

MORALIZING WOMEN:  
THE EXPRESSION OF BELIEF IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of English,

Indiana University

May 2014

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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May 5, 2014

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd first like to thank my dissertation committee, Andrew H. Miller, Ivan Kreilkamp, Rae Greiner, and Jennifer L. Fleissner. Each provided key inspiration along the way, whether it be through a thought-provoking course early on in my graduate career, engaged, probing feedback on multiple drafts of chapters, or a willingness to chat and listen as I attempted to articulate ideas at their more nebulous stages. I am especially grateful to my chair, Andrew, for his careful, generous reading (and rereading) of my work, his faith in my ideas, and his commitment to helping me become a better writer.

In addition to my committee, several other professors provided encouragement and support. At Arizona State University, Dan Bivona's devoted teaching and mentorship were a big reason I became a Victorianist. The intellectual enthusiasm of two other generously committed teachers at Indiana University, Christoph Irmscher and Joss Marsh, proved equally motivating.

I have been very fortunate to benefit from IU's vibrant academic community. The Victorian Studies program in particular has made me feel connected to fellow academics here and beyond. I'm especially grateful for the opportunity to work as Book Review Editor at *Victorian Studies*. My time there provided valuable insight into the field and academic writing in general. It also allowed me to work alongside Melanie Brezniak, Stephanie Koscak, Maureen Hattrup McAvoy, Ashley Miller, and Madeleine Thompson. Their intelligence and work ethic kept me on my toes, and their quick wit and hilarious Internet findings gave me a daily dose of belly laughs at a time in the dissertation writing when I needed it most. I would also like to express my appreciation for the recognition and financial support that came with the Patrick Brantlinger Dissertation Year Fellowship. In addition to such institutional aid, my project

benefited from the thoughtful feedback of many fellow graduate students, including Lee Anne Bache, Mahasweta Baxipatra, Carrie Sickmann Han, Laura Kasson-Fiss, Julie Kraft, Maureen Hattrup McAvoy, and Bekah Trollinger.

I'd like to thank my Bloomington friends for keeping me sane and reminding me of what's important. Looking back on our various adventures, from the impromptu dance parties in the kitchen to the (oddly moving) Thanksgiving renditions of "Dani California," I realize it would be more appropriate to refer to them as my Bloomington family—something I most appreciated during those dark, cold JanuFebs when I felt particularly far from home.

I also want to acknowledge the family and friends who provided encouragement across many miles and over many years. Catherine Haradon's weekly phone conversations, yoga and meditation recommendations, and mindful attitude showed me a more balanced approach to dissertating. My uncle and aunt, Robert Williams and Joan Dunn Williams, have been truly generous in their support of my academic interests. Thanks to my parents, Lou and Mary Ann Simek, for the many spring breaks I spent writing on their patio and our many hikes that allowed me to meander aloud through my ideas while they listened with love and interest. I am grateful to both my parents and my in-laws, Jack and Peg Prendergast, for the many hours of babysitting that allowed me to finish the project.

My biggest thanks goes to Jim Prendergast, for his unparalleled, always inspiring combination of patience, devotion, creativity, and goofiness. Thanks, too, to our Evelyn, whose recent arrival has made the final months of dissertating the most hectic and happiest yet.

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This dissertation examines the longstanding critical distaste for didactic literature and the marginalization of certain Victorian women novelists' work for its overt moral, religious, and political commitments. Exploring women's particular relationship to novelistic didacticism, I show that authors like Ellen Wood, George Eliot, Elizabeth Missing Sewell, and Sarah Grand consciously used didactic forms to address the risks of expressing belief in fiction and challenge stereotypes of the moralizing woman writer. Victorian women novelists faced difficulty avoiding charges of moralizing; while entering the public literary sphere brought charges of vulgar self-display, any counter emphasis on didactic aims brought related charges of moral vanity. Either way, women supposedly failed to embody the figure of the spontaneously inspired, unselfconscious artist celebrated by ethical and aesthetic discourse of the period. These novelists' experience of such constraints, however, prompted remarkable insights into the problematic ironies inherent in such notions of artistic unselfconsciousness as well as alternative strategies for managing the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the novel.

This project reveals that the modernist critique of Victorian moralizing had an antecedent in nineteenth-century religious tradition itself. Even more surprisingly, all the novelists I study, religious and secular alike, turn to religious forms—prayer in particular—to rethink authorial self-consciousness and the limited possibilities for expressing moral, religious, or political belief in literature. Conceptualizing prayer as an address to an audience between self and other, they

cultivate an authorial voice that is neither overly (vainly) self-conscious nor impossibly unselfconscious. Their didacticism thus involves more than the artistically simplistic, morally presumptuous aim of saving the reader; instead, the engagement of the reader and the author with the novel's complex modes of moral self-consciousness allows them, willingly (after an extensive acknowledgment of the risks involved), to save each other.

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## INTRODUCTION

Often dismissed as simplistic and narrow-minded, didactic fiction is one area of Victorian women's literature that remains underexplored. Working from a feminist perspective, critics have recovered many women's writings and demonstrated their subversion of gender norms, their small but significant rebellions against patriarchy. But we tend to avoid talking about the primary purpose of many of these works: their promotion of moral, religious, and/or political beliefs. Referring to what John Sutherland called the "'lost continent' of non-canonical Victorian fiction," Susan M. Griffin notes, "Modernism's lingering legacy has meant...that novels of religious controversy by women continue to comprise one of that continent's darkest reaches" (279). This dissertation seeks to understand why this aspect of modernism's legacy—an aversion for novels with religious (as well as political and moral) aims by women—continues. In considering the reasons for this distaste, I've found that concerns with moralizing in fiction were already present in the writings of the Victorians themselves and were even embedded in the religious thought that appeared in many women novelists' work. A number of these novelists consciously addressed the risk of moralizing and ultimately envisioned alternative methods of managing the intersection of ethics and aesthetics in the novel. In the pages to come, I trace these methods, hoping to cultivate readers' appreciation for the innovations possible within the nineteenth-century didactic novel.

### 1.

Current critical interpretations of George Eliot represent one significant exception to our dismissive attitude toward didactic fiction. A major figure in the canon, Eliot too engaged in didactic writing, as when in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) she promoted sympathy for Jewish struggle.

After the novel was published, she wrote to Harriet Beecher Stowe (famous for her own overtly political novel), “I...felt no temptation to accommodate my writing to any standard except that of trying to do my best in what seemed to me most needful to be done” (qtd. in Haight 487). Eliot’s biographer Gordon S. Haight comments that her “frank avowal of didacticism contradicts George Eliot’s basic tenet that fiction should represent real life” (487). Haight condemns the novel as “fiction with a purpose,” equating this quality with a “failure to achieve creative realization” (487). Haight’s comments recall the many charges of moralizing that plagued Eliot’s work at the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Such charges have not hurt Eliot’s long-term canonical status, however. We can in part thank her superlative literary talents for this fate, but it is also the result of more recent critics’ work to save her from assessments like Haight’s. Such critics highlight Eliot’s complex moral skepticism, her consciousness of the problem of moralizing, and her constant self-critique on this topic.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Missing Sewell, Ellen Wood, and Sarah Grand—the other three novelists this dissertation examines—similarly engage in nuanced self-questioning as they find their way around moralization. This has gone unrecognized in their work. Such authors are primarily (and dismissively) known for the overtly religious or political valences of their novels. They are presumed to take unreflective stances on the expression of belief in fiction. Indeed, the “didactic” label tends to signal that such works could not display the self-reflectiveness and broad mindedness that we expect of good novels. But these authors’ representations of their moral, religious, and political commitments encouraged complex, transformative expressions of selfhood and subtle understandings of topics such as self-consciousness, interpersonal relations, feminine moral agency, narrative knowledge, novel form, and moral earnestness. Identifying

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Neil Hertz, *George Eliot’s Pulse* (2003), and Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (1996).

these aspects of their work, however, requires that we revise our critical assumptions about didactic fiction.

In addition to offending aesthetic tastes, the more religious works examined here can clash with progressive political views. Not long ago, a liberal or radical feminist perspective would have assumed religious and didactic Victorian women writers to be subject to the constraints of patriarchal tradition. The recent surge of studies on women's religious practices in the nineteenth century, however, has painted a more complex picture. These studies often focus on women's reshaping of religious tradition according to their own needs, apart from patriarchy.<sup>2</sup> But such studies, welcome though they have been, themselves risk being reductive; too often they reduce Victorian novels to one-dimensional political messages about women's liberation. And, in doing so, they may inadvertently contribute to the continued distaste for women writers' moral and religious commitments. As my readings of individual authors will show, the desire to prove that an author's thoughts and actions answer to current feminist expectations of subversion, resistance, and liberation leads us to neglect the significant explorations of moral thought and experiments with literary form embedded within some of the more conservative aspects of these women's work.

A distant example might illustrate the importance of understanding women's religious commitments in subtler terms than suppression or resistance. In her work on the women's

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Reader's Repentance* (1992), Christine Krueger argues that women writers' "evangelical hermeneutics briefly vitiated male domination of public speech, allowing women to use the authoritative language of scriptures among men as they traditionally had with each other" (5). The essays in Julie Melnyk's collection *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers* (1998) "demonstrat[e] the ways that women revised, subverted, or rejected elements of masculine theology, in creating theologies of their own" (xii). F. Elizabeth Gray's *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (2010) "seeks to complicate the simplistic equation between traditional Christianity and the oppression of women" by "investigat[ing] how women could find supportive and liberatory models within their Christian faith" (4). Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries's collection *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (2010) addresses the question, "In what ways did religious faith motivate women and give them the inner strength to question, criticize and defy worldly (male) authority?" (6).

mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood explains that the “liberatory” terms characterizing “the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory” cause scholars to overlook “dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance,” “modes of action indebted to other reasons and histories” (14).

Mahmood provides the example of the women she studies:

The task of realizing piety placed these women in conflict with several structures of authority. Some of these structures were grounded in instituted standards of Islamic orthodoxy, and others in norms of liberal discourse; some were grounded in the authority of parents and male kin, and others in state institutions. Yet the *rationale* behind these conflicts was not predicated upon, and therefore cannot be understood only by reference to, arguments for gender equality or resistance to male authority. Nor can these women’s practices be read as a reinscription of traditional roles, since the women’s mosque movement has significantly reconfigured the gendered practice of Islamic pedagogy and the social institution of mosques. (15)

This last statement in particular might seem a preface for a feminist reading, an explanation of how these women’s actions nevertheless do subvert gender norms, but Mahmood argues that, while highly valuable in certain circumstances, such analyses’ reliance on “the binary terms of resistance and subordination” leads them to ignore “projects, discourses, and desires that are not captured by these terms” (15). Although primarily anthropological and political, Mahmood’s perspective is valuable for our study of religion and literary aesthetics. Her desire to “think of ethics as always local and particular, pertaining to a specific set of procedures, techniques, and discourses through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come to be formed” is welcome in literary studies as well (28).<sup>3</sup> Mahmood’s work highlights the possibility of locating these characteristics in works we might otherwise dismiss as oppressive and morally simplistic.

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<sup>3</sup> For philosophical and literary studies that advocate literature’s ability to represent moral complexity through such particularity, see Cora Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts” (1988); Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (1997); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990); and Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (2000).

In a strangely self-contradictory way, our desire for women authors who use their writing to resist oppressive social structures *and* our desire for literature that does more than just espouse one overarching moral, religious, or political message have kept us from recognizing the ethical and aesthetic value of certain Victorian women writers' work. Putting these desires to one side (even if only temporarily) will allow us to identify the ethical and aesthetic insights these writers offer. As will become clear, this sort of study does not ignore the challenges Victorian women faced because of their gender; nor does it preclude the possibility that their innovations could be empowering. But recognizing that gender liberation was not always women's primary goal, we can also recognize the nuances that gave their work aesthetic value, ethical weight, and rhetorical power.

## 2.

With the exception of Sarah Grand, the novelists studied here did not intend to fight gender injustice. They did not desire gender equality in the public literary sphere, either; a more basic need to find a place for themselves as writers led them to study the possibilities for moral expression in the novel. Women's writing at the time was suspect and in need of justification. In middle-class Victorian England, women were properly domiciled within the home, apart from the male public sphere; as various critics and historians, have shown, any appearance in print made them vulnerable to charges of unladylike and vulgar self-display.<sup>4</sup> Needing to justify their writing, then, women writers were forced to make its moral purposes explicit. But that very justification brought its own dangers: the overt demonstration of moral ambition invited charges

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<sup>4</sup> On the association of the nineteenth-century woman writer with the prostitute, see Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984); Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot and *Daniel Deronda*: The Prostitute and the Jewish Question" (1986); Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets* (1995); and Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell's Work* (1999). On Ellen Wood's specific consciousness of this threat, see Andrew Maunder's "Ellen Wood was a Writer: Rediscovering Collins's Rival" (2012).

of moral vanity. Claiming to have some knowledge worth imparting to the multitude was just another form of self-display.

Either way, an excessive self-consciousness was assumed to impede women writers' creative aims. Mainstream ethical and aesthetic discourse advocated unselfconsciousness of audience as essential to sincere inspiration. Women served as a kind of limit case for this unselfconsciousness: they were praised for an angelic "blankness of mind" (Yeazell 51) but then automatically associated with a vain consciousness of such moral and aesthetic superiority. This dynamic appeared in novel criticism as well. As we will see, women novelists were distinctly aware of the problems associated with either an embrace of unselfconscious inspiration *or* a more active, didactic approach to the novel, and they responded to this interpretive bind in a variety of ways. Before I preview these responses, however, let me more carefully spell out the complex nest of constraints from which they emerged.

The charges of self-promotion and vanity that Victorian women writers faced could be extreme. Exposing oneself "to public view... was fraught with danger for bourgeois women writers, since it threatened to equate the professional woman with the demimonde or with the prostitute, who also marketed her person in public" (Hughes and Lund 126). Failure to make the moral aims of one's work explicit brought intense scrutiny from Victorian readers, as Charlotte Brontë found with *Jane Eyre* (1847). In the *Quarterly Review*, Elizabeth Rigby criticized Brontë's characterization of Jane as "the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit" that lacks "Christian grace." Jane "has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature—the sin of pride" (Rigby 173). Denouncing the novel's "moral, religious, and literary deficiencies," Rigby called Jane "a decidedly vulgar-minded woman" and Brontë's work "an anti-Christian composition" (174). The *Spectator* described the interactions between Jane

and Rochester as “hardly ‘proper’” (1074). Guessing that a woman wrote the novel, the *Christian Remembrancer* criticized its “masculine hardness, coarseness, and freedom of expression” evinced by the prominent use of “slang,” “humour...produced by a use of Scripture,” and “love-scenes [that] glow with a fire as fierce as that of Sappho, and somewhat more fuliginous” (396).

A number of women authors, some in direct response to Brontë’s experience, felt compelled to be explicit about their moral purpose. Margaret Oliphant’s derogatory comparison of the moral ambiguity of *North and South* (1854-55) to that of *Jane Eyre* motivated Elizabeth Gaskell to depict Brontë in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) as “never violat[ing] propriety or domestic affections” (Hughes and Lund 128).<sup>5</sup> Gaskell’s biography inspired Elizabeth Missing Sewell to praise Brontë’s literary talents and moral character for similar reasons: in defending Brontë’s character, Sewell defended her own. She wrote in her journal in June 1857 (later published as part of her autobiography), “Years ago, when *Jane Eyre* came out I read it. People said it was coarse, and I felt it was, but I felt also that the person who wrote it was not necessarily coarse-minded, that the moral of the story was intended to be good; but failed in detail” (*Autobiography* 159-60). Describing Gaskell’s biography as “intensely, painfully interesting,” Sewell then comments on Brontë’s moral character: “A purer, more high-minded person it seems there could scarcely be, wonderfully gifted, and with a man’s energy and power of will and passionate impulse; and yet gentle and womanly in all her ways, so as to be infinitely touching” (*Autobiography* 160). Sewell’s comments about Brontë echo her description of her character Aunt Sarah in *The Experience of Life* (1852) (examined below in Chapter 1), who serves as an idealized stand-in for the author. Like Brontë, Aunt Sarah adds “the charm of a

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<sup>5</sup> See Oliphant’s “Modern Novelists—Great and Small,” which appeared in the May 1855 issue of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*.

woman's feeling" to "a character which [i]s masculine in its strength of will and vigour of action" (17).

As these responses to Brontë's writing suggest, women authors felt an urgent need to defend themselves (and each other) against accusations of immoral motives. Greater directness concerning the moral purpose of their fiction, however, brought accusations of superficiality, insincerity, and moral vanity. Critiquing Roman Catholicism in her novel *Margaret Percival* (1847), Sewall was accused of spouting forth "a didactic code" more like "the platform oratory of a baptismally-regenerated assembly" than something indicative of a "high-minded and spiritual authoress" ("Puseyite Novels" 516, 514). Ellen Wood faced repeated charges of using moral and religious language in *East Lynne* (1860-61) to compensate for a more lascivious fascination with the adultery of her heroine.<sup>6</sup> Even Eliot suffered from this tendency to conflate the expression of belief with self-serving moral vanity. In his critique of *Middlemarch*, reviewer Richard Holt Hutton described Eliot's "attempt...to represent the book as an elaborate contribution to the 'Woman's' question" as "a mistake, meting out unjust measure to the entirely untrammelled imaginative power which the book displays" (1555). Hutton implied that Eliot was more concerned with "represent[ing]" her work and herself in a certain way to her audience than accessing the "untrammelled imaginative power" essential to good literature. Later critics would see Eliot as a major source of a more widespread blight. In his 1895 review of Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, D. F. Hannigan complained that "a novelist's first duty is...not to preach or moralize or indulge in hysterical tirade." It was Eliot's "tendency for pedantry" that originated this "fashion" in women's fiction (Hannigan 304).

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<sup>6</sup> The *Literary Gazette* reviewer, for example, argued, "The theology of the work is...open to grave exception...sacred and pregnant language ought not to be used in this unmeaning way" (371). Fellow novelist Charlotte Riddell called Wood "simply a brute" for "throw[ing] in bits of religion to slip her fodder down the public throat" (qtd. in Elwin 241).



Such self-conscious display ran counter to some of the period's central aesthetic and ethical tenets. Broadly speaking, nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse believed that sincere inspiration was grounded in authorial unselfconsciousness. This idea appeared everywhere from William Wordsworth's famous claim that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (242) and John Stuart Mill's assertion that "eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*" (1143) to John Ruskin's notion that "the most perfect human artists" work "without boasting," possessing "an inner and involuntary power which approximates literally to the instinct of an animal" (163). (We hear echoes of this view still today; take, for example, Pico Iyer's recent comment in the *New York Times Book Review*: "At its core, writing is about cutting beneath every social expectation to get to the voice you have when no one is listening" [27].) Such unselfconsciousness requires an obliviousness of audience that is not ignorance or blindness. This aesthetic carries strong ethical undertones; it stems from a post-Kantian movement away from dogmatic moral law toward a more individually, aesthetically shaped ethics based in what John Kucich has described as "a realm of experience that must never be completely known" (26). A version of this ideal took hold in the intuitionist strain of Victorian moral philosophy that believed that "individual freedom involves turning oneself into an intuitively guided moral sophisticate rather than observing moral rules" (Kucich 26). Intuitionist W. E. H. Lecky most directly articulated the unselfconsciousness at the heart of this view, claiming, "the pleasure of virtue is one which can only be obtained on the express condition of its not being the object sought" (36).

We might assume that women writers would have tried to embody such unselfconsciousness to overcome charges of physical and moral vanity. But this interpretive bind actually stemmed from the vexed association of women with the unselfconscious ideal in

aesthetic and moral discourse. Women's unselfconscious modesty was a subject of praise and admiration in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for many of the same reasons men like Wordsworth and Ruskin sought it in their art: it suggested innocence, beauty, goodness, and access to transcendent inspiration. And yet, as Ruth Bernard Yeazell has shown, admiring women for these traits threatened to undermine feminine modesty, ironically associating women's unselfconsciousness with the self-knowledge of moral vanity and even sexual boldness. Eighteenth-century conduct books labeled the resulting feminine types the "prude" and the "coquette." Proudly displaying the moral superiority of her modest demeanor, "The prude affects an appearance of more modesty than she really has." This state of mind aligns her more closely with the "coquette" than she would like to admit (*The Polite Lady* 217). The anonymous author of *The Polite Lady*, however, ultimately prefers the prude. Although the two types are "equally ridiculous," they "are not equally dangerous," since the prude "preserves her reputation" and "at least the appearance of modesty" (219). Within this context, we can see why many women would choose to make the moral aims of their fiction explicit: the moral vanity of didacticism was the lesser of two evils.

Similarly, Amanda Anderson has argued that the moral ideal of feminine unselfconsciousness—or feminine "purity," as she terms it—was often associated with the extreme, uncontrolled self-consciousness of fallenness in Victorian moral discourse. As Anderson explains, "the relation between the categories of purity and fallenness took highly complex forms, with purity sometimes figuring and shoring up coherent, normative forms of identity, sometimes figuring alternate or ideal conceptions of identity, and sometimes displaying—as selflessness or sympathy—the attribute of attenuated agency that typically defines fallenness" (*Tainted Souls* 15). In works as divergent as John Stuart Mill's writings on

moral philosophy and W. R. Greg's review of four accounts of prostitution, the selfless feminine ideal "can actually promote rather than prevent fallenness.... Women are likely to fall, and when they do, it won't be out of any power of choice, since choice is dependent on self-control" (Anderson, *Tainted Souls* 37). As we've seen, women writers were already careful to avoid associations with the figure that epitomized fallenness for the Victorians, the prostitute. But it was difficult to escape such associations, no matter what tactic they took.

Indeed, when women writers embraced their roles as unselfconscious moral exemplars, they faced criticisms of false modesty and uncontrolled self-consciousness. Famous for promoting women's selflessness as a cure-all for Victorian society, the author Sarah Stickney Ellis was criticized for extolling women's moral character a little too strongly. In an 1844 review, A. W. Kinglake criticizes Ellis's comparison of women's angelic nature to a model of male virtue characterized by "a sublimity so nearly approaching what we believe to be the nature and capacity of angels, that as no feeling can exceed, so no language can describe" (qtd. in Kinglake 112). While Ellis promotes a model of virtue similar in its unintelligibility to the ethico-aesthetic ideal of the unselfconscious artist, Kinglake views her description as morally vain. He comments on the irony that in Ellis's writing "[s]ometimes, for whole pages together, we find so much virtue inculcated, that we almost give ourselves credit for having perused some sermons and long, by way of relief, to find our authoress stooping to practical views" (112).

Similar criticisms proliferated in novel reviews. In "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856), Eliot herself denounced women writers' tendencies toward the "*oracular species*" of novel "intended to expound the writer's religious, philosophical, or moral theories," as the "most pitiable of all silly novels by lady novelists" (Evans 449). She complains, "To judge from their writings, there are certain ladies who think that an amazing ignorance...is the best possible

qualification for forming an opinion on the knottiest moral and speculative questions” (Evans 454). What little knowledge these works express “remains acquisition, instead of passing into culture”; the woman writer, “instead of being subdued into modesty and simplicity by a larger acquaintance with thought and fact...has a feverish consciousness of her attainments; she keeps a sort of mental pocket-mirror, and is continually looking in it at her own ‘intellectuality’” (Evans 454-55). Similarly, in “False Morality of Lady Novelists” (1859), W. R. Greg claims that women novelists’ “experience of life is seldom wide and never deep,” their philosophy “inevitably superficial,” and their judgment immature. According to Greg, they promote a “false morality” (149) characterized, in part, by “egotistical notions of self-sacrifice” (150).

The tendency to view women’s attempts at unselfconscious inspiration as morally vain survived well past the nineteenth century. In the mid-twentieth century, F. R. Leavis’s reading of Eliot made clear that access to the inspired unselfconsciousness seen with Wordsworth, Mill, and Ruskin was still limited by gender. Eliot’s vexed relationship with this mindset had prompted modernist complaint, forming a reputation for moralizing that began, according to Leavis, with Henry James’s 1876 review of *Daniel Deronda*. The review claimed that Eliot displayed “a want of tact” in the “importunity of the [novel’s] moral reflections” (288). Leavis defends Eliot from this charge that she had lost, in James’s words, the “spontaneous” ability “to observe life and to feel it” (qtd. in Leavis 46). To the contrary, Leavis argues, her moral interests come from a place of unselfconscious inspiration. But then—revealing the vertiginous difficulties for women in this region of moral psychology—he suggests that Eliot often becomes too self-conscious about her unselfconsciousness. “The direct (and sometimes embarrassing) presence of the author’s own personal need” for audience approval impedes Eliot’s literary achievements (Leavis 43). *Daniel Deronda* in particular contains “something to provoke the judgment that so intelligent a writer

couldn't, at that level, have been so self-convinced of inspiration without some inner connivance or complicity: there is an element of the tacitly *voulu*" (Leavis 96). In other words, Eliot's moral endeavors are inspired, but her love for this fact undermines that spontaneity and inspiration. This "immaturity," as Leavis called it, was implicitly feminine: such consciousness of audience resulted from the close "relation between the Victorian intellectual and the very feminine woman in [Eliot]" (96).

To place all of this in a larger context, Victorian women writers confronted an early version of the "showing vs. telling" dynamic that would arise with Henry James late in the nineteenth century and become central to novel theory in the twentieth. Perhaps this early version is best explained by the absorption/theatricality dynamic that Michael Fried has demonstrated as central to understandings of eighteenth-century French painting and realism more broadly. But these women's responses to the problem differed significantly from their predecessors'. Fried argues that the idea of a beholder or audience threatened the authenticity of an image. Artists thus worked to erase the sense of a painting's consciousness of its beholder. This dynamic formed "the ontological basis of modern art" that took shape into the nineteenth century (Fried 61, 70). Nineteenth-century realism also cultivated a sense of objectivity through authorial unselfconsciousness. Victorian novels often expressed the idea that "[o]ne can only achieve truth through objectivity; one can only be objective by virtue of the moral strength of self-restraint" (Levine 149). The women I study were attuned to this problem, but their experience with the connection of angelic unselfconsciousness to moral vanity led them to reject what up until then had been an acceptable "fiction," as Fried terms it, in art and literature. They refused to feign authorial unselfconsciousness and were thus compelled to find a more difficult solution. They worked to find an acceptable form of self-consciousness that neither denied its

audience nor exhibited too strong a reliance on that audience's affirmation—a difficult balance, to be sure. But such difficulty produced a variety of creative strategies, as will become apparent in the chapters to come.

### 3.

The novelists studied here expose the restrictive view of authorial self-consciousness and address the challenges it posed to moral expression in the novel. Such efforts require considerable self-reflection, of the sort usually denied to didactic writers. Even so alert a critic as Yeazell, for example, is liable to underestimate the capacity of didactic writers to register the ironies of their position. She points out that in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808)—a work that is part novel, part conduct book—Hannah More uses the character of Coelebs to promote a “strict division between the sexes” on the topic of modesty. That “the writer who spoke through him was herself a woman” who undermined her own modesty by speaking about this issue “was not an irony that More and others like her were prepared to register” (Yeazell 8). As the chapters to come will reveal, however, several authors who followed in More's footsteps were quite prepared to address the problems this irony created for women writers. More remarkably, they found in novel form a means of reshaping simplistic understandings of feminine self-consciousness and reconceptualizing the ethical and aesthetic trope of the unselfconscious artist.

This topic is something that Sewell, for instance, addresses at length. Raised under the influence of the Oxford Movement, her adherence to the Tractarian doctrine of reserve, which advocated unselfconsciousness in one's devotion to God, required her to think through the challenges women face in their attempts to embody such a state. Sally, the narrator of *The Experience of Life*, worries that her mother's “reserve of manner” creates “an appearance of want of sympathy” and “unconscious superiority” toward others (7). It is true that male Tractarians

were also accused of moral vanity in their attempts at a worldly withdrawal.<sup>7</sup> Isaac Williams, the author of the tracts that defined the doctrine of reserve, resigned himself to the possibility that practicing reserve “will doubtless lower [a person] in his own eyes, and in the eyes of the world.... [One] must be content to be not understood, to be misrepresented” (V: 8). But in her more limited situation as a woman, Sewell was unwilling to suffer such misrepresentation; she was prompted to resolve the problem Williams identified by revising the terms of sacred unselfconsciousness. Displaying a defining trait shared among the texts I study, Sewell’s reimagining of reserve does not just demonstrate the worthiness of her novel’s religious expression; it above all allows for a self-improvement that would have been impossible had she ignored the problem as Williams does. Like the other novelists examined here, the challenges Sewell faced as a woman writer compelled her to address the contradictions of authorial unselfconsciousness and expand the possibilities for moral expression in the novel.

The balanced self-consciousness these novelists imagine for their heroines and themselves in response to these restraints in some ways calls to mind Anne-Lise François’s conceptualization of the “open secret” in Romantic literary traditions, but it serves more actively moral ends. The open secret, which includes the impulse “to do good only in secrecy, in ways unknown even to oneself,” rejects any imperative toward publicity or concealment, characterized as it is by “self-quieting, recessive speech acts and hardly emitted announcements or reports on self” (François 26, xvi). These authors cultivate a similar self-consciousness characterized by a delicate balance between expression and reticence, but it operates in conversation with more

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<sup>7</sup> As James Eli Adams writes, “Responses to Tractarian reserve energized a social paradox, whereby reticence turned into a canny mode of self-assertion, which laid claim to special privileges. And contemporary hostility to the Tractarians seized on this political dimension. Arnold, for instance, quickly grasped in Tractarianism a reactionary social formation, ‘that sort of religious aristocratical chivalry so catching to young men’—a ‘chivalry’ that Arnold regarded as ‘Antichrist’ because it subordinated duty and character to the purely social attribute of ‘Honor’” (Adams 96-97).

explicit self-reflection. Indeed, the open secret holds power to legitimate women's very public, very conscious articulation of their moral and political beliefs and render them more disposed to consequential moral action.

The narrative voice that results from this particular self-consciousness hovers between communicative and noncommunicative intent. Analyzing sentences of narration at the linguistic level to demonstrate their noncommunicative nature, Ann Banfield argues against understandings of narrative based on a "communication model" that attributes sentences of narration to a self-conscious narrator. "Narration," according to Banfield, does not "entail addressing an audience. Rather, it is of its nature to be totally ignorant of an audience, and this fact is reflected in its very language." Banfield demonstrates that sentences of narration could never be "speakable"; their linguistic construction makes it impossible that they would ever be uttered by someone speaking in everyday conversation with another person. Narrative thus captures the unselfconsciousness so praised in nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse. "[T]he" language of narrative," Banfield argues, "realizes most fully in its form and not only in its intent the essence of the literary which has for so long been taken to be the achievement of poetry"—something encapsulated, as we've seen, in "Mill's famous contrast between poetry and eloquence" (179). Nevertheless, just as the authors I study rejected the idea of such pure unselfconsciousness, their sense of narrative voice similarly nuances Banfield's notion of noncommunication. Narrative voice for these authors rides a fine line between communication and noncommunication. Their novels are not spoken directly to an audience, but they do not avoid communicating either. The sentences of narrative may not be speakable in everyday communication, but by their very nature as language, they still convey meaning. Narrative theorists may argue about whether narrators are a disembodied, unselfconscious means of



presenting an objective reality or self-conscious communicators of their own knowledge, but the authors I study embrace narrative for its ability to exude both senses simultaneously.

To understand narrative in such a way is to imagine an author who neither self-consciously depends on an audience nor attempts unselfconscious ignorance of that audience. All four authors studied here cultivate this voice of balanced self-consciousness both in their heroines' moral expressions and in their narrative to varying degrees. In *East Lynne*, Wood hints at the novel's ability to capture such a voice, imagining a similarly balanced self-consciousness in her heroine Isabel and briefly gesturing toward its implications for herself as a didactic novelist. Sewell, Eliot and Grand engage in a more sustained examination of their own cultivation of this state of mind at the level of the narrative. Eliot and Grand go to the greatest formal lengths to cultivate such an understanding of the implied author. Eliot even has her heroine Gwendolen attempt to speak sentences that employ the same linguistic construction as sentences of narration. Writing in the later part of the century, Eliot and Grand seem to respond with greater urgency to a debate that was becoming more central to discussions of the novel in general but that still held the most severe implications for women writers.

#### 4.

Remarkably, in their search for an alternative mode of moral expression and their desire to move beyond the dualistic view of authorial self-consciousness, all of the novelists in this study, religious and secular alike, look to traditional religious forms. They thus remind us of the importance religion played in the development of the novel as a genre, even as late as the nineteenth century. This turn to older forms to solve such a modern problem may not seem quite so surprising, however, given the problem's largely religious origins. The sincerity of religious expression lay at the heart of the evangelicalism that itself was central to Victorian religious

culture. As Lori Branch has demonstrated, the secular aesthetics represented by Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" originated in the spontaneous sentiment of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century free prayer.<sup>8</sup> From the Reformation through the nineteenth century, Britain understood "spontaneity—an unpremeditated emotional freshness coveted in phenomena as disparate as poetic effusion, enthusiastic worship, romantic attraction, and consumer desire"—to be essential to "meaningful human experience" (Branch 2).

The religious underpinnings of this aesthetic were still apparent in the Victorian period. For example, novelist Ellen Wood's son Charles, in his memoir of his mother, praises her religious emphasis on "the state of the heart" over "petty rules and ceremonials" (263) and the "utter self-unconsciousness" of her literary endeavors (235). Charles seems anxious to prove that his mother "never moralized" in her work: "If a philosopher, she was so unconsciously, for she never obtruded her personality upon the reader" (C. W. Wood 222). Sewell's Tractarianism was similarly concerned with the sincerity of religious and artistic expression, although the movement rejected evangelical outpourings of belief as too solicitous of an audience. As Isaac Williams put it, "A want of reserve, an artificial religious tone in conversation or prayer is...proof that the person is wishing to be, or wishing to persuade himself that he is, rather than that he really is religious" (V: 8). Significantly, through the self-denial and withdrawal advocated by the doctrine of reserve, Tractarianism promoted its own version of unselfconsciousness as key to sincere expression.

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<sup>8</sup> Branch argues for the similarities between Wordsworth's earlier work in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and his later *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822), which, although more popular with Victorians, has been "dismissed by not a few modern critics as a recanting of his youthful idealism and as an ossification into conservatism" (13). In the latter, "ritual and liturgy...recuperate a carefully measured—circumscribed, yet radically free—sense of personal agency. By ritual Wordsworth points simultaneously to the public, communal liturgy of the church but also to intentional rituals of spontaneity: to what he calls in *The Prelude* the 'high service within,' the consciously cultivated habits of mind by which one looks at the world" (Branch 13).

These religious concerns lead authors like Wood and Sewell to search for more adequate ways to express their beliefs. Their novels revise traditional religious forms in response to the restrictions on ethical and aesthetic sincerity imposed on women writers. Even the more secular novelists in this study, Eliot and Grand, look to religious forms to answer to the problem of moralizing. Reconsidering her earlier critique of the vanity driving women writers' "oracular species" of novels, Eliot envisions the narrative of *Daniel Deronda* as a form of prayer—an individual yet "self-oblivious" articulation that "seeks for nothing special" (310). Prayer becomes crucial to these novelists' search for an adequate method of expressing moral belief in the novel. With its unique sense of audience, prayer offers a more concrete way to convey their complex understandings of authorial self-consciousness. Although God can always become just another version of the other or the self, in these women's careful envisioning of prayer, He serves as a mediating presence that guards against the intense self-consciousness that can form from expressions of moral belief directed solely toward the other or solely toward the self. The more secular Eliot and Grand may not put their faith in God, but by using the term prayer, they just as meaningfully signal a reaching outward that isn't necessarily directed toward the human other but that improves one's moral relations all the same.

In recognizing religion's shaping of the novel's formal strategies throughout the nineteenth century, this study contributes to recent reconsiderations of the "secular" in and beyond Victorian studies. As the sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger has demonstrated, "the process of secularization" does not signify the demise of religiousness but is rather "a process of reconstructing belief" (3): "Modernity has deconstructed the traditional systems of believing, but has not forsaken belief. Believing finds expression in an individualized, subjective and diffuse form, and resolves into a multiplicity of combinations and orderings of

meaning which are elaborated independently of control by institutions of believing” (Hervieu-Léger 74-75). Reminding us of the relationship between modern and religious perspectives, the authors in this study call upon traditional religious forms to foster a modern mode of belief in the sincerity of their creative expression.

In this, they help reveal the inaccuracy of understanding nineteenth-century intellectual history as defined by a progressive movement away from religious belief and toward secular doubt.<sup>9</sup> Until very recently, historians have tended to view Victorian intellectual life and religious belief as two separate entities. The dominant understanding has been, as Timothy Larsen puts it, that “[t]here might have been hordes of earnest Christians running around trying to keep people from enjoying themselves, but thinking Victorians, at any rate, generally abandoned orthodox faith” (2). Revising Alfred Tennyson’s phrase “honest doubt” from *In Memoriam* (1850), Larsen demonstrates that a number of members of the Victorian Secularist movement ultimately turned to an “honest faith”: figures “who had fully imbibed, and indeed widely disseminated, all the latest ideas from German biblical criticism to Darwinism ... ultimately came to the conviction that faith was more intellectually compelling than doubt” (vii). Tracing this “crisis of doubt,” Larsen argues, “Future studies of nineteenth-century intellectual history should consider building into their framework a realization that faith was compelling to many Victorian thinkers” (253). The women writers of this study, forced to think in new ways about the cultivation of faith between author and reader, demonstrate the way older religious forms address complexities inherent to modern ethics and aesthetics.

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<sup>9</sup> For studies that argue for a reconsideration of the “secularization” thesis in Victorian studies, see Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation* (2005); Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (2006); Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (2006); William R. McKelvy, *The English Cult of Literature* (2007); and Kirstie Blair, *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (2012).

These writers also anticipate the recognition by poststructuralist writers of the role of the religious in our relationship to knowledge. As philosopher John D. Caputo, explains, “the structure of the religious breaks into our lives just at that point where we experience the limits of our powers, potencies, and possibilities and find ourselves up against the impossible, which is beyond our powers. Those who refuse the religious want to retain their own self-possession, their own power, their own will” (*On Religion* 29). Caputo distinguishes “religion,” which he defines as “the being-religious of human beings...on a par with being political or being artistic,” from “the religious,” which he views as “a basic structure of human experience” (*On Religion* 9). A large part of this experience is recognizing and celebrating the fact that truth, language, and the self are at their core uncertain, and that “we can only and indeed must *believe*, and indeed...we must believe *something*” (*On Religion* 23). Caputo reads deconstruction and Jacques Derrida’s work in particular as an instance of the religious, as encouraging an ongoing renewal of ethical responsibility in the face of meaning’s instability rather than a nihilistic rejection of meaning altogether. Derrida himself recognized deconstruction’s affinities with negative theology and sought to understand this relationship in his later works.<sup>10</sup> A similar “theological turn” can be seen in the work of French phenomenologists such as Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien, who have argued for the methodological utility of phenomenology in understanding religious experience, and in turn, the utility of religious experience in illuminating phenomenology as a philosophical method. Drawing on these developments in philosophy and religious studies, the following chapters demonstrate that patterns of nineteenth-century religious thought led women writers to consider similar problems of truth, sincerity, and selfhood in linguistic expression and

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<sup>10</sup> See, in particular, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” (1989) and “Sauf le Nom” (1995). (“Sauf le Nom” was kept as the title of the English translation in order to preserve the complexity of meaning captured by the French.)

recognize the ability of Judeo-Christian religious tradition to manage and remain alert to these concerns.

5.

The following chapters trace the religious origins of the modern ethical and aesthetic challenges women novelists faced, and they study the way such restraints led to innovative understandings of authorial self-consciousness, moral expression, and the novel form. Recognizing the impossibility of expressing complete unselfconsciousness, the novelists I study engage with the complexities of authorial self-consciousness instead. They explore these complexities through the uneven distribution of self-consciousness and narrative knowledge among characters, narrators, and the implied author. As such experimentation constitutes a key part of these novelists' didactic aims, it becomes clear that didacticism can involve more than the artistically simplistic and morally presumptuous goal of saving the reader. In the case of the works studied here, it is the engagement of the reader and the author with complex models of moral self-consciousness that allows them, willingly (only after an extensive acknowledgment of the risks involved), to save each other.

The first chapter, "Revising Tractarian Reserve: Novel Form and Elizabeth Missing Sewell's Expression of Belief," uncovers the religious underpinnings of the concern with moral vanity in the novel and demonstrates women's particular association with such vanity. Sewell, like other Tractarians, embraced the doctrine of reserve, which endorsed withdrawal and unselfconsciousness. But in *The Experience of Life*, she also tries to resolve one of the doctrine's inherent ironies, that attempts at unselfconscious immersion in God invite accusations of the very moral vanity that reserve was designed to avoid. Although her Tractarian forefathers saw poetry's measured control of emotion as the ideal form for cultivating reserve, Sewell suggests

that the novel was better equipped to address her concern with the problem of self-consciousness in the expression of belief. Using unorthodox modes of plotting and narration and comparing the resulting novelistic voice to a kind of prayer, Sewall embodies a reserved self-consciousness that preserves her religious commitments as well as the reader's faith in her artistic and moral motives.

Chapter Two, "A Cross to Bear: Novelistic Didacticism and Evangelical Experimentation in *East Lynne*," turns to evangelicalism and continues to examine the religious origins of Victorians' concern with moral vanity in the novel. For Evangelicals, unselfconscious spontaneity in prayer ensured that one's religious expression was sincere rather than merely dutiful. But it could also appear solicitous of others who could affirm that sincerity. Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1860-61) reveals how evangelical patterns of thought both produced and offered ways around the interpretive bind women authors faced. With a distinctly evangelical emphasis on the atonement, Wood repeatedly describes the adulterous heroine Isabel's return to her family disguised as her children's governess as "bearing her cross." These moments have been dismissed by Victorian and more recent critics alike as moralizing, but Isabel's strange return allows her a liminal place between a moralizing self-assertion and a feminine unselfconsciousness often read as morally vain in its own right. Doing what she can to help her children while ensuring that she does not act solely for recognition, Isabel's model of moral agency emblemizes Wood's own moral expression in the novel.

I'd like to note briefly here that Wood's use of religious tradition to inform her understanding of a similarly balanced self-consciousness differs slightly from the other authors. She sees prayer as a mode of expression directed more exclusively to God rather than simultaneously to God, others, and oneself. Wood's evangelical background leads her instead to

look to the atonement and the notion of bearing one's cross as providing the distinct method of self-reflective moral expression that the other authors seek through prayer. Nevertheless, this method still has ties to prayer. Wood depicts Isabel's bearing of her cross as a more public version of sincere prayer, a mode that takes her prayers more actively into the world. And, especially important for our interests in the validity of moral expression in the novel, Wood still draws on biblical tradition's complex understanding of the difficulties of linguistic sincerity to validate Isabel's moral expressions and actions. Isabel's repeated use of the simple phrase "yes, yes" at the end of the novel, when she has succeeded in bearing her cross, alludes to similar usages in the New Testament. As we will see, the *yes, yes* has a long tradition of serving as a quiet, unaffected way of affirming one's sincerity while still recognizing the precariousness of that sincerity. The voice that speaks the *yes, yes* is thereby able to capture a similar kind of quiet, balanced self-consciousness as the other authors do with prayer.

Chapter Three, "'Something quite new in the form of womanhood': Reimagining 'Lady Novelists' and the Realist Novel in *Daniel Deronda*," uncovers Eliot's treatment of the ethical and aesthetic limitations placed on women's writing. Facing accusations of moralizing and yearning to speak out against Jewish injustice in her final novel *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot rethinks her earlier critique of women writers' moral vanity in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." She exposes society's expectations of angelic unselfconsciousness that ironically incited this kind of self-consciousness in women and provoked charges of vanity. Suggesting that expectations of authorial selflessness amplify the problem for the realist novelist, Eliot looks to religious form for a more plausible place for the implied author in realism. Her narrative derives rhetorical power by approximating prayer as individual expression that is also "self-oblivious," "seek[ing] for nothing special." Tracing this authorial voice, I revise the critical view of Eliot as hesitant to



use realism as a vehicle for moral belief. Such a viewpoint may debunk modernist depictions of Eliot as moralizing, but it suggests a moral skepticism that “fall[s] into the apologetic philosophy which explains the world into containing nothing better than one’s own conduct” (*Daniel Deronda* 177), a mindset that the novel posits as a type of moral vanity itself.

Chapter Four, “Feminist ‘Cant’ and Narrative Selflessness in Sarah Grand’s New Woman Trilogy,” examines the ethical and rhetorical significance narrative knowledge holds for feminist expressions of belief in Grand’s novels *Ideala* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), and *The Beth Book* (1897). Like many New Woman authors, Grand has been accused of moralizing. But in this critics are only repeating the sort of criticism that her novels themselves make. Grand’s narrators trace a less self-conscious state of mind behind her heroines’ expressions of belief, ensuring that their ethical self-awareness does not become self-regard. Narrative form can make this kind of self-consciousness apparent, but, as Grand realizes, it can also transform it into just another instance of moralizing self-promotion on the part of the author. Grand responds to this problem through formal innovation, shifting among various narrative perspectives and generic modes. These shifts are not isolated experiments, but an integrated project designed to allow for authorial self-expression free of self-absorption. Like the other novelists I study, Grand compares her authorial voice to prayer, in which the purpose of expression lies somewhere between self-reflection and rhetorical efficacy. Training her readers to interpret a version of such complex self-consciousness in others, Grand envisions a community of feminists bound together by their willingness to pick up where the novel must leave off, serving as each other’s narrators in the real, “narratorless” world.

Collectively, these chapters demonstrate the various ways women writers re-envisioned the possibilities for expression of belief in the novel and the various social contexts—

Tractarianism, Evangelicalism, international politics, and the women's movement—they sought to invigorate with their innovations. In our own critical context, these works offer to rethink staid categories such as moral earnestness, evangelism, and cant as they revise our understanding of novelistic didacticism. Seeking to manage the difficult balance of ethics and aesthetics, the women writers studied here developed strategies that can still teach us about the formal possibilities of the novel. In this way, the validity of their didactic goals extends much further than they could have possibly foreseen. Lest we feel coerced by these aims, we might keep in mind that we are, in a way, learning alongside these authors themselves. Driven by more than a simplistic desire to convert readers to their viewpoints, these authors' didactic expressions are often just the beginning, rather than the end, of attempts to cultivate their own faith in their novels' ethical and aesthetic aims.

## CHAPTER 1

### Revising Tractarian Reserve:

#### Novel Form and Elizabeth Missing Sewell's Expression of Belief

The work of Tractarian novelist Elizabeth Missing Sewell has remained at the margins of critical conversations over the years, most likely because of her conservative views on women and her use of the novel for moral and religious purposes.<sup>1</sup> Sewell did make a brief appearance in early feminist recovery work: Elaine Showalter gave a nod to her novels in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, Patrick Scott, and Shirley Foster made extended arguments for continued study of Sewell.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars, however, were put off by her apparent antifeminism.<sup>3</sup> If we judge Sewell from a contemporary feminist perspective, her performance is ambiguous. She rejects certain gender restrictions, questioning fellow Anglican novelist Cecilia Frances Tilley's refusal to describe a clergyman's inner life or "intrude 'into that sacred edifice which formerly a woman's foot was forbidden to profane,'" declaring, "I should never consider it an intrusion to go wherever men go" (*Autobiography* 132). But then Sewell has one of her most beloved characters, the otherwise independently minded Aunt Sarah, tell her niece, "Don't try to be a man when you are only a woman" (*The Experience of Life* 435).

Recognizing the limits inherent to Sewell's historical and social milieu—and that the expression of feminist views was not a primary aim of literature at the time—Maria LaMonaca has recently

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<sup>1</sup> J. S. Bratton speculates that what "has kept [Sewell's novels] from much serious critical consideration is" that their "reflection and advice" are both explicitly Christian (though in no way offensively so, as the author's horror of cant ensures) and explicitly concerned with women" (168).

<sup>2</sup> See Sandbach-Dahlström's "Perceiving the Single Woman: Elizabeth Sewell's *The Experience of Life*" (1984), Scott's "Genre and Perspective in the Study of Victorian Women Writers: The Case of Elizabeth Missing Sewell" (1984), and Foster's *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual* (1985).

<sup>3</sup> See Sarah C. Frerichs's "Elizabeth Missing Sewell: Concealment and Revelation in a Victorian Everywoman" (1979) and Valerie Sanders's "'Absolutely an Act of Duty': Choice of Profession in Autobiographies by Victorian Women" (1986) and *The Private Lives of Victorian Women: Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century England* (1989).

reframed the conversation about Sewell's views on women. Highlighting Sewell's censure of the supposed sanctity of the Victorian domestic sphere, LaMonaca argues that Sewell "would never have considered herself an advocate of women's rights" (110), but "in an era in which women defined their agency in moral, spiritual, and ethical terms, not even the most entrenched social institutions or expectations could quench the desire of" women like Sewell "to live, act, and even write as their consciences demanded" (125). Reading Sewell within terms less strictly defined by twentieth- and twenty-first-century expectations, LaMonaca encourages renewed appreciation for Sewell's representations of the complexities of women's moral and religious agency.

Nonetheless, Sewell remains rarely studied,<sup>4</sup> and this neglect seems not solely the result of her ambiguous gender politics. It also derives from the other aspect of her work that has drawn criticism: its didacticism. Critics recognize Sewell's novelistic talents—her character development in particular—but they also criticize her unsophisticated moral and religious focus.<sup>5</sup> One of the earliest twentieth-century critics of Sewell, Joseph Ellis Baker, wrote that her work was "[a]t once adult in taste and language, juvenile in morality and experience" (116). Years later, Showalter would argue that Sewell "was an extremely conscientious and deliberate novelist with a sophisticated understanding of plot, character, and narrative technique; but she used her books to dramatize her own views on theological and educational questions" (146). Similarly, of Sewell's novel *Ursula* (1858), John Sutherland writes, "the subtle chronicle of the growth of female consciousness is vitiated by a penchant...above all for pietistic conclusions" (567).

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<sup>4</sup> Since the turn of this century, only four studies have devoted any attention to Sewell's work: June Sturrock's "Catholic Anti-heroines: Craik, Sewell and Yonge" (2004), Philip Davis's *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters* (2008), LaMonaca's *Masked Atheism* (2008), and Meaghan Cronin's "Bless Me, Father; Religion and the Good Girl in Elizabeth Sewell's *Margaret Percival* and Mary August Ward's *Helbeck of Bannisdale*" (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have contributed more criticism than praise. Andrew L. Drummond calls Sewell "an assiduous propagandist in fiction," her novels "didactic, wooden and frightfully 'churchy'" (72). Vineta Colby names Sewell as one of a handful of Victorian women novelists who "stop their narratives cold for their moralizing and have their simple homely characters speak the formal rhetoric of the pulpit" (192).

As long as we view Sewell's didacticism as impeding her literary success, we miss a large part of what makes her worth studying. Sewell's talents for self-examination, characterization, and narrative technique propel her engagement with the challenges of moral and religious expression (that is, the aspect of her work that has been dismissed as narrow-minded didacticism). Recognizing this interconnection, we can better appreciate the complexity of her moral commitments and her experiments with novel form. Compelling evidence of such complexity can be found in Sewell's autobiographical novel *The Experience of Life* (1852), popular in its day and more recently dubbed "an unheralded little masterpiece" by Robert Lee Wolff (143). The novel follows the life of its narrator, Sarah Mortimer, or Sally, from childhood to old age. Sally grows up in a large family that struggles financially when her father dies and her uncle keeps the family inheritance. Sally never marries and devotes herself instead to teaching. No "striking event[s]" define Sally's life (1); rather the narrative traces her daily psychological, moral, and religious struggles and her development, aided by her great aunt, also named Sarah Mortimer. The novel is based on Sewell's "own experience, or personal knowledge and observation"; as she claimed, the younger "Sarah's troubled mind was a record of my own personal feelings, but I had no aunt Sarah to comfort me" (*Autobiography* 114-15).

Throughout the novel, Sally's "troubled mind" works to understand the challenges women face when expressing moral and religious belief. Sewell looks to the Tractarian doctrine of reserve to address these challenges, but she also exposes the doctrine's pitfalls. Responding to what the Oxford Movement viewed as the moral vanity of Evangelicalism, reserve advocated for withdrawal and unselfconsciousness in any display of belief. Sewell understands herself to hold to the practice of reserve. But she demonstrates that Victorian women and women authors are particularly vulnerable to accusations of moralizing, whether they attempt to embody reserve's

pure unselfconsciousness or more overtly express their beliefs. In doing so, Sewell pinpoints one of reserve's inherent ironies: attempts at unselfconscious immersion in God invite accusations of the very moral vanity that reserve is designed to avoid.

Sewell reconceptualizes reserve to resolve these issues. She turns from her Tractarian forefathers' emphasis on poetry, suggesting that the novel's formal strategies are better equipped to address her concerns. Sewell explicitly eschews the marriage plot for its association of authors with a wifely unselfconsciousness that verges on vanity, and she experiments with particular narrative techniques to trace a readable sincerity in her characters, her narrator, and herself. Using Sally's careful narration of the nuances of her younger self's self-consciousness as a model, the novel offers readers the opportunity in later scenes to "narrate" its narrator and author in such a way that both figures embody a similarly complex self-consciousness. That is, without asking for this interpretation but inviting it all the same, narrator and author neither affectedly pretend to complete unselfconsciousness nor fall prey to self-conscious moralizing. Sewell compares her resulting novelistic voice to a kind of prayer, the audience for which lies somewhere between self, others, and God. Such ambiguity of audience allows Sewell to preserve her moral and religious commitments while revealing the complexity of thought informing this didacticism.

I should briefly note here that I will speak throughout the chapter of Sewell's struggles to express moral *and* religious belief in fiction. Although her focus on the doctrine of reserve was primarily religious, she also saw it as a guide for moral expression more generally. Thus, at times I will refer to Sewell's aims and expressions of belief as "moral" rather than "religious." The term "moral" should not preclude the possibility that these aspects are also religious in nature; rather it serves to indicate Sewell's concern with the way expressions of religious belief affect

one's relation to other people. As we will see, Sewell's moral interactions with her readers and her religious identity are never mutually exclusive.

1.

Tractarian interest in reserve arose with the movement in the early 1830s. It appeared in John Keble's *Lectures on Poetry* (delivered between 1832 and 1841, when Keble was Oxford Professor of Poetry) and in John Henry Newman's first book, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1833). But it was Isaac Williams's Tracts 80 and 87, both titled "On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge" (1838, 1840), that made reserve a formal doctrine. In their writing about reserve, the Tractarians developed ideas that dated back to the Bible and to the writings of early Church fathers. Williams speaks repeatedly of "our Father 'who seeth in secret,'" a reference to the book of Matthew: "when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: / That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly" (Matt. 6:3-4).<sup>6</sup> These verses capture two key components of reserve: first, that God "is in secret"; his truth is hidden from view and revealed only gradually to the worthy. Secondly, God's faithful should themselves be "in secret," expressing their devotion paradoxically through withdrawal and self-denial.

The idea that worshippers should look only to God, striving for an unconsciousness of other people was central to Williams's tracts—and a point of contention for Sewell. Williams describes "good men" as taking after Christ in their charitable actions, "marked by an inclination, as far as it is possible, of retiring, and shrinking from public view" (II: 7). This emphasis becomes especially clear in Tract 87, which criticizes the Evangelical tendency towards sanctimonious display. Williams's focus on unselfconsciousness in the expression of religious

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<sup>6</sup> See also Matthew 6:5-6: "when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to...be seen of men.... But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and...pray to thy Father which is in secret."

belief reveals, as G. B. Tennyson notes, that reserve is not just a mode for approaching God but also “a principle of the moral life in general” (47). As we will see, Sewell also views reserve as a guide for moral behavior, but for this very reason she identifies the limits of such extreme unselfconsciousness and explores the importance of other people in one’s cultivation of reserve.

In 1840, through her brother, William Sewell, an Oxford-educated clergyman and author, Sewell met “the most marked men of the Oxford leaders,” including Keble, Newman, and Williams (*Autobiography* 61). The *Tracts for the Times* “excited [Sewell’s] curiosity, and led to inquiry,” while her brother also “succeeded in indoctrinating” her with Tractarian views. Sewell singles out the importance of the doctrine of reserve, both in her life and her literary endeavors: “Especially it was a relief to me to find great earnestness and devotion in a system which allowed of reserve in expression, and did not make the style of conversation, which I had met with in the only definitely religious tales I had read, a necessary part of Christianity” (*Autobiography* 57).<sup>7</sup>

Within *The Experience of Life*, Sewell depicts the problems associated with a lack of reserve in her characterization of Sally’s maternal aunt Mrs. Colston, who “preache[s] a sermon upon every word” (166). Aunt Colston’s preaching stems more from her pleasure in displaying her moral fortitude than from any desire to help others. It doesn’t matter when she preaches to her niece on the importance of waking early that, as Sally’s brother protests, Sally already “gets up earlier than any one” (150). When she lectures her niece on “[v]anity, sycophancy, discontent with [her] station in life, exclusiveness,” Sally describes the experience as being “written and talked at” (235). Sewell was alert to the danger of such sanctimony in her own writing. In her

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<sup>7</sup> Sewell refers specifically to evangelical children’s author Mary Martha Sherwood. She admired fellow Tractarian novelists Charlotte Yonge and Harriet Mozley for answering to readers “who turned from the texts, and prayers, and hymns, which Mrs. Sherwood had introduced into her stories, and yet needed something higher in tone than Miss Edgeworth’s morality” (*Autobiography* 62).



autobiography, she recalled that her earliest attempts at authorship were “little sermons for my younger sisters, which doubtless would have been much better applied to myself” (16).

Nevertheless, if Aunt Colston reveals a lack of reserve, her sister, Fanny Mortimer (Sally’s mother), reveals the danger of too much reserve—something Sewell saw as equally problematic. Fanny is “very gentle, yielding, and unselfish,” but she does have her “faults, or at least, failings”: “bred up in an atmosphere of pride and ultra refinement,” she is “not a popular person.” Sally blames her mother’s excessive reserve: “Reserve of manner gave her often an appearance of want of sympathy; and...there was an unconscious superiority shown in her intercourse with the Carsdale society, which threw many persons at a distance” (7). Even if based in gentleness and unselfishness, too much reserve, Sewell suggests, can be interpreted as and actually become a sign of affectation. Again, Sewell recognized this problem in herself. As a girl, she preferred to read alone while her sisters played nearby: “I enjoyed hearing their voices, but I did not wish to join them. But the self-consciousness which naturally goes with such a disposition was very easily seen; and I was told that I was affected, and this again acted upon my irritable temper, and I grew more really reserved” (*Autobiography* 16). Sewell reveals that this “self-consciousness”—a simultaneous withdrawal from others *and* concern with their opinions—continued into adulthood. “I am alluding...to what I was as I grew beyond actual childhood” (*Autobiography* 16-17).

Sally’s mother’s “reserve of manner” extends to her expression of belief as well, more directly evoking questions about whether or not reserve might impede Sewell’s didactic goals. Fanny’s reserve obstructs her children’s moral and religious upbringing. Sally does not know “what first made [her] think seriously about religion”; Fanny “[i]s so reserved that” she has “difficulty...bring[ing] herself to speak upon the subject even to her children” (30). Later Sally

reveals that her mother's "reserve...counteracted much of the good which I might have derived from being with her" (220). Reserve not only risks its own moral vanity but can also exclude others from one's ideas; more drastically, it can prevent moral expression entirely.

In highlighting reserve's limits, Sewell questions the Tractarians' promotion of "natural" feminine self-effacement as an archetype of reserve.<sup>8</sup> As Emma Mason claims, reserve "was understood as a gentle route to God opposed to the manly directness of Evangelical writing" (198): "Already aligned with passivity and sensibility, women were recognized as almost essentially reserved" (205). Williams compares Anglican religious practices to reserved femininity when he criticizes both Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism for affected public expressions of belief. "The eye of man is on both," he explains, "unhallowing the holy things of GOD, and engendering pride" (V: 8). Anglican practices are "directed to the eye of GOD, and not to man; as the Bride who ever looks to the Bridegroom, and to none else" (Williams VI: 1).<sup>9</sup> Women were said to possess a natural unselfconsciousness that men must cultivate.

While the doctrine of reserve allowed Christina Rossetti as well as other High Church women writers such as Felicia Skene, Charlotte Yonge, and Cecil Frances Alexander a particular authority to represent religious issues in their work,<sup>10</sup> Sewell saw this authority as much more

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<sup>8</sup> The leaders of the Oxford Movement were even criticized as "unmanly" for promoting the virtues of reserve over "straightforward, frank, unhesitating action and utterance" (Adams 99). Charles Kingsley, for example, wrote in 1851 that within Roman Catholicism and High Church Anglicanism, "there is an element of foppery—even in dress and manner; a fastidious, maundering, die-away effeminacy, which is mistaken for purity and refinement" (Kingsley 201). For more on this topic, see David Hilliard, "UnEnglish and UnManly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality" (1982) and James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints* (1995).

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Gill Gregory notes that in Williams's poem *The Cathedral* (1838), the speaker admires the cathedral's statue of the Virgin "as an exemplary model of a womanly reserve": the Virgin "ha[s] a song but 'no voice' ('Her voice is with her God, her silence speaks')." But while Williams celebrates the Virgin's reserve, he inadvertently reveals the dangers of associating women with such a pure, natural unselfconsciousness, for the Virgin is in "a state of petrification" in which her "song is no longer her own" (Gregory 364).

<sup>10</sup> Mason argues that their works "employ a certain reserve derived from Tractarianism, subtly alerting the reader to their religious knowledge and so implicit support for women's education" (205). For more on Rossetti's employment of reserve, see Andrew D. Armond's "Limited Knowledge and the Tractarian Doctrine of Reserve in Christina Rossetti's *The Face of the Deep*" (2010) and Mary Arseneau's *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics* (2004).

vexed. Examining Rossetti's poetry, Mason explains that by "requir[ing] the believer to adopt a restrained, submissive and therefore 'feminine' relation to religious investigation," Tractarian reserve "allowed a writer like Rossetti...the role of theological commentator...while exempting her from accusations of vainly flaunting religious learning unsuitable for a middle-class woman" (198). Mason identifies the link between whiteness in Rossetti's poetry and the way reserve allows one to "becom[e] pure, erasing and effacing the self into a state of extreme reticence" (210). But such a wholehearted embrace of reserve and of women's access to it overlooks the ease with which such self-effacement can appear as "vain flaunting" itself.

The interpretive dilemma reserve posed for women becomes clear when we look at Keble's comparison of the "modest reserve" of poetry to "the modest blush of a country maiden" in his *Lectures on Poetry* (V: 84-85). Keble's understanding of self-consciousness within reserve is more tempered than Williams's, since the poet and the maiden "neither conceal their secrets from worthy readers nor cast their pearls before the unworthy" (V: 84-85). As Keble's address of his audience as "gentlemen" makes clear (V: 84), he was primarily concerned with men's relationship to reserve. Nevertheless, if his reference to "the modest blush of a country maiden" suggests something about women's capacity for reserve, his choice of image troubles what might seem a more balanced view of feminine self-consciousness. The history of the blushing maiden in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic and moral discourse reveals the problems Sewall associates with reserved unselfconsciousness. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell demonstrates, the blush signified both innocent unselfconsciousness and sexual knowledge and vanity. On the one hand, the blush was an emblem of the modest "blankness of mind" admired in marriageable women (Yeazell 51): "unlike the other bodily signs of modesty—the downcast eyes, the head turned aside—[a woman's] blushes were not subject to her will and could not, therefore, be affected"

(Yeazell 73). On the other hand, the bodily nature of the blush could also conjure a conflicting sense of sexual knowledge. If young women did not “remain modestly unaware” of their desire for those courting them until the marriage proposal (and even afterward, as Yeazell shows), their blushes risked suggesting a false, manipulative modesty (51). Thus the Reverend John Bennett’s comments in *Letters to a Young Lady* (1789): “a girl should *hear*, she should *see*, nothing, that can call forth a blush, or even stain the *purity* of her mind” (Yeazell 65).

Tracing these conflicting interpretations of women’s supposed unselfconsciousness, we can see how Fanny Mortimer’s reserve could appear affected and why Sewell might hesitate to adopt the traditional forms of Tractarian reserve. Although Keble suggests that women’s mental states are more complex, the image of the blushing maiden ready for marriage tends to get reduced to signifying either helpless innocence or affected vanity. Williams, a student of Keble’s, ignored the nuances of feminine self-consciousness and associated women with pure unselfconsciousness. Sewell counters such reductive treatments of women’s mental states. She refuses to set up Sally’s mother’s extreme reserve as a model of virtuous expression, and, as we will see, she explores the difficulty of getting around the aesthetic and moral expectations that women authors be unselfconscious.

Sewell herself was affected by such conflicted understandings of feminine unselfconsciousness. Just two years before the publication of *The Experience of Life*, she was accused of a pretension like that of Sally’s mother. An *Athenaeum* review of Sewell’s novel *The Earl’s Daughter* (1850) reported that her avoidance of overt didactic expression leaves the reader “tantalized rather than taught by too finely spun speculations on those most secret thoughts in every human breast which are not to be either weighed or condemned by man for man” (655). Tractarian reserve necessitated a similar tension between alluding to God’s truth and struggling

to keep it hidden. The Tractarians drew on a “genealogy of hiding God,” as Mason explains: “Even when the truth is adapted to human comprehension, the disclosure is necessarily guarded, scripture cloaking its meanings behind enigmas, parables and proverbs and the Fathers too often coding their commentaries to bar readers from knowledge for which they were unprepared” (198). This tendency often drew criticisms of pretension. Sewell’s similar refusal to do more than allude to such “secret thoughts”—her reliance on the reader’s “clairvoyance”—creates, according to the reviewer, a sense of “beauty and high pretension” that “is more fatiguing than the harshness and inequality of less perfect creations” (*Athenaeum* 655). This problem reverberates throughout Sewell’s characterization of Fanny, whose “image, in its grace and beauty,” Sally hesitates to describe: it “comes before me as a lovely picture, which I would fain keep in all its original perfection” (7). An attempt to maintain that “lovely picture” of “perfection” through reserve, however, can be easily misinterpreted: when, for example, Fanny tells Miss Cleveland that she would like her daughters to know Lady Emily Rivers, not for her social rank, but because she is “good and unpretending” (49), Miss Cleveland assumes that Fanny’s wish stems from the fact that she *is* “pretending.” She reads Fanny’s reserve as the rest of the town always has, as a sign of her “exclusiveness” and her “pride” in her aristocratic background. Again explicitly using the word “reserve,” Sally describes her own difficulty understanding her mother here as resulting from the fact that “[s]he was so reserved” (50).

Sewell’s reserve similarly led to a misinterpretation of the motives behind her moral expression. Her avoidance of moralizing backfired, at least for the *Athenaeum* reviewer:

The flimsiest or wildest romance is, to our thinking, reading less unwholesome than this quintessential distilment of the mysteries of the heart, made by any mortal teacher, with the view of recommending his own peculiar system of cure as the one which should...quicken every palsied function of conscience...and, in short, utterly cast out mistrust, evil, and imperfection, by the ministry of a few absolute and unquestionable angels on earth. (655)

Just as Sally's mother's resemblance to an "angel of goodness and beauty" can make her seem affected (9), Sewell's attempt at reserve was read as more a performance of her own angelic perfection than a desire to express her religious and moral beliefs effectively. Not only does Sewell's reserve exude pretention for this reviewer; it also begins to resemble a version of didacticism urging an entire belief system on the reader.

After seeing how easily reserve can appear moralizing, we may not be surprised to find that around the same time that Sewell was accused of being too reserved, she was also accused, like Aunt Colston, of "preach[ing] a sermon upon every word." In October 1850, the *Prospective Review* compared Sewell's critique of Roman Catholicism in *Margaret Percival* (1847) to "the platform oratory of a baptismally-regenerated assembly." The review examined Sewell's first five novels,<sup>11</sup> praising them for the most part, but warning, "Religion...should be exhibited as a spring of conduct, a moving force influencing external circumstance, not as a theological system, or a didactic code" (514). Suggesting, as the previous reviewer did, that Sewell too self-consciously imposes her beliefs on the reader, the *Prospective Review* critic expresses the common preference for the organic portrayal of religious and moral issues. Such organicism would be difficult, according to this critic, for an author whose religious arguments resemble those demonstrated by "an English Clergyman...to his niece" (517). Sewell has thus stepped into the realm of preaching inappropriate for a woman author. Again, while Sewell faced accusations of being too self-conscious in her attempts at unselfconsciousness, her attempts at the straightforward expression of her religious views also marked her as affected.

Confronted by this dilemma, Sewell imagines a new model of feminine self-consciousness and moral didacticism and embodies it in the figure of Aunt Sarah, Sally's

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<sup>11</sup> Sewell's first five novels were *Amy Herbert* (1844), *Gertrude* (1845), *Laneton Parsonage* (1846-48), *Margaret Percival* (1847), and *The Earl's Daughter* (1850).

namesake, godmother, and mentor. Aunt Sarah's moral expression contrasts with both Sally's mother's reserve and Aunt Colston's moralizing. When Sally attends classes for confirmation, her mother says "in her quiet way that she should be glad for [her] to go; but aunt Sarah warmly approve[s]," requesting to hear all about it and offering advice (32). Sally's mother may be "very gentle, yielding, and unselfish" (7), but, Sally says, Aunt Sarah is "self-denying, to an extent which I have only lately begun to understand and appreciate" (24). Aunt Sarah's self-denial involves some self-assertion, requiring a prior acknowledgment of self and its inevitable limits. When Sally's father's death leaves the family penniless, Sally assumes it her duty to support her mother with the little money she earns teaching, but Aunt Sarah encourages her to ask her more financially stable siblings for help. She points out the vanity and inefficacy that arise from trying to be too selfless: "they will all...call you an angel; and by-and-by, you will find that you can't support her" (312-13). Aunt Sarah discourages Sally from "half kill[ing] [he]rself with anxiety" to the point that she "turn[s] round upon" her siblings, telling them, "See...how I have sacrificed myself for you." This advice may run "contrary to the dreams of self-sacrifice in which [Sally] ha[s] for years indulged" (315), but as Aunt Sarah says,

good people,--and I call you good, not because you are so, but because you wish to be so,--good people sin in their virtues, as well as bad people in their vices. Generosity is a valuable quality, but justice is so too; and, may be, one is better than the other, because the world thinks less of it. And if you ever wish to be generous, you must begin by being just,--just to yourself as well as to your neighbours. (315-16)

The world's attention to self-sacrificing generosity automatically associates it with vanity. In this case, doing for oneself is less vain than doing for others and, in fact, allows one to do more for others in the long run.

Aunt Sarah's moral expression may be self-assertive, but it is quite distinct from Aunt Colston's sanctimonious preaching. At first glance, though, the two women appear similarly

rigid in their didacticism. For example, Sally's sister Caroline, "who always laugh[s] at what she call[s] over-strictness, used to declare that aunt Sarah had trained even her canary bird to keep quiet on its perch when the Bible was brought out" (31). But Sally contrasts the two women when Aunt Colston tells Sally that "there is nothing so needful as humility for a young person aiming at proficiency as an instructress of childhood" (152-53). Detecting her pretention, Sally reflects, "Oh dear! How much rather I would have heard Aunt Sarah say, 'Sally don't be a goose!'" (153). Sally admires the unaffected tenor of Aunt Sarah's moral counsel. When she advises that Sally always be ready to help her mother, Sally exclaims, "I can help her, I must—I will," to which Aunt Sarah adds, "With red eyes whenever she wants a pair of stockings mended." Sally describes Aunt Sarah's tone as "malicious...yet so kind...that in spite of being heartily provoked with myself, I could not help laughing"—which is exactly the response Aunt Sarah aims to evoke. "Ah! laugh if you will," she says; "laughing helps us through the world." Aunt Sarah's affectionate teasing tempers her moral seriousness, in a way that adds a "depth of earnestness," as Sally puts it, to her tone (84). Aunt Sarah neither shies away from the overt expression of belief nor succumbs to the vanity that can undergird self-assertion.

The intricacies of Aunt Sarah's tone preview Sewell's use of narrative techniques to cultivate a similar tone as author. This connection between Aunt Sarah's didacticism and Sewell's becomes more obvious when Aunt Sarah uses her writing to convince Sally's siblings to support their mother financially after their father's death. Referring to her own failed attempt to do the same, Sally notes, "It was the most difficult letter I ever wrote in my life. I began sentences, and stopped, and tried to twist them differently, and tore up the paper, and never seemed to advance a step further." Sally's letter is ineffective, leading Aunt Sarah to write one herself. "Aunt Sarah's influence in the family...was the result of many years of respect," Sally



says, “and the same things which, said by me, would probably have been disregarded, or have caused annoyance, were received from her with attention; and, at length, produced a practical effect” (330). The effectiveness of Aunt Sarah’s letter depends on readers’ understanding, developed over time, of her tempered self-consciousness. Sewell, as we will see, looks to the novel’s form to shape this understanding for herself.

## 2.

Sewell worked to influence readers’ ongoing interpretations of her moral character as author. Since marital status largely influenced interpretations of Victorian women’s moral character (we need only look to Williams’s reserved bride and the blushing maiden trope as evidence), Sewell’s and her first-person narrator’s explicit lack of desire ever to marry would have hindered such interpretations. Women’s moral characters were defined by their potential to embody the ideals of reserve as selfless, unselfconscious wives. Although highly vexed, these ideals still favored, on the surface, women who married or presumably would marry in the future. As Sally’s sister Caroline declares when attempting to convince Sally to marry, Aunt Sarah “would have held a much higher position in general estimation if she had been married.” Her other sister Joanna adds, “think for a moment how every one laughs at old maids, and how silly they make themselves, and how cross they are” (197). Joanna suggests that a young woman’s unselfconsciousness is eventually sullied if she fails to marry. Society’s definition of middle-class women based on marital status may prevent readers from perceiving the nuances of self-consciousness we see in Aunt Sarah or cause readers to view Sewell’s attempt to demonstrate them as a further sign of vanity.

Sewell suggests that her narrator’s and her own unmarried status may threaten her trustworthiness as a novelist. The Victorian novel certainly relied on its association with

marriage to legitimate its moral aims, affiliating itself, as Rachel Ablow has shown, with idealizations of the angelic wife who purified her husband's moral character. The novel served as a kind of wife to readers, "retrain[ing] their ways of seeing, understanding, and feeling" so that they aligned with the selflessness and spirituality promoted by domestic ideology (Ablow 5). According to Ablow, Dickens epitomizes this idea in *David Copperfield* (1850), his "aesthetic seek[ing] to make [readers] love both him and his characters...and so to 'influence' them in much the same way that a wife might influence her husband" (19). Sewell, however, rejects the Victorian marriage plot in her novel and undermines any automatic association of her moral character with a reserved wifely selflessness. Although a wifely status may seem the easier route to proving her sincerity, it risks association with vanity.<sup>12</sup>

And, indeed, marriage is often linked with vanity and greed in the novel. About her sister Caroline's wedding to the successful businessman Mr. Blair, Sally comments, "I tried to think the event might be for her good, and, if goodness and happiness were to be found in wealth, I knew she had a fair prospect before her. But there was something in my heart which told me that marriage cannot be passive in its effect upon the mind,--that if it does not raise, it must lower, the character." Reversing the idea that it is the angelic wife who should raise the character of the husband, Sally says that Caroline's husband "was not a person to give her higher views of life and its duties. He would, so I feared, sink her first to his own level, and then they must both mutually drag each other lower and lower" (211). Sally reveals the social posturing underlying the notion of the wife as moral exemplar: Caroline "had accomplished the objects for which her husband had been urged to marry her; she had raised him in society, she had made his parties

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<sup>12</sup> This was more a risk for Sewell than for Dickens, since, as a woman, she was more vulnerable to the negative implications of wifely selflessness. Ablow demonstrates that other women authors such as Emily Brontë and George Eliot challenged the novel-as-wife model for the way it glorified not just women's selflessness but also their self-annihilation.

agreeable, set herself against awkward acquaintances, toned down his manners, and gained him respect by a prudent liberality of charitable subscriptions” (229). From this perspective, the wife’s purification of her husband’s character has less to do with genuine moral behavior than with social appearance.

Lest Sewell imply that the blame rests with women themselves, she is careful to demonstrate that society—and more specifically the marriage plot—push women into marrying for vain motives. Sally laments that women she knows and women characters she has read are forced to think of themselves and the trajectory of their lives only in terms of marital status:

Aunt Colston discoursed upon the desirableness of having daughters well settled; even uncle Ralph, when he ventured upon a joke, used to tell Joanna not to say ‘no’ too often. And in novels—if the few I had read were to be taken as any true description of life—there was nothing else worth a moment’s thought. If women were not married, they were either soured by the disappointment, and lived to be the torment of their friends; or after concentrating into a few years the sorrows of a long life, they invariably died of consumption. (221-22)

Caroline’s vain preoccupation with her wifely status inevitably results from an inundation of the idea that marriage is the only worthy aspect of a woman’s life.<sup>13</sup>

Caroline represents more than just a woman desiring to be married; she also takes on the traits of a woman writer using the idea of marriage for her own gain. Caroline displays certain traits fitting for a novelist: “Hers was a mind which seemed to watch and understand all that was going on, and know exactly what every one meant, or was wishing for. She could calculate to a nicety the effect of her own words, and could always prophesy the line of conduct which her companions would pursue.” Having received a dinner invitation and insisted that the entire

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<sup>13</sup> Sewell would express a similar idea in her *Principles of Education* (1865). She does admit, “A happy marriage is the most happy of all happy events.” However, problems arise when marriage is presented as “the purpose and object of life, the final cause of woman’s creation. It seems almost absurd to suggest the possibility of such an idea, and yet so-called rational human beings talk and act as if it was; and fiction, being only the counterpart of the world’s facts, recognizes it as such, and thus presents it to the imagination. Girls are so wrongly taught from childhood that they are led to stake their all upon this one cast” (Sewell, *Principles* 308).

family attend for the sake of Joanna's and her own marriage prospects, Caroline "seat[s] herself at the writing-table,--look[s] at [her] mother and father, as if her arguments were unanswerable,--wr[ites] the acceptance, and that point [i]s settled" (127). Caroline's writing here is directed toward her "one object in life—a wealthy marriage" (127-28). Shaping her own authorial identity in contrast to Caroline, Sewell suggests that plotting for ends other than marriage may be a desirable moral choice and a way around the limitations marriage places on women's and women authors' moral characters. Sally tells us at the very beginning that she will not "write a tale that contain[s] one prominent object, in which all interest is concentrated" because "this is not a real representation of human existence" (1). Instead, Sally recounts Aunt Sarah's "experience of life," and her own, neither of which are centered on the "one prominent object" of marriage.<sup>14</sup> Sewell thus distances herself from the imagined purity of the marriage plot, the angelically reserved wife, and novelists who might use these naturalized structures as moral justification for their writing.

*The Experience of Life* works to establish the sort of trust between author and reader ideally found between people in marriage—but without relying on the structure of the marriage plot. Speaking of Caroline's desire to be married, Sally tells us, "I knew her object; she did not conceal it." Sally knows Joanna's "object" too: "admiration now; marriage by-and-by." She admits, "Sometimes I asked myself, what was my own" (128). Sewell may not have an "object" in the sense of a teleological end toward which the rest of the narrative points, but she does aim to cultivate trust throughout the novel between readers and herself—an aim that, although common among novelists, was more difficult for Sewell caught in the dilemma we have been studying. Working within a didactic tradition, Sewell viewed her fiction as a way to help her

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<sup>14</sup> LaMonaca argues that, in its rejection of marriage as an option for Sally, "Sewell's novel challenges not only the rhetoric of Victorian domesticity, but also existing standards of novelistic realism and the narrow confines of the marriage plot" (110).

readers understand her moral and religious beliefs and strengthen those beliefs for herself. In other words, she sought to bring her readers and herself closer to God, perhaps cultivating a relationship like that between Sally's younger sister Hester and her husband, the rector Mr. Malcolm, in which "the blessings of all spiritual benediction and grace' . . . fall upon them both; for they were amongst those whose one prayer is, 'so to live together in this world, that in the world to come they may have life everlasting'" (438). The novel thus does not rule out marriage's potential to encourage the kind of trust that brings both parties closer to God, but it suggests that Sally may be more successful in cultivating others' trust through a feminine reserve that operates apart from the institution of marriage and, for Sewell, apart from the limitations of the marriage plot.

Sally and Aunt Sarah's faith in each other's capacity for goodness suggests the possibility for this trust outside of marriage. Lady Emily Rivers engenders similar trust in both Sally and Aunt Sarah (and, as we've seen, Sally's mother Fanny). Describing Lady Emily's "soft tones of welcome," Sally asks, "Who could shrink from . . . those words of kindness, of which it was impossible to doubt the sincerity" (103-04). But Sally wonders what it is that makes Lady Emily's "purity" and "unworldliness" legible (73): "I can see them now, when I recall her image, written upon her countenance in indelible, unmistakeable characters; but I could not read them then, I could only feel them" (74). Comparing her understanding of Lady Emily's trustworthiness to a kind of reading, Sally suggests that readers of this novel might learn to detect a similar trustworthiness in their narrator and author. But Sally doubts the widespread possibility of reading and trusting sincerity in another person, asking, "Can it be merely the dream of years, magnifying, to increase its regrets for the past, which bids me look around the world now, and sigh that there are none like her?" (104). Putting this thought in the form of a

question, Sewell seems to ask readers whether or not they will help her make Sally's thought untrue, whether they will help make it possible that Sally and Sewell too are like Lady Emily in their readable sincerity.

3.

With this attention to sincerity's readability and to the problem of the marriage plot, Sewell intimates her belief that the novel holds within its form the potential to free her from associations with moral vanity. Thus far, her most straightforward formal attempt to get around this interpretive bind has involved unorthodox plotting, but she retains misgivings about whether rejecting the marriage plot will be enough, since perceptions of women's moral character are so wrapped up in marital status. Because these perceptions are based in a sense of women's self-consciousness or lack thereof, Sewell looks to the novel to represent the complexities of women's self-consciousness. Alongside her experimentation with plotting, Sewell uses the interplay among levels of self-consciousness in characters, narrator, and author to approximate a sincerity similar to Lady Emily's. Rather than just declaring the existence of that sincerity—as she does with Lady Emily and to some extent with Aunt Sarah—Sewell makes hers legible for her readers to detect for themselves.

With Aunt Sarah, Sewell has demonstrated the nuances of self-consciousness possible in a woman's moral character and expression, but she will undermine her own aims if she attempts to convince readers of these nuances in herself. Reflecting this authorial and narratorial conundrum at the level of character, Sewell places Sally in a situation where her attempts at reserve are read as affectedly self-conscious, and she is left with no way to defend herself from accusations of vanity. Planning a party, Caroline and Joanna decide they need new dresses, but Sally sees no need for one herself. Nevertheless, Horatia—Aunt Colston's niece through

marriage and adopted daughter figure who views Sally as a “rival” for their aunt’s affections and inheritance (152)—forces her into a position in which she appears vainly self-serving whether she refuses or accepts a new dress. The scene suggests that reserve doesn’t automatically generate vanity; such risks arise in the way reserve is read. Although Sally’s affected self-denial begins as a simple lack of interest, Sally allows the accusations to bother her, quickly becoming as vainly self-conscious as her accusers believe her to be. Sewell thus pinpoints the unique threat posed by the charge of self-consciousness: you become exactly what you are charged with. Sally vacillates between rejecting a dress to appear unselfish in Aunt Colston’s eyes and expressing her desire for a dress to keep from seeming like she only rejects the dress to appear good. The younger Sally may find herself caught in an impossible situation, but, as we will see, the older Sally—the narrator of this scene—as well as Sewell, have devised a way out.

Horatia has dresses sent out for Sally and leads Aunt Colston to believe that Sally herself has ordered them, making it appear that the vanity that drives Sally’s supposed desire for a new dress also drives her desire to appear self-denying. Horatia reads Sally’s lack of interest as affected self-denial, accusing her of wanting to “wear sackcloth to be thought a saint.” Sally’s attempt to deflect the accusation only makes it worse. When she asks Horatia to stop, Horatia responds that “saints should never be out of temper” and declares, “She won’t be Saint Sarah if she talks so” (183). Horatia suggests that Sally refuses the “temptation” of the dresses solely “for the sake of pleasing” Aunt Colston. Sally notes the role of language in creating this confusion, explaining, “I really could not allow this absurd scene to go on; and feeling that my words were likely to be taken up and diverted to a contrary meaning, I contented myself with quietly closing the parcel.” Aunt Colston reads this action as Sally further resisting selfish temptation, commenting “Self-command, I see.” Suggesting that the “absurd scene” has not ended but only

grown more absurd as Sally attempts in vain to convince others that she does not act for reasons of vanity, narrator Sally admits to the reader that Aunt Colston's comment "was praise very ill deserved" (185).

"[U]rged by an impatient longing to do something which might, as it were, clear [her]self from suspicion" (187), Sally tries the opposite tactic, openly expressing a desire for a new dress and allowing her mother to help her choose one. But this does not help matters. Sally notes Aunt Colston's disapproval and, "resolving to be bold," tells her, "You are vexed with me about that silk dress...but it really was not my fault." When her aunt asks whose fault it was, however, Sally realizes again that she cannot say anything that will clear her from appearing selfish: "I could not say, 'My mother's,' and felt perplexed how to reply" (205). Sally's tactic of boldness as opposed to reserve only further convinces Aunt Colston of her vanity and increases her own concern with appearance in her aunt's eyes.

Sewell alludes here to the similar dilemma women writers faced with their moral expression. She also acknowledges the way this interpretive bind can snowball into absurdity—an absurdity that Sally herself has some part in creating as she allows these interpretations to affect her. If Sewell criticizes past reviewers for putting her in this position as an author, she also reveals how easy it is to be drawn into perpetuating these interpretations herself. She asks in a refreshingly honest way how one might work one's way out of this interpretive dilemma.

The older, narrating Sally understands the problematic insidiousness of this sort of self-consciousness, but her younger self struggles to avoid it, which only makes it worse. The older Sally recognizes Aunt Colston's approval of her "self-command" as "praise very ill deserved," and when Horatia disingenuously calls the younger Sally "wise" for not accepting a new dress, she tells the reader, "I was not very wise. I was excessively weak; but I was not eighteen, little



used to the ways of the world, shrinking with the most acute feeling from the least suspicion of a double motive” (187). The younger Sally, just as exasperated with her own impotent confusion as with Horatia’s scheming, surrenders to the seeming impossibility of the problem, but the older Sally implies that she has found a way around it; she has learned not to “shrink...from the least suspicion of a double motive.”

Narrator Sally’s acknowledgment of her own susceptibility is not self-berating but instead grants her a kind of knowing command over the scene—the very “self-command” that younger Sally lacks—and undermines any sense that her moral expression is a blind attempt at others’ approval. She cannot explicitly narrate this dynamic in herself without falling into the same trap of defensiveness, but she guides us to understand it by narrating a similar dynamic in her younger self early on. Recounting her confirmation, Sally recalls the pleasure of being admired, a dress again serving as a symbol of vanity: “I felt a consciousness of being noticed as about to take part in a ceremony in which every one I met was interested; my white dress...marking me out as one of the children to be confirmed.” Sally tries to “collect...[her] thoughts,” hoping her self-regard will subside at church, but “the same confusion of ideas followed me, and the service was, what the preparation had been, a struggle in which I believed myself utterly to have failed.” But then, with phrasing that suggests a further level of self-consciousness gained only now that she narrates herself, Sally adds, “Yet, no,—I will not say that entirely. Even then, though grievously vexed with myself, something in my own heart told me that I had not failed” (35). Sally realizes that her younger self’s semi-conscious willingness to engage in this struggle—her refusal to “shrink...from the least suspicion of a double motive”—signals something other than vanity and failure: “I was in earnest, heartily in earnest. I had entered upon the battle of life, and I was resolved, through God’s assistance, that, cost what it

might, I would bear myself bravely to the end” (35-36). Sally’s earnestness here comes from occupying a state between vain self-consciousness and helpless unselfconsciousness and from acknowledging that she will always risk a lack of earnestness at the very moments she wishes to be most earnest—but “bravely” trying anyway.

Sally embodies a similar earnestness in her narration of the dress scene, but she leaves it to readers to detect this state of mind themselves. Unlike her younger self in this scene, Sally the narrator does not fall into the trap of exaggerated self-consciousness. She can laughingly recall the moral conundrum of her exchange with Aunt Colston and Horatia and thus capture the distance she now has on it. The different levels of self-consciousness in her former and current self can only become apparent through their juxtaposition in first-person narrative. Further revealing her balanced self-consciousness, Sally presents this scene and her retrospective relationship to it as parallel to the confirmation scene. The difference this time is that she does not purport to make any claims to her own earnestness. She thus acknowledges the importance of her audience without showing excessive concern with our opinions of her.

Instead, Sally uses the confirmation scene to provide us with an interpretive framework that we can use to “narrate” her in the dress scene. I use the term “narrate” here to signal a distinct kind of reading, in which we are invited in the dress scene to follow the narrator’s lead laid out in the confirmation scene but also granted the freedom of a narrator to interpret as we deem fit. This time no one tells us to think of Sally as earnest, and she in fact presents her younger self as the opposite of earnest. Rather than “shrinking...from...suspicion of a double motive” in the dress scene, narrator Sally openly examines the importance and challenges of shaping one’s behavior in response to others’ opinions, revealing an earnestness that can only come from “bravely” facing these moments that make up “the battle of life.” By offering us the

opportunity to “narrate” this meaning, but never asking us to, Sewell imagines a reserve that acknowledges the impossibility of extreme unselfconsciousness and finds its way around accusations of affectation in the expression of moral belief.

As we will see, Sewell uses the novel to capture this reserve not only in Sally, but also in herself as implied author. Sewell’s investment in the novel thus differs from the Tractarians’ promotion of poetry as the ideal literary form for cultivating reserve. For the Oxford leaders, poetic form tempered the threat of excessive emotion to the sincerity of religious expression and practice. Drawing on Richard Hurrell Froude’s journal and the personal letters of Keble and Edward Bouverie Pusey, Kirstie Blair writes: “The Tractarian vision of an individual Christian...is not of someone...secure in their faith and in full control, but rather of a consciously sinful, tormented individual, frequently vacillating between enthusiasm and despair, who needs forms in order to stabilize his or her defences and achieve the proper state of calmness and order” (29-30). Keble saw poetry as a means to a balanced self similar to that imagined by Sewell in the novel. But where Sewell seeks a balance of self-consciousness, Keble seeks a balance of emotion. As Blair argues, “Poets,” for Keble, “are men who are on the verge of breakdown due to repressed emotion: ‘What must they do? They are ashamed and reluctant to speak out, yet, if silent, they can scarcely keep their mental balance...,’ and so the primary purpose of poetry is curative.” Traditional metrical forms brought divinely sanctioned measure to a poet’s words, thus “offer[ing] an ‘outlet’ for properly reserved expression” (Blair 38). Just as Keble worried about repressed emotion, Sewell worries about repressed self-consciousness and grants an analogous “curative” function to the form of the novel. Thanks to the interplay among levels of self-consciousness in character, narrator, and author, the novelist can access a reserve

that overcomes the self-conscious affectation associated, ironically, with the kind of pure unselfconsciousness that Williams promoted in his tracts.

The legibility of such complex self-consciousness is essential to maintaining reserve and engendering trust between author and reader. In cultivating readers' trust, Sewell looks more aggressively than her Tractarian forefathers into the irony that reserve both requires and is hindered by a consciousness of other people. Whereas Williams ignores the impossibility of ever fully withdrawing from the other, Sewell is compelled to address this issue head-on, having been perceived, like other women authors, as trying to be selflessly unselfconscious only to impress others. While Williams condemns the desire to look to anyone but God as antithetical to reserve, Sewell sees an awareness of others as necessary, ironically, to overcoming moral and religious vanity. Sewell makes legible in herself a distinct form of self-consciousness in which the reader's presence is central to her ability to achieve true reserve and bring herself and readers closer to God. She captures this sense of self-consciousness by imagining her authorial voice as a kind of prayer that speaks to readers, herself, and God simultaneously. The balanced self-consciousness that results from this unique sense of audience resembles that which we detected in Sally's narrative voice earlier. The novel's similar dispersal of differing levels of self-consciousness among characters, narrator, and author in prayer allows Sewell to grasp at this mindset without explicitly claiming she embodies it (and thereby negating it). The novel may not be the only medium by which one can achieve this sense of audience, but it does seem unique in its ability to represent it. And considering how easily this mindset can be destroyed in the very attempt to represent it, such a capacity seems key to making it possible or at least engendering faith in its possibility.

For Williams, a reserved self-consciousness that brings one closer to God can only occur through a complete withdrawal from the gaze of other human beings. Williams directly opposes “looking to man,” which leads to “ostentatious singularity and display,” to “looking to God,” which he claims “will lead us to the reserve of a sacred simplicity” (VI: 5). Sewell, however, would argue that these two things are impossible to separate and that reserved self-consciousness requires acknowledgment of this impossibility. Williams does admit that just saying we must look to God rather than man “surely...will not produce what we want; but rather the very opposite; for to put on the appearance of reverence for example’s sake, or for the edification of others, were but the very thing which we condemn” (VI: 5). But he has no practical solution to this problem except to propose again (in even vaguer terms) the importance of acting for actual good rather than for the appearance of goodness in the eyes of others: “All that can be said is, not to seek to remedy by external effects, that which can only be from within; to think less of appearance, more of the reality” (VI: 5).

For Sewell, an avoidance of “external effects” does not mean an automatic embrace of God. Aunt Sarah asks Sally, “Did you ever watch your own mind when you had buried the memory of a good deed in the bottom of your heart, and tried to forget it?” Sally admits the impossibility of pure unselfconsciousness, responding, “I am afraid one always carries about the consciousness of it.” Aunt Sarah agrees: “Yes; and a much larger consciousness than it has any right to; but take it out and look at it...and ten to one but it shrinks to nothing.... By not seeing things clearly we exaggerate them” (374). Similarly, Sally’s attempt to look solely to God (as opposed to “looking to man”) only brings the crushing weight of extreme self-consciousness. Endeavoring to align her will with God’s, Sally finds that the more actively she tries to direct her thoughts heavenward, the more morbidly self-conscious she becomes: “I had no power to control

my mind. I felt myself so wicked, so intensely wicked, so unlike every one in the world. I longed that others should know me to be what I knew myself; I fancied I could better bear my doubts if they were not secret” (86-87). An attempt to look solely to God only brings a self-absorbed desire to look to other people. Sally goes to Aunt Sarah, planning to “confess what I was, beg her to hate me, to send me from her, to give me any suffering, but only to listen to me and know me” (87).

But looking solely to other people is not the answer either. When Sally reaches Aunt Sarah, she finds her engrossed in prayer, gazing at a picture of her beloved deceased brother and “repeating to herself: ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom then shall I be afraid?’” Sally quietly retreats to her room as she thinks, “Who was I that I should venture to intrude my doubts into the presence of a perfect faith? I closed the door and knelt, but I could not pray; the wretchedness of my mind grew more intense.” Looking solely to Aunt Sarah is not the solution, but avoiding Aunt Sarah in an attempt to look solely to God just intensifies Sally’s self-consciousness. Suddenly, however, she finds a way to look to God and Aunt Sarah simultaneously. Aunt Sarah’s “words...follow” Sally: “I found myself repeating them without thinking of their meaning; and then they framed themselves, as it were, into a prayer, and I said, ‘Lord, be Thou my light and my salvation, then shall I not fear: be Thou the strength of my life, then shall I not be afraid.’” This prayer slowly alleviates Sally’s self-consciousness without abolishing it altogether: “Another moment, and the rush of doubt was upon me again; but I was not helpless as before” (87). Sally’s prayer, which begins as “little more than mechanical” (87), distracts her from her self-absorption but at the same time grants her a more tempered self-consciousness: “I was exhausted, saddened, trembling, as one who has escaped a deadly peril and knows that the danger may return at any

moment; but it was over—the fullness of faith was for the time restored to me” (87-88). Looking solely to God only intensifies Sally’s looking to herself; looking solely to others has the same effect. The key to a more tempered self-consciousness is to look to God, others, and oneself simultaneously, something achieved through prayer.

Sally attains this level of self-consciousness through prayer’s distinct sense of audience. Prayer reaches outward toward the other, both human and divine, but also speaks to the self praying. As Jean-Louis Chrétien explains, prayer is “a self-manifestation before the invisible other, a manifestation that becomes a manifestation of self to self through the other” (154). In praying, one speaks to God and to oneself, but also to other people. Chrétien describes “vocal prayer, whether it be individual or collective” as “public” in nature: “One prays *to* God, but one prays *in* the world” (168-69). More specifically, in Christian prayer, “the individual prayer is distinct from the collective prayer, but only as variants of the same ecclesial prayer, which the Our Father marks in its very form” (Chrétien 171): that is, even an individual praying “say[s] ‘*Our* Father,’ and not ‘*My* Father’” (Chrétien 155). Sally’s intended audience in prayer thus lies somewhere between self and other, allowing her a self-consciousness not solely consumed with her appearance in others’ or God’s eyes.

Such a distinctive sense of audience strengthens one’s faith and inspires faith in others. Although Sally refers to her aunt’s praying as the sign of a “perfect faith,” we can surmise from Aunt Sarah’s repetition of her prayer while gazing at the image of her brother that she experiences difficulty with her faith just as Sally does. She also finds strength through prayer that allows her to look simultaneously to God, other people, and herself, cultivating and expressing a similar self-consciousness that induces Sally and her to trust the sincerity of her words. We again see prayer’s ambiguity of audience as Aunt Sarah offers up the words of her prayer not solely for

herself (she speaks aloud, looks at the image of her brother, and in fact helps Sally), but not solely for God (God knows everything and does not need to hear the words aloud), and neither solely for others (her brother is not actually present, and she supposedly does not know that Sally is there). Further revealing that what Sally originally assumes is a completely unselfconscious “looking to God” is in fact somewhat self-conscious, Aunt Sarah displays awareness that her praying has helped Sally. Bidding her niece goodbye the next day and revealing her own understanding of prayer as an alternative to the at times overbearing self-consciousness of thought, she tells her, “God bless you, my child: don’t think, but pray:--now go” (88). Aunt Sarah’s sense of audience while praying echoes Sally’s and demonstrates how the voice that results from such complex self-consciousness might inspire oneself and others simultaneously. Sewell’s ability to capture this voice in her novel appears key to inspiring trust in readers.

Sewell thus cultivates a voice that is similar to Sally’s and Aunt Sarah’s in prayer, her words aimed somewhere between self and other. When Sally shares one of her frequent prayers to help readers with similar struggles, she unconsciously suggests that this very sharing is a key part of the prayer’s beneficial effect on her personal understanding. Describing how the rising popularity of Dissent causes her to doubt the Church and the beliefs with which she was raised, Sally explains that it often threatens “to bring back my former agony of doubt”; however, she continues, “I was learning how to deal with my own mind.” Echoing Williams’s earlier comments about Anglican practices as “directed to the eye of GOD,” Sally admits,

The history of such a conflict is for the Eye and Mercy of God; it would not even have been referred to here, but that, perchance, it may strengthen some sinking under the same trial, to know that it may be met, even in early youth, without argument, without sympathy, without external aid, but simply with the force of prayer, and the strong will to crush the very shadow of a rising doubt, and that the end is peace, and the conviction not only of faith but of reason. (136)



Although Sally dismisses “external aid” as unnecessary, her notion of “prayer” requires it: ending the passage and the chapter exclaiming, “And now farewell to that great anguish for ever!” (136), Sally inadvertently reveals that the words leading up to this exclamation form part of the very prayer of which she speaks, a prayer that requires the “Eye of God” *and* the reader. Sally, like Williams denouncing “external effects,” may still feel that such growth does not require “external aid,” but Sewell conveys a more complicated view, suggesting that the words of Sally’s prayer are directed toward readers as well as God. She also suggests that the words of her novel are directed toward herself: just as Sally learns from narrating herself, Sewell learns from “authoring” Sally as narrator. While Sally might still be unaware at this moment of the role her readers play in her developing understanding of herself through the novel, Sewell realizes the necessity of the reader to the efficacy of her prayers and resulting self-growth.

Sewell again uses the character Sally to provide us with a model by which we can better understand the intricate levels of self-consciousness cultivated by the narrator and the author in prayer. Perhaps “provide” is not the right verb, since it implies that Sewell fully intends that we receive this understanding. Really, the novel’s moral expression is aimed just as much at Sewell’s own growth as our understanding, but this growth requires our presence and is offered up for our interpretation. Directed toward God, herself, and readers, Sewell’s prayer accesses a reserved level of self-consciousness by never privileging one audience over the others. Of course, the end goal is always salvation, but such unity with God can only be achieved through simultaneous trust in—itself a kind of unity between—herself and other people.

Characterizing herself as a writer and teacher with aims similar to Sewell’s, Aunt Sarah emphasizes this sort of unity with God and resulting salvation as the aim of her interactions with her readers. Showing Sally letters from people she describes as “my children,” she tells her,

“They are from young things, who...took a fancy to be with me, and to listen to me. I could not cast them aside when God had put them in my way; and so I gathered them, as it were, about me, and gave them what help I could to forward them in their journey” (431). Like Sewell, Aunt Sarah suggests that this connection is formed through a simultaneous awareness of her own ability to learn from expressing her moral views to others. She admits the possibility that “they did more good to me, poor children, than I did to them,” revealing, “I was saved from being as narrow in my views as I should have been if left to myself” (432). And this relationship “saves” her in more ways than one; when Aunt Sarah “look[s] forward to the world to which [she is] hastening,” she automatically thinks of her “children,” admitting, “the thought that they will be there to meet me is amongst my brightest hopes” (431).

#### 4.

In the end, Sewell struggles to maintain faith in her ability to represent this communion between herself, other people, and God: representing such unity is just as difficult as achieving it. In his own attempt to describe it, Chrétien looks to Seneca, who himself relies on the divided form of a chiasmus: “Love among men as if God beheld you, speak with God as if men were listening” (169). As close as this sentence comes to capturing the idea of union between self, other people, and God, it falls back on two separate clauses that still suggest that one’s love for men might only be for appearance in God’s eyes, and vice versa. Similar representational difficulty leaves Sally, Aunt Sarah, and Sewell vacillating at the end of the novel between the importance of other people and the importance of God to salvation.

Aware of her impending death, Aunt Sarah shifts focus away from her “children” to God: “all she cared to know of” “was that she was going to be with Him.” Her thinking has changed; when Sally asks her about “those whom she had loved, and to whom she might now

soon be restored,” Aunt Sarah responds that reuniting “was a thought of infinite joy, but it was not the ground of her happiness: she did not think it ought ever to be” (441). As Sally observes this, however, she notes the importance other people continue to play in Aunt Sarah’s mind: although she feels a sense of “rest,—perfect rest,” which “[s]he could not hope...to make others understand...her earthly affections seem...to call out more fully than ever” (443).

Sally similarly vacillates between the importance of people and of God as her life draws to a close. Just like Aunt Sarah’s children, Sally has her sister Hester’s children, who “gather round me and tell me that their daily life is gladdened by me” (467). Sally, who lives nearby and visits daily, appreciates the tranquility of Hester’s home, which results from “the influence of the living”: Hester’s “own tranquil mind, the fervent piety and devoted tenderness of her husband, the warm endearing affection of her children, above all, the love which springs upward to her God” (469). Sally participates in this love that brings the household closer to God; “But,” she insists, “my real home is the Church.” The Church might signal a simultaneous relationship with God and other worshippers, but for a moment Sally’s thinking turns toward God alone. She speaks of “how little the life of a member of Christ’s Church can ever be called lonely. ‘One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all,’—were I without earthly friends, without human relations—could they not all in that life be mine?” But then Sally immediately tells us, “Not each for himself, and by himself, we travel towards Eternity; but together,—one, though many;—united, though separate” (470).

And then, in the most surprising shift thus far, this more balanced sense of the importance of human relationships to one’s salvation gives way to a narrower focus on other people. And not just other people, but other people’s admiration—something our author and narrator have been wary of throughout the novel as they cultivate the proper reserve. The final scene shows Sally

walking through the churchyard, reading the names on the gravestones, and looking forward to her own afterlife. She carries her imagining of the importance of other people past the point of death, where, according to her religious beliefs, one's primary relationship is with God.<sup>15</sup>

Imagining her own resting place in the churchyard, she admits her desire "to be within reach of the prayers and praises I have loved":

most dear is the hope that those over whom I have watched from infancy, the children of my darling Hester, and it may be their children after them, may recall, as they pass my grave, the lessons I have labored to teach them, and speak of me with the love, though it can never be with the reverence, which must ever place amongst the dearest of my earthly memories, the name of—aunt Sarah. (471)

Considering Sally's allegiances to the Church and the basic aims of reserve (even if she differs in how that reserve is cultivated), it is surprising that her life story culminates in the thought of other people exclusively, rather than God. The novel's final sentence is excessively long, almost greedily gathering clauses as it enumerates the people who admire Sally or who might admire her in the future. The sentence does end with Sally directing her own admiration to someone else, but that someone is Aunt Sarah. And in this case, a reference to Aunt Sarah comes very close to another reference to herself; after all, Sally is Aunt Sarah to Hester's children.<sup>16</sup>

Sally suddenly seems consumed with her image in the eyes of people over God. Perhaps, however, this is the ultimate test of the reader's trust that Sewell has worked throughout the

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<sup>15</sup> Sewell believed that human passions, including loneliness and vanity, pass away in heaven, where all have been saved and become one with God. Quoting the Gospel, Sally expresses this idea with regard to marriage in particular: "And 'in heaven there shall be neither marrying nor giving in marriage'" (222). (See Matthew 22:30 and Mark 12:25 for original verses.) Sewell would more explicitly express this belief with regard to human relationships in general a few years later in her novel *Ivors* (1856). The mother of main character Susan offers divine consolation when it becomes clear she will not marry, telling her daughter of "another love, before which all human affection fades into nothingness" (*Ivors* 410-411). Susan's mother refers to God's love, "which is more fond than the love of a husband, more watchful than the care of a parent, and sympathised with us before we understood the affection of sisters or of brothers" and endures as long "as the blessedness of eternity" (*Ivors* 412).

<sup>16</sup> Maria LaMonaca reads this moment as Sally's "identification of herself as a second Aunt Sarah" (121). Recalling Sewell's admission in her autobiography that the novel was drawn from her own experience of life, Wolff claims, "We infer that both Aunt Sarah and the younger Sarah are versions of Elizabeth Sewell's idea of herself and of her own life" (144). Sewell, like Sally in the novel's closing pages, had recently stepped into her own "Aunt Sarah" role: she and her sister Ellen had begun taking in pupils to teach alongside their nieces, whom they had already taken in as their "children" after their sister-in-law passed away (*Autobiography* 117).

novel to foster. Sewell can only come so close to capturing the sense of audience she attempts to portray through her representations of self-consciousness in her character, her narrator, and herself. Achieving this self-consciousness depends to some degree on the reader's faith in its possibility. Sewell believes that looking to other people always implies looking to God, just as looking to God always means looking to other people; it depends on one's willingness to acknowledge and have faith in this simultaneity that determines whether it will be an opportunity for growth or limitation. If readers have heard Sewell's reserved expressions of belief and established faith in her aims as author, they will see that it is up to them to unify these two sides in their mind and trust that she has as well, despite the seeming impossibility of representing this unity on the page. From this perspective, Sally's final focus on the admiration of others serves as a reminder of the fragility of this unity and an acknowledgment of the difficulty of the trust Sewell asks of her readers.

Sewell works to develop such trust throughout the novel, searching for an adequate way to express her commitment to readers' and her own salvation. Facing accusations of moralizing whether she embraced a passive reserve or more explicitly expressed her beliefs, Sewell used the novel's form to guide readers toward a richer understanding of women's moral self-consciousness. Finding traditional understandings of reserve put forth by male Tractarian leaders inadequate to her experience, Sewell brought to light the problematic ironies within reserve and, in doing so, sought a way around the limitations they posed to her faith and her authorship. While Sewell remained committed to Tractarian ideals as well as traditional women's roles, she also sought a more rigorous understanding of reserve's cultivation that would allow women greater moral and religious agency.

## CHAPTER 2

### A Cross to Bear:

#### Novelistic Didacticism and Evangelical Experimentation in *East Lynne*

Since the publication of *East Lynne* (1860-61), critics have denounced author Ellen Wood's moralizing depictions of her adulterous heroine Lady Isabel. Victorians complained that Wood preached a superficial theology, citing in particular her repeated urging that Isabel must bear her cross. This language was not simply sanctimonious in critics' minds; it was also scandalous. After all, bearing her cross leads Isabel back to the home she left, disguised as a governess for her own children. The *Literary Gazette* reviewer argued, "The theology of the work is...open to grave exception...sacred and pregnant language ought not to be used in this unmeaning way" (371). Fellow novelist Charlotte Riddell called Wood "simply a brute" for "throw[ing] in bits of religion to slip her fodder down the public throat" (qtd. in Elwin 241). More recent critics usually note Wood's moralizing language before moving on to examine a counteractive ambivalence in the novel toward such Victorian taboos as uncontrolled emotion, maternal indulgence, and female sexual desire. When this ambivalence is deemed unconscious, it is understood to subvert her official moral and religious stance.<sup>1</sup> When it is deemed conscious, Wood's moralizing language works to mitigate her subversiveness.<sup>2</sup> From either perspective, however, the novel's moral and religious overtones appear narrowly superficial.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ann Cvetkovich, Laurie Langbauer, and Lyn Pykett.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Winifred Hughes and Andrew Maunder, "Ellen Wood was a Writer."

This chapter demonstrates that Wood's ambivalence is embedded *within* and consciously required by her religious perspective.<sup>3</sup> Like Sewell, Wood was keenly aware of the interpretive bind posed by the stereotype of the moralizing woman in moral and aesthetic discourse. Sewell's central dilemma lay between the affectation of reserve and the affectation of a more overtly moralizing stance. For Wood, the stakes are more extreme. In a dynamic closely resembling that which we've seen between the "prude" and the "coquette," women in the novel are forced into a sanctimonious moral stance in order to avoid automatic association with physical vanity and even sexual promiscuity. While the moral passivity of Sewell's reserve can hold self-serving motives, for Wood such vanity holds the more intense implications of fallenness.

Like Sewell, Wood draws on her theological inheritance to elude this interpretive bind. Wood's religious language, then, gestures toward a much larger ethical and aesthetic project. Her alertness to the resources within such language derives from her evangelical background. Wood looks to the atonement to formulate an independent method of moral expression and reflection for Isabel, readers, and herself. Isabel's fall results from intellectual, religious, and moral apathy, her adultery only a symptom of this larger ailment of "indifference." In order to atone for that sin, Isabel must bear her cross, which requires her to recognize that she has a "will," distinguish that will from God's, and then work to unite the two. As she begins this process, however, she finds herself struggling with a bind similar to that of her author. No longer indifferent, she cannot retreat from moral action, but her desire to right past wrongs at times seems driven by selfish motives: to be loved by her family, to be recognized as moral. Isabel's disguised return, however, allows her a method of moral expression and action that overcomes association with

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<sup>3</sup> Only very recently have critics begun to consider Wood's religious belief as a serious influence on her work. Beth Palmer examines how Wood's evangelicalism informed her work at the *Argosy Magazine*, which she owned and edited from 1867 to 1887. Anne-Marie Beller demonstrates the influence of Wood's religious beliefs on the significance of her heroines' deaths in *East Lynne* and other novels.

vanity and moralization. Isabel's return to East Lynne has always stood out to critics as quite odd in its otherworldliness and implausibility. But Isabel's liminality, as I will refer to it, allows Wood to imagine the possibility of moral action and expression separate from the self-conscious desire to appear moral to an audience.

My interpretation of Isabel's return as ethically empowering joins other recent critics working to overturn readings of the novel's second half as solely a masochistic enactment of Isabel's punishment for her sins and her inevitable suffering as a woman.<sup>4</sup> Wood does not attempt to solve the problem of female oppression, but her religious beliefs do guide her to imagine some autonomy for women. Isabel is led by her social circumstances to leave her husband and children for another man, but once she takes this step, it becomes her own sin—in her eyes and the eyes of those around her, if not in ours. Although we may not endorse Isabel's helplessness, we can respect her subsequent attempts to understand her role in what has occurred and to find a position in her new life that allows her some of the moral autonomy she lacked as a wife. Her attempts, through trial and error, to find this autonomy often involve humiliation and pain, but they also bring increased strength and incomparable reward.

Much of Wood's exploration into women's moral autonomy remains at the level of plot and character. She does, however, briefly examine the importance of a narrator (and thus the novel) in attesting to women's unselfconsciousness. She ends up implying that assurance of one's sincerity is more difficult for real women who cannot rely on a narrator. In the end, Isabel must seek out her own method of ensuring the sincerity of her moral expression and action. We might ask then if this method might have some import for women authors struggling with a similar interpretive dilemma. Unlike Sewall and the other authors, however, Wood does not

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<sup>4</sup> See Anne-Marie Beller and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman for other positive interpretations of Isabel's return.



employ Isabel's method at the level of the narrative as a way to shape interpretations of the implied author.

Wood may not go to the same lengths to consider the relation between feminine self-consciousness and narrative voice, but she does suggest more boldly than anyone else studied here that women have special insight into the problem of moral expression because of the interpretive dilemma they faced. While the women in the novel confront accusations of moral and sexual vanity, the men—particularly Isabel's husband Archibald Carlyle, but also the alleged murderer Richard Hare and even the deceitful Sir Francis Levison—never face such suspicion. Hare wins over doubters simply with his “solemn” words and “earnest” tone (55). Levison, after eloping with Lady Isabel, returns to make a plausible bid for parliament—against her former husband, no less. And because the community always views Carlyle as noble and sincere, he is never forced to grapple with the problems of moral earnestness the way women in the novel are. Isabel's moral earnestness in the end requires awareness of the insincerity—the very lack of earnestness—that threatens any attempt to speak about moral issues. While Carlyle at the end of the novel is left unquestioningly and rather emptily espousing to his wife the importance of “earnestly...doing right, unselfishly, under God” (624), Isabel displays a method of virtuous expression that exemplifies her more reflective mindset. Such a method holds promise for women novelists searching for an adequate way to express moral belief.

#### 1.

Central to Victorian Evangelicalism and the religious traditions from which it sprang was a contradictory concern with self-consciousness, which was thought both necessary for and undermining of moral sincerity. Evangelicalism arose in Britain in the 1730s, emphasizing “personal experience and promulgation of the Christian ‘evangel’ (gospel)” (Knight and Mason

122). Celebrating spontaneous conversion and denouncing the hollow rigidity of liturgy and ritual, Evangelicalism was influenced by late seventeenth-century Puritanism and early eighteenth-century Dissent, traditions that emerged from the Reformation's critique of ritual and subsequent rationalization of Christian practices.<sup>5</sup> Lori Branch explains that spontaneous prayer was promoted over liturgy in response to a concern about spiritual "hypocrisy" that was "not a matter of saying one thing and doing another, but of saying one thing and feeling another: of a disjunction between the logocentric intellect and the heart" (44). Spontaneity in prayer, which ensured the sincerity of religious expression, prevented this hypocrisy but, paradoxically, risked encouraging it as well: quoting Henry Dawbeny, a central voice in the seventeenth-century free-prayer debate, Branch claims, "Words uttered spontaneously out of sincere emotional desires not only insure that God will accept an individual's prayer but also 'interpret the desires of our souls unto others'" (49). This consciousness of others who could affirm one's sincerity threatened to undermine that sincerity, creating "an uncomfortable...awareness of its performativity" (Branch 51). Looking in particular at William Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822), Branch demonstrates that these ironies continued into the nineteenth century.

Charles W. Wood's memoir of his mother, published in 1894, seven years after her death, reveals a similar preoccupation. Wood, born in 1814 in Worcester, grew up "under the very shadow of" Worcester Cathedral; religious "devotion was her first duty" (C. W. Wood 17). Her Anglicanism took a distinctly evangelical bent: "the state of the heart" rather than "petty rules and ceremonials" defined her "creed" (C. W. Wood 263). Full of direct passages of praise from Wood's reviewers, Charles's memoir goes to extreme lengths to portray Wood as an artistic

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<sup>5</sup> Branch writes, "Reformation controversies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries accompanied what has been called a crisis of representation, in which the term *ceremony*, for instance, first began to acquire negative connotations of hollowness and superstition, and in which interrogations of the power of signs, 'in particular the communal, repetitive, formal, performative sign,' led Reformers to develop an 'anti-magical semiotics' defined against a 'mystified, sacral, essentialist' understanding of signs" (Thomas M. Greene qtd. in Branch 37).

genius and a saint, implicitly concerned that her authorship might undermine her angelic nature. In her novels, Wood “never moralized or criticized.... If a philosopher, she was so unconsciously, for she never obtruded her personality upon the reader” (C. W. Wood 222). “One of her remarkable traits,” Charles claims, “was an utter self-unconsciousness. It never occurred to her to be a shining light to others, only to be true to herself” (235). Charles’s own religious leanings lead him to praise Wood’s religiousness but also, anxiously, to underscore her lack of affectation.<sup>6</sup>

Exploring the novel’s ability to answer to this preoccupation, Wood herself briefly considers in *East Lynne* the possibility of unselfconscious moral expression, placing Isabel singing in a room adjoining the one where, unbeknownst to her, her father and Carlyle listen admiringly. Overhearing Isabel singing hymns from The Book of Common Prayer, the Earl remarks that “Isabel little thinks she is entertaining us, as well as herself” (67). The Earl may attest to Isabel’s unselfconsciousness, but the narrator must confirm it, echoing, “Indeed she did not” (68). Wood thus considers the value of the novel in representing unselfconsciousness. There may in life be someone to eavesdrop on one’s unselfconscious devotions, but in a novel there is always someone eavesdropping, and an anonymous third-person narrator’s relation to a novel’s characters does not usually carry with it the problematic implications of eavesdropping. Both Isabel’s father and the narrator attest to her ethical and aesthetic sincerity for readers, allowing her to remain “self-unconscious.” Lord Mount Severn observes that the “singular charm” of Isabel’s singing “lies in her subdued, quiet style” rather than “squalling display” (67). That sincerity has a distinct power: “The conversation of the Earl and Mr. Carlyle had been of the eager bustling world,” and Isabel’s “sacred chant broke in upon them with strange contrast,

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<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Elwin argues that Wood “would have been doubtless the first to deprecate her son’s unctuous references to her genius in the extravagantly reverential and sentimental memoir published, in the customary Victorian family fashion, a few years after her death” (233).

soothing to the ear, but reproofing to the heart.” As we might expect of a Victorian depiction of feminine virtue, Isabel’s unselfconsciousness guarantees the purity of her motives and the beauty of her voice in prayer. Much more surprisingly, however, Wood’s novel will emphasize that such unselfconsciousness is ineffective and impossible to guarantee in the real, narratorless world. As Wood herself knew too well, women had to find another way to ensure the sincerity of their moral expression.

Without a narrator figure to identify her unselfconsciousness, Isabel’s moral actions are interpreted as vain. Society in the novel associates femininity first with beauty and then with vanity. Townspeople in West Lynne believe that if they enjoy admiring women, then women must also enjoy admiring themselves. As Mr. Dill tells Cornelia, “pretty young girls know they are pretty, and you can’t take their vanity away from them” (381). Isabel’s father tellingly feels the need to defend her from such a charge. He tells Carlyle that her beauty “caused quite a sensation at the Drawing-room last week,” but immediately adds, “and she is as good as she is beautiful” (12). Carlyle is indeed struck by her beauty—“not so much” by “the perfect contour of the exquisite features,” which might give the impression of careless vanity, but by “the sweet expression of the soft dark eyes,” which suggest “sorrow and suffering” (11). Isabel’s beauty, perceived as an extension of her moral goodness at home, is nevertheless interpreted as a sign of vanity in public. When she discovers she can help the impoverished musician Mr. Kane by attending his concert and convincing others to attend also, she dresses up in all her finery to “show those West Lynne people that *I* think the poor man’s concert worth going to, and worth dressing for.” Before Isabel goes out, her father protests, “You will have the whole room gaping at you.... You have dressed yourself to please your vanity” (76). And, sure enough, the

representative town busybodies Mrs. Ducie and her daughters disapprove of Isabel's calling such attention to herself, never considering that she might have higher motives.

A more vocal stance on Isabel's part would only provoke accusations of moral vanity. Indeed, feminine vanity in the novel exists on a spectrum: women characters who avoid physical vanity risk moral vanity that prides itself on its supposed modesty and prudence. The town coquette Afy Hallijohn and Carlyle's sister Cornelia mark opposite ends of this spectrum. As a "very pretty woman, tall and slender," who "mince[s] as she walk[s], and coquet[s] with her head" (327), Afy is more concerned with drawing men's admiration and women's envy than considering the morality of her behavior. Her vain flirtatiousness leads the town to suspect her of lascivious behavior; after her father's murder she is wrongly assumed to have run off with the prime suspect, Richard Hare. On the other end of the spectrum, Cornelia is "good at heart.... Only her manners are against her, and she will think herself better than other people" (158). Cornelia expresses her sense of superiority through moralizing proverbs: criticizing her brother for buying a carriage, she tells him, "Wilful waste makes woful want.... To be thrifty is a virtue; to squander is a sin" (145). After Cornelia forbids Carlyle and Isabel to use their carriage on a Sunday, the three characters are arranged in a revealing *tableau-vivant*: Isabel stands "at the window with her husband" while Cornelia is "seated at a distant table, with the Bible before her" (151), divided from the couple by her religion.

Always ready to accuse other women of immodesty, Cornelia seems to use her plain dress and moralizing demeanor to distance herself from feminine vanity. She criticizes Afy's "impudence" as she passes wearing a "coquettish little bonnet," "conceited and foolish and good-looking as ever" (381), and she even describes the Carlyles' family friend Barbara Hare (who works valiantly to exonerate her brother Richard from a murder charge) as a "little vain idiot"

(64). But Cornelia comes across as equally self-absorbed. Experiencing a similar double bind, Isabel illustrates it more explicitly: she explains to Mrs. Vane (the wife of her father's heir) that she is not wearing her diamonds for a social event because she "did not like to be too fine.... They glittered so! I feared it might be thought I had put them on *to look* fine." With a "sneer," Mrs. Vane associates Isabel with "that class of people who pretend to despise ornaments," behavior she terms "the refinement of affectation" (16). Given the limited options, appearing affected in her attempts at modesty is the lesser of two evils for Cornelia. As we've seen with the "prude" and the "coquette," "while their characters are 'equally ridiculous,' they 'are not equally dangerous,' since the prude manages to preserve her reputation and 'at least the appearance of modesty'" (Yeazell 7). Cornelia may preserve her reputation, but her moral and religious beliefs are rarely taken seriously.

In depicting characters' struggles with this conundrum, Wood may have drawn on personal experience. Her first novel, *Danesbury House* (1860), written for a Scottish Temperance League contest at the urging of a church rector friend, was reviewed in March 1860, just as the third installment of *East Lynne* appeared.<sup>7</sup> Although reviews of *Danesbury House* were fairly positive, reviewers still intimated that Wood *could have* fallen prey to moralizing like Cornelia's. As the *Athenaeum* notes,

A free temperance song might by possibility be as dashing and inspiring as a drinking song, if the genius, and not the *conscience*, of the writer inspired it; but a Prize Temperance Tale, or a Prize Temperance Song, will, we fear, inevitably smack of the model Sunday-school boy under the eye of his master on his best behaviour—the genuine human nature all stowed away out of sight. (407)

The reviewer admits that the novel "gets over the natural difficulties of the task extremely well" but then argues that in depicting the misery caused by alcohol, "the author endeavours to prove

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<sup>7</sup> Published in twenty-one installments in the *New Monthly Magazine* from 1860 to 1861, *East Lynne* was "still incomplete" that spring of 1860 when the reviews appeared (Maunder, "Introduction" 18).

too much” (407). For the *Glasgow Herald* reviewer, Wood focuses too much on the dark realities of intemperance and not enough on possibilities for reform. The reviewer is disturbed by Wood’s depiction of deaths from delirium tremens: “It is a revolting picture, and of dangerous tendency. For what is the inference which would be drawn by the intemperate reader? . . . That, as he is without hope, he had better have a short life, and a merry one, and ‘die with harness on his back.’” The reviewer allows that Wood showed some integrity in the sudden conversion of the rake Lord Temple, but “by what mysterious process, good reader? By a process very natural and desirable to a lady authoress—by entering into the blessed estate of matrimony.” Wood’s difficulty anticipated those of the women characters in her next novel: like Cornelia, if she didn’t risk accusations of moralizing, she would be accused of the lascivious fascination with sin that townspeople in *East Lynne* associate with Afy. Andrew Maunder puts the latter problem in more extreme terms, arguing that the middle-class Wood was concerned about being associated, like other “authoress[es]” of the period, “with the actress, or worse, the prostitute, who also marketed her person in public” (“Ellen Wood was a Writer”). With *Danesbury House*, the reviewers commend Wood for successfully avoiding these twinned fates but in so doing they make the reader conscious of their possibility.

In *East Lynne*, the narrator defends herself against accusations of moralizing on the one hand and of siding too closely with the fallen Isabel on the other. This defense is aimed not only at the general “reader” but also specifically at the “critic” (590). In a move typical of didactic novels, the narrator openly aligns the reader with Isabel, proclaiming, “Oh, reader, believe me! Lady—wife—mother! Should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you awake. Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life . . . resolve to bear them” (283). This confident position of moral teacher changes, shortly before the novel’s end, as the narrator begins to

question herself from the reader's perspective. She even imagines a separate persona she terms "the moralist" in order to free herself from the taint of moralizing. Describing Isabel's realization of her love for Carlyle, the narrator adds, "It had been smouldering almost ever since she quitted him. 'Reprehensible!' groans a moralist. Very. Everybody knows that, as Afy would say. But her heart, you see, had *not* done with human passions" (590). Through the narrator's shifting perspectives, Wood simultaneously imagines herself in and distances herself from the moralizing position, assigning the role of the "moralist" to the position of an abstract reader or kind of alternative narrator—even aligning it with Afy, who among her immoral tendencies has been known to express "moral" perspectives for their social currency. Wood intimates that the "moralist's" view is immoral, since it suggests an unreflective, simplistic understanding of Isabel's fallenness expressed more to prove something about one's own moral character than out of concern for Isabel's. But she also reveals awareness that she may be criticized for not being "moral" enough in her defense of Isabel: "I shall get blame for it, I fear, if I attempt to defend her" (590). Taking on the traits of both a conventional didacticism and a satire of such didacticism, Wood's narrative powerfully contradicts itself in order to reveal the rhetorical and ethical limits women writers faced.

Previous critics have noted the proliferation of moral maxims and Biblical allusions in the novel, however, and assumed that Wood fully embraced the role of the moralist. As the *Literary Gazette* reviewer observed, "Mrs Wood is, of course, so far conversant with the etiquette of lady literature that she does not fail to parade her moral" (370). Similarly, more recent readings have claimed that Wood's moral interests were motivated by a desire for respectability.<sup>8</sup> But Wood did not take on this moralizing persona blindly. Rather, she uses the

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<sup>8</sup> Winifred Hughes reads the narrator's exhortation of the reader to avoid the urge "to abandon [her] home" and thereby "forfeit [her] fair name and [her] good conscience" as evidence that Wood was more concerned with



novel to comment on moralizing as a phenomenon in women's writing and to reject the charge that her own moral expressions are narrow-minded or self-serving.

Cultivating an ongoing attentiveness to the motives behind moral expression is central to Wood's project; she designs her plot so that Isabel's downfall indirectly results from Cornelia's inflexible moral stance. Imposing her views on Isabel, Cornelia makes her distrust her own judgment. Before her marriage, despite others' view of Isabel as angelically unselfconscious and ignorant of the ways of the world, Isabel reveals a distinct moral autonomy. For example, when she is kept from her father to protect her from the knowledge that he is dying, she reasons with Carlyle: "Tell me the truth, then, why I am kept away. If you can show me a sufficient cause, I will be reasonable and obey." Isabel then asks if he is dying: "Mr. Carlyle hesitated. Ought he to dissemble with her as the doctors had done?... 'I trust to you not to deceive me,' she simply said." Convinced, it seems, by Isabel's reasonableness and moral confidence, Carlyle immediately responds, "I fear he is. I believe he is" (87). Wood deliberately displays Isabel's rationality before her marriage to Carlyle: acknowledging "the custom in romance to represent young ladies, especially if they be handsome and interesting, as being entirely oblivious of matter-of-fact cares and necessities," the narrator insists that such "apathy never exists in real life" (97). Nevertheless, Isabel's ethically self-reflective and self-assured sense of reality quickly fades in the Carlyle home. Cornelia's moral vanity relies on a sense of her own financial prudence and a belief in Isabel's imprudence. Cornelia regularly "impress[es] upon" Isabel that her marriage has struck an "unfortunate blow to [Carlyle's] interests," making her "painfully" aware of "the incubus she must be" (168). Isabel's feelings of indebtedness prevent her from

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appearing moral than actually being moral: "it is no accident that 'fair name' precedes good conscience'.... Mrs. Wood never really addresses the question of morality, or does so only on the most superficial level.... In *East Lynne*, the moral sense is bound up in social status" (114). Similarly, Lyn Pykett argues that "the much-noted moralizing of the narrator, and even the straining for gentility...are...part of a discourse—the discourse of respectable or proper femininity—which constructs morality along class and gender lines" (*The 'Improper' Feminine* 119).

saying anything to Carlyle about his sister or even considering that Cornelia might be wrong.

The narrator laments that if only Isabel “had the courage to speak out openly to her husband, he would assure her “that all these miserable complaints were but the phantoms of his narrow-minded sister” (169).

Isabel’s self-doubt allows Levison, while staying at East Lynne, to convince her (falsely) of Carlyle’s love for Barbara. After repeatedly urging Isabel to suspect her husband, Levison tells her about a private meeting between Carlyle and Barbara. They actually meet to discuss Richard Hare, who has secretly returned despite being wanted for murder, but narrating the scene for Isabel, Levison gives the characters very different motives: “As I came by Hare’s house just now, I saw two people, a gentleman and a young lady, coupled lovingly together, enjoying a *tête-à-tête* by moonlight. They were your husband and Miss Hare.” Levison then takes Isabel past the Hares’, where she sees Carlyle and Barbara engaged in intimate conversation and interprets the scene as proof of Levison’s story. Levison takes her into his arms, “whisper[ing] that *his* love was left to her, if another’s was withdrawn” (271), another lie that Isabel believes. Discovering that Isabel has run away, the servant Joyce, a source of sound moral judgment throughout the novel, immediately assigns fault to Cornelia.<sup>9</sup> Joyce complains to Cornelia and Carlyle that Lady Isabel “has not been allowed to indulge a will of her own, poor thing, since she came to East Lynne” because Cornelia has “curbed her...and snapped at her...all these years” (279). When Lord Mount Severn, Isabel’s father’s heir, finds Isabel in France he reveals that everyone back home still suspects Cornelia had something to do with her departure, even if the severity of

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<sup>9</sup> As Brian W. McCuskey argues, servants in the novel “serve as an antidote to the corruption of excessive secrecy and silence,” brought on, in several critics’ views, by Carlyle’s “fiercely private habits” (372). Joyce in particular holds “responsibility for speaking what must be spoken...if the community is to function healthily because openly and honestly” (McCuskey 373).

Isabel's actions seems to outweigh a motive solely based in feelings of inadequacy brought on by her sister-in-law (304).

Implying a parallel between Cornelia's suppression of Isabel's rationality and her own potential suppression of the reader's, Wood reveals an awareness of didacticism's pitfalls. As we will see, rather than force readers to listen passively to her as author, Wood provides them with the tools to arrive at their own moral conclusions. Although she begs readers not to do what Isabel has done, Wood does not end the novel there, but draws the story out into a strange, liminal place in which Isabel must constantly reassess herself and her actions. Through Isabel's transformation in the latter part of the novel, Wood develops a method of moral reflection and self-interpretation that will help readers avoid Isabel's fate. Discovering a mode of moral expression that helps others while eluding any vain desire that others see her in a certain way, Isabel also answers to the concerns Wood faced as an author.

## 2.

After her departure from East Lynne, living in exile in France and finally realizing the futility of her hope that Levison will marry her and save their baby from illegitimacy, Isabel experiences a religious conversion and vows to "take up h[er] cross" (298). In the novel, cross bearing requires continuous assessment of one's motives, a distinct contrast to Cornelia's unreflective religious moralizing that constrains Isabel's self-understanding before her departure. The novel's epigraph, taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858),<sup>10</sup> stresses the importance of this image to Wood's theology in *East Lynne*: "Truly the heart is deceitful, and out of its depths of corruption / Rise, like an exhalation, the

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<sup>10</sup> Charles W. Wood interestingly describes the epigraph as "almost telling the burden of the book": "The text was so applicable to the story that Longfellow might have written it for that purpose. They are also some of his best and truest lines.... After that nearly all Mrs. Wood's mottoes were taken from Longfellow; every motto wonderfully fitting to its story" (208).

misty phantoms of passion; / Angels of light they seem, but are only delusions of Satan.... This is the cross I must bear; the sin and the swift retribution” (1). The passage suggests that misunderstanding obscure motives can cause sin; and that such sins require repentance. It also suggests, however, that this lack of clarity itself is the cross Isabel must bear; she must continually reassess her motives. But, Wood might add, given all we’ve seen thus far, Isabel must perform this reassessment in a way that does not perpetuate vanity itself. As we will see, Isabel’s disguised return to East Lynne allows her to embody a liminal state that keeps her self-aware without becoming self-obsessed.

The notion of a cross to bear represents one facet of the doctrine of atonement and salvation through Christ that was so central to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Evangelicalism. Describing the rise of Evangelicalism, W. E. Gladstone focuses distinctly on the cross: Evangelicalism “aimed at bringing back, on a large scale, and by an aggressive movement, the Cross, and all that the Cross essentially implies” (qtd. in Jay 51). Significantly, Elisabeth Jay notes that with this statement, Gladstone, “normally a precise and careful writer...was forced to generalize in...vague phrases” (51). Such vagueness may result from the difficulty of pinpointing what exactly the cross “implies.” In an 1856 tract, the Anglican bishop John Charles Ryle described atonement as “knowing” Christ, not just through “a kind of head knowledge,” but through an experiential knowledge of “the power of Christ’s Cross.” Such knowledge is difficult to attain, Ryle insists: “unless you know and feel within that the blood shed on that cross has washed away your own particular sins,--unless you are willing to confess that your salvation depends entirely on the work that Christ did upon the Cross,--unless this be the case, Christ will profit you nothing... You must know His Cross, and His Blood, or else you will die in your sins” (qtd. in Landow 17). Despite the difficulty of “know[ing] His Cross,” Ryle insists on its

necessity for salvation. Ryle's definition of "knowing" is multi-faceted, involving feeling and experiencing, but key for our concerns is that, despite the difficulty of achieving such knowledge, it must be obtained. One must be certain.

For Wood "the Cross essentially implies" a great deal, but its sacredness lies in its very ability to open up possibilities for interpretation. Wood's religious reflectiveness thus draws on evangelical tradition, but foregrounds self-questioning rather than sure knowledge. This unorthodox take may be better illuminated by contemporary religious philosopher John D. Caputo's reading of Christ and the atonement. "The Christian," according to Caputo,

is someone who confesses that the power of God is with Jesus, that Jesus is Emmanuel, which means 'God with us,' *and* at the same time, in the same breath, is continually disturbed by the question that Jesus asks, 'who do men say that I am?' (Matt. 16:15). Contrary to the condensed wisdom of the bumper stickers, Jesus is not The Answer but the place of the question, of an abyss that is opened up by the life and death of a man who, by putting forgiveness before retribution, threw all human accounting into confusion. (*On Religion* 35)

Bearing one's cross involves entering a state of questioning about the very nature of the cross itself. For Isabel this leads her to reflect on what exactly this act of atonement is and what successfully fulfilling it looks like. She must sort out the events that have caused her suffering, distinguishing God's will from her own will and from the will of the men who have controlled her life. It also requires that she recognize when bearing her cross itself becomes a response to her own will rather than God's—a risk she faces when the desire to bear her cross leads her back to East Lynne and the potential recognition of her family.

By bearing her cross, Isabel remedies the main sin that has brought her suffering: her "indifference." Pent up in a house Levison has procured for her in Grenoble, she is oppressed by knowledge of her sin, "not only of the one act of it, patent to scandalmongers, but of the long sinful life" in which she has "been carelessly indifferent." Isabel suddenly reaches "her wasted

hand” toward the Bible, which she used to read “more as a forced duty than with any other feeling.” Reading the verse from Luke, “If any man will come after me, let him take up his cross daily, and follow me” (298), Isabel vows to fight her indifference.<sup>11</sup> She leaves Grenoble, abandoning her hope for Levison to return and marry her, but is severely injured in a railway accident, her baby killed. Believing she will also die, Isabel tells a Sister of Charity about the harm she has caused at East Lynne. The sister advises Isabel to “make in this last moment an act of faith and obedience, by uniting your own will with His who sends this suffering” (321). Isabel understands bearing her cross to involve such a union of wills: she responds, “I will, I have taken up my cross” (322). Doing so requires not only that Isabel have a will, but that she be able to recognize it and then align it with God’s will.

Thus returning to East Lynne involves Isabel’s discovery of her will, revealing, perhaps surprisingly, Wood’s critique of feminine passivity. Looking over the events leading up to her departure, we can see more fully what Isabel means by indifference: she has not born her cross or aligned her will with God’s because she has not seen herself as having a will. Isabel demonstrates “the dangers” of becoming “the passive, dependent... woman of the domestic ideal”; she is “paradoxically both a victim and a villainess” (Pykett, *The 19th-Century Sensation Novel* 101). Where Lyn Pykett and others have deemed such ambivalence on Wood’s part unconscious and Isabel’s return to East Lynne as the novel’s adherence to the domestic ideal, however, I would argue that Wood purposefully counters this ideal. One clear sign of Wood’s turn here lies in her manipulation of the gospel: the verse from Luke on taking up one’s cross reads, “If any man will come after me, let him *deny himself, and* take up his cross daily, and

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<sup>11</sup> See Luke 9:23: “If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.” A similar passage appears in Matthew: “If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt. 16:24).

follow me” (Luke 9:23, emphasis added), but Wood omits the part about self-denial—suggesting that Isabel must first recognize her own will before submitting to God’s.

Wood also depicts Isabel’s lack of will as leading to her adulterous downfall. After her father’s death, Isabel follows only men’s wishes. Passed initially to the care of the next Lord Mount Severn and then to her husband, Isabel seems destined to live a life like that of Barbara’s mother, Mrs. Hare. As the wife of Justice Hare, a man who prefers that everything “be regulated by his own will” (184), Mrs. Hare “ha[s] no will”; her husband’s is “all in all” (21). Events leading up to Isabel’s departure only confirm this sense of her destiny. When Carlyle proposes marriage, Isabel hesitates to accept because she has feelings for Levison. Levison makes her decision for her, however: when she informs him that his congratulations on her engagement to Carlyle are premature, he reveals he has no plans to propose to her himself (122). Even Isabel’s elopement hardly seems her decision. Levison arranges for Isabel to witness Carlyle and Barbara’s “*tête-à-tête* by moonlight” (271). When Levison then encourages her to take revenge on her husband by running away, Isabel does not respond but begins sobbing. At this crucial moment in her story, we do not see her make any decision at all; she succumbs to Levison’s entreaties just as she collapses into his arms.

Wood thus traces the antecedents of what she calls Isabel’s “kidnapping” to demonstrate her heroine’s lack of agency. Her will is circumscribed, as we’ve seen, by that of the men around her. But she is also the plaything of chance. On the day Levison arrives at East Lynne Isabel’s servant Joyce has injured her ankle; her injury will keep her in bed (and away from Isabel) for weeks. When Levison realizes the opportunity this presents, he can hardly contain himself: he gleefully scoops up Isabel’s son “and sw[ings] him around” (279). Geraldine Jewsbury, publisher’s reader for Bentley and Son, recommended that this plot device be rethought,

complaining that “the incident of the fractured ankle is too palpably a predestination. The machinery is too visible” (Maunder 698). But Wood refused to change it, suggesting perhaps that she meant for the machinery to be visible.

In order to bear her cross, then, Isabel must discover her will and align it with God’s. But distinguishing God’s will from her own proves difficult. After the railway accident, Isabel experiences something quite distinct from indifference: a “vain yearning, [an] inward fever, [a] restless longing for what might not be. Longing for what? For her children” (389). Isabel’s yearnings for her children are answered when the opportunity arises to return to East Lynne to work as governess for Carlyle and his new wife, Barbara. But it is not clear that God wants her to return. Before she accepts the offer, Isabel deliberates over the moral implications:

She had a battle with herself that day. Now resolving to go, and risk it; now shrinking from the attempt. At one moment it seemed to her that Providence must have placed this opportunity in her way that she might see her children, in her desperate longing: at another, a voice appeared to whisper that it was a wily, dangerous temptation flung across her path, one which it was her duty to resist and flee from. (397-98)

Wood more fully outlines the ethical ambiguity of Isabel’s desire a few pages earlier. On the one hand, Isabel wants to know her children are safe and not suffering as a result of her departure. She worries “that she ha[s] abandoned them to be trained by strangers. Would they be trained to goodness, to morality, to religion? Careless as she herself had once been upon these points, she had learnt better now.” She especially wants to ensure that her daughter, also named Isabel, will not repeat her mistakes: “Would Isabel grow up to indifference, to—perhaps do as she had done?” (390). At the same time, this selfless desire to help her children risks becoming a selfish need to see them. When a mother is “separated for a while from her little children...the longing to see their little faces again...to feel their soft kisses, is kept under; and there may be frequent messages, ‘The children’s dear love to mamma:’ but, as the weeks lengthen out, the desire to see



them again becomes almost irrepressible” (389-90). Isabel wants to see her children, to give them her love, but her desire to give love is also a desire to *be* loved, “to feel their soft kisses” and even to be recognized as “mamma.” Isabel’s desire to return could be driven either by the altruistic aim to undo the suffering she has caused or by the vain desire to be loved.

Wood thus reveals both the possibilities and dangers Isabel’s feelings pose to her moral autonomy. Critics, however, have seen Wood’s interest in feeling as indicative of an unreflective reliance on the sentimental conventions of melodrama that perpetuates women’s passive, oppressed state. Ann Cvetkovich argues that the novel displaces the pain of women’s social oppression as wives onto the more manageable problem of women’s repressed emotion. According to Cvetkovich, the novel’s sentimental embrace of feminine suffering and release of tears through melodrama allow Isabel and the reader to feel they have been temporarily relieved from these limitations without addressing the larger socioeconomic limits they face as women. But Wood clearly holds a much more complex view of Isabel’s emotions.

Indeed, Isabel’s feelings simultaneously lead to moral action and threaten to infuse any such action with moral vanity. It becomes unclear whether God wills her to return to East Lynne or stay away, since both actions could be driven by selfish motives. At one point, Isabel wonders how she will “bear to see Mr. Carlyle the husband of another.” She decides, “It might be difficult but she could force and school her heart to endurance: had she not resolved...to *take up her cross* daily, and bear it? No; her own feelings...should not prove the obstacle” (398). Here Isabel’s “feelings” create an “obstacle” to God’s will that she return. But in further deliberations they prove the obstacle to God’s will that she stay away: her longing for her children “appeared to be overmastering all her powers of mind and body. The temptation at length proved too strong: the project, having been placed before her covetous eyes, could not be relinquished, and she finally

resolved *to go*.” Returning to East Lynne thus becomes an irresistible “temptation.” In yet further deliberation, however, Isabel sees staying away as equally a form of vanity, an avoidance of humiliation and of repentance: ““What is it that should keep me away?... The dread of discovery?... Deeper humiliation, than ever, would be my portion when they drive me from East Lynne with abhorrence and ignominy.” An embrace of the possibility of humiliation is the only guarantee that Isabel follows God’s will, but she is still not safe in her decision, as her determination to face humiliation verges on a narcissistic pleasure in imagining her own melodramatic, shame-ridden death: “I could bear that, as I must bear the rest, and I can shrink under some hedge and lay myself down to die. Humiliation for me! No; I will not put that in comparison with seeing and being with my children”” (398). Embracing humiliation risks the same vanity as avoiding humiliation. Isabel is in a double bind similar to—if more intense than—that of her author. She must find a way to give to her children what she can without seeking moral approbation or causing further pain.

As Isabel’s feelings obstruct her discernment of God’s will, the novel implies that the answer lies not in a straightforward question of action—should she return to East Lynne or stay away?—but in a more liminal existence that requires ongoing reassessment of her feelings. Through her deliberations, Isabel realizes that just because God has not willed her self-renunciatory retreat does not mean he wills her self-assertive intrusion into the Carlyles’ lives. Bearing her cross thus comes to mean choosing a difficult and open stance, one that keeps alive a multitude of possibilities of interpretation and action, since God’s will lies in an inarticulable place between retreat and intrusion.

Isabel’s disfigurement is essential to inhabiting this liminality. Such an experience, itself resulting from circumstances outside of her control, could of course just encourage further

“indifference,” and it does for a little while: “car[ing] little what became of her,” Isabel momentarily succumbs to her new existence “as one forgotten,” as one “unknown, obscure, unrecognized by all” (327). But then, when her “yearning” for her children becomes too strong, Isabel’s disfigurement becomes the means by which she can return to East Lynne and begin her atonement, disguised as the governess Madame Vine. The liminality her disfigurement allows, while indeed existing apart from a straightforward realm of action, is thus quite different from Isabel’s previous “indifference.” It is defined by the sacred uncertainty of the cross, that is, an impassioned state of deliberation rather than apathetic inactivity. Once she encounters old acquaintances in Germany who do not recognize her, Isabel becomes confident that she will not be recognized in East Lynne either. As she later explains, “the consequences and punishment [of returning] would be mine alone, so long as I guarded against discovery” (615). And, indeed, unrecognized back home, she is able to fulfill her most worthy aim: helping her children. As even Barbara, who “in her heart of hearts...ha[s] never liked” Madame Vine (594), admits, “You are all we could wish for Lucy: and Mr. Carlyle feels truly grateful for your love and attention to his poor boy” (592).

Back at East Lynne, Isabel may be constantly reminded of the consequences of her past, but she is also allowed to believe in the possibility of a new ethical identity. Her liminality, then, places her not only between self-assertion and self-renunciation, but also between self-remembering and self-forgetting. Seeing Barbara again, Isabel painfully remembers the first time they met: “She was Barbara Hare, then, but now she was Barbara Carlyle: and she, she, who had been Isabel Carlyle, was Isabel Vane again” (404). Witnessing Carlyle kiss his wife, she reminds herself that it is “part of the cross she ha[s] undertaken to carry, and she *must* bear it” (411). At one point, however, Isabel remembers her shame too intensely, causing her to retreat from her

duties and race up to her room, collapsing “in an agony of tears and despair” as she contemplates what her marriage might have been had she loved Carlyle “as she d[oes] now.” Observing Isabel wallowing in the knowledge that she is now “worse to him than nothing,” the narrator advises, “Softly, my lady! This is not bearing your cross” (474). Significantly, the narrator herself “intrudes” here to remind us of the problematic consequences of retreat, as if trying to help Isabel return to her place between the two extremes. Wood thus imagines a simultaneous spatial and temporal liminality for her heroine: Isabel must temper the humiliation of remembrance with a certain amount of forgetting that gives her the courage to care for her children.

However, Isabel must not forget herself so much that she falls into self-righteousness. Isabel temporarily assumes a perspective of moral and social superiority as she admonishes the Carlyles for their denigration of Lady Isabel’s memory and their treatment of her children. When discussing her son William’s illness with Carlyle, Isabel “almost forg[ets], as they st[and] there together, talking of the welfare of the child, their child, that he [i]s no longer her husband” (443). Isabel often “almost forgets,” suggesting a desire to be recognized in her previous identity as Lady Isabel Carlyle. For example, when Carlyle asks Isabel not to tell Barbara about the severity of William’s illness, for fear of “griev[ing] or alarm[ing]” her, Isabel “passionately, fiercely, resentfully,” responds, “Why should she be either grieved or alarmed? She is not his mother.” Carlyle tells her she “speak[s] hastily,” and she feels his “reproof,” but for different reasons than he thinks: it causes her to “remember...who she [i]s; remember...it with shame and humiliation. She, the governess!” (521). Bearing her cross requires Isabel to position herself between forgetting and remembering, unselfconsciousness and self-consciousness with regard to an audience in order to gain some sense that she does right. Isabel’s liminality thus addresses the problem of moral vanity and feminine self-consciousness that women in the novel face. As we

will see, it also provides Wood's readers with an independent method of self-reflection and allows Wood to imagine a method of authorial moral expression that works around these concerns.

3.

Isabel must find a way to guarantee her moral sincerity independently. It seems that, working in a didactic tradition, Wood wants to teach readers a similar method. Indeed, her critique of the novel's reliance on a narrator figure to provide this guarantee suggests that she sought a solution for real women in the real world. In the early scene in which Isabel sings hymns unconscious of her admiring audience, the narrator and her father attest to Isabel's unselfconsciousness. It becomes clear, however, that such entirely unselfconscious purity of expression is ineffective; indeed, it is really only discernible in narrative form. Isabel sings a hymn based on a passage from Luke: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel: for he hath visited and redeemed his people. And hath raised up a mighty salvation for us: in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68-69 qtd. in Wood 67). As Jay points out in her notes to the novel, "The line from the Benedictus that Wood chooses to quote has an ironic relevance to Carlyle's role in 'restoring the house of Vane,' though sadly he will be unable to save Isabel from 'her enemies, and from the hand of all that hate [her]'" (628, 67n). Once Isabel has left her father's and her husband's home, she has no one to interpret her moral character for her. The second Lord Mount Severn does offer this sort of "narration" when he visits Isabel in Grenoble, claiming that when a woman finds herself in such an "inexplicable" position, "it is a father's duty to look into motives and causes and actions.... Your father is gone, but I stand in his place: there is no one else to stand in it" (304). Having considered the "motives and causes and actions" of Isabel's departure, the Earl blames Isabel less than Levison, who refused to marry her, and his own wife, Lady

Mount Severn, who pushed the penniless and parentless Isabel into marrying Carlyle to get her out of her home (308, 310). The Earl might offer the sort of narration women lack in the real world, but it remains private, and does not persuade others of Isabel's goodness.

Isabel thus finds a way to save herself through bearing her cross, an act that takes her prayer into the world and makes it more central to her daily thoughts and actions. As Isabel attempts to distinguish God's will from her own, she can only deliberate for so long before she must act on the understanding gained from her deliberations. She chooses to return to East Lynne, an act that is distinctly closer to intrusion than retreat, but she has faith that she still follows God's will, continuing to inhabit a place between these two extremes. Wood identifies this reliance on faith as simultaneously a problem and a possibility as Isabel attempts to ascertain her own sincerity.

Indeed, the end of the novel seems to test the limits of this virtual intrusion: how publicly can Isabel speak her prayers without losing their liminality? As the question of sincerity concerns her moral expression in addition to her physical actions, Isabel's situation more vividly calls out to Wood's experience as a didactic author. Aware of her impending death, Isabel takes an irreversible step closer to asking for recognition of her moral expression when she reveals herself to Cornelia and Carlyle and asks their forgiveness. Carlyle at first doubts Isabel's repentant speech: "Was she equivocating to him on her death-bed?" (614). Isabel can only go so far to convince Carlyle and herself of her earnestness, but Carlyle and Isabel both choose to have faith, expressing this with the same simple phrase: "Yes, yes." Just after Carlyle tells her he forgives her, Isabel "murmur[s]," partly to herself, partly to Carlyle, "To His Rest in Heaven.... Yes, yes: I know that God has forgiven me. Oh, what a struggle it has been!" In response to Isabel's

request that he “keep a little corner in [his] heart” for her, Carlyle too “whisper[s],” “Yes, yes” (617).

This scene represents a turning from Isabel’s liminal state toward a state of affirmation, but affirmation that relies on an acknowledgment of uncertainty. “Yes, yes,” or “yea, yea,” appears several places in the New Testament, always with regard to the sincerity of one’s speech.<sup>12</sup> Its appearance in the Sermon on the Mount provides the most likely context for Wood’s use of the phrase, given her reliance in the novel on the Gospels of Matthew and Luke:<sup>13</sup>

Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more of these cometh of evil. (Matt. 5:33-37)

This passage, explicating the Old Testament prohibition against false oaths, points out the ambiguity in any oath, the danger in presuming such control over the world, language, and one’s motives. Rather than make blindly ostentatious oaths or refrain from making oaths altogether, one must “perform unto the Lord [one’s] oaths,” but only with the temperateness of saying simply yes, yes or no, no. Such temperateness lies in these words’ acknowledgment of the inevitable uncertainty of human motive and language—and the quiet momentary embrace of certainty anyway. It is only after recognizing such uncertainty that sincere faith in the possibility

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<sup>12</sup> See Matthew 5:33-37, 2 Corinthians 1:17-20, and James 5:12.

<sup>13</sup> Among Wood’s many Biblical allusions are repeated references to Matthew and Luke, as in Isabel’s talk of taking up her cross. Additionally, Carlyle cites a verse from Luke, “Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery” (Luke 16:18 qtd. in Wood 319), that closely recalls Matthew 5:32, the verse that immediately precedes the passage from Matthew above. In Matthew 5:32, Jesus proclaims, “whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery,” a statement with obvious implications for the novel. Considering its proximity to the passage above and Wood’s attention to both Matthew and Luke in particular, it seems likely that Carlyle’s and Isabel’s “yes, yes” here draws on Matthew’s “yea, yea.” (The “yea, yea” is frequently translated as “yes, yes,” and would, in fact, appear as such shortly after *East Lynne* was published, in an 1862 translation of the Bible—Young’s Literal Translation, by the Scottish publisher Robert Young, a member of the evangelical Free Church of Scotland.)

of certainty is possible. Although the novel is ambiguous in the end about whether or not Carlyle truly forgives Isabel (he at one point draws away from her, “with a scarlet flush” [616], caused either by renewed anger at the thought of Levison or just by a remembrance of his fidelity to his current wife), it seems Wood asks readers to consider the *yes, yes* as approaching the kind of virtuous expression she has sought. Compared to the novel’s more extreme images commonly associated with Victorian melodrama, the quietness of the *yes, yes* complicates our sense of Wood’s moral aims and puts, as we will see, a much more positive spin on Isabel’s death and the novel’s end.

The *yes, yes* is not the blindly static expression of belief associated with typical understandings of Victorian didacticism. The word “yes” holds special significance in Christian tradition and beyond; as Jacques Derrida has demonstrated, its implicit doubling into *yes, yes* brings the instability of language and the possibility for virtuous expression to the fore.<sup>14</sup> Derrida considers a line from the seventeenth-century German poet and mystic Angelus Silesius, “*Gott spricht nur immer Ja / God never says but Yes [or: I am],*” in which the phoneme *Ja* signifies both “yes” and “I am” (as in *Jahveh*) (qtd. in Derrida 121).<sup>15</sup> It thus brings together the “limitless” Christian “yes” (the apostle Paul said about Christ, “In him there is only yes”) and the “separations and distinctions utilized by all of Hebraic epistemology” (Derrida 122)—in a similar way, I would argue, to the Sermon on the Mount’s reinterpretation of the Old Testament prohibition against false oaths. The line “reminds us of ‘the identity between the Christly ‘yes’ and the ‘I am (the Other)’ of the burning bush,” suggesting that the Christian yes holds within it

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<sup>14</sup> It might strike some as incongruous to compare the thought of Ellen Wood to that of Derrida, but given Wood’s attention to the double bind women faced with the interpretation of their moral character—the way women’s attempt at “modesty” often becomes interpreted as its opposite—a deconstructive ethics seems the most plausible direction for her thoughts toward a solution. For another study that recognizes Wood’s ethical investment in a deconstructionist style of thought, see Marlene Tromp, who examines Wood’s vexing of conventional Victorian understandings of “justice” by employing Derrida’s notion of justice as located in “the undecidable.”

<sup>15</sup> Derrida’s comments here are also an interpretation of Michel de Certeau’s reading of the same line.



an acknowledgement (“*neither Judaic nor Christian*”) of what Derrida calls “the fable inscribed in the *yes* as the origin of every word” (124). The *yes*, he explains, is a word,

And yet, implied by all the other words whose source it figures, it also remains silent.... It exceeds and incises language, to which it remains nonetheless immanent: like language’s first dweller, the first to step out of its home. It *brings to being* and *lets be* everything which can be said. But its intrinsic double nature is already discernable, or more precisely, it is already confirmed. It is and is not of language.... For if it is ‘before’ language, it marks the essential exigency, the promise, the engagement to come to language. (Derrida 125-26)

The *yes* thus affirms the power of language and simultaneously reminds us of the instability on which language is founded.

The repetition of *yes* in Matthew and in *East Lynne* seems to acknowledge this special relationship that the *yes* holds to the simultaneous certainty and uncertainty through which language operates. Derrida argues that at the origins of the *yes* (and thus the origins of language) lies “the fatality of *repetition*, and of repetition as an *incisive opening*” that implicitly doubles and/or splits the *yes* into *yes, yes*:

Let us suppose a first *yes*, the arche-originary *yes* which engages, promises and acquiesces before all else. On the one hand it is originarily, in its very structure, a response. It is *firstly second*, coming after a demand, a question or another *yes*. On the other hand, as an engagement or a promise, it must *at least* bind itself beforehand to a confirmation in a next *yes*.... Since the second *yes* resides in the first, the repetition augments and divides, distributing *in advance* the arche-originary *yes*. This repetition, which figures the condition of an opening of the *yes*, menaces it as well. (130-31)

Expressing one’s faith by saying *yes, yes* returns one to a place of original affirmation, on which language is founded, but also serves as a reminder that, even in its originary state, that affirmation responds to something that requires affirmation (and thereby is not affirmation). The affirmation implied by the *yes, yes* is thus by no means final; the structure of the phrase holds within it an openness to future uncertainty.

Memory and forgetting become important to this acknowledgment, since the first yes requires future confirmation and remembrance with the second yes, but at the same time, the second yes “must come as an absolute renewal, again absolutely, once again absolutely inaugural and ‘free,’ failing which it could only be a natural, psychological or logical consequence”—in Isabel’s and Wood’s case, an overly self-conscious need to convince others of one’s sincerity. The second yes “must act as if the ‘first’ were forgotten, far enough past to require a new, initial *yes*. This ‘forgetting’ is not *psychological* or accidental, it is structural, the very condition of fidelity, of both the possibility and impossibility of a signature” (Derrida 131). The simultaneousness of this remembering and forgetting calls to mind Isabel’s attempt to bear her cross. Isabel’s liminality seems one possible response to the inevitable question of what it might look like not to “forswear thyself” but to “perform unto the Lord thine oaths.” At the end of the novel, Isabel finally reaches a point at which she can say *yes, yes* to herself, recognizing or “remembering” that she has indeed already “said” it through her actions at East Lynne to God.

Carlyle, on the other hand, never makes it clear that he fully understands the instability of moral language that the *yes, yes* acknowledges, and in fact, at the end of the novel, Wood has him espouse the kind of moralizing message for which she herself was criticized. The novel ends with Carlyle telling Barbara, “Every good thing will come with time that we earnestly seek.... Oh, Barbara, never forget—never forget that the only way to ensure peace in the end, is, to strive always to be doing right, unselfishly, under God” (624). Wood might agree with Carlyle’s claim, but she also implies that earnestness, doing right, and unselfishness require continuous reassessment and even some “forgetting”; they are not the static, easily interpreted virtues Carlyle straightforwardly promotes here. Wood makes a radical suggestion with Carlyle’s comparative obliviousness, that the gendered restrictions women face with the interpretation of

their moral characters force them to think about these issues in much more innovative ways than men. Carlyle sums up the novel with his earnest statement, but the fact that it took an entire novel to get to these few sentences of “truth” suggests the underlying instability of these terms. In contrast, Isabel acknowledges “the struggle it has been” to reach a place where she can finally say *yes, yes*.

There is, of course, a negative side to such uncertainty, the idea that one can never be successful in one’s repentance, a belief common to nineteenth-century evangelicalism that the narrator voices near the novel’s end: “The very best man that attains to the greatest holiness on earth has need constantly to strive and pray, if he would keep away evil from his thoughts, passions from his nature. His life must be spent in self-watchfulness; he must ‘pray always,’ at morning, at evening, at mid-day: and he cannot do it then” (590). Wood’s skepticism about the possibility of knowing one’s will from moment to moment risks taking on a negativity that often leads Isabel’s constant self-questioning to be read as an oppressive masochism rather than a path toward moral autonomy, her death the novel’s final word on her behavior, a punishment for her transgressions.

As we have seen, however, Isabel’s time at East Lynne, while often painful, offers a second lease on life—something rare within Victorian representations of fallenness. As Ellen Bayuk Rosenman points out, “Whereas her father’s fall led to a double stasis in both death and the grotesque arrest of his corpse for non-payment of debts, Isabel rises from both shame and the grave for a second, unauthorized life...her body may be condemned and maimed, but it will not be arrested” (27). Isabel’s fate differs from the many Victorian narratives in which a fallen woman’s fate lies only in unabated shame and then death. The positive bent of Isabel’s self-questioning and moral transformation only increases as the novel approaches its end, establishing

value in having faith in oneself and others despite intense skepticism. Even Isabel's death is more accurately viewed in a positive light: interpreting the deaths of several Wood heroines, Anne-Marie Beller identifies a "tension...between a Christian eschatology and the representational codes of contemporary visual art and literature, which repeatedly encoded the dead or dying woman within a rhetoric of fallenness." Taking Wood's expression of religious belief into account, Beller concludes that Isabel's death is more "heavenly reward" than "punishment" (220). Wood, like many religious Victorians, would have viewed the death of a properly repentant individual as much more satisfying than we might today.

Isabel's final rest in God serves as a literal rendering of the affirmative value Wood sees in fiction that encourages readers toward self-reflection and moral questioning. A few years after the publication of *East Lynne*, the book review section of Wood's *Argosy Magazine* (believed to be written by Wood herself) would declare, "The end of art is not so much to satisfy as to create a noble unrest, in which lies the root of a deeper repose" (316).<sup>16</sup> This line revises in more directly aesthetic, secular terms the famous claim from the Gospel of Matthew, alluded to by Mrs. Hare in *East Lynne*, that "there will be a blessed rest for the weary" who find faith in Jesus as the path to "knowing" God (428).<sup>17</sup> Isabel may only reach this rest in the most traditional, literal form, through death, announcing, "To his Rest in Heaven" just before claiming, "Yes, yes:

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<sup>16</sup> This is the first line of the *Argosy's* September 1868 "Log-Book," a monthly review forum. Wood purchased the *Argosy*, a literary magazine in which she would publish many of her own stories, in 1867 and served as editor until her death in 1887. Charles W. Wood, Malcolm Elwin, and, more recently, Maunder all "suggest that Wood wrote at least half of the *Argosy's* contents herself, with only the help of a small staff of writers" (Phegley 188). Phegley argues, "it is likely that she wrote the magazine's most prominent book review section herself, taking cover under the guise of anonymity." If Wood did not write this line, she "certainly seems to have used her editorial control to guide the critical showcase of the magazine toward redefining the terms that influenced the reception of her own fiction" (Phegley 188).

<sup>17</sup> "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and *he* to whomsoever the Son will reveal *him*. Come unto me, all *ye* that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matt. 11:27-29).

I know that God has forgiven me.” But her story grants readers this possibility more figuratively, cultivating “a noble unrest” that continuously allows for “deeper repose” through life.<sup>18</sup>

In the end, the novel reassures those readers who have faith in the earnestness of Isabel’s moral expressions and actions, demonstrating that her decision to reveal herself brings more good than bad to East Lynne. It results, for one, in Cornelia’s atonement for the wrongs she has committed with her religious moralizing and criticism of Isabel. Dying, Isabel asks Cornelia to forgive her, crying, “Jesus did not come, you know, to save the good, like you: he came for the sake of us poor sinners.” The narrator, giving us a glimpse of Cornelia’s thoughts, makes Wood’s interest in the instability of moral language explicit: “The good, like you!... the words grated...fiercely on her conscience.” Cornelia realizes at that moment “that the harsh religion she had, through life, professed, was not the religion that would best bring peace to her dying bed.” In a tone more heartfelt and intimate than any we have heard her use previously, Cornelia asks if she drove Isabel from East Lynne. Isabel responds that she did not and instead asks her for forgiveness. Cornelia “inwardly breath[s],” “Thank God!” but immediately reveals her newly acquired responsiveness, replying, “ ‘Forgive *me*,’ ...aloud and in agitation, touching her hand. ‘I could have made your home happier, and I wish I had done it. I have wished it ever since you left it’” (612). Cornelia’s exchange with Isabel appears the first step toward a self-reflectiveness that might temper her moralizing stance toward others.

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<sup>18</sup> The affirmative nature of this “noble unrest” resembles that found more recently in Derrida’s work, which has previously been seen as nihilistic or at least as promoting a negative ethical vigilance. Derrida himself claimed in 1989 that he had been “read less and less well over almost twenty years, like my religion about which nobody understands anything” (qtd. in Caputo, *Prayers and Tears* xvii). Caputo fleshes out what Derrida means here by looking in particular at his work on negative or apophatic theology. “Deconstruction is never merely negative,” Caputo argues; rather it “is thoroughly mistrustful of discourses that prohibit this and prohibit that, that weigh us down with debts and ‘don’ts.’ Deconstruction is so deeply and abidingly affirmative—of something new, of something coming—that it finally breaks out in a vast and sweeping amen, a great *oui, oui—à l’impossible*, in a great burst of passion for the impossible” (*Prayers and Tears* 3).

The novel's final scene also reveals that the most morally worthy aim leading Isabel to return to East Lynne, her desire to save her children from suffering from her actions, will be fulfilled beyond her death because of her final irreversible intrusion into the Carlyles' lives. Informed of Madame Vine's real identity upon return from the seaside, Barbara immediately questions Carlyle's loyalty. He embraces her, promising that she has no reason to doubt him (623). This open exchange leads Barbara to admit and ask forgiveness for her own failing. She confesses, "there has been a feeling in my heart against your children, a sort of jealous feeling... because they were hers; because she had once been your wife. I knew how wrong it was, and I have tried earnestly to subdue it... I think it is nearly gone. I"—her voice sunk lower—"constantly pray to be helped to do it; to love them and care for them as if they were my own" (624). On the novel's final page, we see the positive motive for Isabel's return fulfilled beyond her death, as a direct result of her having returned to East Lynne *and* revealed herself. Taking her "prayers" more directly into the world encourages Barbara to do the same.

With Carlyle's comment about "earnestly... doing right, unselfishly, under God," the novel ends on a note of moral confidence that, when juxtaposed with the patterns of questioning and ambiguity throughout, suggests that the question remains whether or not readers can find the same faith in Wood's motives as they may have with Isabel. Struggling against stereotypes of moral vanity, Wood, like Isabel returning to her children, seems to try to access the part of herself that can give love rather than the part that just wants to be loved. Wood grasps at this relation to the reader through the sense of audience she constructs through Isabel's liminality, putting herself among others, in a position that allows her moral agency, but in doing so, walking a fine line between truly acting morally and acting for recognition. As Madame Vine, Isabel works to understand herself through her interactions with others, but strives against the

possibility that shaping others' views of her would become her primary motive. The complexity of Isabel's actions at East Lynne—which are self-reflective and morally efficacious but also rhetorically empowering—is never advertised overtly; her ability to maneuver around stereotypical interpretations of women's moral character is never obvious enough to imply that Wood has something to prove about herself. Perhaps for this reason the parallel between Isabel's actions in returning to East Lynne and Wood's expressions of moral belief as author can only remain speculative. But the search for a similar voice, with its unique sense of the relation between self and audience, drives novelists like George Eliot's and Sarah Grand's experimentation with narrative technique and the role of the implied author later in the century. Despite their more secular worldview and method of self-reflection, these authors similarly see something in the form of Judeo-Christian prayer, with its private appeals outward and the need for faith that it conjures, that allows them to believe in the possibility of this voice.

### CHAPTER 3

“Something quite new in the form of womanhood”:

Reimagining “Lady Novelists” and the Realist Novel in *Daniel Deronda*

Early on in her career, the writer who would be known as George Eliot championed a realist aesthetic that lay in direct opposition to moralistic didacticism. Repeatedly in essays such as “The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*” (1855) and “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming” (1855), Marian Evans noted that a tendency to moralize hindered one’s access to life’s truths. In “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), generally understood as an early argument for Eliot’s brand of realism, she claimed that “a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves.” Such a picture can do “more...toward obliterating the vulgarity of exclusiveness, than...hundreds of sermons and philosophical dissertations” (Evans 54). For Evans, sermonizing obstructed artists’ depiction of life “apart from themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

In “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856), Evans examined the moralizing tendency of women novelists in particular. She expressed concern that the woman writer “has a feverish consciousness of her attainments; she keeps a sort of mental pocket-mirror, and is continually looking in it at her own ‘intellectuality’” (454-55). Such vanity emerges in her didacticism. Again expressing a belief that didacticism lay in direct opposition to realism, Evans claims, “the ability of a lady novelist to describe actual life and her fellow-men is in inverse proportion to her

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot subscribed to a notion of realism that believed “one can only be objective by virtue of the moral strength of self-restraint” (Levine 149). This idea “is visible,” George Levine writes, “from George Eliot’s intervention in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, to Thackeray’s self-conscious representation of his own artifices and their distance from truth in *Vanity Fair*, to Trollope’s determination never to trick the reader with surprises, to Charlotte Brontë’s earnest insistence on making the narrative of *Shirley* as ordinary as Monday morning” (149).



confident eloquence about God and the other world” (450). Evans singles out “oracular” works, those “intended to expound the writer’s religious, philosophical or moral theories” as “[t]he most pitiable of all silly novels by lady novelists” (449). Interestingly for our concerns, Evans ties such oracular works to “High Church” authors (455), but she also criticizes Evangelical novels “in which the vicissitudes of the tender passion are sanctified by saving views of Regeneration and the Atonement” (456). If essays like “The Natural History of German Life” helped Eliot define her novelistic realism, “Silly Novels” helped her define her identity as a writer. By labeling work by such “ladies” as “silly” and choosing a masculine pseudonym, Eliot identified herself as a different kind of novelist.

Nevertheless, as this chapter argues, Eliot was not finished thinking about women novelists’ vexed relationship with the expression of moral belief. Having been accused of moralizing about the plight of women in *Middlemarch* (1871-72), Eliot worked to neutralize criticisms of women’s oppression in the second edition. But just two years later, in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), she would consider how such an avoidance of moralizing could signal its own kind of moralizing self-consciousness. As we’ve seen with Sewell and Wood, women’s attempts at unselfconsciousness were often viewed as a form of moral vanity. In her final novel, Eliot recognizes the difficulties of this interpretive dynamic. Inevitably failing to live up to expectations of self-renunciation, characters like Mirah Lapidoth and Gwendolen Harleth seem fated to vacillate between the extremes of “embarrassment and boldness” (Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* 192). “Boldness” in the novel is aligned with unreflective moral vanity, “embarrassment” with the self-berating realization that, thanks to the nature of self-consciousness, such vanity can be impossible to avoid. In this way, Eliot’s “embarrassment and boldness” recall the dynamic we saw with Wood, in which women who avoid association with feminine vanity, shame, and

fallenness become subject to moral vanity. But Eliot shows that this dynamic works in the opposite direction as well: those who avoid association with feminine moralizing become subject to apologetic “embarrassment” that can carry the stigma of moralizing *and* fallen shame at the same time. The novel describes this as “fall[ing] into the apologetic philosophy which explains the world into containing nothing better than one’s own conduct” (177). Fallenness was not only associated with the public self-promotion of the prostitute. As Amanda Anderson has shown, it was also associated with the self-laceration implicit in an attempt at accurate moral self-reflection.<sup>2</sup> Eliot thus suggests that part of women’s interpretive difficulties stemmed from the fact that they confronted fallenness no matter which way they turned.

The novel anticipates a dynamic that would shape Eliot criticism for years to come. While promoting sympathy for Jewish struggle, Eliot did not stray from her ongoing goal of “amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot” (Evans, “Natural History” 54). Nevertheless, critics accused her of an aggressively didactic aim, sparking a reputation for moralizing that grew throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Contemporary readings have countered this idea, tracing Eliot’s complex self-questioning and continual undermining of the moral values her work puts forth. Such readings, however, associate her with the apologetic skepticism that she viewed as equally problematic.

Eliot thus considers the idea in her final novel that the divide between realism and didacticism might not be so clear-cut. If didactic authors like Sewell and Wood demonstrate that didacticism’s moral lessons were more realistic in their broad-minded acknowledgment of moralism’s challenges, Eliot approaches this issue from the other direction, acknowledging that realism always has a bit of the didactic in it. Denying this fact (as Eliot often felt forced to do) risks its own moral vanity.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (1993).

This chapter traces Eliot's reconceptualization of the relationship between realism and didacticism. Although Eliot had earlier derided lady novelists of the High Church and Evangelical schools, her comparison of novelistic narrative to prayer in *Daniel Deronda* recalls similar comparisons in Sewell's and Wood's novels. Eliot's narrative achieves subtle rhetorical power by approximating a secular understanding of prayer as a "form" of "self-oblivious" expression that "seeks for nothing special" (310). This self-obliviousness is not a selfless renunciation in relation to others but a simultaneous obliviousness of others too. In this mode, the obsessive consciousness of audience and the urgent intent of communication associated with both moralizing boldness and self-conscious embarrassment fall away, while the author's moral message still emerges. Even as Eliot adds to her stance on Jewish struggle a more personally charged stance on women's (and women authors') rights, the novel exudes a quiet, balanced confidence in its devotion to sympathetic realism *and* a didactic aim.

Critics condemned the political stances in Eliot's fiction for the same reasons they condemned Sewell and Wood: they saw these stances as reflective of Eliot's desire to demonstrate her own moral rectitude. I will thus refer to this alleged crime as "moralizing," even when the message Eliot espouses is political. But such messages are usually moral *and* political, just as Sewell's and Wood's were moral and religious. Indeed, the novel comments on the oppression of women and Jews in society, but it imagines a moral solution to these problems in the form of sympathy.

#### 1.

The novel examines the constraints on women's moral character through the two female interests of Daniel Deronda, Gwendolen Harleth and Mirah Lapidoth. Both search for their place in the world. Gwendolen, a young woman of the gentry class who has recently experienced

financial ruin after the death of her stepfather, marries Henleigh Grandcourt for his financial stability but ultimately looks to Deronda for moral guidance and affection. Mirah, a young, homeless Jewish woman who has escaped a career as an actress, a betrothal to a man she doesn't love, and the father who forced her into both, seeks Deronda's help finding the mother and brother she lost when her father kidnapped her from England years before. In their search for a proper place, Gwendolen and Mirah also search for a proper moral character. They struggle with the expectation of feminine unselfconsciousness we've seen critiqued by Sewall and Wood, the idea that women are "delicate vessels" bearing "the treasure of human affections," that "girls and their blind visions...are the Yea or Nay of that good for which men are enduring and fighting" (103).<sup>3</sup> Of course, with the term "blind visions," Eliot's narrator reveals some ambivalence in this view that women embody goodness by their very nature, that they do not have to "endur[e] and fight" for it, nor, with their "blind visions," use active reflection to gauge it.

In Gwendolen, this lack of self-reflection has encouraged vanity and selfishness. With Deronda's help, she becomes receptive to self-criticism, but the kind that shades into "a strong self-love without any self-satisfaction, rather with a self-discontent" (13). Gwendolen's situation recalls the problem of "paralyzing self-consciousness" that recurred in narratives of moral development in the nineteenth century (Anderson, *Tainted Souls* 18). Anderson has demonstrated that the figure of the fallen woman served to displace the problem of self-consciousness in moral discourse. John Stuart Mill, for example, laments in his *Autobiography* (1873) that the self-reflection essential to moral character often undermined his moral autonomy. Mill imagines himself in an implicitly sexual and feminized subject position, describing the problem as

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<sup>3</sup> The narrator's use of the term "girls" rather than "women" here is meant to signal the difference between the "girls" in England who are expected to remain innocently unconscious of the more serious dramas of the world, and the "women" in America who have faced a civil war and courageously refuse to "mourn for the husbands and sons who died bravely in a common cause" (102).

“weigh[ing] on [his] existence like an incubus” (108). Since fallenness was associated with a lack of control over the development of one’s character, “the ideal of feminine virtue, insofar as it neglect[ed] ‘the internal culture of the individual,’ c[ould] actually promote rather than prevent fallenness” (Anderson, *Tainted Souls* 37). Fittingly, Gwendolen’s own belated self-consciousness leads her at its extreme to imagine herself in a position of fallenness, the diamond necklace from Grandcourt (previously owned by the “fallen” Lydia Glasher) representing this idea in her mind.

Mirah tries to avoid a similarly debilitating state of mind through a self-renouncing focus on others. Upon entering England after escaping her father’s grasp, the once self-assured Mirah suddenly worries that she “look[s] like a miserable beggar-girl” (188): “I looked like a street-beggar.... All who saw me would think ill of me.... I dreaded lest any stranger should notice me and speak to me” (188-89). Mirah’s image of herself as a “street-beggar” approaches the figure that epitomized fallenness for Victorians—the streetwalker or prostitute. Unable to bear her morbid self-consciousness, Mirah tries to drown herself. After she is rescued by Deronda, however, Mirah’s attentions swing the opposite direction, as, in an act of ongoing self-renunciation, she devotes herself to others like Deronda and, eventually, her brother Mordecai. But, ironically, as she loses sight of herself in one sense, Mirah develops a sense of superiority based on an illusory belief in her selflessness. In this case, the negative connotation of the narrator’s claim that “girls” have “blind visions” about morality emerges more strongly. Displaying an extreme version of the dynamic we’ve seen epitomized in earlier discourse by the “prude” and the “coquette,” Mirah’s narrative intimates that women are pushed toward moral egotism in order to distance themselves from associations with fallenness.

Indeed, Mirah's unreflective sense of moral superiority leads her to imagine herself in direct opposition to Gwendolen, whom she compares to an actress self-consciously dependent on the gaze of an audience. When asked her impression of Gwendolen, Mirah compares her, "with a quick intensity," to "the *Princess of Eboli* in *Don Carlos*," a figure associated "in her...mind...with a certain actress as well as the part she represented" (562). The association is clearly negative, considering the deceitful character of the Princess of Eboli and Mirah's own rejection of the life of an actress. Mirah's "repugnance" for Gwendolen causes her to "conceive...more evil than she kn[ows]" (628), her self-renunciation thus leading to the inaccurate representation of others and a blindness toward herself.

Mirah eventually realizes this problem, rejecting Mordecai's admiration of her feminine ability for "love that loses self in the object of love." Mordecai illustrates his claim with a Midrashic story of a woman in love with a king who loves a different woman in prison awaiting execution. The first woman's love for the king leads her to exchange clothes with the second woman and "d[ie] in her stead." Mirah protests that the first woman "wanted the king when she was dead to know what she had done, and feel that she was better than the other. It was her strong self, wanting to conquer, that made her die" (629). Having experienced the moral vanity of self-renunciation, Mirah rejects her brother's admiration of this quality. But, as Eliot experienced, rejecting such associations for yourself does not guarantee that others interpreting you will do the same.

As we've seen, Eliot worked to avoid the associations with moral vanity that emerged from expectations of feminine selflessness. But she was not always successful. In his 1872 review of *Middlemarch*, Richard Holt Hutton accused Eliot of "attempt[ing]...to represent the book as an elaborate contribution to the 'Woman's' question" and "meting out unjust measure to

the entirely untrammelled imaginative power which the book displays” (1555). Hutton referred to the final chapter’s lamentation of heroine Dorothea’s existence in a society that “smiled on propositions of marriage from a sickly man to a girl less than half his own age” and that encouraged “modes of education which make a woman’s knowledge another name for motley ignorance” (810, 784n). Hutton framed Eliot’s appeal on behalf of women as symptomatic of her excessive dependence on an audience, noting her need to “represent” her work “as an elaborate contribution” to moral and political understanding.

The review illustrates a widespread expectation, embraced in the past by Eliot herself, that authors should leave themselves out of their novels and that the only moral message conveyed by their realism should be an implicit one concerning its selfless objectivity. Eliot would subject this idea to scrutiny, however, through the protagonist of her next novel. Recalling the main quality Eliot sought with her own realism, Deronda is defined by his “activity of imagination on behalf of others” (151). In a way, Deronda authors Mirah’s new life in England, providing her shelter and a means of subsistence by advertising her abilities as a music teacher, narrating her good character to others. Deronda even refers to his actions in literary terms: planning Mirah and Mordecai’s reunion, he “beg[s]” Mrs Meyrick “to make the revelation instead of waiting for him” because he dreads “going again through a narrative in which he seem[s] to be making himself important, and giving himself a character of general beneficence” (496). He thus positions himself selflessly outside the narrative his perspective has made happen, as a realist author who wants to avoid moralizing might.

Eliot expresses discomfort that this avoidance can exude its own kind of moral vanity. After all, Eliot’s response to Hutton’s criticisms would have suggested a similar concern for audience. In the 1874 edition of *Middlemarch*, Eliot erased the feminist undertones, lamenting

only the “determined” existence of “creatures” in general (784-85). Nevertheless, as we’ve seen, a public accusation of self-consciousness, if not accurate at first, always becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Eliot’s revision intimates a desire to demonstrate her “untrammled” authorial selflessness, a selflessness that is doomed to fail because it is driven by others’ expectations.

As Eliot will show, the attempt to avoid moralizing can not only seem moralizing in its own way; it can also take on the traits of a self-conscious fallenness—the other quality women authors had to avoid. Eliot explores this circular bind through Deronda. She gives him a distinctly feminine air, associating him with the angelic nature that, as we’ve seen with Mirah, always verges on moral vanity.<sup>4</sup> Deronda is defined by an “affectionateness such as we are apt to call feminine” (271) and often calls to mind the angel in the house, the wife who serves as the ideal by which her husband gauges his moral character. Deronda “becom[es] a part of [Gwendolen’s] conscience, as one woman whose nature is an object of reverential belief may become a new conscience to a man” (356).

Like Mirah, Deronda realizes the risks inherent in being an icon of selflessness. But he struggles in his attempt to prove that he is not moralizing in this role. Although Deronda is quick to distance his care for Mirah from any self-aggrandizing motives, the more self-negating he does, the more he prides himself on his selflessness. He feels threatened by others, like “the marplot Hans” or Mirah’s mother and brother, who might take away from his singularly benevolent role in Mirah’s life (319-20). Realizing this problem to some extent, Deronda turns to Gwendolen to avoid it (192, 319). Unlike Mirah, Gwendolen has no one else to provide this care, allowing Deronda to believe himself selfless while “giving himself [that] character of general

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<sup>4</sup> Deronda is repeatedly viewed as an angel by those he helps. Upon rescue, Mirah gives him a “look. . . full of wondering timidity, such as the forsaken one in the desert might have lifted to the angelic vision” (164). To Hans, Deronda is “as much out of the question as the angel Gabriel” when it comes to having romantic feelings for Mirah (398). And to Gwendolen, Deronda seems “a terrible-browed angel from whom she could not think of concealing any deed so as to win an ignorant regard from him” (577).



beneficence” he has come to avoid with Mirah. The narrator, feeling perhaps similarly compromised, anxiously denies that Deronda’s “sympathy” for Gwendolen could be driven by self-regard, thus recognizing this to be one possible interpretation: “It was not vanity—it was ready sympathy that had made him alive to a certain appealingness in her behaviour towards him” (354). And again, “Not his vanity, but his keen sympathy made him susceptible to the danger that another’s heart might feel larger demands on him than he would be able to fulfil” (655). The repeated need to distinguish between vanity and Deronda’s self-renouncing version of sympathy exemplifies what Marc Redfield identifies as the novel’s tendency to “worr[y] the status of its ethical categories even as it enforces them” (145). But this tendency, as Deronda himself admits, constitutes a “fall[ing] into the apologetic philosophy which explains the world into containing nothing better than one’s own conduct” (177). The more Deronda avoids moral action motivated by the desire to appear moral, the more he falls right into it. Thus Deronda’s supposedly unselfconscious focus on others increasingly becomes a focus on himself: “in his letters...he had avoided writing about himself, but he was really getting into that state of mind to which all subjects become personal” (534). Eliot faced a similar conundrum in defending herself against Hutton’s charges.

Realizing the impossibility of authorial selflessness and the difficulty such expectations create for women, Eliot, as we will see, ended up embracing certain didactic strains in her realism. Explaining her aims with *Daniel Deronda*, she told Harriet Beecher Stowe,

There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs.... Can anything be more disgusting than to hear people called ‘educated’ making small jokes about eating ham, and showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of the people they think themselves witty in insulting? (Eliot, *Letters*, Volume 6 301-02)

In aiming to reeducate the public, Eliot seemed unconcerned about possible charges of moralism. She further explained to Stowe, “I was happily independent in material things and felt no temptation to accommodate my writing to any standard except that of trying to do my best in what seemed to me most needful to be done” (Eliot, *Letters*, Volume 6 302). But such a “frank avowal of didacticism” confounded even twentieth-century biographer Gordon S. Haight, who argued that it “contradict[ed] George Eliot’s basic tenet that fiction should represent real life” and signaled “her failure to achieve creative realization” (487).

Eliot faced similar criticism after the novel’s publication. Tellingly, both her representation of a selflessly sympathetic perspective through the figure of Deronda and her more overt stance were deemed morally superficial. The *Spectator*, for example, found the character of Deronda “run[ning] the risk of appearing to the end as little more than a wreath of moral mist” (Lerner and Holmstrom 161), while the *Academy* accused Eliot of “a proneness to rank certain debateable positions and one-sided points of view among the truths to which it is safe to demand universal assent” (Lerner and Homstrom 138). Such criticisms signaled the beginning of a reputation for moralizing that continued well into the twentieth century. In *The Great Tradition* (1948), F. R. Leavis held Henry James’s review of *Daniel Deronda* primarily responsible for Eliot’s moralizing reputation, which he described as “still the established notion of George Eliot” (46). Lamenting the “want of tact” in the “importunity of the [novel’s] moral reflections,” the review expressed a preference for Eliot’s more “natural” lack of self-consciousness and the “sympathy” and “spontane[ity]” it allowed (James 288).

James’s review reveals the tendency to associate women with physical and moral vanity that Eliot saw as lending to women authors’ interpretive conundrum. Although criticisms of moralizing were beginning to plague Victorian realists in general as a proto-modernist aesthetics

took shape, the review suggests that such moralizing was still associated with women in particular. The review takes the form of a conversation between a man, Constantius, and two women, Theodora and Pulcheria. While Constantius, a literary critic, is granted a voice of reason and experience, Theodora, as her name suggests, voices a less sophisticated preference for art that expresses conservative moral ideals. Pulcheria appears to represent the other end of the feminine spectrum, enjoying reading only when she can do so aloud in front of others, displaying a primary concern with physical appearance, and admiring the “impur[ity],” as Theodora terms it, of French novels and Aestheticism (James 277). Theodora defends Eliot against the others’ accusations that *Deronda* is “priggish” and “didactic” (James 283, 286). Constantius concludes, however, that there are “two very distinct elements in George Eliot—a spontaneous one and an artificial one. There is what she is by inspiration and what she is because it is expected of her” (James 287). The review ends with both women distracted by the delivery of their muslins, suggesting that their inability to match Constantius’s level of critical insight results from their feminine vanity—something they apparently share with Eliot as an author concerned with what is “expected of her.”

More recent critics have helpfully redeemed Eliot from her moralizing reputation by focusing on her complex modes of self-questioning and moral skepticism. Neil Hertz identifies characters in her fiction who serve as authorial “surrogates” “whose fate it is to be stigmatized within the moral economy of the novels and, in effect, to be cast out of their depicted societies.” These characters’ “fates ask to be read allegorically, as clues to Eliot’s understanding of—or apprehensions about—that form of agency called authorship” (2). Hertz argues that an “alternation between exuberance and apology... govern[ed] Eliot’s literary production throughout her life.” This “exuberance,” characterized by “moments of expansive utterance, where neither

the distance between the self and its signs nor the difference between selves is felt as a problem,” is “commonly followed...by moments of anxious ‘shrinking’ and remorse” (Hertz 26).

Rosemarie Bodenheimer similarly traces “two related patterns of consciousness which consistently emerge” in Eliot’s life and work: “The first is a moral and emotional pattern in which acts of assertion, satire, or rebellion are followed by remorse or retreat. The second is George Eliot’s peculiarly intense consciousness of audience, which caught her between scorn and defiance of public opinion and a strong dependence on it” (xiv-xv).

Such readings of Eliot’s consciousness of the problem of authorial agency helpfully debunk earlier accusations of unreflective moral vanity. But they overlook the fact that she saw this kind of skepticism as equally problematic and morally vain. Eliot worked to develop a novelistic mode that would free a woman author from accusations of vanity whether she embraced didacticism or tried to renounce it in favor of realism. With her final novel, Eliot sought a way around both moralizing *and* the “apologetic philosophy which explains the world into containing nothing better than one’s own conduct” (177).

## 2.

Eliot’s first step in this endeavor was to reshape understandings of women’s moral self-consciousness through her depictions of her female characters. Mirah may struggle between an “exuberance and remorse” similar to Eliot’s, but Deronda at one point notes that she is “free at once from embarrassment and boldness,” thus representing “something quite new...in the form of womanhood” (192). Mirah’s moral self-consciousness at this moment draws on Eliot’s notion of sympathy that acknowledges the difference between self and other rather than attempting to erase the self in the face of the other.<sup>5</sup> By acknowledging the self-consciousness this difference

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<sup>5</sup> See Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, “George Eliot’s Conception of Sympathy” and *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel*. In her theorization of sympathetic realism in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, Eliot refers to her mirror as

creates and thus the impossibility of feminine selflessness, Mirah frees herself from the more intense modes of self-consciousness that plague women in the novel.

For Eliot, sympathy both engenders and tempers self-consciousness. Studies of Eliot's conception of the sympathetic relation usually cite Ludwig Feuerbach as her primary influence.

For Feuerbach, there is no self without the other and no other without the self:

The other is my *thou*,--the relation being reciprocal,--my *alter ego*, man objective to me, the revelation of my own nature, the eye seeing itself. In another I first have the consciousness of humanity; through him I first learn, I first feel, that I am a man: in my love for him it is first clear to me that...we two cannot be without each other, that only community constitutes humanity. (158)

The balanced self-consciousness that sympathy offers depends on an awareness of the difference between self and other. Stanley Cavell's concept of acknowledgment, based in a similar awareness, allows us to see how in Eliot's schema sympathy can not only encourage self-consciousness but also temper its potential burden. In acknowledging the separateness I share with the other, my impulse to gain full knowledge of the other or myself wanes, along with the self-consciousness that is necessary to—but that also interferes with—moral knowledge. We cannot always “save our lives by knowing them” (Cavell 323); a “willingness to forgo knowing” can offer a more accurate sense of ourselves (Cavell 324). Acknowledgment occurs when “I reveal...what I share with everyone else present with me at what is happening: ...that there is a point at which I am helpless before the acting and the suffering of others. But I know the true point of my helplessness only if I have acknowledged totally the fact and the true cause of their suffering. Otherwise I am not emptied of help, but withholding of it” (Cavell 338). I recognize something about myself by acknowledging my separateness from the other, the separateness I

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“defective”; as Rae Greiner notes, “if her portrayals were sometimes ‘faint or confused,’ their outlines ‘disturbed,’ this was because the novel was the product of a double reflection: ‘a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in [the] mind’” (qtd. in Greiner 122-23).

share with the other, and the self-consciousness that shared separateness creates. Such acknowledgment eases the potential burden of self-consciousness.

Before Mirah escapes to England, her sympathetic perspective allows such self-understanding. Mirah interprets the moral complexity of her father's treatment of her, recognizing his "fond[ness]" for her but also his misunderstanding of "what would please [her] and give [her] happiness." Mirah realizes that the greed driving his desire for her to sing professionally "hemmed in my gratitude for his affectionateness, and the tenderest feeling I had towards him was pity. Yes, I did sometimes pity him" (184). Mirah's sympathy gives her insight not only into her father, but also into herself. She is assured that her father's view of her—as fit for the stage—is inaccurate and rejects his and others' attempts to understand her according to certain feminine types. Mirah finds it "insulting" when the Count (to whom her father has promised her as "payment" for getting him out of prison) calls her "petit ange" (186), and she discounts others' connection of her Jewishness to physical beauty, acting, and singing that serve as signs of fallenness. Through sympathy, Mirah gains an autonomous sense of herself.

Upon arriving in England, Mirah must relearn this balanced sense of herself and others, suggesting that Victorian society's limited interpretations of women's moral character cause Mirah's struggles with self-consciousness. When first at the Meyricks, however, she displays what the novel suggests is a more appropriate relation to other people. There Mirah recognizes others, assuring Deronda and the Meyricks of their goodness, but she also allows herself to be recognized. As she self-confidently relates her life story, Mirah intersperses her narrative with pauses that allow Mrs Meyrick to respond. Deronda thinks it "impossible to see a creature freer at once from embarrassment and boldness" (192), suggesting that Mirah has successfully set aside morbid self-consciousness and unreflective egotism simultaneously.

And this realization on Deronda's part proves just as essential to formulating an effective mode of moral agency for women. Because women's vacillations between embarrassment and boldness respond to expectations that they serve as moral ideals of innocent unselfconsciousness, their moral growth also requires a change in the methods of interpreting women's moral character in general. For Deronda, Mirah represents "something quite new...in the form of womanhood. For Mirah was not childlike from ignorance: her experience of evil and trouble was deeper and stranger than his own" (192). Mirah thus offers a new model of feminine moral character, one that begins by acknowledging the impossibility of innocent selflessness and the necessity of self-consciousness to moral development.

This balance finds a place in Eliot's realism too. We first see signs of this at the character level. Deronda, representative as we've seen of both the feminine and the authorial impulses toward renunciation with which Eliot struggled, achieves a balanced self-consciousness similar to Mirah's. Mordecai's unwavering expectation that Deronda is a Jew and Deronda's own desire to help Mordecai and Mirah eventually make him more willing to acknowledge his distinct selfhood. As he explains to his mother, "for months events have been preparing me to be glad that I am a Jew" (344). As Deronda gradually stops avoiding recognition, it holds particular implications for Eliot as author that this recognition is a form of reading: "His mother had her eyes fixed on him..., examining his face as if she thought that by close attention she could read a difficult language there" (567). Deronda next "b[ears] the scrutinizing look of Kalonymos with a delighted awe." This friend of his grandfather asks him if he will embrace his Jewish heritage. "[B]ecoming slightly paler under the piercing eyes of his questioner," Deronda responds, "I shall call myself a Jew.... But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed.... I hold that my first duty is to my own people, and if there is anything to be

done towards restoring or perfecting their common life, I shall make that my vocation” (620). Despite at first appearing “slightly” too self-conscious “under the piercing eyes” of Kalonymos, Deronda achieves balanced moral self-consciousness by the end of this speech: “His respect for the questioner would not let him decline to answer, and by the necessity to answer he found out the truth for himself” (620). Deronda responds somewhat unconsciously, not exactly knowing what he will say as he focuses on Kalonymos, but his response signals a self-reflection that differs slightly from the other’s view of him.<sup>6</sup> Deronda’s self-acknowledgment alleviates the self-consciousness that was beginning to develop, ironically, from his avoidance of himself.

Deronda’s struggles have been read as Eliot’s late exploration of the impossibility of full selflessness in her third-person narrators. I would argue, however, that these struggles more likely speak to the impossible selflessness of the implied author, given that Eliot never attempted such selflessness with her narrators. According to Hertz, Deronda allows Eliot to explore the possibility of the narrator’s “innocent” “neutrality” (or selflessness) at the character level, where the moral implications of self-consciousness formed by the gaze of others are more explicit.

With Deronda, Eliot can

reflect back on...the problem of what her critics have come to call her powers of ‘sympathetic imagination.’ These powers had been most impressively displayed in *Middlemarch*, and most convincingly embodied—or rather dis-embodied—in the shrewd and melancholy presiding consciousness and narrative voice of that novel.... What would happen, she seems to be asking herself, if the *Middlemarch* narrator had to engage with the characters he had been merely observing? (130)

But Eliot never saw narrators as completely unselfconscious. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has shown that Eliot’s realist narration is based in the same understanding of sympathy as her

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson similarly argues that Deronda’s relationship to Jewish identity and nationalism here reflects Eliot’s promotion of “a form of cultural self-understanding that might best be called reflective dialogism:...one must be capable of disengagement from cultural norms and givens. But such achieved distance should in turn promote not a sustained or absolute disengagement—for Eliot a destructive delusion—but rather a cultivated partiality, a reflective return to the cultural origins that one can no longer inhabit in any unthinking manner” (*Powers of Distance* 120-21).



ethics—sympathy that is not self-renunciation but a recognition of difference between self and other. Eliot’s narrators thus reveal a distinctly individual consciousness that nevertheless moves between self-orientation and other-orientation. Ermarth explains, “As an intermittently personalized voice...the narrator inches toward personification; this presence, one who has a scientific friend, a limited range, and selective attention, demonstrates the incarnate nature of consciousness” (237).<sup>7</sup>

Deronda thus seems more likely to question the still-present expectation of authorial renunciation. In other words, Eliot’s third-person narrative voice might be self-conscious, but realist convention requires that it never be identifiable in its self-consciousness as Eliot specifically. Ermarth herself seems to hold this expectation, despite comparing Eliot’s novelistic realism to Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, in which Velázquez portrayed himself painting the Spanish monarchs.<sup>8</sup> While the image of Velázquez is recognizably Velázquez and thus serves as political commentary on his relationship as an artist to the Spanish crown, Eliot’s narrative voice might be “personalized” at times, but Ermarth never considers that the narrative perspective might specifically acknowledge itself for political or ethical reasons as a version of George Eliot. Eliot suggests in *Daniel Deronda* that the same model of sympathetic perspective based in difference that she celebrates in her characters and requires of her narrators applies to the implied author as well.

### 3.

By acknowledging the difference between self and other implicit in the sympathetic relation, Eliot envisions a mode of moral agency and authorship for women that recognizes the

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<sup>7</sup> The narrator also inches away from a singular personification to a plural one, becoming what Ermarth calls “Nobody”: a “generalized historical awareness hardly distinguishable from our own, a power of transition between minds and moments, an implied awareness that makes the realistic series possible” (237).

<sup>8</sup> Ermarth describes Eliot’s narrative voice as “now like Velasquez’s second self, getting into his own picture; now generalized, a power of abstraction and of connection that belongs to a consensus of individual perceivers” (237).

importance as well as risks of self-consciousness without allowing self-consciousness to become a burden. As we will see, Eliot's embrace of this authorial mindset plays out beyond her characterization of Deronda in the formal maneuverings of the novel as a whole, but it does so to some extent apart from the sympathetic relation. Eliot prized sympathy for its ethical and aesthetic implications. But she also expresses concern in her final novel that even her more balanced understanding of the sympathetic relation may be misinterpreted, as it indeed has, as an attempt at authorial selflessness.

We see evidence of this concern in similar misinterpretations of Mirah. Presenting Mirah's balanced self-consciousness as something that is cultivated through her relation to other people—and especially her future husband—can appear as just another simplistic embrace of the angel in the house ideal. Indeed, specifically at moments when Mirah *has* achieved this balance, the Count calls her “petit ange,” and Gwendolen reads her as the type of “wom[a]n who [is] always doing right” (376), who is “blameless” and “perfect” (377). Deronda first misperceives Mirah's balanced self-consciousness as “ignorant innocence” (176) (although he soon realizes that she is “not childlike from ignorance: her experience of evil and trouble [i]s deeper and stranger than his own” [192]). Even contemporary critics tend to understand Mirah this way. Anderson, for example, despite reading Deronda as achieving that “delicate dialectic of detachment and engagement” (*Powers* 132) that in many ways resembles Mirah's “free[dom]...from embarrassment and boldness,” interprets Mirah as “[u]nable to achieve the higher-order, mediated cultural affirmation associated with Deronda”; she is instead only capable of representing “the importance of a deeply felt connection to family and culture” (*Powers* 139).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Nancy L. Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer* (1991), and Alison Booth, *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (1992). For other readings that similarly assume Mirah fulfills a more conventional notion of femininity, see Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans* (1994); Sarah Gates, “‘A Difference of Native Language’: Gender, Genre, and Realism in ‘Daniel Deronda’”; Susan Meyer, “‘Safely to Their Own

Anderson's reading of Mirah draws on studies that ultimately assume Eliot's "unwillingness to abandon conventional ideals of femininity" (*Powers* 138-39).

Eliot thus develops an alternative method of achieving this balanced self-consciousness through her own maneuvering as implied author and her characterization of Gwendolen. This method is most directly presented through the novel's conception of prayer and draws on a "willingness to forgo knowing" similar to sympathy's acknowledgment of the difference between self and other. But it is cultivated to some extent apart from the self-other relation. Its purpose as a mode of moral agency is, of course, to improve that very relation; however, because the feminine ideal of the selfless angel so strongly epitomized the self-other relation for the Victorians, its cultivation apart from this relation distinguishes it from such stereotypes.

Much earlier in her career, Eliot imagined a similarly balanced self-consciousness that resulted not from acknowledgment of self and other, but from a momentary obliviousness of both. Significantly, during a period of particular exhaustion after translating Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* in 1854, she wrote to her friend Cara Bray,

When I spoke of myself as an island, I did not mean that I was so exceptionally. We are all islands...and this seclusion is sometimes the most intensely felt at the very moment your friend is caressing you or consoling you. But this gradually becomes a source of satisfaction instead of repining. When we are young we think our troubles a mighty business—that the world is spread out expressly as a stage for the particular drama of our lives and that we have a right to rant and foam at the mouth if we are crossed. I have done enough of that in my time. But we begin at last to understand that these things are important only to one's own consciousness, which is but a globule of dew on a rose-leaf that at mid-day there will be no trace of. This is no high-flown sentimentality, but a simple reflection which I find useful to me every day. (Eliot, *Letters*, Volume 2 156)

Eliot finds "satisfaction" in imagining the evaporative nature of consciousness, not as an act of self-renunciation in the face of the other—"[t]his is no high-flown sentimentality"—but in an

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Borders': Proto-Zionism, Feminism, and Nationalism in Daniel Deronda"; and Eileen Sypher, "Resisting Gwendolen's 'Subjection': *Daniel Deronda's* Proto-Feminism."

implicit imagining of the evaporation of the other's consciousness too. This "simple reflection" proves "useful...every day"—in the very realities of the reciprocal relation it momentarily erases. Imagining consciousness as "a globule of dew on a rose-leaf," Eliot formulated a unique mode of moral agency that would find its fullest expression in her final novel.

Although this mode takes shape at the level of the implied author, it is more directly illustrated through the novel's conceptualization of the self in prayer. Prayer in the novel allows one to set aside (without denying or avoiding) dependence on the recognition of others. It is the expression of a multiplicity of perspectives, but it originates in the single voice of "the *Chazan*," or cantor:

The most powerful movement of feeling with a liturgy is the prayer which seeks for nothing special, but is a yearning to escape from the limitations of our own weakness and an invocation of all Good to enter and abide with us; or else a self-oblivious lifting up of gladness, a *Gloria in excelsis* that such Good exists; both the yearning and the exultation gathering their utmost force from the sense of communion in a form which has expressed them both, for long generations of struggling fellow-men. (310)

Acknowledging "the limitations of our own weakness," Eliot's conception of prayer does not deny the self praying but continues to reach outward for the "Good" that will make the self better. The "Good" that lies outside the self is, in part, made up of "fellow-men," similarly "struggling" selves, but is also larger than the self-other relation. The person praying accesses this "Good" through a mode of expression that is "self-oblivious," "seek[ing] for nothing special," approximating a state of mind similar to the one Eliot imagined early on, in which consciousness (both one's own and others') becomes like "a globule of dew on a rose-leaf that at mid-day there will be no trace of." Here "yearning and...exultation" blend together in a voice that revels in its presence even as it acknowledges its absence and revels in its absence even as it acknowledges its presence. Prayer is a "form" that has allowed "long generations of struggling

fellow-men” to express the “sense of communion” that emerges from such a mutual acknowledgment and release of self-consciousness. It seems Eliot might hold out hope for her novel to do the same.

Eliot’s understanding of self-consciousness in prayer holds subtle but significant differences from the Feuerbachian relation between the I and the Thou that critics usually associate with her ethics and realism. Prayer for Feuerbach is an act by which

man addresses God with the word of intimate affection—*Thou*; he thus declares articulately that God is his *alter ego*; he confesses to God, as the being nearest to him, his most secret thoughts, his deepest wishes, which otherwise he shrinks from uttering. But he expresses these wishes in the confidence, in the certainty that they will be fulfilled. How could he apply to a being that had no ear for his complaints?... What else is the being that fulfills these wishes but human affection, the human soul, giving ear to itself, approving itself, unhesitatingly affirming itself? (122-23)

Unlike Eliot’s conceptualization of prayer as a “self-oblivio[us]” seeking for “nothing special,” prayer for Feuerbach further confirms the self in the gaze of the other. Significantly absent from Eliot’s mode of prayer is this more intense sense in Feuerbach of being watched—as well as the secrecy, shrinking, confession, and need for affirmation that accompany it. Thus, while Eliot embraces Feuerbach’s model as one way to achieve balanced moral self-consciousness (Mirah at the end of the novel embodies sympathy’s success), she also suggests the need for something else, a simultaneous letting go of self and other only to return to a balanced self-consciousness better prepared for the realities of the reciprocal relation central to moral life.

This particular model of agency holds moral and aesthetic significance for the implied author in realist narrative. Ann Banfield has identified narrative’s ability to capture a perspective similar to Eliot’s secular prayer. Narrative, according to Banfield, does not address an audience. She demonstrates the impossibility that sentences of third-person narrative could hold communicative intent on the part of an “I,” the author, toward a “you,” the reader. One example

of narrative's linguistic uniqueness is the use of past tense with present and future time deictics: "Where *was* he *this morning*, for instance?" (Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, qtd. in Banfield 98, emphasis added). Another example is "the use of the 'shifted' modals *could, should, would* and *might* where discourse would have *can, shall, will* and *may*": "he *could* see it *now* in the pedlar's box" (Eliot, *Silas Marner*, qtd. in Banfield 201, Banfield's emphasis). Neither of these sentences is "speakable": they would never be uttered by a self attempting conscious communication with an other. With prayer, Eliot captures a similar voice, a reaching outward that is not directed specifically toward an audience. But, importantly, it does not deny that audience either. Indeed, Eliot's narrative voice, like prayer, neither intends to communicate nor avoids communication. To understand narrative in this way means imagining an author who neither assumes nor denies her presence in the language, and who neither clings to nor avoids the other who might recognize this fact.

But, especially for Victorian women novelists, such authorial inconspicuousness can be mistaken for an attempt at renunciation that inevitably fails. Eliot thus demonstrates the difference between her balanced self-consciousness and authorial self-renunciation by quietly reenacting the thought process that brought her here. This process moves, as we will see, from repeated early instances of self-renunciation meant to compensate for any sense of moralizing to a moment of self-reflection that questions the need for movement between these extremes. From this point on, acknowledging that the movement between self and other, presence and absence is inevitable to individual and therefore authorial perspective, Eliot eases up from her movement between "embarrassment and boldness." Her own freedom from these two extremes allows a balanced confidence in her stance on Judaism and even allows a stance on women's rights.

Because this stance does not reach levels of “exuberance,” it does not necessitate apologetic retreat.

Eliot accurately predicted that her novel’s focus on Jewish identity and nationalism would require this sort of authorial maneuvering. She had retained (for the most part) an imagined sense of authorial selflessness throughout her previous novels focusing on provincial English life. But when she turned in *Daniel Deronda* to Jewish experience, a topic usually imagined by the Victorians as separate from provincial Englishness, it became more obvious that Eliot’s attention had been drawn in a particular direction for particular reasons, that a human perspective mediated what had previously seemed a presentation of one arbitrary slice of the world. Summing up reactions to the novel five years later in 1881, the American critic and poet Sydney Lanier expressed surprise that “people who had enthusiastically accepted and extolled ‘Adam Bede,’ with all its explicitly moralizing passages and its professedly preaching characters, suddenly found that ‘Daniel Deronda’ was intolerably priggish and didactic” (131). Years later even, Leavis would find the novel “quintessentially English” (Fleishman 275, 1n). He famously labeled the Gwendolen plot the “good half” and the Deronda plot the “bad half,” which “led to the suggestion, apparently seriously intended, that the English half might be rescued from the Jewish and printed separately” (Fleishman 274-75, 1n). Leavis claimed that “the nobility, generosity, and moral idealism” of the “bad half” were “at the same time modes of self-indulgence” (94, 96). Thus in directing her sympathetic perspective toward the topic of Jewish struggle, Eliot automatically called attention to herself as the organizing perspective behind her novel’s focus.

The novel begins by erasing a sense of her agency in shaping this focus. The dual plot structure in particular serves this purpose. By beginning with Gwendolen rather than

chronologically with Deronda rescuing Mirah, Eliot can suggest that she just passively presents her very “English” world before moving on to Deronda, Mirah, and Mordecai. But such renunciation immediately shows signs of obsessive self-reflection in the opening epigraph as the novel simultaneously legitimates and questions the choice to begin with Gwendolen:

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even 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. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backwards as well as forwards, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock-finger at Nought really sets off *in media res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning. (3)

The comparison of poetics to science emphasizes the objectivity of the realist depictions to come, while the comparison of science to poetics’ acts of “make-believe” simultaneously questions the possibility of a selflessly objective perspective. The epigraph’s allusion to the science of chronology also suggests that although there may not be any “true beginning,” a *truer* beginning might have been the moment at which Deronda finds Mirah, since it occurs before his trip to Leubronn and his encounter with Gwendolen.

The sense of forced authorial renunciation continues as the story begins. Although the novel’s opening scene takes place abroad and is populated with “very distant varieties of European type” (4), the only characters we hear from are English people who interact exclusively with other English people. It is in fact striking when reading the scene that everyone knows each other from back home. By beginning the novel emphasizing the possibility of connection among people even when it seems improbable, Eliot justifies the connection she has designed to occur between Deronda and Gwendolen while maintaining a sense that it is arbitrary (that is, not of authorial design). The narrative focus moves from Gwendolen to Grandcourt, and then finally to Deronda, who closes out the first book with his rescue of Mirah. In this way, Eliot



incorporates the core of her story, the relationship between Deronda and Mirah, into larger, more conventional surroundings that distract from the novel's ultimate focus on Judaism. Similarly, her depiction of Gwendolen as just another English heroine embarking on what appears the beginning of a marriage plot with Deronda allows Eliot to avoid a stance on women's issues. Feminist readings of Eliot often note that while her novels call attention to women's suffering within patriarchy, they avoid more active suggestions for change. Eliot thereby continues this passivity—something that Hutton's review of *Middlemarch* could have only encouraged.

Eliot simultaneously conceals her own presence *and*, like Deronda, “fall[s] into the apologetic philosophy which explains the world into containing nothing better than one's own conduct.” Ironically, as her attempt at a selflessness similar to Mirah's supposed “love that loses self in the object of love” intensifies, Eliot takes on the characteristics of Gwendolen's “fallen” self-consciousness. Another instance of Eliot's “explain[ing] the world into containing nothing better than one's own conduct” adds to the sense of identification with Gwendolen:

Men, like planets, have both a visible and an invisible history. The astronomer threads the darkness with strict deduction, accounting so for every visible arc in the wanderer's orbit; and the narrator of human actions, if he did his work with the same completeness, would have to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action, and to those moments of intense suffering which take the quality of action. (139)

The emphasis on psychological suffering over more traditional “action” works to legitimate Eliot's extended focus on Gwendolen rather than Mirah. Mirah takes part in the novel's most significant moments of action: she is kidnapped, taken to America and Europe, and forced into acting to support her father's gambling; she escapes to find her long-lost mother and brother in England; she tries to drown herself; and she is rescued by Deronda, with whom she falls in love and lives happily ever after. However, most of the events of Mirah's life are narrated in only a

few pages by Mirah herself, while Gwendolen's psychological suffering, which directly results from a *lack* of traditional narrative action, is depicted at length.

The possibility of Gwendolen's death comes up repeatedly, seeming to offer an end to Eliot's identification with Gwendolen's obsessive self-consciousness. Certainly, Victorian literature holds plenty of instances in which the telos of a woman's self-destructive shame is death. As Anderson notes about the rhetoric of fallenness, the "structure of moral reflection is self-obliteration, its telos, suicide" (*Tainted Souls* 90). Before Grandcourt's death, Gwendolen's own death, even her drowning instead of Grandcourt, holds distinct possibility.<sup>10</sup> For Deronda, watching Gwendolen's shame thwart her moral autonomy is like seeing "her drowning while his limbs [a]re bound" (389). Deronda considers that Gwendolen "too needed a rescue, and one much more difficult than" Mirah's (478). Even the "imperious" Gwendolen seems to consider, if only momentarily and indirectly, the possibility of death (284): "What possible release could there be for her from this hated vantage-ground...but death? Not her own death. Gwendolen was not a woman who could easily think of her own death as a near reality.... It seemed more possible that Grandcourt should die:--and yet not likely" (518). There *is* a death, but it is Grandcourt who drowns. Until Deronda sees Gwendolen carried in from the sea alive, though, the possibility of her drowning instead remains very present in onlookers' comments: "One said it was the *milord* who had gone out in a sailing boat; another maintained that the prostrate figure he discerned was *miladi*; a Frenchman who had no glass would rather say that it was *milord* who had probably taken his wife out to drown her, according to the national practice" (587).

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<sup>10</sup> Critics usually focus on Gwendolen's overwhelming sense of guilt with regard to Grandcourt's death. The primary counterfactual implied with this focus—that Gwendolen might have thrown the rope out to Grandcourt in time to save him—seems to have led critics to overlook the other counterfactual possibility made very present by the text: that Gwendolen might have died herself.

But Gwendolen's death would signal Eliot's giving in to the debilitating self-consciousness of the fallen woman, feeling the need to deny and erase it, which can only make it worse. Significantly, Gwendolen does not die. Eliot stops avoiding her political stance—the problem that created this conundrum—when the setting moves to Genoa, where Grandcourt dies just after Deronda meets his mother. The scene between Deronda and his mother echoes what afterward seems Eliot's performance of balanced self-reflection behind the scenes. Deronda at first attempts to continue his selfless perspective, focusing on his mother rather than himself: "I beseech you to tell me what moved you...to take the course you did.... I enter into the painfulness of your struggle. I can imagine the hardship of an enforced renunciation." (Just speaking this sentence, Deronda seems to force himself into an illusory self-renunciation.) Deronda's mother immediately refuses this attempt to "enter into" her experience, responding, "No.... You are not a woman. You may try—but you can never imagine what it is...to suffer the slavery of being a girl" (541). It is in this scene that Deronda is finally forced to acknowledge his distinct identity, something that prevents him from ever fully knowing his mother's experience as a woman.

When Grandcourt's death shortly follows, it appears that Eliot has engaged in self-reflection similar to Deronda's. After she presents Deronda with the opportunity to recognize and stand up for himself, Eliot seems to find similar confidence in her own such worthiness as a woman author. Deronda's failure to "enter into" his mother's experience seems to signal a change in Eliot's understanding of the realist author's supposed selflessness. Just as Deronda realizes that he cannot "enter into the painfulness of" his mother's experience as a woman, Eliot is forced to acknowledge her difference from Deronda. Her inability to "enter into" Jewish experience has significant implications for the realist depictions of her characters. But Eliot's

difference from *Deronda* is also significant for the fact that she *can*, like the Princess, “enter into” the experience of being a woman in her own way. As we will see, this self-reflection affirms the novel’s aim of encouraging sympathy with the Jewish cause but condemns the employment of authorial renunciation to achieve this sympathy. Eliot’s attempt at unselfconscious selflessness has encouraged denial that her own distinct identity as a woman would emerge to shape the trajectory of her narrative and cause her at times to identify with certain characters’ experiences over others’.

Critics have read the Princess as a representation of Eliot—but in the context of an “eruption” of authorial narcissism that the narrative then attempts to suppress.<sup>11</sup> Hertz argues that the scene between *Deronda* and his mother anchors authorial agency in the novel, the Princess serving as a “scapegoat” that must be “cast out.”<sup>12</sup> This interpretation demonstrates Eliot’s consciousness of the possibility that her supposedly unselfconscious realism could slide into authorial narcissism, but it also then assumes that Eliot would be discomfited by the way her own needs were shaping the novel. Feminist readings similarly characterize the Princess as representative of the repressed feminist “impulse of the novel” that “erupt[s]” in this scene only to be “suppressed” (Meyer 742). But it seems that Eliot decides to take a stance on women’s rights as well. Eliot does indeed absent herself almost as soon as she presents herself in the figure of the Princess, but she leaves this passive displacement of herself behind only to make her own similar role authoring her characters’ lives as (for better or for worse) the Princess authored *Deronda*’s more explicit and to embrace more openly her role of implied author shaping the trajectory of the narrative.

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<sup>11</sup> See Bodenheimer, Hertz, Meyer, and Redfield, among others.

<sup>12</sup> Reading the scene under the psychoanalytic lens of Kristeva’s abject to suggest Eliot’s ultimate discomfort with the fact that she is implicated by the text, Hertz argues, “the casting out of the Princess, her abjection, is intended not to collapse the distance between author and surrogate, but to stabilize it as a chosen separation and thus to ground the multiple gestures of mimesis that make up the novel” (120-21).

With the recurring image of Gwendolen “drowning” in her marriage, the narrative encourages us to see Grandcourt’s death as allowing Gwendolen to live. And the novel continues to emphasize this connection through Gwendolen’s repeated claim “I shall live” throughout the final pages. Such connective logic is not based in a literal sense of cause and effect; it is explicitly figurative and even political. Redfield reads Grandcourt’s death as the last in a series of deaths in Eliot’s final two novels that “question...what the act of fiction (as sympathy) is.” He argues that the deaths of Casaubon, Madame Laure’s husband, and Grandcourt signal

the convenience of a fiction, and leave...a residue that Eliot’s texts represent in the figure of ambiguous murder. Murder is a crime of omission in George Eliot novels: if killing may be taken as action in its purest manifestation of violence, Eliot’s texts worry the status of the act as a play of conflicting motives and circumstances.... Casaubon’s and Grandcourt’s deaths provoke the supplemental and less stable question of what it means for an ‘author’ to ‘act’—that is, in this idiom, to kill a fictional character, or identify with one, thereby seeing her wish outside her. (Redfield 154)

Grandcourt’s death, however, is significantly different, since, with the first two deaths, there is no parallel possibility that the woman might die instead of the man. Redfield argues that Eliot’s texts are anxiously aware that “bad art...is a figure that does not know whether it is figurative or literal and cannot control the difference.”<sup>13</sup> In *Daniel Deronda*, the added emphasis that Grandcourt’s death has allowed Gwendolen to live seems an open acceptance of the fact that fiction will always hold the possibility of being figurative *and* literal and that obtaining full control over the difference is not the goal. Eliot embraces the simultaneous absence and presence of authorial agency here, acknowledging identification with her woman character rather than

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<sup>13</sup> In *Middlemarch*, the figurative acts of melodrama become “contagious” as the actress Madame Laure actually kills her husband at the same time that her character commits the act on stage in a play. Lydgate, the physician, and Laure’s admirer, “is at the center of this epidemic, aggravating it by trying to isolate and cure it” (Redfield 155). “Eliot’s text,” according to Redfield, does the same, “quarantining this rhetorical plague within the ethical and aesthetic categories of melodrama and narcissism only at the cost of exposing organic history to disease, and raising the suspicion that a certain illegible, literary contagion infects and enables sympathy” (Redfield 155-56). Redfield sees Grandcourt’s death as a continuation of this suspicious activity, but the set-up in *Daniel Deronda* is significantly different.

unsuccessfully avoiding it. The signs of this open acceptance of her role in the narrative only continue as the novel comes to a close.

Having Grandcourt die rather than Gwendolen makes Eliot's political position with Deronda that much stronger, and it allows her a similar stance with Gwendolen. In Deronda's case, the narrative shift further emphasizes his decision to embrace Judaism since it requires him to reject Gwendolen and more actively choose his love for Mirah and his devotion to the Jewish people. After learning that Grandcourt is dead, Sir Hugo voices a desire (common with Eliot's readers at the time) for Gwendolen to be the heroine in Deronda's life story: "To him it was as pretty as a story need be that this fine creature and his favourite Dan should have turned out to be formed for each other" (654). Interestingly, Sir Hugo's thought implies that the conventional marriage plot, although "as pretty as a story," has become so invisible as a construct in the novel (influencing even Sir Hugo's understanding of how things happen in "real life") that marriage between the two protagonists would somehow be more acceptable in readers' minds as a "probable" (less political) outcome. Defying such expectations by having Deronda marry Mirah rather than Gwendolen, Eliot returns to the marriage plot the authorial intention from which it had illusorily freed itself.

Eliot also furthers her development of a valid mode of moral agency for women. Rather than forcing Gwendolen to exit Deronda's life and the narrative through self-obliterating shame, or its telos, death, Eliot allows her to end this self-destructive obsession on her own. Rather than put a definitive stop to his interactions with Gwendolen, Deronda ends up proposing, "I will write you always when I can, and you will answer?" (691). Such ambiguity grants Gwendolen the opportunity to let Deronda go instead of the other way around. Rather than comply with

Deronda's proposal that he write to her and that she answer, Gwendolen writes to him first, making it fairly clear she does not want an answer:

Do not think of me sorrowfully on your wedding-day. I have remembered your words—that I may live to be one of the best women, who make others glad that they were born. I do not yet see how that can be, but you know better than I. If it ever comes true, it will be because you helped me. I only thought of myself, and I made you grieve. It hurts me now to think of your grief. You must not grieve any more for me. It is better—it shall be better with me because I have known you. (694-95)

Gwendolen works toward freedom from embarrassment and boldness for herself here. She finally reciprocates Deronda's sympathy, but she is not self-renouncing. Instead, she expresses the hope "to live to be one of the best women." She displays regret for her behavior, but not embarrassed "remorse or retreat." Gwendolen's focus on the distant future lends the correspondence finality, but she does not beg Deronda not to respond.

The note's final sentence in particular reflects Gwendolen's work toward a balanced self-consciousness. She first rehearses versions of the line just after Deronda reveals his marriage plans. "[H]indered by struggling sobs," Gwendolen eventually utters, "I said...I said...it should be better...better with me...for having known you" (691). As Deronda leaves, she attempts to speak the sentence again: "It shall be the better for me—" (691). This time, Gwendolen cannot finish the thought, described as "what her mind ha[s] been laboring with," because "the intense effort with which she sp[eaks] ma[kes] her too tremulous." Several attempts to speak the sentence to her mother follow, and when she finally writes the sentence in her note, it takes yet another form: "It is better—it shall be better with me because I have known you" (695). Shifting from "better *for* me" to "better *with* me," the final version emphasizes the importance of a general good, of which Gwendolen will partake and to which she will contribute, rather than goodness that exists solely for her. And the shift from "for having known you" to "because I

have known you” positions Gwendolen as stronger and yet more bounded within the “I” of the sentence, as she grants herself agency in the development of moral character while preventing her self-reflection from devolving into overwhelming self-consciousness.

Significantly, neither Gwendolen nor the narrator communicates any of this explicitly. Instead, the understated shifting of prepositions and clause constructions—a subtle linguistic sign of less self-conscious moral deliberation—presents this idea in such a way that the urgent intent of communication falls away, even as a meaning becomes available. In this way, Gwendolen’s language calls to mind Banfield’s understanding of narrative voice, and the strange use of tenses in her repeated revisions of the line seem to consider the ethical significance of this unique voice. The first version of the line, “it should be better...better with me...for having known you,” haltingly combines the shifted modal “should” of narrative with “having known,” the present perfect tense of communicative speech, as if Gwendolen were trying (and failing) to embody the balanced self-consciousness of realist narrative. The final version, “It is better—it shall be better with me because I have known you,” reverts to the present and future tenses of everyday communication. Gwendolen realizes the impossibility of speaking to someone else from a perspective that sets aside communicative intent. However, the quick shifting of tense within this sentence indicates that she maintains a similarly subtle, balanced self-consciousness: not now, while still somewhat conscious of Deronda’s gaze or somewhat unconscious of the fact that she is sympathetically reading him, but sometime in the future when she has reflected on her own role in this sympathetic relation, “it shall be better.” Gwendolen’s note to Deronda is her only presence in the final chapter; the narrative moves on without any explanatory framing, focusing on Deronda and Mirah’s marriage and their journey to the East. Gwendolen thus quietly removes



herself from the overly self-conscious position of receiving Deronda's (and the narrative's) attention—without denying or avoiding it.

Mirah's story ends in marriage, with her husband's gaze upon her, but she has learned how to achieve a balanced self-consciousness and thus moral autonomy within this reciprocal relation. Gwendolen's very different outcome—separated to some extent from the expectation of marriage and sympathy but achieving the same balanced moral self-consciousness—serves as both a comparison and contrast by which Eliot can quietly distinguish her moral model for women. After the novel ends, Mirah, by existing within Deronda's gaze, exists within ours; her marriage plot ending encourages us to imagine a certain story for her beyond the end of the narrative. Gwendolen, on the other hand, necessarily diminishes the intensity of the gaze of the other that has caused her debilitating self-consciousness: without a marriage plot ending (or an existence within Deronda's gaze), there is no narrative convention to carry her beyond the end of the novel in our minds.<sup>14</sup> This diminished intensity is not a denial of the other; it makes only a subtle difference comparable to the difference between Eliot's and Feuerbach's understandings of self-consciousness in prayer. With her unconventional ending, Gwendolen approximates what it might be like to be “a globule of dew” evaporating at “mid-day.” Importantly, Gwendolen does not attempt self-renunciation; the ending to her story is “no high-flown sentimentality.” She will have to return to more intense versions of self-consciousness inherent to the reciprocal relation—but perhaps not quite as intense or seemingly irreversible as they have been in the past. The novel opens with Deronda asking about Gwendolen, “Was she beautiful or not beautiful?” (3).

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<sup>14</sup> Many contemporary readers complained of the bathos of the novel's end. The reviewer from the *North American Review* argued, “The chief defect in the story is that it suddenly stops rather than artistically ends” (Colby 232). It seems Gwendolen's nonexistence beyond the novel's end was so disturbing to some readers that one, inspired by the above review, found a way to return Gwendolen to our consciousness by publishing a sequel (aptly titled *Gwendolen*) that frees up Deronda to marry her. The final lines of the sequel reads, “And when, at last, Deronda confessed his undying devotion and love, she sank beneath gratitude and joy, into the expanded arms of her adored lover,—Reclaimed” (qtd. in Colby 234).

Mirah, for one, embodies “her own definite mould of beauty” only when she is “free at once from embarrassment and boldness” (192). Gwendolen seems on her way to a similar beauty by the novel’s end. We can hope that this is true, but it is the very fact that we (and Deronda) are not there to witness it that makes it more likely.

Linked as the topic of women’s moral character is to realist aesthetics for Eliot, it is fitting that Amy Meyrick asks a similar question about the beauty of a story that celebrates self-sacrifice. Together with the Meyrick women, Mirah tells Deronda about “a wonderful story...of Bouddha giving himself to the famished tigress to save her and her little ones from starving,” and says that she and the Meyrick women “all imagine” him to be “like Bouddha.” Embarrassed, Deronda responds, “Pray don’t imagine that.” As discussion of the ethics of Buddha’s position continues, Mab adds, “Perhaps if he was starved he would not mind so much about being eaten,” to which Mirah responds, “Please don’t think that, Mab; it takes away the beauty of the action” (399). Significantly, Amy asks, “But *was* it beautiful for Bouddha to let the tiger eat him?” (400). Throughout *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot similarly asks whether or not a story’s beauty is found in its authorial selflessness. In a way, Eliot reverses Buddha’s sacrificing of selfhood in order to let the tigress live when she sacrifices her attempt at selflessness to let Gwendolen live. If there is beauty in Buddha’s act, there is also beauty in Eliot’s. But, significantly, Eliot’s act is not celebrated as a “sacrifice” might be—this very subtlety makes it work (but also causes it to be overlooked).

Nevertheless, Eliot’s “sacrifice” of authorial selflessness signals an important cessation of the back and forth between “exuberance and apology” that characterized much of her literary career. Here, following a well-known act of retreat from the feminist undertones of her previous novel, is a subtle but powerful statement on the possibilities for interpreting women’s moral

character and women's writing. For just a moment at the end of her novel-writing career, Eliot took a recognizably personal stance in her fiction, following it up not with apologetic retreat but only with further affirmation, in the form of Gwendolen's note to Deronda at the end of the novel. The note expresses regret, but alongside this regret is acknowledgment that the ethical and aesthetic model that Eliot imagines for women might be possible—that it is possible.

## CHAPTER 4

### Feminist “Cant” and Narrative Selflessness in Sarah Grand’s New Woman Trilogy

A journalist who popularized the term “New Woman,” an activist for such causes as women’s suffrage and rational dress, and a public lecturer on women’s issues, Sarah Grand used her trilogy of New Woman novels to promote a model of feminine moral agency based in active self-consciousness gained through the public expression of belief.<sup>1</sup> Grand may have seen her fiction as one more avenue for her political activism, but throughout *Ideala* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), and *The Beth Book* (1897), she was careful to identify the ethical and aesthetic risks this posed. Grand expected charges of moralism to be directed at her work; she addresses this issue through the trilogy’s repeated preoccupation with “cant.” But she also asks whether “art for art’s sake” can become a kind of moralizing itself. Grand thus joins Eliot in staging a surprising return to didacticism at a time when a protomodernist aesthetics was turning against this allegedly staid, outmoded form.

Of course, like the other authors studied here, Grand’s didacticism is far from staid. In fact, her trilogy can be considered a sustained experiment in revision and renewal—of both her narrative voice and her self-understanding.<sup>2</sup> Grand’s narrators trace a complex moral self-consciousness in their heroines similar to that which we’ve seen in previous chapters. As the trilogy progresses, Grand uses shifts in narrative perspective to question her motives in depicting

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<sup>1</sup> For other studies that focus, in part, on Grand’s investment in the ethical motives behind her more public feminist politics, see Marilyn Bonnell, “Sarah Grand and the Critical Establishment: Art for [Wo]man’s Sake” (1995); John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (1994); and Jil Larson, *Ethics and Narrative in the English Novel 1880-1914* (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Many critics refer to Grand’s New Woman novels as a trilogy for the way they share characters and settings. My use of the term follows this tendency but also reflects my understanding of the novels’ linear progression, not in conventional terms of plot, but rather in their development of a model of moral agency for women and an appropriate narrative perspective for Grand’s politics.

this state of mind. These experimental shifts, previously considered isolated instances, prove an integrated project exploring the ethical consequences of narrative knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Moving from the first-person narration of Lord Dawne in *Ideala* to the anonymous third-person narration in the first five of six books in *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand suggests she can achieve the same unselfconscious, selfless objectivity her narrators do. But then, abruptly moving to the first-person narrator Dr. Galbraith in the final book of the *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand reveals how an author figure might use a supposedly disembodied, unselfconscious third-person perspective to shape her moral appearance for her own ends.

Grand's experimentation culminates in the eponymous heroine of the semi-autobiographical *Beth Book*, through whom Grand more overtly examines her own self-serving use of narrative perspective. Grand finally acknowledges her presence as implied author and reveals the self-examination that pervades the entire trilogy—even those portions that do not employ characters as authorial stand-ins. The previous novels we've studied signal their own autobiographical interests through such stand-ins, but, as we will see, Grand's experiments with narrative perspective more directly suggest that *all* novels are to some extent autobiographical. This inevitability leads Grand to embrace her personal, didactic aims as an author, knowing that they result from renewing self-examination rather than moral blindness. Revealing the recurring

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<sup>3</sup> A surprising lack of attention has been paid to the implications of narrative knowledge in Grand, especially as they emerge across the trilogy. In considering the ethics of truth-telling for late-Victorian feminism, Kucich briefly identifies its connection to formal narrative choices, noting, for example, Grand's novels' "unconcealed narrative manipulation," in which the narrative withholds information or gives a misrepresentative sense of what is to occur by the novel's end (262-63). Studies that examine Grand's interest in narrative knowledge at greater length nevertheless tend to limit their scope to the last book of *The Heavenly Twins*, in which the limited first-person male clinical perspective of the narrator Dr. Galbraith replaces the earlier omniscient third-person narrator. See Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (2000); Adam Seth Lowenstein, "'Not a Novel, nor even a Well-Ordered Story': Formal Experimentation and Psychological Innovation in Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*," *Studies in the Novel* (2007); and Teresa Mangum, *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel* (1998). Mangum's study extends beyond Galbraith to Lord Dawne, the first-person narrator of *Ideala*, identifying both figures as representative of patriarchal perspectives founded in medical and class authority.

connection between narrative and prayer in women's novels, Grand, like Sewell and Eliot, imagines herself to engage in prayer as a way to guarantee the sincerity of her self-examination. Like the authors before her, Grand sees prayer as a means of achieving a distinct self-consciousness through a sense of audience that lies somewhere between self and other. Having been guided by Grand's narrators to identify a similarly complex self-consciousness in her heroines, readers have the tools to identify it in Grand, should they so choose.

Grand notes narrative's unique ability to capture the complexity of women's self-consciousness and laments the lack of such knowledge in real life. Our previous novelists leave it to women to interpret this self-consciousness in themselves while holding out distant hope that their novels' tracing of such complexities may begin to change stereotypical understandings of women's moral character. Grand on the other hand more actively envisions a solution in the form of a community of women willing to provide this interpretation for each other. Narrative's particular representational ability—in conjunction with its limitations—has the potential to propel Grand's feminist vision. A model of feminine moral character that began with fairly conservative, isolated roots in Sewell and Wood thus becomes the source of an ever-expanding feminist community in Grand.

#### 1.

All three novels of Grand's trilogy promote women's active, self-reflective shaping of their moral character through the public articulation of belief. In *Ideala*, a public reading of the eponymous heroine's poem awakens her to its self-absorption, "show[ing] Ideala at about her worst"; her resulting desire for change "mark[s] a period in her career, a turning-point for the better" (47). In *The Heavenly Twins*, Evadne's recording of her thoughts in her journal leads her to know she is right in refusing to consummate her marriage; although her tragic plotline carries

her far from feminist liberation, her protestations against coerced marriage further the novel's critique of the Contagious Diseases Acts. And in *The Beth Book*, Beth's voicing of her views to Dr. Galbraith and the women in her community allows her to see where she stands on women's issues and to find social and professional independence in public speaking.

The importance Grand places on women's public expressions of their beliefs, however, has led to complaints of moralizing. But Grand addressed the possibility of such criticism in her novels. When Ideala rewrites her poem for an audience of friends, giving it a more overt moral, one member of the audience, Ralph, "patronisingly" gives his critique: "Well done, Ideala!... you certainly have a memory, and are quite as good at patchwork as the author of 'Delysle.' I could criticize on another count, but taking into consideration time, place, circumstances, and the female intellect, I refrain." Ralph admits to preferring the first version because, unlike the revision, it avoids "wholesome[ness]" (62). His criticism both echoes a tendency to condemn the naïve articulation of moral belief in art and anticipates criticism, early and late, of Grand for this failing. Grand, like other New Woman writers, was accused of engaging in "moralizing as aggressive as that of a Sunday-school story book" (Noble 493) and filling her novels with "sermonic tedium" (Bradfield 541). This view has endured among more recent critics, characterizing even those who set out to recover New Woman literature. As John Kucich remarks, "The conventional view, formulated by, among others, Elaine Showalter, is that New Woman novelists were too activist and polemical to be interested in aesthetics and that they grounded themselves instead in an antiquated didactic realism" (243, 6n).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Showalter has received special attention from critics aiming to shift the grounds of our assessment of New Woman fiction. Thus Heilmann's complaint that Grand's work and New Woman fiction in general have been relegated to "the Woolfian category of moralistic, stuffy, sensually repressive and intellectually regressive Victorianism which continues to haunt modern criticism, a spectre resurfacing in Elaine Showalter's recent verdict that it is '[i]mpossible' to conceive of 'humorless' first-generation New Women like Olive Schreiner 'writing about women and play, or imagining pleasures, let alone joys, outside of the twin spheres of principle and duty'" (*New Woman Strategies* 2-3).

Other recent critics have, in different fashions, worked to save Grand from such charges. Ann Heilmann identifies Grand's exploration of gender performance and female libidinal desire as countering the potential rigidity of her moralizing.<sup>5</sup> Teresa Mangum points out that throughout *The Beth Book*, Grand attempts to answer the still active question of whether "feminist politics [can] cohabit with aesthetics" (145). Mangum traces Grand's redefinition of "art" as dependent on "purpose": "By insisting that Beth is a woman of genius driven by irresistible impulse, Grand circumvents this facile dichotomy between art and politics with an alternative aesthetic that can encompass both. 'Purpose' motivates art; language ceases to be art unless driven by purpose" (151). Thus, while Heilmann demonstrates that Grand's work does more than just advance a rigid moral purpose, Mangum argues that Grand's moral purpose is still central to her work, but that it holds a more complex relationship to her aesthetics than previously acknowledged.

Grand's vexed views on moralizing seem to have encouraged such interpretive differences. Her preoccupation with this issue is made evident by the frequency with which characters on all sides of the women's rights debate accuse each other of "cant." In *The Heavenly Twins*, Evadne calls Mrs. Frayling's talk of young wives reforming husbands with immoral pasts "cant" (89), Ideala criticizes the clergy's "cant of obedience" for women (266), and Angelica complains of "men's cant about protecting the 'weaker' sex" (451). At the same time, male characters complain of women who "put themselves forward," expressing their beliefs publicly as members of a "shrieking sisterhood" made up of "old harridans" (*The Heavenly Twins* 194).<sup>6</sup> This "shrieking sisterhood" resembles Dan's characterization in *The Beth Book* of the "canting sentimentalists" who protest the Contagious Diseases Acts (399). Although canting would appear

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<sup>5</sup> Heilmann's demonstration of Grand's investment in her heroines' sexual desire works in particular to complicate what has been seen as an overly moralistic, conservative stance on social purity in her novels.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase "shrieking sisterhood" comes from mid-Victorian antifeminist Eliza Lynn Linton, who used it as the title of an 1870 article denouncing women's rights activists.



the special vice of moralizers and not artists, Galbraith warns Beth not to be “misled by the cant of art,” explaining that writers “must learn that right thinking, right feeling, and knowledge are more important” (*The Beth Book* 375). Galbraith suggests that the proclamations of “art for art’s sake” equally risk falling into cant and thus leaves open the possibility that careful articulation of moral belief might have a place in art. Grand challenges the idea that art should never advance a clear ethical agenda, but she is also careful to ask at what point the articulation of moral belief loses its efficacy, becoming “cant” resulting from the same self-centeredness she sees in art created solely for art’s sake.

Kucich is one of the few critics to recognize the exploratory nature of Grand’s investigation of these questions. “Conflicts between literature and activism,” he notes, “filtered through ethical quandaries, are...left very much in abeyance by *The Beth Book*. It is, indeed, striking how much less settled these conflicts are than the conventional New Woman diatribes against ‘art for art’s sake’ have led many critics to believe” (277). The unsettled nature of the conflict derives, on Kucich’s view, from Grand’s novels’ situation between two conflicted feminist impulses: one, an impulse to develop a powerful public voice (that also acknowledged the possibility of moralizing) and the other, an inclination toward a more subtly performative subversion of gender stereotypes (that itself acknowledged the possibility of reinscription into “Victorian clichés about ingrained female mendacity” [245]). This double bind, according to Kucich, kept Grand from “develop[ing] a unified image of feminist moral authority appropriate to the publicly performed sexual and social activism [New Woman novelists] so urgently desired” (278-79).

However, in helpfully making evident the constraints of Grand’s position, Kucich’s reading misses what is new and constructive in her writing. Grand, like the other novelists we’ve

studied, sees the possibility for novelistic expressions of belief to result from an ethical self-consciousness that acknowledges the importance of understanding oneself from the perspective of others and, at the same time, recognizes that such a focus can lead to moral self-regard. Teaching Beth what he calls “the best code of morality in the world,” Beth’s father tells her, “be as good as your friends think you, and better if you can. Tell the truth, live openly, and stick to your friends” (*The Beth Book* 70). Captain Caldwell encourages Beth to develop an active consciousness of herself in relation to her peers through honest, open speech and living. But this awareness alone is not enough; his addendum “and better if you can” suggests the moral risks of an intense focus on what others are thinking of you: while it may allow a way out of the self, it may also lead to moral actions done solely to appear moral to others. Grand’s heroines’ self-understanding depends on others’ views of them, and they must publicly articulate their moral beliefs to influence those views and improve themselves. At the same time, they balance their attention to what others think with an ethical unselfconsciousness in order to guarantee the sincerity of their speech and actions.

In *The Beth Book*, Grand envisions the extreme version of this state of mind at life’s edges, imagining an ideal of sublime unselfconsciousness grounded in a Romantic sense of childhood innocence. Early in the novel, Beth escapes her mother’s harshness at home and visits the nearby mountain streams “to lie her length upon the turf beside them,” losing herself in “the incessant, delicate, delicious murmur of the water, a sound which conveyed to her much more than can be expressed in articulate speech” (61). Similar to Eliot’s “globule of dew on a rose leaf,” such unselfconsciousness seems somehow not fully part of human subjectivity: two pages later, Beth observes the carcass of a horse and “wonder[s] how a creature once so full of life could become a silent, senseless thing, not feeling, not caring, not knowing, no more to itself

than a stone—strange mystery; and some day *she* would be like that, just white bones. She held her breath and suspended all sensation and thought...to see what it felt like” (63, emphasis original). Although any suspension of “sensation and thought” is increasingly impossible as Beth grows up, and the notion of “not caring [and] not knowing” *alone* is antithetical to the novel’s insights into moral development, the memory of such sublime states endures as a model for the moments of fleeting unselfconsciousness essential to Grand’s ethical feminism.

Indeed, the feasible version of this unselfconsciousness is achieved in conversation with a more conscious state. Characters achieve this delicate balance in all three novels, beginning with *Ideala*. At a social gathering, one of Ideala’s friends reads a new poem called “The Passion of Delysle”—a self-enamored piece that tells the story of a woman who relishes the idea of her forbidden love for a priest, reveling in her self-absorbed melancholy; the poem ends with the woman and the priest melodramatically surrendering themselves to the sea, hoping to be united in death. Afterward, Ideala loudly criticizes the immorality of the lovers, the hackneyed storyline, and the self-absorption of the author, before proposing that she try to “produce the same story, with the same conclusion, but a different moral, in an hour” (56-57). Neither Ideala’s audience nor Grand’s first-time readers know that Ideala—having felt “shame and mortification” while listening to the reading (69)—is revising her own poem.

Ideala rewrites “The Passion of Delysle” as “The Choice,” a poem that emphasizes a moral awareness of the self in its relation to others. The new version displays Ideala’s newfound self-awareness, depicting a heroine who resembles (the now “old”) Ideala, with her lack of self-reflection; like Ideala, the heroine’s broken marriage results from having chosen a nobleman over the man she loves. When she again meets her true love, now a monk, by the sea, she considers suicide, but in this version of the poem they decide it their duty to return to their lives

to “do the good [they] can; not seeking death / Nor shunning it, but living pure and true” (62).

Unable to relinquish melodrama entirely, *Ideala* has the tide rise and overtake them before they can depart. Although both poems end with the couple’s death, the difference in intention articulated in the second version makes a marked moral difference.<sup>7</sup>

While Grand does not suggest that the second poem is great art, she does present it as evidence of moral development. *Ideala*’s revision, and, importantly, Grand’s representation of it, hover between conscious moral reflection and a less self-conscious state of mind. In “The Choice,” the couple’s decision to live even though they still die answers to the imperative of doing good in ways unrecognizable to others and oneself. No one else can realize the moral significance of their decision to live and be good to others, since their illicit love has remained unknown. Nor can the couple themselves fully know the significance of their decision, at least to the extent their audience does, since they cannot know the alternate reality of the first poem’s ending. Beyond this even, the audience and the reader are unaware of the significance the revision holds for *Ideala*’s own moral character. Not knowing that the first poem is *Ideala*’s, they see the revision as merely another example of inferior writing, demonstrated through a hasty, equally mediocre rewriting. However, in its later revelation that *Ideala* wrote both poems, the narrative retrospectively reframes the significance of the revision, suggesting that *Ideala* was secretly concerned with the first poem’s revelation of her own self-absorption. Her revision thus seems an act of moral self-reflection, a rewriting not only of the poem but also of herself. Such

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<sup>7</sup> Providing the only other reading of this scene I’ve found, Heilmann briefly identifies in it a simultaneous moral and feminist awakening for *Ideala*: “*Ideala* reveals the protagonist as the author of both a decadent and a moralistic poem about forbidden love. . . . Significantly, though, *Ideala* conceals her authorship of the aesthetic piece, charging decadent writers, and women writers in particular, with merely ‘stimulat[ing]’ the senses but failing to ‘nourish’ the mind or heart. Her move into feminism and social reformism is accompanied by her rejection of aestheticism on the grounds of political incorrectness” (*New Woman Strategies* 107-08).

an ethical motive is never explicitly stated, however. That is to say, Ideala too seems to some extent unconscious of the ethical implications of her revision.

Nevertheless, Ideala's revision exceeds unselfconsciousness when it grants her the confidence to speak out afterward on a variety of social issues to her audience, assured that her motives are sincere. This assurance, however, does not extend to her audience; they consider her expressions of moral belief to be ignorant and judgmental. Unfortunately, there is no one in the room with Ideala to interpret her speech for her audience. As a character in Grand's novel, however, she has a narrator doing this for her. As we've seen with previous authors, Grand's narrators are crucial to revealing the complex self-consciousness underlying women's public expressions of belief: they defend characters from misinterpretation without them having to ask for that defense, or even to be aware of it.

Indeed, the narrator of *The Heavenly Twins* carefully traces the way the unselfconsciousness of Evadne's moral development leads to a quite conscious, but similarly misinterpreted, publicizing of her feminist beliefs. The earnest attention Evadne pays to her father's misogynist comments leads to her eventual feminism, "set[ting] her mind off on a long and patient inquiry into the condition and capacity of women" (13). But the narrator repeatedly emphasizes that Evadne is not fully conscious in this endeavor: "she did not begin her inquiry of set purpose; she was not even conscious of the particular attention she paid to the subject. She had...no wish to find evidence in favour of the woman which would prove the man wrong. Only, coming across so many sneers at the incapacity of women, she fell insensibly into the subject of asking why" (13). This less self-conscious "asking why" eventually leads Evadne to refuse to consummate her marriage, having discovered her husband's depraved past and possible syphilis. "Marrying a man like that," she says, "allowing him an assured position in society, is

countenancing vice, and...*helping to spread it*" (79, emphasis original). Evadne's parents interpret her decision as "outrageously" impulsive—morally unreflective. In letters to her mother, Evadne laments that her parents cannot see the complex state of mind, the "conscience, and not caprice" (93) that has led to her decision: "You say that no girl in your young days would have behaved so outrageously as I am doing. I wish you had said 'so decidedly,' instead of 'outrageously'" (92). Evadne's emphatic desire to be accurately interpreted, and the frustration of that desire within the novel, make evident for readers the decisive role of the omniscient narrator, who can reveal the earnest motives behind Evadne's actions.

Grand's narrators demonstrate the complex self-consciousness prompting Evadne's and Ideala's sincere articulations of moral belief, but they do so without revealing their own purposes. Why doesn't Lord Dawne immediately tell us that Ideala wrote "The Passion of Delysle," or at least explain why he has delayed in giving us this information? Why doesn't the narrator of *The Heavenly Twins* explain why it's so important that Evadne's feminism originates somewhat unconsciously? It is as if the narrators themselves were equally unconscious of their own ethical role in making their heroines' complex states of mind apparent for readers. The move from Lord Dawne's first-person narration in *Ideala* to the anonymous third-person narration in *The Heavenly Twins* helps establish this sense, the latter's disembodied voice suggesting the selfless objectivity of both novels' representations of their heroines. At the same time, the introduction of first-person narrative at the end of *The Heavenly Twins* undermines this sense of pure unselfconsciousness, making it seem more like the third-person narrator and Lord Dawne might be *avoiding* self-consciousness. As we will see, Dr. Galbraith's narration in the final book of *The Heavenly Twins* retrospectively projects such a sense of agency and consciousness onto the anonymous third-person narrative that preceded it.

Grand does not rest comfortably with the idea that third-person narrative could ever achieve pure unselfconsciousness or perfectly selfless objectivity. Like the other authors we've seen, she seems eager to distinguish her heroines' moral self-consciousness and her novels' narrative perspectives from more traditional notions of feminine selflessness that keep women powerless both in their relation to other people and in their ability for moral self-improvement. Several of Grand's characters echo the common belief that "enshrined within her home, a Victorian angel-woman should become her husband's holy refuge from the blood and sweat that inevitably accompanies a 'life of significant action,' as well as, in her 'contemplative purity,' a living *memento* of the otherness of the divine" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 24). According to this model women's virtue is ontological rather than epistemological or practical; women *are* moral, while men think and act morally. As Ideala claims (a statement she later retracts), "My function is not to do, but to be" (*Ideala* 14). Marriage is the quintessential act for women, requiring they "do" nothing more than consent. Hence the wry comment in *The Beth Book* about Beth's mother's belief "that absolute ignorance of human nature is the best qualification for a wife and mother" (44). Innocence, as Mrs. Frayling remarks in *The Heavenly Twins*, makes her daughter Evadne "eminently qualified" to become a wife (39). Lady Adeline challenges Mrs. Frayling, however, calling it instead "dangerous ignorance" (41). Grand's clearest example of the dangers of feminine virtue appears in *The Heavenly Twins* with Edith Beale, who is "fitted by education to move in the society of saints and angels only, and so rendered as unsuited as she [i]s unprepared to cope with" the realities of marriage (159). Unknowingly marrying a man with a promiscuous past, Edith gives birth to a syphilitic child, leading to a mental and physical decline that ends melodramatically in her death.

Grand criticizes this ideal for its deleterious effects on the women it aims to improve, suggesting that it makes them not just vulnerable but also unreflectively self-absorbed. Her critique took vivid practical form in her campaign against corsets.<sup>8</sup> Designed to make women attractive to men by reducing their bodily selves, corsets represented a moral ideal of selflessness as well, suffering for the sake of others. However, Grand suggests that both physical and moral selflessness, taken to extremes, have immoral effects: “The waist is an infallible index to the moral worth of a woman; very little of the latter survives the pressure of a tightened corset” (*The Heavenly Twins* 562). Grand’s witty remark cinches together the physical and moral diminishment demanded by feminine ideals.<sup>9</sup> Devoting their attention to the cultivation of physical and moral selflessness in the eyes of others, women are blinded, the novels suggest, to the inevitable moments at which their attempts at selflessness backfire. Mrs. Caldwell, believing women should be ignorant of the ways of the world and silent about their husbands’ infidelities, exemplifies the psychological side of this problem in *The Beth Book*. Beth’s mother might pride herself on her ability to stay silent about her husband’s philandering, but she channels her discontent into verbal and physical abuse of her daughter. Discouraged as a woman from active moral knowledge, Beth’s mother lacks the self-reflection to realize the immorality of her actions toward her daughter (or the immorality of her husband’s actions toward her).

Grand suggests that her own attempts at a similar selflessness will only lead to self-absorption. Turning in the final book of *The Heavenly Twins* to the first-person narrator Dr. Galbraith, Grand calls attention to the possibility that her narrators not only serve to demonstrate

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<sup>8</sup> Grand was a member of the Rational Dress Society, founded in 1881 “to warn women of the dangers of tight lacing and other constrictive clothing.” Grand’s active involvement, writing and speaking on the Society’s behalf, also “quickly acquainted her with prominent feminists in London” (Mangum 234, 22n).

<sup>9</sup> Heilmann notes that, for feminists, corsets represented both physical and mental confinement for women: “Sarah Grand was at the forefront of writers who exposed the corset as a straitjacket of the mind” (*New Woman Fiction* 122).



Evadne's and Ideala's complex self-consciousness; they also serve to demonstrate her own selflessness. The sudden, unorthodox shift from a heterodiegetic narrator to a homodiegetic one in the novel's final book lends to this sense of metalepsis.<sup>10</sup> Having appointed himself as Evadne's psychologist, Galbraith's gathering of narrative details as part of his psychological and moral assessment points back to the construction of the novel itself, reminding the reader that the implied author's perspective organizes what seems an immediate presentation of a world. Galbraith's purpose is not entirely selfless; he aims to demonstrate something about himself. He explains that doctors should be able to understand the "character" of anyone they meet; any "medical man who has not insight enough to do so at will has small chance of success in his profession" (555). Here in the final book emerges a clear (albeit fictional) author figure selecting and organizing the details of the narrative to serve his own professional needs. This shift unsettles the narratorial stability of the previous books and intimates that Grand herself might be revealing the private details of her heroines' lives only to demonstrate the complexity of her own moral thought, to gain recognition of her moral character.<sup>11</sup>

From this angle, the novels' objective representation of their heroines becomes suspect knowledge, their narrators prying opportunists. The other novelists studied here express concern that their attempts at a disinterested objectivity may on the contrary reveal something about their own interests; in Grand, this disguised self-interest takes the specific forms of spying and even vivisection. The minor character Lady Fulda comments that one might "keep the ten

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<sup>10</sup> Gérard Genette explains of metalepsis, "The transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by the narrating, the act that consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation. Any other form of transit is, if not always impossible, at any rate always transgressive" (234).

<sup>11</sup> Many critics read the shift in perspective to Galbraith's first-person narration as a critique of the objectifying male clinical gaze. Lowenstein sees the shift as "undermin[ing] the very notion of omniscience itself" and representative of the epistemological crisis surrounding late-century understandings of hysteria (438). Galbraith cannot adequately interpret Evadne—as her doctor or her narrator—and diagnoses her as hysterical. It seems to me that the narrative shift provides Grand a prime opportunity to demonstrate her simultaneous commitment to the feminist critique of patriarchy and the active self-questioning essential to her model of moral agency for women.

commandments strictly, and yet be a most objectionable person... , listen[ing] at doors, repeat[ing] private conversations, open[ing] other people's letters, [and] pry[ing] amongst their papers" (*The Heavenly Twins* 537). In *Ideala* Lord Dawne mysteriously admits to piecing together part of the narrative "with the help of papers that have lately come into [his] possession" (90); and the anonymous narration that begins *The Heavenly Twins* includes copies of Evadne's and her mother's letters, as well as entries from Evadne's journal. As Candace Vogler argues, anyone who wants to know a human being ("Jane," in her example) as well as one knows a fictional character like Maggie Verver of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* "will need...to stalk, eavesdrop upon, and interview Jane repeatedly...to study Jane's personal correspondence, wardrobe choices, diaries, and photo albums—all in order to *approximate* the kind of access to Jane that James gives us to Maggie" (15, emphasis original). More starkly yet, such an intruder, "having finally acquired and archived all available evidence on Jane,...will have to see to it that her life ends in order to ensure that the thing he has come to know is finished" (Vogler 15).

Grand anticipates and even extends the criticism implicit in Vogler's comments by recurring to the figure of the prying vivisectionist.<sup>12</sup> In *The Beth Book*, Dan, a vivisectionist, listens at Beth's door, opens her letters, and barges into her room, demanding to know what she has been doing. And Beth herself, a fictional stand-in for Grand, is accused of "vivisecting" Alfred Cayley Pounce: "She watches the workings of his mind quite dispassionately...and then adjusts him under the microscope. It interests her to dissect the creature. When she has studied him thoroughly, she will cast him out, as a worthless specimen" (461-62). In *The Heavenly Twins*, vivisection is directly connected with the act of narration, as rumors circulate early on

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<sup>12</sup> The anti-vivisection movement, which gained momentum in the 1870s, was well underway by the time Grand published her novels. Anti-vivisection was closely linked with the women's movement: feminist Frances Power Cobbe founded the Society for the Protection of Animals Liable to Vivisection in 1875 and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection in 1898, and other feminists like Grand and Mona Caird spoke out for animal rights.

that Galbraith practices vivisection (133). When Galbraith becomes narrator, his aggressive attempts to determine Evadne's motives for visiting a seedy neighborhood late at night are cast in a negative light. Unable to determine her motive, he begins to believe Evadne's actions stemmed from "[a]n unholy curiosity" (621). He bluntly asks her what she was doing, but she refuses to tell him. Galbraith's frustration reflects back upon the self-aggrandizing nature of his constant judgment of her moral character, suggesting a connection between his roles as vivisectionist and narrator.

In drawing parallels between narration and the prying vivisectionist, Grand reverses a trope that had earlier been associated with the objectivity of realist narrative. Indeed, as Richard Menke has shown, G. H. Lewes, Eliot's longtime romantic partner and a vivisectionist himself, compared what he saw as Dickens's failures in characterization to "the deficiencies of an incompetent vivisector" (627). Menke argues that Eliot had a more ambivalent view on the ethics of vivisection but nevertheless "use[d] language and techniques translated from Lewes's physiological psychology" to capture the complexity of her characters' subjective experience in "The Lifted Veil," *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*. As Menke explains, *Daniel Deronda*'s "unusually complex psycho-narration, free indirect discourse, and treatment of psychology...render the subjective aspect of consciousness in an apparently objective form, as Lewes imagined a non-reductive, experimental physiology of mind might do" (646).<sup>13</sup> As we've seen, Eliot may have striven toward objectivity in her realism, but she also had reservations about embracing it wholeheartedly. Grand similarly challenges such a straightforward faith in

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<sup>13</sup> For other studies of the relationship between fiction and vivisection in the nineteenth century, see Lucy Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain in Late Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (2000); Ivan Kreilkamp, "Petted Things: *Wuthering Heights* and the Animal" (2005); Christine Ferguson, *Language, Science, and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle: The Brutal Tongue* (2006); and Jessica Straley, "Love and Vivisection: Wilkie Collins's Experiment in *Heart and Science*" (2010).

objectivity, presenting her scientifically minded narrator Dr. Galbraith as markedly limited by his professional egotism.

Ultimately, then, Grand reminds readers of a key similarity between fallible first-person narrators and objective third-person narrators: objectivity is a mask worn by the limited implied author. The final book of *The Heavenly Twins* sheds new light on Grand's moral project: she has shrewdly used the ambiguity in our understanding of narrators—as both self-conscious, embodied communicators of their own knowledge and an unselfconscious, disembodied means of presenting an objective reality—for her own moral ends. Grand's third-person narrative pushes her ideal of ethical unselfconsciousness to an extreme and intimates that she as the implied author is capable of it. Thus, while the novels express her beliefs about the complexity of women's moral character, Grand can assure her audience that this expression comes from a selfless desire to improve the world rather than an overly self-conscious desire to prove her own merits. But in introducing Galbraith as narrator at the end of *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand questions her narrators' and her own supposedly selfless objectivity: in her attempt to bring to light the reasons and experiences that lead her heroines to think, act, and speak the way they do, is she merely vivisectioning them for her own purposes, as a woman worried about her own ethical identity in the eyes of her audience? By assuming that her third-person narrator allows her a position of perfect selflessness, Grand risks undermining the intricate balance of ethical self-consciousness informing her novels' feminist message. She thus demonstrates that even fiction that avoids overt didacticism can still convey a certain moral self-regard. The key to overcoming cant in one's art is, as we will see, openly acknowledging that fiction will always, at some level, have something moral or political to say to its readers thanks to the inevitable presence of the author.

2.

Grand's self-questioning at the end of *The Heavenly Twins* thus suggests that the more her novels "selflessly" focus on the moral probity of her characters, the more they point back to her own moral probity as implied author. Grand continues to explore this problem in *The Beth Book*, but she also searches for a solution. Grand's attempts at selflessly objective narration in the previous two novels began to suggest an ironic desire for recognition as implied author. With such avoidance of recognition only suggesting a further desire for recognition, it begins to seem that the only possibility for breaking out of this vertiginous circle would involve open acknowledgment of her own purposes in organizing the narrative and morally interpreting characters. Open self-acknowledgment is exactly what Grand demonstrates in the semiautobiographical *Beth Book*,<sup>14</sup> where she more overtly examines herself by projecting her authorial persona into the character Beth. The focus on the author is more explicit this time, but Grand maintains the anonymous third-person narrator, thereby coming as close to autobiography as possible while continuing the investigations of novelistic narrative begun in the trilogy's previous volumes.

Grand's concern thus far has been with her own narrative perspective as author, and her projection of her authorial persona into Beth indeed focuses on the formation of a strangely narratorial perspective in her character stand-in.<sup>15</sup> In this way, *The Beth Book* bends

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<sup>14</sup> Grand was ambiguous about the novel's autobiographical status: "I see the papers are announcing that *The Beth Book* is an autobiography," she commented. "As they have said the same of every book I have written yet, and as the heroine of each is entirely distinct and different, I should think the announcement must begin to fail of its effect." Nevertheless, Grand eventually "contradicted this claim, acknowledging that she had adapted scenes from her girlhood, and, indeed, the similarities between her life and her fiction are striking" (Mangum 144).

<sup>15</sup> Lyn Pykett briefly notes that the early characterization of Beth highlights a kind of writerly sensitivity, providing "the minute details of the myriad sense impressions that constitute the history of Beth's coming to self-consciousness.... Many of the passages which involve this process function as both representations of the character's consciousness, and celebrations of the writer's self-consciousness. The language of these passages is frequently in excess of the demands of the mere portrayal of character; writing itself is foregrounded" (*The 'Improper' Feminine* 178).

*Künstlerroman* conventions, documenting the development not just of an author, but of a narrative perspective. With an uncanny ability for observing the world around her, remembering the earliest moments of her existence, and knowing future events, Beth holds the first-person narrative perspective of an autobiography (Grand's autobiography) stuck in the third-person narrative of a novel. We are repeatedly assured that Beth remembers everything narrated early on in her life, even the first moment she came "into conscious existence" as an infant; the experience "recur[s] to her at odd times ever afterwards" (10). Such an emphasis on observation and memory is usually found in first-person narrative: unlike a disembodied third-person narrator, a first-person narrator must convince readers of "the plausibility of his cognition, particularly when it involves the most inchoate moments of his past" (Cohn 144). In addition to observing and remembering like a narrator, Beth at times finds herself knowing her future as if she has already lived it. First-person narration allows for this knowledge on the part of the narrating "I," knowledge that is typically impossible in third-person narration. The protagonist of a typical third-person narrative, as Dorrit Cohn explains, "cannot know his future self.... The experiencing self in first-person narration, by contrast, is always viewed by a narrator who knows what happened to him next, and who is free to slide up and down the time axis that connects his two selves" (145). Beth holds first-person retrospective narrative knowledge as a character in a third-person narrative. For one, she senses that her aunt Victoria is going to die in the pages before her sudden death. Attempting to explain this knowledge, she says, "I sometimes feel as if I were listening, but not with my ears, and waiting for things to happen that I know about, but not with my head.... I have to...suspend something in myself, stop something, push something aside—I can't get it into words; I can't always do it; but when I can, then I know" (212-13). Beth experiences this sensation again when she is trapped on the beach with Alfred

Cayley Pounce, the tide rising. Beth afterward tells Alfred that although she was frightened, she somehow knew that they would be safe: “The things that have come to me like that on a sudden positively have always been true, however much I might doubt and question beforehand. I did know at that moment that we should not be drowned” (241). At this and other moments, when Beth can “suspend” herself, taking on the more ample perspective of a narrator, she accesses knowledge of her own future. If *The Beth Book* were a traditional first-person autobiography, Grand would be able to talk about events like these with knowledge of their outcome because she would have already lived them, but in Beth this knowledge comes across as precognition.

By inserting herself more explicitly into the story in the character of Beth, Grand acknowledges the human fallibility of her authorial persona. As an embodied character, Beth interacts more directly with other characters than a heterodiegetic narrator or implied author would, and therefore holds a more explicit potential to act for overly self-conscious, self-aggrandizing reasons. Through this acknowledgment, as we will see, Grand creates space to maneuver around her fallibility and let go of her need for moral recognition—not asking for recognition but not avoiding it either. Before she fully acknowledges her fallibility, however, Grand seems only willing to acknowledge her *potential* for fallibility. Beth might hold the potential to act for overly self-conscious reasons, but, significantly, she does not. Instead, she holds a perspective as selflessly expansive as that of a third-person narrator, suggesting that Grand has fallen back into her desire to be recognized for her supposed selfless objectivity as author. Beth’s selfless perspective allows her to shift in and out of free indirect representations of other characters’ consciousness. Beth takes turns “being” other characters (19), speaking in their voices and sensing their thoughts. “[G]enerally somebody else in these days, seldom herself” (131), Beth “make[s] herself passive, . . . reflecting the people with whom she converse[s]

involuntarily” (208), thus approximating Grand’s narrators’ “selfless” presentation of an unmediated, objective reality. Her capacity for selfless observation is in fact often depicted through her bodilessness, as she “seem[s] to be seeing and hearing and feeling without eyes, or ears, or a body” (35). At other times, however, Beth’s perceptiveness extends to the very self of which she is often unaware: “The next day was Sunday. Beth knew it by the big black bonnet. . . . She had a kind of sensation of having seen herself in it, bobbing along to church, a sort of Kate Greenaway child, with a head out of all proportion to the rest of her body” (21). Here, Beth narrates herself as though a character out of one of her children’s books. Grand thus suggests that she can selflessly observe and narrate the world around her, even when that world includes herself.

As the novel continues and Beth grows up, however, Grand gives up the attempt to prove her selflessness to readers. In the most remarkable step in her exploration of narrative ethics, Grand quietly undermines her role as the supposedly objective interpreter of her heroine and allows Beth to stand on her own without need for the narrator’s constant recognition of her selflessness. Early on, the narrator claims of Beth, “In those first few years, had there been any there with intelligence to interpret, they probably would have found foreshadowings of all she might be.” The narrator aims “to throw light on the mysterious growth of [Beth’s] moral and intellectual being” (11). Here Grand implies that she is the one “with intelligence to interpret,” and we’ve indeed seen her interpret Beth as having the abilities of a novelist. But near the novel’s end, Beth shifts direction and leaves writing for public speaking. Grand demonstrates the plausibility and coherence of this development in such a fashion that we discover that her interpretation has been decisively limited:

Angelica had said that all the indications had pointed to literary ability in Beth, but there had been other indications hitherto unheeded. There was that day . . . when



Beth invited the country people in to see the house, and...found words flowing from her lips eloquently; there were her preachings to Emily and Bernadine in the acting-room, of which they never wearied; her first harangue to the girls who had caught her bathing..., and the power of her subsequent teaching...indications enough..., had there been any one to interpret them. (525)

There had been someone to interpret them, of course—the novel's narrator, or Grand as the implied author. And yet she has said nothing. Grand thus alerts us to a shift in her thinking about the aims of narrative.

Suddenly changing paths for herself and for Beth without explanation, Grand lets go of her desire for the sort of moral interpretation she has provided her heroines. Grand undermines her role as the selflessly objective interpreter of Beth at the same moment that Beth herself gives up the roles of author and narrator for public speaker. Beth's change in professional direction mirrors the development of her author: becoming a public speaker rather than a novelist, Beth no longer has recourse to demonstrating her selflessness through her novelistic narration.

Examining herself through Beth, Grand seems to have made the sort of self-discovery that we saw Ideala make in the first novel of the trilogy, this time at the level of the narrator rather than the character. Whereas Ideala rewrote herself across the two poems, in *The Beth Book*, Grand rewrites herself within the same story. Like Ideala, she does not draw attention to her discoveries, nor does she avoid drawing attention to them—and indeed, that balance is an essential part of the discovery itself. Grand might remain silent about her revision, but she leaves it in the novel, available for interpretation by readers. Neither asking for recognition nor avoiding it, Grand finds some autonomy of moral judgment.

Grand aims to develop for readers (as for herself) a model of feminist moral agency that takes cues from her narrators' understandings of her heroines' complex self-consciousness but finds ways to operate in the real, narratorless world. Through her rewriting of herself and Beth,

Grand performs a model of moral agency that requires the articulation of one's views and oneself publicly in order to acquire a sense of one's moral character privately and autonomously. Beth takes on this practice in her own world, understanding it as a form of prayer. Having struggled with her parents' cold indifference toward religion and her aunt Victoria's devout Calvinism, Beth develops a secular religiousness and a reverence for the idea of prayer as part of her personal moral code. She tells her friend Arthur Brock, "Religion is an attitude of mind, the attitude of prayer.... I would not lose that for anything" (502).

Self-questioning is an integral part of moral certainty, and Grand's late conceptualization of the "attitude of prayer" presents this paradox as key to the ethics behind women's confident articulation of moral belief. We've been prepared for the final importance of the term by Grand's earlier uses of it. When Beth's mother forces the servant Kitty to leave—in part because she believes she is converting her children to Catholicism—Beth, heartbroken and angry, is locked in her room for threatening to pray to the Virgin. Struggling between following her mother's Protestant beliefs and embracing Catholic practices she has learned from Kitty, Beth disobeys her mother and prays to the Holy Mother, timidly finding assurance that she has done right through the act of prayer itself: "Her pathetic little face was all drawn and haggard and hopeless. But presently she began to sing." As she prays, "comfort c[omes] to her, and the little voice swell[s] in volume" (41). Through prayer, the young Beth finds a way to do what Grand struggles with throughout her trilogy: obtain fleeting assurance of her own virtue and the sincerity of her expressions of moral belief.

The confident articulation of prayer, as Grand conceives of it, is a response to something outside the self that neither denies the self praying on one hand, nor, on the other hand, requires the fully active self-consciousness that one might, more intuitively, assume motivates a

“confident” expression of moral belief. If we conceive of prayer as Jean-Louis Chrétien describes it—“the act by which the man praying stands in the presence of a being in which he believes but does not see and manifests himself to it” (149)—then its unique relationship between self and other becomes clear: the sense of the listening other in prayer both establishes and alters the self, drawing on the self-certainty and -uncertainty of the person praying. The secular articulation of moral belief in Grand’s novels shares phenomenological characteristics with prayer thus conceived. Grand and her heroines speak not with the intention of specific others hearing them and then seeing them in a certain way, but neither with the intention of speaking solely for themselves. As in prayer, they speak something other than monologue or dialogue: “The word affects and modifies the sender, and not its addressee. We affect ourselves before the other and toward him. This in prayer is the first wound of the word: the yawning chasm of its addressee has broken its circle, has opened a fault that alters it” (Chrétien 153). Speaking not solely for myself, nor solely to affect a listener, “my own speech, altered from the very beginning, perhaps from before the beginning, turns back upon me with...singular force” (Chrétien 153).

Prayer’s intended audience is somewhere between self and other. Grand’s understanding of herself and her beliefs in *The Beth Book* seems to result from a similar in-betweenness. Publicly expressing herself through her novel’s narrative, Grand does not wait for a response before she privately identifies moral problems and adjusts her understanding. Rather, she allows her articulations to “turn back upon [her] with...singular force” in her narrative act of secular prayer. Near the novel’s end, Beth’s work habits reflect the dual nature, public and private, of women’s moral thought and expression. Retreating from the city to live alone but also becoming a public speaker, Beth develops “an attitude of deep devotion,” approaching her work “in the

spirit of the great musician who dressed himself in his best, and prayed as at a solemn service, when he shut himself up to compose” (522). Beth engages in an ongoing process of secular “prayer” meant more to gauge and improve her moral character privately than to prove something about herself publicly.<sup>16</sup>

But the public side of this “attitude of prayer” remains essential for Grand’s moral and political vision. Indeed, one possibility held out by Grand’s secular “attitude of prayer” (and it is, as we’ve seen, essential that this never be its primary aim) is that others will sense its sincerity and change their impressions of the speaker for the better. We see this potential when Beth blurts out her views about the ethics of literary style at a gathering of women. The women disapprove of Beth because of her husband’s position as the head of the Lock Hospital; they assume that she supports his career, even though Beth is unaware of Dan’s position. As they discuss Ideala’s writing, Mrs. Carne tells her, “What *I* love about *your* work is the *style*” (388, emphasis original). When the group consensually defines style as “a thing in itself to be adopted or acquired,” Beth cannot stay silent: “‘I am sure it is not,’ Beth burst out, forgetting herself and her slights all at once in the interest of the subject. ‘I have been reading the lives of authors lately, together with their works, and it seems to me, in the case of all who had genius, that their style was the outcome of their characters—their principles—the view they took of the subject.’” Beth quickly becomes self-conscious, realizing “that everyone...[i]s listening to her.” She reverts at first to uncertainty, feeling that “she ha[s] done the wrong thing to speak out like that” (389), but then changes her mind, realizing that she has in fact done right: “Then suddenly in herself, as before, something seemed to say, or rather to flash forth the exclamation for her comfort: ‘I shall succeed! I shall succeed!... She drew herself up and looked round on them all with a look that

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<sup>16</sup> Heilmann describes the cottage to which she retreats as “the site of Beth’s public and private consummation” (*New Woman Strategies* 82).

transformed her. Such an assurance in herself was not to be doubted” (389-90). With these lines—the only lines of extended narration in the scene—a Grand heroine finally speaks for herself, interprets her own speech (and herself) positively, and does so without the interpretive guarantee that a narrator would provide. She speaks without considering whether her audience will find her sincere, but reflects back on her speech to judge for herself.

In the event, Beth’s peers also perceive her speech positively—something Ideala and Evadne never achieve, but something Ideala helps to bring about here. After Beth abruptly runs out, Ideala convinces the others to listen to what Beth has to say, calling her “the genius for whom we are waiting.... It is the old story. She came unto her own, and her own received her not” (390). Ideala’s work as interpreter is all the more powerful for our recollection that she herself lacked one when she recited her poetry in the first book of the trilogy. Here, as the set of novels comes to its close, the narrator receding into the background, that earlier failure is redeemed: a woman speaks out without any intention of proving herself right or demonstrating her moral character, she and her audience independently reflect on what she has said, and they all conclude that she was right to speak out. Ideala has thus offered something sorely needed in a burgeoning feminist movement in which “[t]here is little union between women workers” and “[e]ach leader thinks her own idea the only good one, and disapproves of every other” (392). Indeed, such public interpretation appears one of the most ethical things women can do for each other: not asking for recognition but providing it for others.

The novel, in its own way, offers this opportunity to readers. When Grand undermines her role as interpreter of Beth, quietly rewriting the story and herself, the reader, trained by Grand, must perform the interpretive work that the narrator performed earlier. Grand has, this is to say, transformed readers into narrators. There are, of course, differences: Grand’s heroines

neither desire nor know of the recognition that their narrator provides them; indeed they cannot, within the conventions of realistic narration. The novel form protects them from this desire and its self-regarding dangers. Their delicate balance of self-consciousness is thus at once sheltered and exposed. This also means, however, that the political potential of this complex self-consciousness exists apart from the heroines and their worlds. In *The Beth Book*, Grand considers the possibility for an ethical feminism to be recognizable in the real, narratorless world, where women still suffer misinterpretation. The novel suggests to readers the importance of acting as each other's narrators, providing moral interpretation for those brave enough to speak out.

Indeed, Grand's politics do not have as transformative an effect on Evadne and Beth as one might expect; as many have noted, both end up in situations that suggest a woman's identity and ultimate happiness depend on finding a man who loves her. Her heroines may be forced back into marriage-plot endings, but Grand devotes the rest of her trilogy to formulating a richer sense of ethical selfhood for her heroines, herself, and her readers. Grand suggests that women, who face constant misinterpretation as either outspoken, moralizing "old harridans" or silent, helpless angels, be their own moral interpreters; public articulation allows them the distance for private self-reflection. But Grand's feminist aims also lead her to make the private motives of her heroines public through narrative fiction—to found a rhetoric of women's rights in a complex ethical self-consciousness. Although publicizing this state of mind still risks accusations of moralizing, an "attitude of prayer" requires that the project be ongoing, characterized by confident but self-reflective acts of writing and repeated rewriting (exemplified by Grand's trilogy). Exploring the possibilities offered by novelistic narrative's ambiguous sense of self and audience, Grand encourages women to cultivate a similar perspective, to develop the ability for a more nuanced moral self-consciousness and for active interpretation of that state of mind in

themselves and others. The novel form can isolate such intricate self-consciousness and make it apparent; Grand's readers have the more challenging but politically rewarding task of identifying it in each other.

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### EDUCATION

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### DISSERTATION

“Moralizing Women: The Expression of Belief in the Victorian Novel”

Committee: Andrew H. Miller (director), Ivan Kreilkamp, Rae Greiner, Jennifer L. Fleissner

My dissertation examines Victorian women novelists’ concern with the stereotype of the moralizing woman in moral and aesthetic discourse and their use of novel form to counteract this stereotype’s influence on the interpretation of their fiction. Consciously struggling against accusations of moral vanity, women novelists—canonical and non-canonical, religious and secular alike—looked to prayer and other religious forms as models for a complex self-consciousness and novelistic voice that could answer to these challenges. Examining authors such as Ellen Wood, George Eliot, Elizabeth Missing Sewell, and Sarah Grand, the project highlights modernism’s lingering influence on our assessments of Victorian women novelists’ expression of moral and religious belief in fiction.

### PUBLICATIONS

“Feminist ‘Cant’ and Narrative Selflessness in Sarah Grand’s New Woman Trilogy.”  
*Nineteenth-Century Literature* 67.3 (2012): 337-65.

“The Sounds of Narrative in Longfellow’s *Evangeline*.” *Reconsidering Longfellow*, eds.  
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### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Book Review Editor, *Victorian Studies*, 2009-10.

Assistant Book Review Editor, *Victorian Studies*, 2009.

## AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

William Riley Parker Prize in British Literature. Career award for outstanding advanced graduate student working in field of British literature. Indiana University Department of English. 2013.

Teaching Fellowship. Indiana University Department of English. 2012.

Patrick Brantlinger Victorian Studies Dissertation Year Fellowship. Indiana University Victorian Studies Program. 2011-12.

Nominee, Award for Outstanding Teaching by an Associate Instructor. Indiana University Department of English. 2008-09.

David H. Dickason Award for Best Graduate Student Essay on American Literature, for “The Sounds of Narrative in Longfellow’s *Evangeline*.” Indiana University Department of English. 2007-08.

Culbertson-McNutt Fellowship. Indiana University Department of English. 2006-07.

First-Year Departmental Fellowship. Indiana University Department of English. 2005-06.

## PRESENTATIONS

“Narrative Performances of Ethical Selflessness in Sarah Grand’s New Woman Trilogy.” North American Victorian Studies Association Conference (NAVSA). Vanderbilt University. November 2011.

“Feminist ‘Cant’ and the Curious Moral Self in Sarah Grand’s New Woman Trilogy.” Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers Conference. Ohio State University. April 2011.

“Choosing Atonement in *East Lynne*.” Department of English International Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference. Indiana University. March 2008.

“*Buena Vista Social Club* and the Nostalgic Imagining of ‘American’ Culture.” Department of English Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference. Indiana University. March 2007.

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teaching Fellow, Indiana University Department of English. 2012.

***Introduction to Fiction*** (Fall 2012). Independently designed and taught a course that familiarizes students with the art of fiction and literary analysis and fulfills the IU College of Arts and Sciences intensive writing requirement. The course develops students’ close reading and analytical skills, and covers the major components of fiction, including plot, character, setting, point of view, and theme. Writing three essays, three microthemes, and weekly “write to learn” assignments, students learn the key components for successful literary analysis, including argument, organization, evidence, format, tone, and style.



Associate Instructor, Indiana University Department of English. 2006-2011.

**Monsters**, Introduction to Writing and the Study of Literature, with Professor Joss Marsh (Fall 2008, two sections). Assisted in teaching a composition course that introduces students to the study of Victorian literature. Led two discussion sections twice weekly, graded written assignments and exams, and delivered a one-hour plenary lecture on representations of women in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and other literature, art, and popular culture of the period.

**Paradise or Prison? Exploring the Desert Island from Robinson Crusoe to LOST**, Projects in Reading and Writing (Spring 2008, Spring 2009). Designed (in collaboration with a fellow instructor) and taught a freshman composition course that integrates critical reading, thinking, and writing about retellings of the desert island myth, including Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee's *Foe*, and the television series *LOST*, and related topics of colonialism, post-colonialism, and globalization. In Spring 2009, one of my students received the Culbertson Prize for outstanding writing in a freshman composition course, for her comparative analysis of femininity in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Foe*.

**Professional Writing** (Fall 2010, Spring 2011). Taught genres of writing common to the workplace, focusing on the rhetorical principles behind effective tone, organization, and document design.

**Elementary Composition: Basic Writing** (Fall 2007, two sections). Taught students reading, writing, and analytical strategies designed to enhance their ability to meet the challenges of future academic writing tasks. The course caters to students who are at-risk or who have earned low SAT or ACT verbal scores. Focused on writing skills essential to explaining concepts, evaluating texts, analyzing causes and effects, proposing solutions to problems, and developing an argument with the use of outside sources.

**Elementary Composition** (Fall 2006, Spring 2007). Introduced students to strategies for critical reading, thinking, and writing about cultural issues. Focused on the ways newspaper stories, photographs, and films represent cultural assumptions and values in a series of three analytical essays and various shorter writing assignments.

## SERVICE

Contributor, Victorian Women Writers Project Online Database. Indiana University Digital Library Program. 2011-12.

Compiler, Victorian Studies Bibliography. 2007-12.

Planning Committee Member, *The End?* IU Department of English International Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference. 2009-10.

Speaker, Graduate Student Advisory Committee Panel on Taking Qualifying Exams. IU Department of English. February 2009.

Department of English Representative, Indiana University Graduate and Professional Students Organization. 2008-09.

Volunteer, *Female Marginalia: Annotating Empire* British Women Writers Conference. Bloomington, Indiana. 2008.

Planning Committee Member, *Open Secrets* IU Department of English International Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference. 2007-08.

Graduate Student Mentor. IU Department of English. 2006-08.

## **PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

North American Victorian Studies Association

Modern Language Association

## **LANGUAGES**

Spanish (fluent)

French (reading proficient)

## **REFERENCES**

**Andrew H. Miller**, Editor of *Victorian Studies* and Professor of English, Indiana University (ahmiller@indiana.edu)

**Ivan Kreilkamp**, Editor of *Victorian Studies* and Associate Professor of English, Indiana University (ikreilka@indiana.edu)

**Rae Greiner**, Editor of *Victorian Studies* and Associate Professor of English, Indiana University (drgreine@indiana.edu)

**Joss Marsh**, Emeritus Associate Professor of English, Indiana University (jomarsh@indiana.edu)

**Kathy Overhulse Smith**, Associate Chair, Composition Program Coordinator, Director of Basic Writing & Special Programs, Department of English, Indiana University (kosmith@indiana.edu)