It is a common occurrence in the literature classroom: a student muses aloud that if only Pip would face the facts and get over Estella, or if Dorothea would realize the horrors that await her and refuse to marry Casaubon, or if Angel Clare would just forgive Tess’s past transgressions—if characters in a novel would simply do something other than what they do—then they would avoid the painful events of the novel. Equally common, I imagine, is the professorial response: Pip is not real; Dorothea is not real; Angel is not real. These are not real people and they cannot choose to do something other than what is written on the page.

The tendency for students to relate to a novel’s characters as real people, with real choices and real agency, seems painfully obvious to the practiced scholar. In order to facilitate students’ attempts to analyze a text as a text, we must first break them of the comfortable habit of approaching texts as people.

And yet, aren’t we so often guilty of the same? As easy as it is to spot the facile simplicity of the student who wonders why Jane Eyre doesn’t just fix herself up—a dear friend vividly remembers when, as an undergraduate herself, a fellow student asked that very question in a Victorian literature course, to which the frustrated professor responded in a tone of woe-tinged anger, “Jane Eyre had no hair!”—we fail to recognize the tendency of criticism, especially ethical criticism, to relate to novelistic characters exactly as if they were people. And not simply any people, but people who can teach us important lessons, encourage us to altruistic behavior, and provide cautionary examples of how not to behave; think of Wayne Booth’s description of that “unique value of fiction”: “its relatively cost-free offer of trial runs.” We insist that our students are wrong, that the characters in novels are not people; yet what ethical argument
does not depend on their functioning precisely as other humans?

On a fundamental level, it seems that to deny characters human attributes is to foreclose the possibility of ethical growth. If we cannot relate to the novel or its subjects on a human level, how might we learn the human lessons the novel offers? George Eliot's famous formulation—that art must “enlarge men’s sympathies”—depends on characters standing in for people, functioning for the reader in place of the “others” they may not otherwise come across, doesn’t it?

In this book, I argue that Victorian novels and paintings work hard to disabuse their readers and viewers of this tendency. They do so on two levels: first, they depict the unknowability of the human other. There are distinct limits to knowledge, and the ultimate limit case in the realist work is the human being. Second, these works insist on the distinction—in both form and content—between that unknowability of the person and the knowability of art. Stories can be learned, novels are finite; people, however, are not. These texts and images thus inscribe alterity through their representation of human interaction, and they enact the absence of alterity through their very substance. A reader can know a book, and can know a painting, but the subjects of those books and paintings can never fully know each other.

I do not disagree with the idea that novels teach us how to empathize. Indeed they do. But in this book, I suggest a radical revision of the mode through which that ethical expansion takes place. Art can edify its audience, but we have failed to recognize one mechanism of that edification. Realist art does not make empathy possible by teaching readers what it is like to be another person; it makes empathy possible by teaching us that the alienation that exists between the self and the other cannot be fully overcome, that the alterity of the human other is infinite and permanent. But in that radical, inalterable alterity exists the possibility of ethical engagement.

Perhaps this formulation seems ungenerous. It is human nature to want to overcome a sense of alienation; we want to think that through hard work, we may reach a state of identification leading to sympathy or, better yet, empathy. We have been told for centuries, perhaps most influentially by Adam Smith, that this is how fellow feeling arises. Novels, under that schema, can teach us how to empathize by moving readers through a series of paces: setting up an unfamiliar character who becomes known, possibly endearing, potentially lovable, through the exposure gained by the time and effort required to read the text. This desire explains why a common analogy—that a character in a book, or even a book itself, is like a person—is so very compelling. The complete
knowledge we can have of a novel’s characters fills up the void that must necessarily exist in human interactions. That analogy elides an important distinction, however, between character and person: a character is—to the reader—finite and knowable, but a person is—to another person—ultimately unknowable. And so a novel may depict the realization of alterity between characters, but the same realization cannot exist between a reader and a character.

Part of what I’m saying may seem familiar—others have gestured toward the very limitation that my book is built upon: we cannot know people, but we can know the people in books. E. M. Forster describes this condition with such clarity and precision that his formulation deserves to be quoted:

For human intercourse, as soon as we look at it for its own sake and not as a social adjunct, is seen to be haunted by a spectre. We cannot understand each other, except in a rough and ready way; we cannot reveal ourselves, even when we want to; what we call intimacy is only a makeshift; perfect knowledge is an illusion. But in the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading, we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life. . . . They are people whose secret lives are visible or might be visible: we are people whose secret lives are invisible.

And that is why novels, even when they are about wicked people, can solace us; they suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power.²

What makes a character in a novel realistic, in Forster’s telling, is in fact antithetical to what makes human beings human: a character in a book is real, he writes, “when the novelist knows everything about it,” even if the novelist withholds some of that “everything” from the page.³ That his argument, so clearly rendered, did not forestall decades of ethical criticism insisting on ideas contrary to his demonstrates the concentrated power of the solace he describes. I want to insist steadfastly that to the reader, a novel’s characters are knowable. Only to the other characters within the work are fictional people “others.”

Realist novels depict characters who recognize on some level the ultimate unknowability of another character, and more often they depict those who plow ahead assuming (erroneously) that in fact they do know exactly what the other is thinking and who the other is. Such is the marvelous faculty of the omniscient narrator or the multiplot structure that
those formal qualities of the book can lay bare the gulf of alterity to the 
reader, even though the characters within may remain ignorant. Tertius 
Lydgate might think he knows Rosamond Vincy, but we readers know 
better.

There are two levels of knowledge, then, presented by these works: 
the limited knowledge shared by the subjects of art, and the comprehen-
sive knowledge available to the audience. Where we (the audience) get 
muddled—to borrow Forster’s word—is in the confusing of the two. The 
lesson of Victorian realism is that we cannot know the other, and since 
that lesson applies only to the human other, the means of pedagogy— 
the book, the painting—must be safe from presumptions of alterity. But 
the impulse to view artworks as analogous to people is strong, as is our 
belief that identifying with or knowing the other is essential to empathic 
or ethical extension. To counter the strength of that desire, I call upon 
the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who gives language to the idea that 
acknowledging alterity, and not overcoming it, is ethics. His phenom-
enology reframes the apperception of alterity not as an obstacle but 
rather as the very means to interpersonal ethics. Essential to Levinas’s 
formulation is the denial of the book-to-person analogy, as any work of 
art is fungible and ultimately knowable.

It is indeed problematic for humans living together to treat other 
people as if they were books: knowable, fungible. But for the literary 
critic, at least, and I would argue for any engaged reader, the inverse of 
the analogy is equally troublesome. When we treat artworks as human— 
when we insist that the art object can and should function as the other— 
we miss the point that these works are at pains to make. We can know 
the subjects of art precisely because they are subjects of art. The nonhu-
man-ness of the novel or painting is what gives us the tantalizing feeling 
that we have access to a person in a way that, in reality, we lack.