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What does it mean to recognize oneself in a book? The experience seems at once utterly mundane yet singularly mysterious. While turning a page I am arrested by a compelling description, a constellation of events, a conversation between characters, an interior monologue. Suddenly and without warning, a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader; an affinity or an attunement is brought to light. I may be looking for such a moment, or I may stumble on it haphazardly, startled by the prescience of a certain combination of words. In either case, I feel myself addressed, summoned, called to account: I cannot help seeing traces of myself in the pages I am reading. Indisputably, something has changed; my perspective has shifted; I see something that I did not see before.

Novels yield up manifold descriptions of such moments of readjustment, as fictional readers are wrenched out of their circumstances by the force of written words. Think of Thomas Buddenbrook opening up the work of Schopenhauer and being intoxicated by a system of ideas that casts his life in a bewildering new light. Or Stephen Gordon, in *The Well of Loneliness*, stunned to discover that her desire to be a man and love a woman is not without precedent after stumbling across the works of Krafft-Ebing in her father's library. Such episodes show readers becoming absorbed in scripts that confound their sense of who and what they are. They come to see themselves differently by gazing outward rather than inward, by deciphering ink marks on a page.

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Often it is a work of fiction that triggers fervent self-scrutiny. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* describes Dorian's infatuation with a book that is usually assumed to be J. K. Huysman's decadent manifesto, *Against Nature*. "The hero, the wonderful young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it."<sup>1</sup> Here recognition is not retrospective but anticipatory: the fictional work foreshadows what Dorian will become, the potential that lies dormant but has not yet come to light. And a hundred years later, the young narrator of Pankaj Mishra's novel *The Romantics*, a student living in Benares, develops an obsession with Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, noting that "the protagonist, Frédéric Moreau, seemed to mirror my own self-image with his large, passionate, but imprecise longings, his indecisiveness, his aimlessness, his self-contempt."<sup>2</sup> Interleaving Flaubert's words with his own, Mishra writes back to those who would indict canonical texts for turning Indians into would-be Europeans, suggesting that a more intricate and multi-layered encounter is taking place.

These vignettes of recognition, to be sure, are plucked from disparate, even disjunctive, literary worlds. *The Well of Loneliness* leaves its readers in no doubt that a momentous discovery has taken place; whatever our view of sexology, we are asked to believe that Stephen Gordon has arrived at a crucial insight about her place in the world. An impasse has been breached, something has been laid bare, a truth has been uncovered. Elsewhere, the moment of recognition is so thickly leavened with irony as to leave us uncertain whether self-knowledge has been gained or lost. Does Dorian come to fathom something of his deepest inclinations and desires, or is he simply seduced by the glamor of a fashionable book, lured into imitating an imitation in an endless hall of mirrors? Surely this particular moment of self-apprehension is thorough qualified by Wilde's own leanings towards theatricality and artifice, his rendering of Dorian as a pastiche of the desires and words of others. And yet, if we, as readers, are made aware of a more general impressionability and susceptibility to imitation

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through Dorian's response, has an act of recognition not nevertheless taken place?

Taken together, these examples point to the perplexing and paradoxical nature of recognition. Simultaneously reassuring and unnerving, it brings together likeness and difference in one fell swoop. When we recognize something, we literally "know it again"; we make sense of what is unfamiliar by fitting it into an existing scheme, linking it to what we already know. Yet, as Gadamer points out, "the joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar."<sup>3</sup> Recognition is not repetition; it denotes not just the previously known, but the becoming known. Something that may have been sensed in a vague, diffuse, or semi-conscious way now takes on a distinct shape, is amplified, heightened, or made newly visible. In a mobile interplay of exteriority and interiority, something that exists outside of me inspires a revised or altered sense of who I am.

That the novel should brood over its own effects is far from surprising, given its intimate and intricate implication in the history of the self. One of its most persistent plots describes a hero launching himself on a process of self-exploration while puzzling over what shape and form his life should take. For Charles Taylor and Anthony Giddens, this idea of selfhood as an unfolding and open-ended project, what Taylor calls the impulse toward self-fashioning, crystallizes a distinctively modern sense of identity. Cut loose from the bonds of tradition and rigid social hierarchies, individuals are called to the burdensome freedom of choreographing their life and endowing it with a purpose. As selfhood becomes self-reflexive, literature comes to assume a crucial role in exploring what it means to be a person. The novel, especially, embraces a heightened psychological awareness, meditating on the murky depths of motive and desire, seeking to map the elusive currents and by-ways of consciousness, highlighting countless connections and conflicts between self-determination and socialization. Depicting characters engaged in introspection and soul-searching, it encourages its readers to engage in similar acts of self-scrutiny. It speaks to a distinctively modern sense of individuality – what one critic calls improvisational subjectivity – yet

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this very conviction of personal uniqueness and interior depth is infused by the ideas of others.<sup>4</sup> One learns how to be oneself by taking one's cue from others who are doing the same. From the tormented effusions of young Werther to the elegiac reflections of Mrs. Dalloway, the novel spins out endless modulations on the theme of subjectivity.

Cultural history as well as casual conversation suggest that recognition is a common event while reading and a powerful motive for reading. Proust famously observes that

every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have experienced in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity.<sup>5</sup>

This coupling of reading with self-scrutiny has acquired renewed vigor and intensity in recent decades, as women and minorities found literature an especially pertinent medium for parsing the complexities of personhood. And yet, even as recognition pervades practices of reading and interpretation, theoretical engagement with recognition is hedged round with prohibitions and taboos, often spurned as unseemly, even shameful, seen as the equivalent of a suicidal plunge into unprofessional naïveté. Isn't it the ultimate form of narcissism to think that a book is really about me? Isn't there something excruciatingly self-serving about reading a literary work as an allegory of one's own dilemmas and personal difficulties? And don't we risk trivializing and limiting the realm of art once we start turning texts into mirrors of ourselves?

This wariness of recognition has been boosted by the recent impact of Levinas on literary studies. As an advocate of otherness, Levinas warns against the hubris of thinking that we can ultimately come to understand that which is different or strange. Ethics means accepting the mysteriousness of the other, its resistance to conceptual schemes; it means learning to relinquish our own desire to know. Seeking to link a literary work to one's own life is a threat to its irreducible

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singularity. For theorists weaned on the language of alterity and difference, the mere mention of recognition is likely to inspire raised eyebrows. To recognize is not just to trivialize but also to colonize; it is a sign of narcissistic self-duplication, a scandalous solipsism, an imperious expansion of a subjectivity that seeks to appropriate otherness by turning everything into a version of itself.

If the idea of recognition is acknowledged at all in literary theory, it is to be alchemized – via the reagent of Lacan or Althusser – into a state of misrecognition. We owe to these thinkers two celebrated fables of self-deception. Lacan’s essay on the mirror stage conjures up the scenario of a small child gazing into the mirror, mesmerized by his own image. Thanks to the reflecting power of a glass surface – or the encouraging, imitative gestures of the mother-as-mirror – he comes to acquire a nascent sense of self. What was previously inchoate starts to coalesce into a unity as the child realizes that he is that image reflected back by the sheen of the mirror. Yet this moment of recognition is illusory, the first of many such moments of misapprehension. Not only does the image of the self originate outside the self, but the seemingly substantial figure that looks back from the mirror belies the void that lies at the heart of identity. Lacan’s subject is essentially hollow, a spectral figure that epitomizes the sheer impossibility of ever knowing the self.

For Althusser, the seminal instance of misrecognition takes place on the street, at the moment of what he calls interpellation or hailing. As I am walking along, I hear a police officer calling out “hey, you there!” somewhere behind me. In the very act of turning around, of feeling myself addressed by this generic summons, I am created as a subject. I acknowledge my existence as an individual, as someone bound by the law. To recognize oneself as a subject is to thus to accede to one’s own subjection; the self believes itself to be free yet is everywhere in chains. One’s personhood has a sheer obviousness about it as a self-evident reality that demands to be recognized. Yet this very obviousness renders it the essence of ideology, the quintessential means by which politics does its work. It is via the snare of a fictional subjectivity that individuals are folded into the state apparatus and rendered acquiescent to the status quo.

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Over the last thirty years these modest anecdotes have acquired the status of premonitory parables underscoring the illusoriness of self-knowledge. Whether the work of fiction is analogous to the mirror or the police, it seeks to lull readers into a misapprehension of their existence as unified, autonomous individuals. Storytelling and the aesthetics of realism are deeply implicated in this process of misrecognition because identifying with characters is a key mechanism through which we are drawn into believing in the essential reality of persons. The role of criticism is to interrogate such fictions of selfhood; the political quiescence built into the structure of recognition must give way to a slash-and-burn interrogation of the notion of identity. Here we see the hermeneutics of suspicion cranked up to its highest level in the conviction that our everyday intuitions about persons are mystified all the way down.

That acts of misrecognition occur is not, of course, open to dispute. Who would want to deny that people deceive themselves as to their own desires or interests, that we frequently misjudge exactly who or what we are? Literary texts often serve as comprehensive compendia of such moments of fallibility, underscoring the sheer impossibility of self-transparency. Tragedy is a genre famously preoccupied with documenting the catastrophic consequences of failing to know oneself or others. And what are the novels of Austen, Eliot, or James if not testimonies to the excruciating ubiquity of misperception and false apprehension? Yet the idea of misrecognition presumes and enfolds its antithesis. In the sheer force of its judgment, it implies that a less flawed perception can be attained, that our assessments can be scrutinized and found wanting. If self-deception is hailed as the inescapable ground of subjectivity, however, it is evacuated of all critical purchase and diagnostic force, leaving us with no means of making distinctions or of gauging incremental changes in understanding. Moreover, the critic soon becomes embroiled in a version of the Cretan liar paradox. If we are barred from achieving insight or self-understanding, how could we know that an act of misrecognition had taken place? The critique of recognition, in this respect, reveals an endemic failure to face up to the normative commitments underpinning its own premises.

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While recognition has received a drubbing in English departments, its fortunes have risen spectacularly in other venues. Political theorists are currently hailing recognition as a keyword of our time, a galvanizing idea that is generating new frameworks for debating the import and impact of struggles for social justice. Nancy Fraser's well-known thesis, for example, contrasts a cultural politics of recognition organized around differences of gender, race, and sexuality, to a goal of economic redistribution that defined the goals of traditional socialism. Feminism, gay and lesbian activism, and the aspirations of racial and ethnic minorities towards self-determination serve as especially visible examples of such demands for public acknowledgment. For Axel Honneth, by contrast, the search for recognition is not a new constellation driven by the demands of social movements but an anthropological constant, a defining feature of what it means to become a person that assumes multifarious cultural and political guises. Recognition, he proposes, offers a key to understanding all kinds of social inequities and struggles for self-realization, including those steered by class. What literary studies can take from these debates is their framing of recognition in terms other than gullibility. Political theory does justice to our everyday intuition that recognition is not just an error or an ensnarement, that it is, in Charles Taylor's words, a "vital human need."<sup>6</sup>

I need, at this point, to address a potential objection to the drift of my argument. Recognition, in the sense I've been using it so far, refers to a cognitive insight, a moment of knowing or knowing again. Specifically, I have been puzzling over what it means to say, as people not infrequently do, that I know myself better after reading a book. The ideas at play here have to do with comprehension, insight, and self-understanding. (That recognition is cognitive does not mean that it is purely cognitive, of course; moments of self-apprehension can trigger a spectrum of emotional reactions shading from delight to discomfort, from joy to chagrin.) When political theorists talk about recognition, however, they mean something else: not knowledge, but acknowledgment. Here the claim for recognition is a claim for acknowledgment, dignity and inclusion in public life. Its force is ethical rather than epistemic, a call for justice

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rather than a claim to truth. Moreover, recognition in reading revolves around a moment of personal illumination and heightened self-understanding; recognition in politics involves a demand for public acceptance and validation. The former is directed toward the self, the latter toward others, such that the two meanings of the term would seem to be entirely at odds.

Yet this distinction is far from being a dichotomy; the question of knowledge is deeply entangled in practices of acknowledgment. Stanley Cavell is fond of driving home this point in an alternate idiom: what it really means to know other people has less to do with questions of epistemological certainty than with the strength of our personal commitments. So, too, our sense of who we are is embedded in our diverse ways of being in the world and our sense of attunement or conflict with others. That this self is “socially constructed” – indisputably, we can only live our lives through the cultural resources that are available to us – does not render it any less salient: there is no meaningful sense in which we can, on a routine basis, suspend belief in our own selfhood. From such a perspective, the language game of skepticism runs up against its intrinsic limits: in Wittgenstein’s well-known phrase, “doubting has an end.”<sup>7</sup> We make little headway in grasping the ramifications of our embeddedness in the world if we remain fixated on the question of epistemic certainty or its absence.

The reasons for disciplinary disagreement on the merits of recognition are not especially hard to fathom. While political theories of recognition trace their roots back to Hegel, literary studies has been shaped by a strong strand of anti-Hegelianism in twentieth-century French thought. In this latter tradition, recognition is commonly chastised for its complicity with a logic of appropriation and a totalitarian desire for sameness. Yet such judgments conspicuously fail to do justice to its conceptual many-sidedness and suppleness, while neglecting the dialogic and non-identitarian dimensions of recognition, as anchored in intersubjective relations that precede subjectivity. The capacity for self-consciousness, for taking oneself as the object of one’s own thought, is only made possible by an encounter with otherness. Recognition thus presumes difference rather than

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excluding it, constituting a fundamental condition for the formation of identity.<sup>8</sup> Insofar as selfhood arises via relation to others, self-knowledge and acknowledgment are closely intertwined. Thus theorists of intersubjectivity do not react with disappointment or distress to the news that the self is socially constituted rather than autotelic, nor do they decry such a socially created self as illusory or fictive. Rather than seeing the idea of selfhood as an epistemological error spawned by structures of ideology or discourse, they insist on the primacy of interpersonal relations in the creation of persons. We are fundamentally social creatures whose survival and well-being depend on our interactions with particular, embodied, others. The other is not a limit but a condition for selfhood.

It goes without saying that such relations between persons are filtered through the mesh of linguistic structures and cultural traditions. The I and the Thou never face each other naked and unadorned. When we speak to each other, our words are hand-me-downs, well-worn tokens used by countless others before us, the detritus of endless myths and movies, poetry anthologies and political speeches. Our language is stuffed thick with figures, larded with metaphors, encrusted with layers of meaning that escape us. While selfhood is dialogic, dialogue should not be confused with harmony, symmetry, or perfect understanding. Here we can take on board Chantal Mouffe's insistence that social relations cannot be cleansed of conflict or antagonism, and Judith Butler's claim that the Hegelian model of recognition is ultimately driven by division and self-loss.<sup>9</sup> Recognition is far from synonymous with reconciliation.

Yet structures that constrain also sustain; the beliefs and traditions that envelop us are a source of meaning as well as mystification. The words of the past acquire a new luster as we polish and refurbish them in our many interactions. Language is not always and only a symbol of alienation and division, but serves as a source "of mutual experiences of meaning that had been unknown before and could never have existed until fashioned by words."<sup>10</sup> While we never own language, we are able to borrow it and bend it to our purposes, even as aspects of what we say will continue to elude us. We are embodied and embedded beings who use and are used by words. Even as we

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know ourselves to be shaped by language, we can reflect on our own shaping, and modify aspects of our acting and being in the world. Rather than blocking self-knowledge, language is our primary means of attaining it, however partial and flawed our attempts at understanding ourselves and others must be. We live in what Charles Taylor calls webs of interlocution; struggling to define ourselves with and against others, we acquire the capacity for reflection and self-reflection.

How do such broad-brush reflections on recognition and intersubjectivity pertain to the specific concerns of literary studies? Literary texts invite disparate forms of recognition, serving as an ideal laboratory for probing its experiential and aesthetic complexities. Conceiving of books as persons and the act of reading as a face-to-face encounter, however, are analogies that can only lead us astray. Texts cannot think, feel, or act; if they have any impact on the world, they do so via the intercession of those who read them. And yet, while books are not subjects, they are not just objects, not simply random things stranded among countless other things. Bristling with meaning, layered with resonance, they come before us as multi-layered symbols of beliefs and values; they stand for something larger than themselves. While we do not usually mistake books for persons, we often think of them as conveying the attitudes of persons, as upholding or questioning larger ideas and collective ways of thinking.

Reading, in this sense, is akin to an encounter with a generalized other, in the phrase made famous by G. H. Mead. Like other theorists of intersubjectivity, Mead argues that the formation of the self involves all kinds of messy entanglements, such that no “hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others.”<sup>11</sup> It is only by internalizing the expectations of these others that we come to acquire a sense of individuality and interior depth, or, indeed, to look askance at the very norms and values that formed us. We cannot learn the language of self-definition on our own. The idea of the generalized other is a way of describing this broader collectivity or collectivities with which we affiliate ourselves. It is not so much a real entity as an imaginary projection –

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a conception of how others view us – that affects our actions as well as the stories we tell about ourselves. It denotes our first-person relationship to the social imaginary, the heterogeneous repertoire of stories, histories, beliefs, and ideals that frame and inform our individual histories.

Under what conditions does literature come to play a mediating role in this drama of self-formation? Often, it seems, when other forms of acknowledgment are felt to be lacking, when one feels estranged from or at odds with one's immediate milieu. Reflecting on her own passion for fiction, feminist critic Suzanne Juhasz writes: "I am lonelier in the real world situation . . . when no one seems to understand *who I am* – than by myself reading, when I feel that the book *recognizes* me, and I recognize myself because of the book."<sup>12</sup> Reading may offer a solace and relief not to be found elsewhere, confirming that I am not entirely alone, that there are others who think or feel like me. Through this experience of affiliation, I feel myself acknowledged; I am rescued from the fear of invisibility, from the terror of not being seen. Such moments of recognition, moreover, are not restricted to private or solitary reading; they resonate with special force when individuals come together to form a collective audience for a play or a film. Aesthetic experience crystallizes an awareness of forming part of a broader community.

A historical instance of such knowledge/acknowledgment can elucidate the theoretical point. When Ibsen's plays were first performed in England in the 1880s and 1890s, they were often staged in matinee shows catering to a largely female audience. Contemporary journalists spoke with a certain condescension of the peculiar habits of this public (its love of large hats, its habit of munching chocolate during the performance), yet they were also struck by the intensity of its involvement. Women, it seems, were prone to recognize themselves in Ibsen's work. Here is Elizabeth Robins, the well-known Ibsen actress, reacting to negative reviews of *Hedda Gabler*, a play that she was instrumental in bringing to the stage:

Mr. Clement Scott understand Hedda? – any man except that wizard Ibsen really understand her? Of course not. That was the

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tremendous part of it. How should men understand Hedda on the stage when they didn't understand her in the persons of their wives, their daughters, their women friends? One lady of our acquaintance, married and not noticeably unhappy, said laughing, "Hedda is all of us."<sup>13</sup>

What should we make of this ordinary, quite unexceptional anecdote? Among literary theorists, the usual language for explaining such sparks of affiliation is identification, a term that is, however, notoriously imprecise and elastic, blurring together distinct, even disparate, phenomena. Identification can denote a formal *alignment* with a character, as encouraged by techniques of focalization, point of view, or narrative structure, while also referencing an experiential *allegiance* with a character, as manifested in a felt sense of affinity or attachment. Critiques of identification tend to conflate these issues, assuming that readers formally aligned with a fictional persona cannot help but swallow the ideologies represented by that persona wholesale. Identification thus guarantees interpellation. In reality, the relations between such structural alignments and our intellectual or affective response are far from predictable; not only do readers vary considerably in their evaluations and attachments, but texts contain countless instances of unsympathetic protagonists or unreliable narrators whose perspective we are unlikely to take on trust.<sup>14</sup>

On those occasions when we experience a surge of affinity with a fictional character, moreover, the catch-all concept of identification is of little help in distinguishing between the divergent mental processes that come into play. In one possible scenario – what we might call the Madame Bovary syndrome – a reader's self-awareness is swallowed up by her intense affiliation with an imaginary persona, an affiliation that involves a temporary relinquishing of reflective and analytical consciousness. Readerly attachment takes the form of a cathexis onto idealized figures who are often treasured for their very remoteness and distance, for facilitating an escape or release from one's everyday existence. It is their very dissimilarity that is the source of their desirability. Immersed in the virtual reality of a fictional text, a reader feels herself to be transported, caught up, or

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swept away. I examine this condition of rapturous self-forgetting under the rubric of enchantment.

Another experience of reading, however, points back to the reader's consciousness rather than away from it, engendering a phenomenology of self-scrutiny rather than self-loss. A fictional persona serves as a prism that refracts a revised or altered understanding of a reader's sense of who she is. The experience of self-recognition and heightened self-awareness is routed through an aesthetic medium; to see oneself as Hedda Gabler is in some sense to see oneself anew. In saying "Hedda is all of us," a woman comes to name herself differently, to look at herself in a changed light, to draw on a new vocabulary of self-description. Here an alignment with a fictional character sets into motion an interplay of self-knowledge and acknowledgment, an affiliation that is accompanied by a powerful cognitive readjustment. The idiom of identification, in other words, is poorly equipped to distinguish between the variable epistemic and experiential registers of reader involvement.<sup>15</sup>

A second striking aspect of the Robins quotation is its announcement of a plural voice, an "us" or "we." The context makes it clear that this commonality falls along the lines of gender, that the "we" being invoked is female. The claim that Hedda is "all of us" suggests that Ibsen's play speaks especially strongly to women by addressing their condition. Indeed, what the female audience recognizes in Hedda, according to Robins, is its own experience of misrecognition, of not being known. Just as Ibsen's male characters have no inkling of Hedda's motives and desires; just as the male audience members fail to get Hedda and to take her part as a dramatic character; so the women in the audience are similarly misunderstood by their husbands, fathers and friends. There is a structural symmetry between text and world that brings to light a shared gender asymmetry.

Let me leave aside, for now, the merits of the claim that men cannot understand Hedda and that women inevitably do so (I will come back to this question). What is noteworthy is how this passing remark brings together the two facets of recognition I have outlined. It gives voice to a sense of illumination, a moment of self-reckoning triggered by an aesthetic encounter (Ibsen's play speaks to me, the

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character of Hedda tells me something about my life). At the same time, it also advances an ethical and political claim for acknowledgment (Ibsen's play highlights a broader injustice, it deals with the unequal condition of women, their failure to be acknowledged as full persons). The moment of self-consciousness, of individual insight, is simultaneously a social diagnosis and an ethical judgment; a response to a work of art interfuses personal and public worlds; the desire for knowledge and the demand for acknowledgment are folded together.

To a degree that is sometimes forgotten today, Ibsen was closely identified in his lifetime with the suffragette movement and testimonies to the transformative power of his plays were fulsome and frequent. In the words of one actress: "his women are at work now in the world, interpreting women to themselves, helping to make the women of the future. He has peopled a whole new world."<sup>16</sup> There is no evidence that the "Hey you!" that emanated from *Hedda Gabler*, the moment of being buttonholed or interpellated by a text, lulled its audience into complacency or apathy. Ibsen's play highlights a failure of recognition, as those around Hedda seek to impose upon her familiar schemata of femininity – the radiant newly-wed, the joyful expectant mother, the femme fatale – that she protests with every pore of her being. And at least some members of its female audience recognized themselves in Hedda's plight and were brought to see the world differently.

The reception of Ibsen hardly squares with claims that realism sways its audience into acquiescence with the status quo, even as theorists who condemn its purported naïveté fail to do justice to the aesthetic self-consciousness of many realist writers. Such self-consciousness is especially apparent in the case of Ibsen, whose work repeatedly draws attention to the opacity and recalcitrance of language. Much of the action of *Hedda Gabler* takes place below the surface, in the resonance of verbal tone, gesture, and silence, in the enigmatic expressiveness of the non-said. There is a patent theatricality in the way Hedda stages her existence as a dramatic performance, an artful manipulation that leaves her underlying desires and motives obscured. "She controls herself completely," observes Lou

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Andreas-Salomé, “and is an all-hardened surface, a deceptive shell, a mask prepared for every occasion.”<sup>17</sup> With a nod to Cavell, we might describe *Hedda Gabler* as a tragedy of an unknown woman, with the proviso that Hedda wants not to be known by a man but rather to know like a man, to break free of the sheltering constraints of feminine innocence and ignorance.

It is also hard to see how realism can be accused of sustaining the fiction of autonomous selves when it embeds its characters so relentlessly in habitat and milieu. Ibsen, for example, enmeshes his characters in circumstances that shape them all the way down. Hedda’s sense of alienation from her milieu, her knife-sharp irritation with the kindly fussiness of her husband and Aunt Julie, springs from an aristocratic upbringing that impels her to view her marriage as a slide into middle-class provincial drabness. Yet Ibsen also attends to the failures of interpellation, the clash of ideologies and worldviews, those instances when people turn away from the norms of selfhood held out to them, or seek to configure them differently.

What, however, should we make of the afore-mentioned claim that only women could understand Hedda while men were unable to do so? This claim will seem highly contestable, if not downright reprehensible, to several groups of critics. It cannot help but stick in the craw of those who insist on the disruptive and defamiliarizing qualities of aesthetic experience, for whom any impulse toward recognition must be strenuously resisted. Yet such a comment gives equal offense to the traditional humanist credo that great art speaks equally to everyone, by scissoring responses to Ibsen’s play so emphatically along gender lines. Contemporary feminists are also likely to take issue with a gender essentialism that overlooks the fracturing of female identity by race, class, and other divisions. A passing remark thus leads us into a thicket of questions about the phenomenology of interpretation. When one recognizes oneself in a novel, a play or a film, what quality, property, or phenomenon is being recognized?

We need, first of all, to come to terms with the fact that we cannot help linking what we read, at least in part, to what we know. The current mantra of otherness insists that we can wrest ourselves

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free of our ingrained frameworks of reference, only to underscore the tenacious hold of such frameworks. Sarah Ahmed drives home this point when she questions the possibility of an ontology of strangeness, of an encounter with pure alterity. The stranger, she observes, is always already a symbol, a marker of distinction, a freighted term within a cultural and political history that deems certain persons to be more foreign, more alien than others. As Ahmed points out, “the stranger is produced not as that which we fail to recognize, but as that which we have already recognized as ‘a stranger’.”<sup>18</sup> The point holds equally for testimonies to the otherness of literary texts; even as critics pay tribute to a work’s radical singularity, they echo ingrained ideas about the ineffability and untranslatability of literature that stretch all the way back to Romanticism via Cleanth Brooks. Literary otherness is identified via a thoroughly familiar set of critical maneuvers and classifications.

This is not at all to deny that art can be a source of surprise or wonder, but to restate the rudimentary point that otherness and sameness are interfused aspects of aesthetic response, not alternate buttons one can push. Innovation and familiarity are, as Ricoeur points out, inextricably intertwined; the perception of certain phenomena as other, new, or strange depends on, and is shaped by, a prior conception of what is already known. In this regard, a notably melodramatic quality clings to the mantra of “sameness bad, difference good” echoing through much contemporary theory. “Melodramatic” tenders itself as an apposite adjective in this context, given melodrama’s propensity for organizing the world in terms of Manichean moral schemes. Philosophical terms, however, do not carry their effects stamped on them in indelible ink, and the ethical and political consequences of attending to sameness or difference are far from predetermined.

If reading cannot help but involve moments of recognition, the question we face is not how to avoid such readings, but what forms they might take. In one possible scenario, recognition is triggered by a perception of direct similarity or likeness, as we encounter something that slots into a clearly identifiable scheme of things. It was by chance that I stumbled across Hilary Mantel’s novel *An Experiment*

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*in Love*, only to be floored by the shock of the familiar. In Mantel's account of a Catholic girl growing up in a grimy northern English town and winning a scholarship to an elite grammar school, I found a history unnervingly close to my own. Not having lived in England for several decades, the jolt of recognition was especially intense. Mantel's book brought back memories of things long forgotten: dolly mixture; free school milk; *Judy* and *Bunty* comics; elderly women pushing shopping baskets on wheels; particular English phrases ("giving cheek"); processed peas; mothers who used to clean their children's faces by spitting on their handkerchiefs; the baroque uniforms and accouterments of English upper-class schools (Aertex blouse, gym tunic, winter skirt, school tie, blazer, shoe bag, indoor shoes, outdoor shoes . . .).

Let me call this moment one of *self-intensification*. It is typically triggered by a skillful rendition of the densely packed minutiae of daily life: evocative smells and sounds, familiar objects and everyday things, ordinary routines, ways of talking or passing time, a reservoir of shared references from religious rituals to popular jokes to the TV shows of a certain decade. Even as we know full well that we are reading a work of fiction steered by the internal pressures of form and genre, we can be nonplussed by the clarity with which a form of life is captured. Recognizing aspects of ourselves in the description of others, seeing our perceptions and behaviors echoed in a work of fiction, we become aware of our accumulated experiences as distinctive yet far from unique. The contemporary idiom of "having an identity" owes a great deal to such flashes of intersubjective recognition, of perceived commonality and shared history. It is not especially surprising, then, that the writing and reading of fiction has often fueled the momentum of social movements.<sup>19</sup>

Recognition may however also take the form of what I call *self-extension*, of coming to see aspects of oneself in what seems distant or strange. When the narrator of Mishra's *The Romantics* reflects on the resonance of *Sentimental Education*, that resonance does not hinge on direct resemblance, on a commonality of cultural and historical context. Indeed, at first glance, Benares in 1989, with its crumbling buildings, bathing ghats, hordes of pilgrims, and kaleidoscope of

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colors, seems a world away from the nineteenth-century French capital of Flaubert's novel. With the patience of a micro-surgeon, Mishra pinpoints the endless misapprehensions, the acts of condescension and bungled gestures of friendship, that thwart the dramas of cross-cultural encounters. Californian students and the children of the French bourgeoisie seek enlightenment in India, convinced they will find a Gandian paradise of serene, cotton-spinning, pacifist villagers. Indians dazzled by dreams of Bond Street or Rodeo Drive are convinced that the lives of Westerners are endlessly blissful and chock-full of glamor, only rarely becoming conscious of "the cruel-seeming asymmetry between desire and satisfaction that could exist in the most privileged of lives."<sup>20</sup>

Yet Mishra does not limit himself to documenting the disjunctions of life-worlds, to lamenting the clash and crash of alien cultures. Even as he pays tribute to *Sentimental Education* as a prototype for his own *Bildungsroman*, he uses Flaubert's novel as a leitmotif through which to explore the complex cross-hatching of likeness as well as difference. What, the narrator wonders, could a student in a provincial Indian university in the late 1980s possibly have in common with Frédéric Moreau and his generation? At first glance, the cultural, historical, and economic disparities seem glaring and all-decisive. Yet he slowly comes to realize that "the small, unnoticed tragedies of thwarted hopes and ideals Flaubert wrote about in *Sentimental Education* were all around us."<sup>21</sup> Not only do the narrator's unfocused longings and feelings of inadequacy mesh with those of Flaubert's hero, but modern India yields up countless stories of individuals disowning their provincial origins to seek success, only to see "their ambitions dwindle away over the years in successive disappointments."<sup>22</sup> What Mishra's novel suggests is that exoticizing difference, tip-toeing around other cultures by treating them as the mysterious and unknowable Other, is a perilous and deeply patronizing endeavor that blinds us to moments when histories and cultures overlap.

Shu-mei Shih has recently crafted a forceful indictment of what she calls "technologies of recognition" operative in the field of world literature, arguing that critical attention to non-Western writers is blighted by Eurocentric norms. She cites a cluster of endemic

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problems: sweeping generalizations and omnipotent definitions; the reduction of literary works to nationalist allegories; the marketing of multicultural identities purged of any mention of economic structures or global inequities. According to Shu-mei Shih, such practices derive from the prison house of recognition, which she parses as the reiteration of the already known, whether false presumptions of universality or Orientalist fantasies of difference. Yet her often persuasive catalogue of the various mishaps and misreadings of postcolonial studies falls short in its aim of refuting recognition, offering a notably truncated account of its doubleness and complexity. Indeed, the guiding thread of the essay, which demands that Western critics become more critical of their own practices (a call to self-knowledge) and details how non-Western literary works are often given cursory or careless treatment (a call for acknowledgment), remains entirely caught up in the premises and protocols of recognition.<sup>23</sup>

Mishra's allusions to *Sentimental Education*, moreover, underscore that moments of recognition are not restricted to readers addicted to the plodding veracities of realism, as its most stringent critics like to suggest. Flaubert is, of course, typically read as a proto-modernist writer under whose corrosive gaze language decomposes into an assortment of random banalities, a parroted muddle of received ideas emptied of any representational force. His work mercilessly records the various pathologies of misrecognition afflicting those who seek to glean a sense of personhood from collective fictions and counterfeit identities. The ending of *Sentimental Education* attests to the stalling of self-knowledge, as any hopes that the protagonist's worldly failures and romantic bunglings would trigger incremental gains in insight are famously frustrated. Yet the registering of such ironies also grants Flaubert's own text a diagnostic force, as an acerbic account of the failures of self-interpretation. It is in this sense that the reader's own jolt of recognition assumes a self-critical rather than consoling form; what Mishra's narrator recognizes in Frédéric Moreau, in a scenario layered with multiple levels of irony, is their shared propensity for using fictional personae as a means of self-orientation. Here acknowledgment is oriented not around a sense of shared identity, but an apprehension of a negative commonality

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based on a parallel history of interpretive missteps and mishaps. In calling into being a heightened self-consciousness about such mechanisms of identity formation, modernism complicates but by no means cancels a phenomenology of recognition.

One reader, for example, mentioned to me his own stab of recognition at encountering, in *To the Lighthouse*, the extended description of Mrs. Ramsay's wedge-shaped core of darkness. The tentative commonality here rests on a shared failure to be known by others (a part of oneself that remains inaccessible, that is never displayed at dinner parties or revealed to family members), yet it is a recognition that is stripped of any specific content. To assume any substantive similarity between this reader's "heart of darkness" and Mrs. Ramsay's own would be to deny her the very uniqueness and unknowability that the passage insists upon. Recognition is rendered imperfect or incomplete, in Terence Cave's terms, rather than absent.<sup>24</sup> While modern protagonists are less likely than their Victorian counterparts to achieve a conclusive moment of self-understanding, recognition is not so much negated as transferred to readers forced into a heightened awareness of the instabilities and opacities of personhood. Indeed, in the absence of any such mechanism it would be hard to explain the resonance of modernist texts: as Adorno points out, it is the bizarre quality of Kafka's works that renders them so uncannily familiar. Even as they block our standard strategies of interpretation and cancel out a conventional hermeneutics, they conjure up a sense of bafflement, frustration, and anxiety that many of us know all too well.

These varying models of recognition, grounded in a perception of direct likeness or metaphorical affinity, fuel much of the wrangling over literature and politics, serving as totems for warring academic tribes. The experience of reading, some critics suggest, cannot help being bound up with our desire to reflect on who and what we are; such desires are in turn tied up with differential histories, experiences of embodiment, and political realities. Our selves are sticky, in Stephen White's phrase; rather than being frictionless, disembodied and detached, they are caught up in the particulars of time and space, of culture and history, body and biography.<sup>25</sup> These

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differential circumstances matter; they demand to be acknowledged in literature as in life.

Other critics demur from what they see as an eagerness to fence readers into groups according to programmatic speculations about social identities, declaring that the value of imaginative art lies in its power to expand or extend perception. Entering other worlds, we become acquainted with the unfamiliar, are drawn to see things from different angles, glimpse aspects of ourselves in distant lives. The much decried notion of universality is simply a way of acknowledging the incontrovertible fact that literary works can resonate with readers from many different backgrounds. *Antigone* has intrigued straight men and lesbians, Norwegians and South Africans; you do not need to be an Irishman to admire James Joyce. Such an experience of extending the self, these critics conclude, trumps a sectarian aesthetics which decrees that women see themselves only in works by and about women, which would restrict gay men to a diet of Oscar Wilde, James Baldwin, and Edmund White.

Let me suggest, in response, that critics who disparage any intrusion of political affiliations into art are stricken by a failure of the very imagination that they prize so highly. If our existence pivots around the drama of recognition, our aesthetic engagement cannot be quarantined from the desire to know and to be acknowledged. We all seek in various ways to have our particularity recognized, to find echoes of ourselves in the world around us. The patent asymmetry and unevenness of structures of recognition ensures that books will often function as lifelines for those deprived of other forms of public acknowledgment. Until very recently, for example, such deprivation stamped the lives of women who desired other women; a yearning etched into the body and psyche functioned only as an absence, unmentionable at home or work, whited out in the media, invisible in public life, acknowledged only in the occasional furtive whisper or dirty joke. Reflecting on the singular impact of *The Well of Loneliness* on lesbian readers, Terry Castle speaks of its ability to engage “our deepest experience of eros, intimacy, sexual identity and how our fleshly bodies relate to the fleshly bodies of others.”<sup>26</sup> Nor is it justifiable to shrug aside such acts of recognition as merely

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political rather than literary. Hall's novel resonated with readers because it fashions a narrative, not a sociological screed; because it fleshes out the drama of same-sex love through wrenching descriptions; because it draws on tragic topoi to bestow an aura of seriousness on its protagonist. Its existential and political impact is inseparable from its status as a work of fiction.

Yet it has also inspired a host of passionate repudiations: "*The Well of Loneliness*," remarks Heather Love, "still known as the most famous and most widely read of lesbian novels, is also the novel most hated by lesbians themselves."<sup>27</sup> Hall's tragic view of same-sex relations was to clash with subsequent conceptions of gay identity, inspiring a host of readers to disavow any conceivable parallels between themselves and Stephen Gordon. Whether or not such disavowals are justified – Love suggests that they are not – such a reception history underscores the lability and contingency of moments of recognition. Moreover, the risks of what Alexander García Düttman calls "recognition as X" (a woman/lesbian/person of color) have by now been comprehensively rehearsed.<sup>28</sup> To be pinned down in this way can be deeply constraining, as one's personhood is summarily defined, exhausted, and thereby reduced. The fixation on defining the self may encourage a belief that identities are governed by an immutable script, inspiring a model of repressive authenticity that leaves little room for ambiguity, disidentification, or dissent. Such convictions seem especially ill-suited to capturing what goes on in the flux of reading, when the relations between social demographics and particular patterns of affiliation and recognition are often fluid and unpredictable. Matching up the identities of readers and characters, assuming that recognition requires direct resemblance, means, in essence, denying the metaphorical and self-reflexive dimensions of literary representation.

Let me return one last time to *Hedda Gabler*. At the time of its first performance, the impact of Ibsen's play lay in the ruthlessness with which it ripped off the mask of domestic harmony, exposing the chasm that yawned between men and women. One of the first plays to center on a heroine's sense of panicked entrapment, to zero in on a woman's revulsion with the roles of wife and mother, it opened

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up new and disturbing lines of thought. What exactly is woman's nature? Do all women share the same nature? How exactly does one justify the denial of male freedoms to women? The confrontational nature of such questions should not be underestimated. At a time when suffragettes were still often dismissed as a lunatic fringe, Ibsen's plays brought issues of female emancipation into the middle-class drawing room. Rather than addressing everyone equally, they opened up painful and politically charged schisms in their audience. The historical record suggests that women and men were often divided over the merits of *Hedda Gabler* and that Ibsen's play made some women more aware – or differently aware – of their status as women.

Yet nowadays, the meaning of Ibsen's play no longer seems quite so firmly fixed by the gender divide. A substantial body of work by critics and directors has put paid to the claim that men are inherently incapable of understanding Hedda. What she symbolizes for women may also have changed. In the last three decades we have heard countless stories about frustrated women trapped in loveless marriages: what seems revelatory now is not so much Ibsen's exposure of the hidden dramas of domestic discontent as his audacious conception of his heroine. I came of age at a time when feminism was associated with claims about women's essential difference from men, amplified by copious references to female nurturing, an ethics of care, and the moral superiority of women. Ibsen gives us the antithesis of such a woman-identified woman, a protagonist who is arrogant, callous, and openly self-centered, who flinches away from any association with the feminine. What now seems remarkable is the boldness with which Ibsen severs morality from politics, suggesting that women's likeability or goodness has nothing to do with the legitimacy of their demand for freedom. Rather than being synonymous with feminism, Ibsen's heroine now offers a prescient commentary on feminist tendencies to idealize and circumscribe what it meant to be a woman. The recognition triggered by *Hedda Gabler* rather than confirming the clarity of the gender divide, frays and unravels its already tattered edges.

Literary texts thus offer an exceptionally rich field for parsing the complexities of recognition. Through their attentiveness to

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particulars, they possess the power to promote a heightened awareness of the density and distinctiveness of particular life-worlds, of the stickiness of selves. And yet they also spark elective affinities and imaginative affiliations that bridge differences and exceed the literalism of demographic description. Such texts, moreover, can also underscore the limits of knowability through structures of negative recognition that underscore the opacity of persons and their failure to be fully transparent to themselves or others. Rather than simply debunking or disrupting recognition, in other words, the literary field offers endless illustrations of its complexity as an experiential mode and an analytical concept. As my examples show, recognition does not require or revolve around an immutable kernel of literary content. We do not glimpse aspects of ourselves in literary works because these works are repositories for unchanging truths about the human condition, as conservative critics like to suggest. Rather, any flash of recognition arises from an interplay between texts and the fluctuating beliefs, hopes, and fears of readers, such that the insights gleaned from literary works will vary dramatically across space and time.

In this regard, the condition of intersubjectivity precludes any programmatic ascription of essential traits to oneself or others. If selfhood is formed in a dialogic and relational fashion, no basis exists for ascribing an unchanging core of identity to one or more members of a group. What it means to be a certain kind of person will shift in accordance with external forces, under the pressure of seismological shifts in attitudes and forms of life. None of us have unmediated access to our own selves, which we are called on to interpret through the cultural resources available to us. R. Radhakrishnan rightly insists that recognition's entanglement with structures of linguistic and cultural representation precludes the possibility of authentic or primordial being.<sup>29</sup> Yet the flattening out of subjectivity in current theory, the off-hand references to persons as bundles of signifiers or textual effects, engenders a singularly flimsy and unsatisfying model of the self that is unable to explain either the phenomenon of self-consciousness – our ability to reflect on, and in some cases to modify, what we are – or why particular

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representations may strike a chord with some groups and not with others. Virtually every aspect of our behavior and interaction reveals a complex interplay of individualized predispositions, deep cultural influences, and reflexive practices of self-interpretation and adjustment that is poorly captured by the often anodyne rhetoric of social construction.

Having brought together knowledge and acknowledgment, I want in conclusion to prise them apart, to highlight the potential tensions and frictions between the dynamics of literary recognition and the desire for public affirmation. When political theorists speak of the politics of recognition, they are referring not only to a public acknowledgment of someone's existence, but also to an affirmation of its value. Reacting against a history of condescension and marginalization, women and minorities seek to affirm their distinctiveness and to have it affirmed by others. To be recognized, in this sense, does not just mean having one's differences noticed (for they were always noticed), but having those differences seen as desirable and worthy. Steven Rockefeller, for example, claims that "the call for recognition of the value of different cultures is the expression of a basic and profound universal human need for unconditional acceptance." Writing in a more openly psychoanalytical vein, Suzanne Juhasz argues that the recognition that women find in books is a form of affirmation akin to the nurturing and empathy of maternal love.<sup>30</sup> In these and similar observations, stress is laid on the positive value to be assigned to particular persons or groups of persons.

Such a vision of recognition as unconditional affirmation collides with any notion of recognition as clarifying self-scrutiny, given that the latter process is likely to be discomfiting, even unpleasant, requiring a reckoning with one's own less appealing motivations and desires. Here literary studies offers a further adjustment and amplification to political debates over recognition. Over the years, literary and cultural critics have sporadically called for positive images of disenfranchised groups, yet such attempts tend to attract little support and soon run out of steam, in large part because of their awkward proximity to aesthetic idealism: the pre-modern doctrine that art should uplift its audience by depicting virtuous and unblemished

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persons. In modernity, however, we are often drawn to literary texts for quite other reasons, including their willingness to catalogue the extent of our duplicities, deceptions, and destructive desires. While the language of positive images is an understandable reaction to a historical archive of malicious or salacious representations, it enacts its own form of symbolic violence in erasing the complexity and many-sidedness of persons and censoring contradictory impulses or inadmissible yearnings.

The Lacanian picture of the child gazing entranced at its own idealized self-image thus falls notably short as a schema for capturing how literature represents selves. The experience of reading is often akin to seeing an unattractive, scowling, middle-aged person coming into a restaurant, only to suddenly realize that you have been looking into a mirror behind the counter and that this unappealing-looking person is you. Mirrors do not always flatter; they can take us off our guard, pull us up short, reflect our image in unexpected ways and from unfamiliar angles. Many of the works we call tragic, for example, relentlessly pound home the refractoriness of human subjectivity, the often disastrous gap between intentions and outcomes, the ways in which persons commonly misjudge themselves and others. We can value literary works precisely because they force us – in often unforgiving ways – to confront our failings and blind spots rather than shoring up our self-esteem.

Literary texts offer us new ways of seeing, moments of heightened self-apprehension, alternate ways of what Proust calls reading the self. Knowing again can be a means of knowing afresh, and recognition is far from synonymous with repetition, complacency, and the dead weight of the familiar. Such moments of heightened insight are not just personal revelations in a private communion between reader and text; they are also embedded in circuits of acknowledgment and affiliation between selves and others that draw on and cut across the demographics of social life. While the language of identification has triggered much unproductive wrangling over the precise value of identity, recognition does not depend on the integrity of self-identity in the same way. Because it is anchored in a dialogic

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relation rather than a core personhood, the question of what we recognize in texts or persons can receive many different answers. I would dispute Patchen Markell's claim that theorists of recognition assume the possibility of a world of mutual transparency, a world without alienation, where identity is treated as a *fait accompli*.<sup>31</sup> This strikes me as an inaccurate, even unjust, characterization of the work of Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth, or Charles Taylor, all of whom conceive of recognition as a far more ambiguous, conflictual, and open-ended process than such a statement suggests.

In a well-known essay, Foucault warns against any attempt to find moments of continuity and resemblance in history, speaking dismissively of the "consoling play of recognitions."<sup>32</sup> Against such all too frequent polemical jabs, I have argued that the phenomenology of recognition brings into play the familiar and the strange, the old and the new, the self and the non-self. It may help to confirm and intensify a sense of particularity, but it may also cut across and confuse familiar rubrics of identity. Recognition is about knowing, but also about the limits of knowing and knowability, and about how self-perception is mediated by the other, and the perception of otherness by the self. Precisely because of its fundamental doubleness, its oscillation between knowledge and acknowledgment, the epistemological and the ethical, the subjective and the social, the phenomenology of recognition calls for more attention in literary and cultural studies.

"What guarantees the security and authority of the cognitive 'categories' of the knowing subject?" asks Christopher Prendergast in an argument that voices qualified sympathy for the idea of recognition. Yet the question is surely misplaced, voicing an impossible demand for guarantees that threatens to plunge us back into skepticism's treacherous waters. Any pursuit of self-knowledge is dogged by difficulty and the shadow of failure, tied to all the usual epistemic risks of error, blindness, and confusion.<sup>33</sup> The insights we glean from reading are precarious if no less precious, fallible, and imperfect, flashes of illumination flanked by shadowy zones of unknowingness. What once seemed like an epiphany may continue to resonate and

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transform our lives, or it may turn out to be less momentous than we once thought. The narrator of *The Romantics* find his self-understanding permanently enriched and deepened by the tangled layers of affinity he uncovers between himself and Frédéric Moreau. By contrast, Thomas Buddenbrooks soon forgets the insights he gleaned from the pages of Schopenhauer and dies ignominiously from a stroke not long after, even as the novel withholds any final judgment as to the truth of the philosopher's words. Recognition comes without guarantees; it takes place in the messy and mundane world of human action, not divine revelation. Yet it remains, in its many guises – including the rueful recognition of the limits of recognition – an indispensable means of making sense of texts and of the world.