves open to reality the whole—the infinite whole—of logical space. ... Tautology and contradiction are the limiting cases—indeed the disintegration—of the combination of signs. (42)

If contradictions represent the "outer limit" of all propositions for Wittgenstein, since they are statements that can never follow from any ordinarily meaningful proposition, then "tautology is the unsubstantial point at their center" (48). All logical statements seem to run the risk of falling at any moment into tautology, since in leaving open the whole of "logical space," a tautological

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<sup>18</sup> James, review of *Can You Forgive Her?*, in *Literary Criticism*, 1317.

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 41.

proposition allows any other proposition to follow from it logically. “Diamonds are diamonds, therefore diamonds are expensive” is a valid deductive inference at the level of pure mathematical abstraction.

Wittgenstein’s metaphor—of tautology as the black hole at the center of the galactic system of propositional logic, whose centripetal gravitational pull balances the centrifugal force of contradiction—helps to explain the function of tautology as a formal principle. Tautologies are not meant to generate new knowledge, as both Kant and Wittgenstein suggest. They tell us what we already know, or perhaps make us feel that we already know it by asserting that it cannot be otherwise than true. The fact that tautologies merely formalize the assertion of *a priori* truths helps to explain why they might have a powerful function in literary texts, which are themselves formal systems for the representation of the actual world. But realist representation can never give us the full density and reality of an “actual world,” and like tautology itself, we might understand the world of a realist novel as, depending on how we think about it, both empty and full (only an illusion, yet a populated one; or both transparent and solid (something we see as if “through” the material existence of words on a page). Of course, merely generating a tautology cannot actually *make* a truth self-evident, and yet Descartes seems to have shown us that we need at least one self-evident truth in order to begin deducing others. Tautology is the performance of a kind of extreme confidence in a truth’s self-evidence—I am thinking, therefore I think (therefore I am)—and so its role in the kind of ethical accounting that fills so many of Trollope’s novels can be tricky. Tautology can make the actually refutable seem mathematically irrefutable, but can also persuade us to include new kinds of propositions (such as “I desire him”) under the rubric of irrefutable knowledge.

## 2. Tautology, Accountability, and Erotic Essentialism

I have claimed that in Trollope's fiction, the most powerfully meaningful tautologies tend to accompany attempts to justify or rationalize the opaque motivations and imperatives of erotic life. And this is because tautology, when used to describe oneself and one's desires, represents a highly attenuated kind of essentialism in which a quality's essentiality is seemingly brought into being through a performative trick of language. This is not quite the essentialism familiar to us as a topic of debate in identity politics, since statements like "I am what I am" or "my desire is my desire" express a distinctly individualized attitude of essentialism based on personal identity and idiosyncratic desire rather than an essentialism of gender or racial identity by which we claim an essence common to all women, all queer people, etc. Of course, the repetitive emptiness of tautology makes essentialist statements like these seem arbitrary, constructed, merely confidently asserted rather than transcendently true. But it doesn't make their force any less powerful; after all, tautology is the only *form* of argumentation in which one can explicitly claim a fact, or an essence, as self-evidently true or real rather than phenomenally or empirically true or real. The very point of essentialism, at least in the tautological and "personal" form I'm after, is often to claim something as exempt from social interrogation—if it just *is*, and cannot be otherwise, then we need not wonder about its social causes or its potential social malleability. Essentialism, like tautology, has often been understood as inherently conservative, especially in the debates over it that arose alongside the development of academic feminist and queer theory through the 1970's and 1980's. In her now classic defense of what has been called "strategic" essentialism, Diana Fuss argues, however, that essentialism is not as reactionary as many constructionist arguments would suggest. She insists on the distinction between "deploying" or "activating" essentialism versus "falling into" or "lapsing into" essentialism; while the latter implies a political failure, the

former emphasizes essentialism's strategic (and potentially temporary) uses, so that "the radicality or conservatism of essentialism depends ... on *who* is utilizing it, *how* it is deployed, and *where* its effects are concentrated."<sup>20</sup> In asking how erotic essentialism structures the development of character and the complex problems of moral and erotic accountability in Trollope's fiction, and in imaginative writing more generally, we need to attune ourselves to the kinds of self-conscious and cynical relationships to essentialism that Fuss describes.

Strategies of erotic essentialism, often expressed in the logical gambit of tautology, almost always involve risky moments of disclosure or announcement, either to oneself or to another.<sup>21</sup> In fact, in the world of the Victorian novel, with its strict representational limits when it comes to sexual desire, the very fact of experiencing desires that are powerful enough to merit real notice or to figure as part of a moral self-accounting can come to read as a kind of sexual

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<sup>20</sup> Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 20. Discussions of essentialism, and specifically "strategic essentialism," are incredibly wide-ranging, but for the origin of the concept see Grosz and Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution." It's also important to note that the essentialism of "I am what I am" is linked to the structure of predication, which Spivak has often argued (along the same lines as her concept of strategic essentialism) is a kind of unavoidable precondition for the positive articulation of a "theory of interests" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 273). When poststructuralist thinkers attempt to critique the ideology of subjectivity, she argues, they often only sidestep a thorough theorization of ideology itself. Spivak's argument is too complex to summarize fully here, especially because her concept of subject-predication has been deployed in several of her essays, but its broad outlines help us to understand something about the relationship between the predicating structure of "I am what I am," or even "I am gay just because I am," and the tautological structure of certain versions of essentialism. See also Spivak, "Scattered Speculations."

<sup>21</sup> See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, which presents a still-compelling case for the secrecy/exposure image as one of the "binarisms" that comes at the end of the nineteenth century to be framed by the rational incoherence of the homo-/hetero- dichotomy that structures sexual identity. My reading suggests that we can draw upon this same conceptual language to think about the role of tautological assertions in the process of "coming out" as a sexual being. Sedgwick actually gestures to the potential capaciousness of the "coming out" narrative as a particularly dense image of the binary relationship between secrecy and disclosure, suggesting for example that one could "come out" as a fat woman (72). Her Foucauldian history of sexuality necessitates, however, that she insist upon the specifically gay meanings of coming out rather than projecting the metaphor too literally beyond the late nineteenth century, and her impulse in wanting to preserve the historical specificity of the "closet" image is, I think, absolutely right. And yet I draw upon it here in order to suggest that a similar drama might attend many kinds of disclosures of non-normative sexual desires, even though they are not enacted through exactly the same set of images.

non-normativity. In *Can You Forgive Her?*, when Mrs Greenow, Alice Vavasor's aunt, admonishes her maid Jeanette that "You shouldn't think about handsome men, child," Jeanette responds, "And I'm sure I don't. ... Not no more than anybody else; but if a man is handsome, ma'am, why it stands to reason that he is handsome" (233). Jeanette's circular reasoning serves to disarm the prohibition against her open expression of erotic interest; by framing it as a matter of reasoning so simple as to be tautologically irrefutable, Jeanette actually normalizes her desire by generalizing it ("Not no more than anybody else") and by partly depersonalizing or abstracting it ("it stands to reason"). If a thing is so inescapably and abstractly true (handsome is handsome), what could be the harm in speaking it aloud? Jeanette's rationalization creates a situation in which the statement seems not entirely to belong to Jeanette even while it announces her own desire, much in the way that the scriptedness of "I'm gay (because I just am and so are many others)" doesn't allow the formulation to belong to any one of its speakers but makes it a matter of an identity politics and thus defuses its potential to be read as an expression of idiosyncratic perversity. The most pressing question raised by the idea of bad logic is, why not abandon logic altogether? Jeanette's apologia for her erotic desire goes some way toward answering this question by demonstrating how the universal legibility of logical form allows for safe ways in which to perform otherwise risky erotic disclosures.

"I Am What I Am," the tautological paean to coming out performed by the drag queen Albin in the 1983 musical adaptation of *La Cage Aux Folles*, quickly transcended its specific plot to become an anthemic standard of gay pride festivals, and its strategies echo Jeanette's cunning use of tautology. The song's yoking together of tautology and essentialism is what is important for our purposes as we describe the messy interaction of essentialism and constructionism, especially when we consider the complex opening lines of the musical, sung by a chorus of drag

queens: “We are what we are, and what we are is an illusion,” later echoed in Albin’s “I am what I am—I am my own special creation.”<sup>22</sup> If we accept that various aspects of erotic life—object choice, gender position, the relationship of sexuality to marriage—are moralized or at least morally inflected, both in Victorian culture and in ours, then we have to wonder what form a language of sexual accountability would take, one that might balance the essentialist attitude that grounds a statement like “I am what I am” and the constructionist detachment that can then elaborate, “and what I am is an illusion.”

While this may seem to be a tangential line of thinking and reading, I am actually not the first to connect the dynamics of Victorian secrecy, psychological interiority, and sexuality to this often-adapted narrative of drag “passing” and its complex dynamics of closetedness and performance. D. A. Miller borrows its title for his chapter on Wilkie Collins’s sensation fiction and the concept of the “feminine carceral” in *The Novel and the Police*, drawing on the literal translation of “cage aux folles” as “madhouse” in his reading of Collins’s complex plot of sexuality, mental illness, and mistaken identities. And Miller’s iconoclastic *Place for Us: An Essay on the Broadway Musical* features a careful reading of the Fierstein-Herman musical in the context of a gay culture coming to terms with the shattering of its closets. Miller suggests that the strangeness of the musical’s opening line is partly in its attempt to combine, in a single turn of phrase, the disclosure of coming out with a nostalgic image of the secrecy of the closet: “To perceive the closet was always also to perceive the multitude of conditions under which closeting was possible. . . . No doubt we like *La Cage* and its meager progeny even less for obliging us to admit, to our confusion, how keenly we miss this sublime vision, though it may have been the

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<sup>22</sup> Herman, “We Are What We Are” and “I Am What I Am,” from *La Cage Aux Folles*.

only truth that the closet's mendacity ever told."<sup>23</sup> Miller seems to go so far as to suggest that the structure of the closet allowed for a freedom of desire and a promiscuity in its signification that is lost once one buys into the singularity and the social legibility expressed by a declaration like "I am what I am." The idea that the punctual act of disclosure—which seems to be inherently tautological—constructs a singular, self-centered kind of desire, and therefore has the perhaps deleterious effect of foreclosing the possibility of desire's imaginative promiscuity and multiplicity, will resonate with my own reading of Alice Vavasor's resistance to her own apparently tautological desires. While readers have often expressed frustration at Alice's protracted erotic indecision, Alice's tragedy may be that she must choose in the first place, and in doing so must foreclose one set of desires (pragmatic, intellectual, career-oriented) in favor of another set (erotic, affective, passionate) that seem, as in Miller's reading of coming out, to foreclose too many possibilities.

Miller helps us to understand that the tautological argument that "I am what I am" rests on an essentialism of personal identity that can be tragically narrow. Without its constructionist supplement—the awareness that despite the irrefutability of my identity, that identity is also to some extent fantasmatic and malleable—the tautological argument becomes overreaching. "I am what I am" shades into "it is what it is," and soon into a generalized attitude of willful attachment to the status quo. In George Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879), Sir Willoughby defends himself against the accusation that he is overly prideful by way of our all-purpose tautology of personal identity: "I am what I am," he says. "It might be demonstrated to you mathematically that it [pridefulness] is corrected by equivalents or substitutions in my character. If it be a

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<sup>23</sup> D. A. Miller, *Place for Us*, 133.



failing—assuming that.”<sup>24</sup> For Willoughby, “I am what I am” is far from a neutral assertion of something essential about his identity; instead, he leaps from the grammatical symmetry of tautology to a morally charged image of a mathematically precise balance of character, in which “I am (proud)” can cancel out “I am (some quality that is as good as pride is bad).” From there, tautology becomes for Willoughby a capacious metaphor for perfect moral symmetry and consistency, as well as a powerful tool with which to make a marriage engagement seem frighteningly binding; when his fiancée Clara Middleton hints at doubts about their engagement, he invokes a tautological moral code: “Bride is bride, and wife is wife, and *affianced* is, in honour, *wedded*. You cannot be released. We are united” (149, original emphasis). Later on, even as Clara actively seeks a mechanism by which to escape the engagement, she seems thoroughly to have internalized Willoughby’s coercive bad logic: “She had accepted Willoughby,” she thinks to herself in a scene of free indirect discourse, “therefore she accepted him. The fact became a matter of the past, past debating” (201). Meredith’s novel could not be more clear: tautology is *bad* precisely because of the insidiousness of its irrefutability, because of its egotistical essentialism of identity and its concomitant moral absolutism. Willoughby purposefully manipulates Clara’s need “to be thought consistent” by disguising his aggression in the form of a classic moralistic truism: a promise is a promise (178). It’s easy to see how the most apt response to such intimidation might be another tautologically inflected plea: “I can’t, just because I can’t.”

As we will see in greater detail, Alice Vavasor’s plot in *Can You Forgive Her?* is structured by a similarly manipulative use of tautology as an instrument of power and sexual coercion wielded by men against women, and a similar internalization of the self-evidence that

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<sup>24</sup> Meredith, *The Egoist*, 90. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

tautology seems to assert. And yet, in Trollope's version of the story, tautology is a more labile form; the novel's circuitous pursuit of "forgiveness" (our forgiveness, the narrator's, John Grey's), always oriented toward *her*, the potential object of redemption, helps us to see what is at stake in the triangulated relationship between tautology, sexuality, and moral accountability. Clara Middleton's psychological plot is initially oriented around secret, interiorized doubt, which she indulges by conducting debates with herself while outwardly feigning satisfaction: this is what Meredith's narrator describes as "the terrible struggle ... within her horizon of self, now her utter boundary" (105). We watch as Clara undergoes the painful process of opening up to trusted confidantes about doubts that she fears will be met with sneers and derision. Alice Vavasor's plot, on the other hand, from the beginning is oriented around both private doubt and public choice. Even at the outset of the novel, with Alice engaged to Grey, we as readers, along with all of the novel's characters, are well aware that she has previously been connected to her cousin George; once Alice leaves Grey and becomes engaged to George, the drama of her choice, and its newly apparent potential for infinite reversals, becomes an even more glaring object of public scrutiny.

This is where the concept of forgiveness truly becomes activated: the Victorian reader might forgive Alice, but it depends largely on the public account that might be given of her waffling and of her eventual choice and on the forgiveness publicly doled out or withheld within the world of the novel's *dramatis personae*. But while Alice is able to think of plenty of sensible reasons why she should marry her cousin George (through him she might participate indirectly in political life and "make herself useful,—useful in some sort that might gratify her ambition"), her desire to marry John Grey does not seem as amenable to a public, rational account (342). It is presented as an essential fact, an *a priori* premise that seems to arise from nowhere and to lead

nowhere. This double-suitor plot, a subgenre of which Trollope was a major innovator, rests partially on the opaque claims of erotic essentialism—the feeling that one’s desires are irrefutably, inescapably one’s desires. The claims of this essentialism are opaque and suspicious because tautological, and also *easy* because tautological if one is willing to accept their circular terms. Alice’s prolonged reluctance to commit to John Grey arises out of her wariness toward this very easiness:

She was not satisfied with herself in having loved him. In her many thoughts on the subject, she always admitted to herself that she had accepted him simply because she loved him;—that she had given her quick assent to his quick proposal simply because he had won her heart. But she was sometimes almost angry with herself that she had permitted her heart to be thus easily taken from her, and had rebuked herself for her girlish facility. (50)

The close repetition of “simply,” followed by “easily” and “girlish facility” makes it clear what is at stake here. For Alice, the closed, circular given of tautology—I accepted him because I love him, and I love him *simply* because I love him—represents a feminine avoidance of the rigors both of logic itself, and of a vague feeling of the ethical responsibility to follow the path of difficulty and rich, earnest contemplation. Alice is caught in a double-bind between the “girlish” femininity of giving in too quickly and the imperative of a more mature feminine virtue which would demand that she withhold her affection until the appropriate moment.

In *The Eustace Diamonds*, Lucy Morris feels suspicious of her own desires in much the same way and wonders if in desiring Frank Greystock too unreflectively she has proven herself “unmaidenly”: “Had she been too forward with her heart? Had it been extracted from her, as women’s hearts are extracted, by efforts on the man’s part; or had she simply chucked it away from her to the first comer?” (I, 59). Lucy, like Alice, wonders if something has gone wrong with her marriage plot—is she not supposed to be persuaded rationally to desire, to have her heart laboriously “extracted” rather than giving it freely and almost instinctively? Is desire not

supposed to hide behind the economic and moral considerations that so often accompany marriage proposals in Victorian novels? Of course there's a strategic element to this problem as well, whereby in giving oneself up too quickly one depreciates one's "market value"—we'll return to the dynamics of the marital "exchange in women" later on. Lucy's narrator has actually anticipated her questions in this case, in an earlier aside:

To be in love, as an absolute, well-marked, acknowledged fact, is the condition of a woman more frequently and more readily than of a man. Such is not the common theory on the matter, as it is the man's business to speak, and the woman's business to be reticent. . . . But such presumptions, though they may be very useful for the regulation of conduct, may not always be true. It comes more within the scope of a woman's mind, than that of a man's, to think closely and decide sharply on such a matter. (I, 31)

Despite the narrator's assurance that women's sexual reticence is a social norm rather than an innate quality, it is significant that even in his revised description, a woman does not actually speak about her desires. Love is "well-marked" and "acknowledged" in Lucy Morris's case primarily by herself and to herself. She may "think closely" and "decide sharply" but she does not speak loudly until her engagement is formalized. Trollope's narrator plays up the strange way that tautological certainty, when it comes to the representation of women's erotic life, is always to some extent interiorized, and largely uncommunicative. "I desire him because I desire him" describes an erotic feeling, but it cannot account publicly for that feeling in the morally rigorous terms that both Alice Vavasor and Lucy Morris strive after. But even more important, the interiority of this kind of apodictic certainty seems threatening or dangerous to these women because it represents a desire arising from within rather than only as a kind of response to a male desire that is demonstrated in advance.

The interiorized tautological arguments of erotic essentialism seem to make one's character opaque, unintelligible, illogical, and Trollope is well aware that tautology represents a resistance to analysis, to narration, and to the conventional development of character through an

eventful, unfolding plot. We've seen the way in which Trollope's narrator himself resorts to tautology rather than admit that Alice's erotic psychology might not lend itself to a rational narrative exposition. Glencora, Alice's cousin who is dully married to Plantagenet Palliser while constantly fantasizing about her dashing and sexually exciting first love, Burgo Fitzgerald, seems more willing than Alice or the narrator to inhabit the position of erotic essentialism despite its dangerous suggestion that Glencora's marriage was a bad choice. Even though the narrator tells us that "she could not analyze her own wishes" when it comes to her sexual dilemma, "She declared to herself, in the most passionate words she could use, that she loved this man [Fitzgerald] with all her heart" (453). Refusals of accountability, or assertions of the impossibility of accountability when it comes to erotic life, seem to obfuscate character on one hand, but on the other hand, Trollope's characters have a variety of relationships to tautology and to the ideal of erotic accountability that allows this seeming hitch to become a source of characterological complexity. From Glencora's unabashed choice of "passionate words" over rational ones, to Alice Vavasor's suspicion of the "girlish" simplicity of desire's tautological rationale, to characters like John Grey who exploit tautology as a kind of sexual coercion, Trollope's fiction actually develops a multifaceted taxonomy of tautology and its uses.

Glencora's inability to "analyze" herself, and the similar (but tautologically covered-up) failure of the narrator of *Can You Forgive Her?* to give us a "true reading" of Alice's psychology, foregrounds one of the limitations of psychoanalysis as a rubric of literary analysis and at the same time allows me an opportunity to clarify the place of psychoanalytic theory in my own methodology and to explain why I find its terms useful. In its model of the ongoing "work" of analysis through the process of the talking cure, psychoanalysis empowers narrative as a tool for untangling the most stubborn knots of desire (compulsion, repetition, melancholia),

while also to some extent emphasizing the way in which desire makes one partially opaque to oneself, and the related fact that the moralized labor of the psychoanalytic cure never ends.<sup>25</sup> In other words, in the most classic psychoanalytic theories of the novel from René Girard to Peter Brooks to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, psychoanalysis is necessarily invested in the repetitiousness, circularity, and open-endedness of narrative. On this account, the quest to make sense of one's cathexes of desire is essentially endless, except insofar as the movement toward closure actually mirrors the compulsion toward inanimacy represented by the death drive. Moreover, formal structures like narrative, character, or *bildung* align with the formalized, law-bound energy of desire or libido as opposed to the messy, unnarratable energy of the drive. And yet narrative only ends, at least according to Brooks, because of our irrepressible and unaccountable desire to return to the beginning, to escape the repetitive oscillations of plot and to return to stasis—in short, to close the circle. As he puts it, “If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, *inexorably*, desire *for the end*.”<sup>26</sup> Brooks's conception of plotting relies on the seemingly uncontroversial assumption that we want to know what everything means in a narrative, and before him Girard described the same apparent want in even more moralistic terms that use logic as a rubric: “All types of structural thinking assume that human reality is

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<sup>25</sup> For a corrective to the paradox I'm describing, see Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Butler's insistence that the limitations of self-knowledge (conceived of in the terms of psychoanalytic theory) could actually ground a revised version of moral accountability seems to me to be an important revision to the symptomatic focus of so much psychoanalytic thought, which leads us into a never-ending search after greater and greater psychic depths. Butler's attitude of relaxed but ethically careful acceptance of what we can and cannot know about ourselves resonates with Best and Marcus's exhortation to accept what the text says about itself.

<sup>26</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 52; original emphasis. It is worth noting that Brooks's use of the term “desire” as a structuring mechanism of novelistic plotting is very different from this chapter's interest in the difficulties of representing characters' desires.

intelligible; it is a *logos* and, as such, it is an incipient *logic*, or degrades itself into a logic. It can thus be systematized, at least up to a point, however unsystematic, irrational, and chaotic it may appear even to those, or rather especially to those who operate the system.”<sup>27</sup> Both Girard and Brooks translate psychoanalytic concepts (particularly the concept of desire) into the vocabulary of structuralism in order to mobilize desire as a mechanism of narrative form. Both of these theories of the novel take desire as a structuring energy that can aid in the process by which narrative totalizes, systematizes, and orders meanings. And this is, in some sense, a reasonable use of psychoanalytic theory, which as I have suggested invests similar effort in the formalization of what is most chaotic in each of us.

Bad logic is not a structuring force, but nor is it a rejection of narrative or of meaning. It is perhaps more accurate to describe it as a remainder of unintelligibility in the midst of a structuring system (the realist novel) that often values the systematization and totalization of meaning above all. My reading of Trollope through what I’m calling “erotic essentialism” draws upon the psychoanalytic idea that our desires can be simultaneously socially constructed (a part of the formalized libidinal field of psychoanalysis) and also absolutely opaque and unsystematic (the chaotic energy of the drives, which are the raw material of desire), and that this paradox might deeply inform the literary representation of personhood. This way of connecting psychoanalytic reading to moral accounting allows that sexuality might have an intrinsic moral significance that does not respond to interrogation. That the blunt moral force of sexuality is easily manipulated in the service of patriarchal coercion, however, means that this is not necessarily a story of sexual resistance or liberation. All of this is best summed up in Lacan’s famous, and famously difficult, ethical maxim that “the only thing of which one can be guilty is

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<sup>27</sup> Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 3; original emphasis.

of having given ground relative to [*d'avoir cédé sur*] one's desire."<sup>28</sup> Many critics have pointed out that this maxim can be read as a freeing tribute to erotic pluralism or as a troublingly unreflective commitment to hedonistic satisfaction at all costs.<sup>29</sup> Precisely this double-meaning persists in the flexibility of tautology in Trollope's fiction, where it can be a form in which an ideology of feminine submissiveness dissembles as sexual liberation, or a form through which to register a critique of the instrumental rationality of moralized sexuality.

Most importantly, however, the kind of tautological characterology that I analyze in this chapter resists symptomatic analysis—the search for repressed causes of desire—by presuming that erotic life is what it is and that it may not be worth interrogating, or indeed that such an interrogation may not even be *possible*. (Nor may it be morally right.) The representation of personhood always runs the risk of sacrificing sheer idiosyncrasy or singularity—those aspects of individual psychology that are so essential as to resist formalized accountability—in the service of an abstraction which would make a fictional person universally legible and responsive to the kind of accountability represented by “good” logic. In her sonnet “In an Artist's Studio,” Christina Rossetti elaborates this basic problem of characterological representation as part of a critical analysis of the interchangeable female figures that populate her brother's paintings, and in reading the poem one must be aware of its nested analyses of characterology, the first art-historical and the second poetic: “One face looks out from all his canvasses,” the speaker says (1), and so “every canvass means / The same one meaning, neither more nor less” (7-8). The

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<sup>28</sup> Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 319.

<sup>29</sup> For an overview of this critical reception, see Žižek, “Author's Afterword,” in *Interrogating the Real*, 328-356. Žižek argues that Lacan's maxim is notoriously difficult to square with any of our many well developed ethical theories, but that the basic function of the maxim is to insist on moral autonomy, even in our relationship to the law-bound energy of desire. As he puts it, Lacan wants to get us out of “the common misconception that the basic ethical message of psychoanalysis is, precisely, that of relieving me of my responsibility, of putting the blame on the Other” (331).



highly stylized and standardized visual vocabulary of Pre-Raphaelite painting is in one way communicative—it is a refined and narrowly limited vocabulary that resists the usual practices of interpretation and thus ensures the artist’s control over the production of meaning. On the other hand, this representational practice is decidedly anti-realistic, and Rossetti indicates this problem with a subtly tautological moral: the artist represents this formalized female figure “Not as she is, but as she fills his dream” (14). Here Rossetti teasingly suggests the possibility of visualizing the idiosyncratic essence described in a phrase like “she is as she is.” Rossetti reminds us that these paintings are representations of real women who have been abstracted into the terms of a rule-bound artistic vocabulary, into indistinguishable instances of a type—the “same one meaning” that is both universally digestible and also pathetically meager of substance. When in Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*, Prince Amerigo describes Charlotte Stant by saying that “one admires her, if one doesn’t happen not to,” we may stumble over the Jamesian flourish in syntax before recognizing the tautology in the observation, and the trick is similar to Rossetti’s difficult shadow-image of the subject “as she is.” James’s syntax first establishes the universal truth that “one admires” Charlotte Stant before qualifying it with a conditional that only phantasmatically presents us with the impossible person who would “happen not to” admire her. The tautological essence of the conditional is something like “if one admires her, then one admires her”; merely in making this basic tautology more highly wrought, James seems to hint into existence an impossible person—a person without desires, or at least a person who desires in a radically anti-normative way.

### 3. Tautology is Easy / Tautology is Ideology

Understanding tautology as *easy* necessitates a relaxation of the critical interest in depth. We usually fail to notice tautologies—no matter how much a novelist like Trollope tries to draw our attention to them—because they appear to us syntactically as nothing but an impenetrable surface, a rhetorical ornament, or at best as an evasion of a difficult problem. And so tautology only becomes insidious when it is made to masquerade as a form of language made invincible because made irrefutable. In this version of the story tautology combines with the language of reason and ethics in order to give ideology a particularly coercive force. What is at stake here is the potential danger posed by tautology when it is understood as the apotheosis of lucidity: in what ways does this conceptualization of tautology function as a form of deceit in which difficult questions are made to seem suspiciously straightforward?

*Can You Forgive Her?* vibrates with exactly this tension. Aside from the problems presented by the particular relationship between the language of accountability and the language of sexuality, the novel consistently addresses the broader problem of how the easiness or difficulty of language structures the ethos of communication and social belonging. Our introduction to Mr. Vavasor, Alice's father, in the first chapter of the novel, includes a description of his job "at a dingy little office near Chancery Lane" that seems to look ahead to Kafka and Orwell: "his duty would consist in signing his name to accounts which he never read, and at which he was never supposed even to look" (41). Willful or enforced ignorance of this kind is one way to evade the thorny problem of confrontation with the social world while still nominally participating in its functioning; but something more is at stake when it comes to the tendency of language itself to mystify rather than clarify. Plantagenet Palliser's philosophy of political speechifying seems to represent an antidote to the kind of opacity we find in Alice

Vavasor's illegible motivations: "He desired to use words for the purpose of teaching things which he knew and which others did not know; and he desired also to be honoured for his knowledge. But he had no desire to be honoured for the language in which his knowledge was conveyed" (268). Palliser wants words to be transparent containers for knowledge, but this novel's interest in failures of communication and failures of justification (even when one justifies oneself to oneself) casts Palliser's ideal of lucid speech as nobly naïve, and more importantly, "very dull" (267). Just as important is the fact that Palliser's concern with accuracy and lucidity also entails a deliberate rejection of style—of any obtrusion of the texture of language itself as something to be reckoned with—much as Trollope's own writing has often been thought to reject style itself. Palliser is perhaps the only character who avoids repetition as a mode of argument, "labouring day and night to learn to express himself with accuracy, with no needless repetition of words" (267).

Palliser's model of efficient, pedagogical language gives us an alternative to Mr. Vavasor's alienated participation in the social through his robotic signing of unread documents, and this kind of transparent, communicative, "intelligible" language is demanded by Trollope's own theory of novel-writing: in his *Autobiography* he argues that in composing a novel, "The language used should be as ready and as efficient a conductor of the mind of the writer to the mind of the reader as is the electric spark which passes from one battery to another battery."<sup>30</sup> The binary electric circuit of minds that Trollope proposes provides us with a metaphor for tautology-as-easy. That which is circular is that which leaves no room for misunderstanding, in which "not only some proportion of meaning, but the very sense, no more and no less, which the

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<sup>30</sup> Trollope, *An Autobiography*, 235.

writer has intended to put into his words” is communicated.<sup>31</sup> This image also combines easiness with coercion; the goal of perfect intelligibility is that the reader will have no room to add or subtract or interpret or debate, will only have “the very sense, no more and no less.” Ruth apRoberts praises this very quality as crucial to Trollope’s psychological realism: “He *masters complexity*,” she argues; “he makes us forget the words while we apprehend effortlessly the most tenuous delicacies of nuance in psychology, or social situations of the most extreme complexity.”<sup>32</sup> The same paradox arises in apRoberts’s description as in Trollope’s own: how can one maintain a real sense of “meaning” or of “extreme complexity” while also aiming for an ideal of language as a transparent “conductor” of significance or a vehicle of effortless apprehension?

Our stereotype of Trollope says that, in the pursuit of this ideal of intelligible prose, he rejects style and texture just as Plantaganet Palliser does; and yet his interest in tautology, anti-logical language, and unintelligible characters shows us that Trollope’s fiction actually emphasizes the texture of language and our tendency to be suspicious of language that is smooth and easy. Part of what is threatening to Alice about John Grey is his extreme self-possession, insofar as it is opposed to her profound vacillation. Alice says of him that “no possible position in life would put him beside himself” (655) whereas Alice’s relationship to herself at the height of her indecision is one of doubling and one which positions her as both a fiction and its reader: “She sat there, thinking of her fate, as though it belonged to some other one,—not to herself; as though it were a tale that she had read” (396). The textual metaphor makes it clear that Alice’s self-analysis is partly about a confrontation with narrative itself: she can’t decide how her own

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> apRoberts, *Trollope: Artist and Moralist*, 22.

story will end, and this indecision itself is a hitch in the smooth progress of the story. The narrator makes his position on the issue of psychological legibility clear, both in his insistence on his true knowledge of Alice's character, and in his comment on George Vavasor, "a man who would bear no inquiry into himself," that "for myself I like the open babbler the best. Babbling may be a weakness, but to my thinking mystery is a vice" (151). In other words, George Vavasor and Plantagenet Palliser stand on opposite ends of the spectrum of lucidity, with George championing the poetic romance of unintelligibility in his raptures at Basle: "The poetry and mystery of the mountains are lost to those who make themselves familiar with their details, not the less because such familiarity may have useful results. In this world things are beautiful only because they are not quite seen, or not perfectly understood" (79). Trollope, as usual, arranges his characters (including his narrator) into distinct camps, and Alice's vacillation seems to come down to a choice between opacity and lucidity.

But of course, it's not quite that simple, because in the world of Trollope's fiction, the romantic choice valued as clear, obvious, necessary, and morally sound, is always also the one that is most resistant to logical justification—it is the one bound up in a tautological formulation like *I love him because I do* or *I won't marry him because I won't*.<sup>33</sup> Alice's state of being is at once irrefutable and illogical. The history of Alice's erotic desire is made clear early on—it seems that in her past entanglement with George Vavasor, he was a genuine object of attraction. But the desire gets recounted in terms of immateriality, ephemerality, and a dissolution of self: "there had been something of a rapture in that earlier dream . . . which could never live, indeed, except in a dream." Her affair with George had involved "a total abnegation of self" in the

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<sup>33</sup> J. Hillis Miller has argued that the self-justifying nature of love in Trollope's work is part of a critique of the ideological assumptions of Victorian courtship and marriage, in which love is usually preceded by rational arguments for its appropriateness and its social utility. As he puts it, "Falling in love is for Trollope . . . unaccountable, irrational. It just happens—or does not happen" (*Others*, 95).

worship of “an idol of clay” (60). George is the only material thing in this equation, and we might read this as amounting to an immature version of desire that is more religious than erotic. At the time of the novel’s setting, George is decidedly not the object of erotic attachment, as we see most clearly in a mixture of free indirect speech and narratorial evaluation:

Was she to give herself bodily,—body and soul, as she said aloud in her solitary agony,—to a man whom she did not love! Must she submit to his caresses,—lie on his bosom,—turn herself warmly to his kisses? ‘No,’ she said, . . . ‘no;—it was not in my bargain; I never meant it.’ But if so what had she meant;—what had been her dream? . . . How am I to analyze her mind, and make her thoughts and feelings intelligible to those who may care to trouble themselves with the study? (397)

Once again we see the narrator’s impatience with the difficult task of psychological exegesis. To him the most incomprehensible psychological state is Alice’s attempt to found a marriage on an absence of desire which actually extends to a kind of physical revulsion.

John Grey, on the other hand, is described again and again as mesmerizingly good-looking, but the easiness of his appeal is always coupled in the novel with the reality of Alice’s potential to lose herself in marriage to him. While George offers her a vicarious political life, Grey offers her—what? Lady Macleod, one of Alice’s many advisors, seizes upon the strangely repellent aspect of Grey’s literally stunning good looks:

She was overawed by him after the first three minutes. Indeed her first glance at him had awed her. He was so handsome,—and then, in his beauty, he had so quiet and almost saddened an air! Strange to say that after she had seen him, Lady Macleod entertained for him an infinitely higher admiration than before, and yet she was less surprised than she had been at Alice’s refusal of him. (186)

Lady Macleod is unable to identify the quality that makes her simultaneously attracted to Grey and indifferent to him, but in the scene that follows, Alice seems to decipher the problem as she stares into his face, “serene in all its manly beauty” (188). Unlike George, who “if he were moved to strong feeling, showed it at once in his eyes,—in his mouth, in the whole visage of his countenance,” Grey “when speaking of the happiness of his entire life, . . . had no more sign of

passion in his face than if he were telling his gardener to move a rose tree” (188). Grey becomes aligned with Palliser here as an advocate of pure intelligibility, in this instance made synonymous with his “awe”-inspiring, “serene,” “quiet,” but also simply boring beauty. The narrator seems predisposed to favor Grey because his attractiveness simply *is*, but this self-evidence—this absolute easiness—also seems to offer grounds for suspicion. Isn’t there more to a marriage plot than there is to gardening?

Tautology, then, becomes the habit of mind that will lead to the correct course of action in the narrator’s terms, and precisely the course that makes Alice uneasy at the outset. Tautology requires a suspension of disbelief—a relaxed acceptance that its meaning is simply given as a smooth surface, with no depths to plumb. Tautology is easy. And so tautology causes Alice—who wants to “make herself useful,” to “gratify her ambition,” for the purposes of which love seems utterly “vain and futile” (50)—to feel as if she is committing an act of submission. John Grey’s task is to reverse this formulation toward an acceptance of easiness. Alice begins to come around to Grey’s way of seeing things almost immediately after accepting George’s proposal, a decision which finalizes the split between Alice’s material, desiring self and the abstract, contractual self represented by her money.<sup>34</sup> When she offers George her money but not her passion, she puts it succinctly: “my money shall be less cross-grained than myself” (355). Money has no texture, but Alice’s self does, and a rough one at that. We then get Alice’s expression of repentance: “Her acceptance of her cousin’s offer had not come of love;—nor had it, in truth, come chiefly of ambition. She had not so much asked herself why she should do this thing, as why she should not do it” (373). *Why not?* is not a tautology. It is, however, a form of double-

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<sup>34</sup> For a different reading of Trollope’s marriage plot in relation to the notion of contract, see Marcus, *Between Women*. While Marcus links what I call the “abstract, consensual self” with feminist models of equality in marriage, I aim here to get at the opposite side of the same coin in focusing upon the potential feminist meanings of the intractable desire that is opposed to just such contractual abstraction.

negative—“there is no reason not to do this”—which bears some of the same anti-logical features as tautology. It threatens to make a lack of evidence against a particular claim equivalent to positive evidence in support of the opposite claim. Rather than being a closed circle, then, the double-negative endlessly refers away from itself, proving its opposite by its own irrational mathematics. We can’t help but be reminded of Alice’s “abnegation of self” in her immature infatuation with George Vavasor; the threat of the double-negative is the threat of losing one’s self.

It’s important to note that the novel frames Alice’s choice as binary (there are two suitors here but no more) and that both choices represent different versions of a loss of self, so that in this case neither erotic attraction nor political opportunity seem to offer any real possibility of self-affirmation or development, let alone fulfillment. We can only imagine what this novel would look like if Trollope wasn’t obliged to represent erotic choice as so terribly singular and final. Alice and her cousin Kate both describe the ways in which marriage to Grey would represent a kind of living death. In a letter to Grey, Alice laments that while his life can continue normally after marriage, in the same house and with the same day-to-day pursuits, for her it would be “as though I were passing through the grave to a new world” (136). Kate, advocating on behalf of her brother George, amplifies Alice’s concern when she compares a marriage to Grey as both death and imprisonment:

You would have been as much lost to me, had you become Mrs Grey of Nethercoats, Cambridgeshire, as though you had gone to heaven. . . . But such an Eden is not tempting to me, nor, as I think, to you. I can fancy you stretching your poor neck over the dyke, longing to fly away that you might cease to be at rest, but knowing the matrimonial dragon was too strong for any such flight. If ever bird banged his wings to pieces against gilded bars, you would have banged yours to pieces in that cage. (167)

The equation between absolute pleasure—this is heaven, or even Eden—and life-denying imprisonment becomes crystallized in Kate’s pile-up of metaphors. John Grey’s desirability is



easy and undeniable, but marriage cannot help but squelch personhood. Even erotic life cannot be all. All of this reaches its sad culmination in Alice's perfunctory reappearance in a party scene in *Phineas Finn*, the next novel of the Palliser series. John Grey having been listed among the M.P.'s and political power-players in attendance, we get a passing afterthought: "Mr Grey had also brought his wife" (342). Alice's indecision as to her object choice allows her a voice, a central narrative presence as the protagonist of a long and complex novel, but after her choice is made and the marriage finalized, she all but disappears from the ongoing plot of the Palliser series.

The slow resolution of John Grey's pursuit of Alice is one in which he echoes the narrator's paradoxical "reading" of Alice, something that takes the form of an analysis without offering any substantive argumentative content. Speaking to Palliser about his unconditional forgiveness of Alice, he says, "In all that she has done I think that I have seen her motives; and though I have not approved of them, I have always known them to be pure and unselfish. . . . I think she loves me," to which "Mr Palliser said that he was sure she did, though what ground he had for such assurance I am quite unable to surmise" (733). Despite our general sense—perhaps because of his opposition to the wild and debauched George Vavasor—that John Grey represents an ideal of rationality and good sense, he is actually deeply invested in the anti-logic of tautology. Palliser looks for a "ground" for Grey's reasoning; Grey understands love to be a ground in and of itself.

John Grey's marriage proposal culminates in a series of performative utterances, and it is worthwhile to think about the connection between the performative and the tautological.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential analysis of "periperformatives," or those statements that are "about performatives" and "cluster around performatives" is an important point of reference here (68),

Tautology, in its self-sufficiency of argumentation, has the effect of bringing certainty into being through mere repetition. It does something with words, if only on an imaginative level; in fact, as I have been suggesting, to make tautology signify seems to require an act of imagination—we might even go so far as to call it an act of faith in the reality of fictional worlds, rather than a rigorous desire that fictional language should at every moment be representative of an actual world. The performative requires a similar leap of faith to ensure its efficacy: faith in the validity or reality of the rituals and social forms that surround performatives and give them a kind of guarantee of effectiveness. If I have no belief in the validity or reality of the state, then the classic performative utterance, “I do,” fails to function for me. If we try to abstract a performative into the symbolization of deductive logic, it ends up seeming tautological: something like “I declare  $x$  has occurred, therefore  $x$  has occurred.” The meaningfulness of this tautological formation is dependent on a third proposition, “Some state of affairs gives me the authority to bring  $x$  (marriage, forgiveness, etc.) about.” John Grey plays on the relationship between forgiveness—which tends to be effected through the performative “I forgive you”—and forgetting, here altered into its own performative: “Let us forget it,” he says, “or rather, let us treat it as though it were forgotten . . . and the last twelve months shall be as though they never had been” (769). Alice herself immediately makes the leap from forgetting to forgiveness, responding, “I cannot forgive myself for what I have done, and . . . you ought not to forgive me,” to which Grey enjoins a final performative, equivalent in expression to the marital one: “But I do” (769). Grey’s confidence is shaky here, and elsewhere in the novel he never seems more aware of the imaginative act that grounds the performative. We see this in his quick shift from “let us” to “let us treat it as though,” with the “as though” continuing forward into his insistence

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especially insofar as she argues that periperformatives aid in the effort required to “disinterpellate from a performative scene” which presumes assent to dominant social values (*Touching Feeling*, 70).

on willed amnesia. The relationship between performativity and tautology emerges in Grey's repulsion of Alice's ethical argument, "you ought not to," with the mystified self-sufficiency of "but I do." The profound problem of *akrasia*—knowingly doing that which one acknowledges to be irrational, harmful, or morally wrong—is here coolly shuttled to the margins and replaced by unperturbed acceptance. "My psychological state? It is what it is." Performativity does not communicate anything, but it solicits the imagination in order to accomplish an important argumentative function—and in this case, it is coercive insofar as it pretends to be self-grounding.

Forgiveness in this novel is often, as Sharon Marcus argues, "violently coercive," and the reconciliation of Alice and Grey is no exception.<sup>36</sup> The reinstatement of tautology as a valid means of argument also involves forcing Alice to re-inhabit a body whose impulses she has been unable to trust, and Grey's physical and argumentative coercion mimics the violent intimidation that is George Vavasor's favored mode of persuasion. But importantly, John Grey softens the aggression of his demands by cloaking them in political and ethical language. "I have a right," he declares, "to demand your hand. My happiness requires it, and I have a right to expect your compliance. I do demand it. If you love me, Alice, I tell you that you dare not refuse me. If you do so, you will fail hereafter to reconcile it to your conscience before God" (771). Here we discover the important caveat of John Grey's trust in tautology, lest we begin to think that his primary goal is the empowerment of women's erotic desire. Much like the narrator, Grey uses anti-logical language *as though* it is an irrefutable form of logical argumentation. Grey dissimulates by transforming difficult language into the smoothness of ideology. And so Grey is able to segue in a deceptively seamless way from the imaginative meaning of the performative to

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<sup>36</sup> Marcus, *Between Women*, 255.

a more forceful declaration of rights and moral obligations. Louis Althusser's influential account of ideology emphasizes its relationship to the "primary 'obviousness'" of the idea that "you and I are subjects (free, ethical, etc. ...)." <sup>37</sup> On an unreflective account, obviousness might appear uncomplicated and uncontroversial, but Althusser argues that ideology "imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are 'obviousnesses') obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognize* and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud, or in the 'still, small voice of conscience'): 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'" <sup>38</sup> Far from being seamless and easily assimilable, obviousness can be a particularly dense manifestation of ideological coercion, and the way in which Althusser exploits the aggressiveness of tautology in his attempt to describe the insidious strategies of ideology is telling for our purposes.

In the scene that follows Grey's ethically charged set of demands, Grey makes the jump from argumentative trickery to physical aggression, and the sheer rapidity of this leap reminds us that in Trollope's fiction tautology has a close connection to the language of embodiment, a language of surfaces, opacity, and sheer force. The connection is made explicit in the description of Grey's physical intimidation of Alice: "She shrank from him, back against the stonework of the embrasure, but she could not shrink away from his grasp. She put up her hand to impede his, but his hand, *like his character and his words*, was full of power. It would not be impeded" (772, emphasis added). For Grey, irrefutability is a weapon, a hand with a mind of its own that cannot be held at bay, and Alice's submission to irrefutability comes to seem more like imprisonment than liberation. Grey's final words raise the stakes: "the battle is over now, and I have won it."

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<sup>37</sup> Althusser, "Ideology," 116.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

When Alice responds, “You win everything—always,” the narrator makes sure to tell us that “she still shrank from his embrace” (772). Anti-logic can disguise itself amongst the rationalistic language of rights, ethics, and religious duty in order to distract from the spuriousness of its own irrefutability. Marcus suggests that the coerciveness of forgiveness in the novel is made all the more effective by the dissimulation of that coercion. The interrogative of Trollope’s “hectoring title,” she argues, “encapsulates the novel’s recoding of force as ethics, commands as questions: not ‘you must forgive her,’ but ‘can you forgive her?’”<sup>39</sup> Marcus’s observation helps us to see how the power of anti-logical language might be made explicit as ideological critique rather than hidden as an ideological weapon. What if tautology were not “recoded,” and were instead embraced in all its aggressive opacity and anti-sociality? In the next section of this essay, I will suggest some answers to this question as they are elaborated upon by Trollope in *The Way We Live Now* and in the character of Glencora Palliser. But even in the final chapters of *Can You Forgive Her?*, as Alice Vavasor’s plot draws to a pained resolution, Trollope continues to remind us that while tautology can be easy and penetrable, it can also be as hard as a diamond.

*Can You Forgive Her?* ends on a mixed note. We seem to conclude with Alice having accepted the easiness of her love for Grey, but even once the marriage is decided, both we and Alice are left with a bad taste in our mouths. The importance of tautology is re-emphasized in the title of one of the final chapters, “Diamonds are Diamonds,” and the chapter itself re-emphasizes the mixed possibilities of tautology. Lady Midlothian, a wealthy relation of Alice’s who has advocated for Alice’s marriage to Grey, reconciles with Alice by giving her a gift of diamonds. Alice, still resentful of Lady Midlothian’s meddling, declares “I don’t care for diamonds,” and explains that in comparison to all the other jewels she has received, “to me they are just as good

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<sup>39</sup> Marcus, *Between Women*, 255.

as the others.” Alice’s friend Lady Glencora responds with the set of tautologies with which I opened this chapter: “Diamonds are diamonds, and garnets are garnets; and I am not so romantic but that I know the difference” (824-25). To the end, Alice resists the possibility that anything can be this simple, this glaringly manifest, and clings to the “romantic,” to George Vavasor’s insistence that the least intelligible states of mind are the most beautiful. Glencora’s pithy demonstration of the pellucidity of tautology, however, has the unintended effect of shutting aside the powerful symbolism of the diamonds. Glencora herself complains earlier in the novel that her choices in romance were constrained because she was “terribly weighted with her wealth” (254). Lady Midlothian, Alice’s nemesis, has won the day, and is weighing Alice down with jewels in much the same way. The gift attempts to concretize the finality of Alice’s marital decision and to prevent the continued wavering of her desire. We can’t help but think of Jane Eyre’s famous rejection of Rochester’s gift of jewels: “Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange: I would rather not have them,” a formulation in which the preposition “for” doubles as a sign of substitution. Jewels threaten to take the place of Jane Eyre.<sup>40</sup> In a similar way, diamonds, presented here as the example *par excellence* of the close connection between tautology and hardness, threaten to make Alice vanish altogether because they come at her as an attack from without. The alternative would be the possibility that the imaginative power of tautology could ground a female character from within, could be used by her as a weapon, and could in this way alter the shape of the marriage plot.

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<sup>40</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 311.

#### 4. Tautology is Hard / Tautology is Critique

Having explored the narrative ambivalence of *Can You Forgive Her?*, which registers the power of women's desire—and its relationship to tautology—as a problem, if only as a problem that doesn't get solved, I want to skip ahead by a decade to see how Trollope revisits the same set of problems in *The Way We Live Now*. As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, this is not a developmental narrative for Trollope, whose fiction vacillates on feminist arguments as much as Alice Vavasor on her choice of suitor. Rather, juxtaposing these two novels allows us to see the range of possibilities presented by Trollope's characteristic engagement with desiring women and with anti-logical language. In *The Way We Live Now*, female characters make use of tautology to express the force of their erotic desire. Rather than making tautology amenable to the language of liberal rationalism, these characters emphasize the body rather than the abstractions of logic, and the anti-social rather than the social. Because tautology refuses “good” logic and its implicit values of sociality, it becomes a form of critique, a language that resists both the rationality valued by liberalism and the economic rationalization of the heterosexual exchange in women. Because it stands apart from these rationalistic vocabularies, in other words, tautology is in a position to reject them.

Glencora Palliser, the protagonist of the other major courtship plot of *Can You Forgive Her?*, has been compared to Alice throughout the history of Trollope criticism up to the mid-twentieth century, time and time again being declared the more successful, appealing, or fully realized character, or described as the spirited rebel to Alice's earnest bore. The strangely intense derision of Alice finds its apotheosis in Robert Polhemus's dismissal of her character as “tedious,” “a hard-hearted, boring prude,” and a “self-righteous, conscientious, passive, sexless ‘good girl’” who pales in comparison to Glencora, who is “exuberant, touching, though often

foolish,” and “very much like that intractable, often unsatisfied, and always intriguing creature, ‘modern woman’” (111). The attempt to evaluate the successful realization of female characters according to their sexiness, and their sexiness according to their erotic openness and voraciousness, is in some ways puzzling and even offensive, but it indicates the ways in which this novel can be appropriated as part of a narrative of the cultural construction of the “prude” Victorian woman giving way to the new construction of the “exuberant” modern woman, both of which fictional identities are represented by kinds of “intractability.” As I transition from Alice’s wavering to the rebellious obstinacy of characters like Glencora, I risk rehearsing the same kind of spurious distinction in which characters are evaluated rather than analyzed, and in which female characters who use tautology as part of a critique of the dominant ideology are figured as feminist heroes. This kind of reading is what Amanda Anderson has described as the “aggrandized agency” that feminist criticism (and, I would suggest, even anti-feminist criticism like Polhemus’s) has often attributed to characters and authors who are “strange exceptions” to the patriarchal system, “exempted from networks of power.”<sup>41</sup> I aim to avoid this kind of reading, in part by insisting that what I am describing as tautological “critique” has severe limitations. Tautology can indicate an intractable resistance, but it can never articulate a progressive position; it is often represented as a kind of last resort when all other forms of argument seem impossibly insufficient, rather than as a consciously chosen strategy. In other words, although it may represent a partial detachment from the norms of moral accountability surrounding sexuality, it never represents a fully elaborated argument for a new set of norms or

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<sup>41</sup> Anderson, “Aggrandized Agency,” 46-47. While Anderson’s critique in this instance is primarily aimed at critics who accord particular historical individuals a kind of enhanced or omniscient understanding of ideology (as she argues that Mary Poovey, for example, does with Florence Nightingale), Anderson also gestures to particular fictional characters in the nineteenth-century (such as Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*) who are often assumed by critics to have a similarly privileged view of the workings of ideology.



for an abandonment of sexual norms altogether. In this sense, perhaps Barthes was partly right to link tautology to a kind of fearful rejection of a language that we feel has failed us.

The notion of tautology as critique offers a possible corrective to the tendency of many critics to reevaluate the Victorian marriage plot by finding increasingly complex ways to account for a marriage economy in which women are figured as objects of exchange. This is especially true of criticism that analyzes Trollope's plots of courtship and marriage, perhaps because we associate Trollope with his cleverly strategic and self-conscious plotting, which often seems to treat characters as moveable objects. The narrator of *Can You Forgive Her?*, so consistently frustrated by the need for psychological insight into the characters he describes, has already given us the perfect example of this Trollopian trope.<sup>42</sup> Analyzing women in novels as objects, however, gives us an impoverished sense of the complex dynamics of the ways in which women's agency could be represented novelistically in the Victorian period. In short, these readings offer a study of culture that reinterprets the culture's most vocal ideology. This is, of course, an important critical enterprise, which attunes us to the force and logic of dominant power structures in the Victorian period, and my own argument that Trollope was interested in the ways that ideologies of gender and sexuality insinuate themselves into our everyday lives takes part in this same kind of project. But we can add to this type of analysis a different critical perspective that attends to the power of fiction as a discourse that can register both dominant ideologies and dissenting counter-ideologies.

The existing debate over the significance of Trollope's marriage plots is too multifarious to rehearse exhaustively, but I am thinking especially of Elsie B. Michie's recent argument that

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<sup>42</sup> One particularly well-known example is the moment at which the narrator of *Barchester Towers* purposely spoils the suspense of the novel's marriage plot by informing the reader well in advance that Eleanor Bold will marry neither Mr. Slope nor Bertie Stanhope (I, 143).

in Trollope's fiction, the female object of exchange in the marriage economy is actually bifurcated, divided between "the woman one should marry and the woman one should not," and that we must attend to the complex ways in which heiresses modify the system of exogamous kinship and its connection to money.<sup>43</sup> I'm thinking also of William A. Cohen's reading of Trollope a decade earlier, in which Cohen performs an analysis of the ways that jewels stand for genitalia in *The Eustace Diamonds*, particularly the ways that this symbolism at once obfuscates sexuality by metaphorizing its embodied aspects and also "literalizes the economics of sexual difference."<sup>44</sup> Both are astute readings of the dominant ideology of Victorian gender inequality and the ways that it manifests itself in Trollope's fiction, but neither pays much attention to how more overt forms of resistance to this ideology—which figures women as valuables to be exchanged—might have been represented by Victorian writers, and by Trollope in particular. Critics like Michie and Cohen are certainly right that Trollope's fiction can often be misogynistic in its tendency to silence feminist critique. But on the opposite side of the spectrum of debate are recent readings that are attuned to Trollope's ambivalence about the ideology of gender and marriage. Kathy Alexis Psomiades's "Heterosexual Exchange and Other Victorian Fictions" offers a reading of *The Eustace Diamonds* that complicates Cohen's, and uses this reading to support the claim that the idea of the economic exchange in women was a myth generated by a culture feeling increasingly anxious about women's growing control over property and erotic desire. Sharon Marcus follows Psomiades by drawing our attention to a Victorian marriage form (female same-sex marriage) in which women are not made to be objects of exchange among men. I group myself with Psomiades and Marcus in wanting to investigate the ways in which

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<sup>43</sup> Michie, "Rich Woman, Poor Woman," 422.

<sup>44</sup> Cohen, *Sex Scandal*, 161.

Trollope registers the possibility of resistance (in this case through anti-logical language) without necessarily advocating for that resistance as a political program.

In an influential recent article, Amanda Anderson describes Trollope's focus on "recalcitrant psychology" as a feature of characterization and as an important element of the theory of critique that Trollope's fiction develops.<sup>45</sup> Recalcitrant psychology is a "powerful limit to the social" for Anderson (and, according to her, for Trollope) because it represents the stubborn knot of idiosyncrasy that prevents the smooth operation of social and ethical codes, despite the fact that those codes have individuals as both their origin and their end.<sup>46</sup> Just as I have suggested that Trollope can represent possibilities for critique without endorsing the argument of the critique itself, Anderson suggests that in Trollope's fiction, critique is "an ethos that can be cultivated, rather than simply an estranging practice that threatens traditional ethos."<sup>47</sup> One of the productive limitations of Anderson's argument is that because of the influence of the Habermasian ideal of communicative ethics on her conception of critique, her readings of Trollope focus exclusively on communicative language, especially persuasive language, whether in speech or writing. I want to redirect this focus somewhat to include language that is non-rational or non-communicative as part of our model of critique.<sup>48</sup> In other

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<sup>45</sup> Anderson, "Trollope's Modernity," 510.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 516.

<sup>48</sup> See also Gagnier, "Gender, Liberalism, and Resentment." Gagnier offers a similar response to Anderson's essay: she argues that Anderson's emphasis on rationalism and proceduralism as dominant values in a liberal culture blinds us to the importance of passion and affect in generating critique. As Gagnier puts it, "freedom is not just rational but *passional*, and when frustrated gives rise to physiological conditions of resentment, which govern our actions even when they are life- and self-denying" (246). Gagnier's key term of "resentment" is specific to her argument, but her broader line of thinking usefully pursues the notion that critique operates in multiple modes and can (indeed must) include a concept of the physiological and the affective, especially when the object of critique involves gender or race.

words, there might be something parallel to the dominant language that subjects *it* to critique. The idea of a “critique of critique” can easily seem overwrought, but it’s something close to what I’m pursuing here.<sup>49</sup> In this case, sexuality stands apart from liberal abstraction and rationalism and manifests itself in a language of unintelligibility, circularity, and impenetrable hardness—but at the same time a language that seems partially maimed or muted by the requirements of logical accountability that it cannot fully escape. Like Anderson, I maintain that Trollope does not offer an unambivalent feminist critique—the assertion of sexuality through anti-logical language is not entirely an “estranging practice” precisely because of its unintelligibility. While female characters use this tactic to resist or re-orient the social pressures of the marriage market, the irrationality of tautology precludes them from developing a positive counterargument. Tautology in this novel is nothing if not deeply ambivalent.

Hetta Carbury becomes the central character in one of the novel’s several courtship plots, and provides us with an apt place to begin, as a character whose refusals of erotic rationalization persist to the end of the novel. Hetta’s plot centers on a love triangle: her cousin, Roger Carbury, has long courted her and is seen as the sensible match both by himself and by Hetta’s mother, Lady Carbury; Hetta, however, is in love with Roger’s friend and protégé, Paul Montague, a dashing but financially unstable prospect. Echoes of the double-suitor plot of *Can You Forgive Her?* are immediately obvious—Trollope seems to be fascinated by a woman’s choice between stability and romance. The interesting variation in *The Way We Live Now* is in Hetta’s extreme opacity and her rejection of psychological reflection on her choice. Unlike Alice, who sees it as

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<sup>49</sup> For an account of this term in relation to the literature of twentieth-century Britain, see Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, 3-4. Walkowitz argues that mounting a “critique of critique” entails extending the scope of our attention to include the very categories that seem to make argument possible. I suggest that embodiment is one of these taken-for-granted categories that might subtend critique in surprising ways.

her duty to make a reasonable and socially justifiable choice, Hetta insists that her desire for Paul be accepted as an incontrovertible state of affairs, rather than treated as a proposition that is up for debate. Why does she love Paul? Because she does.

In other words, Hetta Carbury's refusal to give up on Paul Montague, and her accompanying refusal to explain herself, ironically registers the instability of a social concept like *love* and forcibly removes the concept from the realm of the social or ethical by allowing its signification to be self-generating as well as self-centered. For much of the novel, any articulate expression of Hetta's desire for Paul is withheld by the narrative. It is simply a fact that can be taken for granted by both Roger and Lady Carbury in their clueless attempts to direct Hetta's marital choice. The one miniscule piece of evidence we have that Paul really is a significant obstacle to Hetta's engagement to Roger comes in a minor narratorial aside that closes the second chapter. We have been told that Roger is in love with Hetta, and then the narrator remarks, "he was, however, nearly forty years old, and there was one Paul Montague whom [Hetta] had seen" (I, 21). The emphasis on the visual is important here—remember that Hetta and Paul barely speak to each other until well into the second volume, at which point her love for Paul has already taken hold as an incontrovertible fact. The text's explanation is that Hetta had "seen" Paul, and the "enough-said" of her visual attraction is put in direct relation to the "enough-said" of Roger's undesirable age. Later on, once Paul and Hetta have finally confessed their love to each other, she initiates a puzzling exchange in which she explicitly and repeatedly tells Paul, her betrothed, how far inferior he is to Roger, whom she has rejected. She tells Paul that Roger is "as good as gold" and "ever so much better" than Paul, all the while "stroking his [Paul's] hair with her hand and looking into his eyes" (II, 149). The physical trumps the moral,

as Hetta goes on to declare, “I suppose we ought to love the best people best; but I don’t, Paul” (II, 150). Hetta loves the best-*looking* person the best, and she will not apologize for it.

Hetta’s desire, then, is deeply unspoken in a certain way, and yet spoken *about* at several points in a particularly meaningless version of the language of *love*; in other words, Hetta must use a word like *love*, saturated with social and ethical meaning, in order to cover up the anti-sociality of tautology, much as John Grey uses rationalistic language to cover-up the irrational nature of his appeals to Alice. Hetta rejects her mother’s repeated suggestion that she reconsider Roger by countering, “It is to me horrible that you should propose it to me when you know that I love that other man with my whole heart” (II, 385). If we parse the logic of the line of argumentation here, we find that it is circular: “you ought not to press me because you know that I love him; you know that I love him because I said so; I said so because I love him,” and so on. *Love* is the assumed conclusion that forms a knot in any attempt to disentangle Hetta’s obstinate self-centeredness. We only know that Hetta’s working definition of love is first of all somehow tautological or self-referential—I love him because I do and that should suffice—and furthermore is decidedly different from her mother’s socialized conception of love. Lady Carbury offers her version of love in a rumination on Hetta’s stubbornness:

She [Lady Carbury] herself had within the last few weeks refused to join her lot with that of a man she really liked, because her wicked son was so grievous a burden on her shoulders. A woman, she thought, if she were unfortunate enough to be a lady without wealth of her own, must give up everything, her body, her heart,—her very soul if she were that way troubled,—to the procuring of a fitting maintenance for herself. Why should Hetta hope to be more fortunate than others? (II, 383)

Lady Carbury acknowledges desiring love (or like)—she feels the weight of “really liking” Mr. Brune—but more importantly, she valorizes love as a social practice that is only concerned with the non-financial self and with erotic desire in a narrowly limited and conditional way. For Hetta, on the other hand, desire is self-centered, and self-grounding (as is tautology) rather than socially

responsible (as is rational debate). The refusal of justification necessitated by an anti-social desire becomes an end in itself, or a potent form of recalcitrance, to return to Anderson's powerful terminology. Once she sets herself in opposition to Lady Carbury, Hetta's rebellion becomes capacious: "she was disposed to do battle with her mother and her cousin in the matter—if only with the object of showing that she would not submit her own feelings to their control. She was savage to the point of rebellion against all authority." *To the point of* becomes the key phrase here if we continue to follow Anderson's logic. Hetta has registered a limit—brought the massive generalization of *all authority* into view in her local and specific refusal to cede—without really transgressing that limit other than figuratively or microcosmically. There's a deep paradox here: how can one be "savage *to the point of* ..."? Doesn't savagery assume the crossing of a limit between the human and the sub-human, the morally upright and the radically uncivilized? Unlike Alice Vavasor, for whom the anti-logic of tautology represents a feminine evasion of moral responsibility, Hetta Carbury holds tenaciously to tautology as a rejection of a version of moral responsibility that cannot account for the force of erotic desire.

Marie Melmotte presents us with a different version of the same problem: if Hetta seems to resist the authority of socially sanctioned love almost silently, by refusing explanation even in the interiority afforded her by the novel, Marie seems more aware of the physicality and aggressiveness of her rebellious desire. The daughter of the mysterious and morally corrupt banker whose failed Ponzi scheme drives one of the novel's plots, Marie is dissatisfied by her function in the marriage market as a wealthy heiress whose marriage into aristocracy must guarantee the social respectability of her nouveau-riche family. She is conscious that her money gives her the power to catch an attractive man, and his moral character is not especially important to her. Early on in the novel we get the first implications of Marie's germinal feeling

of power in terms which are reworked, repeated, and amplified throughout the novel: “The girl herself, too, began to have an opinion. . . . [S]he had had experience since Lord Nidderdale, with a half laugh, had told her that he might just as well take her for his wife, and was now tempted from time to time to contemplate her own happiness and her own condition” (II, 33).<sup>50</sup> She rebels against her family’s aspirations by holding fast to her attraction to Felix Carbury, Hetta’s debauched brother who has mercenary intentions in his courtship of Marie. When we see her dancing with Felix at Mme. Melmotte’s ball, we understand that erotic desire is the locus of her “temptation” to self-assertion:

To give Felix Carbury what little praise might be his due, it is necessary to say that he did not lack physical activity. He would dance, and ride, and shoot eagerly, with an animation that made him happy for the moment. It was an affair not of thought or calculation, but of physical organization. And Marie Melmotte had been thoroughly happy. She loved dancing with all her heart if she could only dance in a manner pleasant to herself. (II, 37)

Far from being the mute object of exchange, Marie understands how to exploit economy to her own ends, for pleasure rather than for status, for sheer “physical organization” rather than rational “calculation.”

Even when Marie briefly doubts that looks can be all, a comparison of Felix to Lord Nidderdale quickly returns her to her grounding in erotic desire:

Sir Felix Carbury was not in all points as nice as she had thought him. Of his beauty there was no doubt; but then she could trust him for no other good quality. Why did he not come to her? Why did he not show some pluck? Why did he not tell her the truth? . . . Lord Nidderdale was, she thought, not at all beautiful. He had a commonplace, rough face, with a turn-up nose, high cheekbones, no especial complexion, sandy-colored

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<sup>50</sup> Lauren Byler has recently argued in “If the Shoe Fits” that “the girl” in Trollope’s fiction stands as a paradoxical symbol of both utility (she is required for the smooth functioning of the marriage plot) and uselessness (the marriage plot depends on her “marital impasses that generate narrative and lubricate readerly desires”) (268). Her emphasis on the way in which the desires of female characters can “clog” narrative momentum and can bridge the gap between social utility and uselessness complements my own sense of these desires as often refusing linear, communicative language while still signifying resistance.



whiskers, and bright laughing eyes,—not at all an Adonis such as her imagination had painted. (II, 67-68)

Marie's single-minded interest in looks once again undermines the social or ethical functions of courtship and marriage. But the difference between Marie and Hetta—and the similarity between Marie and Alice Vavasor—lies in Marie's willingness to vocalize a rationale for her stubborn desire, albeit a rationale that follows the logic of physical force and counter-force rather than the logic of morality. She confesses to Hetta that her desire is a direct reaction against her father's physical abuse: "He beats me sometimes. . . . But I never will yield a bit for that. When he boxes and thumps me I always turn and gnash my teeth at him. Can you wonder that I want to have a friend? Can you be surprised that I should be always thinking of my lover?" (II: 167). Socially transgressive physical desire becomes Marie's way of resisting attempts to cow her through physical intimidation and violence. In *Can You Forgive Her?*, Glencora describes her own fantasy life in the same terms, as a kind of belated program of resistance to the aggressive pressure from her wealthy relations under which she has buckled by marrying Plantaganet Palliser: "They browbeat me and frightened me till I did as I was told;—and now;—what am I now? . . . I tell you that every day and every night,—every hour of every day and of every night,—I am thinking of the man I love. I have nothing else to think of. . . . I am always talking to Burgo in my thoughts; and he listens to me. I dream that his arm is around me—" (305). While Marie presents her resistance as a proactive strategy (I won't marry him and my resistance is figured by my insistence that I fantasize about another man), Glencora's situation is marked by erotic privation in which fantasy is a tragic half-compensation (I married a man who I'm unattracted to, so fantasy offers me a surrogate erotic life).

When her erotic object is denied to her and it becomes apparent that she cannot escape being married off by her father, her mock concession, delivered to Mme. Melmotte, exposes the

sexuality at the heart of the exchange in heiresses: “I’ll marry Lord Nidderdale, or that horrid Mr. Grendall who is worse than all the others, or his old fool of a father,—or the sweeper at the crossing,—or the black man that waits at table, or anybody else that he chooses to pick up” (II: 170). By inserting indiscriminate desire into this economy Marie actually registers sexuality as the limit of the purely socioeconomic structure of the marriage market. In other words, her insistence on desire makes the novel’s heterosexual marital exchange impossible, since that patriarchal system would then require a woman’s readiness to desire everyone and anyone chosen on her behalf. (Or, alternatively, it would require her to have no desire at all, only indifferent acquiescence.) Just as any proposition can lead by deduction to a tautology, the logic of the marriage market can always lead by a similar trick of deduction to miscegenation. We hear echoes here of Alice Vavasor’s insistence to Glencora that “one can’t marry all the people one likes” (287). The relationship between Melmotte’s abuse and Marie’s rebellion is not one of simple action and reaction; rather, Marie clings to desire and to the irrefutability of tautology because it offers her a way of frustrating her father’s power as a trafficker of women—a frustration that parallels his similar impotence as a trafficker in stocks.

## **5. Tautology and the Body**

If tautology in fiction has the potential to disguise an insidious ideology and also to critique that ideology, doesn’t the meaning of the term become capacious to the point of uselessness? Can tautology ever have a specific significance if it seems to have such a wide range of uses in Trollope’s novels? In setting out to establish Trollope’s different uses of tautology and the anti-logical, I have also intended to indicate one function of this linguistic tic that seems to remain constant in his fiction: anti-logical language is always a language that

resists abstraction because it resists meaningful mathematical symbolization. “If P and Q, then P” represents a logical truth, but no matter what real objects its terms represent, the statement can never really say anything about the world. Kant got it right in this sense: when considered as objects of logical study, tautologies are empty, useless, contain no new knowledge about reality. But the phrase “I love him because I love him” does seem to describe a particular state of affairs with a power that properly logical language cannot achieve. In other words, tautology is a kind of language through which the body can manifest itself with particular vividness. And so the ambivalence that surrounds these anti-logical knots echoes the multiple ways in which the body can communicate or refuse to communicate.

Bodies and their desires can seem to hinder social utility by insisting that we obey them unreflectively and impulsively. For Alice Vavasor, a woman who harbors political ambitions and cares about the ethics of social engagement, the imperative to submit to the circular argumentation of embodied desire can seem positively dangerous. The force of desire, and the force of its anti-logical language, can be imposed upon one from without as physical force and sexual pressure. On the other hand, bodies and desires might, for these very same reasons, be understood as powerful mechanisms of social refusal when the social seems to promise little in return for accession to its demands. We might in fact go further, and claim that understanding the body as a limit-point, impervious to certain kinds of social demands and moral duties, can represent a radical rejection of the very idea of “social context” or “public life.” It might be a point of view that gestures to intimate rather than abstract sociability—opaque idiosyncrasy rather than social accountability—as the novel’s proper object of concern when it comes to the representation of individuality and the questioning of the ideology of liberal individualism. Enclosing oneself inside a body that desires but refuses to communicate except in the obstinate

language of desire is, according to this perspective, an assertion that sexuality has a local, intimate, and personal significance that is not available to public debate.

## **Part II**

### *Forms*

## Chapter Three

### *Illimitable Wants: Eliot's Vagueness*

#### 1. The Forms of Vagueness

“Form,” George Eliot argues, “as an element of human experience, must begin with the perception of separateness.”<sup>1</sup> No concept of form is comprehensible, she insists, without a more basic concept of one thing being different or separate from an adjacent thing. She restates the point in various ways: “Fundamentally, form is unlikeness” (432); “every difference is form” (433); and finally, “what is form but the limit of that difference by which we discriminate one object from another?” (434). But where, Eliot wonders, does difference come from, and how do we perceive things as distinct wholes when they are often entirely continuous with what surrounds them? She insists that “with this fundamental discrimination is born in necessary antithesis the sense of wholeness or unbroken connexion in space & time: a flash of light is a whole compared with the darkness which precedes & follows it; the taste of sourness is a whole & includes parts or degrees as it subsides” (433). What begins as an emphatic equation between form and separateness develops into a dialectical model of the manifold ways in which difference and sameness interact in the genesis of form:

And as knowledge continues to grow by its alternating processes of distinction & combination, seeing smaller and smaller unlikenesses & grouping or associating these under a common likeness, it arrives at the conception of wholes composed of parts more & more multiplied and highly differenced, yet more & more absolutely bound together by various conditions of common likeness or mutual dependence. (433)

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot, “Notes on Form in Art,” in Pinney, ed., *Essays*, 432. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

What Eliot is after in her unpublished essay “Notes on Form in Art” is a way of talking about this paradoxical interdependence of likeness and difference, or about the way in which the edges, boundaries, and distinctions that seem to make form possible and perceptible always appear, upon closer inspection, to waver and to blur. Eliot is concerned, in other words, with the philosophical problem of vagueness and its way of hobbling our capacities for perceiving separateness: the exact point of transition from light to dark, for example, or from sour to sweet.

Wittgenstein’s theorization of vagueness in *Philosophical Investigations* can help us to see the everydayness of this philosophical problem, in the ways in which we fumble through our project of making meanings for one another despite, or often by virtue of, the vagueness of our language. Wittgenstein asks us to imagine the affinity between “two pictures, one of which consists of colour patches with blurred boundaries and the other of patches similarly shaped and distributed but with sharp boundaries.”<sup>2</sup> In such a case, Wittgenstein argues, “the affinity is just as undeniable as the difference.”<sup>3</sup> He goes on with this thought experiment, trying to find the point at which the undeniable affinity between the blurred and the sharp outline ceases to hold:

For imagine having to draw a sharp picture ‘corresponding’ to a blurred one. In the latter there is a blurred red rectangle; you replace it with a sharp one. Of course—several such sharply delineated rectangles could be drawn to correspond to the blurred one.—But if the colours in the original shade into one another without a hint of any boundary, won’t it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one? Won’t you then have to say: “Here I might just as well draw a circle as a rectangle or a heart, for all the colours merge. Anything—and nothing—is right.”—And this is the position in which, for example, someone finds himself in ethics or aesthetics when he looks for definitions that correspond to our concepts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., §77.

Wittgenstein points out here that some vagueness in language is natural, and indeed workable: after all, we need some flexibility in the way that we understand and apply concepts in order to communicate at all. If my concepts are too rigid, and if nothing less than a perfectly sharp overlay of my concept upon yours will satisfy me, then I risk a tragic kind of solipsism in which the world becomes radically unavailable to me, in which nothing can be right, nothing certain. If I allow vagueness to become too generalized, on the other hand, and lose all sense of boundaries, then I'm equally adrift, groping through a world in which anything—and nothing—is right.

Despite the association of the vagueness problem with twentieth-century thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell, it has ancient origins and continued to be an object of inquiry for philosophers, and indeed for novelists such as Eliot, in Victorian England.<sup>5</sup> Eubulides, a contemporary of Aristotle, is usually credited with the first elaboration of what we call the sorites paradox, from the Greek *soros* meaning “heap,” which demonstrates the way in which vagueness inheres in everyday language. The paradox asks us to picture a heap of sand, from which we begin to remove grains one by one. At what point, we're asked, does the heap become a non-

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive (if deeply cynical) précis of the explosion of contemporary academic interest in vagueness, see Rorty, “How Many Grains Make a Heap?” Rorty's review of Scott Soames's multi-volume history of analytic philosophy argues that the problem of vagueness is something of a red herring around which the analytic school has developed. Rorty's perspective is particularly useful as an example of a pragmatist's conviction that vagueness is a superficial problem, since as long as language “works” in its social deployment, our investigations of its deep insufficiencies as a representation of an actual world can never actually provide us with any worthwhile or useable insights. For an example of a literary argument that centers around vagueness but (mistakenly I think) describes it as a philosophical invention of the twentieth century and a unique product of the linguistic turn, see Quigley, “Modern Novels and Vagueness.” Quigley explicitly argues that “it was not until the end of the nineteenth century with the origins of the analytic tradition that vagueness resurfaced as a key concept” (106), but fails to note that the origins of the analytic tradition, and especially of logical positivism, extend at least back to the 1840's and Augustus de Morgan's initial development of symbolic logic. On her account of the philosophical history, therefore, vagueness comes to the fore as a flashpoint for debate between logical positivists (Russell, Whitehead, early Wittgenstein, etc.) and pragmatists (Peirce, W. James, Dewey, etc.); on my account, this later debate was in fact a development of an existing nineteenth-century debate between proponents of mathematic logic (de Morgan, Boole, Venn, etc.) and proponents of a traditional logic more fully grounded in ordinary language (primarily Mill).



heap? We don't doubt that this change must take place at some point, even by the painstaking process of removing grains individually. But it seems absolutely impossible to ascribe the change to the removal of a particular grain. The concept of heap, in other words, is blurry. It seems to include any number of borderlines cases in which we struggle to assign a truth-value to a simple statement such as "this is a heap." We can imagine temporal and spatial dimensions to vagueness: the paradox asks us to consider the difficulty of isolating the moment in time when one thing turns into another, as well as to consider the insufficiency of our diagrammatic methods of imagining categories as bounded by sharp lines.

Vagueness poses deep problems, in other words, for logic and epistemology, and as Wittgenstein points out, these problems quickly ramify into fields such as ethics and aesthetics, which seem to rely especially heavily upon our capacity to define concepts precisely. The sorites paradox suggests that binary logic might not always work in defining concepts, since the borderline cases highlighted by the sorites aren't at all amenable to sharp divisions between "true" and "false," or between "this" and "that." This has led some logicians to various versions of "many-valued" logic, whether it's a system that imagines several discrete truth-values between true and false, or a system of "fuzzy" logic that imagines truth as a kind of spectrum. If we decide to stick it out with binary logic, then we're forced to accept that our knowledge about the world has severe limits, that there must be a sharp conceptual boundary between "heap" and "non-heap," specifiable to a single grain of sand, but that it's simply a boundary that we can never intuit.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, I'll argue that this set of philosophical problems underlies George Eliot's practice of psychological realism, especially insofar as that practice presses at the limits of

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<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the history of these different approaches to the sorites, see Williamson, *Vagueness*.

language's capacity to capture the phenomenology of clear ethical thinking and its vexed relationship to the haziness of desire. If it seems straightforwardly true that logic provides a "sharp" or "clear" way of reasoning in language while desire is vague or hazy in its resistance of logical truth, then Eliot often shows us that logic and desire may be more structurally analogous than we'd expect as forms of knowledge about the organization of our psychic and erotic lives. Indeed, ethical reasoning may often seem fuzzy and erotic desire may appear to us as incredibly clear. Both are structures, in the end, that are given shape by a dialectical relationship between formal clarity and formal vagueness. In *Middlemarch*, Will Ladislaw applies a version of that ancient moral maxim, "know thyself," to his evaluation of Casaubon's ethical misstep in marrying Dorothea despite his inability to make her happy: "A man was bound to know himself better than that" (360). But it's left unclear what exactly it is that Casaubon is, or was, bound to know: can one know about one's incapacity for erotic investment and romantic attachment in the same way that one can know the sort of moral law that Ladislaw asserts? Or can one know oneself insofar as one is always interconnected with others, affecting them in unpredictable and sometimes uncontrollable ways? And if these two kinds of knowledge are somehow mixed—if erotic self-understanding is part of a larger project of rational and moral self-knowledge, then how can we tell where one ends and the other begins? In other words, although most philosophical discussions of vagueness take as their central problem the relationship of language to the external world, Eliot focuses her attention on the reflexive relationship of language to self, or of language to immediate phenomenal experience. How can it be possible to narrate psychic life (whether one's own, or another's, or that of a fictional character) if it often appears to us in reality as a tumultuous flood of overlapping modes of thinking, knowing, and desiring? More importantly, should our ultimate goal be to locate and draw sharp boundaries between categories

of psychic experience? It certainly seems, after all, as if we'd be better equipped to act ethically if we could know ourselves—our intentions and motivations—with a fine-grained precision. What would ethical self-knowledge look like, on the other hand, if it incorporated vagueness as a unique practice of knowing, with its own set of ethical possibilities?

My argument will focus on Eliot's use of vagueness as a powerful rubric through which to understand the relationship between ethics and erotics: between on the one hand the rational claims and duties that ground Eliot's ethics, and on the other hand the idiosyncratic impulses, feelings, and "flows" that define her conception of the erotic. This is the model of erotic feeling famously described in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) as "the seductive guidance of illimitable wants."<sup>7</sup> I'll begin this chapter by situating Eliot's thinking about vagueness as a problem of novelistic form within the context of nineteenth-century philosophical accounts of vagueness and its potential "solutions," a problem most fully worked out in John Stuart Mill's *A System of Logic*. I'll then present a reading of Maggie Tulliver's plot of erotic bildung in *The Mill on the Floss* that centers around the ambiguities of this phrase, and its implications for understanding Eliot's representation in this novel of a character who persists, to a tragic end, in understanding sexuality and ethical reason as fundamentally antithetical domains of knowledge. Finally, I'll move on to a reading of *Middlemarch*, in which I argue that this later novel finds Eliot returning to the problem of vagueness, this time with a greater attention to its potential productivity in thinking and reasoning about erotic desire. The contrast between these two novels should make clear that Eliot's understanding of vagueness as a way of linking erotics and a logical model of ethical reasoning does not carry with it a predictable ethical judgement. In other words, we can't say that Eliot thought it was "good" or "bad" to attend to vagueness or to think vaguely; we can

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<sup>7</sup> Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 325. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

at best say that she acknowledged the impossibility of avoiding vagueness in our relationship to language and our practices of thinking and desiring, and so she sought to account for the particular texture or the unique affective experiences associated with vagueness, while also trying to account in some way for its productivity as well as its limitations.

My reading of Eliot is in many ways in conversation with David Kurnick's recent work on the relationship in Eliot's fiction between erotics and what he calls "social knowledge," and I follow him in understanding these two domains as intimately related rather than mutually exclusive for Eliot. But while Kurnick focuses on the practice of novel-reading itself as a model for the ways in which critical detachment and objectivity can themselves be understood as objects of erotic desire, I suggest that in Eliot's fiction erotic desire aims for a kind of miry *depth* of situated ethical knowledge rather than (or, more accurately, in addition to) the detached, critical view of the narrator or the reader.<sup>8</sup> The basic question for Eliot is: when does an erotic desire become ethical, or when can it be understood as making a legible ethical claim? When is it more than an opaque, embodied cause? When, instead, can it be understood as an ethical reason? Does this tipping over from the merely impulsive happen as a result of a slow intensification or narrowing of desire, and if so, when or where does the transformation happen? Or is it that desire

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<sup>8</sup> See especially Kurnick, "An Erotics of Detachment"; and also Kurnick, "Abstraction and the Subject of Novel-Reading." Karen Chase, in *Eros and Psyche*, has understood this same problem in yet a different way: she describes the complex way in which Eliot's psychological realism combines influences from physiological psychology and a more traditional philosophy of reason. On Chase's view, Eliot is interested not in the inarticulateness of erotic desire, but in showing "passion as it enters consciousness and informs motive, passion as it enters the realm of idea, image, and belief" (142). While Chase argues convincingly for Eliot's syncretic representation of psychology, she doesn't attend to the profound epistemological and ethical problems raised by such syncretism. If passion "enters" the realm of idea or "informs" motive, can we still call it passion? How much idea or motive can be transfused with passion before we are forced to call it by some other name or designate it by some other concept? Finally, Sally Shuttleworth, in "Sexuality and Knowledge in *Middlemarch*," has also argued for the influence of physiological psychology on Eliot's fiction, especially in its "insistent segregation of sexuality from the domain of knowledge" (435). On Shuttleworth's account, physiological psychology is characterized by an internal contradiction by which the mind is made coextensive with the body, while sexuality is nonetheless excluded from such a model by considering it in evolutionary terms as a primitive remnant.

must be tempered and reasoned with in order to modify it into an ethical motivation? If it seems dangerous to be guided by what is “illimitable,” for both Eliot and a later thinker such as Wittgenstein, then when and where do the limits appear that would make erotic desire meaningful rather than merely seductive?

I’ve gestured to several different understandings of logic and reason that are at play simultaneously in Eliot, and throughout my reading of her fiction, and it’s important to sort them out, insofar as that is possible, at the outset. Theories of symbolic logic purposefully exclude vagueness. There is no vagueness, after all, in mathematics, and as we’ll see, part of the motivation for the development of a mathematical system of logic was the idea that one could find a domain of linguistic meaning freed from the difficulties of vagueness, an idea that reached its apotheosis with the work of Bertrand Russell, but which we can see being worked out in the Victorian theories of symbolic logicians such as George Boole and John Venn. But as we now know, “logic” covered a terrain in the Victorian period that extended far beyond questions of algebra to questions of ordinary language, riddled as it is with vagueness. In this field, the goal was not the elimination of vagueness, but rather a pragmatic theory about how it could be controlled, limited, or stabilized—how we could continue to use language logically, in other words, despite its intrinsic vagueness. A thinker such as John Stuart Mill, with his wide-ranging idea of logic as a general philosophy of language, gives us a model for the ways in which logic and desire might be understood as analogous rather than in conflict: both seem to have an abiding and intimate relationship to vagueness as a kind of underlying formal principle that demands to be reckoned with. But our everyday understanding of logic as a realm of clarity and precision tends to put logic and desire, or even logic and ethical deliberation, at odds. Indeed, the debates between “ordinary language” logicians such as Mill and symbolic logicians such as

Boole or Venn often came down to the question of whether ethical reasoning could be understood as “logical” at all. Mill said yes, the symbolic logicians said probably not. In the context of the realist novel, of course, this question is crucial—what are the basic forms that enable deliberative ethical reasoning? Are they vague or are they not? If they are vague, then it seems possible that the haziness of erotic desire might not be ethically meaningless, and yet it would also mean that ethical reasoning is fundamentally less lucid than we would often like it to be. If they are not vague, then our deliberations appear much more persuasive and authoritative—beholden as they are to abstract mathematical forms that seem indisputable—and yet this would also seem to hollow out ethical life, to deny its confusions and its embodied intuitions, and finally its affective richness.

## 2. Suppressed Transitions

“Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending.”<sup>9</sup> This is the narrator of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1872-3), opening the novel’s final chapter by claiming that a fictional conclusion must be something like a shading off into an implied but shadowy fictional future, an acknowledgement that characters’ lives continue somewhere, in the readers’ or the author’s imagination perhaps, and that our exit from a fictional world is never as sharp or as simple as slamming shut a book. Eliot’s narrator shows us a sharp line—a limit—before immediately proceeding to blur it, or to make it vibrate in our field of mental vision through the invocation of a kind of uncertainty principle, much as Eliot does in defining form. And of course, Eliot opens *Daniel Deronda* (1876) with an epigraph that picks up where *Middlemarch* leaves off, as ending cycles back to beginning: “Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even

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<sup>9</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 832. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought."<sup>10</sup>

Suddenly the concept of limit doesn't seem so easily apprehensible. At the very least it seems thoroughly arbitrary; there's no clear place where the limit necessarily falls, rather there's a range of possibilities within which we choose, potentially somewhat randomly, where to begin, and where to end. When the narrator of *Middlemarch* describes Dorothea's bewildered experience of Rome, with its many-layered histories crowding in upon her, we get a similar description of "historical knowledge" itself, the elusive distanced perspective which, the narrator tells us, "traces out the suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts" (193).

Keen insight and profound knowledge, at least on Eliot's view, promise us not a neatly organized understanding but an often vertiginous sense that there are no real limits, no genuine contrasts, but only our words and our forms and our suppressions, which comfort us with the appearance of sharp outlines. Dorothea's uncle, Mr. Brooke, elevates this kind of comforting illusion to the status of an ethical imperative when he cautions her in his circuitous way against the kind of deep thinking about knowledge and reason that dizzy her in Rome: "The fact is," he says, "human reason may carry you a little too far—over the hedge, in fact. It carried me a good way at one time; but I saw it would not do. I pulled up; I pulled up in time. But not too hard. I have always been in favour of a little theory: we must have Thought, else we shall be landed back in the dark ages." Mr. Brooke's image of the limit is something like the asymptote that always approaches the edge, or indeed the hedge, and yet always pulls up. To be carried away by reason, it seems, to cross over the hedge, is to end up outside of the realm of reason altogether. We should have a little bit of thought and theory, Mr. Brooke admits: just enough with which to

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<sup>10</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 3.

get by, to make sense, to be civilized, and to be understood. The haunting question posed by his metaphor is, where would I be if I did not pull up in time? What if I drop the reins, and gallop on? After all, even Mr. Brooke understands that finding the limit is often a game of feeling things out: “there are oddities in things,” he says. “Life isn’t cast in a mould—cut out by rule and line, and that sort of thing” (41).

Henry James invokes the problem of limits in a different register in his 1873 review of *Middlemarch*, published shortly after the novel’s final serial installment. He claims that “It sets a limit ... to the development of the old-fashioned English novel.”<sup>11</sup> He takes Eliot to task for having become “philosophic” and “obscure,” for the novel’s “diffuseness” and for Eliot’s general “loss of simplicity,” which he suggests “lies buried (in a splendid mausoleum) in *Romola*.”<sup>12</sup> He compares the expectations set up by the opening chapters, that the novel would be “an organized, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with a sense of design and construction,” with the feeling one has by the novel’s conclusion that it has been “a mere chain of episodes, broken into accidental lengths and unconscious of the influence of a plan.”<sup>13</sup> James’s account would have it that Eliot pushes the traditional novel to (or beyond) a clear formal limit by her very skepticism about the viability of limits: the limits, that is, that separate fiction from philosophy, the controlled from the diffuse, the simple from the complex, the composed from the formless, and, of course, the beginning from the ending.<sup>14</sup> It’s not that *Middlemarch* is without

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<sup>11</sup> James, review of *Middlemarch*, in *Art of Criticism*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Kent Puckett has also argued, in “Stupid Sensations,” that James’s description of *Middlemarch* as a novel with a “brain” highlights the particularly important vagueness of the distinction between mind and embodiment in Eliot’s fiction. As Puckett puts it, “the brain is not only an organ of intelligence, but also an organ; it is a thing that not only thinks, but ‘throbs’” (297). And therefore the centrality of the brain to



form or moments of direct simplicity, it's that Eliot seems to James recklessly heedless of the outlines that define these categories. She slides in and out of them unpredictably. Or perhaps, in the end, Eliot is really unconvinced about the efficacy of limits, preferring to occupy the fuzzy spaces of uncertainty—the borderline cases, as we call them—that lie between clear categories.

Victorian philosophers generally agreed with Eliot (and Wittgenstein in turn agreed with them) that some level of vagueness is productive and in fact necessary. Vagueness gives us room for debate as to where the outer limits of a concept like “the traditional novel” lie. John Stuart Mill’s treatment of vagueness, for example, is eminently liberal in its appeal to reasoned consensus as a way of making do with the blurriness of ordinary language. In *A System of Logic*, he anticipates Wittgenstein in arguing that “vagueness may exist without practical inconvenience; and cases will appear, in which the ends of language are better promoted by it than complete precision” (46). He offers the example of “human” as a vague concept. Although we might agree to define humanity as including the quality of rationality, we run into trouble when we realize that rationality is “a quality which admits of degrees” and that “it has never been settled what is the lowest degree of that quality which would entitle any creature to be considered a human being” (46). This is a good thing on Mill’s view. It allows to consider borderline cases of rationality—infant children, the mentally disabled—with a kind of liberal open-mindedness that would allow us to include them in the category of humanity based upon their various affinities with that category rather than excluding them based upon overly intransigent or quantitative criteria. Vagueness is what allows, in other words, for the practice of sympathy with those both like and unlike ourselves—different in many ways, even perhaps in the capacity for rationality, but still, after all, human. We come to provisional or working

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this reading of *Middlemarch* gets at a host of questions, Puckett suggests, about how we separate the “higher-order” cognitive functions of the brain from its “lower-order” nervous functions.

definitions that remain open to change, and in so doing we stay true to the inescapable problem of vagueness while still drawing clear, if temporary, forms overtop of it.

Like Wittgenstein, however, Mill is sensitive to the possibility that such arguments can easily be taken too far. They might, in other words, give us license to play fast and loose with a whole variety of concepts whose definitions carry enormous ethical weight. It doesn't take much to get from blurry boundaries to no boundaries at all, and so Mill insists that the uncertainty inherent to language "can only be free from mischief when guarded by strict precautions" (46). Mill's precautions are pragmatic, and grounded upon the liberal values of reasoned debate and consensus. Rather than pursuing vagueness to its philosophical depths, we can stop its creeping spread by coming to a set of provisional agreements about the uses and definitions of concepts. If sharp boundaries don't always exist in language itself, Mill argues, a person should invent them, "by giving to every general concrete name which he has frequent occasion to predicate, a definite and fixed connotation; in order that it may be known what attributes, when we call an object by that name, we really mean to predicate of the object" (49). When I speak of a "heap of sand" or a "person," I must define my terms: perhaps I insist that when I say "heap" I mean no fewer than five grains, and by "person" I insist that the capacity for abstract thinking is where I draw the line. Ideally, part of the collective project of logic would be to come to a consensus through reasoned debate about what we agree to mean by such words. We don't want to be too rigid here. We need to agree as well upon the exceptional situations in which flexibility and a tolerance of borderline cases are useful and productive, but we need above all to set some hard and fast limits. And yet, as we've seen, vagueness is not merely a problem of unclear social conventions about language, and Mill himself implies as much in his initial assessment of the problem. The

model of flexible consensus, while it certainly “works” in the pragmatic sense, amounts to an attitude of denial about the very depth of vagueness as a crisis of logic and epistemology.

Vagueness, in other words, insistently exposes the points at which the ideal language of logic fails to map onto ordinary language, but many logicians, beginning in the Victorian period, have seen this as a boon for logic as a discipline. While Mill’s work on logic aimed to incorporate it into a kind of unified field theory of human psychology, linking it tightly with ethics and epistemology, the mid-Victorian period saw the development of a counter-movement in logic, represented by thinkers such as Augustus de Morgan and George Boole, who insisted that logic should be a kind of mathematics, and as such would only describe the structure of objective, positivistic domains of knowledge and deduction. Indeed, they argue, ordinary language *is* hopelessly unclear. It makes use of countless concepts that are resistant to sharp circumscription. Logic is decidedly *not* ordinary language, and therein lies its great importance—it provides us with the only domain of knowledge freed from the uncertainties of vagueness. Bertrand Russell would eventually come to argue that the precision of an ideal logical language makes it the only language suitable for any kind of philosophical reasoning at all. In other words, Russell was convinced that philosophy should try to do away with ordinary language and its vagueness altogether, as he famously suggests in his 1923 essay “Vagueness,” albeit with an ironic awareness that speaking and writing in symbolic logic might have its limitations: “You all know that I invented a special language with a view to avoiding vagueness, but unfortunately it is unsuited for public occasions. I shall therefore, though regretfully, address you in English, and whatever vagueness is to be found in my words must be attributed to our ancestors for not having been predominately interested in logic.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Russell, “Vagueness,” 84.

In fact, Russell's Victorian ancestors, foremost among them George Boole, *were* primarily interested in logic, and like Russell thought that logic should be an ideal language freed of vagueness. But unlike Russell and other twentieth-century logical positivists, Boole was unconvinced that logic must be the only language of philosophical inquiry, and indeed explicitly allowed that the positive knowledge about thought and its structures that logic affords still leaves out other kinds of knowledge less amenable to mathematical symbolization. Boole describes the outer limits of logical insight with a metaphor that itself invokes the idea of vagueness:

As the realms of day and night are not strictly conterminous, but are separated by a crepuscular zone, through which the light of the one fades gradually off into the darkness of the other, so it may be said that every region of positive knowledge lies surrounded by a debateable and speculative territory, over which it in some degree extends its influence and light. (400)

The point at which the insights of logic cease to be useful, at which we end up wandering in the darkness despite its distant illumination, is itself a kind of vague limit, somewhere at the uncertain edge of that "crepuscular zone" that separates positive knowledge from other kinds of knowing. And in one of *Middlemarch's* most famous descriptions of the reach of the novelistic narrator's vision, we hear an echo of Boole's metaphor: "I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe" (141). Eliot's narrator sets concentration against dispersion, and of course nothing could seem less vague than the concentration of a spotlight, with its crisp edges keeping that insidiously "tempting range of relevancies" cloaked in darkness and at bay. It seems that there is no "crepuscular zone" here, and yet it's the temptation that's important. Even what's kept in the dark seems in this image to beckon to us. We may concentrate our beam of light and draw a clear circle around our objects of interest, but it's only,

after all, an arbitrary selection, not a rational or logically necessary one, and desire seems to beckon to us from across that wavering, tenuous edge.

### 3. The Loving Tide

I've suggested that Eliot's representations of the vagueness of psychic content, and of individual characters' acts of surrendering to that vagueness, are ethically ambiguous; in turning to *The Mill on the Floss*, I'll attempt to flesh out the nature of this ambiguity and its relationship to Eliot's ambivalence toward the erotic in this novel that offers us her most extended and focused meditation on desire and its vicissitudes. On the one hand the confused, languid, eroticized introspection generated by the surrender to vagueness can seem positively reckless for someone as committed as Eliot to an outwardly oriented ethics of sympathetic understanding. A commitment to vagueness threatens to turn the mind into an undifferentiated field which might as well be empty, something like a black hole, or the "dark shrouded pool" that comes to mirror for Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* (1859) her own descent into a fugue-like and resigned moral aimlessness: "Her great dark eyes wander blankly over the fields like the eyes of one who is desolate, homeless, unloved."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, an attunement to the sheer vagueness of one's own reasons, desires, intentions, and feelings often seems to lead to an elision of the very boundaries that fence consciousness in from the outside world, and in this sense might be conducive to the sort of self-forgetfulness and renunciation of egoism that are required of a worldview like Eliot's. When Maggie Tulliver, for instance, first lights upon the idea of religious renunciation, she imagines it as predicated upon a kind of absorption of the self into a wide world:

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<sup>16</sup> Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 364.

It flashed through her like the suddenly apprehended solution of a problem, that all the miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasure, as if that were the central necessity of the universe; and 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)

Maggie decides to see her desires as centered in the world, rather than centered in herself, a perspective that can only be made possible by a forceful “shifting” of position, or a conviction that point of view might be dislocated from its rootedness in the self if only one could cease seeing the self as a distinctive form with sharp edges.

Maggie’s play with the structure of possession and predication here—her speculation that she should not be the subject or the vessel of her own activity of desiring—in fact develops out of her skeptical curiosity about syntax and logic. In a description of Maggie’s autodidactic reading, we’re told that she “found the Latin Grammar quite soothing . . . for she delighted in new words. . . . She presently made up her mind to skip the rules in the Syntax—the examples became so absorbing. The mysterious sentences, snatched from an unknown context, . . . gave boundless scope to her imagination” (147). Maggie’s interest is in the texture of language and its imaginative suggestiveness rather than in its structures and rules. Even when she embarks upon a more formal education, the distracting experience of pleasure and absorption returns as Maggie tries to study the “masculine wisdom” of Aldrich’s *Artis Logicæ Compendium*, a popular logic textbook throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

In the severity of her early resolution, she would take Aldrich out into the fields, and then look off her book towards the sky, where the lark was twinkling, or to the reeds and bushes by the river, from which the waterfowl rustled forth on its anxious, awkward flight—with a startled sense that the relation between Aldrich and this living world was extremely remote for her. The discouragement deepened as the days went on, and the eager heart gained faster and faster on the patient mind. (287)

Poised between the eagerness of embodied pleasure and the patience of reasoned self-cultivation, Maggie looks in vain for the mechanism of connection between the elegant and abstract forms of logic and the “anxious,” “awkward,” and “twinkling” living world. Maggie’s father, Mr. Tulliver, repeatedly offers us even more direct expressions of confusion over the strange relation (or surprising nonrelation) between language and the world: “It’s puzzling work,” he says, “talking is” (10-11). Mr. Tulliver is therefore very cautious in approaching the same vagaries of syntax that leave Maggie cold: “He was not a man to make an abrupt transition. This was a puzzling world, as he often said, and if you drive your wagon in a hurry, you may light on an awkward corner” (15). Rational language, as Maggie comes to understand, isn’t well-equipped to handle the awkward—one must hope to avoid it, as Mr. Tulliver does, or one must seek out another model for thinking that does justice to one’s absorption in a vibrant and complicated world of textures and pleasures, without of course tipping so far into irrationality that one can’t function in a social world. Indeed, Mr. Tulliver hopes that his son will get along more smoothly than he does in this respect, that he’ll learn to “see into things quick, and know what folks mean” (22).

The moral problem at the center of *The Mill on the Floss*—which we might broadly describe as Maggie’s painful wavering between ascetic renunciation and the surrender to pleasure—aligns, then, with the difficult relationship between formal reflection and embodied immediacy, or between logical reasoning and the sort of absorptive experience that we’ve identified with vagueness. The novel’s opening sentence is already alive with this tension: “A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace” (7). The sentence zig-zags, from the “broadening” of the river to its containment between its banks, from the

“rushing” of the tide to the check brought about by two opposing movements of water, and finally to the twist in which this check to the river’s movement is imagined not as a kind of control or prohibition but as an “impetuous” expression of love—as an “embrace” or a merging rather than a conflict or a clash. We’re meant to oppose this loving check to the kind of policing that we see later on in the novel in Tom Tulliver’s impulse to control his sister and to force her into a kind of feminine submissiveness: we’re told that Maggie’s “fits of anger ... towards Tom, who checked her, and met her thought or feeling always by some thwarting difference—would flow out over her affections and conscience like a lava stream” (287). Tom has a severe sensitivity to breaches of limits and boundaries, and his version of the “check” is not to embrace and to merge, but to block and to thwart—and so the river flowing between its green banks is transformed into the lava stream that scalds and scars.

We might be reminded here of the scene in *Jane Eyre* in which Rochester warns Jane against the same kind of passive “floating” for which Tom chastises Maggie. To Rochester, as to Tom, one must focus on the obstacles to movement—on the dams and the rocks that block the path of the river—rather than on the freedom and potential shapelessness of movement itself:

Floating on with closed eyes and muffled ears, you neither see the rocks bristling not far off in the bed of the flood, nor hear the breakers boil at their base. But I tell you—and you mark my words—you will come some day to a craggy pass in the channel, where the whole of life’s stream will be broken up into whirl and tumult, foam and noise: either you will be dashed to atoms on crag points, or lifted up and borne on by some master-wave into a calmer current—as I am now. (166-67)

Rochester makes the metaphor even more explicit than Eliot’s narrator: this is the stream of life itself. Floating, Rochester insists, represents both a willful denial of reality (“closed eyes and muffled ears”) and also a kind of moral innocence in which the refusal to make choices or to reflect upon one’s choices arises out of the fact that one simply hasn’t encountered any truly difficult choices. And yet as in the opening description of the Floss, the experience and



movement of floating takes on form and shape in this image, insofar as it is defined against the formless “whirl and tumult, foam and noise” that accompanies a moral crisis. The best that one can hope for is to end up in a “calmer current”—in other words, to continue floating along, perhaps now with open eyes and listening ears—rather than be “dashed to atoms” as the self explodes into airy diffusion, or to be disintegrated by the lava stream that floods out over the banks of the obstructed stream of life. Floating along a stream functions as a useful image for both Brontë and Eliot of the tenuousness of the formal boundaries that define the self and its experience of movement through everyday life.<sup>17</sup> Riverbanks are notoriously soft, after all, and susceptible to erosion.

Maggie Tulliver’s eventual decision to renounce worldly pleasures, under the influence of a momentous reading of Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*, is something of a reaction to the insistent thwarting that her thoughts and feelings have met with at the hands of her family. As we’ve seen, Maggie decides that it might be better to have no feelings and no desires of her own rather than be destined to a life in which the pittance of pleasure allowed her feels aching and inescapably limited. I’ve also suggested that this might represent one potential “solution” to the affective experience of vagueness, in which desire always seems to overlap with reason in complex ways, and yet is chastised and blocked by a host of social pressures and norms often identified with logical modes of reasoning and their ostensible clarity and intelligibility. Rather than allow for the vague merging of impulsive erotic feeling and reasoned ethical feeling, which is difficult and painful and requires a concerted effort at social outsiderism that seems to get Maggie nowhere, why not eliminate desire and pleasure from the equation altogether? Maggie’s self-effacement in the name of a generalized or collective pleasure allows her to locate desire and

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<sup>17</sup> For an influential discussion of flowing water as one of Eliot’s most ubiquitous metaphors, see J. Hillis Miller, “Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*.”

consummation as states not of mind but of the world—a distinct object upon which reasoned ethics can work rather than a vague field that invades and informs reason from within and around its edges.

While Maggie's aspiration to asceticism often seems to be at the heart of *The Mill on the Floss*, it's important to remember that the novel takes very seriously the arguments against such an evacuation of the pleasure-seeking self, especially in debates between Maggie and Philip Wakem in which he tries to persuade her out of her religious severity. "It is mere cowardice," he insists, "to seek safety in negations. No character becomes strong in that way. You will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite" (329). This is a standard enough apologia for responsible self-fulfillment: repress a desire for long enough and it will transform from a "rational satisfaction" into a "savage appetite"; a total denial of desire requires a total withdrawal from the world, and such a withdrawal is not in fact possible. Better, in other words, to practice, to become "strong" in one's capacity for reasoned desire. And yet Philip's argument falls somewhat short in its concession to the moral dichotomy of reason and impulse—exactly the kind of distinction that leads Maggie to mistrust everything pleasurable, lest it dissolve her capacity for reason and the sort of social belonging and respectability that it promises.

In other words, what if what brings one genuine pleasure *always* feels impulsive, nonlinguistic, nonrational? Can there still be a place for what we call "reason" in such a picture, or for what Philip calls "rational satisfaction"? It seems to Maggie that the very essence of pleasure and erotic desire lies in their chaos and their resistance to organization. It's in this discussion with Philip, after all, that Maggie describes the appealing "simplicity" of her pleasure-denying life. As she considers that her stance might be "unreasonable," we're told that "the

severe monotonous warning came again and again—that she was losing the simplicity and clearness of her life by admitting a ground of concealment, and that, by forsaking the simple rule of renunciation, she was throwing herself under the seductive guidance of illimitable wants” (325). Maggie’s “simple rule,” in other words, is the only way to ward off the vagueness attendant upon the formless experience of pleasure, desire, and erotic excitement. We see here the two moral dimensions of vagueness that Eliot so often imagines as two sides of the same coin: on the one hand, its dizziness, its confusion, its invocation of a feeling of vertigo or disorientation; on the other hand, its easiness, its floating serenity, its promise of an oceanic absorption of self into world as all kinds of divisions and boundaries lose their forbidding sharpness and offer room for navigation, for feeling it all out.

Christopher Herbert has used this scene from *The Mill on the Floss* as a striking example of the task he claims for the concept of “culture” as it developed in fields like anthropology, ethnography, aesthetics, and political thought in the Victorian period. Although Herbert insists that the “culture concept” is fundamentally incoherent, he argues that it took shape as an attempt at “a scientific rebuttal” of “the myth of a state of ungoverned human desire,” albeit a rebuttal that “has never succeeded in dispelling” that myth.<sup>18</sup> Herbert reads Maggie’s concept of “the seductive guidance of illimitable wants” as presupposing “a polarity of strict renunciation and ‘illimitable’ libido, with scarcely any intermediate term between the two,” which “means that extreme self-violence may be the necessary cost of personal moral hygiene” (33). This is true insofar as we focus on the immediate context of Maggie’s will to asceticism, and yet as we’ll see, the moral and epistemological stakes of her rejection of desire become exceedingly complex as the novel goes on, and as the plot of her erotic attraction to Stephen Guest continues to

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<sup>18</sup> Herbert, *Culture and Anomie*, 29. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

thicken. Herbert does qualify his reading by pointing to the “tension and ambivalence” attached to the question of desire’s negation: “Can desire be hardly put down without mutilating personality? Scarcely a significant work of the age fails to press this question upon its readers” (34). Eventually, Herbert will claim that the myth of ungoverned desire generated not only “anxiety” or even “panic” for Victorian culture, but also that it became the basis of a “perennial ideal, in which guise it went and still goes by the name ‘freedom,’” an equally nebulous concept “severed from any practical referent or definite logical content” because so intimately tied to the various kinds of “control” that limit freedom and give it a rational form (44-45, 53).

Herbert’s account of “culture” as a system for formalizing and directing desire in social or political terms overlaps in many ways with the idea of logic—and indeed bad logic—as devices for giving language to desire in the Victorian period, and as we’ve seen, a binary logic of true-false and either-or can seem in its own way incoherent or untenable. If Herbert tracks the rise of “culture” as a progressively intensifying and rigid “theory of the dominance of the symbolic in human experience,” then we might easily imagine the rise of symbolic logic as itself participating in this wider trend, finally reaching its apex and its point of greatest conceptual tension in theories that explicitly codify sexual desire in the terms of symbolic logic, foremost among them Lacanian psychoanalysis (29). But while Herbert tends to imagine Eliot as a champion of the culture concept—especially in what he sees at the reductive dichotomy of illimitable want and desire’s negation that is sustained by the structure of *The Mill on the Floss*—I insist that Eliot’s attunement to the affective and erotic experience of vagueness demonstrates that her ideas about “freedom” and “control” are more complicated than all that.

While Maggie’s renunciation shows us one way of displacing or blurring erotic subjectivity by locating desire outside of the self, the immediate feeling of vagueness, in which

desire and reason seem for a moment indistinguishable, provides a different model for such an abdication of what we might call “logical” subjectivity, based upon mechanisms of formalization, sorting, naming, reflective self-consciousness, and deliberative reason. We see this other version of self-forgetfulness in the extended episode that forms the climax of Maggie and Stephen Guest’s tentative courtship, in which they take a boating trip together that turns into a dreamlike scene of empty-headed surrender. In the chapter titled “Borne Along by the Tide,” it appears as if rational thought, rather than erotic desire, is the object of renunciation for Maggie and Stephen alike:

Some low, subdued, languid exclamation of love came from Stephen from time to time, as he went on rowing idly, half automatically: otherwise, they spoke no word; for what could words have been but an inlet to thought? and thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they were enveloped—it belonged to the past and the future that lay outside the haze. Maggie was only dimly conscious of the banks, as they passed them, and dwelt with no recognition on the villages: she knew there were several to be passed before they reached Luckreth, where they always stopped and left the boat. At all times she was too liable to fits of absence, that she was likely enough to let her way-marks pass unnoticed. (464)

Words and thought belong outside of the atmosphere that surrounds Maggie and Stephen, and so it’s crucial that this atmosphere is hazy, or in other words that its outside is constitutively indeterminate. If this boat becomes what Foucault might call a “crisis heterotopia,” defined by its exclusion of the everyday world in order that sexual awakening can be understood to happen nowhere in particular, it is an exclusion difficult to define in space with any precision.<sup>19</sup> Words might be an “inlet” to thought here, which suggests that language might be able to transmit messages across the boundaries of that hazy zone. Time is also blurry here—the present is supposed to stand apart from the past and the future, distinct and thoughtless as against every other time that is saturated with thought. But we know that our mechanisms for organizing

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<sup>19</sup> See Foucault, “Of Other Spaces.”

temporal experience are notoriously vague, a fact reemphasized by the description of Maggie falling into “fits of absence” and losing track of the way-marks that measure the distance of their journey. In time, as in the floating journey down a river, everything is relative—and so it’s easy to lose track of where one is or was, on this side or on that side of the signposts that help to orient us.

Stephen’s attempts to persuade Maggie into giving up her resolution against pleasure, and more importantly into breaking her promise to marry Philip Wakem, draw upon the concept of the vague formation of intention that we’ll see at work later on in *Middlemarch*. In this case, Stephen takes the idea to its logical extreme, insisting that their tryst has come about through an accidental accumulation of other people’s actions, or a confusion of necessary causality with deliberative reason. “See, Maggie,” he urges, “how everything has come without our seeking—in spite of all our efforts. We never thought of being alone together again: it has all been done by others. See how the tide is carrying us out—away from all those unnatural bonds that we have been trying to make faster round us—and trying in vain” (465). Of course Stephen’s argument is essentially spurious, insofar as it simply reverses the terms of Maggie’s grounds for resistance. Rather than expunge desire from the realm of reason, Stephen asks Maggie to expunge the forms of moral reason—particularly the idea of social “bonds” that is so important to Maggie—from the realm of erotic desire.

Maggie is not persuaded by his case for the rejection of duty, and as she begins to come to a panicked awareness of the social implications of her illicit journey with Stephen, her anxiety focuses on the idea that a life with Stephen would entail the loss of her moral direction and of the forms that give life shape and meaning:

[S]he had rent the ties that had given meaning to duty, and had made herself an outlawed soul, with no guide but the wayward choice of her own passion. And where would that

lead her?—where had it led her now? ... Her life with Stephen could have no sacredness: she must for ever sink and wander vaguely, driven by uncertain impulse; for she had let go the clue of life—that clue which once in the far-off years her young need had clutched so strongly. She had renounced all delights then, before she knew them, before they had come within her reach. (471)

A life devoted to the frenetic wandering of impulsive drives is, for Maggie, a terrifyingly meaningless life. And even at the height of this extended experiment in surrendering to the pull of erotic desire, we see that Maggie maintains her sense of the mutual exclusivity of impulse and rational meaning. Passion feels good, but it guarantees the total dissolution of ethical meaning and of social bonds and duties. At the same time, we see in the final turn of this passage a moment of tentative reconsideration. Maggie remembers the “clue of life” that the simple rule of renunciation had offered to her, but now as a distant memory of “far-off years,” an object for her “young need.” Indeed, when Maggie committed to divest herself of erotic desire and of embodied pleasure, she hadn’t in fact known what these experiences were like—they had not yet “come within her reach.”

In the chapter of *Romola* entitled “Drifting Away,” Eliot tries to imagine what it would feel like truly to abscond from moral duties and claims, in the way that Maggie refuses finally to do. Disillusioned after discovering the hypocrisy of her religious mentor Savonarola, Romola decides that “She had done enough; she had striven after the impossible, and was weary of this stifling crowded life. She longed for that repose in mere sensation which she had sometimes dreamed of in the sultry afternoons of her girlhood, when she had fancied herself floating naiad-like in the waters.”<sup>20</sup> And so in order to escape, perhaps into death, but in any case a state eroticized here as the memory of some “sultry,” “floating” feeling of the naiad’s state of “mere

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<sup>20</sup> Eliot, *Romola*, 502.

sensation,” Romola borrows a boat that she happens upon, hoists the sail, and allows herself to drift out onto the open sea:

She was alone now: she had freed herself from all claims, she had freed herself even from that burthen of choice which presses with heavier and heavier weight when claims have loosed their guiding hold.

Had she found anything like the dream of her girlhood? No. Memories hung upon her like the weight of broken wings that could never be lifted. . . . Romola felt orphaned in those wide spaces of sea and sky. She read no message of love for her in that far-off symbolic writing of the heavens, and with a great sob she wished that she might be gliding into death.<sup>21</sup>

The only thing more radically alienating than to repudiate all moral and social claims is to repudiate even the “burthen of choice” that those claims are intended to shape and to guide. In all of Eliot, this scene goes the furthest in imagining the simultaneous bliss and terror of the empty and isolated self. It stands as a particularly powerful counterpoint to the scene of Maggie and Stephen floating down the river, both in its emphasis on social bonds as “guides” that give form and direction to moral intention, and in the notion that a dissolution of such bonds in favor of “vague wandering” might represent an illicit, eroticized fantasy in which pleasure becomes a “guide” to reason.

At the same time, such a fantasy is represented as exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to realize. Maggie Tulliver does not end up eloping with Stephen Guest. She returns home to be shamed by the community of St. Ogg’s, who assume that she has thrown herself at Stephen only to be rejected, since they can’t imagine the situation in which she might have claimed the final word. She drowns in a flood without ever marrying. Romola does not drift to her death or divest herself of social ties, but washes ashore in a village beset by disease where she takes on the role of ministering angel to the surviving members of the community, rediscovering the immediacy

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 504.



and simplicity of moral duty and self-sacrifice. Maggie's *bildung* is, in the end, tragic, and it's important to reemphasize here that my argument that Eliot takes vagueness seriously as a mode of thinking erotically does not imply that vagueness necessarily represents for her characters a real or viable route to some kind of sexual liberation.

Indeed, Maggie maintains to the end her insistence that moral forms must trump and exclude the formlessness of her illimitable wants; and yet at the same time, we see in the aftermath of her journey with Stephen a profound and painful regret at the path not taken. Of course, as Nancy K. Miller has argued in her classic feminist reading of this novel, it's important to avoid casting judgment on Maggie's renunciation as somehow wrong, or in other words, to equate erotic denial with a painful impoverishment or mortification of erotic life is to severely limit our potential ways of thinking about eroticism (particularly, Miller argues, in women's writing). Miller suggests that we should read women's fiction not as being about "life" or "solutions in any therapeutic sense," but rather as being "about the plots of literature itself, about the constraints the maxim places on rendering a female life in fiction."<sup>22</sup> In other words, if we imagine that Maggie's choice is ultimately reducible to an either-or proposition—either renounce pleasure or give in to it wholeheartedly—then we obscure the fact that she might truly desire neither of these things, that she might in fact desire the preservation and prolonging of erotic excitement in the form of fantasy. I invoke Miller's argument in order to further clarify my own position, which is to insist that vagueness, like Miller's concept of subtle variations in "emphasis," is part of an aim to get beyond the logic of the "either-or" in favor of the "both-and," and that even when such an experiment seems to fail or to be limited by the oppressiveness of social norms and scripts (logic included), the very fact that Eliot registers it so frequently as a

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<sup>22</sup> Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added," 46.

possibility represents the power of the “both-and” as a conceptual model of desire in her fiction.<sup>23</sup>

And so while Maggie certainly feels regret after her refusal of Stephen Guest’s proposal, this regret seems to hint at the possibilities of vagueness: “The thought of Stephen was like a horrible throbbing pain, which yet, as such pains do, seemed to urge all other thoughts into activity. But among her thoughts, what others would say and think of her conduct was hardly present. Love and deep pity and remorseful anguish left no room for that” (479). The throbbing pain of Maggie’s feeling for Stephen begins to mingle here with what Maggie understands as moral feelings—with love and with pity and with a remorse that feels like embodied anguish. As she drifts off to sleep that night, she relives the day that has passed, coloring and shading it differently in her memory than in her immediate experience of it:

Did she lie down in the gloomy bedroom of the old inn that night with her will bent unwaveringly on a path of penitent sacrifice? The great struggles of life are not so easy as that; the great problems of life are not so clear. In the darkness of that night she saw Stephen’s face turned towards her in passionate, reproachful misery; she lived through again all the tremulous delights of his presence with her that made existence an easy floating in a stream of joy, instead of a quiet resolved endurance and effort. The love she had renounced came back upon her with a cruel charm, she felt herself opening her arms to receive it once more; and then it seemed to slip away and fade and vanish, leaving only the dying sound of a deep thrilling voice that said, “Gone—for ever gone.” (479-80)

Hindsight allows Maggie to relent somewhat in her narrow pursuit of “penitent sacrifice,” and to acknowledge, in the simplest way, that life isn’t always “so clear.” As Maggie dreams of opening her arms to embrace Stephen’s love, we’re reminded of course of the “impetuous embrace” of the river as it meets the rush of the tide. Only in this case, the embrace is unreturned and quickly dissolves into the irretrievable past. At least in dreams, Maggie dwells for a moment in the “darkness” where the easy floating of desire and the effort of form and reason come together in a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 43. For an argument that responds to and expands upon Miller’s argument about women’s writing and the inscription of social norms within language, in this case by reading *The Mill on the Floss* alongside the work of Luce Irigaray, see Jacobus, “The Question of Language.”

dense intermingling, if only as a way of fully absorbing the irrevocability of her decision:  
 “Gone—for ever gone.”

We might say that part of the tragedy of *The Mill on the Floss* lies in its seeming hopelessness about the possibility of making eros intelligible as a valid kind of social claim. If Maggie is unable to reconcile “uncertain impulse” with the “claims” and “duties” of her ethical life, it’s because her world offers her no formal vocabulary through which to conceive of such a reconciliation—to put it somewhat roughly, no *name* or recognizable category for the kind of thinking or feeling in which these two dimensions of the self might overlap, only a distinct sense that they are separated by a crucial boundary whose dissolution would equal the dissolution of one’s very self and one’s sense of social belonging. Stanley Cavell has described this as a persistent problem in our philosophical conception of what kinds of “claims” are understood as vitally social and which are understood as merely personal. He argues that we might compare the idea of “the risk of aesthetic isolation with that of moral or political isolation,” and goes on to describe “the aesthetic claim ... as a kind of compulsion to share a pleasure, hence as tinged with an anxiety that the claim stands to be rebuked. It is a condition of, or threat to, that relation to things called aesthetic, that something I know and cannot make intelligible stands to be lost to me.”<sup>24</sup> While Cavell is interested in aesthetic knowledge, his argument seems readily translatable to the concept of erotic knowledge. In other words, erotic knowledge occupies a similarly liminal position between the idiosyncratic (something that I know and experience and that no other can feel as I do) and the social (something that I want to make known, to share with someone else in a way that is meaningful and intelligible). It also seems to carry with it a similar anxiety about its potential to be “rebuked” or lost if it cannot be made comprehensible—if it cannot, in other

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<sup>24</sup> Cavell, “Something Out of the Ordinary,” 9.

words, find a life outside of myself. Maggie Tulliver's desire is indeed something she *knows*, and yet she cannot find a way to put it into the language of ethical forms and of social life. In the end, that knowledge or that dimension of the self "stands to be lost" to her.

#### 4. Indefinable Movements

We know that Eliot was very familiar with Mill's *A System of Logic*, and that she found it edifying, but we also know that it left her uninspired. As she wrote to a friend in 1875, "though I have studied his books, especially his *Logic* and *Political Economy*, with much benefit, I have no consciousness of their having made any marked epoch in my life."<sup>25</sup> We might imagine of course, that whatever "epoch" they did make was a vague one rather than a "marked" one, and that the importance of Mill's theory of logic to her conceptualization of human psychology was based upon a fundamental ambivalence toward it rather than an enthusiastic embrace. That the narrator of *Middlemarch* shares her proclaimed indifference—even her skepticism—toward Mill's brand of logical theory is clear enough in the description of Fred Vincy's growing desire to return to gambling even after it has gotten him into deep financial and romantic trouble:

Fred did not enter into formal reasons, which are a very artificial, inexact way of representing the tingling returns of old habit, and the caprices of young blood: but there was lurking in him a prophetic sense that evening, that when he began to play he should also begin to bet—that he should enjoy some punch-drinking, and in general prepare himself for feeling 'rather seedy' in the morning. It is in such indefinable movements that action often begins. (672)

This passage gives us an ethical equivalent of the paradox of the heap—actions and intentions and desires which seem inconsequential when taken one by one somehow add up to moral ruin. The "indefinable movements," indeed the embodied "tingling," that somehow convert into action or at least into rational, ethical considerations are an obsession for Eliot, who returns again and

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<sup>25</sup> Eliot to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, in *Letters*, vol. 6, 163.

again to the problem in *Middlemarch*, and often keying it, as in this example, to the problem of fictional character. If formal reasons are an “artificial, inexact way of representing” interiority in all its complexity, they are also easy and straightforward. They can be listed and counted. The primordial ooze from which these reasons take form is certainly more mysterious, more fundamental, and to Eliot more interesting—but how to represent something so formless as this except to gesture to the very *impossibility* of such a representation?

We see another version of the problem in the narrator’s account of Bulstrode’s “indirect misdeeds”: “many of these misdeeds were like the subtle muscular movements which are not taken account of in the consciousness, though they bring about the end that we fix our mind on and desire. And it is only what we are vividly conscious of that we can vividly imagine to be seen by Omniscience” (687). Here the narrator seems to say that when it comes to vagueness, the jig is up. Like Mill, she’s careful to guard against the genuine problem of vagueness becoming a kind of refuge for the weak-minded, the weak-willed, and the morally careless. If every motive, every stirring of impulse, every movement, seems to add up, bit by bit, grain by grain, until suddenly I’ve committed a horrible action without knowing how, then my ability to absolve myself of moral responsibility becomes radically expansive. Even a fictional person like Bulstrode seems to come equipped with a vested interest in keeping the developments of his thought somewhat hazy as a way of protecting himself from the sharpness of narrative judgment. But although he “vividly” imagines that Omniscience, including omniscient narrators, can only see what is equally vivid in himself, Eliot’s narrator insists that she truly sees all, that no muscular movement or unconscious desire is too miniscule to be registered by the precise vision of the novel when it narrows and magnifies, like the microscope that Eliot so often uses as the metaphor for a certain mode of novelistic vision.

In *Middlemarch*, and indeed across Eliot's fiction, desire in the sense of "wanting" always hovers around the edges of moral thinking, but it's the questions particular to erotic desire that seem to present the most profound and particular challenge to both Eliot's ethical vision and her practice of psychological realism. As the narrator of *Middlemarch* puts it in describing Rosamond's complicated attraction to Lydgate, which seems to mix erotic excitement with a more reflective strategic interest in the possibility that he is a "man of family":

If you think it incredible that to imagine Lydgate as a man of family could cause thrills of satisfaction which had anything to do with the sense that she was in love with him, I will ask you to use your power of comparison a little more effectively, and consider whether red cloth and epaulets have never had an influence of that sort. Our passions do not live apart in locked chambers, but, dressed in their small wardrobe of notions, bring their provisions to a common table and mess together, feeding out of the common store according to their appetite. (166)

The narrator is trying to defend the verisimilitude of her representation of Rosamond's motivations—despite our moralizing tendency carefully to distinguish good reasons from bad reasons, or the mere "thrills" of erotic attraction (whether to status or to a man in uniform) from the more deeply reasoned but related response of love, we must indeed admit that in reality our psychic and erotic lives are far more tumultuous than that. The question then becomes, what is the nature of the "common table" where our various passions "mess together"? What is the "common store" out of which they feed? How, indeed, does a novel represent in concrete terms those troublesome borderline cases of psychic life in which erotic impulse and reasoned, ethical reflection seem somehow difficult to disentangle?

Dorothea Brooke is of course the character who most stubbornly resists the narrator's picture of the "common table" and the "common store" in her tendency to separate the ethical from what she sees as the merely personal. Early in the novel, her ethics is grounded on a severe impulse to renunciation (common to many of Eliot's heroines, from Dinah Morris to Maggie

Tulliver to Romola), as well as a high standard of self-knowledge and self-cultivation. She understands the messiness, haziness, and fuzziness of thinking as a failing to be overcome by reason and a resolute act of will. As the narrator puts it in describing her yearning for moral clarity, “For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective” (28). And yet just before this the narrator hints at something else in Dorothea—an openness of vision and feeling that seems oriented toward the very vagueness that she desires to eliminate from her mind: “there was nothing of an ascetic’s expression in her bright full eyes, as she looked before her, not consciously seeing, but absorbing into the intensity of her mood, the solemn glory of the afternoon with its long swathes of light between the far-off rows of limes, whose shadows touched each other” (27). Absorbing rather than seeing this scene, Dorothea’s vision encompasses sharp-edged “swathes” of light but also the tantalizingly vague image of shadows beginning to touch, perhaps soon to merge. Difficult to tell at that point where one shadow ends and the other begins, or to find that zone of deeper blackness where one overlays the other.

Dorothea, in other words, suppresses what seems to be her natural impulse toward vagueness. She takes refuge from it in what she understands to be the highly organized, taxonomizing scholarship of Casaubon: “she was looking forward to higher initiation in ideas, as she was looking forward to marriage, and blending her dim conceptions of both” (86). Even here, Dorothea’s tendency to imaginative “blending” of love with wisdom, the erotic with the rational, is understood by the narrator as a failing, or at least as a kind of “dim” naïveté. And on her honeymoon in Rome, as she begins to become disillusioned by Casaubon and his frigid romantic unavailability, she laments in even more pointed terms her inability to seize upon a “distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself,” since it seems that Casaubon’s failure to

excite must merely be a result of “her own spiritual poverty” (192). Without the active mentorship in reason that she had expected from Casaubon, she again feels unable to know and to shape her own mind: “by a sad contradiction Dorothea’s ideas and resolves seemed like melting ice floating and lost in the warm flood of which they had been but another form. She was humiliated to find herself a mere victim of feeling, as if she could know nothing except through that medium” (198). Here we are offered a different version of the image of the common table at which the passions feed out of a common store, refigured as a body of water filled with quickly melting floes of ice. But in this metaphor, instead of separate passions emerging from locked chambers and coming to feast together, we have a change of state. Indistinct eros and the finished shape of reason have the same molecular structure, which only has to change the frequency and heat of its vibrations in order to take on new appearances and new functions.

The culmination of what I’ll call Dorothea’s vagueness plot returns us to the problem of limits, with the moment late in the novel when Dorothea admits to herself her love for Will Ladislaw:

The limit of resistance was reached, and she had sunk back helpless within the clutch of inescapable anguish. . . . [S]he locked her door, and turning away from it towards the vacant room she pressed her hands hard on the top of her head, and moaned out—  
     ‘Oh, I did love him!’  
 Then came the hour in which the waves of suffering shook her too thoroughly to leave any power of thought. (786)

Even as Dorothea crosses the “limit of resistance” by which she has stifled her attraction to Ladislaw and sinks back into anguish, announcing her love as the clarity of hindsight washes over her, her last very literal gesture of repression is to press her hands down upon her head, to try to maintain a physical limit in the place of the psychic limit that seems to have dissolved into painful indistinctness. And then come the “waves”—in French, of course, *vagues*—of suffering that presage a kind of rebirth for Dorothea as she rises the next morning: “she had awaked to a



new condition: she felt as if her soul had been liberated from its terrible conflict; she was no longer wrestling with her grief, but could sit down with it as a lasting companion and make it a sharer in her thoughts. For now the thoughts came thickly” (787). The imagined animosity between Casaubon’s moral claim to Dorothea’s loyalty and her own feelings for Ladislav transforms into an image of sharing, a companionship of self with self, thought with thought—and indeed the thoughts swarm “thickly” in this shared psychic space, impossible to corral. Dorothea, long a pursuer of the “distinctly shapen” idea, arrives at a different conception of psychic organization, and indeed of the kind of accountability that we can expect of ourselves where the moral claims of erotic desire are concerned. When Dorothea’s younger sister Celia wonders how Dorothea’s engagement to Will came about, she asks, “Can you tell me?” to which Dorothea responds, “No, dear, you would have to feel it with me, else you would never know” (822). The conditional here obscures the plain fact that such a thing is impossible: Celia cannot “feel it with” Dorothea, at least not in the sense that Dorothea intends. In other words, Celia cannot feel Dorothea’s feelings, especially not as Dorothea feels them. The conditional is bound to fail: you cannot feel it with me, and therefore you will never know. And yet, despite Dorothea’s inability to “tell” Celia how or when reason finally made allowances for desire—finally acknowledged, in other words, desire’s moral claim—we must imagine that this change happened at a moment in time, that moment when the vague “limit of resistance” is crossed.

## **5. Oceanic Feelings**

For Eliot, the question of vagueness is, as we’ve seen, a question of form and formlessness, and what lies between them: how do thoughts and desires take form from what Eliot imagines again and again as a primordial undifferentiation, not least in Lydgate’s search for

the “primitive tissue” that underlies all organic structures? This scientific ambition is later subtly refigured as a more expansive pursuit of the mysterious in-between places of psychic experience: “he wanted to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness” (165). It seems that our only access to the “minute processes” and “invisible thoroughfares” of thought and desire is to see what is left of them in the finished forms that they produce. What remnants of that origin cling to their edges, making their shapes blurry, difficult to hold steadily in our field of inner vision? Psychoanalysis has taken up these same questions, whether in Freud’s “oceanic feeling” or “polymorphous perversity,” or in Winnicott’s “transitional object,” but these powerful metaphors nonetheless figure vagueness, even in their very different ways, as a developmental stage to be grown out of on the way to the shaping and circumscribing of our erotic selves and to the orientation and naming of our erotic investments. In the end, psychoanalysis offers us little in the way of considering the productivity of vagueness as a place to dwell or to return to periodically, or as a real mechanism of psychic and erotic organization rather than as the incipient threat of psychic disintegration.

Freud comes close to taking vagueness seriously in his attempt to come to a psychoanalytic explanation for what he outlines in *Civilization and Its Discontents* as the “oceanic feeling”: “a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole.”<sup>26</sup> He begins by reminding us about the continuity of the ego with the unconscious: “the ego is continued inwards, without any sharp delimitation, into an unconscious mental entity

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<sup>26</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 12.

which we designate as the id and for which it serves as a kind of façade.”<sup>27</sup> But he goes on to say that despite such inward continuity (the utter lack of a limit between conscious and unconscious self), the line between the ego and the outside world is nonetheless clear and unmistakable. The only exception occurs at “the height of being in love,” when “the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away.”<sup>28</sup> Although an easy alignment of Eliot with Freud is tempting here, I want instead to emphasize the way in which Freud, like Mill, represses what is most difficult about the problem of vague boundaries: that is, the sheer muddle that it represents, the irreducibility and the inescapability of the vague field between clear concepts. The indeterminate zone between unconscious and ego is in Freudian theory reduced to a kind of waiting room with its own definition and boundaries, the transit point called the preconscious, which lies between two carefully delineated realms, one of libidinal drives and the other of reasoned formalism. This is at best a point or a field through which messages are relayed from id to ego and back again, but nothing that has any substance or texture of its own. The dissolution of the line between self and other, on the other hand, if indeed it ever makes good on its *threat* of melting away in love, is imagined as a utopian disappearance of all boundaries, or in other words as an ecstatic return of the oceanic feeling.

Leo Bersani has recently suggested a corrective to this tendency of psychoanalysis, and with his argument we return at the same time to the question with which we began, of the outer limits of a novelistic world, those limits that Eliot found so hauntingly impossible to draw. “Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending.” In his essay “Sociality and Sexuality” Bersani revisits the psychoanalytic question of the origin of relationality. To imagine such an origin, he

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 13.

suggests, requires that we imagine the impossible scene of nonrelation, of sheer undifferentiation, which precedes it. Art, Bersani argues, is the place in which such a scene is repeatedly figured forth in anxieties that what has taken form might just as easily have failed to take form, or in other words that the formal relations imagined in art arise out of thin air and can just as easily return there: “the coming-to-be of relationality, which is our birth into being, can only be retroactively enacted, and it is enacted largely as a rubbing out of formal relations. Perhaps traditional associations of art with form-giving or form-revealing activities are at least partly a denial of such formal disappearance in art.”<sup>29</sup> What begins in other words, must end; what takes shape must be rubbed out, or at least smudged. Bersani is, like Freud, thinking about the relations between self and world, and not primarily about the reflective relationship of self to self, or indeed of novelist to fictional character. My argument has been that we might read Eliot as a novelist not of ethical clarity (of clarity in the sense of sharpness) but as an advocate of the powers of vagueness—not, in other words, as promoting only the carefully taxonomical system of claims, duties, and social bonds which often seems to structure her ethical theory, but as also registering the sheer difficulty of the kind of self-understanding required to give our erotic lives a meaningful shape, to speak about erotic feeling as a “lasting companion” to reason, a “sharer in thoughts.” In Eliot, thoughts come thickly, and ideas and desires often change from solid to liquid and back again—before we know it.

Indeed, when Lydgate tries to “pierce the obscurity” of the mind, to burrow down to the place where all form disintegrates, he finds himself cast adrift even despite his own careful scientific method, and feels “that agreeable after-glow of excitement when thought lapses from examination of a specific object into a suffusive sense of its connections with all the rest of our

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<sup>29</sup> Bersani, “Sociality and Sexuality,” 104.

existence—seems, as it were, to throw itself on its back after vigorous swimming and float with the repose of unexhausted strength” (165). From James’s complaint of the formal “diffuseness” of *Middlemarch*, we’ve arrived at Eliot’s own description of thought’s “suffusive” connections. (This is, in fact, the first recorded use of the adjectival form of “suffuse.”) Suffusion suggests control and direction even in its image of a liquid or a field of light or color spreading over a surface, where diffusion suggests a truly “bad” kind of vagueness, or a confusing kind of indistinctness—a suffusion taken too far, so that liquid or light or color thins into utter formlessness. Eliot’s description in fact enacts the kind of suffusion it describes as thought and its “specific object” combine as the potential antecedents of the vague pronoun “its”: “a suffusive sense of *its* connections . . . .” If we’re meant to imagine *thought’s* connections, then we might see this as something like Freud’s oceanic feeling, in which the psyche feels so vibrantly connected to the external world as to lose its defensive outlines and its spatial bearings. On the other hand, we can easily understand this pronoun as referring to “the specific object”: in Lydgate’s case, that object is the mysterious process by which thoughts and desires take form out of obscurity. But the more we try to bring such a process or mechanism or structuring principle into focus, the more it seems that form and obscurity, taxonomy and tumult, are so intimately connected as to be inseparable—so inseparable or so densely admixed that they are suffused, in fact, by their very interconnections.

The image of Lydgate’s mind thrown on its back and floating suggests one example of what an ethos of vagueness might look like, or in other words, a lived commitment or aspiration to the kind of epistemic disorientation that comes with submerging oneself in the dark places between, behind, or before clear forms. Amanda Anderson has argued that theorists too often invoke ethos as a way of describing situated commitments and practices while nonetheless

attempting to avoid the normativity associated with liberal and rationalist models of ethics.<sup>30</sup> In other words, according to Anderson, “ethos” as a concept is a way for these theorists to have their cake and eat it too, doing away with norms while still wanting to describe aspects of life that seem inherently normative. In characterizing vagueness as an “ethos,” I risk seeming to idealize states of confusion and ethical debilitation as a kind of utopian liberation from norms of rationality. But the problem of vagueness is, in fact, internal to systems of language and rationality, and therefore to the practice of making normative claims at all, a practice which Eliot undoubtedly values. Vagueness, in other words, is not an ideal for Eliot as much as it is a particular kind of experience with its own goals, its own value, and its own place in an apparatus of ethical reason.

Lydgate’s suffusive connections might also suggest the idea of vagueness as a “mood” or a “background” that enables and underlies structured thought. In invoking this concept, I’m inspired by Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman’s recent argument for “mood” as a concept that might complicate the theory of affect, particularly insofar as the generality and aimlessness of mood “circumvents the clunky categories often imposed on experience: subjective versus objective, feeling versus thinking, latent versus manifest. The field of affect studies,” they point out, “is sometimes taken to task for reinforcing such dichotomies, creating a picture of affect as a zone of ineffable and primordial experience that is subsequently squeezed into the rationalist straitjacket of language.”<sup>31</sup> Far from Mill’s solution of pragmatic efficiency or Boole’s escape to the ideal (and ideally lucid) language of symbolic logic, Eliot’s psychological realism commits her to a reckoning with our all-too-human confusions of desire and reason, of erotic impulse and

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<sup>30</sup> See Anderson, “Argument and Ethos.”

<sup>31</sup> Felski and Fraiman, “Introduction,” vi.

reasoned intention. Rather than considering vagueness as a philosophical problem to be neatly solved, Eliot's fiction asks: what is the experience of vagueness? What does it *feel* like to take the borderline case as an object of examination, as a guide to action, or simply as an inescapable state of psychic existence? When Dorothea struggles to sort out her complicated feelings upon reading the letter in which Casaubon proposes marriage, her best course of action seems to be not a steeling of the reasoning mind, but the warm and pleasurable emptying of the mind: "She could not pray under the rush of solemn emotion in which thoughts became vague and images floated uncertainly, she could but cast herself, with a childlike sense of reclining in the lap of a divine consciousness which sustained her own" (44). One possible response to the onslaught of psychic vagueness is to give up on the sense of a bounded, agential self, and in doing so to "cast" oneself free. In this case, the experience of thoughts and images and desires haphazardly blending and overlapping extends outward to a sense that consciousness itself blends with some wider "divine" consciousness.

But of course, such a response doesn't get Dorothea very far, and seems emblematic at this juncture of her generally "childlike" longing for an imperious but nurturing authority to whom she might entrust her moral guidance. Later on in the novel, as Dorothea navigates married life, the narrator offers us a famous description of the process of learning to separate one's own identity from that of others:

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference." (211)

The problem here is the distinction of the “easiness” of subsuming one’s own identity to another’s versus the difficult effort of feeling with “distinctness” the difference between oneself and another.<sup>32</sup> The strangeness of the passage is in its unexpected reversal of the roles of “reflection” and “feeling.” How, we’re forced to ask, does a profoundly metaphysical problem such as our capacity to imagine and to know other selves come to be an object of “the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects”? It seems that the kind of distinctness that Eliot’s narrator is after is not one of abstract, conceptual lines and boundaries, but the sort of undeniable feeling of distinctness that comes from pressing up against another with one’s very body. The project of feeling out limits and forms and lines can’t be a logical project at all, it seems, but rather must be a project of a body groping in the darkness, just beginning to emerge from “moral stupidity” and looking outside of oneself for the limits so solid, so directly *there*, that they can’t dissolve into vagueness. Lydgate’s experience, on the other hand, is a kind of involution of thought, in which the elements of consciousness appear so densely interconnected as to seem infinitely deep and infinitely expansive.

In either case, what I’ve been calling Eliot’s vision of vagueness as ethos is linked to images of floating, swimming, reclining, passively receiving: in short, to images of deeply pleasurable surrender and oceanic feelings. But whether this is understood as an ethically good or bad kind of pleasure in the world of Eliot’s novels is so far unclear; or at least the possible outcomes of such states are various enough that they can seem ethically neutral or contingent. In other words, while “ethos” provides us with a broad sense of the kinds of commitments and

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<sup>32</sup> For a reading of this passage with a closer attention to its relationship to Casaubon as a character and his association with the “margin” and the “cluster of signs,” see Hertz, *George Eliot’s Pulse*, 20-42. The concepts with which Hertz associates Casaubon have to do with his thematic connection to textuality and writing, and their relationship to personhood in Eliot’s fiction, and yet the “margin” and the “cluster” have obvious connections as well to the problem of vagueness.



goals that would lead one to sink into the comfort (or the disorientation) of vagueness, it also might encompass a set of norms about how and when to deploy the seductive haziness of vagueness as a mode of reflective self-understanding and moral reasoning. The sense that all is interconnected, that no true lines can be drawn, and that no valid taxonomies exist, can lead to an exhausted disavowal—an emptying out of the self, or as we saw in the case of *Romola*, a dissolution of social and ethical connections. This sense can also lead to a kind of giddy lightheadedness in which vagueness becomes eroticized as a source of pleasure—this mode of vagueness is often described by Eliot in terms of absorption and involution, as in the image already discussed of Dorothea “absorbing into the intensity of her mood” the sensation of a beautiful afternoon, or Maggie Tulliver’s compulsion toward the maximum fullness and depth of pleasure: “I was never satisfied with a *little* of anything,” she tells Philip Wakem; “That is why it is better for me to do without earthly happiness altogether. . . . I never felt that I had enough music—I wanted more instruments playing together—I wanted voices to be fuller and deeper” (328). As we can see from Maggie’s account, the two reactions to vagueness that I’ve been describing can easily combine—the pleasure of the “too-much-ness” of the self can be counteracted by a moralizing tendency toward total renunciation. Since the kind of maximum pleasure that Maggie so painfully and desperately desires is impossible, better to do without pleasure altogether, to stop the drive toward pleasure at its source and thereby to foreclose disappointment.

What I’m describing as vagueness in Eliot—her interest, that is, in representing the dense interconnectedness and overlapping of psychic life, and her skepticism toward easy classification—has been understood by critics in various other ways. For example, Gillian Beer and Sally Shuttleworth have pointed to Eliot’s interests in evolutionary theory and the general

Victorian movement toward a model of organic form in biology, psychology, and social theory as contextual explanations for her ambitiousness in representing infinitesimal shades of psychological detail, formal complexity, and social interdependence.<sup>33</sup> More recently, Nicholas Dames has argued for a powerful link between Eliot's theory of the long novel form and Wagner's theory of long musical form, both of which work to achieve a combination of "elongated temporal length and insistent complexity," or in an even more suggestive formulation for our purposes, "demanding and exhausting forms" of "unbroken complexity."<sup>34</sup> Both organic theory and musical form provide Eliot with useful analogues, in other words, for the theorization of forms that are fundamentally continuous in both space and time, but also overwhelmingly complex in that continuousness—made up of indistinguishable elements that are thickly layered and overlapping.

Indeed, Catherine Gallagher has taken the very concept of the category or the "type" in its supposed opposition to the instance or the particular as a crucial problem for Eliot's strategies of character development. Gallagher suggests that in Eliot, fictional individuals take general types as their referent, even while realist novels always "conjured as their own 'background' an empirical cultural understanding that the type is only a mental abstraction from more real concrete individuals in the world."<sup>35</sup> The novel form is therefore "structured like a triptych, in

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<sup>33</sup> See Beer, *Darwin's Plots*; and Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*.

<sup>34</sup> Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel*, 125.

<sup>35</sup> Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," 62. For another recent reading of Eliot as interested in the overlapping of seemingly contradictory formal categories, see Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*. In his study of the modernist bildungsroman, Esty positions *The Mill on the Floss* as a pioneering text for its challenge to a simple opposition of individual soul to bounded nationhood, and the novel's insistence that "the bildungsroman can and usually does project an array of overlapping chronotopic possibilities: the local, bounded space of tradition ... ; the radically open and unbounded space-time of empire and globalization ... ; and the mediating, reconciling chronotope of the nation" (56-57).

which ontologically distinct categories of ‘the particular’ appear on either side of a category of ‘the general,’ creating a centrality for the middle category not normally sustainable under the empirical assumptions that contrast the ideality of the type with the substantiality of the experientially available individual.”<sup>36</sup> According to Gallagher’s model, the “general” characterizes the zone of overlap between distinctive versions of particularity, one fictional and the other real, rather than merely standing in opposition to a monolithic concept of particularity. Gallagher goes on to argue that we have overemphasized Eliot’s *ethical* conception of particularity, which is the basis of her theory of sympathy, and which inspires the caricature of her stern Victorian moralism; instead, Gallagher insists that “Eliot’s ethics are preceded and animated by an *erotics* of particularization” generated by the reader’s identification with fictional characters who yearn to pass to the other side of the zone of “generality,” and therefore to become embodied and concretely real.<sup>37</sup>

We might imagine Gallagher’s “triptych” form of novelistic characterization as a Venn diagram; and yet even John Venn himself, the Victorian logician who popularized this distinctive diagrammatic way of representing overlapping categories, understood that such a representation covers over the deep uncertainty that the very concept of “overlap” generates. Far from being the inventor of such logical diagrams, Venn reviews their complex history in his *Symbolic Logic*, all the while insisting that circles made of continuous solid lines do injustice to the vagueness of areas of overlap. He suggests using dotted lines in the overlap segment of the diagram, or in the case of diagrams that include many categories, filling different areas with different saturations of color, from shades of grey to the black of maximum density of overlap; or finally, he points out

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 70; original emphasis.

that we might use shapes other than circles that have a better capacity for representing vague boundaries.<sup>38</sup> Venn goes on to argue that a rigid insistence upon the exactness of logical diagramming as a mathematically precise representation—in which the sizes of individual compartments would “match up,” for example, with the relative extensions of various categories—actually confuses the qualitative aspects of logical set theory with its more quantitative mathematical aspects:

The compartments yielded by our diagrams must be regarded solely in the light of being bounded by such and such contours, as lying inside or outside such and such lines. We must abstract entirely from all consideration of their relative magnitude, as we do of their actual shape, and trace no more connection between these facts and the logical extension of the terms which they represent than we do between this logical extension and the size and shape of the letter symbols, *A* and *B* and *C*.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, diagrams act as visual aids that offer us easily apprehensible boundaries, contours, and shapes by which to understand the relationships between various concepts or classes; and yet as Venn points out, these shapes are in another sense mere phantasms, arbitrarily situated in space, something like the many shapes that we might choose to draw within the blurry edges of Wittgenstein’s rectangle. As Eliot puts it in relation to aesthetic form: “Boundary or outline & visual appearance are modes of form which in music and poetry can only have a metaphorical presence” (“Notes” 433). The shapes of a Venn diagram are in fact used as *variables* in just the same way that we use other symbols as simplified stand-ins for a dizzyingly complex range of possibilities. They represent, as Venn says, a qualitative kind of experience rather than a quantitative mapping of logical language onto empirical reality. In this sense,

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<sup>38</sup> Venn, *Symbolic Logic*, 427-38. Although Venn’s name has by now become synonymous with sets of overlapping circles, he attributes the development of this particular type of diagram to the eighteenth-century Swiss mathematician Leonhard Euler, and calls them “Eulerian circles.” Venn was, however, largely responsible for adapting this kind of diagram to the field of logic, hence his concern with distinguishing their logical uses and limitations from their mathematical uses.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

Venn's model of logical representation is at least partly analogous to Eliot's model of fictional representation, in which the qualitative experience of the zone of overlap is much more important than the rational project of drawing exact boundaries—or perhaps more precisely, in which the drawing of boundaries is constantly exposed in all its arbitrariness. This aid to understanding might comfort us, Eliot tells us in many ways, but it is temporary and superficial, and will never exempt us from a reckoning with vagueness. This is the sense behind the narrator's famous description in *Middlemarch* of Bulstrode's fear of having his criminal past exposed:

The terror of being judged sharpens the memory: it sends an inevitable glare over that long-unvisited past which has been habitually recalled only in general phrases. Even without memory, the life is bound into one by a zone of dependence in growth and decay: but intense memory forces a man to own his blameworthy past. With memory set smarting like a reopened wound, a man's past is not simply a dead history, an outworn preparation of the present: it is not a repented error shaken loose from the life: it is a still quivering part of himself, bringing shudders and bitter flavours and the tinglings of a merited shame. (615)

The glaring light cast from the present over the past; the “zone of dependence” in which growth and decay are “bound into one” and make life a continuous whole; the painful quivering and tingling by which one feels one's past deeds as if they are fused into one's very body: Eliot combines here a variety of ways of imagining the sinking horror of continuity, or of the impossibility of making clean cuts and shaking loose the repulsive desires and moral mistakes of the past.

And yet from the point of view of moral judgment in its social dimension, all that matters is the bare, clean-edged fact (or at least perception) of wrongdoing. As the narrator describes it, “That was the bare fact which Bulstrode was now forced to see in the rigid outline with which acts present themselves to onlookers. But for himself at that distant time, and even now in burning memory, the fact was broken into little sequences, each justified as it came by

reasonings which seemed to prove it righteous” (618). Bulstrode’s breaking of his life into “little sequences” is a way of dealing with the vagueness of time, which binds a life into one relentless whole—of course, those little sequences could be further divided and subdivided ad infinitum, and that is precisely the terror of vagueness that his careful organizational scheme of memory holds at bay. The painfulness and the confusion of apprehending what Dames might call the “unbroken complexity” of memory, and its connection to the present, is counterbalanced by the very ethical productivity of such apprehension. The vagueness inherent in the continuity of lived experience can serve as a strategic cover, as we’ve already seen, in which small decisions add up as if by magic into moral failure; but vagueness also accurately represents the very difficulty and swampy thickness of ethical thinking as against the clear “rigid outlines” which are at best pragmatic aids to efficient or casuistic moral classification.

## **6. A New Organ of Knowledge**

And so finally, vagueness in Eliot takes shape as a question both of space (the problem of imagining a spatialized organization to psychic life in which different kinds of knowledge and feeling are separated into distinct categories) and time (the problem of dividing one’s life, one’s reasons, one’s desires, one’s language, into discrete and apprehensible segments). As Will Ladislaw insists to Dorothea, “To be a poet is to have a soul ... in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. One may have that condition by fits only” (223). Perhaps, then, to be a novelist is to have a soul in which knowledge passes slowly and laboriously into feeling, and feeling flows or diffuses itself just as slowly and laboriously back again. Ladislaw is of course oblivious to the problem of vagueness in his description of poetic sensibility: to him the transformation of knowledge into feeling and

back again is an instantaneous flash. Now you see it, now you don't. And yet when feeling "flashes back as a new organ of knowledge," it seems it must be bringing something with it, interfusing itself into knowledge in a way that raises all of the problems of vagueness which have by now become familiar to us. What is the maximum amount of feeling that can be imparted to knowledge before we cease to call it knowledge any longer and begin to insist that it's something else entirely? Does feeling in this case overwhelm and squelch knowledge, so that we have a simple transition of one to the other? Or do we need another name for what happens when these two kinds of experience become thoroughly mixed?

Throughout my reading of Eliot, I've insisted that vagueness is intimately related to drifting, floating, and empty-headed passivity, and also that Eliot's goal is to represent these states as having a relationship to form despite seeming hopelessly formless, chaotic, and vaguely defined. If the philosophical interest in vagueness is, at its root, a challenge to the idea that our psychic lives can be represented by the formal system of logic, Eliot's interest is in discovering what other forms we might imagine as guiding our rational, ethical, and erotic lives, especially insofar as these various modes of knowing and thinking can be understood as merging together. What does logic look like beyond form or at its vague edges? After all, "logic" in its broadest sense refers not only to the normative set of rules and laws that define "right" reasoning, but also to the fundamental and neutral structures that enable thought and rational language in the first place. But what if these structures are fuzzy instead of clear? Theorists of "fuzzy" logic have taken this question very seriously, but they tend to do so at a high level of mathematical abstraction, whereas Eliot tries to show us what such a fuzzy structure feels like, both what it enables and what it disables in our everyday experience of the world: what we might gain by

sinking into and possibly emerging out of vagueness, and what stands to be lost, on the other hand, by sharpness.



## Chapter Four

### *Groping Knowledge: Everything in James*

#### 1. The Most Promising Quantity

In his New York Edition preface to *The Ambassadors*, Henry James offers one of his many reflections on the process of building a plot out of a small idea, a process he describes here as an easy following of “inductive steps” that lead him from the idea of Lambert Strether’s “position” to the plot which would tell us “why, on his hands, it had turned ‘false’”: “I accounted for everything,” James tells us, “and ‘everything’ had by this time become the most promising quantity.”<sup>1</sup> In looking back on his own fiction, James tends to be obsessed by the image of an infinitesimal concept which balloons outward, potentially out of control. This is one of the few instances in which he seems content to allow that ballooning to proceed unimpeded, infinitely, to encompass *everything*, that “most promising quantity.” The thrill of a potential relation to everything clearly represents for James a triumph of logic. The infinite connectivity implied by the process of logical reasoning (whether inductive or deductive, since both kinds of logic are based on the concept of entailment) can generate an unending series of linked ideas, apparently without any active effort on the part of the author. This thrill is also connected to erotic knowledge by way of James’s experiment in *The Ambassadors* with a consistent focalization of the narrative through the single consciousness of Lambert Strether. James insists that he will subsume his own omniscient knowledge of this world to the limited knowledge of Strether, or in other words that he will know the facts of the novelistic world “only through his [Strether’s]

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<sup>1</sup> James, “Preface,” in *The Ambassadors*, xxxv-xxxvi. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

more or less groping knowledge of them, since his very gropings would figure among his most interesting motions, and a full observance of the rich rigour I speak of would give me more of the effect I should be most 'after' than all other possible observance together" (xxxix). There's a tenuous balance here between logic, which in its systematic mode of entailment and implication leads us inexorably on and on to "everything," and the erotics of a person embedded at the center of such an immensity of possibility, who gropes as if with feeling hands for knowledge, as if finding his way in the dark or, on the other hand, finding his way around the contours of a desired body.

This chapter begins from James's paradoxical link between logic and groping as parallel devices of novelistic form in order to argue that "everything" functions in James's fiction as a surprisingly labile concept through which to think about form and its difficult relationship to the erotic life that seems most resistant to formalization. The irreverent, irresponsible, and sometimes inaccurate or unintelligible uses of "everything" in James function, in other words, as a potent kind of bad logic by which erotic desire becomes both wildly expansive and infinitely diminished, diluted, or attenuated. After all, if it's "everything," it's also, in some sense, nothing at all. Another way of putting this is to say that to use "everything" in its everyday usage always involves us in a kind of trickery of reason, which takes advantage of the mathematical forms of modern logic that are so much more at home with the infinite than are our ordinary ways of thinking and reasoning with one another. "Everything" returns us to the concept of logical space that we encountered in thinking about tautology (a form which leaves that space completely open) and contradiction (a form which collapses or limits the reach of logical space).

We tend to think of erotic life as bound up with particularity, directionality, or pointedness—the sharpness and embodied specificity of a pang—rather than with the generality

and the refusal of particularity that “everything” seems to signify—the wet blanket it would seem to throw over a set of specifiable erotic cathexes. Even polymorphous perversity, which would distribute pleasure indiscriminately over the entire body, shares its limits with the limits of that body; and as we found in the previous chapter, Freudian psychoanalysis tends to see this kind of vague diffusion of pleasure as something to leave behind, to be replaced ideally with a set of circumscribed and normative genital pleasures, a process which Freud compares many times to the building of “dams” which over time “restrict the flow” of pleasure toward socially normative stimuli.<sup>2</sup> This was perhaps Foucault’s most important insight about Freudian psychoanalysis—that its claims to clearer or deeper insight into the erotic self might be only another use of knowledge as power, which controls more than it liberates. My argument here aims to elide the tension between the psychoanalytic and Foucauldian readings of the relationship between language and sexuality by pushing aside both the question of insight and the question of the repressive hypothesis. What I’m after in following “everything” in James’s fiction and in his theory of the novel is a different kind of “knowledge” about the erotic, one that’s invested primarily in form rather than content. For both Eliot and James, this seems to be why logic provides such a productive counterpoint in thinking about erotic desire: logic is a science of form indifferent on some level to content, or a formal philosophy of first principles that determines the possible shapes of our thinking, and perhaps our desiring, without forcing us into a moral judgment about what that thinking and desiring contain. And yet the very fact that logic tends to be understood as, above all, a normative philosophy of right reasoning suggests that even its form, taken as a space that must find its limits or edges somewhere, might already carry with it an ethical significance. This is of course to say that James’s interest in “everything” does not

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<sup>2</sup> Freud, *Three Essays*, 42.

represent a coded discourse of sexual liberation. “Everything” in James is by no means a shorthand for “everything goes,” precisely because it doesn’t carry with it a predictable ethical evaluation about the content or the objects of erotic desire, which “everything” does so much to make indefinite and diffuse.

In this chapter, I aim to offer something less than a comprehensive reading of any single novel, and something more than a listing of James’s every use of a particular word. I begin by thinking in greater detail about how James understands “everything” as an object of erotic knowledge and as a crucial principle or problem of novelistic form, and set that understanding against philosophical traditions of thinking about “everything” in logical terms. I then move on to an analysis of *The Portrait of a Lady*, in which James figures Isabel Archer’s self-exemption from the logical space of “everything” as a naïve mode of skepticism, solipsism, and erotic indecision. “Everything” as a mechanism of negation or exclusion works quite differently in *The Golden Bowl*: to talk about “everything *but*” one particular thing (often the specificity of the body or the self and the idiosyncrasy of erotic desire) in that novel is seemingly to negate particularity in favor of a diluted and evasive generality, often read in the history of James criticism as representative of an attitude of sexual repression; but for James it also provides an occasion to think through what he sees as the hazards of circumscription, or at least the varied ethical complications that arise when one tries to get specific about erotic life. I move on in my reading of *The Golden Bowl* to an examination of the paradoxical concept of super-addition by which James’s narrators and characters often refer to what exists outside of everything but in an intimate relation to it—often behind it, or beneath it, or reflecting it as in a mirror.<sup>3</sup> One might

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<sup>3</sup> The position of “behind” has of course been an important object of discussion for critics interested in Jamesian sexuality. Kaja Silverman, in her influential Lacanian reading, points to James’s “predilection for rear subject-positions” (158), which she connects to a structure of “sodomitical identification” (179).

read these usages of “everything” as another version of exclusion or repression; after all, when we push something outside of the bounds of everything, we seem necessarily to make it unavailable, particularly on a logical theory of language that relies upon the set, class, or category as a crucial formal concept, of which “everything” provides the all-encompassing first principle. But I’ll argue that James’s interest in the possibility of “everything *and*” represents an interest in establishing a position from which to turn “everything” into an object in itself—an object of sympathy or perhaps fantasmatic identification—rather than an object against which exemption and exclusion are measured. This is a position, in other words, from which to investigate the formal contours of everything, the possibilities it offers, and the kinds of knowledge it enables in addition to the kinds it disables. It’s in these moments that James turns from an erotics of particularity or idiosyncrasy to the challenging notion of an erotics of infinity.

## 2. Knowing Everything

In *The Awkward Age*, characters tend to call upon “everything” as a way of tracking and measuring the erotic knowledge around which so much of the plot of the novel revolves—who knows what about the sexual schemes and dalliances that structure the novel? This is a particular problem in the case of Nanda Brookenham, the young woman whose potential marriage to Gustavus Vanderbank, a marriage to be bankrolled by the withdrawn and genteel Mr. Longdon,

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Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick picks up a similar thread in her analysis of the prefaces and James’s “fussy, immensely productive focus on the sensations, actions and paralyses, accumulations and probings and expulsions of his own lower digestive tract” (49), a reading which explicitly challenges Silverman’s assumption of “epistemological privilege” in her analysis of James, or in other words her assumption that James couldn’t have intended, or couldn’t have been fully conscious of, the sexual meanings in his own writing (54). It’s important for our purposes to take note of the idea that the spatial rubric of inside/outside and behind/within map for both of these critics onto very different epistemological stances, something that is also true of James’s invocation of “everything” as a kind of space. I’ll have occasion to return to both of these readings of James later on. See Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 157-184; and Sedgwick, “Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity,” in *Touching Feeling*, 35-66.

the erstwhile lover of Nanda's grandmother, provides much of the narrative momentum of the novel. Much like the very "age" of James's title, Nanda is precariously balanced between a model of erotic knowingness (the outré Tishy Grendon) and a model of erotic ignorance (the sheltered and naïve "Little Aggie," who after her marriage reveals herself to be not so prudish after all). And yet it's the question of Nanda's own uncertain knowledge, her ability or inability to decode the workings of the plots and dealings of which she is the central object, that preoccupies almost every other character in the novel. "She always knows everything, everything," says Vanderbank at one point to his friend Mitchy, who responds with an incantatory echo that only intensifies Vanderbank's opacity: "Everything, everything."<sup>4</sup> Vanderbank quickly qualifies: "But of course she can't help it. . . . Everything, literally everything, in London, in the world she lives in, is in the air she breathes—so that the longer *she's* in it the more she'll know" (378, original emphasis).

The paradox here, that one might know everything and yet still find that there's "more" to know as time passes, or that everything can be contained within a person as knowledge and at the same time exist outside of that person as the very air that sustains her, aligns with the paradox of the very word, "everything," which is balanced on the line that separates the infinite from the countable. The quintessentially ambiguous Jamesian syntax only intensifies our uncertainty about the spatial limits, or indeed the formal properties, of the "everything" under discussion—is Vanderbank saying that everything *in London* is in the air that Nanda breathes? Everything in Nanda's particular and limited "world"? Or is everything itself—a much more indefinite or infinitely expansive "everything"—in London? Does the city, and Nanda's place within it, somehow hold within itself *everything*, or at the very least, everything that matters to this novel,

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<sup>4</sup> James, *The Awkward Age*, 377-78. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

to these characters? Contemporary drag culture often ironizes this paradoxical usage of “everything” as a slangy shorthand for a kind of overwhelming glamour. This is an infinite fabulousness that must also maintain, in the very act of impersonation, a relationship to the particular material reality of clothes, voice, hair, and makeup—to the idiosyncrasy of style that elicits desire or identification in the first place: “Judy Garland? She’s *everything*.” To say that Nanda knows everything, or that the air she breathes is, or contains, everything, is to perform a similar feint. Nanda’s knowledge is both of her world and radically beyond it, is both contained by her and always threatens to disperse or dilute her particularity, to flatten her out in every direction.

The word “everything,” in other words, seems to point to a limited number of things—all the things that exist in the world or in the universe or in a novel or a character as potential objects of knowledge—and at the same time, in its everyday usage, it’s often meant to evoke a sheer sense of infinity. If an unmodified “all” seems clean and simple in its inclusiveness, then “everything” still maintains an attachment, at least etymologically, to materiality or countability. There can only be so many discrete things, after all, for me to touch and to count, and yet there are indeed enough of them out there that to try to hold in mind the idea of “every” thing can prompt a kind of exhausted resignation: they may as well be infinite for all I can know of them. Of course, encountered in a different aesthetic mode, we might also confront “everything” with the fever-pitch intensity of awe that we call the sublime. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* elegantly puts it in one of its rare entries that have remained unaltered since 1894, “The distributive sense etymologically belonging to the word is often absent, its force being merely collective; hence it is the current substitute for *all*.”<sup>5</sup> “Everything” slips, in other words, from the

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<sup>5</sup> “everything,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

fastidious project of accumulation and distribution, of a counting out that seems never to end (we might think here of Mrs. Gereth's hoard of art objects in *The Spoils of Poynton*), into the "merely collective" flattening and attenuation (another favorite word of James) by which everything becomes indistinguishable from, or in effect interchangeable with, everything else. It's not the *things* after all, that tend to matter once "everything" is invoked, but the rhetorical force, the hazardous overreaching, of *everything* as an idea, or as a placeholder for a kind of incapacity of expression. "What is it?" "Oh," one might wearily respond under the weight of what seems an unbearable burden, "it's simply everything." We often forget that "everything" is a pronoun, because it tends to have a profoundly unclear antecedent, difficult to point to and identify—or maybe that antecedent is always meant to be irrecoverable, painfully lost to us or to our language, somewhere out there, or everywhere.

In James's fiction, this alternation between weary resignation and sublime expansiveness, or this refusal of indexicality in favor of an impossibly broad sweeping gesture, is intimately connected to the problem with which we began, of the appeal of particularity and the pull to generalization with which the novelist struggles as he tries to give recognizable shape to his story. Of course, in thinking about *The Ambassadors*, James seems to insist that generalization is the dominant force, and that the urge toward "everything" is in fact a "promising" one. In his preface to *The Awkward Age*, on the other hand, his concern is to defend the novel's carefully circumscribed scope—its stubborn interest in representing the idiom of a strange, unrepresentative social group. "The circle surrounding Mrs. Brookenham, in my pages," he writes, "is of course nothing if not a particular, even a 'peculiar' one—and its rather vain effort (the vanity, the real inexpertness, being precisely a part of my tale) is toward the courage of that condition" (xi). "Everything" is in some sense the antonym of "nothing," and yet as I've



suggested, they're often closely aligned for James, who suggests here that a failure of particularity in his treatment would in fact make it a treatment of nothing: Mrs. Brookenham's set is "nothing if not" particular, or perhaps it would have much the same rhetorical effect to say that if they're not particular they're everything. The "circle surrounding" Mrs. Brookenham is analogous in other words to the circle that circumscribes the novel itself, prevents its form from becoming too vague around the edges, and contains it as a discrete whole or composition.

This is much the same formal problem that we've seen Eliot grapple with, and James's way of describing it is strikingly similar here. He invokes, as Eliot does, the problem of shape, line, sharpness, and containment, or in other words our Venn-inspired way of understanding ideas and their relationships to one another diagrammatically: "though the relations of a human figure or a social occurrence are what makes such objects interesting, they also make them, to the same tune, difficult to isolate, to surround with the sharp black line, to frame in the square, the circle, the charming oval, that helps any arrangement of objects to become a picture" (*AA* viii). James offers us a wavering shape, which shifts in one sentence from an indeterminate borderline to a square, to a circle, to an oval, and the lack of conjunctions makes the relationship of these shapes doubly opaque. It's difficult to tell whether we should imagine these shapes as simultaneous and overlapping; as fundamentally interchangeable shapes subsumed under the metaphor of the ordinary "frame" of a picture; or as a set of alternatives each of which carries its own formal implications. While on the level of novelistic form Eliot worries about beginnings and endings—those moments of entrance into and exit from a novelistic world, or indeed the moments of formal genesis and dissolution as they occur in time—James worries about the out-of-control expansion of what he calls here the "little idea" or the "happy thought" that serves as the seed of the story in the author's imagination, the "proposed scale" of which story was

intended to be “the limit of a small square canvas” (vi-viii). “Charm” is one of James’s favorite ambiguous concepts, and in this case, the drawing of the “charming oval” represents both an achievement of aesthetic appeal and a kind of rite of magic by which to defend against the threat of total attenuation, of the particular story overflowing its proper bounds, or branching out into infinite connections—into everything.

In the case of *The Awkward Age*, James tells us that his experimental method of containment was his emulation of dramatic form in the decision to write a novel almost exclusively in dialogue. Even the few scenes of third-person narration in this novel pointedly eschew any hint of insight into characters’ interiority, focusing instead on description of setting, clothing, and sometimes facial expression. If the English novel tends to be, James argues, “a perfect paradise of the loose end,” then

the play consents to the logic of but one way, mathematically right, and with the loose end as a gross impertinence on its surface, and as grave a dishonour, as the dangle of a snippet of silk or wool on the right side of a tapestry. We are shut up wholly to cross-relations all within the action itself; no part of which is related to anything but some other part—save of course by the relation of the total to life. (xx)

Here we have a total reversal of the version of logic that James elaborates in the preface to *The Ambassadors*, where it is a self-directing mechanism that allows the author to lay back and bask in the wonderfully open-ended expansiveness of connection that develops out of a single scene. Now logic is a tool of mathematical precision which cuts a very narrow path indeed, and is the absolute enemy of the loose end.

In the final afterthought of this passage—“save of course by the relation of the total to life”—James’s plan seems to crumble: neither the novel nor the play can be formally airtight, sewn up at the edges with the kind of sharp finish for which James seems to yearn. Both novels and plays have audiences, and both purport to represent an actual world, and these relations of

the aesthetic to the actual are of course formally constitutive. The very openness to the outside that James calls loose constitutes in some sense the very guarantee of wholeness and circumscription that he desires. Joseph Conrad, writing before the magnum opus of the New York Edition, goes so far as to identify the conspicuous lack of a collected edition of James's work with something in his fiction itself that resists circumscription: "in the body of Mr. Henry James's work there is no suggestion of finality. . . . It is impossible to think of Mr. Henry James becoming 'complete' otherwise than by the brutality of our common fate whose finality is meaningless—in the sense of its logic being of a material order, the logic of a falling stone."<sup>6</sup> The material weight of the stone, or indeed of the book as an object, which seems to Conrad the only possible anchor of finality, is in itself meaningless. But as we've seen, the meaninglessness of completion that Conrad is after in fact might merely be exchanged for the meaninglessness of an oeuvre that's so open-ended as to be everything. As the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* puts it in describing his attempted escape from the relentlessly formalizing, rationalizing, systematizing drive of his own imagination, "I should leave behind me my tangled theory, no loose thread of which need I ever again pick up, in no stray mesh of which need my foot again trip. . . . Only I must break off sharp, must escape all reminders by forswearing all returns."<sup>7</sup> James circles back here to the terror of the loose end and its capacity to be picked up and attached onto everything in view, and to the careful craft of closure, which requires not a languorous complexity or ambiguity, but a ruthless break and a confident escape into whatever lies beyond the novel's infinite capacity of expansion.

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<sup>6</sup> Conrad, "Henry James," 15.

<sup>7</sup> James, *The Sacred Fount*, 201.

All of this is to say that we might very well understand James's interest in the potentially hazardous infinitude of the erotic, and similarly of novelistic form itself, as a further development, or torquing, of George Eliot's interest in vagueness as a problem of logic, form, ethics, and finally erotics. For Eliot, the forms of desire and reason alike—their shaping, separation, and circumscription—tend to suppress an underlying field of vague interpenetration, a field that might be ethically productive as a place to revisit, or indeed pleasurable as a place to lay back and float along with erotic impulse. We can't deny vagueness as a problem of ordinary language, and yet for Eliot, to admit it is also to risk admitting too much of it; in other words, to commit oneself to the recognition of vagueness as a state of mind, an ethical mood, or a kind of erotic pleasure, is also to commit oneself to exercising a precarious control over the extent to which vague boundaries bleed into each other, or over our ability to return each time from the murk of vagueness to the clarity of form. Close attention to vagueness, coupled with a desire for form and clarity, is a matter not of an infinite expansiveness but of an infinitesimal focus on, for example, grains of sand or finely drawn, delicate limits.

James's novelistic uses of vagueness, on the other hand, sometimes seem to pursue as their object the very flattened field of undifferentiation or indeed attenuation that precedes or underlies the forms of separateness and limitedness that Eliot works so diligently to theorize—those forms that she represents so often just as they begin to come into view as sharp lines and shapely contours. Eliot insists that form is nearly synonymous with our capacity to perceive separateness, and that this perception exists for us only in a kind of dialectical tension with the smooth continuity implied by vague boundaries. But James again and again refuses the resolutions promised by this dialectical model, asking us to imagine how the nebulous “everything” that would seem to terrorize Eliot might itself be a kind of form, a thing that one

might talk about meaningfully and take as an object of reasoned consideration. I've been at pains, of course, to indicate that James by no means celebrates "everything" as a shorthand for liberation, erotic freedom, or infinite knowledge; in fact, tracking "everything" in the prefaces is clearly one way to illuminate the essential inconsistency of James's theorization of his own novelistic practice. Or perhaps it's unfair, after all, to assume that the prefaces should present a consistent theory at all—what works for one novel, in other words, might not work for another. If an experiment in *The Ambassadors* with the formal device of focalization seems amenable to infinite expansiveness and the inductive logic of "groping knowledge," it might nonetheless be true that an experiment in *The Awkward Age* with the formal features of drama necessitates a rejection of that expansiveness in favor of a narrow world, mathematically logical, in which "everything" is more of a mystical incantation than a rational object. "Everything, everything," we hear Mitchy chant.

The question in philosophy that maps onto James's shifting understanding of "everything" is a question on which the Continental and Anglo-American traditions are thoroughly divided: does "everything" refer to a set or invoke a formal, even metaphysical, concept? For the symbolic logic of nineteenth-century Britain, "everything" is primarily a mathematical concept—it's a way of describing the set which might be understood as including all things that exist, and therefore all smaller sets as well. In other words, it's an enabling background concept or first principle for a basic set theory, since we must be able to imagine the set that includes everything in order to begin to divide everything into narrower categories. John Venn, for example, refers to "everything which the universe contains" as the referent of the number "1" in the binary algebra invented by George Boole and carried on by Venn, and simply "nothing" as the referent of "0." The mathematical notation for "everything except  $x$ ," or more

simply “not- $x$ ,” would be “ $1 - x$ .”<sup>8</sup> Everything and nothing are binary concepts of existence for a symbolic logician such as Venn, or his forerunner Boole—everything that exists, or some things, or nothing; yes, maybe, or no.<sup>9</sup>

Bertrand Russell’s work on the problem of linguistic reference provides us with a different kind of contribution to our understanding of how “everything” might be understood as a set. In his influential 1905 essay “On Denoting,” Russell develops his theory of what he calls “denoting phrases,” defined as any noun phrase that isn’t a proper name: for example, “the woman,” “a woman,” “the present Queen of England,” etc. “Everything,” he suggests, along with “nothing” and “something,” are “the most primitive of denoting phrases” since the most expansive in the field they denote or exclude; among these, “everything” is taken as primary, or as Russell elaborates, it is “ultimate and indefinable, and the others are defined by means of it.”<sup>10</sup> Russell’s larger argument in this essay is that denoting phrases can never have any meaning in and of themselves, but only acquire meaning as part of a proposition. Since it is impossible for one to be directly acquainted with everything, it is at best an abstract concept that only “means” insofar as it is connected to other things, qualities, etc., with which one can be directly acquainted. “Not everything is red” has meaning because I can know directly what “red” is, I’ve

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<sup>8</sup> Venn, *Symbolic Logic*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> The field of logical set theory became immensely more difficult two decades after Venn’s *Symbolic Logic*, with Bertrand Russell’s discovery in 1901 of what came to be known as “Russell’s paradox.” Because the full complexity of the paradox is, frankly, quite beyond me as a non-mathematician, I choose not to elaborate upon it here in any detail. We might understand the specialized difficulty of this kind of work, however, as in itself a meaningful development in the history of logic—it might, in other words, represent the point at which symbolic logic finally becomes entrenched as a rarefied academic field, incomprehensible to lay readers. After 1901, the kind of approachable language used by Venn in explicating his set theory would become useless, a fact captured perfectly in the tendency to refer to the work of the period before Russell as “naïve set theory.”

<sup>10</sup> Russell, “On Denoting,” 480.

seen that color before and can be taught its name—I can identify it again—whereas “everything” as a standalone phrase is essentially meaningless.<sup>11</sup> In the same journal forty-five years later, P. F. Strawson would critique Russell for failing properly to distinguish the meaning of a term itself such as “everything” from the meaning elaborated in its individual *utterances* and its potentially changing *uses*, a subtle modification of Russell’s idea which would allow denoting phrases to have a meaning informed by context, a meaning which could shift as the world shifts.<sup>12</sup> Strawson’s response to Russell can be understood as an early example of the mid-twentieth-century shift away from the relentless mathematicization of symbolic logic toward what would be called ordinary language philosophy, with its sensitivities to the social life of language. In short, tracing the history of “everything” in British logic might give us a kind of miniaturized version of the history of the discipline, its innovations and controversies.

For Hegel, on the other hand, and the Continental tradition that would follow him in the philosophy of language, “everything” is not a particularly important term. Hegel is primarily interested in logic not as a mathematics but as the science of the forms of thought that enable rational consciousness at all. Logic in the Continental tradition is a first philosophy of the form of language, without the heavily normative focus on “right reasoning” that tends to preoccupy the British tradition. Instead of “everything,” Hegel is after the infinite, and more specifically what he calls the genuine or true infinity as opposed to “bad infinity” (sometimes translated as “spurious” infinity). Hegel argues that the bad infinite aligns with our everyday way of thinking of infinity as a never-ending series or collection of finite things, or to put it more simply, as the opposite or negation of the finite. If we imagine infinitude and finitude as opposites, Hegel

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See Strawson, “On Referring.”

insists, we miss the point. We imagine an infinitude that is never complete, always expanding and always limited externally by the finite things which continue to be added on to it, always needing to add one *more* thing, and then another, to its series in order simply to *keep going* to infinity. It is, Hegel says, a “*finitized* infinite,” in a paradoxical turn of phrase that echoes the tension within the word “everything.”<sup>13</sup> Hegel’s emblem of “true” infinity is the circle, which has no beginning and no end, and which therefore represents infinity as a whole concept or totality which contains the finite within itself as “moments” or “internal differentiations.” In other words, Hegel’s true infinity represents the core of his mystical brand of transcendence: it is “the true being” and “the elevation above restriction,” and “at the mention of the infinite, soul and spirit *light up*, for in the infinite the spirit *is* at home, and not only abstractly; rather, it rises to itself; to the light of its thinking, its universality, its freedom.”<sup>14</sup> Another way of putting this is that for Hegel, the finite contains within itself the will to the infinite as a kind of energy of potentiality: the infinite is its “affirmative determination, its vocation, what it truly is in itself.”<sup>15</sup>

Henry James’s uses of “everything” as a device of formalization are interesting in precisely the way that they shift between the two modes I’ve outlined, and particularly because the work in logic and epistemology that James would have been more intimately familiar with, that of his friend Charles Sanders Peirce especially, draws so heavily upon both of these traditions. If we look to an essay such as “Logic as Semiotic,” we see Peirce appealing to the idea of “mathematical reasoning” and to the principles of set theory in formulating his idea of logic as a “doctrine of signs,” while in the movement from traditional logic to the idea of the

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<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 109; original emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*; original emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.



“semiotic,” his attention to the sociality of meaning, constructed by a relationship between a sign, an object, and a subjective “interpretant,” anticipates somewhat the later shift in England toward ordinary language philosophy.<sup>16</sup> If we look, on the other hand, to “The Law of Mind,” we find a thoroughly Hegelian concept of consciousness as an irreducible “continuity” or what Peirce terms “synechism,” rather than as a series of fully differentiated impressions.<sup>17</sup> Suffice it to say that James’s shifting understandings of “everything” might be understood as analogous to, if not by any means perfectly aligned with, these competing philosophical approaches to the concept, and in turning to James’s interest in the ethics and erotics of self-exclusion, we’ll begin to see the ways in which “everything” can represent in his fiction both a limited, normative world of things and logical rules, and also the metaphysical infinitude promised by a consciousness that luxuriates in introspection.

### 3. **Everything *but* ...**

James criticism offers us no shortage of ways to talk about the concept of exclusion as sexual repression in his work: the ellipses and indirections, in other words, by which James’s

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<sup>16</sup> See Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 98-119.

<sup>17</sup> See Peirce, “The Law of Mind,” in *Philosophical Writings*, 339-353. If I seem to push aside Peirce over-hastily as a figure who might have had a direct influence on James, it’s largely because Peirce’s work on logic, as I’ve suggested, echoes many of the preoccupations of the British tradition in logic and epistemology, including its occasional incorporations of Continental ideas as in the work of thinkers such as Carlyle and Eliot. A detailed analysis of his work, in other words, would not add enough to our working vocabulary to make it entirely worthwhile here. Moreover, he doesn’t provide us with many interesting accounts either of “everything” or of the infinite, and so it seems appropriate to pay closest attention to the philosophers who do have a great deal to say about these concepts. In other words, a straightforward influence model is not what I pursue in this chapter, nor in this project as a whole, and in any event, the field of direct philosophical influence has been well covered in James criticism. For an excellent recent account of Peirce’s influence on James, for example, which pertains specifically to the problem of vagueness, see Quigley, “Beastly Vagueness.” For one of the most influential readings of Henry James alongside the work of William James, see Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*. For a reading that argues for James’s anticipation of ideas in Continental phenomenology, see Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James*.

queerness is excluded from his texts. Much of this tradition of reading sexuality in James begins from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential argument that in "The Beast in the Jungle," "an embodied male homosexual thematics" is present only as "a thematics of absence, and specifically of the absence of speech."<sup>18</sup> Sedgwick is of course not arguing that James "excludes" sexuality from his work in any consistent way; on the contrary, she poses his complex ironizing of secrecy, his ways of making its absent meanings proliferate, against the discourse of the closet which would equate secrecy and silence with a monadic, seamless homosexual content. Her reading of James has produced, of course, a wealth of critical debate over the extent to which James was or was not beset by a "self-loathing" terror of his own sexuality. Hugh Stevens, for example, has argued that while James indeed persists in a "refusal to name the sexual," we might understand this evasiveness as merely a rejection of essentialism or sexual identity politics; or in other words we might think of repression in James as a rich source of "pleasure, humour," even "narrative itself," a model which is proto-constructionist in its play with sexual signification.<sup>19</sup> Michèle Mendelssohn, on the other hand, by approaching this problem from the angle of biographical and cultural-materialist criticism, has recently called into question the myth of James's internalized homophobia by calling into question the equally persistent myth of his homophobic rejection of Oscar Wilde and aestheticism.<sup>20</sup> If these critics disagree about many things, particularly about the biographical reading of James's experience of his own sexuality, they tend to agree that the dynamics of sexual repression and avowal are crucial to an

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<sup>18</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 201.

<sup>19</sup> Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> See Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and Aesthetic Culture*. For the most fully worked out reading of James's relationship to aestheticism, which touches upon questions of sexuality in a somewhat more subsidiary way, see Freedman, *Professions of Taste*.

understanding of James's fiction, and that these dynamics tend to elaborate into a related dynamics of vagueness and specificity. The negative or the silent is vague or pleasurably ironic, and on Sedgwick's reading, a thematics of absence in James allows for a powerful uncertainty of erotic meaning that resists the culture's desire to make that absent meaning into a coherent idea of homosexuality. The positive or the avowed (or in the case of homophobia, violently ascribed) sexual "truth," on the other hand, is confining, coercive, clear-cut, and singular.

Sedgwick's later work on James somewhat revises her position, or at least pursues Jamesian eroticism through a very different set of psychoanalytic and linguistic terms, replacing silence and secrecy with shame and performativity. Sedgwick suggests that for James, and for queerness in general, shame may in fact be precisely that which individuates—which structures identity rather than threatening its coherence. In James, this takes the form of the "specificity" and "explicitness" of the "particular erotics" (on Sedgwick's reading the complex anal erotics), of the prefaces.<sup>21</sup> Rather than understanding the "forms taken by shame" as forms of exclusion, in which "'toxic' parts of a group or individual identity ... can be excised," Sedgwick argues that these forms are "instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *transfiguration*, affective and symbolic loading and deformation, but perhaps all too potent for the work of purgation and deontological closure."<sup>22</sup> If Sedgwick's initial point about James in *Epistemology of the Closet* was that the closet itself was more open to the multiplicity of sexual meaning, or the polymorphousness of queer desire, than had traditionally been allowed, then in *Touching Feeling* she adds to this reading by insisting upon shame as an affect uniquely attuned

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<sup>21</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

to the dialectic relationship between specificity and indefiniteness, or between exposure and hiding. Sedgwick insists that for James, shame first of all circumscribes and defines sexual pleasure, attaching it for better or for worse to specific bodily zones (and this is a familiar enough psychoanalytic story about shame and desire); but she goes on to insist that the specificity of shame might also provide the impetus for a kind of infinite project of meaning-making, the potentially endless moments of metaphorization and proliferation that Sedgwick describes, which crucially *resist* closure: rather than closing off or making absent its objects, shame in fact makes them “available” for manipulation.

Sedgwick’s emphasis on “reframing” and “deformation” is of course crucial for our purposes: she offers us an echo of the flexible, shape-shifting narrative frame that James imagines in the preface to *The Awkward Age*, and of course insists that for James, the particularities of erotic life are not, after all, mere circumscriptions. What seems to be purposefully left out of the logical quantification of “every” thing, every desire, in other words, might not be an abjection—at least not *only* an abjection—but might after all represent a perspective of its own. Of course, it’s true that this perspective—a quasi-omniscient point of view which seems to have a privileged relationship to “everything” by virtue of standing outside of it—is often in James’s fiction cast as an immature or naïve will to freedom, which ends by being chastened into an acceptance of the limitations of one’s knowledge. The refusal of “everything,” or the attempt to exclude oneself from its parameters, is an important problem, in other words, for the Jamesian plot of erotic bildung.

Early on in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer’s ideas and thoughts, whether about ethics or politics or erotic desire, are no better than “a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgement of people speaking with authority,” and they seem confused

precisely because they refuse those foundational logical practices of discrimination that would narrow “everything” into discrete classes and objects.<sup>23</sup> At one point during a discussion of the idea of revolution, Isabel’s uncle Mr. Touchett says to her, “I forget whether you’re on the side of the old or the side of the new. I’ve heard you take such opposite views.” Isabel responds by simply refusing the distinctions that Mr. Touchett has drawn: “I’m on the side of both. I guess I’m a little on the side of everything” (126). Her refusal to choose is in another sense a positive choice to distribute herself in every direction—to be “a little on the side of everything,” it seems, is to dissolve oneself into pieces, with all the freedom and all the terror that such an infinite self-dispersal would imply.

The narrator of the novel goes so far as to represent this refusal as an embarrassment—a sort of touchy subject—which leads to his own refusal, or perhaps incapacity, of specificity in favor of generality: “Her errors and delusions were frequently such as a biographer interested in preserving the dignity of his subject must shrink from specifying” (104). Isabel’s erroneous practices of thinking are, in other words, so simply *stupid* in the narrator’s eyes that they threaten to make her dangerously unsympathetic or unbelievable; they’re so off the mark that they seem actually vulgar, and so the narrator retreats, decides to “shrink” out of sight at this moment and leave it to our imaginations to play over a kind of infinite and indefinite field of potential stupidities rather than mark Isabel out with any too specific offense against reason. Of course, if the narrator tends to be ashamed of Isabel, or nervous about her likeability, she rejects that stance: “she had a fixed determination,” we’re told, “to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action: she held it must be detestable to be afraid or ashamed” (104). To rein in her thoughts—or in other words to ask them to submit to a normative form—

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<sup>23</sup> James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 104. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

would be to limit their expansion, to set up resistances and phobias where Isabel wants none. If in logic as set theory, “everything” only *appears* to indicate infinity, and actually refers to the whole contents of a carefully defined space, everything available to *these* forms of thought, everything that I might be able to know and to reason about in *this* universe, then Isabel wants to make available to herself much more freedom of movement than that, and it’s this fantasy that sustains her, and that in James’s treatment threatens to debilitate her as well.

The shamefulness that the narrator attaches to Isabel’s over-certainty about the expansiveness and free movement of her knowledge also begins to hint at its relation to the more specific problem of erotic knowledge, the source of several major dilemmas in the first half of this novel. Isabel is faced with a series of suitors and must decide whom she desires and why, and perhaps just as importantly, must account to herself and to others for her conspicuous failures of desire in the face of attractive candidates like Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton. These failures, of course, are inexplicable—they simply *are*—and yet Isabel and the narrator take very different tacks in nonetheless attempting to account for each one. The best that Isabel can do in explaining to herself her indifference to Goodwood’s undeniable good looks is to say that “He was not romantically, he was rather obscurely, handsome; but his physiognomy had an air of requesting your attention” (90), or to put it even more baldly, “she sometimes thought that he would be rather nicer if he looked, for instance, a little differently” (170). Goodwood is, on some basic level, not Isabel’s *type*, he doesn’t turn her on, or as Isabel thinks in a somewhat more Platonic mode about it, “he had never corresponded to her idea of a delightful person” (171). Erotic knowledge seems to Isabel self-evident, and yet this is something slightly different from the tautological refusals of depth that we get in Trollope. Despite Isabel’s conviction that she can’t desire Goodwood—can’t simply because she doesn’t—her feeling of being in the

wrong about it leads her into a careful investigation of the nature of erotic desire. What's the difference after all, Isabel seems to wonder, between having your attention requested and having your desire stimulated? The refusal of Goodwood's erotic advances finally forces Isabel into a choice, if only passively, the kind of choice she won't make between the old and the new.<sup>24</sup> Solicited bodily, Isabel feels herself unable simply to disappear in every direction, or choose to be "a little on the side of everything"—one desires or one doesn't. One discovers resistances there, in those convictions of desire, along with freedoms; there may be inexplicable dislikes and indifferences, the remnants of choices one didn't know one had made.

The terror of erotic choice is only intensified by the time Osmond proposes to Isabel— at which point choice represents for her a kind of exposure that she is reluctant to hazard. Her first feeling in thinking about the proposal, after the drama of Goodwood and Warburton, is "the dread of having, in this case too, to choose and decide":

What made her dread great was precisely the force which, as it would seem, ought to have banished all dread—the sense of something within herself, deep down, that she supposed to be inspired and trustful passion. It was there like a large sum stored in a bank—which there was a terror in having to begin to spend. If she touched it, it would all come out. (360)

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Brooks suggests that this is all part of James's strategy for representing what Brooks calls "the melodrama of consciousness." He points out that Isabel's choices become more and more heightened and intensified as the novel goes on, so that her culminative choice to reject Goodwood's advances and return to her unhappy marriage to Osmond "is freighted with the lurid connotations of sacrifice, torture, penance, clausturation" (157). But of course, this reading tends to minimize the interest of Isabel's early choices, in which she is much more preoccupied with everyday questions of erotic desire than with the very different moral dilemmas and social stigmas associated with committing adultery or ending a marriage. Brooks's reading does, however, help us to see how Isabel begins from a chosen position of naïve and happy self-exclusion, in which "everything" seems a seamless object of knowledge for her; and ends by seeming to choose an unhappy, almost Gothic social exclusion. See Brooks, "Henry James and the Melodrama of Consciousness," in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 153-197.

Isabel's fear here seems to be a fear of sexuality itself, and this has been a popular critical diagnosis of Isabel's romantic choices and rejections.<sup>25</sup> I think this somehow misses the mark, or at least oversimplifies, the kind of "dread" that Isabel is trying to describe here, which seems to be importantly aligned with, for example, Charlotte Brontë's interest in the erotics and the bodily affects of hoarding, saving, and circulating. The fear is not of desire itself, but is rather born out of a willful alienation from desire as that which forces one to choose, which seems to beckon from the "real world" that Isabel so fears, beholden as that world is to the norms and beliefs and laws that would limit one's utter freedom. What terrorizes Isabel is the sense that one can't simply dip one's toe into the water to test its temperature—can't in other words seem to enter into a tentative, "free," experimental relationship with one's erotic desires. Rather, to come into contact with one's desiring self seems to Isabel to mean absolute exposure, plunging in head first: "If she touched it, it would all come out." Both Brontë and James represent circulation as simultaneously erotic and terrifying—both a necessary practice in acceding to social belonging, and also a potentially horrifying dissipation of oneself, by which one is in fact spent and emptied, if one doesn't know how to direct or control that outpouring of resources financial and erotic.

We might, then, read Isabel's avoidance of choice, and particularly erotic choice, as a kind of willful solipsism or skepticism, in which she turns away from the real world of everything and everyone that exists—away from the logical idea of the world of sets—in favor of a Hegelian fantasy of the limitless consciousness in which anything is possible, and everything allowed, in which one's savings grow and grow without ever having to be spent. This

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<sup>25</sup> For an overview of how Isabel's romantic choices have been read and pathologized, including the idea that her decision-making demonstrates a general fear of sexuality, see J. Hillis Miller, "The Story of a Kiss: Isabel's Decisions in *The Portrait of a Lady*," in *Literature as Conduct*, 30-83. Hills Miller reads these decisions, of course, through the framework of speech-act theory, in order to claim that in this novel the kiss becomes a kind of "sign act."



is bad logic manifesting as a complete refusal to belong to the world in which logic holds—a conviction that those rules may apply to everyone and everything, but not to special, luminous *me*. Reflecting on her refusal of Lord Warburton’s proposal, Isabel realizes that what repels her is his way of seeming to solicit her on behalf of a system, “the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved” (156). The adverb “invidiously” takes on a full range of possible meaning in this phrase: it could mean that Isabel sees Warburton as trapped begrudgingly in a system that he resents; it could mean that his easy movement in the system makes Isabel herself grudging or jealous of him; it could, in a related way, mean that his belonging in this system simply offends her, or seems nothing more than an arbitrary distinction between his system and hers, designed to incite strong feelings in her, to force her to choose. For Isabel, after all, all distinctions seem invidious. One thing is certain: Warburton is *in* his system, whatever it comprises, and Isabel is out of it. “A certain instinct,” the narrator tells us, “not imperious, but persuasive, told her to resist—murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own. It told her other things besides—things which both contradicted and confirmed each other” (156). The instinct which murmurs to Isabel might be “certain” both in the sense of indefiniteness and of decidedness: this is *a* certain instinct, difficult to tell which one exactly, but also a *certain* instinct, confident in its pronouncements about Isabel’s being exempted from the rules of reason itself. Instead of everything, she has “other things besides” which have the mystical power to simultaneously contradict and confirm. This “system and orbit of her own” might, in other words, place her both outside a system of good logic, in the place where everything contradicts everything else, and inside that strange black hole of tautology, in which everything is confirmed, everything left open. (More on tautology later.)

Ralph Touchett gets to the heart of the matter when he explicitly invokes logic in asking Isabel to account for her decision to reject Warburton's proposal. "What had you in mind," he asks her, "when you refused Lord Warburton? ... What was the logic—the view of your situation—that dictated so remarkable an act?" (202). Ralph never seems more the stand-in for James than he does at this moment, as he makes logic into an epiphenomenon of a kind of narrative point-of-view. If each of us has a particular view of our situation, then that view constitutes the specific "logic" within which one reasons. For every view, a different logic. Isabel responds by implicitly rejecting the terms of Ralph's line of questioning: "I didn't wish to marry him—if that's logic"; to which Ralph finally rejoins, "No, that's not logic—and I knew that before. It's really nothing, you know. What was it you *said* to yourself? You certainly said more than that" (202). On Ralph's reading, Isabel's insistence on standing outside of everything, creating a system and orbit of her own, does not allow her to elaborate an independent "everything" inside consciousness—it's "really nothing" in the end. Logic doesn't have to be complicated, he seems to insist, or mathematical, at least when it comes to the kind of moral reasoning or accountability that interests him here. It's only a kind of talking to oneself about oneself. Merely feeling something, say a desire or a repulsion, is not logic, but deciding to say something, anything, to oneself about that feeling, desire, or repulsion—that's logic. We would probably call it a philosophy of ordinary language. What matters is that, at least on Ralph's view, it doesn't try to encompass "everything," nor does it necessarily work solely in sets and categories of objects. It encompasses, rather, a specific point of view that must try to account for its own peculiarities.<sup>26</sup> Before this exchange, Isabel has in fact admitted to herself that there

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<sup>26</sup> The philosopher Robert B. Pippin, in *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, has argued that Ralph's kind of position is typical in James, and that it exemplifies his "resistance to skepticism" in questions of ethics (7). At the same time, Pippin argues, "the sorts of worries about contingencies in how we determine

might be something bad in her logic. It isn't that she doesn't like Warburton, she reflects, it's that "she liked him too much to marry him, that was the truth; something assured her that there was a fallacy somewhere in the glowing logic of the proposition—as *he* saw it—even though she mightn't put her very finest finger-point on it. ... [S]he was wondering if she were not a cold, hard, priggish person" (164-65). Isabel seems to anticipate Ralph here in taking a sort of pragmatist view of logic; there's a fallacy as Warburton sees it, but for Isabel, the error is hopelessly indefinite. Is it, she wonders, that the mistake is so hard to point to because there's nothing there after all, only coldness and hardness where it seems there should be desire?

Of course, the tragedy of this novel is that, once finally forced to choose, Isabel seems immediately to have made the *wrong* choice, or to have given herself over to the wrong kind of desire in accepting Osmond; and this is where it becomes clear where "everything" fits in James's intertwining of plots of erotic and moral development. While Isabel thinks that her position of exclusion—the impossible place outside of everything that she believes she can carve out for herself—is a guarantee of freedom and the expansion of the mind, it somehow ends up imprisoning her:

The desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her soul by the sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one's energies to a point. ... What had become of all her ardours, her aspirations, her theories, her high estimate of her independence and her incipient conviction that she should never marry? These things had been absorbed in a more primitive need—a need the answer to which brushed away numberless questions, yet gratified infinite desires. It simplified the situation at a stroke, it came down from above like the light of the stars, and it needed no explanation. There was explanation enough in the fact that he was her lover, her own, and that she should be able to be of use to him. She could surrender to him with a kind of humility, she could marry him with a kind of pride; she was not only taking, she was giving. (403)

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what is justifiable or not ... are frequently raised in James, and are clearly part of his worry about the rigidity and judgmental rigor of the moral point of view" (9). In other words, Pippin's reading of James positions him as someone trying above all to locate stable sources of moral truth in a modernizing world that seems more and more skeptical of the existence of such universal truths.

In hindsight it seems that what had paralyzed Isabel in the face of erotic choice was not an incapacity of desire, but rather the pleasure of promiscuous, imaginative desire, a pleasure which Isabel hesitates to relinquish, and which doesn't need to attach to a real object. Once invested in Osmond ("if she touched it, it would all come out"), desire tethers Isabel not only to the real world in which "everything" surrounds and smothers her, but to one small corner of it, one person in it who over time seems less and less remarkable than he once did. Her energies are now gathered "to a point," and Isabel has given up the pleasure of questioning in exchange for the pleasure of gratification. She has given up unlimited expansion in exchange for a simplification by which desire follows a straightforwardly economic, binary system: ownership and usefulness, give and take.

If Isabel's regret is at first only half-acknowledged, it later comes to overwhelm her in the culminating moment at which the magnitude of her loss in marrying Osmond at last becomes clear to her. James's tragic conception in *The Portrait of a Lady* of the attitude of exemption from "everything"—the sheer illusion of freedom that it represents for him here, an illusion bound to come crashing down—is an important benchmark of comparison for the ways in which he reworks this same problem in later novels. Isabel, as she understands more and more about Osmond's repellent personality, realizes that the infinite freedom she had hoped for was all along its very opposite:

She had taken all the first steps in purest confidence, and then she had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness, from which the world would seem to lie below one, so that one could look down with a sense of exaltation and advantage, and judge and choose and pity, it led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard as from above, and where it served to deepen the feeling of failure. (474)

It's in trying to translate solipsism, or what psychoanalysis might call a primary narcissism, into desire, that Isabel finds her infinite vista suddenly shrinking to a dark, narrow alley that leads to a dead end. And most importantly, instead of the "exaltation and advantage" of a position something like that of an omniscient narrator, who oversees the world and doles out judgment and preference and pity, Isabel finds only the "restriction and depression" of being tied to the world of things, the world of everything at all, with its stubborn limitations. And yet, by the end of the novel, with Isabel once again fully conscious of the burden of choice in her final confrontation with Caspar Goodwood's seemingly tireless patience, the narrator offers us a revised image of the "infinite vista," now made brutally worldly and disorienting: "The world, in truth, had never seemed so large; it seemed to open out, all round her, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she floated in fathomless waters" (634). But then the image is turned outside in, with a philosophical flourish: "This however, of course, was but a subjective fact, as the metaphysicians say; the confusion, the noise of waters, all the rest of it, were in her own swimming head" (635). If Isabel has earlier felt that "introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air" from which one might return "with a lapful of roses," the novel ends with an image of introspection gone awry—with introspection, in other words, as a kind of aimless solipsism, divested of the forms that language and intimacy together might provide, or as a terrifying floating in an infinite space that knows no bounds.

"What's language at all but a convention?" Isabel asks at one point in the novel, in defending her interest in Madame Merle; "she has the good taste not to pretend, like some people I've met, to express herself by original signs" (244). If Warburton moves within a system "invidiously," then Madame Merle does so with great gusto: "Isabel found it difficult to think of her in any detachment or privacy; she existed only in her relations, direct or indirect, with her

fellow mortals” (244). One of the most famous passages in the novel is, after all, Madame Merle’s bravura claim that “there’s no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we’re each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our ‘self’? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everyone that belongs to us—and then it flows back again” (253). This is almost the opposite of Isabel’s philosophy of exemption from the world and its forms, and the related idea that in introspection one can generate a world unto oneself, even more expansive and open than the actual world. Her response to Madame Merle is telling in the way it finally specifies the form of Isabel’s exemption of herself from “everything”: “Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me,” she says; “everything’s on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one” (253). “Everything” is deployed in a strange way in this sentence, but we’re now in a better position to understand its conspicuousness. In other words, we can now read “everything” as a vague gesture toward a vague collection of all the things that belong to Isabel, or that might belong to her, but we can also read it as an abstract concept that describes a mode or field of logical thought. It might not be that *things* are separate from Isabel, outside of the contours and limits that define her subjectivity rather than a mere extension or “measure” of that subjectivity. It might be, instead, that the very logical space allowed by “everything” is experienced by Isabel as paradoxically limiting and constraining. Everything’s a limit, on the other side of which Isabel prefers to wait and to watch. Everything’s a barrier or a dam, erected in the process of making choices, or of blocking off one avenue of erotic possibility in favor of another. Everything’s arbitrary—defined by a set of rules, divided by principles of classification and laws of sound reasoning, that seem difficult to grasp, convoluted, invidious.

#### 4. Everything and ...

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the specific, the embodied, the circumscribed point of view tends to be a trap, a prison, or a narrow and painful limitation. In James's late novels, on the other hand, the "specific" is often an elusive object of desire in its own right, a particular something that seems difficult to put into words, even taboo or disallowed, as characters talk *around* the thing in question, wandering in the kind of pained, weary indefiniteness that James's late style so perfectly evokes.<sup>27</sup> Maggie Verver, one of the central characters of *The Golden Bowl*, feels this powerfully when, after her marriage to Prince Amerigo and her father Adam Verver's marriage to her friend Charlotte Stant, she and her father finally have a moment alone together, a moment which would seem the perfect opportunity for Maggie to discuss with him what she thinks of as the "particular difference" that his marriage has made in their lives:

It [the act of sitting down alone together in the park] made her feel but the more sharply how the specific, in almost any direction, was utterly forbidden her—how the use of it would be, for all the world, like undoing the leash of a dog eager to follow up a scent. It would come out, the specific, where the dog would come out; would run to earth somehow the truth—for she was believing herself in relation to the truth!—at which she mustn't so much as indirectly point. Such at any rate was the fashion in which her passionate prudence played over possibilities of danger, reading symptoms and betrayals into everything she looked at and yet having to make it evident even while she recognized them that she didn't wince. (382)

This scene already begins with a strange overlapping of the specific with the indefinite, in that classically Jamesian use of "it" from which one has to trace back for several pages in search of

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<sup>27</sup> David Kurnick, in *Empty Houses*, argues against the reading by which James's "major phase" moves away from the "communal and depsychologized vision" of novels such as *The Awkward Age* in favor of "an obsession with point of view" and "the epistemological conundrums this perspectivalism fosters" (144). Kurnick insists that James's late style maintains what he calls a "performative universalism": "One thing Jamesian style wants," he suggests, "is to replace the differentiating energies of the drama of consciousness with an equally compelling vision of collectivity and universalism" (146). This reading of James's style might give us yet another way to think about the erotics of the tension between indefiniteness and particularity in James, although Kurnick's aim is somewhat different than mine in his focus on the theatricality of Jamesian "interiority."

the vague antecedent that ends up being the somewhat unremarkable event of sitting down on a bench during a walk in the park. Maggie's relation is, similarly and paradoxically, both to *the* truth and undoubtedly to *a* truth—some specific truth that's denied to her. She's free to range over everything but *that*, the specific fact, the particular difference, at which the best she can do is indirectly point. That vague indirection quickly spirals out of control: suddenly it seems that everything she looks at might be a symptom or betrayal of the specific thing she's after, and so it loses, again and again, its very claim to specificity. And yet each time she thinks she's lighted on something specific, the important thing is not to show it, not to “wince” in a way that would reveal that specificity's bodily effect upon her as a kind of localized, stabbing pain. The truth—in its transcendent, non-specific sense—is at risk of being “run to earth” by the specific, or in other words, to point too directly to the specific is to risk making the pursuit of truth nothing better than a dog sniffing in the dirt.

The very metaphysical complexity and abstraction of the questions raised here about truth as a concept, and its dependence upon (or antagonism to) the specificities of the material world—the sniffing dog and the wincing body—can easily lead us away from what's actually meant to be at stake for Maggie in following this winding philosophical road. It's crucial, of course, that “the specific” here represents a fact about erotic life in this novel that is so concerned with the erotic “arrangements” that might stabilize what threatens to be a disruptive or anti-social energy of desire and jealousy. Maggie marries Amerigo, leaving her father cast adrift after the loss of their intensely close relationship; and so Maggie arranges his marriage to Charlotte Stant, her friend and the past love interest of Amerigo himself, the woman who in other words threatens to break up Maggie's own marriage. This situation becomes a veritable house of cards, in which the equilibrium maintained by this group of four is so tenuous as to be thrown off



balance by the lightest touch. (“If I touch it, it will all come out.”) The problem is that by putting one’s “finest finger-point” on erotic knowledge, one seems to destabilize it or to deaden it, to run it into the dirt or to deny its essential unknowability. To see it only obliquely, only out of the corner of one’s eye, seems at least a halfway solution, a way of acknowledging the specificity of the erotic without coming to know what that specificity consists in or what exactly it means. If Isabel Archer aims to elaborate a self-sufficient infinitude of consciousness outside of the limiting category of “everything,” then in this version of the story, it’s erotic knowledge in all its intractable, unintelligible particularity that seems to be hauntingly missing, excluded from the logic of “everything”: “the specific, in almost every direction, was utterly forbidden her.” What remains to be seen is what kind of latent possibility that conspicuous “almost” signifies. In which direction might the specific take shape, or does it only take shape through the complex practice of *indirection* that Maggie elaborates?

In other words, if the specificity of the erotic often seems to James’s characters frustratingly unavailable, so that they feel constantly adrift in a relation to “everything” that always precludes an apprehension of “something,” then they also elaborate two important ways of thinking about desire and its specificity that I’ve classified together under the attitude of “everything *and*.” First, the specific is imagined as a kind of inaccessible zero-point of perspective that exists alongside or in addition to everything rather than within it—this is what is happening in Maggie’s reflection that the specific is denied to her “in *almost* every direction.” The second form that this logic of super-addition takes (upon which I’ll elaborate later) is an understanding of embodied erotic contact as a way of “letting everything go.” The erotic embrace is imagined by James as on the one hand a bracketing of “everything” in favor of the

narrowness and specificity of intimacy, and on the other hand a potentially coercive and tragically constrained mode of erotic life.

What, then, do I mean by this almost Heideggerian formulation of a consciousness existing “alongside” everything? I don’t, first of all, mean to invoke Heidegger in any serious way, but rather to read what may seem to be an attitude of exclusion or repression—much the same combination of self-exclusion and sexual refusal that appears so tragic in *The Portrait of a Lady*—as actually more complicated than this dichotomy of erotic freedom versus erotic denial allows, particularly in the late fiction. In a later conversation with her father, for example, Maggie explains to him that she could never be jealous of Amerigo; something about the precise character of their relationship and the pitch of her feeling for him makes it impossible. “You *could* be—otherwise?” her father asks, and Maggie responds by explaining how her attachment to Amerigo prompts a complex orientation toward everything:

“Oh, how can I talk,” she asked, “of ‘otherwise’? It *isn’t*, luckily for me, otherwise. If everything were different”—she further presented her thought—“of course everything *would* be.” And then again as if that were but half: “My idea is this, that when you only love a little you’re not naturally jealous. . . . But when you love in a deeper and intenser way, then you’re in the very same proportion jealous. . . . When however you love in the most abysmal and unutterable way of all—why then you’re beyond everything, and nothing can pull you down. (506, original emphasis)

When Mr. Verver asks Maggie if she loves Amerigo in that “abysmal and unutterable” way, she responds that she didn’t quite mean to imply that, but “I do *feel* however beyond everything—and as a consequence of that, I dare say, . . . seem often not to know quite *where* I am” (506, original emphasis). It’s an extremity of love—both as deep as an abyss and entirely unspeakable or unintelligible—that puts Maggie in this strange position “beyond everything.” And yet unlike Isabel Archer, for whom everything needs to be put at a distance, bracketed or forgotten or looked down upon with self-aggrandizing pity, Maggie’s position “beyond” everything leaves

her nonetheless determined by its shape and its pressures. Only if everything were otherwise would everything be otherwise—but on the contrary, Maggie insists, everything is what it actually is, and so even in feeling herself beyond it, lost, and disoriented, she nonetheless feels bound to its preconditions. Even in trying to make herself clear to her father, Maggie aims for totality—pushing herself beyond the truth that seems at best “but half” of what she’s after.

If Maggie’s concerns about erotic feeling and erotic truth already differ in important ways from those of Isabel Archer, then the plot of Amerigo’s ongoing affair with Charlotte Stant offers us a further elaboration of what it means to take “everything” as an object of identification, possession, or exchange. When Amerigo finally lights upon the “happy principle” by which to govern his illicit relationship, he describes it to himself in terms of its capacity to objectify “everything” as something that might be given up or passed around:

This principle was simply to be, with the girl, always simple, and with the very last simplicity. That would cover everything. It had covered then and there certainly his immediate submission to the sight of what was clearest. This was really that what she asked was little compared to what she gave. What she gave touched him, as she faced him, for it was the full tune of her renouncing. She really renounced—renounced everything, and without even insisting now on what it had all been for her. Her only insistence was her insistence on the small matter of their keeping their appointment to themselves. That, in exchange for ‘everything’, everything she gave up, *was* verily but a trifle. (106, original emphasis)

Simply to be simple, with simplicity—that will certainly cover everything. For now, we should note that the intensity of the tautology here has the effect of allowing for everything, or perhaps more accurately being prepared for the arrival of every possible thing; we’ll return to tautology’s relationship to openness in the concluding section. What’s more important for our present purposes is the way in which the “everything” that Charlotte renounces—or in fact *exchanges* for Amerigo’s discretion about their secret meeting—shuttles back and forth between the sense of particularity and the sense of indefiniteness. Amerigo imagines that Charlotte renounces

“everything,” certainly, but we’re also given the sense that “everything” might in fact be an indirection that allows her to refuse to name or to “insist” upon “what it had all been for her.” If what it had all been was love, desire, erotic attachment, that is perhaps covered up or denied by “everything,” or perhaps it *is*, for her, “everything.” Things only become more fraught as her renunciation of “everything” is qualified or limited, defined as “everything she gave up.” But haven’t we just been told that “everything she gave up” *was*, in fact, “everything”? If so, how do the two become distinguishable, one scare-quoted and standing alone, and one extended into a somewhat more definitive noun-phrase? Whatever the object of this exchange is, it gets stuck in a kind of immobilizing fug of indefinite denotation as Bertrand Russell might describe it, somewhere between “everything” and “something.” As it gets passed back and forth, turned this way and then that, “covered” and then “renounced” and then “exchanged,” its form seems to change, from vague to sharp-edged and from wide to narrow.

If Amerigo’s principle is sure to cover everything, then what does everything cover? When, in an erotic exchange, everything is at issue, or at least everything that one has to give, what is it that we’re trying to talk about? It’s a problem of reference, or “denotation” in Bertrand Russell’s terms, except that logic seems incapacitated when it comes to denoting the particularities of desire. As Amerigo and Charlotte while away the time alone together on the eve of his wedding to Maggie, Charlotte invokes just this problem of logic and what it covers or “references”:

“Would it be,” Charlotte asked, “your idea to offer me something?”

“Well, why not?—as a small ricordo?”

“But a ricordo of what?”

“Why of ‘this’—as you yourself say. Of this little hunt.”

“Oh I say it—but hasn’t my whole point been that I don’t ask you to. Therefore,” she demanded—but smiling at him now—“where’s the logic?”

“Oh the logic—!” he laughed.

“But logic’s everything. That at least is how I feel it. A ricordo from you—from you to me—is a ricordo of nothing. It has no reference.” (116)

Charlotte demands that reference be mediated by logic, which seems in one sense simple enough. Bertrand Russell would heartily agree. And yet what she’s concerned with is not a linguistic problem of reference but a problem of memorialization—of an erotic secret that in being kept secret must evade reference altogether. The “logic” which covers everything for Charlotte, much like the “principle” which covers everything for Amerigo, has nothing to do with the laws of thought as we usually understand them. Rather, it has to do with the logical laws of concealment and revelation—or in Amerigo’s case, “simplicity” and obscurity—that circulate around the question of linguistic reference, a question made particularly complex in the case of erotic desire and its messy proliferation of ethical meanings.

At the very least, however, Charlotte finds logic a useful metaphor here for the sort of rule-bound stabilization of meaning that seems threatened by Amerigo’s too-overt revelation of the open secret of his desire. Logic *must* cover everything, or at least everything that we want to bring out into the open. That which we want to conceal, or wish to leave suspended as to meaning—that which has no reference, at least as far as we are concerned—must remain silent and unrecorded. We hear a kind of echo here of Wittgenstein’s famous ethical injunction against going beyond the limits of logic, a system which in his early work Wittgenstein imagines as fundamentally a system of referential or “denoting” language: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”<sup>28</sup> Or of course, we might think of the moment in *The Spoils of Poynton* when Fleda Vetch finally admits her love for Owen Gereth with a repetitious wailing—“I cared, I cared, I cared!”—before immediately swearing him to a pact of silence: “But you

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<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 89.

mustn't, you must never, never ask! It isn't for us to talk about. . . . Don't speak of it, don't speak!" Fleda then tries to return herself from the frantic unintelligibility of desire to the world of language and meaning: "It was easy indeed not to speak when the difficulty was to find words. . . . She stilled herself in the effort to come round to the real and the thinkable."<sup>29</sup> In Charlotte's case, logic (which is everything) provides a crucial limit alongside which to suspend oneself in refusing to account for, to "refer" to, desire. This is, in fact, a refusal to orient oneself in terms of reference at all, or in other words, Charlotte hints that her relationship with Amerigo and their mutual desire are—must be—incompatible with reference. If a *ricordo* from Amerigo to Charlotte is "a *ricordo* of nothing," then where they are, what they're doing, whatever is exchanged between them, must also be nothing—but a nothing that maintains an intimate proximity to everything.

In linking Charlotte's invocation of logic as everything to the open secret (which for her must stand alongside everything, must be an object of acknowledgment, but must not be an object of logical reference), I'm of course invoking a rich history of critical readings of the open secret as a literary concept. D. A. Miller has argued that the realist novel relies on characters' performance of a kind of open secrecy that convinces us of their deep, private interiority even while that interiority is actually something of an epiphenomenon of narrative omniscience and the disciplinary power of social norms.<sup>30</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes the open secret the primary epistemological underpinning of the cultural discourse of the closet, by which a complex dynamics of secrecy and revelation become definitive of sexuality, at least on the level of its cultural representation, rather than a careful attention to the sheer multiplicity of sexual desires,

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<sup>29</sup> James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, 162.

<sup>30</sup> See D. A. Miller, "Secret Subjects, Open Secrets," in *The Novel and the Police*, 192-220.

attachments, turn-ons, and behaviors that might shape any individual's sexual life.<sup>31</sup> More recently, Anne-Lise François has proposed a counterargument to these Foucauldian readings, which focuses on "the ways in which the open secret as a gesture of self-canceling revelation permits a release from the ethical imperative to *act* upon knowledge."<sup>32</sup> In other words, rather than being a form born of social discipline or effected by repression, the open secret for François represents a potentially viable form of minimal affirmation or "nonemphatic revelation," a reading which might allow us to understand "never-acted-upon passions and uncounted experiences not as *nos* disguising incipient, concealed, or denied affirmatives but rather as aimless, innocent, minimal, all but negative, contented affirmations."<sup>33</sup> This reading of the open secret, then, allows us to escape the repression-avowal binary that still so often structures readings of sexuality in James's fiction, but more importantly, François suggests a subtle way of differentiating between denial or negation on the one hand, and something more like the "alongside" attitude that I've been after here. If the affirmations that François describes are "all but negative," then we might say something similar about Charlotte's seeming refusal of logical reference when it comes to erotic desire. We might say, in other words, that her affirmation of desire takes a form other than the expression of a logical truth—other than a reference to, or a "ricordo of," something existing in the world of everything—and instead affirms almost "nothing."

Later on in the novel, we see Amerigo seem to come around to Charlotte's way of thinking about their relationship and its tenuous position in relation to logic, and to everything.

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<sup>31</sup> See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 67-90.

<sup>32</sup> François, *Open Secrets*, 3; original emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi, 32; original emphasis.

During a vacation to Fawns, Adam Verver's rented country estate, at which the novel's entire cast of characters is present, Amerigo finds himself suddenly stunned by Charlotte's straightforwardness in referring to herself and himself publicly as a pair: "we've settled, Amerigo and I," she says to Fanny Assingham, "to stay over till after luncheon." It's Charlotte's "nonemphatic revelation," to return to François's terminology, which brings into focus for Amerigo "the idea with which, behind and beneath everything, he was restlessly occupied":

She had answered Mrs Assingham quite adequately; she hadn't spoiled it by a reason a scrap larger than the smallest that would serve, and she had, above all, thrown off, for his stretched but covered attention, an image that flashed like a mirror played at the face of the sun. The measure of *everything*, to all his sense at these moments, was in it—the measure especially of the thought that had been growing with him a positive obsession and that began to throb as never yet under this brush of her having, by perfect parity of imagination, the match for it. His whole consciousness had by this time begun almost to ache with a truth of an exquisite order, at the glow of which she too had so unmistakably then been warming herself—the truth that the occasion constituted by the last few days couldn't possibly, save by some poverty of their own, refuse them some still other and still greater beauty. It had already told them, with an hourly voice, that it had a meaning—a meaning that their associated sense was to drain even as thirsty lips, after the plough through the sands and the sight, afar, of the palm-cluster, might drink in at last the promised well in the desert. (283, original emphasis)

If Amerigo has been laboring away, trying to decipher the idea that preoccupies him, "behind and beneath everything," then Charlotte's nonchalance suddenly reorients him, provides him with a particular image that gives him back "everything," takes its "measure," as if by a reflection in a mirror—an overwhelmingly bright reflection, as if of the sun itself. But as we've seen again and again, "everything" appears only intermittently here, as we shuttle back and forth between its flashes of blinding solar light and the more muted particularities of Amerigo's desires. The measure of everything is in the image that Charlotte provides, and yet this is soon narrowed; it takes the measure *especially* of "the thought" over which he has obsessed, which "throbs" under Charlotte's sympathetic pressure, the "brush" of the matching thought in her. What's revealed in this wavering set of images is "a truth of an exquisite order" which seems to



promise them more and more, always holding in store “some still other and greater beauty,” promising them in other words, over and over again, that it will deliver its meaning in full, which they suck and slurp and drain like desert wanderers who have happened upon water, or possibly only a mirage. We hear an echo of Maggie’s own desperate and perhaps delusional attachment to a truth that seems necessarily to elude her grasp, at which she can only indirectly point. (“For she was believing herself in relation to the truth!”)

Of course, the passage, and my reading of it, make “everything” seem in this case nothing better than a ghostly reflection, a fantasy conjured by a thirst for meaning, or a stunning flash which only blinds us. We get, at best, its afterimage glowing on our eyelids. And this isn’t wrong. Precisely what Amerigo realizes in this moment, and what Charlotte seems to capture in her understanding of desire’s incompatibility with reference, is that to hover alongside everything is painful, disorienting, blinding, literally dumbfounding. It’s not a state to which to aspire as a permanent vantage-point. In much the same way that Eliot seems to understand descends into the mire of vagueness as potentially dangerous, even if ethically illuminating and necessary, James’s repeated descriptions of characters coming into a kind of intimate communion with “everything” balance vertiginous terror with the power of ethical and erotic epiphany. Amerigo’s “stretched but covered attention” is primed, it seems, for the sort of expansively open point of view required of this kind of epiphany, which hurts, aches, and throbs as much as it satisfies.

It’s also important, of course, that Amerigo’s tarrying with the specificity of his desire happens “behind and beneath everything” rather than, for example, in front of and above it. Behind and beneath are positions associated with repression (putting a feeling or a desire behind a barrier, or burying it beneath a set of psychological defenses) but they’re also positions

associated with hidden supports and foundations (the work being done behind the scenes, or the foundation sitting beneath an edifice). Kaja Silverman has offered us what is still perhaps the most thorough reading of James's interest in the position or orientation of "behind," but her analysis remains attached to a model of sexual repression without considering at all the varied meanings that "behind" might carry aside from or in addition to what she casts as a kind of tortured relationship to anal eroticism, particularly in its association here with "beneath." For Silverman, James's fondness for describing his authorial perspective as "behind" the world of the text has to do with a "'sodomitical identification' with 'the father,' an identification which permits the fantasizing subject to look through that figure's eyes and to participate in his sexuality by going 'behind' him."<sup>34</sup> Silverman is attempting to get at the paradox by which James both minimizes his presence as author, and at the same time uses that position to appropriate the kind of sexualized potency that he associates with the father—he uses the father as a kind of proxy for the wielding of narrative authority and also a cover. But when we dial down from the level of omniscient narration to the level of character, we get a very different understanding of "behind" and indeed "beneath." For Amerigo, being behind and beneath everything means a kind of withdrawal from the world of the novel in which he moves, a "restless" preoccupation that stretches his capacity for attention to a painful tautness or a vapid thinness. It's in fact Charlotte's minimal acknowledgement of mutual attachment that draws him out of his "behind and beneath" position into a more active, sympathetic, flashing vision of "everything."

So far I've focused on the idea of being alongside everything in *The Golden Bowl* as a matter of position, perspective, reference, or orientation; but the novel includes an important pair

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<sup>34</sup> Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 173.

of images of erotic intimacy between Amerigo and Maggie that gesture to an alternative understanding of the “everything *and*” position that I’ve been tracing. This is what I described earlier as the practice of “letting everything go” in the literal, embodied particularity of the embrace. In the first of these scenes, Amerigo’s embrace of Maggie is described as a power play, in terms of physical control and submission, as Amerigo attempts to make Maggie relax her obsessive attention to his relationship with Charlotte:

She gave up, let her idea go, let everything go; her one consciousness was that he was taking her again into his arms. It was not till afterwards that she discriminated as to this; felt how the act operated with him *instead* of the words he hadn’t uttered—operated in his view as probably better than any words, as always better in fact at any time than anything. Her acceptance of it, her response to it, inevitable, foredoomed, came back to her later on as a virtual assent to the assumption he had thus made that there was really nothing such a demonstration didn’t anticipate and didn’t dispose of.

(345, original emphasis)

Amerigo, as usual, discovers a way to “cover everything,” this time with an uncanny mixture of affectionate solicitude and physical coercion. The embrace, Maggie realizes only after the fact, is “always better . . . at any time than anything,” in a turn of phrase that closely echoes Amerigo’s tautological principle simply to be with Charlotte always simple, with simplicity. But what’s most important here is that in being embraced, Maggie’s response, “inevitable” and “foredoomed,” is to let her idea go, and in doing so, to let everything go. In letting everything go, she gives herself over to the thought that Amerigo is actually ready for everything, prepared to dispose of anything and everything she might seize upon as evidence of his infidelity.

The novel’s final scene is almost a reenactment for which this earlier scene prepares the ground. Now that Maggie has shuttled Charlotte off to the United States, her marriage has been secured against the threat that she has been so jealously aware of—but it has also meant for Maggie the loss of her father, who accompanies his wife across the Atlantic. The novel concludes with a mixed sense of Maggie’s privation and her erotic security. She poses a question

to Amerigo as if to try to close the books on Charlotte—“Isn’t she too splendid?” (579)—before adding the ambiguous qualification, “That’s our help, you see” (580). Amerigo responds with the embrace that concludes the novel: “close to her, her face kept before him, his hands holding her shoulders, his whole act enclosing her, he presently echoed: ““See”? I see nothing but *you*.’ And the truth of it had with this force after a moment so strangely lighted his eyes that as for pity and dread of them she buried her own in his breast” (580, original emphasis). The novel ends, in other words, with Maggie positioned as the real negation of “everything” in Amerigo’s eyes—“I see nothing but *you*”—and yet this positioning continues to seem a terrible burden, heightened by the invocation of those quintessential tragic emotions, “pity and dread.” Maggie hides her eyes from the strange light in Amerigo’s eyes, which in their laser focus have finally denied everything in favor of a specific desire for a specific person who can be enclosed in his arms. There’s a kind of pained closure to this novel, which seems in the figure of the tight embrace and the eyes buried in dread to present both an image of coupled, marital love with which to draw the curtain down, and also an image of that love as intrinsically constricting, negating, terrifying—a truth run to the ground like a dog sniffing in the dirt.<sup>35</sup>

## 5. Wide Open Spaces; or, Everything is Everything

The problem of “everything” for James might finally be understood as a problem of openness and closure, or of the diffusion of thought and desire versus the focusing of thought

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<sup>35</sup> David McWhirter has argued that this scene, the final scene in James’s final completed novel, offers us his first representation of mature, fulfilled “love,” a moment of mutual recognition and acknowledgement, as opposed to the narcissistic “desire” which only projects onto its object the anxieties and fixations and aspirations of the desiring subject. See McWhirter, *Desire and Love in Henry James*, 1-12. I argue, on the contrary, that this kind of binary limits our ability to see the painful adjustments necessary even to adapt or orient oneself to the kind of “mature” love that McWhirter idealizes. James returns again and again to the idea that the narrowing or circumscribing of desire, its reckoning with the facticity or materiality of the world, involves a painful process of orientation or reorientation.

and desire on specific objects. If everything were otherwise, Maggie Verver reflects, it would be otherwise—but it isn't. Everything is everything, and that opens up a space for us, the entirety of logical space, within which to find our way. In thinking through Trollope's understanding of tautology, we had recourse to Wittgenstein's insistence that with tautology, logical space remains open: no possibility has been foreclosed, since any other proposition can follow consistently from a tautology. But of course logical space might not reach as far as we'd like it to. Even as it appears to be everything, to cover everything, it might come to feel restrictive. Its edges might seem to foreclose too many possibilities already. The idea of figuring logic as a "space" in the first place carries with it several ramifications about how to find the edges of that space (a question with which Eliot is concerned) and also with whether one's body or one's particular self can survive in that space or whether to occupy it requires a difficult practice of self-negation (a question with which Brontë is concerned). Finally, we might say that James is most concerned with how to orient oneself in that space, or how to orient oneself toward it from a position outside its limits.

Sara Ahmed has argued influentially for a philosophical reconsideration of the "orientation" in "sexual orientation," and if her concerns lead her naturally to phenomenology, then my concerns lead to the more metaphoric concepts of "space" and "orientation" that logic invokes through its practices of reference, entailment, and delimitation. If Ahmed, in other words, wants to think about "the sexualization of space" and "the spatiality of sexual desire," I'm suggesting that James tries to represent the erotics of our logical orientation in language, and the spatiality of our logical orientation.<sup>36</sup> Ahmed suggests that in phenomenology, the appearance of objects to consciousness relies on the bracketing of what is relegated to the background, and as

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<sup>36</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 1.

we've seen, logic often asks us to perform similar operations of bracketing, narrowing, or putting to one side. But as Ahmed clarifies, "We remain reliant on what we put in brackets; indeed, the activity of bracketing may sustain the fantasy that 'what we put aside' can be transcended in the first place. The act of 'putting aside' might also confirm the fantasy of a subject who is transcendent, who places himself above the contingent world of social matter."<sup>37</sup> We hear an echo here of Hegel's fantasy of the spirit's ultimate potential, its fullest self-affirmation, which would be to transcend itself and become infinite. On Ahmed's view, we're always in the world of "everything" even when we try to put it, or parts of it, in brackets, and this very well might be true for James also—after all, as we've seen, it's difficult to speak very intelligibly about our relationship to "everything," and we often come out of such an enterprise seeming to have circled around and around a concept that never quite jells. Part of the aim of Ahmed's queer critique of phenomenology is to recuperate disorientation—to maintain its painfulness, its terror, its vertigo, while also acknowledging that even if disorientation represents a loss, it also directs us toward new ways of knowing and desiring, toward the difficult practice of reorientation. Both Eliot and James in their different ways, of course, struggle to come to terms with the affective experience of disorientation, but they have a common conviction that the source of this disorientation lies in the rich defectiveness of language. Vagueness and the indeterminate denotation of "everything" represent impasses internal to logical models of linguistic meaning, argument, and reference, but they are impasses, Eliot and James suggest, that we'd do better not to break through or cover up. Their dizzying effects might be just what we sometimes need.

Stanley Cavell opens his essay "The World as Things" with an epigraph from James's *The Spoils of Poynton*, in which the novel's protagonist, Fleda Vetch, tries to come to terms with

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 33.

her friend Mrs Gereth's "strange, almost maniacal disposition to thrust in everywhere the question of 'things,' to read all behaviour in the light of some fancied relation to them. 'Things' were of course the sum of the world; only for Mrs Gereth, the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental china."<sup>38</sup> In this essay Cavell is interested, clearly, in taking literally that dangling "thing" at the end of "everything." What would it mean, this essay wonders, if we took seriously and philosophically the concept of collecting? What if we understood our selves and our worlds as collections of things or moments, whether accidentally accumulated, meticulously curated, or jealously hoarded? Such a philosophical enterprise, which is often borne out most fully, Cavell suggests, in the intricate quotidian detail of aesthetic realism, might allow us to pose a range of questions about how we "orient" ourselves in the world according to a particular set of attachments, and how that orientation might be, as Ahmed would say, "contingent": "Why do we put things together as we do?" Cavell asks; "Why do we put ourselves together with just these things to make a world? What choices have we said farewell to? To put things together differently, so that they quicken the heart, would demand their recollecting."<sup>39</sup> Such questions ask us to hearken back with a kind of nostalgia to the wide-openness of logical space, before any potential "choices" have been closed to us. This is the space held open in tautology (or indeed in silence, before anyone has spoken), and which narrows further and further as propositions and entailments cut their paths, shaping "everything" into the particular world that accretes around us. Once "everything" has a definite form, it becomes more and more difficult to move through it.

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<sup>38</sup> James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Cavell, "The World as Things," 280. For the "contingency" of sexual orientation, see Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 94-95.

To finally renounce “everything” might mean in novelistic terms something like “closure,” the pain of ending one story and looking ahead with disoriented anxiety toward the beginning of a new one—we’ve seen that Eliot felt that keenly. The obsessive narrator of James’s *The Sacred Fount* clearly feels it keenly too. His story revolves around his attempt, over a weekend at a country house with many visitors, to detect the secrets of various erotic liaisons by tracking their visible signs, mostly through a quasi-supernatural theory by which one lover always vampirically drains the other of some potent energy such as youth or intelligence. At one point, talking to his friend Ford Obert, the narrator tries to trace back to the moment from which “everything” began for him. “What do you mean,” Obert asks, “by everything?” The narrator responds, “Well, this failure of detachment” (210). Once attached to everything, it’s difficult to detach oneself—one after all feels a kind of responsibility to the world in which we’re mired, a responsibility perhaps to make complete sense of it and moreover to make sense of our particular way of being attached to it, erotically drawn to particular points within its field, and repelled from others. “You’ve extraordinary notions,” Obert says to the narrator, “of responsibility” (210). To give up on that responsibility, to succeed at detachment (and perhaps reattachment, or reorientation, elsewhere) is, for James, the great challenge of novelistic form, and also the great challenge of reasoning about erotic desire. How do we talk about the way in which desire expands and contracts, from a diffusive attachment to “everything” to the focused, potentially obsessive attachment to “something” or “someone” in particular? Once circumscribed, once directed in a particular way, how might we choose to disorient ourselves? What pains, and what new pleasures, might that entail?



## Afterword

### *Truth Claims: Logic, Sex, and the Law*

“Law” has haunted these pages. But of course “law” has two meanings: the law that is imposed as a prohibition versus the law that describes a necessary state of affairs. Things must be this way, lest you be punished; or things must be this way because they simply must. The latter is the version usually understood to be appropriate to logic—a move that places the study of logic in the company of the study of physics or, indeed, mathematics. When George Boole, for example, published *An Investigation of the Laws of Thought*, the title itself presupposed the law of logic as something independent of human morality or jurisprudence. These laws are objects of investigation, not disciplinary injunctions. This is the way our thought is structured, not the way it *should* ideally be structured. And yet, as we’ve seen, when logic is positioned as one particularly powerful interface between the individual and the social—the only set of forms through which I can be clear, or through which I can account intelligibly for my orientation toward the world, my erotic attachment to *him* rather than to *him*, and the ethical deliberations that guide my movement through the world—it can often be experienced as disciplinary. It excludes too much that I nonetheless want to think and talk about, and that I want moreover to be clear about. What is my recourse and where is my escape when I seem to be denied any mechanism by which to think and speak about the depths that don’t want to stay buried?

In other words, our concern has been with the tenuous and controversial connection in Victorian thought between logic and ethics, and in turn between ethics and erotic desire, but it hasn’t been primarily with the law—the very real and very painful laws that regulated and criminalized particular sexual acts and identities in the Victorian period. But the question

persists, particularly as we conclude with Henry James, a gay novelist whose fiction has felt so closeted to so many readers. Even a decade after James's last novel, and almost twenty years after the Wilde trials, as E. M. Forster composed *Maurice*, his one "gay novel," in 1914, the legal danger of publication seemed intense enough to Forster that he circulated the manuscript only among close friends, and insisted that it only be published after his death.

In his "Terminal Note" to *Maurice*, Forster intensifies the question I've been pursuing: what good is bad logic when it comes to the real legal claims of sexual life? If I've pursued more intimate kinds of claims—claims to simple acknowledgement or recognition or meaningfulness—then Forster, and queer people of this period more generally, needed necessarily to stake more serious claims and make more serious cases for the "good logic" of queer desire. Written in 1960, Forster's note is in part an angry reaction to Parliament's lengthy delay in implementing the recommendations of the Wolfenden Report of 1957, which had come to the conclusion that gay sex should be decriminalized. The report led to a decade of debate, which finally ended in the decriminalization of most gay sex acts (except, of course, sodomy) by the Sexual Offences Act of 1967. In 1960 Forster was simultaneously optimistic and morose about the possibility of this kind of legal recognition: he had dedicated *Maurice* upon its completion in 1914 "to a Happier Year," and yet even forty-six years later, he assumed that that happier year was still distant, a utopian epoch that could only come after his own death. And in fact it's the happiness and optimism of the novel's ending that Forster worried would get him into legal trouble, with Maurice and Alec in love and having a real, pleasurable sex life, even fleeing to the "greenwood" that provides the novel with its own utopian metaphor:

If it ended unhappily, with a lad dangling from a noose or with a suicide pact, all would be well, for there is no pornography or seduction of minors. But the lovers get away unpunished and consequently recommend crime. Mr Borenus [the overbearing church

rector in the novel] is too incompetent to catch them, and the only penalty society exacts is an exile they gladly embrace.”<sup>1</sup>

Gay sexuality, in other words, can be made public in literature, but only in all its badness, as the object of cruel and unusual social punishments, and only in a somewhat sterilized form that would protect it from being understood as pornographic. The only thing for it, at least in the world of a novel, is to escape to the greenwood, the utopia of sexual freedom that can at least be elaborated in fiction. As Forster puts it, “A happy ending was imperative. . . . I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows, and in this sense Maurice and Alec still roam the greenwood” (218). There’s a kind of tragedy, in the end, to this fictional utopian exile, which remains suspended in time as a kind of permanent condition—these lovers *still* roam the greenwood, even in 1960, even as the Stonewall riots rage in 1968, and long beyond.

It seems that for Forster, at least part of the problem is the fundamental irreconcilability of sexuality and the law, since the decriminalization of gay life presupposes the possibility or the desirability of making rational arguments on its behalf—of accounting for it, in other words, logically. Better to hit the road, Forster thinks, than to be forced to plead a case for our sex lives, and by doing so to divest sex of its frisson, its electric shock. The opening of the “Terminal Note” recounts Forster’s own sexual awakening, and the immediate inspiration for the composition of *Maurice*, as taking place on a visit to the home of Edward Carpenter and George Merrill. Forster remembers how on his third visit to their home, “the spark was kindled” as the couple “combined to make a profound impression on me and to touch a creative spring. George Merrill also touched my backside—gently and just above the buttocks” (217). The “spark” of

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<sup>1</sup> Forster, “Terminal Note,” in *Maurice*, 218. Further citations appear parenthetically within the text.

creative intellect and the “spark” of sexual arousal are indistinguishable in Forster’s account, and this leads him to a rumination on the impossibility of accounting intelligibly for the excitement of desire: “The sensation was unusual and I still remember it, as I remember the position of a long vanished tooth. It was as much psychological as physical. It seemed to go straight through the small of my back into my ideas, without involving my thoughts” (217). The arousal of the erotic touch doesn’t involve thought, nor does it wait upon ideas—its sensation passes “straight through” the body’s exterior, and enters into ideas in what Forster imagines as a kind of fertilization. “If it really did this,” he continues, “it would have acted in strict accordance with Carpenter’s yogified mysticism, and would prove that at that precise moment I had conceived.” While Forster wants to elaborate a connection between arousal and intellect, it’s not the rational or logical picture of intellect giving eros a meaningful form, but rather a picture of eros penetrating reason and fusing with it, and a picture in which Forster casts himself as the impregnated woman, penetrated and impregnated by the simultaneously psychic and embodied “sensation” of sexual desire. From Austen’s Emma Woodhouse, who feels her erotic epiphany pass right through her in an instant, like an arrow, we arrive at Forster’s account, in which a sexual charge passes into the body and then into the creative mind, not as an elusive and empty object around which reason circles but as a seed planted in the very ground of reason.

Of course none of this provides a legal argument, does it? Forster’s language may be typical of the bad-logical modes of reasoning about desire that have occupied us over the course of the preceding chapters, but in the end, while their “badness” might be meaningful in all sorts of profound ways, these are not the kinds of sound logical arguments that win us legal rights. Forster might argue that it’s all for the best, or at least that it takes a careful balancing act to weigh the embodied pleasures of sex against the security of legal recognition—these, he argues,

are different things, and they require different kinds of thinking and speaking, different languages and different claims to truth. And he wouldn't, of course, be alone in thinking that the pressures of the law and its apparatuses of rational argument can only miss the point when it comes to our erotic lives and our sex lives.

I end on this note, with the queer fiction of the early twentieth century, in order to pose some open questions about the relationship between bad logic and the law, or perhaps more accurately, the relationship between the bad logic of the Victorian novel and the complex twentieth-century historical development of sexual identity politics, insofar as that development necessarily involves problems of legal argument and legal recognition. None of this is to make the clearly false claim that the legal regulation of sexuality only began to be challenged or debated in the twentieth century, and indeed this would have been a different dissertation if logic and legal argument, or logic and legal rights, had been my primary focus all along. Rather, my aim is to conclude by wondering about one potential afterlife of bad logic as it finds its way into the early, tentative moments of queer activism in the English realist novel. What is the use of the kinds of claims that bad logic makes? If that use is necessarily narrow, "personal," intimate, and ordinary, then is it really, after all, very important? Forster helps us to see that this need not be an either/or proposition. There is space for more than one kind of erotic truth—and for each kind of truth, a different kind of claim. The challenge is to remind ourselves that these different vocabularies and different formalizations of erotic life are only, after all, different, rather than at odds. Whether one hears me or not, whether one acknowledges the self-evidence of my claim—indeed, whether or not I can entirely understand it myself—I am what I am.

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