

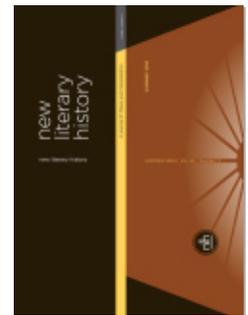


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Reading Process

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Literary Ethics, Revisited: An Analytic Approach to the Reading Process

Tess McNulty

LITERARY CRITICS HAVE LONG DRAWN extensively on continental theory, whereas they have taken little interest in analytic philosophy. At times, they have critiqued analytic philosophy as apolitical or pedantic. More often, they ignore its existence. Perhaps they have done so, in part, because its methods have been ill-suited to their projects. Throughout the past few decades, literary critics have often—if not always—embraced two intellectual activities: historical contextualization and political critique. Continental theorists, more than analytic philosophers, have specialized in the performance of those tasks. While continental theorists have tended to approach philosophical concepts like the “good” or the “just” with suspicion, as instruments of political interests, analytic philosophers have put aside those concepts’ historical status, opting instead to describe their contours with precision.

In recent years, literary critics have become increasingly dissatisfied with prevailing methods, pushing against the limits of contextualization and critique. Rita Felski, for example, has proposed reading texts as active agents in social networks, rather than as passive products of power structures.¹ Heather Love, Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus have favored description over demystification.² Accordingly, literary critics have begun to look beyond continental theory to other disciplines for inspiration. They have found it, by and large, in the sciences. To take one example: in keeping with growing emphases on textual effects and critical description, many literary critics have attempted to unpack the reading process, adapting methods from cognitive science, computer science, sociology, anthropology, and media studies.³

As of yet, however, literary critics have not drawn inspiration from continental theory’s historical foil: analytic philosophy. This is despite the fact that analytic philosophy is ideally suited to perform the types of tasks, like precise description, that literary criticism now embraces. In this essay, I use analytic philosophical concepts to refine literary critical descriptions of the reading process and, more particularly, of its ethical dimensions. In doing so, I aim to show that analytic methods can play

a role in a literary criticism that emphasizes textual agency and critical description, without necessarily abandoning ethics or politics. I will primarily argue that analytic methods are well suited to perform “post-critical” tasks, but I will also suggest how they can fortify historicist or “suspicious” approaches (which in my view remain valuable).

Literary critics have long explored the ethics of reading, particularly during the heyday of the “ethical turn,” between 1990 and the early 2000s. Contributors to that critical movement, like many of their precursors, preempted present-day efforts to treat texts as causes rather than effects, arguing that literary works confer unique types of ethical knowledge on their readers, rather than purvey politically motivated ideologies. To make that argument, they focused on ethically ambiguous texts in a modernist vein—such as novels by Henry James or J. M. Coetzee—and on the encounters with an unknowable alterity, which such texts appear to inspire.⁴ The result has been a monolithic picture of the ethics of reading, which goes roughly like this: sophisticated ambiguity, typical of higher-status, canonical texts, casts readers into vital states of uncertainty, whereas a more simplistic didacticism reinforces blind conformity.

Meanwhile, since the mid-1990s, analytic aesthetic philosophers contributing to the “value interaction debate” have also probed relations between aesthetic reception and ethical thinking, though without attracting the attention of practitioners of the “ethical turn.” They have done so, moreover, from a distinct perspective. Unlike literary critics, contributors to the value interaction debate have not focused on distinctions between ambiguity and didacticism, or edification and indoctrination. Rather, they have emphasized the contrast between situations in which works do and do not produce their intended effects. To categorize those situations, they have appealed to three key concepts: “uptake” and failed “uptake,” as introduced by philosopher of art Noël Carroll, and “imaginative resistance,” as adapted from the work of philosopher of mind Tamar Szabó Gendler.⁵ Through an appeal to those three concepts, I will refine literary criticism’s account of the ethics of reading, which currently embodies a false dichotomy. Either ambiguity or didacticism, I will show, can inspire productive uncertainty; either can inspire unquestioning conviction. Both can, therefore, produce positive or negative social effects by literary critical standards (which may also be contested, of course). The specific effects they produce will depend on whether they induce uptake, failed uptake, or imaginative resistance, which, in turn, depends on various subtleties of moral psychology, like the strengths of readers’s cognitive or emotional attachments to moral viewpoints.

To demonstrate these points, I will use as a test case Tom Wolfe's 1987 *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. This middling satirical novel is at times morally ambiguous and at others didactic, embodying both sides of the traditional dichotomy that informs much literary critical work on the ethics of reading. It therefore furnishes a vehicle through which to test traditional claims about the effects of both literary qualities.

I begin by unpacking the three concepts to which I appeal, as elaborated in the context of the value interaction debate—uptake, failed uptake, and imaginative resistance. Then, after adapting those concepts to align with literary critical imperatives, I use them to analyze the responses that a book like *Bonfire* inspires. Finally, I discuss some broader methodological implications. The concepts that I repurpose to describe reader-response are useful because they are precise. Their precision is a product of the analytic methods that have been used to construct them. Literary critics can use such methods to build concepts that capture aspects of the reading process that are inaccessible to current approaches (like those that draw on sociology and cognitive science), or they can use them to characterize a broader array of phenomena. Where literary critics have sought to critique and demystify, continental theory has helped them; where they seek instead to describe, analytic philosophy may come in handy.

I. Uptake, Failed Uptake, and Imaginative Resistance

Since the mid-1990s, analytic aesthetic philosophers associated with the value interaction debate (Carroll, Berys Gaut, A.W. Eaton, James Anderson, Jeffrey Deane, Matthew Kieran, and, less directly, Gendler) have aimed to determine whether valid aesthetic judgments incorporate moral evaluations.⁶ As part of that project, they have developed concepts that describe relationships between aesthetic reception and moral psychology. They use such concepts to consider the responses that real and hypothetical artworks might inspire in “ideally sensitive” audiences with “correct” moral beliefs.⁷ I repurpose the concepts of uptake, failed uptake, and imaginative resistance to describe and categorize the reactions that real texts might inspire in real audiences with varying, and perhaps un-“ideal,” moral ideas. Along the way, I address reservations that literary critics might have about the “value interaction” debate—reservations grounded in deep differences between literary criticism and analytic philosophy.

Participants in the value interaction debate agree that works of art “prescribe” responses. By that they mean something only slightly stron-

ger than literary critics do when they say that works “afford” responses.⁸ These philosophers, that is to say, mean not only that works are suited to produce certain responses, but also that they seem to “want” to produce those responses, whether their authors intend them to or not. (Wayne C. Booth might say that their “implied” authors intend these responses.) Gaut, for example, splits a work’s prescriptions into two categories: works prescribe that we “imagine” certain scenarios—“*Juliette* prescribes imagining that actual acts of sexual torture occur”—and they prescribe that we react to those scenarios in certain ways—that we “find sexual torture erotically attractive, [are] aroused by it, [are] amused,” etc.⁹

When works prescribe that we imagine scenarios, they ask that we do many things. Carroll, Kieran, and Gendler, in particular, stress the degree to which, simply in order to imagine what they describe, works ask us to “import” facts, emotions, or impressions (P 197). “No storyteller,” as Carroll puts it, “portrays everything that might be portrayed about the story she is telling; she must depend upon her audience to supply what is missing and a substantial and ineliminable part of what it is to understand a narrative involves filling in what the author has left out.” What the author has “left out” can be factual: “If the story concerns ancient Rome, we presuppose the message was delivered by hand, not by fax.” It can be emotional: “One does not understand *Trilby* unless one finds Svengali repugnant.” Or it can be “folk-psychological”: “The author need not explain why a character is saddened by her mother’s death.”¹⁰ Realist and nonrealist works, moreover, dictate differently what audiences should and should not “import.” Where a work is realist, “regulations concerning imports will be extremely lenient: in general (though there will be numerous exceptions), if something is true in the actual world, it will be true in the fictional world” (P 198). But nonrealist stories are protectionist; they regulate “imports” more strictly.

When works prescribe that we react in certain ways to the scenarios that we imagine, they likewise ask that we do many things. They may prescribe quasi-affective attitudinal responses, like amusement or disgust, or they may prescribe that we adopt “propositional attitudes,” like belief or doubt.¹¹ Indeed, as Gendler argues, works may ask us to “export” beliefs about the real world *from* them, prescribing that we believe that facts about their worlds are also facts about our world (“In this way, I might learn how women wore their hair in nineteenth-century France”). Or they may prescribe that the broader conclusions that we draw about their worlds can then be applied to the real world (“In this way, I might learn that the relationship between loyalty and adultery is more complicated than I had imagined” [P 198]). Realist works, again, will place more lenient restrictions on exports than do nonrealist works.

Uptake occurs when a work succeeds in producing the response that it prescribes. Failed uptake occurs when it does not. The value interaction debate revolves around this truth: the difference between uptake and failed uptake often depends on an audience's moral attitudes. When works prescribe that we imagine scenarios, they often rely on our being willing or able to understand or entertain moral propositions or perspectives—"knowing that murder is bad," as Carroll notes, is "a presupposition that the reader must bring to *Crime and Punishment* in order to understand it." When works prescribe that we respond to scenarios in particular ways, they do the same—the reactions they prescribe often involve emotions with "ineliminable moral components," like anger or admiration.¹² This means that, depending on the reader's moral intuitions, flexibility, or susceptibility, works can fail to secure the responses that they prescribe. Participants in the value interaction debate most frequently appeal to two examples of the phenomenon. Almost all cite as an example Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. That film prescribes that audiences experience awe and wonder as they behold National Socialist ideals of Aryan manhood, but audiences deeply disturbed by the mere idea of Nazism will not feel those effects. Most also address the example of the racist joke. Such a joke will usually (though not always) prescribe laughter. But an audience may be too incensed or too unsettled to laugh.

One might assume, on first considering such examples, that the difference between uptake and failed uptake depends on whether an audience accepts that the moral proposition implied by the prescribed reaction is true—whether they believe going in, for example, that Nazism is or can be good. But preexisting beliefs are only one factor, and perhaps not the most important one. We can come to entertain moral perspectives other than our own in the course of appreciating works. I can inhabit the headspace, for example, in which George Wickham is the most awful cad for seducing Georgiana Darcy, whether or not I believe that the sin is really so grave. Aaron Smuts elaborates on one example: one might laugh at an offensive joke without believing in the moral perspective that it evinces.¹³ Some philosophers, including Ronald de Sousa and Richard Moran, demur, maintaining that this perspective is too convenient: laughter, they argue, is the sign of an implicit belief (though one that we may not acknowledge). But that argument rests on a particular, simplistic conception of belief: what we believe is only that which might guide or determine how we act. Such "*motivational judgment internalism*," Smuts argues, is incorrect and misapplied to the case in question.¹⁴

Failed uptake, then, is not always attributable to an audience's lack of belief in the moral perspective implied by a work's prescription. It may have to do with the author's skillfulness—I may consistently believe that misfortune deserves pity, for example, but some artworks may inspire my sympathy more expertly than others. It may have to do with the strength of an audience's attachment to a particular moral view—intense or personal commitment to a view may make it more difficult to entertain its opposite.¹⁵ It may have to do with the vividness of an imagined scenario—I might, for example, be excited by an action film that depicts violence obliquely, but disgusted by one that depicts it more graphically—or it may be caused by a combination of those factors. In other words, the types of failed uptake are many, their variety a function of subtle features of our cognitive and emotional relationships to moral views.

“Imaginative resistance” is one particular type of failed uptake. Though aesthetic philosophers associated with the value interaction debate appeal to it, philosophers of mind debate it in more detail. Gendler defines imaginative resistance, in the most well-known example, as a *volitional* refusal to entertain a scenario. Imagine a story, says Gendler, about black and white mice. The story immediately announces itself as an offensive racial allegory. It begins: “Once upon a time there were a bunch of mice. The mice who had white fur were hardworking and industrious, but the mice who had black fur were slothful and shiftless. A huge number of them were addicted to some kind of drug, and the rest of them just spent their days hanging out on the streets and eating watermelon” (P 195). Many readers, presented with such a story, will actively refuse to accept the author's account of how the fictional world she describes looks. They may even attempt to renegotiate its elements. They might ask: “Were the black mice really *slothful* and shiftless?” Or they might say: “It's not true in the world of ‘The Mice’ that white mice are better off than black mice because they deserve to be; that may be what the *narrator* of the story thinks, but she's obviously mistaken” (P 196).

In such cases, Gendler argues, audiences will not, rather than cannot, imagine a scenario. One might plausibly argue that the difference between will not and cannot is slight. One person might find, for example, the idea of the black mice “deserving” to be worse off than the white mice incoherent. She could not imagine it if she tried; for her it is morally unintelligible. And yet audiences often imagine—or entertain—unintelligible scenarios. When presented with a world in which time travel exists or in which “twelve is not the sum of two primes,” they will often simply fudge—that is, imagine those phenomena in fuzzy ways (P 191). “Make-believe depends upon precisely the sort of abstraction that may well leave out conceptually relevant features of the situation

at hand," Gendler writes; for example, "when we pretend that a banana is a gun, we focus on certain similarities, such as shape, while ignoring others, such as internal complexity" (P 192). But audiences refuse to imagine that the black mice "deserve" to be worse off than the white mice even in a fuzzy way. And so they *choose* (however automatically) not to imagine the scenario.

They do so, Gendler adds, because they feel the stories that they read are asking them to export certain moral evaluations and apply them to the real world. Where a story claims that twelve is not the sum of two primes, it so clearly deviates from reality that it seems not to prescribe exportation. "But because we recognize that there are instances of *actual* moral disagreement, when we encounter fictional truths that concern deviant morality, we cannot assume that their deviance is an indication that the author does not wish them to be exported" (P 200). Imaginative resistance, then, is a complex form of failed uptake: a work seems to prescribe that a person imagine a scenario and export a related moral notion; that person, however, refuses to imagine the scenario *because* she resists exporting the moral notion.¹⁶

Of course, uptake and failed uptake (including imaginative resistance) may be difficult to distinguish in particular cases. Where a work's prescriptions are nuanced, one may be mistaken for the other. Gaut, for example, differentiates between a work's "higher-order" and "lower-order" prescriptions.¹⁷ On a lower order, a work might produce failed uptake. In *Lolita*, for example, Humbert Humbert's attempts to render rape beautiful may inspire straightforward, unmediated revulsion, but on a higher order, the work may co-opt that failed uptake in aid of its aesthetic project. Humbert is not Nabokov, and *Lolita* is clearly designed to provoke precisely that queasy feeling of trying to extricate beauty from brutality. Where readers do not see that the lower-order failed uptake is part and parcel of the higher-order uptake, they may miss the point. But of course, such distinctions—even in the example just proffered—are rarely indisputable. Where a work's prescriptions are unclear, uptake and failed uptake may be intertwined. Some offensive jokes, for example, cause laughter accompanied by unease.¹⁸ It's difficult to say whether that unease is or is not part of such a joke's prescription.

The difficulty of pinning down a work's prescription often leads participants in the value interaction debate to illustrate their points using hypothetical rather than real examples. Gendler's black and white mice, deliberately designed to offend most people, illustrates a point simplistically in a way that *Lolita* cannot. Because philosophers who participate in the value interaction debate pursue not an interpretive but a philosophical aim—to probe the nature of aesthetic judgment,

rather than a novel's meaning—the difference between a real and a hypothetical text is to them immaterial. Rafe McGregor does argue that it makes their concepts difficult to apply to complex works.¹⁹ But that need not be so, so long as they are applied with care. In general, analytic philosophy works out from the simple to the complex. Scenarios that produce clear-cut intuitions (like the Trolley Problem, or the Experience Machine) can be aggregated to produce concepts complex enough to impose some order on thornier ones (like Deontology, a Theory of Wellbeing). An example as simple as Gendler's mouse story can clarify aspects of the refusal to imagine—that it involves volition, that it does not hinge on belief or disbelief. And the clarification that it provides can then render that refusal more intelligible when it arises in response to more complex narratives. So long as we attend to the nuances and ambiguities of prescription, then, concepts like imaginative resistance, once carefully defined, can be applied widely.

To incorporate such concepts into a phenomenology of real-life reading does—as I have implied—require altering them to eliminate one other simplifying assumption. To make their points, participants in the value interaction debate consider these concepts only in relation to “ideally sensitive” audiences. Carroll, for example, uses the concepts of uptake and failed uptake to argue that when we judge a work aesthetically—find it not funny, or not beautiful—we often do so because our moral presuppositions or emotions have impeded uptake. So valid aesthetic judgments do involve moral evaluations. This is not to say that just anybody's failed uptake bespeaks an aesthetic flaw in the work. It is rather to say that the ideally sensitive audience's failed uptake does.²⁰ That totalizing logic, typical of the field, will rankle literary critics. But the same concepts used to describe ideally sensitive audiences's responses may be adapted to describe the responses of real-life readers—responses provoked not because they are morally “right” or “wrong,” but because readers harbor cognitive or affective attachments to moral notions. Such attachments may predate the reading process, or they may emerge in dialogue with literary works. Here is an example of what I mean.

II. Didacticism and Ambiguity Reconsidered: *Bonfire of the Vanities*

Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, a panoramic depiction of greed and corruption in 1980s New York City, operates on two levels. On one level, it aspires to be nothing more than a straightforward social satire, mocking the degeneracy of various social types: Wall Street bankers,

muckraking journalists, and African American community leaders. But on another level, it attempts to be a sophisticated realist novel, unpacking the complexities of class and race-based conflict in the contemporary metropolis. It succeeds far more on the first level than on the second, effectively lampooning characters' foibles, but offering little by way of penetrating social analysis. Accordingly, critics have now largely dismissed it from the academic canon; after devoting a few articles to its more problematic elements, they ceased to discuss it altogether.²¹ The novel serves my present purposes, however, because it includes sequences of obvious didacticism as well as sequences of ambiguity. Between two covers, then, I find examples suitable to demonstrate the divergent responses that such sequences inspire. Any analysis of reader-response will tend to involve some "mad scientism" (as Leah Price puts it).²² Like most who undertake such analyses, I necessarily resort to bricolage. I make claims that stand or fall on their intuitive appeal. But I also buttress them, where possible, with whatever empirical evidence is at hand. I consult, for example, magazine and *Goodreads* reviews of the novel to gauge its reception by readers.

To begin with, *Bonfire* makes clear moral points about social elites, inviting readers to consider, and mock, their turpitude. In the novel's first scene, for example, the wealthy bond-trader Sherman McCoy imagines himself a "Master of the Universe" and a virile deity ("King Priapus") who "deserves" even "more" than he already has, as he sneaks out of his apartment and away from his wife Judy to place a telephone call to his mistress Maria.²³ Instead he calls Judy by mistake and succumbs to anxiety that his infidelity will come out. At Maria's apartment, he is emasculated by her, and by the author, for his attack of nerves. Maria: "You know what? You're cute. You're just like my little brother." Wolfe: "The Master of the Universe was mildly annoyed" (B 19). Finally, McCoy is undone by desire, incriminating himself even further, prolonging his absence to have sex with Maria instead of reporting in at home. This "Master of the Universe," the vignette closes, "had no conscience" (B 23). A related sense of justice attends Sherman's downfall in similar scenes. In one he assumes that a young African American man walking toward him at night is a criminal, not realizing that he himself looks more threatening (B 17). In another, he snubs a garage worker named Dan in an outsized display of egotism ("One of the unwritten rules of status conduct is that when an inferior greets you with a how-are-you, you do not answer the question") and is punished when Dan testifies against him in a vehicular homicide case (B 99).

Such sequences seem to demand a sense of amused and self-righteous satisfaction at Sherman's moral failings. And where audiences are ame-

nable, uptake can occur. Many original reviewers of the book reveled in Wolfe's exposé of the delinquent upper classes: *The Wall Street Journal's* Christopher Buckley, for example, called it both a "joy" and "a harrowingly moral tale," a satirical send-up of high society that stood on "rock-solid ground."²⁴ Nor did reviewers have to find the book's satire accurate to find it effective. Wolfe's "targets," *America's* Peter A. Quinn noted, are unrealistically two-dimensional, but still he "rarely misses."²⁵ *Bonfire* "does it to you," Frank Conroy wrote, despite its being ridiculously over-the-top.²⁶ Today's *Goodreads* reviewers often agree, with one, for example, calling the book "a hilarious and damning indictment of Wall Street"; "[Never have I read] such an effective condemnation [of] people worrying about 'what's in fashion this season'. . . as if it actually f*cking matters."²⁷

In achieving that sort of uptake, *Bonfire* moralizes in a manner amenable to literary critical critique. Moral rules, as Nietzsche reminds us, are often expressions of one social group's will to exert power or influence over another. *Bonfire* indulges the very bourgeois resentment that Nietzsche describes by wielding morals as a weapon against social elites. In so doing, it encourages audiences to focus on Sherman's foibles, rather than on the financial system's failures. In one scene, for example, Wolfe has Sherman try to explain bond trading to his daughter Campbell. His inability to describe his job is meant to suggest his lack of integrity ("Daddy doesn't build roads or hospitals" [B 236]). But it inadvertently underscores an irony: the book asks readers to revel in the moral bankruptcy of bond trading without themselves necessarily understanding what it is. These days, moralizing tales of investment bankers tend to acknowledge that irony with a wink and a smile. In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Leonardo DiCaprio's character begins to explain his illegal dealings to the camera, but then stops midway, saying that he doesn't want to bore us; in *The Big Short* Margot Robbie explains the subprime mortgage crisis to us from a bubble bath.²⁸

But *Bonfire's* mockery of the leisure classes can also produce failed uptake: a "bitter aftertaste" that mars the complacent satisfaction of watching immorality mocked or punished. To be sure, the text sometimes seems to sanction this form of failed uptake, or even to "prescribe" it as a "lower-order" means to a more complex, "higher-order" aesthetic end (B 33). Grant Wolfe that. But often the failed uptake is clearly inadvertent—the "failure" is the author's. What Wolfe mocks, others might see as pitiable (like the self-starvation of the wealthy housewives whom he calls "social X-rays" [B 12]). And what he presents as grotesque vanity, others might see as too innocent to warrant censure (like Ed Fiske's susceptibility to exploitation by a group of English flatterers). Different

examples will strike readers differently. However, many reviewers of *Bonfire* identify at least one example of the book's comedy that they find too cruel or unwarranted to be effective. A *Punch* reviewer points to scenes in which Wolfe's treatment of Sherman seemed "sadistic";²⁹ a *Goodreads* reviewer imaginatively resists Wolfe's depiction of Maria as a "high class hooker," demurring, "she is not."³⁰ More broadly, some have found it difficult to sustain a judgmental stance for 680 unrelenting pages. Here is Frank Conroy in *The New York Times*: "After a while, when it turns out that everyone is pathetic (except for me and thee, of course), the fun can turn sour. Malice is a powerful spice. Too much can ruin the stew, and Mr. Wolfe comes close." There is a morning-after queasiness to rival Peter Fallow's: "When the author has let go of your lapels . . . there is an odd aftertaste, not entirely pleasant."³¹

Bonfire's comedic excess, then, may produce uptake, satisfying readerly resentment. But where uptake fails, it can check that resentment. The book pushes moralizing impulses so far that they turn on themselves and begin to feel "not entirely pleasant."³² The reader begins to feel discomfort at the smugness that accompanies the act of judgment. Within that feeling of surfeit lurks the recognition that judgmentalism has its origins in a will to power. Literary critics interested in the ethics of reading often argue that, by thwarting moralizing impulses, ethically ambiguous texts produce self-critical modes of normative thought. Judith Butler, for example, describes the process of reading the end of James's *Washington Square* as follows: "We are asked to understand the limits of judgment and to cease judging, paradoxically, in the name of ethics, to cease judging in a way that assumes we already know in advance what there is to be known."³³ Ironically, by indulging moralizing impulses to an excess, a satirical novel can, however inadvertently, provoke a similar confrontation with the limits of moralism.

Ambiguity, conversely, can produce not only this type of uncertainty, but also redoubled moral conviction. And again, *Bonfire* provides an example of the phenomenon. In many cases, the novel's attitudes about race are all too transparent. But a number of the book's depictions of African American characters are still textually ambiguous, and are clearly designed to produce uncertainty. Indeed, Wolfe uses the same ambiguous tactic on which Gayatri Spivak comments in an article on the ethical effects of *Disgrace*. Coetzee, Spivak points out, focalizes his narrative through the problematic perspective of a white male protagonist, David Lurie. And as a result, the reader feels an impulse to "counter-focalize." As Spivak writes, "This shuttle between focalization and the making of an alternative narrative as the reader's running commentary" demonstrates the point that "literary reading teaches us to learn from

the singular and the unverifiable."³⁴ *Bonfire* is no *Disgrace*, but it similarly courts uncertainty by means of focalization. Wolfe, too, channels the problematic perspectives of a white male protagonist. And in some cases, he clearly does so to provoke "counter-focalization." Take, for example, the scene in which Sherman first drives into the South Bronx. Wolfe has us view the neighborhood through the lens of Sherman's racist paranoia via free indirect discourse, and so he bars us from knowing what is real and what is imagined. At first, Sherman's impressions are clearly illusory—he thinks he sees a "human head" but then realizes that it is a "chair" (B79). But then things become more ambiguous: he has the impression that he sees a man and woman fighting, while a crowd of people watch. "They're laughing," he thinks; "they're cheering" (B81). The reader is clearly meant to wonder what might "really" be going on. And if uptake is achieved, the reader will feel unable to morally judge.

Yet uptake is not always achieved. Some readers will register the scene's ambiguity. (One, at least, directly acknowledges it in the context of *Bonfire's* timid movie adaptation: "Perhaps the director was trying to show Sherman's perception of [the people in the Bronx] rather than their actual personalities").³⁵ Others, whether inadvertently or willfully, however, will look past it. In one case, this might simply involve failed uptake: a reader will take Sherman's description of the scene at face value, and find in it confirmation of a racist vision of New York City's urban outskirts. But in another case, it might involve imaginative resistance. The reader will conflate Sherman's vision with Wolfe's, and then refuse to entertain it—indeed, a reader might do so, not because he or she cannot discern textual ambiguity, but because the description cuts too close to the bone. *The New Statesman* reviewer George Black, for example, places Wolfe's depiction of the Bronx at the center of his objection to the novel's racist stereotypes (he argues that it "confirms and indulges [prosperous Manhattanites'] terrors about the jungle that lies, beyond the Harlem river . . . a black, alien presence, full of chaos and menace").³⁶ Not even in a fictional world, he made clear, would he entertain the possibility of such a reality. He closed his review with an alternative description, a benign counter-vision of the same Bronx neighborhood.

Of course, even the most skeptical critic will likely see no harm in Black's variety of moral conviction, which brings me to another point. Thus far, I have preserved the normative standards established by literary criticism's "ethical turn," according to which, as Felski puts it, we must choose between "a reduction of texts to political tools or instruments, on the one hand, and a cult of reverence for their sheer ineffability, on the other."³⁷ But of course these are not the only two options, and

our scholarship might come to reflect what most already feel: though all moral rules are both socially constructed and politically motivated, some are nonetheless more valuable than others. We might acknowledge, then, not only that a willfully ambiguous text can produce a morally certain response, but that such a response, socially speaking, might also be valuable. If we want to establish more specific normative standards, moving beyond the simple dichotomy between conviction (bad) and subversion (good), then we can look for help to Anglo-American moral philosophy. For the remainder of this essay, however, I will focus on more basic critical tools that analytic philosophy can offer to literary criticism—tools that literary critics can use to describe the reading process as a precondition to ethical and political evaluation, or even, where appropriate, to critique.

III. Analytic Methods for Literary Critics

In this essay, I have used three concepts developed by analytic aesthetic philosophers (uptake, failed uptake, and imaginative resistance) to describe different types of reading. Those concepts are helpful because they are precise. They draw distinctions between different readerly reactions (the refusal to imagine a scenario vs. the inability to feel some way about it), and they differentiate the mental features of those reactions (one involves will, another may not; all involve more than just moral belief). These concepts attain their precision, in part, by virtue of the analytic techniques used to develop them. And literary critics interested in analyzing reading and reception might use those techniques to develop more concepts capable of describing the reading process, among other phenomena.

As of now, literary critics use what I will call “speculative” and “empirical” methods to analyze reading. When using speculative methods, critics theoretically consider the reading process—usually by reflecting on their own reading experiences—and construct phenomenologies of reading; Wolfgang Iser and reader-response theorists, contributors to the ethical turn, and critics like Elaine Scarry and Felski have taken this approach.³⁸ When using empirical methods, critics produce concrete evidence that readers respond to texts in certain ways. Some work like historians, reading documents that record readers’ responses to texts. Increasingly, they use digital tools of analysis. Others (for example, Janice Radway) work like sociologists, conducting surveys of reading communities. Still others take cues from cognitive science, consulting research on the reading brain.³⁹

Both speculative and empirical methods have their strengths and weaknesses, and they complement each other well. Speculative methods are subjective and unverifiable, but flexible: one can decide to consider any facet of the reading process, right down to the impression produced by a single word. Empirical methods are objective and verifiable, but limited in scope. Historical methods, for example, confront the fact that readers only write so much about their reactions to texts. Sociological and cognitive scientific methods are in other ways restricted. Literary critics rarely have the training or institutional support necessary to design and conduct their own sociological or cognitive scientific experiments, so they often rely on preexisting research; in such cases, they are confined to discussing aspects of reading that come preselected by sociologists or cognitive scientists. Such experiments, in any event, may also have difficulty probing certain aspects of the reading process. Sociological surveys, for example, are limited by readers's abilities to describe their internal experiences, and fMRIs can illuminate the physiology, but not necessarily the phenomenology, of reading. Both speculative and empirical methods, then, play useful roles in a holistic, literary critical approach to the reading process. Analytic techniques can be used to refine the former—literary critics, that is to say, can use analytic methods to produce more precise speculative analyses of reading.

Although few philosophers agree on a definition of analytic philosophy, certain methods are unmistakably analytic. According to the most rigid and now largely out of date model, analytic philosophers use hypothetical examples to isolate the necessary and sufficient conditions for broader concepts. The analytic philosopher begins with a concept like "knowledge." What is it, she asks, to "know" something? To answer that question, she constructs hypothetical cases, and asks whether the word "know" applies. Those cases help her to determine what is necessary and sufficient for knowledge. She might, for example, hypothesize that justified true belief is sufficient for knowledge (a once popular epistemological theory). To test that hypothesis, she might search for a hypothetical case in which a belief is both justified and true, but seems not be knowledge. She might, for example, construct a "Gettier case." In that well-known case, Smith has a justified true belief.⁴⁰ Yet most English speakers, intuitively, would not say that he "knows" the thing that he believes (in some examples, Smith's belief turns out to be true by sheer coincidence). So justified true belief is not both necessary and sufficient for knowledge. A new hypothesis will be required, and will be generated. And in this way, the concept of "knowledge" is slowly defined.

According to a looser methodological model, which better captures most contemporary analytic work, analytic philosophers use hypotheti-

cal cases, not to discover the necessary and sufficient conditions for concepts—which may not exist—but to characterize those concepts in less all-encompassing ways. Gendler demonstrates this process when she analyzes imaginative resistance. Rather than ask, “What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for imaginative resistance to occur?” she asks, “Do we imaginatively resist fictional scenarios simply because we cannot imagine them?” She sets out then to test a hypothesis: the inability to imagine a coherent proposition causes (or is sufficient cause for) imaginative resistance. To do so, she constructs a case to examine what happens when we try to imagine an incoherent proposition: the story in which twelve is not the sum of two primes. Here, she shows, we simply retrench, imagining the incoherent proposition in a fuzzy way without actually resisting it. Something more than mere incoherence, then, must cause imaginative resistance. To put it another way, incoherence cannot be the sole or sufficient cause. This helps her toward an ultimate conclusion that, in the failure to inhabit moral views contrary to one’s own, the proactive will must play a role (P 191–94). The benefit of Gendler’s method, here, is that it distinguishes between different types of mental phenomena—like belief, volition, understanding, etc.—that are compounded in what might have seemed a unitary readerly reaction.

Because literary critics engaged in speculative analyses of reading need to impose order on a chaotic array of such mental phenomena, they might find Gendler’s methods useful. Some such critics—like Iser and Georges Poulet—have analyzed the reading process generally, as it operates in every case.⁴¹ Others have focused on its more particular moments—in *Uses of Literature*, for example, Felski focuses on specific reading experiences like enchantment and shock. Critics interested in extending this second line of inquiry, in particular, might find analytic methods of concept-building useful, in both their rigid and looser forms. They might ask, for example, what are necessary and sufficient conditions for suspense (or horror, or sympathy, or *schadenfreude*). And they might construct hypothetical scenarios through which to test different conditions. No doubt it will be difficult, and even perhaps undesirable, to fix a rigid definition to each concept. Nevertheless, the process might suggest revealing patterns. It might, for example, yield distinctions between different types of suspense that can then be mapped onto the reactions that texts provoke. It might show how each depends on certain assumptions, involves other types of affects, or interacts with specific political or moral ideas.

Some critics have already used quasi-analytic, speculative methods to construct their accounts of the reading process, but more deliberate adaptations of analytic methods might refine their analyses. In *Dreaming*

by *the Book*, for example, Scarry uses counterfactual scenarios to discover rules of “vivid-image making.”⁴² Her second rule states that authors make objects seem solid by overlaying them with filmy or shadowy materials. She constructs that rule by entertaining a hypothetical scenario. Focusing on a scene in which Proust describes a shadow playing over a wall she asks, what if Proust were to describe a woman walking in front of the wall instead? The wall, she argues, would seem less solid.⁴³ An analytic philosopher, however, would go one step farther. What if Proust were to describe a solid object, like the woman, but orient it directly in front of the wall? What if he were to describe an ethereal object, but orient it farther away? What if he were to describe the wall using words with hard consonants? What if he were to describe it using sibilants? By means of such thought experiments, a more precise rule regarding mental objects’s solidity might be generated.

Indeed, wherever literary critics aim to classify, categorize, and describe, they may find analytic methods useful. These methods might help them to limn the contours of affects and emotions, or of human and nonhuman varieties of agency; they might help them to reclassify literary genres (something that digital humanists are currently doing with increasing zeal); and they might help them to “just read” various cultural phenomena—to use Sharon Marcus’s phrase.⁴⁴ Such methods of classification can even aid literary critics more interested in critique. Literary phenomena *are* often the symptoms of underlying power structures, and it behooves us to read them as such. But we cannot do so with care unless we first discern clearly how they operate. An ideological reading of *Bonfire*, for example, that describes the novel as indulging resentment will only account for half of the story. It will miss the more complex way in which the novel interacts with the reader and the world, and by extension the more nuanced operations of ideology. Literary critics, like continental theorists, may dismiss analytic philosophy as simplistic or pedantic. But a little pedantry is required before any idea, however grand and all encompassing, can take flight.

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NOTES

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1 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), 151–85.

2 Stephen Best, Heather Love, and Sharon Marcus, “Building a Better Description,” *Representations* 135, no. 1 (2016): 1–21.

3 For digital or media studies approaches to hyper reading, deep reading, and shallow reading, see N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), 55–80, and David Dowling, “Escaping the Shallows: Deep Reading’s Revival in the Digital Age,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (2014): 1–42. For different types of sociological or anthropological approaches to reading, see Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984) and Heather Love, “Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 371–91. For a review of cognitive scientific approaches to reading, see Lisa Zunshine, “Introduction: What Is Cognitive Cultural Studies?” in *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, ed. Zunshine (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010), 1–35.

4 For a review of literary criticism’s “ethical turn,” see Dorothy J. Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century,” *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (2009): 900. Hale surveys work by J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Harpham, Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Adam Zachary Newton, Derek Attridge, and Martha Nussbaum, among others. For readings of Henry James’s work, see Butler, “Values of Difficulty,” in *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, ed. Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003) and Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990). For readings of J. M. Coetzee’s work, see Spivak, “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching,” *Diacritics* 32, no. 3–4 (2002): 17–31 and Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004). For a more recent approach to the ethics of reading, see C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014). Serpell deepens but does not abandon the movement’s emphasis on ambiguity.

5 For Noël Carroll’s introduction of the term “uptake” and, by extension, its opposite (failed “uptake”), see Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 36, no. 3 (1996): 223–38; for Tamar Szabó Gendler’s account of “imaginative resistance,” which was subsequently cited by contributors to the value interaction debate, see Gendler, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance,” in *Intuition, Imagination, and Philosophical Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 179–202 (hereafter cited as P).

6 See Carroll, “Moderate Moralism”; Berys Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art,” in *Ethics and Aesthetics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998); A. W. Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70, no. 3 (2012): 281–92; Daniel Jacobson, “In Praise of Immoral Art,” *Philosophical Topics* 25, no. 1 (1997): 155–99; Matthew Kieran, “In Defense of the Ethical Evaluation of Narrative Art,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 41, no. 1 (2001): 26–38; James C. Anderson and Jeffrey T. Deane, “Moderate Autonomism,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 2 (1998): 150–66; Gendler, P.

7 Carroll, “Art and Ethical Criticism,” *Ethics* 110, no. 2 (2000): 379.

8 See, for example, Serpell, *Seven Modes*, 21.

9 Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism,” 192.

10 Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” 227–28.

11 Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 282.

12 Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” 228–29.

13 Aaron Smuts, “Do Moral Flaws Enhance Amusement?” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2009): 153.

14 Smuts, “Do Moral Flaws,” 153–4.

15 Ted Nannicelli, “Moderate Comic Immoralism and the Genetic Approach to the Ethical Criticism of Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72, no. 2 (2014): 172.

- 16 Some philosophers of mind have taken issue with Gendler's argument. They do not contest the existence of imaginative resistance, but they do contest that it is volitional. See, for example, Brian Weatherson, "Morality, Fiction, and Possibility," *Philosophers' Imprint* 4 no. 3 (2004): 1–27, or Stephen Yablo, "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda," *Conceivability and Possibility*, ed. Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002): 441–92. Gendler has admitted that imaginative resistance is sometimes not volitional, but continues to effectively argue that it often is. See Gendler, "Imaginative Resistance Revisited," *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction*, ed. Shaun Nichols (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006): 149–73.
- 17 Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," 193.
- 18 Nannicelli, "Moderate Comic Immoralism," 171.
- 19 Rafe McGregor, "A Critique of the Value Interaction Debate," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54, no. 4 (2014): 455.
- 20 Carroll, "Art and Ethical Criticism," 379.
- 21 The MLA database locates no peer-reviewed articles on *The Bonfire of the Vanities* after 2000. For two pre-2000 critiques of the novel, see Joshua J. Masters, "Race and the Infernal City in Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 29, no. 2 (1999): 208–27 and Liam Kennedy, "'It's the Third World Down There!': Urban Decline and (Post)National Mythologies in *Bonfire of the Vanities*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 43, no. 1 (1997): 93–111.
- 22 Leah Price, "Reading: The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 7, no. 1 (2004): 304.
- 23 Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), 11–18 (hereafter cited as *B*).
- 24 Christopher Buckley, "Dandy Does Dickens," in *The Critical Response to Tom Wolfe*, ed. Doug Shomette (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992), 182.
- 25 Peter A. Quinn, "Eggh Whaddaya? Whaddaya Want From Me?" in *The Critical Response to Tom Wolfe*, ed. Doug Shomette (Westport, Ct: Greenwood, 1992), 199.
- 26 Frank Conroy, "Urban Rats in Fashion's Maze," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/06/specials/wolfe-bonfire.html>.
- 27 Chris, review of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, by Wolfe, *Goodreads*, March 25, 2013, http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2666.The_Bonfire_of_the_Vanities.
- 28 *The Wolf of Wall Street*, directed by Martin Scorsese (2013; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2014) DVD; *The Big Short*, directed by Adam McKay (2015; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2016), DVD.
- 29 David Benedictus, "Golden Crumbs and Mouse Bites: On a Modern Fable of Manhattan," in *The Critical Response to Tom Wolfe*, ed. Shomette, 190.
- 30 Lauren, review of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, by Wolfe, *Goodreads*, March 10, 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1575561597?book_show_action=false&from_review_page=1.
- 31 Conroy, "Urban Rats."
- 32 Conroy, "Urban Rats."
- 33 Butler, "Values of Difficulty," 208.
- 34 Spivak, "Ethics and Politics," 21–22.
- 35 James Elkins, "Book Review *The Bonfire of the Vanities* by Tom Wolfe," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_qTsvHD7tY.
- 36 George Black, "The Far-Right Stuff," in *The Critical Response to Tom Wolfe*, ed. Shomette, 192.
- 37 Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 29.
- 38 Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2008); Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001).
- 39 See Radway, *Reading the Romance*, and Zunshine, "Introduction."

40 The Gettier case, via the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: “The case’s protagonist is Smith. He and Jones have applied for a particular job. But Smith has been told by the company president that Jones will win the job. Smith combines that testimony with his observational evidence of there being ten coins in Jones’s pocket. (He had counted them himself—an odd but imaginable circumstance.) And he proceeds to infer that whoever will get the job has ten coins in their pocket. (As the present article proceeds, we will refer to this belief several times more. For convenience, therefore, let us call it belief b.) Notice that Smith is not thereby guessing. On the contrary; his belief b enjoys a reasonable amount of justificatory support. There is the company president’s testimony; there is Smith’s observation of the coins in Jones’s pocket; and there is Smith’s proceeding to infer belief b carefully and sensibly from that other evidence. Belief b is thereby at least fairly well justified—supported by evidence which is good in a reasonably normal way. As it happens, too, belief b is true—although not in the way in which Smith was expecting it to be true. For it is *Smith* who will get the job, and Smith *himself* has ten coins in his pocket. These two facts combine to make his belief b true. Nevertheless, neither of those facts is something that, on its own, was known by Smith. Is his belief b therefore not knowledge? In other words, does Smith fail to know that the person who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket? Surely so (thought Gettier).” For more, see Stephen Hetherington, “Gettier Cases,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, May 13, 2016, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/gettier/#H3>.

41 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980); Georges Poulet, “Phenomenology of Reading,” *New Literary History* 1, no. 1 (1969): 53–68.

42 Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 22.

43 Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 22.

44 Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 3.