

## INTRODUCTION

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### “MORALISED FABLES”

Friedrich Nietzsche, writing at the close of the nineteenth century, offered an account of the “origin of English morality.” Victorians had replaced their religion with morality, Nietzsche argued, and in place of God, now believed that the source of right action lay within.<sup>1</sup> No one, for Nietzsche, exemplified this better than the zealous-Calvinist-turned-secular-novelist, George Eliot:

They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality. That is an English consistency; we do not wish to hold it against little moralistic females *à la* Eliot. In England one must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is. . . . When the English actually believe that they know “intuitively” what is good and evil, when they therefore suppose that they no longer require Christianity as the guarantee of morality, we merely witness . . . that the origin of English morality has been forgotten.<sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche is wrong here, in the ways that he is often wrong: a lack of discrimination in the spectrum of the religious and the secular, a characteristic contempt for the figure of the “the literary female.”<sup>3</sup> But in the essentials, he is correct. Over the course of the nineteenth century, an “intuitive” faith in an internalized sense of right and wrong did come to take an increasingly prominent, if fraught, place in English moral life. And it was to be “moralistic” figures like George Eliot—that is, novelists—who would provide the most lasting expression of this prominence.<sup>4</sup> One more thing Nietzsche was correct about, albeit not quite in the way he intended: the origin of this connection—between novel-writing, intuition, and morality—would come to be largely forgotten.

What do we mean now when we say that the progress of a narrative “feels right”? How did feeling, form, and the sense of right and wrong get

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mixed up, in the nineteenth century, in the experience of reading a novel? This book is an attempt to answer these questions. The compulsion of narrative, a reader's feeling of being drawn through a text, was a key term in the developing novel art of the nineteenth century. Thackeray, for example, would describe Dickens's novelistic skill in these terms: "The power of the writer is so amazing, that the reader at once becomes his captive, and must follow him whithersoever he leads."<sup>5</sup> The metaphor of physical motion, which Victorians applied to the reading experience, came to offer a means of describing the movement from what *is* to what *ought to be*—or at least the yearning for that movement. At the same time, the moral valence that readers placed on the stories they read came to shape, in terms of both market forces and creative tradition, the principles that now define the well-plotted realist novel.

This book, then, will make two joined arguments. First: when Victorians discussed—as they so often did—the moral dimensions of novel reading, a closer look will demonstrate that they were being a good deal more attentive to the formal properties of the novel than we have tended to give them credit for. And, second: that the moral principles that attached to the Victorian understanding of the novel form have persisted, and become an implicit part of our own ongoing critical practice. We have begun, with the recent work of critics such as Nicholas Dames and Caroline Levine, to give the Victorians credit for their formal understanding of literature.<sup>6</sup> Yet even in these discussions, the moral dimensions of Victorian thought still remain a bit of an embarrassment for critics: a sort of stuffy, stiff-necked rectitude that can obscure more meaningful scientific or aesthetic insights. By offering a fuller context for the ethical discourse of the British nineteenth century, *Good Form* argues that Victorian formalism was inextricably tied to moral thought. This not only impacts our reading of Victorian literary and philosophical history but also offers a new perspective on our own approaches to literature. We cannot understand the formal principles of the novel that we have inherited from the nineteenth century without also understanding the moral principles that have come with them. Key Victorian insights into the theory and practice of narrative came in the guise of moral arguments, much as more recent insights have taken the form of linguistics or cultural history. And the force of these moral readings has so shaped the structure of novels, and our understanding of them, that we continue to reenact these readings today. Victorian moral thought, in other words, has become part of the fabric of both novel theory and canonical formation: what we read and how we read it.

At the center of my argument lies the term, "intuition," which Nietzsche singled out to describe what he saw as a typically Victorian approach to moral concerns. His use of the word was not arbitrary, and corresponds to its frequent usage in the philosophical debates of the day.<sup>7</sup> As Bernard

Williams puts it, "Intuition used to be taken as an intellectual power of arriving at abstract truths, and its application to ethics lay in the idea that ethical truths could be grasped *a priori* by such a faculty."<sup>8</sup> The school that this term came to apply to, philosophers like William Whewell and H. L. Mansel, situated itself in opposition to the consequentialist and deliberative utilitarianism of Bentham and the Mills. Intuitionists argued in the tradition of Lord Shaftesbury and Frances Hutcheson for an internal basis for moral ideas. As Mansel put it in an 1854 lecture, "conceptions of right and wrong without an intuitive moral faculty are as impossible as conceptions of colours without a sense of sight."<sup>9</sup> Now, we normally remember the period for its utilitarianism, but at the time, the intuitionist side had enough currency that John Stuart Mill opens *Utilitarianism* by setting himself in opposition to it: his work, he says, will refuse to have "recourse to the popular theory of a natural faculty, a sense or instinct, informing us of what is right and wrong."<sup>10</sup> Discussions of the nineteenth century, therefore, which stress the dominance of utilitarianism to such an extent that there seems to be little else on the ethical landscape, have little to say about the role of the moral sense and intuitionist thought. As J. B. Schneewind has noted, "the intuitionist standpoint is, quite surprisingly considering its importance for the thought of the period, almost completely neglected in histories of philosophy no less than in surveys of literature."<sup>11</sup> If we want to understand how Victorians understood themselves as moral beings, then, we need to broaden the scope of our conversation to try to explain the experience of intuitive judgment.

This means looking beyond the narrow confines of utilitarianism—but it also means reconsidering the stereotype of the moralizing Victorian.<sup>12</sup> Such a stereotype is a legacy of the *fin-de-siècle* and modernism, and contends that Victorian novels suffered from having their morality bolted on: opinionated narrative intrusions that did not serve an aesthetic or formal purpose. In an 1885 review of a biography of George Eliot, Henry James took the occasion to sum up the author's "general attitude with regard to the novel": "not primarily a picture of life, capable of deriving a high value from its form, but a moralised fable, the last word of a philosophy endeavouring to teach by example."<sup>13</sup> This reading of Eliot, and of the Victorian novel in general—moralism over formalism, good intentions over good writing—took hold in the early part of the twentieth century and has yet to let go. F. R. Leavis, for example, uses this quote in *The Great Tradition* as evidence that James "show[s] finer intelligence than anyone else in writing about George Eliot."<sup>14</sup> We see a similar approach taken by Virginia Woolf, when she introduces George Meredith as an example of the disparity between the nineteenth century and "the age we now live in—the year 1928." The Victorians, Woolf suggests, let their moralizing get in the way:

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His teaching seems now too strident and too optimistic and too shallow. It obtrudes; and when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both. Above all, his teaching is too insistent. He cannot, even to hear the profoundest secret, suppress his own opinion.<sup>15</sup>

Meredith's typically Victorian failing, then, as far as Woolf is concerned, is not so much that his work has a moral quality. Rather, it is that, like James's version of Eliot, he *moralizes*—that is to say, he presents a moral argument that seems to be separate, or separable, from his artistic product.

What I will argue in this book is that it would take a good deal more than even the formidable combined powers of Henry James and Virginia Woolf to separate out the moral content from Victorian novels. I am not talking here about Eliot's occasional harangues or Meredith's overt erudition; these are a certain sort of stylistic trait typical of, though by no means confined to, the nineteenth century. What is more deeply ingrained in the form of the Victorian novel is the sense of narrative necessity that underwrites naive novel reading and the most sophisticated narratologies alike. By focusing discussions of morals in Victorian novels on authorial intrusions and philosophical themes—on those non-narrative elements of the novel that seem to disrupt the novel's forward progress—we tend to miss the ways in which moral ideas can become a part of narrative structure itself. The central issue in the *Madame Bovary* obscenity trial, for example, was whether the novel was *about* Emma's sexual activities, or instead just featured them as a way of focusing on a moral lesson.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the moral questions surrounding Flaubert's novel became questions of whether the meaning of the novel was to be found in synchronic description or diachronic narrative development. The same question, it turns out, was operative in debates about the propriety of crime novels—"Newgate novels," as they were called—and their representation of vice. If vice and criminals were presented in the service of a Bunyanesque progress toward salvation, as many argued was the case with Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, then such details would be morally acceptable. If they were presented as an end in themselves—charges often leveled against other Newgate novels by Edward Bulwer-Lytton and William Harrison Ainsworth—then the novel could be considered immoral. In crime novels, then, morality or vice was a function of whether the details of the novel took on a diachronic or synchronic form. The feeling that Thackeray described in Dickens, of being "led," became the experience that allowed the novel its ethical dimension. I will discuss these points in greater depth in chapter 2, but the key point here is that when Victorian critics discussed the morality of novels, they were discussing a good deal more than

its static elements: the explicit arguments and the choice of details. Instead, what we find when we look closely is that arguments about moral topics frequently turned on nuanced formal points.

And it is here—where Victorian theory and practice move back and forth between the formal and the moral—that we can locate the moral content that modernist critics would be unable, in Woolf's words, to "cut out . . . with a pair of scissors." What we have come to see as formal novelistic principles—narrative disclosure, character development, the relation of the one and the many—continue to echo the intuitionist moral ideas of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche saw moral intuition as the cross scratched in the sand, marking where the Victorians had buried, and forgotten, their dead God. But now, as Schneewind suggests, even that burial site—the tradition of intuitionist thought—has been forgotten, with the result that discussions of narrative form have come to seem ethically neutral. Still, we encounter the "intuitionist standpoint" every time we make reference to the propulsive force of the narrative, in terms like Georg Lukács's "poetic necessity," Roland Barthes's "constraint of the discourse," or Peter Brooks's "narrative desire."<sup>17</sup> Each of these terms relies on its own metalanguage—historical materialism, structural linguistics, psychoanalysis—and yet each is still dependent on the sniff-test, on a criterion of "I'll know it when I see it."

Moral intuition and these intuitions of theory: the similarity between the two goes beyond analogy. One intuition is not simply *like* another. Rather, in the moral conceptualizations of narrative form, through the give-and-take of literary evolution, Victorian reading practices codified a certain sort of text, and a certain way of understanding it. But—and this is important—I do not mean here that our reading is actually governed by moral intuitions: that some turns of events (a successful courtship, perhaps, or responsible maturation toward a vocation) actually appeal to our moral faculties. What I mean is that "moral intuition" is the name that Victorians gave to the experience of anticipated, developing, formal satisfaction. Over the nineteenth century, through the dialectic of production and reception, that moral inflection when novel theories imply that we can all recognize a successfully completed narrative arc. But the central idea here—of an agreed-upon sense of what constitutes the right outcome of events—is where Victorian ideas of morality ended up. The understanding of moral intuitions shifted over the nineteenth century—from an innate faculty to tacit communal consensus—until we were left with a form and interpretive methods, shaped by moral concerns and yet somehow understood to be morally neutral. The moral concerns of the Victorians have taught us how to read their books.

Is it any wonder, then, that generations of critics have been troubled by the power of narrative form to naturalize, to *argue for*, certain moral positions? We don't read completely ingenuously; any generic understanding

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requires a sort of primitive novel theory. And part of that primitive novel theory—the part that finds that a certain sort of story feels right—has moral considerations built into it, which can act as the ground for any number of normative positions. This is all to say that the focus on ethical thought in this book should not be taken as a denial of the political or ideological work that novels can do. I agree, for the most part, that novel narrative can be subtly coercive. But what are the conditions of possibility for a novel narrative being political or ideological in the first place? We generally take it for granted that there can be something normative—or galvanizing, or politically inspiring—in a five-hundred-page account of the made-up experiences of made-up people. But how does a compelling story become a compelling argument? That is the question that this book seeks to address.

Fifteen years ago, a book like this would have needed to offer a justification for its focus on ethics. Now, on the other side of criticism's "turn to ethics,"<sup>18</sup> connecting moral thought and literary form hardly requires explanation. But this project does require, perhaps, some explanation of what it is not. While I am certainly anxious to vindicate Victorian literature from modernist caricatures of its overt moralism, I do not want my argument to be taken as a championing of the period's covert, formal, moral ideas. In particular, I would like to emphasize that this book does not take as axiomatic the transformative hypothesis: the idea that that reading novels actually alters people's moral or political character. This notion seems to be implicit in most discussions of novels, and particularly discussions of novel realism—even those that would not explicitly subscribe to it. When Fredric Jameson, in the *Political Unconscious*, characterizes "the bulk of garden-variety literary criticism" as "ethical," he is referring to a sort of criticism that looks to literature for "permanent features of human 'experience,' and thus . . . a kind of 'wisdom' about personal life and interpersonal relationships."<sup>19</sup> Even criticism that does not see itself as concerned with ethics will still tend to look for instructive examples: what Eliot, say, shows us about egoism, or what Dickens reminds us about the effects of dehumanizing bureaucracy. As we will see in chapter 1, the tradition of novel criticism, through its varied twentieth- and twenty-first-century forms, has tended to justify its institutional existence by calling on this broadly ethical model. Given this tacit disciplinary consensus, the sort of link between ethics and novel form that I am drawing in this book will, inevitably, sound like it is arguing for the mildly life-altering properties of reading. Suffice it to say here that this is not my intention. There is moral thought in these novels—even moral arguments implicit in their form—but I am not convinced that it is morally improving to read them.<sup>20</sup> This should not be taken as a jab at those who do draw lessons from their readings. This book is greatly indebted to the work of critics such as Amanda Anderson, Caroline Levine, and Andrew Miller, who have returned with care and precision to the moral concerns of

Victorians and shown how those concerns are still of relevance to us today.<sup>21</sup> In each of these cases, an ethical thrust of Victorian fiction—Habermasian communicative rationality for Anderson, imaginative reconsideration of social possibilities for Levine, radical self-improvement for Miller—becomes in some way an ethical challenge for readers.<sup>22</sup> While I remain skeptical about the suggestion that novels themselves can transform us, I am largely convinced that faithful, ethically charged criticism, acting in concert with these novels, can provide a useful model of attentive reading and can be a spur to moral thought. But, when it comes to moral intuition, setting such an example is not, for better or for worse, what I wish to do in this book.

And, after all, we certainly don't need the Victorians to tell us to be more intuitive in our moral lives. When it comes to morality, we are plenty intuitive enough already—*too* intuitive, I tend to think, when it comes to things like hiring, housing, and voting for public office. What a careful reexamination of Victorian moral thought does offer, though, is a greater understanding of the moral undercurrents of our critical and theoretical heritage. I am less concerned with pointing out what we might learn about right action from a careful reading of Victorian texts; I am more concerned with learning how we developed that practice of careful reading in the first place. The ethical intuitions that our literary practice has learned from the Victorians and internalized—the feeling of rightness, and the pull toward a better conclusion—are those feelings that we use to explain the rightness of a conclusion, or the familiarity of a text over space and time. *Good Form* does not propose to offer lessons, handed down from the Victorians, that we *ought to* learn. Rather, I want to show how their moral beliefs have inflected what we have already learned—and what we, as literary critics and cultural historians, already do. It seems clear to me that Victorians were indeed concerned, through and through, with moral questions. But it also seems clear to me that this did not produce only the rigid moralism so often associated with Victorianism. It also produced subtle thought on the nature of reading. Any encounter with their novels, and with many realist novels that we read in the same fashion, must take into account the moral stamp that their intuitions left on their work, and on us.

In my first chapter, “What Feels Right,” I will pick up on the questions that I have raised in this introduction, in order to show how literary theory bears the mark of the ethical debates of the nineteenth century. Through a reading of two industrial novels, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, as well as a discussion of a number of classic narrative theorists, I will show how narrative theory, underwritten by a principle of forward compulsion through the text, reiterates the position of the intuitionist thinkers of the Victorian period. By then turning to a discussion of the philosophical arguments of Bernard Williams—famous for his use of

small narratives as philosophical argument—I will suggest how narrative form, having subsumed the tenets of intuitionism, itself became an effective argumentative practice.

In the chapter that follows, “The Subject of the Newgate Novel,” I will focus what I take to be a central moment in the development of these moral narrative practices—one that is, at the same time, a moment in the coming into being of “the Victorian novel.” Looking at *Oliver Twist* and the “Newgate novel” controversy of the 1830s, I offer an example of one way in which the experience of diachronic reading could be interpreted in an explicitly moral fashion. The specific formal technique that I will be discussing is “suspense,” understood broadly as a novel’s overt withholding of certain key elements from its readers. This is a pretty familiar part of a good deal of Victorian narrative—*Jane Eyre* and *Little Dorrit* come immediately to mind. Looking at Newgate novels, crime novels whose moment of popularity immediately precedes the appearance of such canonical figures as Dickens and Thackeray, I show that the basis for the contemporary condemnations and defenses of these works—specifically of Ainsworth’s *Jack Sheppard* and Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*—was not simply subject matter but also narrative method that produced the novels’ moral, or immoral, effects. In particular, I show that Dickens’s novel parts ways with the larger subgenre at the moments that it calls attention to the fact that there is a backstory that is both responsible for the events we read and inaccessible to us. In other words, it becomes both more morally acceptable to its contemporary readers and more of a familiar “Victorian novel”—the very first, according to some—to its modern readers. Ainsworth’s novel, on the other hand, betrays a certain strangeness that was part and parcel of its moral unacceptability: a sense that it was not directed by any law outside of the events that it was describing. This chapter thus serves to introduce the moral themes of the Victorian novel and also to show an example of what storytelling that does not make use of moral sensibility might look like.

Suspense, though, was not the only narrative mechanism that an author could use to imply that there was a “law” governing the text. My third chapter, “Getting David Copperfield,” finds another method in a rather unlikely place: humor. This is not, as I show through a discussion of Romantic and Victorian writings on the subject, a humor that was defined by its ability to make a reader laugh. Rather, I show that humor was a strategy used to produce, in the reader, the experience of unspoken agreement and shared community with others. What was withheld in *Oliver Twist* is here present, but forgotten as a part of everyday life. The narrative of David’s progression is always measured against this backdrop of an anonymously judging public of which he is part, and the novel’s narrative method seeks to move him into agreement with that public. The novel thus uses humor to underscore the idea that our individual intuitions are shared, though in ways that are



difficult to conceptualize. Dickens's narrative technique thus makes use of an externalization, into the social sphere, of a reader's individual feeling.

Themes of the two previous chapters—canonicity and *sensus communis*—come together in the next chapter, on the *Bildungsroman*. "Back in Time" is a study of the philosophical and literary significance of the novel of development. Of particular interest will be the question of how this one particular narrative trajectory came to stand in, at least in the study of the Victorian novel, for the much larger body of nineteenth-century literature. Why does *Oliver Twist*, for example, follow its developmental narrative into the textual archive of Victorian studies, while *Jack Sheppard*, profoundly nondevelopmental, remain outside as historical context? Through readings of Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, *Great Expectations* and Mill's *Autobiography*, I will suggest that the ethical foundations of the concept of *Bildung*—and in particular the idea of *sensus communis*—made form in the *Bildungsroman*, lay the groundwork for our own understanding of what makes a novel count as an object of study.

"The Large Novel and the Law of Large Numbers," on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, exposes a suspicion with the very possibility of development—particularly as it relates to the connection between an individual and her larger community. In the process, I suggest that Eliot's final work calls into question the ethical implication of individual intuitions in general. I have been arguing that the nineteenth-century novel form linked developmental narrative, intuition, and a sense of social embeddedness; in Eliot's novel we can see a deep distrust of this connection. Looking at the novel in the context of changing understandings of statistics and probability, I show how Eliot's sweeping narrative structure highlights the divide she, and many of her contemporaries, had come to see between intuition and the outcomes that emerge from long durations and large numbers. By thematizing the counterintuitive nature of the statistical split between the one and the many, Eliot expressed her discomfort with the Victorian connection of individual intuition and the novelistic representation of larger groups.

Finally, as a conclusion, I turn briefly to a consideration of how the arguments in this book relate to the question of literary periodization. This is, without question, a book on Victorian literature, written in the context of Victorian moral thought. From that point of view, it is very much rooted to a specific time and place. On the other hand, many of the arguments and theoretical ideas in this book rely on a certain concept of realism that would seem to extend beyond Britain and beyond the nineteenth century. In these closing thoughts, I will consider just how much of my argument is portable to a larger discussion of literary realism. In so doing, I hope to elaborate the ways in which the Victorian novel, and the moral thought that attached to it, has continued to influence our larger sense of how works from the past can seem to be, in some odd way, about us.