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Formative Modernists: Ordinary Sympathy, Sublime Provocation, and Ethics in Thomas Mann
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Abstract

Does art – literature – have a place in the ethical life? Can it practice moral formation? Moral philosophers from the nineteenth century through the modern era have answered both questions in the affirmative. In this paper, I argue that several of the former, such as G. E. Moore and Arthur Schopenhauer, inspired the modernist writers Virginia Woolf and Thomas Mann to use distinctively modern narrative strategies to morally form their readers. To establish a vocabulary useful in explaining how and to what end they did so, a brief exposition of contemporary virtue theorists opens the paper. Analyses of each writer follow; first, Mann relies on irony, emotional and deliberative narration, and the sublime to provoke the reader into confronting their biases on ethical-aesthetic problems throughout *Death in Venice*. Woolf creates ordinary “common meeting-places” and uses stream-of-consciousness narration to engender readers’ sympathy in “The Mark on the Wall” and “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street.” Despite those strategic differences, however, both draw their readers into morally valent individual psychological realities without trying to destroy them. In this way, their texts are capable of re-creating the reader as “finely aware and richly responsible,” a faculty which I then situate in late modernity’s nascent discomfort with and inability to disavow grand narratives. The paper concludes that Woolf and Mann’s formative modernism is a critical midpoint between modernity and poststructuralist postmodernity.

There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth . . . than that of the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it.

—Henry James, Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*

“How does one come by one’s morality? Surely,” wrote Virginia Woolf to a friend, “by reading the poets.”¹ On the surface, this reads like a quip, an offhand remark about fables or moralizing writers. The 1922 letter from which it comes, however, indicates a deeper significance. In it, Woolf bemoans the fact that “there’s not a single living writer (English) [she] respect[s]” and claims that “the Edwardians, from 1895 to 1914, made a pretty poor show.” These authors, such as Thomas Hardy and Arnold Bennett, often made ethical claims on social conditions and ideology through narrative structure, or the ordering and depiction of events.² William Scheick, for example, writes that Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* uses its “hourglass design” and parallel narration to represent both pessimism and compassion in response to the constraints of fate.³ Scheick does not analyze Woolf in detail, but he does say that she writes characters who “determine their own motives,” creating “an integrity of character so complete that the reader is excluded and reduced to a fascinated voyeur.”⁴ He is certainly correct to imply that Woolf’s opportunity for moral writing lies in her narration of character, but not to insist that this style excludes the reader. As I argue below, Woolf herself argues the opposite in story and essay alike. Where her predecessors’ narrative structures emphasize how an individual or a society should act according to certain social constraints or ethical principles, I will argue that Woolf’s narrative lens shows the reader how they should *be*. To understand how it does so and to situate it more firmly in literary modernism, this paper will bring two of her short stories into conversation with the German writer Thomas Mann and his *Death in Venice*. The novella is famously concerned with the intersection of aesthetics and ethics, and its modernist author was himself an avid

¹ Woolf, Virginia Woolf to Janet Case, 529.

² Larson, *Ethics and Narrative*, 13-14.

³ Scheick, *Fictional Structure*, 102-103; 97-98.

⁴ Scheick, *Fictional Structure*, 30.

student of moral philosophy.⁵ For those reasons, it is an ideal text in conversation with which to examine Woolf's fiction on the question of moral formation. How, then, can "poets" develop one's moral consciousness? By what morality could one come through a book?

Martha Nussbaum, Virtue Ethics, and Literature

In 1958, G.E.M. Anscombe launched a scathing critique of her philosophical contemporaries. In "Modern Moral Philosophy," she declares that the concepts of "moral *obligation* and moral *duty*... ought to be jettisoned... because they are survivals... from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer survives."⁶ In her account, law-based morality, or that appealing to some binding obligation, became unintelligible when secularization cost it its divine lawgiver. She then finds that no principles proposed as replacements, such as utilitarianism and Kant's Reason, avoid legitimizing some horrific actions or bridge the is-ought gap. After her article appeared, contemporary virtue ethics arose to meet that challenge.⁷ Its adherents understand virtue, or the aspects of self necessary to reach some telos, as the unit of analysis of moral life. Although many scholars focus on different virtues or claim different ends as the telos, they all share that basic paradigm. Virtue ethics concerns itself with the constitution of the self and its consequences, not codifying rules for life or imposing arbitrary obligations, and both writers considered here derive their moral philosophies from major precursors to that project. For that reason, this paper will take the virtue ethics tradition as its starting point.

⁵ Kitcher, *Deaths in Venice*, 121-123.

⁶ Anscombe, "Modern," 1.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* is the most influential text in contemporary virtue ethics and provides a useful introduction to the field. For more perspectives on virtue ethics, see *Virtue Ethics (Oxford Readings in Philosophy)*, edited by Roger Crisp and Michael Slote.

Most recent scholarship on morality in literature involves at least some grounding in the work of Martha Nussbaum. Her ethical project is “the search for a specification of the good life,”⁸ an “adventure of the personality.”⁹ To live this adventure well, she argues, one needs the virtue of practical wisdom, or the ability to choose well despite insoluble conflicts of value. This faculty has three components, the first being the habitual use of “flexibility, responsiveness, and openness to the external” to perceive the particulars and values involved in a situation as fully as possible.¹⁰ Next follows integrative, respectful deliberation, involving “link[ing] particulars without dispensing with their particularity” in mental images.¹¹ In Iris Murdoch’s words, “true vision occasions right conduct.”¹² Finally, she claims that one must acknowledge the inevitability of conflicts of value before improvising a decision.¹³

Key to Nussbaum’s place in this inquiry is her claim that such practical wisdom “must be supplied by nothing less messy than experience and stories of experience,” realistic novels chief among them.¹⁴ This is so for three reasons. First, literature presents the reader with a character’s rich self- and other-perception, as well as their subsequent deliberation on the results. This allows the reader to practice those skills in the laboratory of the text. By bringing the reader into sustained, close contact with a character’s rich psychology and sense of self, literature can help the reader to love that character as an end in itself. This should ensure that “true vision occasions right conduct.” Finally, the sort of richly mimetic literature with which Nussbaum is concerned presents us with those aspects of highly realistic characters as they navigate insoluble conflicts of

⁸ Nussbaum, “Flawed Crystals,” 134.

⁹ Nussbaum, “Discernment,” 93.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, “Discernment,” 74.

¹¹ Nussbaum, “Discernment,” 79.

¹² Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 64.

¹³ Nussbaum, “Flawed Crystals,” 137.

¹⁴ Nussbaum, “Discernment,” 74.

value, teaching us to anticipate them in our own lives.¹⁵ In sum, Nussbaum's moral psychology contends that becoming "finely aware," "people on whom nothing is lost," gives us the information needed to improvise paths through such conflicts of value.¹⁶ Certain works of literature can help their readers to both develop these abilities and feel "richly responsible" for others to a great enough extent to motivate their use.

That Nussbaum bases these arguments on the late-period work of the British novelist Henry James, especially his rather impenetrable novel *The Golden Bowl*, suggests that applying them here as well may prove fruitful. From 1897 until his death, James began to experiment.¹⁷ These works, such as *The Golden Bowl*, "The Beast in the Jungle," and *The Wings of the Dove*, feature long paragraphs, chaotic yet rich sentences, and vivid mental imagery, especially when James elaborates on characters' perception and deliberation. Despite the inaccessibility of this style, it establishes his late works as exemplars of the moral novel for Nussbaum. James saw them this way himself.¹⁸ The same rich perception of characters' inner selves also appears in Woolf's stream of consciousness narration. Woolf also read and wrote extensively on James.¹⁹ Given these resonances, Nussbaum's vocabulary appears tentatively compatible with Woolf's work.

To be sure, Nussbaum's work is not without its critics. She spends several pages answering the theorist Hilary Putnam's criticism that her paradigm could lead to an "empty situation morality" in which anything is permissible given enough agony over a decision and its

¹⁵ Nussbaum does not use the term in *Love's Knowledge*, but she defines it in *Political Emotions* (145) as "the ability to imagine the situation of the other, taking the other's perspective."

¹⁶ Nussbaum, "Discernment," 84; Nussbaum, "Discernment," 135.

¹⁷ McWhirter, *Desire and Love*, 2.

¹⁸ Nussbaum, "Finely Aware," 148.

¹⁹ Woolf, *Writer's Diary*, 39; 57-58; 301.

trade-offs.²⁰ She does so well enough, notably by pointing out that general principles, traditions, and personal background ensure practical wisdom's reliability. Neither does she provide many other examples of art capable of teaching that virtue beyond James's work, but that is, after all, one question addressed in this paper through Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" and "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" and Mann's *Death in Venice*. Together, they should reveal whether and how Nussbaum's theory of literature-induced moral formation applies to writers outside James or to literary traditions outside the Anglo-American. Most importantly, this inquiry should provide some insight as to whether Nussbaumian moral formation has any distinctive relation to literary modernism or relies on any kind of distinctly modern relationship with the reader.

Death in Venice

Understanding Mann's preoccupation with moral questions should begin with an account of the moral philosophers who influenced him. First among these is the German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer, whose central work, *The World as Will and Representation*, Mann so loved that he edited and introduced the 1938 abridged edition.²¹ He first read the text during the 1890s, long before he began *Death in Venice*, and returned to it for decades afterward.²² As Philip Kitcher demonstrates using Mann's archived copy of *World as Will*, Mann seems to have found two conclusions especially attractive in the second and fourth books of the first volume. The first was Schopenhauer's skepticism of the productivity of *a priori* reasoning in comparison with experience of the Will's tyranny over the world as its representation, a perspective to which

²⁰ Nussbaum, "Discernment," 93-96.

²¹ See Thomas Mann, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung von Schopenhauer in einer gekürzten Fassung dargeboten von Thomas Mann* (Zürich: Classen, 1948).

²² Kitcher, *Deaths in Venice*, 8-9.

Mann subscribes in his 1938 introduction to the text.²³ In Kitcher's words, even more captivating to him were Schopenhauer's questions, his "modification of the problematic of philosophy, replacing Kantian questions about the world and our knowledge of it with issues about the value of human lives."²⁴ Among these was the relation between the well-lived life and the artistic life, which Schopenhauer held to be inextricably linked.²⁵

Schopenhauer's work on ethics also prefigures the recent revival of virtue ethics. In *Über die Grundlage der Moral (On the Basis of Morality)*, he takes the claim that "if an act [has] an egoistic object as its motive, then no moral value can be attached to it."²⁶ Of all the possible "motives" that he examines, he finds that only compassion satisfies this condition, because the compassionate person experiences a perceptive synergy with the sufferer.²⁷ As compassion entails feeling those emotions as one's own, it is the complete abolition of distance between its possessor and its target. In that this compassion is also a motive understood as authentic in the immediacy of its use, it resembles a virtue, an aspect of self necessary to live a moral life. While the depth of Mann's engagement with this particular text is unclear, the roots of its ideas are also present in the magnum opus that he so loved. In Schopenhauer, he found both a self- and humanity-centered moral framework and a virtue with which to fill it.

Even so, Schopenhauer earns that distinction only because Friedrich Nietzsche was an anti-moral philosopher. Nietzsche was in vogue among the young Mann's contemporaries, largely because of his inclination to excruciating self-evaluation, to *Selbstüberwindung*. In

²³ Mann, "Schopenhauer," 4:286-288; see also 4:419-421.

²⁴ Kitcher, *Deaths in Venice*, 35.

²⁵ Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 193-201.

²⁶ Schopenhauer, *The Basis*, 166.

²⁷ Schopenhauer, *The Basis*, 169

letters, Mann made clear the influence of this idea on his early work, as he read Nietzsche even before he discovered Schopenhauer.²⁸ Nietzsche was also preoccupied with the conflict between art and morality. This is central to *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which he writes that “we are expected to feel elevated and inspired at the triumph of good and noble principles, at the sacrifice of the hero in the interest of a moral conception of things,” but those who do “have had no experience of tragedy as the highest art.”²⁹ Mann may have derived some of his own interest in that question from Nietzsche. Also of note is Nietzsche’s basic predilection to deconstruct conceptual absolutes, especially those of morality, truth, reason, and religion.³⁰ Disavowing codification in morality is a precondition to practicing virtue ethics. A virtue ethicist would contend that Nietzsche wrongly generalized from moral discourse in his own time to morality in general. Even so, his inclination to the will to live guided by subjectivity comports with their project, as does what some scholars see as his concern with human flourishing.³¹ Finally, Mann appears to have noted Nietzsche’s ironic, vivid style before any other aspect of his work.³² He never agreed with many of Nietzsche’s substantive conclusions, however, and after World War II, he openly disavowed him.³³ Along with his ironic attacks on dogma, Nietzsche’s influence on Mann seems to have comprised his preoccupation with *Selbstüberwindung* and art’s relation to moral life. Together, these suggest that Mann may have inherited specific questions and general elements of what has since become the virtue ethics method from him.

²⁸ Kitcher, *Deaths in Venice*, 9.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 170.

³⁰ See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 5-6: “What really is this ‘Will to Truth’ in us... granted that we want the truth: why not rather untruth?”

³¹ Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche*.

³² Feder, *Mahler*, 179-187.

³³ Many scholars believe that he did so out of political expediency.

As will become apparent, the broad strokes of the novella's plot suggest that the problems that Mann explores through *Death in Venice* incorporate his philosophical influences. Its protagonist, Gustav Aschenbach, is a disciplined, ascetic writer of some note who decides to take a holiday in Venice, eventually landing in a hotel near the sea. At dinner, he is struck by the sight of a fourteen-year-old Polish aristocrat, Tadzio, whose beauty he finds intoxicating. Over the next few weeks, Aschenbach's tormented ardor deepens even as he begins to hear rumors of a serious cholera epidemic sweeping Venice. In the story's coda, Aschenbach sees Tadzio far away on the beach one last time. When he rises to follow him, he falls back into his chair and dies.

Aschenbach's perception of Tadzio drives the novella's plot. Specifically, he is concerned with Tadzio's beauty, but "beauty" seems an inadequate description, given its provocation of awe and rumination in him. Aschenbach spends the entire text struggling to describe it. In this way, Tadzio embodies the sublime to him, the aesthetic quality of ineffable beauty. Schopenhauer writes extensively on this idea in *World as Will*, describing a spectrum ranging from a feeling of beauty to the fullest feeling of the sublime. Those objects that can hurt or unite with their observer, he explains, provoke stronger feelings of the sublime.³⁴ Aschenbach's experiences of the beautiful follow exactly this pattern. At first, he merely contemplates the beauty of the city of Venice, which poses no threat to him by itself and therefore evokes the weakest form of the sublime.³⁵ The sea, which poses a threat but could not sustain Aschenbach's life, awakens slightly more intense contemplation.³⁶ Aschenbach's vision then narrows completely when it lands on Tadzio. Here, words fail him: "Er war schöner, als es sich sagen läßt, und Aschenbach

³⁴ Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 259-268.

³⁵ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 32, 34. At this point in the novella, Aschenbach does not know about the looming cholera epidemic.

³⁶ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 42.

empfand wie schon oftmals mit Schmerzen, daß das Wort die sinnliche Schönheit nur zu preisen, nicht wiederzugeben vermag.”³⁷ This is what Schopenhauer called sublime proper, the sublime sensation arising from objects that could hurt their observer; here, Aschenbach indeed apprehends Tadzio “mit Schmerzen.” Whether he reaches the fullest feeling of sublime, that which arises from apprehending the infinity of the universe and one’s unity with it, remains ambiguous. He dies on the beach before he can walk over to Tadzio and symbolically unite with the beauty that to him has become infinite, but his awed, wordless reaction to Tadzio’s gaze suggests that he has reached a new degree of sublime perception.³⁸ In special encounters, such as Aschenbach’s encounters with Tadzio in his hotel dining room, on the beach, during a street performance, and before his death, Aschenbach experiences progressively higher degrees of the sublime through Tadzio’s beauty.

From this, two virtue-ethical questions emerge, the first being the relationship between life and mind and the second being the tension between embodied beauty and artistic sensibility. Aschenbach’s ascetic, disciplined life as a successful but pedestrian author prevents him from acting on or suffering physically from his desire for Tadzio, the embodied beautiful, until he has the barber dye his hair and skin. After this, he eats several overripe strawberries and collapses.³⁹ Here, as elsewhere, this is a symbolic expression of love.⁴⁰ Unable to seize Tadzio’s beauty, he commits himself to it symbolically, although the obvious immorality of his pursuit and the dangers of staying amid a cholera epidemic would cost him his dignity and his chance to flourish. A mental obsession threatens his embodied well-being. Tellingly, Aschenbach dies at

³⁷ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 92.

³⁸ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 134, 136.

³⁹ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 128.

⁴⁰ Ross, “Strawberries,” 238-239.

the very moment when he finally appears ready to interact with Tadzio. The overripe strawberries both represent Aschenbach's commitment to that beauty and, likely infected with cholera, literally kill him. The reader wonders whether the death of Aschenbach, the mind, is an inevitable result of his attraction to the idea of unity with Tadzio, the beautiful. Put another way, can the artist faithful to the sublime achieve the telos of human flourishing?

Also critical are the ways in which Aschenbach's apprehension of Tadzio's beauty prompts the reader to consider the relation between Schopenhauerian compassion and beauty. On one hand, Tadzio's beauty inspires Aschenbach to draw nearer to him, to edge toward a unification. Schopenhauer argued that real, moral compassion involved a sympathetic unification between its possessor and a sufferer. Aschenbach's movement toward Tadzio, then, should have allowed him to act more compassionately, warning Tadzio's mother about the cholera epidemic. He does no such thing. In this way, Mann fuses two of Schopenhauer's questions. If engaging with beauty can provide the artist or the observer with insights into a higher reality but may provoke obsession, can that artist remain compassionate? In this way, the central philosophical question of the text becomes: can one both maintain a sensibility for the beautiful and practice the virtues?

Arguing that Mann's novella places the reader inside that question and that doing so might instill the virtues is a taller task. Indeed, Mann's narration of Aschenbach's collapse in the square after eating the strawberries seems to suggest that Mann takes a rule-based ethical stance against Aschenbach's tragic fall. As he totters in the abandoned plaza, Aschenbach's "schlaffen Lippen, kosmetisch aufgehöhht, bildeten einzelne Worte aus von dem, was sein halb

schlummerndes Hirn an seltsamer Traumlogik hervorbrachte.”⁴¹ This follows an extraordinarily harsh mockery of Aschenbach’s former asceticism and loss of dignity. Until this point, Mann withholds overt judgment, and in the coda, he resumes his detached tone, even emphasizing his character’s nobility by calling him “Gustav von Aschenbach.”⁴² Why vilify him here, and only here? One piece of Mann’s mockery may indicate the answer. Just before he allows Aschenbach to speak, he calls him “Überwinder seines Wissens und aller Ironie.”⁴³ “Überwinder” echoes Nietzsche’s emphasis on overcoming oneself, but Nietzsche and Mann both used “Ironie” liberally.⁴⁴ Mann was particularly well-known for it.⁴⁵ This suggests that Mann’s harsh, almost caricatured attack on Aschenbach may itself be ironic. Even so, some scholars use Aschenbach’s subsequent declaration that poets must “notwendig in die Irre gehen, notwendig liederlich und Abenteuer des Gefühles bleiben” to make a different claim.⁴⁶ Martina Hoffmann, for example, indicates his movement from what Nietzsche describes in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the Apollonian mode of life to the Dionysian, from ordered and form-differentiated to disordered and form-undifferentiated.⁴⁷ However, as Kitcher’s archival work demonstrates, Mann likely did not engage with that part of *The Birth of Tragedy* in much depth.⁴⁸ For Nietzsche, moreover, neither the Apollonian nor the Dionysian was praiseworthy alone. He upheld early Greek tragedy as the form’s pinnacle on the basis of its fusion of the two.⁴⁹ With this in mind, I contend that Mann’s use of irony in this scene confronts the reader with their own dogmatic condemnation of

⁴¹ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 131.

⁴² Mann, *Death in Venice*, 132.

⁴³ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 131.

⁴⁴ Behler, *Irony*, 93-95.

⁴⁵ Heller, *Thomas Mann*, 236-238.

⁴⁶ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 130.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 22; Hoffmann, *Thomas*, 78-92.

⁴⁸ Kitcher, *Deaths in Venice*, 29.

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 6-8.

Aschenbach's "fall." Mann was certainly a careful enough reader to understand that his readers would experience a knee-jerk reaction against that fall. His affinity for Nietzsche's problematization of dogma suggests that he would have wanted to disabuse his readers of such easy instincts as well.

In fact, this irony extends to the novella as a whole. In her monograph on Dostoevsky, Greta Matzner-Gore proposes that "both his characters and his narrators 'are in a struggle'... with ideas, with one another, and with the chaotic stories they endeavor to tell." In turn, this "spark[s] the struggle in his readers" and "whet[s] [their] desire for... moral beauty."⁵⁰ Here, too, Aschenbach's entire narrative arc is one of struggle, both with himself and between ideas. While Mann likely did not intend to weigh the Dionysian against the Apollonian, they are nevertheless useful in understanding Aschenbach's internal conflict. Dreams of chaotic, Dionysian forests, primeval nature, and the East torment and tantalize him. These desires, provoked by Tadzio, exist in tension with his well-ordered conventionality. Mann surely knew that his readers would instinctively decide either that Aschenbach had lived an excessively Apollonian life, allowed the Dionysian to conquer him, or both, and thereby reach quick judgments on the quality of life possible through each. In this way, the text functions to place the reader inside Aschenbach's philosophical problems. The questions of Nietzsche's two modes of life, the possibility of a life both virtuous and faithful to the sublime, and the role of compassion become ours.

How the novella as a whole enacts this dichotomy becomes apparent as Aschenbach deliberates leaving Venice to escape the epidemic. While standing in a square, Aschenbach considers warning Tadzio's mother about the plague; "er erwog eine reinigende und anständige

⁵⁰ Matzner-Gore, *Dostoevsky*, 13.

Handlung.”⁵¹ An unusually rich account of the process whereby he decides to keep silent follows, ending in the question, “Was galt ihm noch Kunst und Tugend gegenüber den Vorteilen des Chaos?”⁵² Here, as at each stage of the sublime, Aschenbach chooses beauty and chaos over ordered virtue, and the rich narration of his deliberation toward that choice draws the reader into that deliberation, at once provoking reactive condemnation and guilty empathy. Thus arises Mann’s ironic challenge. Who has not been struck by “Hoffnungen, unfafßbar, die Vernunft überschreitend und von ungeheuerlicher Süßigkeit” and felt guilty on their account?⁵³ Vivid exposition of Aschenbach’s emotions and deliberation ensure that we do here. Even while he paces the town square, the reader learns the details of his many emotions and often opposed motivations on this question. The narrator specifies that he does so “in fiebriger Erregung, triumphierend im Besitze der Wahrheit, einen Geschmack von Ekel dabei auf der Zunge und ein phantastisches Grauen im Herzen.”⁵⁴ In the narration of his subsequent dream, the reader also experiences a full, “körperhaft-geistiges Erlebnis” explaining his anxieties and motivations.⁵⁵ Where the previous narration of the latter’s deliberation only described his thoughts and emotions, this shows them to us. Just as “ihr Schauplatz war vielmehr [Aschenbachs] Seele selbst” and these images fuse with his self, the narrator’s images of Aschenbach’s experience are so holistically vivid as to bring the reader into emotional unity with him.⁵⁶

In this way, *Death in Venice* bears a striking resemblance to Nussbaum’s ideal of moral literature. It is “nothing less messy than... [a] stor[y] of experience,” of Aschenbach’s moral and

⁵¹ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 118.

⁵² Mann, *Death in Venice*, 120.

⁵³ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 120.

⁵⁴ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 118.

⁵⁵ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 120.

⁵⁶ Mann, *Death in Venice*, 122.

psychological world. The richness of its emotional and deliberative narration and its sympathetic component demonstrate to the reader the resonance of Aschenbach's basic humanity with their own. Nussbaum would see this as teaching the reader to see Aschenbach — people — as ends in themselves and therefore worth loving. The sheer vividness and volume of the perceptual material provided by the narrator gives readers a laboratory to hone their own perception. In Nussbaum's paradigm, *Death in Venice* does therefore function to render its readers "richly responsible" and "finely aware," respectively. Finally, Mann's involvement of the reader in Aschenbach's struggles reinforces to the reader the agony and inevitability of Nussbaum's insoluble conflicts of value.

"The Spot on the Wall" and "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street"

As with Mann, two of Woolf's philosophical and literary influences shaped her morality more significantly than any others. First among these is G.E. Moore, a pioneer of the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy.⁵⁷ Woolf likely did not subscribe to that aspect of Moore's thought, but his ethics was a different matter.⁵⁸ Moore was a consequentialist, but he held the meaning of "good" to be indefinable because of what many scholars term the "open-question argument."⁵⁹ Because all statements of the form "anything that is X is good" are understood as significant and all questions of the form "is it good that object Y possesses quality X?" are understood as debatable, determining the positive content of "good" must be impossible. Otherwise, those statements and questions would be insignificant and obvious, as in declaring that "anything that is a clear sky is blue" or asking whether it is terrifying to a child that a man

⁵⁷ Livesey, "Socialism," 133.

⁵⁸ Reynier, "Virginia," 132.

⁵⁹ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 15-17.

possesses a gun. Instead, he claims, intuition reveals to us that which is good in itself, not necessarily in virtue of the value of its parts.⁶⁰ As a consequentialist, he holds that obligatory duties to reach such goods-in-themselves derive from the results of their associated actions, the degree to which the latter succeed in producing the greatest good possible.⁶¹ He also admits that these duties and rules of action derive in part from individual and social context.⁶² Most importantly of all, he defines the virtues as permanent dispositions to perform those duties.⁶³ In sum, one should intuit moral value, integrate context, reason, and general principles, to formulate plans to attain it, and use virtue to understand and apply those duties.

Woolf may have studied the *Principia Ethica* and applauded Moore's ethics, but his ideas did not define hers.⁶⁴ Indeed, her criticism of a different George Moore might as well be applied to this one. He, she writes, "never used his eyes. He never knew what men and women think. He got it all out of books."⁶⁵ As her significant engagement with Russian literature reveals, Moore should instead have "got it all out of books" about "what men and women think." In "The Russian Point of View," she explains that in Chekhov, she sees a fixation on the soul and its status as "ill" or "cured" emblematic of the literary tradition in which he wrote. Dostoevsky's novels are "seething whirlpools... which hiss and boil and suck us in" with the result that "we are drawn in, whirled round, blinded, suffocated, and at the same time filled with a giddy rapture."⁶⁶ From these works, Woolf learned how to draw a reader into a narrative and provoke a range of emotions in the process. Tolstoy's work is her case study for attention, because "nothing

⁶⁰ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 76-77; 27.

⁶¹ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 181.

⁶² Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 157.

⁶³ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 182.

⁶⁴ Reynier, "Virginia," 132-138.

⁶⁵ Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 294.

⁶⁶ Woolf, "Russian Point of View."

glances off him unrecorded. Nobody, therefore, can so convey... all the fierce desirability of the world to the senses” of the reader.⁶⁷ Moore gave Woolf notions of the Good as indescribable and apprehended through intuition, methods for action as syntheses of reason, principles, and context, and the virtues as qualities of self. From the Russians, she learned to use literature to draw the reader inside the text, depict the health of a character’s inner self, and encourage rich perception thereof. Nussbaum considers all of these crucial to literary moral formation.

To understand if and how these ideas appear in Woolf’s fiction, I now turn to two of Woolf’s early stories, “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” and “The Mark on the Wall.” The former narrates the journey of a London socialite named Clarissa Dalloway to buy herself gloves. While narrating this journey, Woolf relates every emotion, every passing thought and association, and every aspect of Mrs. Dalloway’s environment not just as they look, but as her character experiences them:

A man in bronze stood heroically on a pedestal with a gun on her left hand side — the South African war. It matters, thought Mrs Dalloway walking towards Buckingham Palace. There it stood foursquare, in the broad sunshine, uncompromising, plain. But it was character, she thought; something inborn in the race; what Indians respected.⁶⁸

Only those physical details that happen to strike Mrs. Dalloway and her impressions thereof appear here, which we see in the descriptions “stood heroically,” “uncompromising,” and “plain.” Her opinions on the statue’s implications for the British identity appear in the colloquial, abbreviated manner in which her inner monologue would have thought them. As in “it matters” and “heroically,” Woolf reports her emotions as well. In “The Mark on the Wall,” Woolf focuses this practice on just one object. One morning, the unnamed protagonist looks up to see a

⁶⁷ Woolf, “Russian Point of View.”

⁶⁸ Woolf, *Dalloway*.

mysterious spot on her wall. For the entire length of the story, she ponders what the mark is and how it arrived there. Is it a “rose-leaf, a crack in the wood?”⁶⁹ A torrent of related thoughts follow, ranging from epistemological despair — “And what is knowledge? What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits...?” — to psychological speculation — “Hence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action.”⁷⁰ In these ways, each story is an exemplar of stream-of-consciousness narration, the narrative device whereby writers present characters’ thoughts as firsthand experiences.

Both stories are notable for the sheer mundanity of the objects perceived through stream-of-consciousness. Dozens of statues line the streets of every European capital, and few people ever notice an odd fleck on a wall. That Woolf fixed her stream-of-consciousness narration so often on the everyday reveals a great deal about her understanding of the ordinary as a concept. Woolf’s own essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” written to refute Arthur Bennett’s contention that Woolf and the Georgian novelists had failed to create realistic characters, makes her awareness of ordinary experience explicit. In dialogue with “Mr. Bennett,” the modernist “Mrs. Brown” accepts Bennett’s premise of character development’s centrality to the novel. She insists, however, that the Edwardians had in fact sacrificed creating believable characters in the name of enumerating as many concrete details as possible. Tellingly, Woolf claims elsewhere that Dostoevsky’s complex, humanly incoherent characters had just begun to awaken English literature to this flaw.⁷¹ Why, though, does she find this transition so critical? Her answer arrives at the end of the essay:

⁶⁹ Woolf, “Mark,” 112.

⁷⁰ Woolf, “Mark,” 111; 113.

⁷¹ Woolf, “Russian Point of View.”

The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. And it is of the highest importance that this common meeting-place should be reached easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one's eyes shut.⁷²

This “something which [one] recognizes” references the ordinary elements of life to which most or all of us can relate. Chancing on such commonplace experiences, thoughts, and objects allows the reader to understand characters in terms of their own lives, as grounded in reality and worthy of respect. In this way, the ordinary becomes what Woolf calls “a common meeting-place” between an author’s character and the reader.

Woolf herself attempts this in both “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” and “The Mark on the Wall.” The latter’s protagonist first draws the reader in through the sheer relatability of gazing at a strange mark and idly wondering what it is. The effort becomes explicit when the protagonist muses, “How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it.”⁷³ This sentence fuses the “I” of the narrator and the “you” of the reader into one “us,” united by their shared understanding of the same ordinary experience. Because it occurs in this shared space, the reader becomes less likely to find the protagonist’s subsequent stream of consciousness disorienting and more likely to appreciate it as authentically human.⁷⁴ “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” applies the same function both within and through its narrative. Just after she leaves home, Mrs. Dalloway runs into Hugh Whitbread, an old friend. They begin their conversation by talking about the morning and wondering whether “walking in London” is “better than walking in the country.”⁷⁵ After they

⁷² Woolf, *Bennett*, 17.

⁷³ Woolf, “Mark,” 100.

⁷⁴ Woolf, “Mark,” 112.

⁷⁵ Woolf, *Dalloway*.

establish a shared space using those common experiences, their discussion takes a serious turn. Hugh and his wife have come up to London “unfortunately to see doctors.”⁷⁶ Crucially, even this conversation itself is ordinary. One might have three such dialogues while walking to work. In this way, Woolf uses Mrs. Dalloway’s establishment of a “common meeting-place” to establish one between Mrs. Dalloway and the reader. That the text leads the reader to this common place, rather than simply tell them to sympathize, resonates with Woolf’s admonition that one should reach common meeting-places “almost instinctively, in the dark, with one’s eyes shut.”

What end could such a “common meeting-place” serve? Mrs. Dalloway’s example provides some indication. As soon as Hugh breaches a serious topic in their meeting-place, Mrs. Dalloway becomes “instantly compassionate.”⁷⁷ After the two part ways, this instinctive emotion inspires her thoughts about Hugh and his ill wife. She remembers “with amusement, with gratitude, with emotion” how shy the former had always been. By the end of her meditation, she concludes that “men like Hugh respect” others’ ineffable instincts “without saying it, which is what one loves... in dear old Hugh.”⁷⁸ Mrs. Dalloway’s dialogue with Hugh in their common meeting-place provokes first compassion for him, then a thicker understanding of him, and, finally, love for him. This is a humanist ardor, a love for another person as an end in themselves.

The latter is a manifestation of what scholars of Woolf’s work and that of others have termed sympathy.⁷⁹ Here, I follow Kirsty Martin in defining it both as the “more distanced ‘feeling for’ others” and the “absolute inhabiting of another’s experience, or ‘feeling with,’” as

⁷⁶ Woolf, *Dalloway*.

⁷⁷ Woolf, *Dalloway*.

⁷⁸ Woolf, *Dalloway*.

⁷⁹ See Lowe, *Victorian*; Britton, *Vicarious*.

the two often occur together in life and in Woolf's prose.⁸⁰ While Martin's "absolute inhabiting" rings somewhat hyperbolic, the narrator of "The Mark on the Wall" does ensure that the reader feels along with her. It also provokes the reader to feel for the narrator, whose epistemological and existential anxieties — Does God exist? How can I know? — are both deeply troubling and very common. As Martin argues, this sympathy works because of the author's mimetic success and "determination to be true to what it is to feel."⁸¹ A virtue ethicist would understand both processes as stemming from attention, an open readiness to receive information from the world around us.⁸² It is this attention that Summerhayes calls Woolf's "clairvoyance," her "faculty for searching out shy secrets."⁸³ To reliably inspire sympathy via accurate perception, the author must first perceive well themselves.

On two primary philosophical accounts, many literary critics have argued that Woolf's notion that engendering accurate perception in readers provokes sympathy carries moral valence. The first of these is Moore, but the second, David Hume, was also a major influence on Woolf.⁸⁴ In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume contends that sentiment, not Kant's reason, forms the basis of moral psychology, because "everything still presents us with the view of human happiness or misery, and excites in our breast a sympathetic movement."⁸⁵ This sympathetic reaction is a "mechanism" whereby one can "participate in the emotional life, and the pleasures and pains, of others." Compassion, by contrast, "is merely one of its products."⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Martin, *Modernism*, 9.

⁸¹ Martin, *Modernism*, 1.

⁸² Weil, "School Studies," 111-112.

⁸³ Summerhayes, "Society," 331.

⁸⁴ Sim, *Woolf*, 180.

⁸⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, 26.

⁸⁶ Penelhum, "Hume's Moral," 256-257.

Morally effective literature should trigger this mechanism by presenting the reader with an authentic, complete “human happiness or misery.”

All told, Woolf’s prose reflects her moral and literary influences. Through stream-of-consciousness narration in both stories, she emulates Tolstoy’s capacity for rich description of experience and Dostoevsky’s incoherently human characters. Her concern with the self’s reaction to literature evokes Chekhov’s fascination with the soul. Furthermore, Woolf’s focus of that narration on the ordinary to create “common meeting-spaces” engenders connection and sympathy both between her characters and between her characters and their readers. G.E. Moore’s arguments that one apprehends the indescribable good through intuition, develops methods for action as syntheses of reason, principles, and context, and uses the virtues to reliably fulfill them resonate with this system as well, with one exception. As Sim and Martin both argue, Woolf’s characters often exhibit patterns of sympathy with people whom they do not know.⁸⁷ This contravenes Moore’s focus on long-term relationships capable of creating morally valuable “organic unity.”⁸⁸ For Woolf, then, the bond of shared humanity between two characters or a character and a reader suffices to engender sympathy. As it does for Mrs. Dalloway, this sympathy teaches Woolf’s characters and readers to love others as ends in themselves and helps them to practice perception. Though it has not yet proven to reckon with insoluble conflicts of value, the former two resonances with Nussbaum nevertheless satisfy the latter’s assertion that moral literature renders its readers both “finely aware” and “richly responsible.”

⁸⁷ Sim, *Woolf*, 182.

⁸⁸ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 149.

Where Is the Reader?

Two strains of moral literature have emerged. In *Death in Venice*, Nussbaumian moral formation becomes possible through Aschenbach's apprehension of progressively higher degrees of the sublime. He draws ever nearer to the latter's highest form, only to die on the beach just before experiencing it. This closing of distance also becomes physical in Aschenbach's increasingly bold pursuit of Tadzio, in which each encounter is closer than the last. Tadzio provokes the problems into which Mann's narration draws the reader; that the two episodes through which they became clear occur near the end of the story is no accident. Aschenbach's increasing proximity to the sublime mediates the reader's presence within these problems. Moreover, observing Aschenbach's struggles may even provoke feelings of the sublime in the reader. Mann's irony challenges the reader by presenting us with great beauty, Aschenbach's rich psychological world, that poses great danger to our opinions and illusions. The end result, as Schopenhauer claims for the sublime, is that we surmount our fear and hostility to develop a greater understanding of Aschenbach and his problems.⁸⁹ In this way, *Death in Venice* dramatizes within-narrative physical and emotional distance from the sublime to give the reader a sublime experience of Aschenbach's psychological world. Woolf's stories also enact Nussbaumian moral formation, but they do so by minimizing reader-character distance through "common meeting-places" in the ordinary to give the reader a more complete understanding of the character's psychological world.

How can we account for this mechanistic divergence, the difference between Woolf's sympathy of the ordinary and Mann's sublime provocation? As far as the two stories examined

⁸⁹ Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 259-268.

here are representative of her work, Woolf does not force her characters to wrestle with moral dilemmas or insoluble conflicts of value. As we have seen, however, each work's claim to morally form its readers rests on the premises that a universal humanity exists and that clear vision thereof produces sympathy. To give their readers this clarity, whether on a character doing something as banal as buying gloves or as sublime as wrestling with aesthetic sensibility and virtue, both works place the reader within characters' unique psychological realities. We develop sympathy for them even as we find that their reality, striking in its differences from our own yet relatable and valid in virtue of its clear humanity, challenges our assumptions about being human and living well. Finally, by refusing to force the reader into such conclusions or make their projects explicit, both writers avoid the violent act that would be breaking down the character-reader barrier completely.⁹⁰ *Death in Venice* never condescends to inform us that we are all Aschenbach. As Marian Eide argues in close readings of Joyce, this distinction reinforces each work's claim to be morally making morality, so to speak.⁹¹ On humanistic grounds, therefore, both Mann's and Woolf's works draw their readers into individual, morally valent psychological realities without obliterating the boundary between the two.

Literary Modernism and Moral Formation

Whether and how Mann's and Woolf's works morally form their readers inside Nussbaum's paradigm is now clear. This inquiry's final unanswered question, then, becomes one of intellectual history. Why did both take up this challenge so near one another, and how do their results relate to the stage of modernity in which they wrote? "Grand narratives," as Jean-François Lyotard calls them, purporting to drive history forward using some "transcendental and universal

⁹⁰ This is one way in which *Death in Venice* problematizes Schopenhauerian compassion.

⁹¹ Eide, *Ethical Joyce*, 3-5.

truth” like Enlightenment or Progress caused great harm in modernity by encouraging intellectual and political totalitarianism.⁹² An extended argument on that point is beyond the scope of this paper, but one could easily argue that Enlightenment rationality and the impulse to “civilize” gave rise to the imperialism and nationalism behind World War I. Though Mann and Woolf may not have been conscious of any nascent anxiety regarding modernity’s codifying metanarratives, I will argue that it nevertheless pervades their respective works. Instead of preaching principles, they explore the qualitative, intuitive content of the self and seek to improve it in their readers. This presupposes some kind of human flourishing as a telos, which Lyotard might argue itself exemplifies the metanarrative of Progress, so they are best understood as uncomfortable with modern metanarrative yet unable to leave it behind. In fact, Mann was an ambivalent nationalist during World War I but strongly condemned the Nazi movement decades before World War II.⁹³ In this way, they and their works are creatures of late modernity.

Their shared project of closing reader-character distance also qualifies as distinctly modernist on the basis of its mechanism’s most basic premise. Both writers assume that if one apprehends another’s humanity, that truth will engender a kind of loving sympathy. This is a manifestation of humanism, the outlook emphasizing individuals’ social potential, well-being, dignity, and agency in virtue of their humanity. As David Quint argues, its recognition of “the newness of [its] enterprise — the extent to which it constituted a rupture with past culture” enabled it to narrativize itself and associate itself with modernity.⁹⁴ Humanism, the one grand principle left in Mann and Woolf’s paradigm, is therefore both the enemy of their belief in plural,

⁹² Lyotard, *Postmodern*, xxiii

⁹³ Kurzke, *Thomas*, 255; 264.

⁹⁴ Quint, “Humanism and Modernity,” 424.

interacting personal narratives and the most crucial aspect of their literary actualization thereof.⁹⁵ One could even read this basic tension as the final element of Nussbaum's functions of moral literature. It is an inescapable, irresolvable conflict of values of the kind with which Nussbaum argues that one should reckon through art. The opposition of two modes of life, the Dionysian and Apollonian, in *Death in Venice* functions similarly. In these ways, Mann and Woolf's paradigm of moral literature becomes both a distinctive product of late modernity and a critical midpoint between metanarrative-oriented modernity and poststructuralist postmodernity.

Indeed, the two writers' psychological-distance function was a recent innovation. In early modernity, for example, Schiller's work on morality and aesthetics offers a very different project. In *Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man*, he argues that morally effective art preserves truth through social upheaval, prioritizes ideal over reality, and ennobles one's character through beauty. While the latter does center the self and its character in moral reasoning, Schiller's fixation on ideals stands in stark opposition to Mann and Woolf's desire to convey the reality of the natural and human worlds. In fact, his major philosophical contribution in the *Letters* is itself an instance of grand narrativization. The "instinct of play," he claims, is a fundamental mode of life involving the contradictory union of sense and reason.⁹⁶ To contemplate the beautiful, or that which unites feeling and form, is to exercise the play drive, which encourages the beholder to unite sense and reason to become holistically human. The characteristically modern humanism appearing in Mann and Woolf is already evident in this line of reasoning, but where they and their moral influences understand morally effective art as connecting the individual character's psychological world with the beholder, Schiller's thought differs in two ways. First, he claims

⁹⁵ Many critics have used a similar argument to criticize Lyotard's concept of grand narrative.

⁹⁶ Schiller, *Letters*, Letter XIV.

that the quality of beauty, not any instance of humanity in it, is sufficient to awaken his notion of play drive.⁹⁷ Moreover, he understands the play drive as a force pushing civilization toward a utopia in which contentment and beauty reign.⁹⁸ Schiller does claim that art can “educate the sensibility,”⁹⁹ but he still wants art to understand ideals, sees the play drive as part of a grand teleology, and claims that contemplating beauty is sufficient to ensure that this occurs.¹⁰⁰ Mann and Woolf, by contrast, depict more localized narratives, search for the authentic self, and engage their readers in characters’ psychological realities to morally form them.

Schiller’s inclinations persisted, albeit in different forms, through the Edwardian writers whom Woolf so sharply criticizes. Their novelistic form, as Scheick argues, and use of beautiful, concrete detail to satisfy the sensibility appear highly developed. Although some, like Bennett, preached the merits of rich characterization, they rarely practiced it. Instead, they used their writing to, as Lyotard would conclude, advance the metanarratives of Progress and Enlightenment by advocating for improved social conditions and ideology. These writers harmonize form and sensibility to advance metanarratives, as does Schiller. Even later in the twentieth century, other artists, such as Bertolt Brecht in his *Lehrstücke*, relied on the same method.¹⁰¹ The same is true of revolutionary Romantics like Maksim Gorky and Russian Futurists like Vladimir Mayakovsky. The latter two promulgated the grand narrative of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism, but their claims to marry form and sensibility to teach their readers specific ideas nevertheless strongly evokes Schiller’s paradigm. With Nussbaum’s theory

⁹⁷ Schiller, *Letters*, Letter X.

⁹⁸ Schiller, *Letters*, Letter VI.

⁹⁹ Schiller, *Letters*, Letter VII.

¹⁰⁰ Schiller, *Letters*, Letter IX.

¹⁰¹ Martin, *Modernism*, 2-3.

in mind, this comparison indicates that while the distance-closing moral formation in Woolf and Mann's works is characteristic of late modernity, it does not broadly apply to literary modernism. Eide's similar research on Joyce, Martin's work on D.H. Lawrence, and Nussbaum's scholarship on James suggests, however, that Woolf and Mann were not the only writers to practice their flavor of moral formation. These formative modernists, as I will call them, comprise a small, diverse, and decentralized yet philosophically coherent movement.

Conclusions

With Martha Nussbaum's paradigm of mimetic literature as capable of moral formation as its guide, this paper has sought to explain how "one come[s] by one's morality... by reading the poets," where "the poets" are Virginia Woolf and Thomas Mann. First, I argued that Mann derives his preoccupation in *Death in Venice* with the self, the sublime, compassion, challenging dogma, and certain insoluble ethical problems from Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. Irony, image-rich emotional and deliberative narration, and the sublime draw the reader into such ethical-aesthetic quandaries and challenge their biases throughout the novella. From G.E. Moore, David Hume, and several Russian writers, Virginia Woolf derives her conceptions of virtue and the good, her understanding of sympathy, and her rich, participatory characterization, respectively. "The Mark on the Wall" and "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" exemplify her creation of ordinary "common meeting-places" engendering sympathy, as well as her use of stream-of-consciousness narration to evoke the emotions necessary therein. Both writers' mechanisms correspond to Nussbaum's concept of moral literature as helping one become "finely aware and richly responsible." I then argued that, at base, both authors' works draw their readers into morally valent individual psychological realities without obliterating the

differences between them. This allows them to re-create the reader as “finely aware and richly responsible.” Finally, I situated this process in late modernity’s nascent discomfort with grand narratives and inability to disavow them, concluding that their formative modernism is a critical midpoint between metanarrative-oriented modernity and poststructuralist postmodernity.

Even so, this account of formative modernism is by no means complete. To my knowledge, Martin’s monograph is the only study to examine more than one modernist writer’s practice of moral formation at once, and hers is more specifically concerned with sympathy in three specific writers than moral formation in a broader movement. With that in mind, future research would do well to examine more authors, such as James and Joyce, together with Woolf and Mann through a Nussbaumian lens. Continental works would be especially instructive. Even the latter two writers’ other works, given what Alex Zwerdling sees as Woolf’s late-period loss of a “sense of oneness with her kind,” might also complicate this argument considerably.¹⁰² An inquiry into whether and how moral literature’s functionality has changed in postmodernity might prove illuminating as well, especially in the context of Guy Debord’s notion of the spectacle. Feminist care ethics, Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of the Other, and other strains of virtue ethics could also bear useful fruit as alternate philosophical lenses.

Literature’s ability to alter the moral psychology of its readers has been controversial at least since Plato lambasted poets in the *Republic*, but it has taken on a new urgency in recent decades. Especially in the contexts of critical race theory, LGBTQ representation, and free expression, many books have drawn accusations of corrupting or harming the young.¹⁰³ Many of the same books draw praise from other groups on the basis of their capacity to teach social

¹⁰² Zwerdling, *Virginia*, 279; 326.

¹⁰³ Sarappo, “Shakedown.”

justice.¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, both sides of this discourse often assume that literature is capable of affecting a person's moral consciousness in this way. Very few bother to think rigorously about how it might do so, and the strong case for formative modernist works' capacity for moral formation suggests that we would do well to debate this question. The nuances of that moral function also suggest that civil discourse would benefit by doing so with a vocabulary rooted in the debate's origin and complete enough to parse a text's holistic moral valence. Moreover, whether one subscribes to Lyotard's view on the postmodern death of the metanarrative or not, that society has not lost its affinity for simple accounts of complex realities is painfully clear. The recent rise in authoritarian populism indicates the ease with which elites can exploit this weakness, and those interested in stemming that tide may find that the formative modernists' struggle against metanarratives provides a useful precedent for their work. Such is the fundamental strength of the virtue ethics project: in literature and elsewhere, it stands for freedom over constraint — for humanity.

¹⁰⁴ Grady, "Social Issues."

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