To VTS,

of course
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Preface

Only Evolve! Bioethics and the Need for Narrative

The primary political and philosophical issue of the next century will be the definition of who we are.

—Ray Kurzweil in 1999

Ray Kurzweil is afraid to die. Multimillionaire inventor of the first reading machine for the blind, Kurzweil is best known for his predictions about the future that culminated in his 2009 book, *The Singularity Is Near.* Kurzweil predicts that by 2045 machines will exceed human intelligence and the posthuman era will begin, eventuating in solutions to all of our most pressing problems, including death. In the opening voice-over of the recent documentary *Transcendent Man,* Kurzweil speaks slowly and deliberately, with haunting strains of the music of Philip Glass in the background:

I do have a recurring dream. It has to do with exploring this endless succession of rooms that are empty, and going from one to the next, and feeling hopelessly abandoned and lonely and unable to find anyone else. That’s a pretty good description of death. Death
is supposed to be a finality, but it’s actually a loss of everyone you care about. I do have fantasies sometimes about dying. About what people must feel like when they’re dying, or of what I would feel like if I were dying. And it’s such a profoundly sad, lonely feeling . . . that I really can’t bear it. And so I go back to thinking about how I’m not gonna die.²

There is nothing new, of course, about Kurzweil’s fears or hopes. The inevitability of death has always shaped human psychology, philosophy, religion, and the arts. What is relatively new here is the specific content of Kurzweil’s optimism: he believes that his life on Earth will literally not end. In his lifetime, humanity will evolve to overcome death by learning how to repair diseased and aging cells, and eventually how to download minds into computers.³ Kurzweil’s personal desires have become a part of his prophetic narrative: by way of the exponentially increasing power of science applied through technology, humans will return to the garden of Eden, with not only a new Eden but a new Adam and a new Eve to inhabit it. And Kurzweil is far from alone in this ultimate prediction. When Lee Silver, a Princeton biologist, wrote Remaking Eden: How Genetic Engineering and Cloning Will Transform the American Family, this is what he meant: that our scientific knowledge and technical skill will ultimately give us complete control over our own evolutionary future. “We, as human beings, have tamed the fire of life,” Silver writes, describing this future world. “And in so doing, we have gained the power to control the destiny of our species.”⁴

Whether the ability to control the destiny of the human species will turn out to be a good thing remains to be seen. Either way, to define transcendence as the inevitable outcome of technologically driven human evolution represents not only a phenomenon unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries⁵ but also a rejection of thousands of years of philosophical and theological thinking about what constitutes the highest and best life available to human beings.⁶ While it is tempting to think of Kurzweil and Silver as outliers, their thinking is merely a logical extension of the increasing confidence that late modern people have placed in finding technological solutions to problems. This belief could be summed up by the mantra “Only evolve!” This kind of evolu-
tion, it must be noted, is not Darwinian evolution; it assumes that Mother Nature has been fickle and random, and that we can and should do much, much better. Variations of this mantra can be seen in best-selling books by Steven Pinker, Daniel Dennett, Lee Silver, Simon Young, Rodney Brooks, and many others. What they all share is the belief that we inherently know what the good life is (to be free from suffering, disease, death, and other difficulties) and that it is something that we can and must make, not learn. Technoscience—scientific knowledge applied through technology—is the way to make that life.

As if this change were not profound enough, the “Only evolve!” mandate resists any challenges to its fundamental definition of the good life. But that doesn’t phase Kurzweil or any of these thinkers, for as a mandate built on a scientific naturalist conception of human life, it has no mechanism for self-questioning. Eric Cohen puts it very simply: “Science is a means to many ends without wisdom about which ends are most worthy.” Consumer culture is left to itself to define the ends in the form of products and services that affluent Americans stand by ready to purchase. Thus, as Brent Waters has argued, the best way to characterize the goal of late modern technology is not by modern conceptions of progress but by a desire to transcend limitations simply because they are limitations. Kurzweil insists that what “represents the cutting edge of the evolutionary condition” is simply “to seek greater horizons and to always want to transcend whatever our limitations are at the time.” What Kurzweil names as a limitation or how he plans to transcend it is not the issue. It does not matter what we are evolving into, only that we evolve. What matters most about our destiny is simply the fact that we get to choose it.

As I will develop in the introduction to this book, confidence in the mandate to “only evolve” has serious implications for ethics. It changes both the urgency and the shape of the ancient philosophical question, how should we then live? Questions about how to gain immortality or psychological equilibrium or enhanced cognitive function replace inquiry into the desirability of attaining those things. In a 2006 debate with Ray Kurzweil, Baroness Susan Greenfield, a neuroscientist, pressed him on the issue of immortality. She asked Kurzweil what exactly we think we would do with eternal life and whether having longer lives
would necessarily make people happier. He never really answered the question.\textsuperscript{13}

America faces rapidly accelerating technological change in the area of human enhancement, and that change is led by Kurzweil-type prophets who do not converse with, consult, or question leaders from other disciplines about the desirability of their vision.\textsuperscript{14} This is precisely the outcome that Hannah Arendt insisted we must do everything we can to avoid:

This future man, whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians.\textsuperscript{15}

These decisions have, in fact, been left to scientists and politicians. They are not being handled publicly in the manner Arendt advocates. Instead, the humanistic disciplines that would be most interested in the philosophical question behind these decisions—namely, how should we then live?—have instead doubted the value of addressing that question in the academy. A variety of thinkers have sketched out this so-called crisis in the humanities, which is often described as a forceful dismissal of such bluntly ethical questions.\textsuperscript{16} This crisis has been most pronounced in literary studies, which, toward the end of the twentieth century, had all but abdicated thinking of itself as a generally humanistic discipline that contributes scholarship to larger political conversations in favor of thinking of itself as a guild of specialists who contribute scholarship accessible only to a narrow band of academics.\textsuperscript{17}
In their efforts to historicize the crisis, Brian Stock and Martha Nussbaum argue that the way individuals read (especially the way we read fiction) has changed significantly because of this arrangement. Stock compares the goals of modern readers to those of ancient readers like Seneca and Augustine, who believed in the reader's "ethical responsibility for postreading experience." For them, the hard work began after the text was read, in applying its vision to gain self-awareness and to grow in the virtues. From that position individuals could make meaningful contributions to the polis. The modern reader, on the contrary, locates the work to "some form of interpretation, that is, to expounding, clarifying, or explaining the text." The ancient question of the good life is left behind, and "interpretation has become the only widespread postreading activity." As Martha Nussbaum explains, the disciplines of both philosophy and English converged to exclude ethics from inquiry. Philosophers were reluctant to ask the ancient question, how should we then live?, and English professors were even more so. This reluctance was due partly to the discipline’s efforts to keep ethicists from simply raiding texts as if they were nothing but pantries full of bite-sized morals. Some of the reluctance came from the effort to justify English as its own discipline, and some came from the theoretical skepticism of poststructuralist theory. Regardless of the motives, mid- to late-twentieth-century literary critics often assumed, as Nussbaum explains, that any critical work interested in the reader’s practical needs “must be hopelessly naïve, reactionary, and insensitive to the complexities of literary form and intertextual referentiality.”

One of the results of the exclusion of the ethical question from the academy is the production of a kind of rift in reading practices among contemporary Americans, where professional readers—scholars of literature—have little influence over how, why, or what the average American reads. John Guillory explains the loss as one of the “intermediate practices of reading,” which lie “between the poles of entertainment on the one side, and vigilant professionalism on the other.” The two types of reading are so disconnected that they barely resemble one another. So Guillory concludes that the only way to understand reading as a social practice is by returning, in some way, to the ethical."
Although there has been a recognized “turn toward the ethical” already (which I will describe below), the continued misrecognition of reading as an inherently ethical activity has impoverished public debate on questions that reach beyond the traditional domains of literary study. By isolating fiction between the two poles of reading professionally and reading for entertainment, fiction’s potential contribution to the larger ethical debates is marginalized. This has happened at exactly the time when, because of the rapidity of change in the biotechnological revolution, its need may be most urgent.

For example, one result of the failure to recognize the ethical importance of reading fiction is that the human enhancement conversation has been sequestered within the discipline of bioethics. Not surprisingly, bioethicists are trained to discuss very specific scenarios, and not how to read fiction in order to draw its much-needed insight into the debates. Indeed, a quick look at the ethical debates surrounding human enhancement technologies reveals that fiction is not a wise old sage that scholars turn to for discerning moral inquiry. Fiction is treated less like a sage and more like a slave; it is used to churn the wheel of argument or is simply ignored as irrelevant. For example, even Leon Kass, who is one of the better readers of fiction among bioethicists, is not always consistent in treating novels like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* as the complex and flawed texts that they are. This encourages scientists like Stephen Pinker to debase fiction and the role it can play by merely dismissing it, belittling Kass for treating “fiction as fact.”

In spite of these problems, in recent years some very good writers have paved the way for the return of narrative to ethical questions. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, writing in a special issue of *New Literary History*, issued a plea for literary scholars to be willing to write for a larger audience, to contribute “in some identifiable way to a purpose beyond that of the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake.” Specifically, scholars can demonstrate how textual studies can offer what Carla Hesse explains is vital to ethical reflection: “deep investigation, concentration, reflection, and contemplation.” Wayne Booth argues that the very ubiquity of stories means they are already a part of our ethical reflection—the work they do just needs to be highlighted. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are all affected by stories, and everyone feels
the ethical effects of engaging with them: “No human being, literate or not, escapes the effects of stories, because everyone tells them and listens to them.” While critics may think that the best thing to do is to put themselves above identifying with the texts, argues Booth, actual readers do not so purge themselves of these responses. That is reason enough to take them seriously. And all of these scholars insist that to take stories seriously as ethical barometers is not to ignore the question of form and other questions distinctive to the discipline of English—far from it. As Nussbaum reminds us, even Plato, that most famous banisher of the poets, knew that “to choose a style is to tell a story about the soul.” In other words, not only is the story about who we are and what we want to become, but it also enacts those options in a way that nothing else can. Narrative must be treated in all of its complexity.

One of my goals in writing Prophets of the Posthuman is to demonstrate that ethical debates—if they are to be meaningful at all—require deep, nuanced, and ongoing reflection on narrative. Narrative does not visit ethical questions abstractly; it lives them, because it lives in the realm of ethos, of persons as persons engaged with one another. Persons influence each other for good or ill; persons love one another well or poorly. Persons are the ones in pursuit of the good life; persons need to find out why they are alive at all. The fact that all these things are true in part explains why the novel was born and why it still flourishes today.

In short, precisely because it is the question, what is the good life for persons?, that is at issue, Prophets of the Posthuman insists that the humanities, and especially literary study, can no longer take a backseat when it comes to bioethics. As Harpham discerns, there is a new urgency for conversation between humanistic and nonhumanistic disciplines as “they confront not only such new subjects as genetic engineering, environmental trauma, and the cognitive capacities of animals or machines, but also, and most intriguingly, such traditional subjects as the nature of language and the distinctive features of a specifically human being.” Because these issues concern fundamental questions of humanity, the humanities, whose realm has always been the larger world of meaning and values, must now reposition itself as the “natural sponsor of the debates and controversies that swirl around such issues.”
To become such a sponsor, literary studies must not be afraid to trace how and why contemporary novels in particular have directly and indirectly intersected with the core issues of posthuman enhancement technologies. And one of the first things that needs to be addressed is that while some literary scholars may have been content to avoid moral and ethical questions, novelists themselves thrive in them, even those who claim, like Oscar Wilde, to avoid them as a matter of principle. Though they might not put it precisely this way, most writers would resonate with George Saunders’s belief that “all good fiction is moral, in that it is imbued with the world, and powered by our real concerns: love, death, how-should-I-live.” Even writers who find this statement repugnant would agree that they are interested in imparting their vision—whatever it might be—to their readers. One could even say that vision is their trade, the goal of their work, their raison d’être. In the well-known words of Joseph Conrad, the writer’s task is “to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything.”

This concern with vision means that although not a few of them might shun the label, many fiction writers are also prophets. Like all prophets, they try to speak in venues where the largest number of people might be able to see and hear, to change their vision of the world, even to change their vision of change. The venue they have chosen is not the pulpit or the classroom, but something they see as even more central and vital to the formation of vision: fiction. In fiction, they flesh out the worlds we think we want; they imagine the outcome of our deepest dreams; they challenge the desires that fuel our decisions. Their work insists that stories are not a luxury. We live them; we need them. We need them because we live them. Novelists have recognized the pressure that technology puts on what is good for a human being: what this life means and what it is for.

The writers I engage with in this book are not only concerned with this question but concerned that their readers be sufficiently interested in it. For all but perhaps the most crass of metafiction writers, literary artists maintain a hope that someone in their audience will see things the way they see them. These writers want individuals to reconsider how they see themselves, others, and life itself. George Saunders is just
such a writer. In an interview, he remarked that reading Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* helped him to recover his sensibility that fiction can be about this kind of transformation: “The idea is that you go into this room called the short story and come out different. I don’t really care what’s in the room, as long as when you come out, you’re 6% more aware, more happy to be alive, more appreciative, more curious, instead of closed down.”

*Prophets of the Posthuman* is fundamentally a plea for us to venture into the house of fiction and stay awhile. Its rooms contain something that no one interested in ethics can do without: the real people who will be affected by our decisions, good and bad. The very best fiction writers stand apart from their merely popular counterparts because they do not allow us to assume that any vision is correct because it feels good, sounds right, or sells well. They dare to ask what life is for and whether we are aiming for what would really be best for us. These writers are the ones brave enough to venture under the foundation of our posthuman dreams and find out what is underneath them, what may be rotting, or what we have tried to stuff down there in order to forget.

This book unveils their vision.