

ETHICS AND  
NARRATIVE IN THE ENGLISH  
NOVEL, 1880-1914

JIL LARSON

*Western Michigan University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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A revitalization of the field of ethics and literature has recently gained the attention of scholars in philosophy and literary studies. Drawing on interdisciplinary work in this field by a diverse range of thinkers, including Martha Nussbaum, Emmanuel Levinas, and Paul Ricoeur, Jil Larson offers new readings of late Victorian and turn-of-the-century British fiction to show how ethical concepts can transform our understanding of narratives, just as narratives make possible a valuable, contextualized moral deliberation. Focusing on novels by Thomas Hardy, Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Oscar Wilde, and Henry James, Larson explores the conjunction of ethics and *fin-de-siècle* history and culture through a consideration of what narratives from this period tell us about emotion, reason, and gender, aestheticism, and such speech acts as promising and lying. This book will be of interest to scholars of the nineteenth century and modernism, and all interested in the conjunction of narrative, ethics, and literary theory.

JIL LARSON is Assistant Professor of English at Western Michigan University. A former managing editor of *Victorian Studies*, she has published on Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and ethics and literature. She is currently a member of the Executive Board of the Centre for the Study of Ethics in Society at Western Michigan University.

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*For my parents and my friend Jonathan*



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CHAPTER I

*Ethics and the turn to narrative*

Can the reality of complex moral situations be represented by means other than those of imaginative literature?

Bernard Williams<sup>1</sup>

The dilemma cuts two ways. On the one hand, how much of what is genuinely important to people can be rendered in universal theories? On the other hand, are stories valuable for ethics, if no moral is attached?

Tobin Siebers<sup>2</sup>

I began planning this project in the late 1980s, during the heyday of critical theory when interdisciplinary studies of literature had become common and literary critics were writing from theoretical vantage points developed through work in other fields, especially history and philosophy. Given my interest in the ethics of fiction, I noticed that the seemingly natural combination of moral philosophy and literature was virtually non-existent in literary criticism, despite all the attention to other branches of philosophy. Why? In an essay published in *The Future of Literary Theory* (1989), Martha Nussbaum concedes that to answer this question fully would be a long story, which “would include the influence of Kant’s aesthetics; of early twentieth-century formalism; of the New Criticism. It would include several prevailing trends in ethical theory as well – above all that of Kantianism and of Utilitarianism, ethical views that in their different ways were so inhospitable to any possible relation with imaginative literature that dialogue was cut off from the side of ethics as well.”<sup>3</sup> Like Wayne Booth, who had articulated his answer to this question a year earlier in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988),

Nussbaum also faults the writing that gave ethical criticism “a bad name, by its neglect of literary form and its reductive moralizing manner” (“Perceptive Equilibrium” 62). While traditional ethical criticism was too often essentialist, normative, and blind to the implications of narrative choices and rhetorical relations both within a text (between narrator and narratee, for instance) and outside a text (between readers or listeners and narrators and implied authors), the formalist correctives to this type of literary criticism tended to leave ethics behind altogether.<sup>4</sup>

These reasons drawn from the history of literary studies and moral philosophy are persuasive, but the neglect of ethical criticism can also be explained by examining the anxieties that have lingered in the wake of this history. These anxieties and prejudices are evident in the way most intellectuals, especially those in English departments, respond to the word “moral” by distancing themselves from it, automatically associating it with censoriousness, life-denying rigidity, coercion. The expectation of this response is palpable in nearly all of the seminal studies of ethics and literature. Booth’s admirable and ambitious book on the subject, for example, is marred by a defensiveness of tone, undoubtedly because he anticipates just such a hostile audience.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, Geoffrey Harpham begins his 1992 study of ethics, language, and literature with a discussion of ethics as an “embattled” concept: “Ethics often provokes from other discourses the same resentment and belligerence provoked in the subject by ethical laws or by the conscience.”<sup>6</sup> Partially for this reason, ethical theory and literary theory have, until recently, remained separate discourses. In his *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism*, Tobin Siebers also alludes to the reaction typically provoked when these discourses are brought together, and he too, in a prefatory warning, employs a military metaphor: “I ask those readers interested in a less polemical evaluation of the relations among ethics, politics, and literature to consider my work in *Morals and Stories* . . . It is less a battle cry than this effort . . .” (*Cold War* xi). Since this battle to gain a hearing for arguments about ethics and narrative has been fought so ardently and intelligently by Siebers, Harpham, Booth, Nussbaum, and

others who have entered the fray either along with them or later, fortified by their example, my hope is that my own book can build on their work, not by continuing the battle but (to return to Nussbaum’s gentler metaphor) by participating in what it has made possible – a newly revived dialogue among novelists, literary theorists, and moral philosophers.

This book has two broad purposes: the first is to read ethics through narrative by reflecting on ethical concepts or problems as they take shape in the telling of a story; the second is to further an argument about late Victorian aesthetics and ethics. This second purpose makes my project similar to William Scheick’s in *Fictional Structure and Ethics: The Turn-of-the-Century English Novel*.<sup>7</sup> We share an interest in Hardy and Conrad (a juxtaposition that Scheick concedes might strike some as odd) and in the ethics of their fiction, particularly their ideas about compassion. My work departs from Scheick’s, however, in the philosophical lenses through which I read these texts, and, perhaps most importantly, in the literary historical direction of my overall argument. While his book focuses on Hardy, Conrad, Wells, and other writers of their generation in relation to twentieth-century fiction (both modernist and contemporary), my study considers late nineteenth-century English novelists in relation to Victorian culture and the work of those writing earlier in the century. One reason for this emphasis is my interest in the turn-of-the-century obsession with the new, which went hand-in-hand with sometimes defiant, but more often ambivalent efforts to break free of the trammels of the old, including both mid-Victorian moral culture and novelistic traditions.<sup>8</sup>

At the end of the last century there existed a similar desire for a clean break.<sup>9</sup> In late twentieth-century moral philosophy this turn toward the new has often meant a turn to literature, a move that has accompanied recent skepticism about foundations, including those grounded in reason and ahistorical, hypostasized conceptions of human nature. If nothing else, this interdisciplinary work has stimulated debate. Because the questions posed by moral philosophers writing about literature have done so much to revitalize the



thinking of literary critics writing about ethics, I would like to consider briefly what has motivated this turn to narrative and why some philosophers resist it just as much as some literary theorists object to a focus on ethics. Before I attempt to read ethics through narrative, in other words, it will be useful to explore some of the arguments for and against such a methodology.

#### ETHICS AND NARRATIVE DETAIL: THE EXAMPLE OF FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

Among the controversial but influential philosophers who have made a case for the ethical value of studying literary texts, Martha Nussbaum provides a striking example because she has gone so far as to argue that literature can be read *as* moral philosophy. Although it is not accurate to call her work antifoundationalist (since she makes it clear that principles play a role in ethical deliberation and that good judgment involves an element of universalizing), one of the main reasons for her turn to narrative is that it offers the particularity that philosophical discourse lacks. Like the antifoundationalists, Nussbaum is wary of philosophy's emphasis on general descriptions. In her view, "the particular is in some sense prior to general rules and principles" (*Love's Knowledge* 165); reading a novel, then, can be "a paradigm of moral activity" (*Love's Knowledge* 148) because long narratives, by definition, unfold stories rich in complicated details.

This idea becomes especially intriguing in the context of Victorian fiction because one of the reasons novel reading was thought to be not only less respectable than other forms of literature but even morally suspect (especially from the perspective of certain nineteenth-century religious sects) was that fictional details enchant and seduce and are therefore liable to distract readers from the moral of the story.<sup>10</sup> To locate the ethics of fiction in its particularity, however, is to refuse the assumption that the "moral" must reside in a general, normative truth.<sup>11</sup>

Nussbaum's essays on philosophy and literature have much in common with work in feminist ethics, one of the fields currently

developing philosophical ideas through literary texts. Margaret Urban Walker, for instance, describes an alternative epistemology for a feminist ethics that will lead to "questioning barriers between philosophical, literary, critical, and empirical investigations of moral life."<sup>12</sup> Like Nussbaum, Walker responds to the regnant paradigm of moral knowledge by advocating increased attention to the particular, a "contextual and narrative" construction of ethics (here she is also drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan), and an awareness of the crucial role of emotion in our ethical lives. Walker and Nussbaum desire a moral philosophy that accounts for both the unique and the socially situated, for "individual embroideries and idiosyncrasies, as well as the learned codes of expression and response" (Walker, "Moral Understanding" 167). In other words, they want a philosophy with historical awareness and a detailed narrative dimension.<sup>13</sup>

To say, however, that these two philosophers and this position represent feminist ethics would be to oversimplify a dynamic, contested area of inquiry. One of the points of contention hinges on whether or not rejecting normative philosophy in favor of what has come to be thought of as postmodern ethics – in its resistance to universalism and its dismantling of philosophical tradition – will lead to positive change for women. Virginia Held, for one, suspects that it will not, for she fears a corrosive skepticism that distracts attention from gender; she argues that "the alternative to a philosophy which has become a handmaiden of the sciences should not be a philosophy which becomes a handmaiden to literature."<sup>14</sup> Maintaining a clear distinction between philosophy and literature, according to Held, offers a safeguard against subjectivism and relativism by keeping the focus of philosophy on general, shared understanding; in her view, that will do more to further feminist moral inquiry than giving in to what she describes as "literary post-modern fragmentation" (*Feminist Morality* 16).<sup>15</sup>

Nussbaum's privileging of the particular and the literary would undoubtedly be subject to Held's critique, but she resists, as does Held, what both writers perceive as counterproductive arguments in feminist philosophy, such as the idea that reason, as a product of

patriarchy, must be replaced with some new mode of thinking that overturns the old demand for objectivity. Like Held, Nussbaum questions how these arguments, formulated in the wake of post-structuralist critical theory, further women's progress; in Nussbaum's view, "the opposition to women's equality . . . derives support from the claim that traditional norms of objectivity are merely a parochial liberal ideology. Women in philosophy have, it seems, good reasons, both theoretical and urgently practical, to hold fast to standards of reason and objectivity."<sup>16</sup>

What interests me about this debate and others in current moral philosophy is that they have emerged through interdisciplinary discussions that are shaking loose formerly stable ideas. As much as I share Held's goal of transforming culture by developing a feminist morality, I do not see why literature and postmodern theory must necessarily be threats to this end. On the contrary, I find intrinsic value in the questions that arise once the barrier between ethical theory and literary theory has fallen – regardless of how those questions are answered. For this reason, I see a distinction between Nussbaum and Held, similar as their positions are in certain respects. And this is also why I argue for integration of traditional philosophical standards with postmodern skepticism about those standards. Seyla Benhabib develops a similar argument, pointing out that norms of "autonomy, choice, and self-determination" must be central to social criticism that is helpful to women in their struggles, but also stressing that it is possible to imagine a universalism that is attentive to gender, context specific, and interactive rather than legislative – what she calls "a revived, post-Enlightenment universalism" (*Situating the Self* 3).

Nussbaum and Benhabib are right that traditional standards of reason and objectivity do women's causes more good than harm, but at the same time, the students of subjectivity (including those of us who read novels and poststructuralist theory) have at least made everyone more alert to bias masquerading as objectivity by calling for scrutiny of the assumption that authority be granted to whatever or whomever claims to be disinterested. And such wariness can benefit women as much as well-reasoned argumentation can –

hence the value of integrating the two. As Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out, our way of talking about morality "is not what it once was"<sup>17</sup> because subjectivism is such an integral part of our culture, but we appeal to reason in our arguments nonetheless: "Does this not suggest that the practice of moral argument in our culture expresses at least an aspiration to be or to become rational in this area of our lives?" (*After Virtue* 10). And do not certain forms of subjectivism aspire to a kind of "objectivity" by unmasking pseudo-objectivity?<sup>18</sup> Although I admire Nussbaum for rejecting, rather than simply tolerating, absurd and potentially destructive extremes (such as the idea that we should seek a form of reasoning that abandons the rational), I also see reason to value the questioning of philosophical tradition that happens to be one of the consequences of a turn toward the literary on the part of ethical thinkers, including Nussbaum herself.

Just as I stress the value of integrating the objective and the subjective, tradition and the critique of tradition, I also believe in benefiting from the work of very different philosophers – such as Martha Nussbaum and Emmanuel Levinas – whose work is not often included in the same study (or at least not accorded equal authority). In subsequent chapters I hope it will become apparent that I seek not to flatten out or even to reconcile divergent perspectives in so multivalent and contentious a field as contemporary moral philosophy, but rather to demonstrate how and why ideas that emerge from a variety of philosophical orientations can illuminate different dimensions of ethics – especially ethics during the Victorian *fin de siècle*, a period passionate about the new and yet, as Terry Eagleton has pointed out, better than we are at seeing rival ideas – old and new – as compatible instead of merely antagonistic.<sup>19</sup>

#### STORIES, THEORIES, AND MORAL REMAINDERS

In light of these complications, rather than speaking of unidirectional influence, it might be more accurate to say that it is the cross-fertilization of philosophy and literary theory that has

provoked a critique of foundationalist philosophy, which then fostered a new relationship between ethics and literature. Like Nussbaum and Walker, Richard Rorty has called for “a general turn against theory and toward narrative.”<sup>20</sup> He describes a role for narrative that is at once philosophical and political. What creates solidarity, he insists, is not metaphysics or religion but detailed descriptions of other human beings (especially those unlike “us”), together with redescrptions of ourselves that include qualities, such as cruelty, traditionally suppressed in our self-descriptions: “This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel” (*Contingency* xvi). Rorty’s readings of Nabokov and Orwell demonstrate his conviction that “literary language is, and always will be, parasitic on ordinary language, and in particular on ordinary moral language. Further, literary interest will always be parasitic on moral interest” (167). Characters in novels are concrete and socially embedded, and thus they encourage us to reflect on our own choices and actions in relation to theirs.<sup>21</sup> Such reflection makes solidarity and ethical/political change more likely than totalizing theories that attempt to escape contingency and to unify incommensurable values.

Philosophy is often idealistic in a way stories are not. Ethical theory attempts to imagine the perfect moral choice because, in Platonic fashion, it tends to equate the “perfect” with the “good,” the “universal” and unchanging with the “true.” By contrast, narrative, which typically dwells on the particular and unique, more often imagines loss, regret, and imperfection. That it does so is one of its points of attraction for many contemporary moral philosophers, including Nussbaum, Walker, and Rorty. In her reading of Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*, Nussbaum describes the transformation of Maggie Verver’s moral idealism into something more contingent. As Nussbaum shows, James’s provisional and contextual ethical sense is conveyed through the very form of his writing, at the levels both of syntax and of narrative technique. The complexity, obliquity, and “sheer difficulty of James’s later style” alert us to “the incompleteness and inadequacy of our own

attention” (*Love’s Knowledge* 144) and thereby underscore the novel’s ethical themes. Through a series of particular experiences – the story the novel tells – Maggie comes to embrace a “new ideal,” one which, paradoxically, enables her to accept her own imperfections. Nussbaum reads it this way: “See clearly and with high intelligence” (which is also her description of a key ethical imperative of James’s fiction). This new ideal says to Maggie, “If love of your husband requires hurting and lying to Charlotte [your husband’s mistress], then do these cruel things, making the better choice. But never cease, all the while, to be richly conscious of Charlotte’s pain and to bear, in imagination and feeling, the full burden of your guilt as the cause of that pain” (*Love’s Knowledge* 134, 135). Because this point so relies on the full context of Nussbaum’s reading of the novel, out of context it might seem like merely an argument for something akin to liberal guilt. But the point is an honest one that often emerges from narrative accounts of ethical choice: no act, no matter how good, is without its cruelty and its troubling loose ends, but recognizing this fact can take one further, ethically, than blinding oneself to another’s pain in order to live more comfortably with one’s own moral choice. As Zygmunt Bauman observes in his delineation of postmodern ethics, morality is necessarily aporetic: “virtually every moral impulse, if acted upon in full, leads to immoral consequences; yet no moral impulse can implement itself unless the moral actor earnestly strives to stretch the effort to the limit.”<sup>22</sup> Such moral actors tend to remain dissatisfied with their choices after they have made them. Narratives tell the often unsettling but instructive stories of these actors, while the philosophical position Bauman and Rorty seek to refute with their antifoundational arguments strives for the very certainty and rule-governed confidence that such stories disallow.

Margaret Urban Walker also resists the view that a correct verdict can bring closure to a moral problem. Her narrative paradigm, by contrast, suggests ongoing, continuously revised understanding. Like Nussbaum, she sees ethical choice and action not as the solution to the problem but as messy attempts to do what’s right; these choices will almost inevitably leave what she

calls “moral remainders,” “genuine moral demands that, because their fulfillment conflicted with other genuine demands, are ‘left over’ in episodes of moral choice, and yet are not just nullified” (“Moral Understanding” 170). Placing this “episode” in the context of a full story – connecting past, present, and future – calls attention to its moral remainders (which, as Nussbaum’s example from James shows, are sometimes people who have been hurt). Narrative also satisfies our need to understand “others,” “actual others in a particular case at hand, and not repeatable instances or replaceable occupants of a general status” (Walker, “Moral Understanding” 167). Again, the pull of narrative for contemporary philosophers is the corrective it offers to the abstract, totalizing vision of much traditional ethical theory.

In response to the philosophical contention that we can believe either in “the good life for man,” which is a determinate ideal, or in rival, incommensurate, mutually exclusive goods, MacIntyre questions the assumptions of contemporary moral philosophy underlying this either/or choice. Like Walker and Nussbaum, MacIntyre undertakes a critique of these assumptions by appealing to an idea that has much in common with Walker’s conception of moral remainders: “By choosing one [of two rival goods] I do nothing to diminish or derogate from the claim upon me of the other; and therefore, whatever I do, I shall have left undone what I ought to have done” (*After Virtue* 224). MacIntyre points out that in our culture of liberal or bureaucratic individualism, the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues has been lost, and one of the consequences of that loss is an inability to see that an ethical agent’s choice between rival goods in a tragic situation is not the central ethical concern that J. L. Austin, R. M. Hare, and others contend it is. “What this contention is blind to is that there may be better or worse ways for individuals to live through tragic confrontations of good with good. And that to know what the good life for man is may require knowing what are the better and what are the worse ways of living in and through such situations” (224). Narratives help us to imagine what these better and worse ways might be, and late Victorian fiction, because of its skepticism about agency, tends

to encourage ethical assessment that does not center on choice. Even though the views of Nussbaum and MacIntyre differ considerably in some respects, they are similar, then, not only in their Aristotelian origin but also in their regard for the narrative context of ethical life. For MacIntyre, any specific, meaningful account of the virtues presupposes our ability to see a human life as having unity and narrative structure. To examine an ethical choice in isolation from the ways of living through the consequences and moral remainders of such a choice simply makes no sense to him.

Rorty, an analytical philosopher who does not share MacIntyre’s historicist orientation (and in fact represents the very liberal individualism that MacIntyre finds so troubling), nonetheless similarly values a narrative paradigm and turns to literature at least in part because it keeps us from deceiving ourselves about moral remainders. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he describes a figure he calls the “liberal ironist,” which is clearly himself and all others who would be happiest in his utopian, postmetaphysical culture. His definition of “liberal” comes from Judith Shklar’s argument that although cruelty has traditionally not been the worst of sins in either politics or religion, the liberal hates cruelty more than any other evil.<sup>23</sup> The “ironist” element of Rorty’s term refers to this figure’s willingness to accept the contingency of his or her most central beliefs, acknowledging that there is nothing beyond history and chance that grounds them. Many of the questions of metaphysicians strike the liberal ironist as pointless:

“Is it right to deliver  $n$  innocents over to be tortured to save the lives of  $m \times n$  other innocents? If so, what are the correct values of  $n$  and  $m$ ?” . . . Anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question – algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort – is still, in his heart, a theologian or metaphysician. He believes in an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities. (xv)

For antifoundational philosophers like Rorty, as well as for the late Victorian liberal ironists at the center of my study, story has replaced moral hierarchy, and human and contextual particularities

have become more important than the rules and theories that guide ethical choice.

To grant primacy to narrative and detail is not, however, to reject principles or even normative morality.<sup>24</sup> As Tobin Siebers has observed, “we have a moralistic tendency to reject morals just because they are morals” (*Morals and Stories* 41). By appealing to relevant ethical theory, my analysis of late Victorian ethics seeks to avoid that tendency, even though the *fin-de-siècle* writers were themselves among the first in literary history to succumb to it. A central thesis of this book is that these writers shaped what they considered a new ethics by telling traditional stories in a new way, and the methods and details of those narratives construct alternatives to conventional Victorian morality even as they reveal the residual hold that such a morality has on late-century writers. And this brings me once again to the second of the two purposes of my study, mentioned above: to investigate the connection between aesthetics and ethics.

#### IMPERFECTLY BREAKING FREE: THE NEW ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY NARRATIVES

Referring to Victorian Christianity, the narrator of Olive Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) says, “When a soul breaks free from the arms of a superstition, bits of the claws and talons break themselves off in him. It is not the work of a day to squeeze them out.”<sup>25</sup> This metaphor of embedded fragments of claws and talons vividly captures the attitude of Schreiner and other post-Darwinian writers toward not only the religion but also the ethics and ideology from which they are breaking free. Her novel's narrator represents Christian morality as irrational (“a superstition”) and oppressive (the bird's embrace is not only all-encompassing but painful and predatory). But because novelists tend to be preoccupied with the histories that situate us, Schreiner also points out through her choice of metaphor that this “old” morality will not simply disappear once it is consciously rejected, for it has already had a defining influence.

In my next chapter, which considers ethics within both a Victorian and a more broadly modern, post-Enlightenment context, I discuss the importance of history and of the *fin-de-siècle* writers' sense of themselves as transitional. The anxiety about agency experienced at this historical juncture differs in important ways from similar anxieties that came before and after, and though it is impossible to do justice to the complexity of all that contributed to this difference, there is value in delineating – even in broad strokes – the conception of history that informs my thinking about turn-of-the-century narrative ethics and about the contribution twentieth-century moral philosophy can make to an analysis of this ethics.

All the writers I am considering in this study, besides emerging from a particular moral tradition, have also, of course, been influenced by a particular novelistic tradition. By reworking familiar narrative techniques and genres, they do not completely escape an aesthetics that has been the vehicle for a more conventional morality than the new ethics they are seeking to articulate. But they make surprising or unsettling aesthetic choices that allow them to undertake a different sort of ethical inquiry than that of earlier Victorian writers.<sup>26</sup> Hardy, Schreiner, and other late-century New Woman novelists, for example, in their revisions of traditional courtship and marriage plots and their transformation of realism, attempt to displace patriarchal values and assumptions with a new ethics of gender relations and sexuality. Yet they do so under the guise of telling realistic stories of relationships between men and women – just like those of their mid-Victorian precursors. Oscar Wilde, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, develops what I would call a proto-postmodern ethics by telling, ironically enough, a traditional fairy-tale or fable-like story with an ostensibly clear moral. But that morality survives only as the embedded beak and talons in an otherwise ethically elusive and contradictory text. Of all the fiction writers I consider, Joseph Conrad is the most committed to the ideal of ethical principles. Unlike Hardy's, his novels are full of identifiably good and evil characters, and his narrators and implied authors rarely shy away from moral judgments. Still, the radical ways in which Conrad departs from nineteenth-century narrative

tradition complicate the principled, clearly defined morality that can be identified in his texts as a Victorian inheritance. Conrad appropriates traditional genres but then works against their norms both aesthetically and ethically. In *Lord Jim*, the romantic sea story/adventure novel of the sort Jim himself read as a boy becomes, in Conrad's hands, a narrative that skeptically questions many traditional moral notions – heroism, the effectiveness of a code of conduct, the value of sympathy – by violating the narrative conventions that typically undergird these ethics. Similarly, *Heart of Darkness* infiltrates the jingoistic adventure-writing tradition to construct a critique of imperialism, and *Under Western Eyes*, the Conrad novel I focus on in the final chapter of this study, unfolds as a spy story in a political context that obliterates the distinctions on which such a story would seem to hinge: the difference between “us” and “them,” autocrat and revolutionary. Like the other writers I consider, then, Conrad develops narratives that are fascinating hybrids of old and new; Victorian genres and normative values compete with technical experimentation and searching, flexible modes of ethical inquiry.

In the *fin-de-siècle* texts I examine, I focus on four ethical preoccupations that are all related to what is arguably the keynote of late Victorian and turn-of-the-century ethics: anxiety about agency. I delineate these preoccupations as gender and sexual ethics (chapter 3), moral luck (chapter 4), aestheticized ethics (chapter 5), and the ethics of speech acts (chapter 6). For the novelists of this period, a time of cultural upheaval and uncertainty, all of these concerns are related to questions about personal freedom and doubts about moral autonomy.

After the following chapter, which paves the way for a reading of ethics contextualized by intellectual history and cultural politics, I begin by exploring *fin-de-siècle* ideas about agency in narrative treatments of sexual ethics. Besides sharing an interest in gender, sexuality, and power, Hardy and such late-century women writers as Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand sought to confront and narrate the problem of cruelty and victimization in a way that would transform Victorian sexual morality. I consider their narrative efforts to

articulate a new, emotionally driven ethics alongside philosophical discussions of the cognitive dimension of emotion and the debates surrounding Gilligan's feminist notion of an ethics of care. In interpreting these stories about what the late Victorians called the New Woman, I am as intrigued by the ethical ambivalence and uncertainties of the texts as I am by their defiant critiques of the status quo. Unlike recent critics who have discussed Hardy's novels in the context of New Woman fiction, however, I am reluctant to attribute the ethical contradictions of his work to his gender or to describe him as significantly less feminist than his female contemporaries. I argue that Hardy's ethics of love has been misconstrued as patriarchal, conceding that the emotional and passionate nature of his ethical thinking leaves it vulnerable to just such interpretations. Schreiner and Grand run the same risk, and their women characters often slide into cruelty as they unsuccessfully attempt to escape their culture's paradigm of dominance and submission in relations between the sexes. Like John Kucich, who concludes his recent study of Victorian ethics with chapters on Hardy and Grand, I feel that New Woman writing is best understood within an ethical context since moral categories were so important to the feminism of these late-century writers. Unlike Kucich, however, who focuses on “questions of truthfulness in both personal and aesthetic domains”<sup>27</sup> and in doing so illuminates one dimension of this ethical context, my treatment of these writers concludes that an understanding of emotion – especially as it influences rational choice – can shed light on another crucial dimension and lead to a different assessment of the ethics of this fiction. To argue that these three writers, despite their differences, all sought to develop an ethics of emotion at odds with Victorian public morality and the ideology of separate spheres is to question recent judgments (including Kucich's) about how Hardy's novels might be read within the context of New Woman fiction.

In my fourth chapter I discuss the ethics of Hardy's fiction from a very different perspective, though one even more clearly imbued with concerns about agency. It is a critical commonplace that the plots of Hardy's novels are governed by chance, but this important



dimension of his narratives is illuminated in a new way when studied in light of the controversial concept of moral luck, which has only recently received the attention it deserves. Influenced by the work of Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel on this topic, I make a case for the existence of moral luck as Nagel defines it: “Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck.”<sup>28</sup> This concept is central to the ethics of Hardy’s fiction. Agency, responsibility, and moral assessment become problematic when luck plays a determining role in our lives, as it so often does in Hardy’s novels. Chapter 3 focuses on moral luck in *A Laodicean*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. On the surface *A Laodicean* seems to be merely a lurid melodrama, but its controlling metaphor of life as a game in which we must gamble whether we choose to or not makes it a fascinating text to read alongside Hardy’s more famous novels. Central to all three works are ideas about time, timing, knowledge, intention, and moral judgment. I argue that Hardy’s belief in moral luck complicates his attraction to Kantian ethics which is opposed to such a concept because of the primacy for Kant of intentions and agency.

An ethical concern at the heart of late nineteenth-century British aestheticism also raises the question of agency: is it possible for the Victorian artist to escape Victorian morality? In the fiction of Oscar Wilde and Henry James, I explore the ethical implications of the aestheticist desire to refashion the world. Chapter 5 compares Wilde’s strange, Gothic, proto-postmodern, *fin-de-siècle* narrative, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with James’s *The Ambassadors*, an early modernist novel which, as Jonathan Freedman has pointed out, offers a response to Wilde’s aestheticism in *Dorian Gray* (*Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Structure* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990]). I build on Freedman’s comparative study by reading both novels in light of philosophical ideas about the ethics of self and other, especially as expounded in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur. I see the different styles of aestheticizing ethics in Wilde and James as similar in

emotional self-protectiveness, a strategy that erects a defense against both suffering and love.

The final ethical preoccupation in the texts I discuss is lying, which critics have only recently begun to recognize as central to Victorian ethics, just as important as the moral earnestness for which the nineteenth century was famous. This section of my study benefits from John Kucich’s *The Power of Lies* but focuses on Conrad, a novelist his book mentions only in passing. While Kucich’s approach emphasizes the function of honesty and dishonesty within the dynamics of middle-class Victorian culture, my own approach considers lying – like promising, confessing, and storytelling itself – as a speech act that late-century writers (unlike most of their Victorian precursors) began to treat with nearly obsessive self-consciousness. When philosophical literature on promising and lying is juxtaposed with Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*, a novel about both, the ethical significance of particularity, context, and narrative emerges with unusual clarity. Philosophical reflection on this topic – even at its most sophisticated and nuanced – seems unable to do justice to the complexity of the problems and paradoxes that motivate or follow from the promises and lies narratives imagine. Whereas in my analysis of late-century narratives of passionate and compassionate love, Hardy’s stories about moral luck, and the aestheticized ethics of Wilde and James, I argue that ethical theory can provide a framework within which to interpret the fiction, in this chapter I maintain that the novel offers the better ethical guide, enriching our understanding of the moral philosophy. Speech acts are dependent on contexts, and the dialogic form of the novel furnishes these contexts in a way that abstract philosophy cannot. This final section of the book, then, offers further evidence for Nussbaum’s claim that ethical inquiry in literature can offer a viable alternative to the prevailing mode of inquiry in moral philosophy.

In these final two chapters, my discussion of Wilde, James, and Conrad raises a broad question about turn-of-the-century ethics by examining how such different writers can be equally ambivalent in their understanding of the relationship between art and morality.

As dissimilar as Wilde and Conrad are, for example, in their attitudes toward aesthetics, they start from an oddly similar definition of art. Wilde's defiant declaration in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that "All art is quite useless" sums up Conrad's frustration with the difficult and apparently profitless work of writing novels, which often felt to him like a form of torture. As Anthony Cascardi explains, "what Conrad understands by the difficulty of art has roots in the fact that it remains in the end aesthetic, that it is a sphere of work without apparent purpose or aim and, for Conrad, without significant compensation outside that which it can itself provide" ("Ethics and Aesthetics" 21). Wilde embraces the idea of art's uselessness as a release from the bondage of Victorian didacticism (which, in fact, neither his novel nor his preface manage to avoid altogether). Conrad, however, resists aestheticism despite its attractiveness. As difficult as he found the effort to believe in truthfulness and art's capacity to achieve an ethical end by telling the truth about the world, his fiction continues to undertake this effort. Virginia Woolf recognized both Conrad's struggle and his success in the very texture of his prose: "the beauty of surface has always a fibre of morality within. I seem to see each of the sentences . . . advancing with resolute bearing and a calm which they have won in strenuous conflict, against the forces of falsehood, sentimentality, and slovenliness."<sup>29</sup> Conrad's fiction seems very modern in its depiction of lying as virtually inescapable, and yet Woolf is right that for Conrad falsehood nevertheless remains the enemy. His protagonists seek to disentangle themselves from webs of deceit, and *Under Western Eyes* – unlike *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – never glamorizes lying.

The emotional approach taken by Hardy and the New Woman writers in their reworking of Victorian ethics is antithetical to the approach of Wilde, James, and Conrad, who project well-disguised, elusive narrators and implied authors and guard themselves against feeling. Conrad does so because of his Kantian distrust of emotion's potential to undermine reason and ethics, even though throughout his fiction there are vivid instances of emotional bonding. James does so by filtering his story through a character's consciousness,

which enables a more nuanced, flexible form of moral deliberation than other narrative methods, even as it protects him from divulging any ethical commitments of his own. Wilde does so because as a homosexual his strongest feelings were banned. Much of Wilde's most memorable writing startles us through its apparent affront to reason, but ultimately it appeals to a reader's intellect and aesthetic sensibility rather than eliciting compassion or other emotional responses.

These three writers rethink Victorian morality not by turning to emotion or revising the traditional love plot, but by exploring the relationship between private and public that has always been so central to ethics. Wilde's need to lead a double life, despite the openness signaled by his public flamboyance, made him especially alert to the discrepancy between the ethics he could imagine for his private life and the public code of morality that made lies necessary. Conrad, too, coming as he did from a family of political activists, had a heightened awareness of the public world that demands roles, contracts, and disguises; his novels show that while individuals can work to change this world, it has the power to coerce and to strip away ethical agency.

One of my aims in the chapters that follow is to demonstrate the centrality of ethics to our understanding of *fin-de-siècle* literature and culture. Like Kucich and other recent commentators on ethics and politics, I believe we need to work against "an oversimplified sense of how ethics is related to the kinds of political or ideological concerns that have preoccupied contemporary criticism" (*The Power of Lies* 37). All of the writers I consider were political in their desire to change what they considered obsolete or oppressive attitudes, institutions, laws, and moral codes. But the politics of their texts cannot be construed apart from the ethics, just as the ethics can only be read through close attention to aesthetic choices. I also hope to show that such attention to narrative detail and context can complement the work of moral philosophy, and that the theories and debates animating contemporary ethics can revitalize our study of the ethics of fiction.

## *Victorian history and ethics: anxiety about agency at the fin de siècle*

Theory is required to support observation, just as much as observation theory.

Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>1</sup>

Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes.

Charles Taylor<sup>2</sup>

Despite all the emphasis on particularity, context, and narrative in recent studies of ethics and literature, scholars working in this field have directed surprisingly little attention to the question of why an ethical problem or set of ethical concerns dominates in narratives written during a given historical period. Such historicizing might be avoided for the simple reason that identifying the moral preoccupations of an era represents only the beginning for an ethical critic and immediately begs several questions. My claim, for instance, that anxiety about agency during the British *fin de siècle* determines in a variety of ways the ethical sensibility of late Victorian and turn-of-the-century novels gives rise to a question about history – how are the ethical issues of these novels distinctively different for their time? – as well as to a number of theoretical inquiries about the value of understanding ethics as historically contingent, inquiries that concern the existence of moral absolutes and the validity of universal claims about virtue.<sup>3</sup>

Any satisfying answer to these questions would entail a complex explanation of both the relationship between history and ethics and the historical and cultural context of Victorian ideas about will, agency, and determinism, not to mention nineteenth-century conceptions of selfhood. Although all I can do here is begin to explore

a few points that would contribute to such an explanation, doing so will further disclose my theoretical assumptions and clarify what I mean when I refer in subsequent chapters to Victorian morality and *fin-de-siècle* ethics. Because the historical context of the fiction I go on to discuss must be conceived both narrowly (the 1890s) and broadly (modern), my method in what follows is to investigate the continuities that make the late nineteenth century seem to be of a piece with both the Victorian period and the twentieth century as well as the discontinuities that mark it as distinctively different, especially in its ethics and its ideas about identity and agency. Between the Victorians' vigorous efforts to deny anxiety about agency and the moderns' acceptance of such angst as unavoidable, the turn-of-the-century writers positioned themselves not only in a discursive, ethical space that they felt to be new and leading to the new but also in the midst of paradox. The paradox of at once accepting uncertainty and instability and developing creative strategies to refuse the despair that seemed to come in the wake of such acceptance enabled the late Victorian writers to forge a new ethics. Although this ethics emerges in all its contradictions, details, and subtleties only in the fiction I discuss later, my treatment of it here, in the context of intellectual and cultural history, sketches its broad outlines and highlights features of the past and future that help give it definition.

### MILL AND MACINTYRE: HISTORICAL PECULIARITIES AND MORAL CONVICTIONS

One of the twentieth-century philosophers most attuned to the historical dimension of ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre, can be said to have an unlikely Victorian precursor of sorts in John Stuart Mill. MacIntyre has famously argued that "every moral philosophy has some particular sociology as its counterpart" (*After Virtue* 225) and that it makes no sense to speak of virtues apart from the social order that gives rise to them. He has also sketched a history of morality that describes the unity and teleology of both the Aristotelian ethical tradition and that of Aquinas and the Christian