I end this study with moments from two very different novels, one an exemplary Romantic text, Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), and the other an exemplary realist text, George Eliot’s *Middle-march* (1871–72). The contrast between these works throws into relief a distinction threatened by the reductive definitions that have come to plague realism and, indeed, Romanticism, definitions that set the objectivity and comprehensiveness of realism in opposition to the emotional subjectivity of Romanticism. In the preface to *Werther*, Goethe prepares his readers for the story that is to follow. He adopts the tone of a mere editor who has collected Werther’s letters; who cares deeply about the novel’s subject; and who expects readers to share a uniform, predictable, emotional response to the novel:

I have carefully collected whatever I have been able to learn of the story of poor Werther, and here present it to you, knowing that you will thank me for it. To his spirit and character you cannot refuse your admiration and love: to his fate you will not deny your tears.

And thou, good soul, who sufferest the same distress as he endured once, draw comfort from his sorrows; and let this little book be thy friend, if, owing to fortune or through thine own fault, thou canst not find a dearer companion.¹

Goethe enfolds the reader into the story by declaring the value of Werther’s “spirit and character” and positioning the reader as admirer and friend. In addition to framing the reader’s relationship to Werther, the preface also frames the reader’s relationship to the novel. “The little
book” itself can function as a friend to the reader, in moments when the reader is in need.

The novel’s structure works hard to enact the relationships detailed in this preface. With its one-sided epistolary form, The Sorrows of Young Werther situates its reader as the recipient of Werther’s letters, and Werther addresses the reader as “dear friend” in the first lines of the first letter. Further, Werther’s narrative focuses almost exclusively on his interactions with others; he falls in love, he endears himself to the locals, he offends his employer, he goes mad when his love rejects him. When he believes he has lost the relationships that were most important to him, and feeling himself quite alone, Werther commits suicide. The Sorrows of Young Werther ends with his lonely burial, and the novel’s last, stark line reads “No clergyman attended.”

One hundred years later, George Eliot opens Middlemarch with a prelude in which she describes her heroine Dorothea Brooke in terms of what she is not: no Saint Theresa, defined by indefiniteness, “foundress of nothing.” Not only is there no “coherent social faith and order” in which women such as Dorothea could locate an outlet for their yearnings and ambitions, there is no community of friends to which they belong: “a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind.” The central figure is introduced not as a heroine to be admired or loved, but rather as an odd creature, out of place in her own time, and lost among a sea of others who bear no resemblance to her.

Middlemarch ends, as it begins, considering Dorothea’s relation to the world and those around her:

Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (838)

In Eliot’s construction, the “hidden life” and “unvisited tomb” are not signs of rejection, alienation, or abandonment. Rather, they are a necessary consequence of the realities of a social order that is not ideally suited to the temperament and desire of every individual. And still, in spite of or perhaps because of the mysteries that define human existence,
the effect of an individual on those around her is incalculable, diffuse. Dorothea might not be a celebrated martyr, but the “growing good of the world” depends on the unknown acts of Dorothea and those like her.

For Goethe’s novel presumes a universal response to its content, and it affects so thorough a portrait of an individual that merely reading his letters can serve as the basis of friendship. Eliot’s novel, on the other hand, asserts from beginning to end the strangeness of Dorothea, a woman who does not even know herself fully. And so in a narrative of infinitely greater complexity and length than *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Eliot frames *Middlemarch* by reminding readers not what they know or what they will know, but rather what they do not know and cannot know. This is the work of realism: to describe alterity through the recognition, representation, and reification of the limits of the self. The unknowable other serves to check the expansive knowledge of the external world that is the other central concern of the realist enterprise.

Indeed, the vast historical and stylistic differences between the works (and there are many) do not overwhelm the shift in conception of the relationship between the individual and the other, or between the book and the reader, evident in these novels. Goethe defines the relationship between reader and text as one of identification and admiration. We will admire and love Werther; we will feel his pain. The text that tells his story will be our companion in loneliness, itself a friend. And though no clergyman attends Werther’s funeral, and though his suicide is intended to pain those who were his friends by completing a long cycle of attraction and repulsion, we readers are there at his burial, faithful to the end of the narrative. *Werther* thus demonstrates—perhaps unintentionally—the precarious separation between identification and empathy. If we feel all of Werther’s feelings with him, if we experience his joy and his sorrow, how can we distinguish our joy or pain from his? When are we being empathic toward the radical other, and when are we simply being aware of our own feelings?

Eliot uses a prelude and finale to structure her insistence not on identification but rather on mystery, diffuseness, and the hidden. Dorothea’s is a story of not fitting in; her assumptions even about herself are constantly assailed. If Dorothea can’t know herself, could the book claim to know her? Could its readers? Eliot escapes from this potential bind by foregrounding the lack of knowledge and uncertainty of situation that defines Dorothea’s life. Eliot places that uncertainty at the center of the novel, and what results is a generous vision of the unknown and unremarkable. The beauty of the hidden life and unvisited tomb is precisely that we may never know exactly the greatness of the impact of
those lives. And in that recognition of a true alterity exists the space for empathic extension.

The goal of this study was to establish the ways that alterity arises in realist texts and images, and to consider how depictions of unique individuals test the limits of representation. I have further attempted to work through the tension that underpins the realist project: how empathic extension can occur in light of those limitations. If we recognize that the radical alterity of the other is a feature of lived experience, it becomes clear that realists’ strategies for representing the unknowability of the other do not undermine their project but rather enhance it. By emphasizing the impossibility of knowing a character purely by knowing her story, and the impossibility of regarding the novel or the painting as an other, realists break away from the literary and pictorial traditions that preceded their own. This condition of not knowing the other does not damn the individual to a life of solitude or misery, a fact that distinguishes realism from other movements that follow. Perhaps it took Levinas to articulate a vocabulary that could account for both the ethical imperative that drives the realist project and the insistence on the limitations of representation that define its aesthetics. His descriptions of intersubjectivity construct the relationship between the self and the other as one of insurmountable difference, yet he asserts that the potential for an ethical engagement with the other exists in and only in the recognition of that difference: the lesson of realism that we might come to know is that we can never fully come to know the human other. Realist works temper the starkness of radical and insurmountable alterity with the awareness that such recognition requires work, which is itself edifying. Learning to read realist novels and paintings depends on the realization that we might never know the other fully, but that as a consequence of that inherent mystery, “things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been.”