Moral Imagination
DAVID BROMWICH

Morality and imagination have something to do with each other, and both have something to do with the human power of sympathy. Probably most people would grant that much. The difficulty comes when we try to decide how and where to bring morality and imagination together. From the seventeenth century onward, morals denotes the realm of duties and obligations, of compulsory and optional approvals and regrets, the rewards and sanctions properly affixed to human action. Imagination applies to things or people as they are not now, or are not yet, or are not any more, or to a state of the world as it never could have been but is interesting to reflect on. Morality, we say, is concerned with the real and its objects are actual. Imagination conjures up fictions and its objects are, at most, probable: we could believe them real in a world that otherwise resembled our own. The sense that morality and imagination are closely allied—that they might not belong to separate categories—is initially as puzzling as the idea of “moral imagination” that is my subject.

Imagination, in its dominant sense in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, referred to an extravagant and undependable faculty of the mind that fetched ideas from afar. This was the imagination of Philip Sidney and Fulke Greville, and of Francis Bacon when in the Novum Organum he remarked that the mind of man was an “enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture.” Hobbes, with his scientific and reductionist program, defined imagination as “decaying sense,” and among the extraordinary short definitions at the start of Leviathan, you find none at all of morals; but Hobbes’s drift can be inferred from his observation that conscience is the coming together of two or more opinions. Thus opinion and imagination are equally unreliable, for Hobbes. Of all the writers of the period, Shakespeare has, if not the gentlest, the least indifferent things to say for imagination; yet when Theseus utters his sententious speech
at the close of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—"The lunatic, the lover, and the poet, / Are of imagination all compact"—the well-tuned words of praise do not wholly vindicate imagination:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

The idea that the poet gives to things "A local habitation and a name" makes a handsome compliment; but Theseus is only saying that such particulars help the idle coinage of the brain to carry credit. For what the poet dreams of can never be checked, since it lies in the realm of things unknown; while the shapes that emerge from poetry begin as "airy nothing," and are not expected to have a permanent life in the mind of a rational person. Shakespeare does not take us far from Hobbes after all.

Both the division between morals and imagination and the common distrust of imagination itself have to be recalled if we are to realize what a strange yoking of contraries is signaled by the very idea of moral imagination. The departure comes in the later eighteenth century and without much foreshadowing. If you think of Romantic poetry and the criticism and the writings on morality that it sponsored, you may find yourself taking moral imagination for granted. By the middle of the nineteenth century—in Heine, in Hugo, in George Eliot—the idea seems to be everywhere. And it shows a vitality that has persisted in the thinking (even the tactical thinking) of movements of social reform and political resistance in the twentieth century. Yet there was nothing inevitable about the rise of this idea, which offers to society no equipment for living and no pragmatic measure of its own consequences.

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The first writer to use the phrase “moral imagination” was Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The passage occurs in his meditation on the crowd that forced the king and queen of France to move from Versailles to Paris; close up, the phrase comes out of Burke’s report of the assault on the queen in her bedchamber, a disgrace of which he says: “I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.” But the time when that could happen is past; the age of chivalry is gone, and with it the moral conditions that made such a response possible: the spirit of religion, and the spirit of a gentleman. What has replaced them, Burke says, is the morale of “a perfect democracy,” which is “the most shameless thing in the world.” He adds: “As it is the most shameless, it is also the most fearlessness.” Burke thinks the age of chivalry was admirable because it did not bring moral duties under the institutional control of majority suffrage; and in seeking to give an adequate picture of the older regime of judgment, he arrestingly joins the words morality and imagination. By a total revolution like that of France, all will now be changed:

All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to a dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

This celebrated passage is by no means easy to interpret. Burke sets on one side metaphors of the ancient, the pleasing, the bland and beautiful; the assimilable, the dignified; modesty and softness and concealment. On the other side are metaphors of destruction and iconoclasm; shining a light to expose what is hidden; tearing
away a veil or a piece of clothing; ridiculing; exploding. The essence of things seen without prejudice or illusion, by the cold light of reason or of pretended enlightenment, is shown to be unendurable: it leaves us naked, shivering, helpless, and stripped of dignity. Things are made humanly bearable and assimilable only as they are modified by habit and custom, enhanced by "superadded ideas," made pleasing by the work of illusion. We need the coverings that enlightenment and reason want to strip away.

Notice that "moral imagination," as Burke here uses the phrase, is an entirely conventional process. "All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination"—it furnishes habitual ideas that, item by item as they are plucked from the wardrobe, protect our shivering nature and make us know our duties. I exhibit a moral imagination when I act rightly by my selection from a preexisting array of approved habits. There is nothing original or individual about moral imagination on this view. It is the means by which possible motives of action are winnowed in advance; so long as I choose with a moral imagination, I cannot but choose well. By the same measure, I cannot but act in a way that is familiar and precedent. This does not mean that my action is a matter of sheer reflex. It is a conscious choice, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies: Burke put the last words into the sentence because he wanted to be sure that we would view the possessor of a moral imagination as obeying the conscience through an act of will. Yet the result that I achieve must be the same result that would predictably come to anyone rightly brought up. If we compare imagination in its high Romantic sense, there is nothing imaginative about this version of moral imagination; nor is there anything moral about it, in either the Kantian or the utilitarian understanding of morals. The moral imagination simply offers wisdom without reflection.

Various motives conspired to produce the eloquence of this orthodox account. The object of Burke's sympathy, the Catholic queen of France, was a surprising and in some ways an unconventional choice for a Protestant writer in a country that went to war with France nearly once a decade in the eighteenth century. The
reverence with which he treated the queen appeared, to most of Burke's English contemporaries, startling both in degree and in kind. By portraying the French revolution, in a nearby description, as a leveling and calculating agency, an instrument of democratic modernization and ascendant finance capitalism, he suggests that our continued reliance on a moral imagination may have something heroic about it, just because it is now under challenge. What was once a safe and rehearsed response has become a defensive assertion of faith, requiring moral and physical courage. Yet what stands out most is Burke's elaboration of a curriculum of imagination: he makes us see that to imagine morally is a labor of the social will whose success is proved only when woven into the conduct of each person. The instructions I am to follow are already there, but they must act through me in order to be realized. Each individual is tested at every moment of a revolutionary age. Burke himself is on the line; and so is the reader. The words of the passage finally say more than the logic of his thinking should have made Burke want to say. The sense is orthodox, but the stance is critical, dramatic, inquisitive, disturbed.

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Of the poems Wordsworth published in *Lyric Ballads* in 1798, the one that exposed him to most derision and reproach was "The Idiot Boy." Yet Wordsworth set particular store by this poem; and he was right to do so. To capture the radicalism of its sympathy, one has to summarize a story that is chiefly remarkable for what does not happen in it. Betty Foy sends her child, an idiot boy named Johnny, to fetch a doctor to the bedside of her friend Susan Gale, who is sick with a high fever. Hours pass, Johnny does not return, and gradually his mother's thoughts turn from care for her friend to anxiety that her boy is lost—and, since he does not know his way, lost forever. She goes to ask the doctor for help but, roused from sleep after midnight, he resents the intrusion. Betty herself sets out, in despair of finding Johnny:
So, through the moonlight lane she goes,
And far into the moonlight dale;
And how she ran, and how she walked,
And all that to herself she talked,
Would surely be a tedious tale.

In high and low, above, below,
In great and small, in round and square,
In tree and tower was Johnny seen,
In bush and brake, in black and green;
'Twas Johnny, Johnny, every where.

She comes upon Johnny sitting on his horse, near a waterfall, and when she hugs him Johnny laughs and makes his excited noise *Burr*. She asks him what he has done all night, what he has seen and heard, and he answers: "The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, / And the sun did shine so cold!" The owls he turns to cocks, the moon to the sun at night—a metaphor with the incongruity and truth of poetry. Meanwhile Susan Gale has been miraculously cured of her fever.

Readers at the end of the eighteenth century would not have been shocked by the mere presentation of a character like the idiot boy. The appearance of such figures in ballad or fiction was almost a cliché: a madwoman, Madge Wildfire, a few years later was placed by Scott near the center of the plot of *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*. If anything, in Romantic writing the presence of a mad man or woman supplied an occasion for exotic coloring. Wordsworth's readers might indeed have been more satisfied had they been told more about Johnny's feelings from inside. But the treatment of Johnny is matter-of-fact: we hear nothing about his feelings except the concluding words about the sun and the cocks; about his condition we learn nothing apart from the words of the title. As for the melodramatic interest that is set up—the answer to the question, Will Susan Gale obtain her cure by this unreliable messenger or by some other means?—it is scuttled twice almost casually and introduced at the end as a matter of incidental concern. What Wordsworth attends to, rather, are the feelings of Johnny's mother about her wayward son.
The portrayal of a mother's cares, as deeply as such feelings can be imagined, and with the idiot boy as their object: this was the choice that drew the scorn and incredulity of respectable critics. Wordsworth was felt to have abused the name and nature of human feelings by portraying the mother's affection for an aberrant instead of a normal person. Surely, they said, readers could be brought to sympathize with a woman like Betty Foy without distraction by the unsuitable match of her feelings with so embarrassing a cause.

To critics and to a young disciple, John Wilson, who complained of the emotional demands of the poem, Wordsworth replied by insisting on the humanity of Johnny as it comes to be known through his mother's love. It mattered to Wordsworth's realism that he had chosen to treat the subject not by a pretended empathy with Johnny himself, but rather "by tracing the maternal passion through many of its more subtle windings" (as he wrote in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads). And here we touch on a discovery announced by his mode of treatment: moral imagination is not to be found in the reliable sentiment anyone may be supposed to have on such an occasion, the sentiment shared by every person who knows what the appropriate emotions are regarding a boy like Johnny. The orthodox question—"What kind of feeling ought he to elicit?"—has been replaced by the question, "What can I feel about him?" Wordsworth thought it was possible for the reader to have feelings other than generous pity for a human aberration. Yet we come upon our feelings here through Betty Foy's attachment to Johnny. We are made to feel as she does; and the integrity of her feelings is seen to constitute its own defense.

The axis of imagining has shifted as we moved from a third-person to a first-person question—from a rehearsed response of pity for children like this to a sense of Johnny's actual dignity. Pity, let it be added, might well lead to action on behalf of its object, as pity often does: the settling of Johnny into a home for such boys, to make sure that he has company, for example; or the issuing of a reprimand to Betty Foy for letting him go dangerously unsupervised. Our sense of his dignity, by contrast, leads apparently nowhere. That is one of the odd things about it. In trying to feel not as Johnny does, even if
that were possible, but, instead, as his mother does, I choose to call human the things that one can have human hopes and fears about. Possibly Wordsworth would go even further. He would say, I become human by the self-knowledge acquired in coming to recognize that I have such feelings. (That is the sense of one of Wordsworth's greatest lines, a line that floats almost free of its context in "Resolution and Independence": "By our own spirits are we deified.") My attention to Johnny ultimately says something about him; but it does so only after it has said something about me. A dignity I withheld from him I would at once have failed to confirm in myself. According to Wordsworth (if I have his doctrine right), the only relevant evidence is the mark of respect and self-respect that is shown or stinted.

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"The great secret of morals," wrote Shelley in A Defence of Poetry, "is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own." One remarkable thing about this definition is its refusal to confine the object of identification to a person; we may equally sympathize with an action or a thought: an extension and decomposition of the idea of sympathy that seems consistent with Shelley's most original poetry. But notice that on his view—which Shelley derived from Wordsworth's early poems and the Preface to Lyrical Ballads—the more unlikely or remote the path of sympathy, the surer the proof of moral imagination. Thus, to sympathize with someone like myself is commendable, perhaps, but it shows nothing much. It is a plausible extension of the future-regarding aspect of ordinary egotism, and the scriptural warning applies: "For if ye love them that love you, what reward have ye?" (Matthew 5:46). But to feel with the mother who has lost her idiot boy, or, as in Frankenstein, with a monstrous creature who must learn humanity from people even as he finds that people recoil—these are truer tests of "a going out of our nature."

So far, I have been discussing the theory of moral relations—a topic outside the realm of practical morality. But one extension to our
ideas of justice seems clear. What I owe to people like me is a duty whose performance comes easily. Carrying it out is like paying dues. By contrast, justice to those who are not my kind is surprising, unrehearsed. The idiom of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophy—as shown in the characterization of moral duties by writers like Samuel Pufendorf and William Paley—understates the contrast when it calls an "imperfect" rather than a perfect obligation a prosperous person's giving of shelter to a miserable houseless man. Whatever we may call it, Wordsworth and Shelley place conduct of this sort in a separate category; they find it a source of wonder and admiration which they deny to association with every thought, action, or person similar to one's own. The moral imagination here takes an interest in people it cannot call neighbors without enlarging the meaning of a neighbor. I turn now to Burke once more, for a different kind of example, in which the metaphor of a wardrobe could not possibly have served his purpose.

In 1783, when Burke began in earnest his prosecution of the British East India Company, the company itself was the government of Bengal. It had enjoyed an official sanction from the 1760s onward whose peculiarity has been captured in recent histories by Peter Marshall, Frederick Whelan, and Nicholas Dirks, among others. The company was a trading power, which a series of ad-hoc adjustments had vested with political authority: a government in the disguise of a merchant, as Burke called it. Its operations were handled by the members of a governing council in Bengal, itself answerable to the company directors in London; but the council could hire agents to collect rents and taxes, and it could recruit mercenary or tribal armies to fight the wars of a company whose sovereignty was identical with that of Britain. It also effectively controlled a supreme court that had recently been appointed to dispense laws of a British severity to the native subjects of India.

Several plausible cases of misconduct or criminal action were brought before Burke and other India reformers in the House of Commons in the early 1780s; it was understood that their response would affect the control of the future governance of India. Earlier
Burke himself had rejected calls for an inquiry into the finances and management of the company, on the ground that this would constitute an intrusion on a corporate charter. By 1783 he had changed his mind; and Fox's East India Bill, which he now supported, would have assigned all authority over the company to two government commissions, one for administration and one for commerce, to run their terms regardless of changes of ministry. Whatever one thought of the plan, it was, as the historian Richard Pares observed, the first time in the reign of George III that someone had tried to take the politics out of an interest that had always been purely political.

What could justify so radical a step? Burke starts his answer by pointing out that the East India men are corrupting the government of England by the wealth they extract from India and use for self-aggrandizement.

Arrived in England, the destroyers of the nobility and gentry of a whole kingdom will find the best company in this nation, at a board of elegance and hospitality. Here the manufacturer and husbandman will bless the just and punctual hand that in India has torn the cloth from the loom, or wrested the scanty portion of the rice and salt from the peasant of Bengal, or wrung from him the very opium in which he forgot his oppressions and his oppressor. They marry into your families; they enter into your senate; they ease your estates by loans; they raise their value by demand; they cherish and protect your relations which lie heavy on your patronage; and there is scarcely an house in the kingdom that does not feel some concern and interest that makes all reform of our eastern government appear officious and disgusting; and on the whole, a most discouraging attempt. In such an attempt you hurt those who are able to return kindness, or to resent injury. If you succeed, you save those who cannot so much as give you thanks. All these things shew the difficulty of the work we have on hand: but they shew its necessity too. Our Indian government is in its best state a grievance. It is necessary that the correctives should be uncommonly vigorous; and the work of men, sanguine, warm, and even impassioned in the
cause. But it is an arduous thing to plead against abuses of a power which originates from your own country, and affects those whom we are used to consider as strangers.

Here, the test of the justice of a moral imagination turns out to be justice to a stranger. Burke is closer, in fact, to Shelley than he is to himself in his writings on France. Yet, Burke confesses with bewilderment, there is a puzzle about acting on someone’s behalf across so wide a distance: a puzzle that perhaps in the nature of empire cannot finally be solved.

The people connected with India whom one comes to know in England are those who have profited from the company’s trade, rent, and less official exactions, those who convert their financial gain into social standing and political power at home. They have injured the people of India, but the cries are lost over the thousands of miles of ocean that separate England from the subcontinent it governs by proxy. Friendship and association with the former plunderers are inviting to the English at home. They “marry into your families” and “enter into your senate” and give out loans that protect your relations; the benefit you can realize from their crimes is now familiar and conspicuous. Meanwhile, whatever gratitude the Indians may feel for the defense of their rights is valueless, since it is the gratitude of people without political strength, and it cannot be heard across the barriers of language and race. Given the illicit pressures on opinion in England and the censorship of perception, Burke’s motive for addressing the fate of India must have had a deeper basis than conventional good breeding and the “wardrobe of a moral imagination” in his later sense. To share his urgency regarding the reform of British India, one must break out of the domesticating habits for which the wardrobe served as a metaphor—the socialized forbearance toward neighbors and their fortune, with no questions asked—and recover a natural indignation on behalf of the oppressed of every race. One must make one’s own the pleasures and pains of the Indians as members of the same species as oneself. If I think as a citizen of the empire, under this moral imperative, I must suppose they are people
who have as much right as I have to be ruled by a government that in its best state is not a grievance.

Burke says that only men of warm passions can initiate so thoroughgoing a change. This emphasis implies that one cause of the evil may be a wrong or weak imagining; the sort of thinking that assumes that the Indians need a certain way of life, about which they may receive instruction from a political or economic theory or a proper historical understanding. Burke, on the contrary, has not come to assist the Indians mainly from a sense of their suffering; rather, what strikes him is that his own country is the cause of their suffering; he identifies himself with the transgressions of Britain in order to accuse his neighbors. Burke seems to say that the motive for sympathetic action must come from learning the work of truth and constancy that is becoming to one's own dignity. It is not a question of what I owe to the sufferer but of what I owe to myself. A usual mistake of imagination—especially when heated by ambition—is to think of other people as moral objects while regarding oneself as a moral actor. Burke's deep intimation is that the momentum of commerce, the insolence of power, and an empire's appetite can only be checked if the rulers of Britain now resolve what they will not permit themselves.

I do not know whether Lincoln ever read Burke, but he had a similar grasp of political psychology in one important respect. Characteristically, Lincoln traced people's collective actions to a basis in shared customs, sentiments, and habits of thought. Like Burke, he knew that he was living in a revolutionary time, and he believed any radical change, if it was to be a change for the better, had to draw on moral commitments and social practices with a long past. If one opposed slavery, one ought not to say that the Constitution was a covenant with death and an agreement with hell, but rather say that the words "All men are created equal" really meant to include all men, and that the Constitution, however imperfectly at first, always existed to realize this promise of the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln understood as Burke did a singular truth about moral
persuasion in politics: that an injustice you aim to correct had better be seen not from the point of view of the victim, but from the perspective of the agent who commits the injustice, the person who profits from it. The sense of pity, whatever need it satisfies, is practically useless to the cause of reform, but the particulars of self-accusation may be useful. With Lincoln on slavery, as with Burke on empire, the pressure for reform comes from a redefinition of self-respect or sympathy with myself. Some contrast between what I am and what I ought to be startles me and leads to self-discontent, which then issues in remedy or redress.

The most instructive passages come from the years 1856 and 1857, when Lincoln was starting to draw the line between two possible futures for the United States, in one of which the states would be all slave, and in the other all free. The following passage deals only with the feelings, manners, and expectations of white people:

Can men vote truly? We will suppose that there are ten men who go into Kansas to settle. Nine of these are opposed to slavery. One has ten slaves. The slaveholder is a good man in other respects; he is a good neighbor, and being a wealthy man, he is enabled to do the others many neighborly kindnesses. They like the man, though they don't like the system by which he holds his fellow-men in bondage. And here let me say, that in intellectual and physical structure, our Southern brethren do not differ from us. They are, like us, subject to passions, and it is only their odious institution of slavery that makes the breach between us. These ten men of whom I was speaking, live together three or four years; they intermarry; their family ties are strengthened. And who wonders that in time, the people learn to look upon slavery with complacency?

You cannot vote truly, Lincoln says, in a state or territory where one kind of person has inordinate influence, and where the slave owner, with his human property and the power it confers, himself contributes to a brutalization of manners. In a sense, the more amiable the slave owner is, the worse his influence on society, since, by the
effects of his wealth and his kindness together, his example weakens
the natural aversion people generally feel toward slavery (if they have
not been inured to it from childhood). Now suppose that the vicious
habits of the slave system—contempt for the rights of some people,
acceptance of inequality, and accommodation to the spectacle of
arbitrary power—suppose these habits are taken into the wardrobe
of a moral imagination. What then becomes of the morale of a free
people? We shall come to look on slavery with complacency; but
from the moment we do, “our progress in degeneration” is “pretty
rapid” (as Lincoln says in a letter about this time.)

A second passage may be read as completing the same thought;
but it belongs to a different context. Chief Justice Taney’s majority
opinion in the Dred Scott case presented a new theory about the
meaning of the Constitution. It said the framers never contemplated
the admission of Negroes to citizenship; that none of the rights of cit-
izens had been intended to apply to Negroes; and that the rights of
property of a slaveholder were such that no new territory could legally
exclude slavery. There was a reason why Lincoln called this finding
“an astonisher in legal history.” He believed that the founders of the
United States did have in their minds the significance of the words
“all men are created equal” when they framed the Constitution a
decade after they signed their names to the Declaration. And Lin-
coln thought they gave those words the same sense that most readers
give them. But if the Negro is a human being and if, knowing that he
is one, we in our own minds ratify the wrong of the Dred Scott deci-
sion, what are we doing to ourselves?

All the powers of earth seem rapidly combining against [the
black man]. Mammon is after him; ambition follows, and philoso-
phy follows, and the Theology of the day is fast joining the cry.
They have him in his prison house; they have searched his per-
sion, and left no prying instrument with him. One after another
they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they
have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys,
which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every
key; the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they
scattered to a hundred different and distant places; and they stand musing as to what invention, in all the dominions of mind and matter, can be produced to make the impossibility of his escape more complete than it is.

To the extent that we support the decision as the law of the land, we ourselves become the jailers of a man locked behind the doors of a prison bolted with a hundred keys, and the keys in a hundred different hands. Imprisonment without any means of redress or accountability by the jailer meets the commonest definition of tyranny. And as with British India in the 1780s, so with America in the 1850s: respectable society comes to the assistance of the jailer. Money, political ambition, conventional morality, theology, all play their parts; and for Lincoln this proves the moral bankruptcy of the arrangements to which American society has given way. A contemporary who read these passages and placed them side by side might start to ask questions. Are we happy to be the prosperous jailers of a significant portion of humanity? If we consent to oppressions like these and profit from them directly, as in the South, or indirectly, as in the North, who and what are we?

And yet, once again, as in Burke’s description of the misery of British India, we are not quite put into the minds of the sufferers, though Lincoln comes a little closer than Burke: instead of the cloth torn from the loom or the rice taken out of someone’s mouth, he gives us the extended image of the prison and the lock and keys. The omission of anecdote and detail points to a salient feature of Lincoln’s morality that has not been much noticed. He speaks about slavery more often from the perspective of the master than from that of the slave. His resistance to slavery is founded less on horror and pity than on a conscientious belief in the good of renouncing mastery. “As I would not be a slave,” he wrote in a journal note, “so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.” Almost nowhere does Lincoln speak with contempt of slaveholders—a remarkable fact when you consider that he maintained steady
contact with the abolitionists and admired their moral commitment if not their tactics. From the Peoria speech of 1854 through the final speech on reconstruction, Lincoln says "our Southern brethren" have had the bad fortune to inherit an institution which has made them oppressors. If we of the North, he adds, had grown up with slavery as a permitted practice, we would be no better than they are; and if they had grown up in a section free of slavery, they would be no worse than we are.

Behind much oppression and behind the complacency with which we abridge our knowledge of suffering, lies a force in human nature as pervasive as habit; namely the force of inhibition, of willful imperceptiveness and self-censorship; a benign-seeming, coercive instinct that aims to bring uniformity to experience and to leave us comfortable and free of doubts. In a central passage of Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf introduces her readers to the god "proportion," whose severe standard guides the clinical practice of the psychiatrist Sir William Bradshaw. Proportion assists Sir William in his important work of sculpting society in order to trim it clear of unseemly shapes:

Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William's goddess, was acquired by Sir William walking hospitals, catching salmon, begetting one son in Harley Street by Lady Bradshaw, who caught salmon herself and took photographs scarcely to be distinguished from the work of professionals. Worshiping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion. . . .

But Proportion has a sister, less smiling, more formidable, a Goddess even now engaged—in the heat and sands of India, the mud and swamp of Africa, the purlieus of London, wherever in short the climate or the devil tempts men to fall from the true belief which is her own—is even now engaged in dashing down shrines, smashing idols, and setting up in their place her own stern countenance. Conversion is her name and she feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own
features stamped on the face of the populace. But Conversion, fastidious Goddess, loves blood better than brick, and feasts most subtly upon the human will. For example, Lady Bradshaw. Fifteen years ago she had gone under. It was nothing you could put your finger on; there had been no scene, no snap; only the slow sinking, waterlogged, of her will into his.

What Sir William's god despises, what it seeks as far as possible to obliterate, is all evidence of idiosyncrasy, every sign of an individual will that turns aside from the drift of the group. This specialist on mental disorders is a well-adapted priest of power and unconscious privilege—or perhaps one should say, of a privilege whose cost and reward is unconsciousness. The connection Woolf draws between his professional status and social authority and the oppression of marriage seems to me far from arbitrary. She has in mind a tacit authority that recruits us to its ends and incorporates us before we can know what we might be without its intervention. And the suicide of a main secondary character of the book, Septimus Warren Smith, the young poet returned from the war, seems to be a direct emanation of the will of Sir William. When Smith has his recurrent fantasy of a brutal and predatory nature under the cover of society—which he signals to himself by the shadowy epigram, "Once you stumble, human nature is on you"—what really haunts him is the confident bad art of Sir William. Though Smith hardly knows why, he knows he must defect from the rule of proportion and conversion; and he is satisfied even to part from life, so long as suicide frees him from the burden of these gods.

The names "proportion" and "conversion" are drawn by Woolf from different idioms—proportion from aesthetics, conversion from religion and morals. By her choice of terms, I take her to be saying that lack of imagination is a necessary condition for keeping up a society based on subordination, a society in which balance and stability are valued more than justice and liberty. We do not want to think so, of course; and we use other names: mental hygiene, sanity, propriety, decency. But the end is to tyrannize by the imposition of
uniformity, suavity, compliance, all those estimable qualities which
serve to polish experience and to give it every quality of art except
courage and surprise. The fate of those whom society crushes or the
state overrules is suffered first and last in the mind of the individual.
Woolf connects this fact with the loss of identity in marriage because
proportion and conversion, working together, turn every two into
one. Society is worse because it crushes more than two at a time.

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There are conversions so public and voluntary we may feel they
deserve a different name—let us call them transformations, with-
out supposing that we have brought to light an altogether different
phenomenon. An example within living memory was Martin Luther
King's speech "A Time to Break Silence," delivered at Riverside
Church, New York, in April 1967. It may be symptomatic of our own
love of proportion that this has not become one of King's best-known
speeches or writings. Yet "A Time to Break Silence" marks a coura-
geous choice by a leader of a movement to pass beyond his parish
and speak for people whose sufferings he had no formal obligation to
address. King was pleading here not for the rights of black people,
but against abuses of a power that originated from his own country,
and that affected those whom we were used to consider as strangers.

What do the peasants think as we ally ourselves with the land-
lords and as we refuse to put any action into our many words
concerning land reform? What do they think as we test our lat-
est weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new med-
icine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe?
Where are the roots of the independent Vietnam we claim to
be building? Is it among these voiceless ones?

We have destroyed their two most cherished institutions:
the family and the village. We have destroyed their land and
their crops. We have cooperated in the crushing of the nation's
only non-Communist revolutionary political force—the uni-
fied Buddhist church. We have supported the enemies of the
peasants of Saigon. We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men. What liberators!

Now there is little left to build on—save bitterness. Soon the only solid physical foundations remaining will be found at our military bases and in the concrete of the concentration camps we call fortified hamlets. The peasants may well wonder if we plan to build our new Vietnam on such grounds as these. Could we blame them for such thoughts? We must speak for them and raise the questions they cannot raise. These too are our brothers.

This is an argument against destruction, on behalf of the great secret of morals which is love, or mercy. King imagines himself in the position of the Vietnamese under the bombing sorties of B-52s, or the casualties of what was called the pacification program. He imagines the situation of people who watch their society destroyed for their own sake to yield a better and more modern and liberal society.

King asks his listeners to look at what is actually happening; but he does so without firsthand testimony by the sufferers. Indeed, his description, unlike Lincoln’s, is not even heightened by metaphor; yet its purpose comes out plainly in his repetition of the most important word of the passage, we. What have we done? Who are we that have done this? It is a summons to a personal and national inquest. King said in an interview about this time that he could no longer segregate his protest against injustice at home from his knowledge of the injustice his country was doing abroad. He supposed this was an issue in which black and white Americans together were implicated. Self-respect, he says, forbids us from seeing ourselves as the authors of these deeds. What then shall we do to become ourselves again?

A critical feature of the moral imagination I have been exploring is that justice to a stranger comes to seem a more profound work of conscience than justice to a friend, neighbor, or member of my own community. This goes against the premise, shared by political conservatives and moral conservatives (some of whom are political liberals), that every person builds up loyalties and public affections from the inside out, the circle of those closest to me naturally taking
priority over the circle of those who are less close. But one can penetrate the falseness of that communitarian diagram simply by recalling any strong feeling one has ever had of the reality of a person about whom one knew very little. One may conclude that, to acquire such reality, it is not necessary for a stranger to be defined or made to acquire "thickness" by the data of ethnicity, race, or class.

This rejection of remedial action from a predigested idea of people's needs may serve to bring into view a second feature of moral imagination. Its authority calls on me to act in accord with my own constitution. An ideal of virtuous action, to borrow a thought from Pindar, moves the actor to become what he has already learned himself to be. So I refuse to treat myself as less than a moral judge and agent; every action becomes a matter also of my duties toward myself. For needs and sufferings, when entered into from the point of view of the sufferer, are liable to be mischievous; they excite an impulse toward relief that can justify any improvement, any therape
tapeutic cure, any act of assimilation or conquest. They vindicate my choice by a generous picture of myself as a doer. In this way, the evangelical doer of the nineteenth century was excited to action by regarding himself as an agent of civilization. The doer of the twenty-first century may achieve a similar result by regarding himself as an agent for the global market, or for the spread of universal rights. The moral imagination warns against such complacent self-regard.

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To pass from Burke as a critic of empire to Martin Luther King on the duties of nonviolent resistance is not so long a stretch as most people imagine. Both were faithful to a particular constituency—the Rockingham Whigs, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—and by their apparently divergent acts of protest, they did not suppose they were undermining that constituency. Still, in their campaigns against the Vietnam War and the East India Company they went against the prudent advice of many who had been close to them. I have stressed the perception that they could not do otherwise and still be themselves. But one must also record an impression that
every biographer of both men has been struck by. Burke and King alike were possessed of an elemental keenness that made them angry at the sight of injustice. They did not, like so many public men, half-consciously guard against such exposure; and when it came unbidden, they registered a shock. King resolved to give his best energies to opposing the Vietnam War from the moment when in the January 1967 issue of Ramparts he saw pictures of Vietnamese children burned by napalm. It happened over breakfast and the reaction was almost physical. Something similar occurred when Edmund Burke first read the accounts of British officials approving the torture of the Begums of Oudh in order to obtain their treasure. The Begums were Indian princesses, under a foreign code of conscience, but when Burke saw their story he recoiled as he would from an assault on an English lady, and spoke as if he would avenge even a look that threatened them with insult. In King and Burke, the sense of anger at injustice is strong and perpetual: we come to feel they have sharper sight for the abuses of power than ordinary men and women; we also feel that an injustice they witness calls out to them instantly. It is as if a layer of insensibility that normally weakens, muffles, and protects us, were missing from their composition.

Both King and Burke had in view a difficult-to-persuade audience like ourselves. Why difficult? The liberal contract theory of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries pictured the citizen as one who proves the reality of natural rights by binding himself to other members of society. This theory rests on an idea of both individual and collective freedom in which rights tend to implicate needs (the right to property as acquisition, the need for property as protection). To the extent that the political contract is sealed by its responsiveness to needs, it is interventionist regarding the conscience of the individual. For the same reason, liberal theory gives support to the psychology of intervention in a larger sense. I draw here on a recent paper by Uday Mehta, “The Language of Peace and the Practice of Non-Violence,” which traces a consistent challenge to the contract theory of collective legitimation from Gandhi’s idea of conscientious nonviolent resistance.
Since, observes Mehta, the contract supposed by the state-of-nature theorists must be seen to confer benefits equally on all, it requires sufficient power—including a possible resort to violence—to overcome opposition to those benefits or to remove the sufferings imposed by people who obstruct the full reach of the benefits. To secure that object, the state is awarded a monopoly on violence, and it takes as one of its proper functions the making of war for the sake of preserving peace. What then becomes of the individual? He is called on, from time to time, to approve or cooperate with the violence of the state. It may seem that the pragmatic good performed by a limited constitutional state more than offsets the evil of this encroachment. Yet Gandhi’s objection to the theory, as Mehta interprets it, cannot be met in this way, for the assimilation of each person into the plan of benefit, improvement, and clearance of distress, itself embodies a trespass against individual conscience: at the very least it presumes that all the work of conscience can be done collectively. The individual is absolved of both credit and blame, because the decision has been routed through the imperative of the common good. By contrast, nonviolent resistance, which relies on persuasion and excludes force, may favor a collective life distrustful of violence and not prone to interventions that place us outside ourselves.

The modern morality in which the person, and then the state, are supposed to sympathize with the needs of the sufferer, is vitiated by an original error. For this theory removes from the scene the actor, the doer, who is called upon to confer the benefits or relieve the suffering. He can easily come to think that his conscience is not on the line, since the machine of collective remedy triggers a suitable attention to reform. All the interventions take care of themselves without regard to the integrity of the person who acts. Indeed, that person is emancipated to commit violence without remorse. But there is surely something wrong with this exemption; one cannot help feeling that mischief could come of it. For it treats the ideal of the common good with a half-conscious cynicism, as if the common good might be achieved without the virtue of integrity.
In a remarkable essay, “Gandhi, the Philosopher,” Akeel Bilgrami suggests that the distinctive mark of Gandhi’s thinking is a tension between personal integrity and a communal participation that evades or dissipates conscience. Regard for integrity, as Bilgrami points out, tends to awaken conscience, or the actor’s awareness of his individual constitution. It informs conduct and brings action into coherence with judgment. At its bidding, I do not hope to implicate, improve, organize, or modernize other people as a consequence of the adequacy and rightness of my judgment; nor do I condemn them if they decline to follow me. I reserve to myself the duty to resist any invitation or compulsion to follow them when they do wrong. Integrity, to the extent that it influences others, works by example and not by precept or conversion. Nonviolent protest is thus a tactic that becomes more than a tactic, since its self-sufficiency and its restraint may have an exemplary power. Something of this train of thought is familiar to American readers from Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience.”

It is only a step from Gandhi to Martin Luther King by way of Thoreau; and only another step when we turn to the source Gandhi acknowledged for his thinking about integrity: Ruskin’s pamphlet on the duties of commerce, Unto This Last. Ruskin here contests what he thinks is the central maxim of modern political economy, “Buy in the cheapest market, and sell in the dearest”—a maxim in which he discerns the essence of moral anarchy. Whatever the adepts of economic correctness may say, there is a radical fault in a system that, as the cost of distributing the benefits of the market, turns each buyer and each seller into a knave. At the heart of Ruskin’s critique is the immorality of the capitalist market, when measured against an ideal of chivalric honor. He makes this plain in the opening essay of Unto This Last when he numbers the ancient professions of soldier, pastor, physician, lawyer, noting the existence of a good bestowed by each and a corresponding harm that each must be willing to die to prevent. The soldier must risk his life rather than desert his post; the physician must risk his life rather than violate his oath as a healer. And the merchant?—“what,” says Ruskin, “is his ‘due occasion’ of
death?” If the merchant does not know the duties in the service of which he would sacrifice himself and his fortune, how can he know what good he serves?

Buy in the cheapest market?—yes; but what made your market cheap? Charcoal may be cheap among your roof timbers after a fire, and bricks may be cheap in your streets after an earthquake; but fire and earthquake may not therefore be national benefits. Sell in the dearest?—yes, truly; but what made your market dear? You sold your bread well to-day: was it to a dying man who gave his last coin for it, and will never need bread more; or to a rich man who to-morrow will buy your farm over your head; or to a soldier on his way to pillage a bank in which you have put your fortune?

None of these things you can know. One thing only you can know: namely, whether this dealing of yours is a just and faithful one, which is all you need concern yourself about respecting it; sure thus to have done your own part in bringing about ultimately in the world a state of things which will not issue in pillage or in death.

“The Roots of Honor” was the name that Ruskin gave to one chapter of Unto This Last—an homage to a phrase in Burke’s description of chivalric virtue in “A Letter to a Noble Lord.” So we are thrown back again on Burke’s analysis of a company that acts in the place of a government and fails to know what pillage or plunder it ought to deny itself.

I think that there is in fact a continuous coherence in the thought about public duty and conscience that passes through Burke, Wordsworth, Lincoln, Ruskin, Woolf, Gandhi, and King. Different as they are, I take all of them to be saying one thing. We are lifted wrongly out of ourselves by the idea of a system that absolves us before the fact, whether that system is an empire, a Union, an economy, or a national security state in the grip of “perpetual emergency.” I do not mean by these examples to suggest that global commerce or mass democracy or the profession of psychiatry or the contract theory of government is, in itself, an enemy of integrity, or that
there is a reflex passage from any of these to proselytism for state violence and the abuses of empire. None of these entities is in every imaginable form an evil. The use of moral imagination is to gauge the self-deception that intervenes when in the apparent service of high-minded aims we come to describe our appetites as needs.

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The human creature loves to justify itself. It will generate adequate explanations of any conduct, however brutal, in order to show itself uncontaminated by the evil it has set out to cure. In this endless adventure of rationalization, pity serves as a unique and trusted assistant, since the presence of pity assures us that we can feel generously. Yet pity can be made agreeable to selfishness. Blake prophesied in "The Human Abstract":

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody Poor
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.

And mutual fear brings peace,
Till the selfish loves increase:
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears
And waters the ground with tears;
Then Humility takes its root
Underneath his foot.

The pity of Jesus was spontaneous, gratuitous, the mover of conscience to acts of mercy. It was a human and divine going out of his nature on behalf of the unlucky. What the projectors of nation, empire, and the rational market did, according to Blake, was to conventionalize pity and set it to regular work. The good it brought could then be seen as a fortunate by-product of the evil with which it cooperated. This symmetry, of vicious policy with virtuous compensation,
gave a pleasing odor to the poison of heartlessness. The Christian virtue which instructs us to relieve those in adversity is corrupted by the satisfaction it takes in the persistence of misery and the sheer accidents of inequality. No inequality, no pity.

And mutual fear brings peace. Hobbes had thought this a scientific law of politics among individuals ruled by a sovereign—a law that could assure individuals remaining at peace anyway with each other. Blake replies that the passions of love and hate cannot be deployed so mechanically and still assure the negation of their likely effects: the fear to which you become accustomed in one realm, foments cruelty in another. Public life and private morality are in this way not insulated from each other's effects. Cruelty knits his snare even for instincts not initially disposed to cruelty, and it waters them with "holy fears"—the threat to our happiness and our property comes to be seen as a threat to something higher, for which human sacrifice is warranted; a sacrifice we might shrink from offering, but for the conviction that the fears are holy. The final perversion of moral feeling, says Blake, is to cover with humility those acts of collective self-will that involve collective sacrifice. I, too, suffer for the cruelty I commit; I suffer in thinking that others must suffer at my hands; I weep for the fact that I am the chosen instrument of necessary violence; I shed holy tears for torments brought into being by a system that humbles me as it tramples others.

What is lost in this human process of self-justification? The answer is everything Blake means by "The Divine Image"—the title of the poem he wrote as the companion and antithesis of "The Human Abstract." Dignity, magnanimity, every inward relation to the content and consequence of the acts I perform or ratify by an act of will, these are the things that are lost as I dwindle into a tool. That Blake was a believer in nonviolence may be doubted, in view of his poems on the French and American revolutions; but as a moral psychologist, he was of the party of Gandhi and King. He says that resistance to cruelty begins with resistance to oneself. That is the sense of his proverb, "Without contraries is no progression"; and also, "Opposition is true friendship." Actual enemies do
exist, yet perpetual brooding on the identity of friend and enemy is a disease that chokes all roads to self-knowledge. Besides, there is a difference between thinking that some part or aspect of a person is at enmity with my interests, and believing myself possessed of a science so perfect and preemptive that I am forbidden to think about the person and am allowed only to plan his destruction (or what comes to the same thing, his total absorption into my enterprises).

Such deformations of morality come from a love of power that may be indistinguishable, in practice, from the compulsion to be doing something—knowing, conquering, and never letting be. In Orientalism, Edward Said wrote memorably about Flaubert's mockery of the nineteenth-century European dream of total knowledge and the concomitant dream of empire; and he remarked with bafflement the indifference of the ideologists to the botched debris of their dreams: "failed revolutions, wars, oppression." However balked by failure, they kept up their incorrigible "appetite for putting grand, bookish ideas quixotically to work immediately." This craving for immediate effect is essential, also, to the diagnosis of power I have borrowed from the writers on moral imagination. Said went on to say of the achievements of nineteenth-century orientalist scholarship: "What such science or knowledge never reckoned with was its own deeply ingrained and unself-conscious bad innocence and the resistance to it of reality." That is a striking formulation: bad innocence; an innocence that denies reality. How can innocence be bad? Blake would answer, By wishing to perpetuate itself as innocence; by remaining impervious to the intractable particulars of reality. Power, alone, seldom persists in the face of constant contradiction, but, when helped by bad innocence, there is no mischief or wickedness of which it is not capable. The writers in the tradition I have been recalling are all in this sense destroyers of bad innocence.

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My argument rests on an intuition of moral psychology. The aim has been to find a source of resistance to the most elusive of vices, self-deception. And the place to look for self-deception, the writers I
have quoted all agree, is in the texture of human conduct, in our manners or habits of self-regard. But how to guard against the risk of mystifying manners? Why should they be as consequential as these writers say they are? It might seem that manners are themselves often a mask for the real relations of privilege and privation; that they cover more than they disclose; that, when appeased, they produce a semblance of good conscience that excuses the worst oppressions of society. Is it not possible that we conceal from ourselves, precisely through the softening hygiene of manners, the cruelties we ourselves commit? Do we not, by a thoughtless choice of approved relations, absolve ourselves of our crimes against strangers? Complicity in a system of accepted feelings—including the outlets of accepted reform—in this way might be seen to abet our blindness to the actual harm we do.

The criticism is more than plausible. A regime of honest oversight, for example, such as Burke proposed for the British in India, could render the exactions of power all the more insidious. The view that it tends to do so is broadly accepted by recent postcolonial scholars, many of them influenced by Michel Foucault; and the criticism some have offered of Burke's protective warning about men who "marry into your families" can easily be made to undercut Lincoln's warning about our acceptance of the slave owner as a good neighbor. The suggestion that we abate an evil in order to guard ourselves against pollution—this argument from manners, it is said, falsely narrows the culprit; and in that sense, all emphasis on corruptions of manners may lighten the burden of conscience by picturing an evil that is not systemic. And yet Burke and Lincoln impart a constant wariness of the adjustments by which we square a public abuse with ourselves by removing a symptomatic part of its facade. They constantly bring their questions closer to home. On the other hand, the nonmoral critique of moral imagination issues from a reluctance to speak at all of such things as integrity and conscience. This reluctance is premised on the belief that the foundations of social action lie in relations of status and power that are impenetrable by our knowledge of persons.
To grant that premise is to deny that every man and every woman embodies an integral principle, a coherence. But once you begin to regard yourself as an end and think of what it is to constitute yourself, the data of manners appear no longer an affair of the surface but the marrow of conduct: they command interest at every point, and nothing rivals their claim to give substance and stress to experience. A state constitutes itself by a framework of laws, we say; but it does not make itself just as it pleases. It presumes the constitution of the person, the vitality and sustaining presence of individuals who have gone to the work of creating themselves. This stubborn faith accounts for the way that Burke, Lincoln, and Woolf, especially, ask their readers or listeners to put themselves on the line: every gesture, they seem to say, must be tallied and answered for. They would like to hold each person responsible at every moment. They are pointing to a sense in which the casual saying, “The personal is the political,” might turn out to be true and important. In this way they look to reverse a tendency they see in the modern state and society: a tendency to subordinate the individual to a point that leaves every person both impotent and exonerated. As the corrupt Christian pleads, “I sinned, but I can put it off on Jesus,” so the corrupt citizen is tempted to say, “I did not refuse, but my yes was meaningless; it was the system that did it.”

The use of moral imagination as a source of resistance is clearest when one tries to think in opposition to collective enterprises such as the manipulation of sentiments to pump up a war of aggression. The person who sees himself as a doer, sees others, and, a fortiori, other nations as worthy or unworthy objects of his moral will. It is an expansive feeling, quite without the pressure of self-inquiry, and it naturally falls in with expansive policies. Such a person has in view a great civilizing good. The logic of benevolent imposition need not be looked at too closely. The person, on the contrary, who sees himself as both doer and object, who asks what a given act is doing to himself and his neighbors, is less a prey to an imagination heated by proselytism and war. For humanitarian wars and other such projects gather adherents chiefly from an impression that the good they bring
is more than personal. The end of human action becomes a horizon formed by the profiles of the beneficiaries of all our actions; and as we act for them and act again, that horizon continually recedes. Gandhi was speaking against this justification of cruelty by success, this process of self-confirming rationalization, when he asked the “Reader” of his dialogues on Indian Home Rule, *Hind Swaraj*, to resist “the argument that we are justified in gaining our end by using brute force because the English gained theirs by using similar means. It is perfectly true that they used brute force and that it is possible for us to do likewise, but by using similar means we can get only the same thing that they got. You will admit that we do not want that.” Those words may make a credo for all who act from moral imagination. Whether by the ruses of philanthropy, enlightenment, conversion, or war, there is no escaping the question, What shall we be? But even as we ask it, we must admit it to be a weak translation of another question, repeated many times over: Who shall I become?
Notes on Contributors

David Bromwich is Sterling Professor of English at Yale University and the editor of American Sonnets (The Library of America, 2007). His essay in this issue was the Said Memorial Lecture delivered in April 2007 at Columbia University.

Peter Coviello is Associate Professor of English, and Acting Director of the Program in Africana Studies, at Bowdoin College. He is the author of Intimacy in America, and the editor of Walt Whitman’s Civil War memoir Memoranda During the War.

Adam O. Davis works as an editor for an educational publishing company in New York City. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in several journals, including the Paris Review, Western Humanities Review, and Boston Review.

Hilary Fraser holds the Geoffrey Tillotson Chair in Nineteenth-Century Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. Her most recent publications include English Prose of the Nineteenth Century (with Daniel Brown) and Gender and the Victorian Periodical (with Judith Johnston and Stephanie Green). She is currently working on a project titled Gender, History, Visuality: Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century.

Joseph Harrison’s new book, Identity Theft, is being published this spring by the Waywiser Press.


Samuel Menashe’s New and Selected Poems, edited by Christopher Ricks, was published by The Library of America in 2005.