

Writing the Poverty Line: Dickens, Gissing, Orwell and the Social Scientists

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary critics recognize that in nineteenth-century Britain literature and science were vying to represent the real to a rapidly expanding reading public. “Victorian fiction, although sophisticated about the impossibilities of a naïve realism, aspired to represent the ‘real,’ that is, a nonverbal reality,” George Levine writes in *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988), “and worked with the imaginative possibilities constructed by the culture” (12). As the nineteenth century progressed these “imaginative possibilities” became increasingly narrow, and literature represented this “nonverbal reality” within an intellectual and cultural milieu that favored so-called objective, scientific accounts of reality. “Perhaps more intensely than in any prior period, those possibilities were conditioned by the discourse of science,” Levine continues, “which had begun to assume almost exclusive responsibility for reporting on that real” (12). Yet despite, or perhaps because of, literature’s demotion as a means for representing observable phenomena, science too ran against the limits of its collective imagination. This was due, Levine suggests, to the fact that science, like literature, was a cultural construct and its representations of the real were forged within the imaginative possibilities allowed by that culture.

Levine’s depiction of the relationship between science and literature as one of mutual inflection exemplifies a particular critical turn taken in the early 1980s. This turn, which Levine elaborates in *Darwin and the Novelists*, was initiated by Gillian Beer in

*Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983). In his forward to a reprint of Beer's work issued in 2000 Levine writes, "Early in *Darwin's Plots*, Gillian Beer argues that *On the Origin of Species* is 'one of the most extraordinary examples of a work which included more than the maker of it at the time knew, despite all that he did know'," and concludes that "with these words Professor Beer initiated an enterprise that itself probably included more than she knew" (ix). Levine's levity downplays the controversial nature of Beer's contribution; critics (in the sciences, mostly) balked specifically at Beer's claim that Darwin's scientific writing and the fiction of Darwin's time shared tropes and themes. Beer's critical approach certainly differed substantially from that of an earlier generation of literary critics who attempted to relate the sciences to Victorian literature in a manner more palatable to scientists. Leo Justin Henkin's *Darwinism and the English Novel, 1860-1910: The Impact of Evolution on Victorian Fiction* (1964) fairly captures this earlier generation's conviction that literature passively received science's influence while itself in no way influencing science (the gendered nature of this relationship needs little elaboration). Lionel Stevenson's *Darwin Among the Poets* (1932), which predates Henkin's text, makes a similar assertion.

Critics after Stevenson and Henkin broke with the (somewhat chauvinistic) idea of a one-way relationship between science and literature, thus paving the way for Beer's groundbreaking study. Tess Coslett's *The 'Scientific Movement' and Victorian Literature* (1982) signaled this change in critical approach. Situated in the historicist tradition, Coslett's text works to dispel the perception that science and literature represented two markedly different—and often conflictual—disciplines. Not at all a passive subject

awaiting science's fecundation, literature, Coslett argues, addresses itself to the same fundamental concern as science, namely "our sense for conduct and beauty, [...] touched with emotion" (2).

Peter Morton's *The Vital Science: Biology and the Literary Imagination 1860-1900* (1984) elaborated Coslett's argument, adding certain flourishes. Specifically, while Coslett spoke of the sciences in general and examined both fiction and poetry, Morton centered his argument on the life sciences and Darwin. Morton claims novelists "searched among the data of life sciences and found material particularly susceptible to imaginative transformation" (6). Morton's analysis imputes agency to novelists; they deliberately sought material they could actively transform rather than play the role of passive recipient à la Stevenson and Henkin. This passivity Beer and Levine also attempt to eliminate in a similar manner, granting literature an agency on par with that attributed to the sciences.

Though emphasis on the two-way relationship between literature and science continued into the 1990s, critics of this decade elaborated analytical discourse beyond the narrow scope of Darwinian evolutionary biology. They did so by opening up discussion to those aspects of the sciences overlooked by Beer and Levine—chemistry engineering, hospital wards, laboratories, lecture theaters, mathematics, mind science—though special emphasis lay on pathology and the mind sciences. Two emblematic works, Miriam Bailin's *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* (1994) and Athena Vretto's *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (1995), take advantage of this wider critical ambit, while Helen Small's *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity 1800-1855* (1995) adds greater specificity to theories of pathology

developed in the Victorian period by looking exclusively at madness and women in nineteenth-century fiction. Sally Shuttleworth and Carolyn Dever pay particular attention in their texts to mind sciences, and therefore represent the second strain of the 1990s critical trend. Shuttleworth's *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996) insists, in an distinctly Foucauldian manner, on the works of Brontë's deep entanglement with fashionable ideas of psychology and phrenology that she discovered through lectures on the local Haworth circuit, press articles, trial accounts, and advertisements for medical remedies. Shuttleworth claims that the Brontë's fiction both assimilated and challenged prevailing notions of selfhood and identity. Carolyn Dever argues something similar in *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* (1998) in her analysis of how prior fictional narratives of psychological development informed Freudian psychoanalysis.

The present work will examine yet a different branch of the sciences—the social sciences—and the relationship they enjoyed with literature; for that relationship is more fraught and entangled than many critics are wont to admit. Too often Charles Dickens is juxtaposed with an early social scientist like Henry Mayhew; contemporary criticism remarks on the dissimilarity between the two men. But they had great influence over one another's work. This affinity should come as no surprise given the uncanny likeness between the social sciences and literature. In his 2006 essay "From Politics to Aesthetics," Jacques Rancière writes,

Social science purported to tell the truth about the illusions of literature and aesthetics. But the procedures by which it contemplated that work of demystification of literature and aesthetics had precisely been framed by literature itself; they were part of the aesthetic revolution of the art of writing. Taking the power of speaking away from the speakers to give it back to mute things, leaving the old theatrical stage of the conflicts of ends

and means in order to disclose the hidden depths of the self and of society, reading on the very body of mute objects the ciphered meaning of an age, a history or a society—all that was the invention of literature. Social science, social criticism and the science of the unconscious had to borrow from naïve literature the weapons aimed at disclosing its naivety. (17)

Regardless of claims to a more objective way of surveying the world, the social sciences borrowed from the discipline they purported to replace: namely, literature. And like literature the social sciences purported to discern and decipher the truth written upon the subjects of their observation. For literature “framed a new poetics giving flesh to a ‘voice from below,’ an eloquent voice of the mute” (18).

With almost mystical sagacity it “purported to decipher the signs written on faces, walls, clothes, etc., to travel under the visible stage and disclose the secrets hidden underground,” Rancière continues (18). “It framed what would afterwards be endorsed by social science and criticism: a hermeneutic of social truth, as opposed to political lies or chatter. It was no coincidence that the exemplary plot of the modern novel was the plot of the child of the people drawn to misery, crime or suicide by the reading of a novel, by the entry into the universe of writing” (18). The universe of writing is bound to social truth, and vice versa. Unlike the ephemeral nature of political writing, literature lays claim to meaning of lasting significance, testifying to the permanence of certain social truths. The social sciences attempted to unseat literature as a discloser of “secrets hidden underground.” But in order to do so they had to use a method of discourse from the very discipline they sought to unseat.

Contemporary criticism tends to focus almost exclusively on the unseating of literature by the social sciences. In *A History of Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences*, Mary Poovey writes, “Even though I began by thinking I was writing about

the history and semantics of nineteenth-century statistics, [...] I discovered that that history belonged to a larger narrative: the story of how description came to seem separate from interpretation or theoretical analysis; the story of how one kind of representation—numbers—came to seem immune from theory or interpretation” (xii). Yet in the work of the early social investigators description was not separate from interpretation or theoretical analysis. Indeed, one depended on the other. Theoretical analysis was supplemented by description to find purchase with the reading public. Lorraine Daston writes that “the critical period was the mid-nineteenth century, when new ideals and practices of scientific objectivity transformed the persona of the scientists and the sources of scientific authority” (“Fear and Loathing of the Imagination in Science” 17).

Part of this transformation involved, for a time at least, a dependence on the very discipline scientific objectivity purported to replace. This is especially true in respect to the social sciences. Terry Eagleton elaborates this point, writing that an “impoverished empiricism, unable to rise to the level of an ideology proper, is driven to exploit the fertile symbolic resources of Romantic humanism, drawing on its metaphysical sanctions and quasi-feudalist social models to ratify bourgeois property relations” (102). The social sciences exploited the symbolic resources of sentimental discourse to not only ratify bourgeois property relations, but also to legitimate existing social relations. In the present work I argue that the social sciences represent a reaction to the democratization of culture that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, and that novelistic discourse was the means by which this reaction could be prosecuted. In so doing I contribute to the ongoing critical dialogue about the relationship between science and literature, while at the same time insisting that the presence of sentimental prose in supposedly objective and

scientific sociological reports merits closer attention than has been given by contemporary critics.

Though there have been a few articles on the statisticians and social science—Audrey Jaffe’s “Detecting the Beggar: Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry Mayhew, and ‘The Man with the Twisted Lip’” and Catherine Gallagher’s “The Body Versus the Social Body in the Works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew” are two—very few works address the brand of objectivity they attempt to valorize and the literary backlash to that valorization. This work focuses on that very topic. It will explore the role of the statisticians in cultivating a viable image of professional, scientific efficiency and how that image was challenged by the writers of the day. This work takes as its subject the relationship between literature and the social sciences, but it discusses the entry of a social class into the universe not so much of writing but of reading. For though the social sciences were laying claim to the representation of the lower classes, those classes were slowly changing the production of those representations. As the reading public enlarged toward the end of the nineteenth century it began to shape to publishing industry and dictate the terms by which authors produced their work.

The first chapter of the present work argues that Mayhew’s fictional work was integral to the success of his scientific studies of the London poor and, in fact, shared more with such so-called critics of the social sciences as Charles Dickens than scholars have heretofore acknowledged. This argument continues in the second chapter, which suggests that the categorization of Mayhew and Dickens into different and mutually opposed types (a practice that now seems habitual) has led to the simplification of both figures—the first an almost Gragrindian personage devoted only to the social sciences,

and the second an unreconstructed sentimentalist opposed to anything scientific. The second chapter argues that in order more accurately to represent their subject both authors produced texts that revolutionized the very concept of sentiment, and this new conception served to reform readers of certain ingrained, ideologically inflected perceptual tendencies with respect to the poor.

The third chapter analyzes the changes social-scientific writing underwent in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and examines early works of prototypes of such social scientists as George Sims and Andrew Mearns. This examination serves as a necessary preliminary to a consideration of the literary and social work of Walter Besant, who sought to reshape the social environment both institutionally, by founding the People's Palace, and literarily, by penning narratives that sentimentalized the lives of the poor. This chapter considers Besant's attempt to reshape both institutionally and aesthetically the phenomenon of London's lower classes in light of education reform and the concomitant expansion of the reading public.

The fourth chapter looks closer at the phenomenon of the new popular literary market and explores the surprising affinity between George Gissing and social scientist Charles Booth with a view to interrogating the means by which both authors contended with the new phenomenon of mass reading publics and publishing technologies that favored mass production, both of which militated against the possibility of authorial authority with respect to published work. The chapter argues that these two men, seemingly disparate in their chosen professions, were united in their concern for the means by which the truth of their work could be represented to a large, seemingly unclassed public. Both of them were aware that they labored in the shadow of the

towering literary figure of Charles Dickens, to whom an awareness of readers' sympathetic appreciation of sentimental discourse proved the key to his publishing success. Changes in the publishing industry and the spread of universal education made a similar triumph impossible for both Gissing and Booth, and thus these two personalities became linked by dint of vocational circumstance.

The concluding chapter argues that George Orwell sought, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, his 1937 account of the working poor in the north of England, to develop a countermodernist aesthetic, one which fetched writing from the rare air of modernist experiment and deposited it into the dust and mud of politics. Though evidently uncomfortable with the working class, Orwell sought to harness the potential of the mass reading public and the publishing technologies that catered to it. I argue that *The Road to Wigan Pier* represents an altogether new type of ethnography that managed not only to expose the hypocrisy behind the central conviction of early twentieth-century sociology that scientific objectivity is not only desirable but possible, but also encouraged true sympathy for the subject on the reader's part, as well as for the author himself. I argue that in the tonality if not the diction or phraseology of *The Road to Wigan Pier* Orwell proves a worthy heir to Dickens, who in *Bleak House* writes, "Jobling, there *are* chords in the human mind." If struck in enough of those minds, Orwell demonstrates, these chords could become the opening notes of socialism's triumphant overture.

## CHAPTER ONE

### CLASS DISORDERED: HENRY MAYHEW AND THE NEW SOCIAL SCIENCE

Henry Mayhew was more than the staid social statistician scholars have made him out to be. The author of *London Labour and the London Poor*, an immensely popular work of social science which was published in four volumes between 1851 and 1861, Mayhew was a veritable Renaissance man. He published plays, journalism, and social surveys, and he co-founded the humorous magazine *Punch*. Together with his brother Augustus, Mayhew completed a number of novels that garnered high praise from his contemporaries. A series of articles in *The Morning Chronicle* quickly established him as an expert on the lives of the working poor, and he conducted ethnographic studies on the German people, the findings of which appeared in multi-volume works.

It was Mayhew's early work as a dramatist and novelist, not as an amateur social scientist, that made his social surveys so compelling and unique. Mayhew used literary tropes and flourishes to make the subjects of his social reports more palatable to his middle-class audience. These tropes and flourishes, generally of a sentimental sort, allowed Mayhew to capture his middle class audience's attention; the allure of the forbidden and exotic that attended the subject of London's underworld Mayhew tempered with the discourse of comfortable bourgeois sentiment. The man usually seen as one of the first social scientists was actually something quite different. He was a dramatist first and then a surveyor of the London poor, and the skills cultivated in his first

profession lent themselves to the overall success of the second. It is this Mayhew that I will examine in the following chapter, demonstrating how his fictional work was integral to the success of his scientific studies of the London poor and, in fact, shared more in common with so-called critics of the social sciences like Charles Dickens than the criticism had heretofore acknowledged.

### The Rise of Statistics as a Science

The history of the social sciences started well before Henry Mayhew's work on the London poor. In the first volume of his *England as It Is, Political, Social, and Industrial in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century* (1851), the Irish politician William Johnston recalls how Sir Robert Peel, a man reputedly of "parliamentary eminence," had memorized all the Blue Books by heart. Unimpressed by Peel's mental feat, Johnston writes that "the kind of attention necessary for the mastery of these details is, in some respects, injurious to the mind. Its nobility is impaired—its discursive and soaring tendency is destroyed" (143). Johnston concludes by conjecturing that "perhaps, if the attention of Sir Robert Peel to minute statistics had been less fixed, his adhesion to principles and political friends had been more firm" (143).

The vehemence with which Johnston denigrates Peel's mental feat might be surprising, but the sentiment he expresses is nothing new: The science of statistics, unique as it was at the time, inspired a deal of suspicion among politicians and laymen alike. Part of this suspicion was due to the newness of the science: Along with chemists, electrical engineers and physiologists, social statisticians only began forming their own professional societies in the mid-nineteenth century (the Statistical Society of London, for

instance, was formed in 1834). The science had been around for some time – indeed since antiquity-- though mainly in the form of the census. Scholars credit Aristotle with being the first to compile systematically empirical data in a quantitative manner in order to explain such phenomena as earthquakes and weather.<sup>1</sup> William the Conqueror's *Domesday Book*, compiled in 1086, represents the most comprehensive demographic survey of the Middle Ages. But it was the seventeenth-century physician William Petty who with his "political arithmatik" first applied the science of statistics in a programmatic manner to human society. His treatise, *Natural and Political Observations on the Bills of Mortality* (1662), written with John Gaunt, offered a new approach to the study of society. Its analysis of births and deaths entered in parish records proved useful for examining the mortality rates during the plague years, the conclusions it drew eventually leading to social reform.

Though Petty came to doubt the method he applied in *Bills of Mortality*, he did maintain his faith in the then-nascent discipline generally, crediting it with a high degree of utility in terms of its ability to lead to "true politics," particularly in times of "peace and plenty." He went on to write a number of tracts and surveys that continued the methodological spirit of *Bills of Mortality*, applying what he termed "political arithmatik" to such cities as London and Paris, which addressed the question of populations and their relative use to the state. The value of Petty's work lies in the fact that he acquired his evidence through first-hand observation and a careful reading of official source material like pollbooks. This approach allowed Petty to "judge more safely of others,"<sup>2</sup> since he

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<sup>1</sup> For a succinct overview of Aristotle's pioneering contribution to the field of statistics see: Spyros Missiakoulis, "Aristotle and Earthquake Data: A Historical Note," in *International Statistical Review* 76. 1 (2008): 130-33.

<sup>2</sup> In an introduction he supplied for *Essay on the People of England*, Petty writes: "The calculations therein

could appeal to facts and figures to substantiate his observations.

This concern with careful observation substantiated with “political arithmetik” intensified in the eighteenth century, when statistics were used to formulate “life tables” for life insurance annuities and to manage threats to the public health. “Statistics” as a term of art was first used in 1770 by W. Hooper in his translation from the German of J. F. von Bielfeld’s *Elements of Universal Erudition*. Bielfeld defined statistics as the science “which teaches us what is the political arrangement of all the modern states of the known world” (269).<sup>3</sup> Statistics promised a totalizing and totalized form of knowledge from which the secrets of no modern state could remain hidden. After Hooper’s early use of the term, it was not referred to again until 1787 with the publication in English of the eight-volume *Geographical History of Mankind* [*Geographische Geschichte des Menschen*] by a German of the *Tabellen Statistik* (“Statistical Tables”) school, E. A. W. Zimmerman. That same year, Thomas B. Clark who had acquired a taste for statistics while traveling in Europe, returned to Great Britain to publish his *Statistical View of Germany* (1790). One year later, Sir John Sinclair, a Scottish politician and writer on finance and agriculture—and the first person to use the word “statistics” in the English language, some scholars argue—published the “Statistical Account of Scotland,” wherein he defined statistical investigations as “those respecting the Population of a Country [...] and Other Matters of State” (*The Statistical Account of Scotland* xix). The advent of modern statistics in the late seventeenth century can be seen, then, as a response to

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contained are very accurate, and more perhaps to be relied upon than has been done of the like kind. This skillful and laborious gentleman has taken the right course to form his several schemes about the numbers of the people, for besides many different ways of working, he has carefully inspected the pollbooks, and the distractions made by the acts, and the produce in many of the respective polls, going everywhere by reasonable and discrete mediums: besides which pains, he has made observations of the very facts in particular towns and places, from which he has been able to judge and conclude more safely of others, so that he seems to have looked further into this mystery than any other person” (135).

concerns of the state with regard to population, especially as this population became increasingly urbanized.

One particular concern of the state involved that single-most ominous inevitability with respect to populations and cities: disease. Perhaps one of the most interesting application and discussions of statistics from this period is in William Black's piece on medical statistics, "Observations Medical and Political, on the Smallpox." A physician and writer of medicine, Black was one of the first writers in England to apply statistics to his field, developing a "medical arithmetic" and publishing in 1789 *An Arithmetical and Medical Analysis of the Diseases and Mortality of the Human Species*, wherein he proposed to show that births, mortalities, diseases and casualties could be subjected to arithmetical proof. Like Petty, however, Black cast a skeptical eye on statistics. He therefore made judicious use of statistical material, believing that a close familiarity with source materials should be combined with a certain degree of skepticism as to their value. Black thought that earlier writers "have obscured their works in a cloud of arithmetik and calculations" (37). To offset the impenetrability this fog of numbers tends to engender, therefore, Black recommended that his contemporaries muster "no small portions of phlegm and resolution to follow [their calculations] through with attention," particularly if they should find themselves unblessed with such prodigious talent as shown by Sir Robert Peel, because arithmetic and calculations tend "to tax the memory and patience with a superfluidity of figures, even to a nuisance" (37).<sup>4</sup>

Black, like William Johnston, considered excessive reliance on statistical data

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<sup>3</sup> This is just one of the possible sources of this document.

<sup>4</sup> Black particularly disliked certain aspects of Perry's *London Bills of Mortality*, which he described as "Gothic ruins, which it is wasting time to prop and plaster" ("Observations Medical and Political on the Smallpox" 268).

deleterious to a writer's overall project and to the reader's physical constitution. Both writers thought statistical data could cause physical harm, making the act of reading texts heavily reliant on statistical data an enervating experience. If statistical data and statistics in general were developed to manage and interpret the increasingly urbanized state, the reaction elicited by statistical data is in accord with the mental state created by the urban environment as described by sociologist Georg Simmel in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903). Simmel writes that "the essential intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolis becomes intelligible as over against that of the small town which rests more on feelings and social relationships" (325). The increasing emphasis on statistics seen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries then is in accord with an increase in industrialized towns and cities; as states became increasingly more industrialized, and their populations more urban, a science was developed to account for the unique social relations resulting from this new urban environment. In essence, the science of statistics is an urban science, a way of understanding the new social problems presented by the metropolis and its burgeoning populations.

The peculiar sociopolitical challenges that attended the growth of urban populations became more apparent in the early nineteenth century, a period which saw a shift in emphasis away from determining population characteristics through surveys and censuses and toward investigations of social problems by both government and private individuals. In 1798, Malthus's "Essay on Population," published in 1798, led to a bill in British Parliament that eventually led to a census taken in 1801. The concern with overpopulation articulated by Malthus in his essay was a part of the overall concern with the condition of the English population. The Census of 1801, for instance, resulted

because of a disastrous harvest and Parliament's subsequent fear that the population, which, as Malthus observed, "increases in a geometrical ratio" (that is, exponentially), would soon become too large for the given means of subsistence, which increases in merely an "arithmetic ratio." A census presented a way of keeping abreast of this problem, offering future projections of population as well as the means of calibrating subsistence levels for maintaining the population in such a manner as to forestall a crisis of resources.

Though the census of 1801 seemed a promisingly thorough solution in theory, in practice it proved otherwise. Chief among its defects was the flawed manner in which it was administered—a testament to the fact that statistics was as yet in its infancy as a science. No method or system for collecting information about the populations in question was given or even suggested. As a result, misunderstandings abounded (Kent 17), and many of the survey's findings had to be discarded as, according to the Report on the Census in 1811, they produced "no result."

For all of their flaws, censuses taken in the early years of statistics point to an increasing interest in a type of quantification distinct from that of political economists, who derived their laws deductively from their theories. Their devotion to a deductive mode of theorizing thus led them to frown upon the inductive mode favored by political arithmeticians, a discipline that, by the nineteenth century had been replaced by the new science of statistics.<sup>5</sup> Yet for all of their ostensible disdain, and despite certain

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<sup>5</sup> The statisticians were those who set out "to describe the condition of a particular country at a particular period," as John Ramsey McCulloch writes in *The Principles of Political Economy* (1825), while the political economists was "to discover the causes which have brought it to that condition, and the means by which its wealth and riches may be indefinitely increased" (39). The political arithmeticians were early scholars who used arithmetic models to study the numbers of people in particular political entities and were among the first to recognize the potential for a science based on observations of human populations.

reservations about its reliability, political economists found themselves drawn to this upstart science. Raymond Kent writes in his *A History of British Empirical Sociology*,

At the very least they [the political economists] were compelled to take statistical information seriously by the great political question of the day: “was English society deteriorating and heading towards revolution as the Tories were prone to claim, or was it progressing as the Whigs would have it?” The issue of “the condition of England” could be settled only by statistical information. (18)

With its array of facts and figures, statistics achieved a certain empirical validity that compelled political economists, who were otherwise content with abstractions, to take them seriously, if for no other reason than the former appeared to reflect, directly and with great precision, the relative health of a nation’s population, particularly with regard to industrialization and its observed effects on this population.

Indeed, this concern with the so-called “condition of England” was a governing factor in the establishment of the London Statistical Society in 1834. The Society was brought about by a final proposal by Malthus, which set about “the collection and classification of all facts illustrative of the present condition and prospects of Society.” The Society presented a rather straightforward program by which to gather these facts: “The Statistical Society will consider it to be the first and most essential rule of its conduct to carefully exclude all Opinions from its transactions and publications—to confine its attention rigorously to facts—and, as far as it may be possible—to facts which can be stated numerically and arranged in tables” (qtd. in Bulmer 9). The Society’s mission statement (so to speak) reconciled science with politics, objectivity with relevance; it proposed to look at only the facts in order to ascertain answers to certain social problems. In stressing its reliance solely on facts that can be arranged in tables, the Society also explicitly distinguished itself from the discipline of political economy:

The Science of Statistics differs from Political Economy because although it has the same end in view, it does not discuss causes, nor reasons upon probable efforts; it seeks only to collect, arrange and compare, that class of facts which alone can form the basis of correct information with respect to social and political government. ( 3)

The Statistical Society aimed to achieve complete objectivity through numbers. The individuals behind those numbers only mattered insofar as they could fit under a certain table or proved a particular fact; it was not for the Society to delve into the stories those facts and figures represented. In formulating this new mode of surveying social problems, the Society essentially created a new discipline that would come to overshadow the political economists and arithmeticians.

The explicit aim of the Statistical Society was to eschew theorization in favor of practical management of information distilled from its surveys and censuses. In this way, the Society thought it could lay claim to a sort of objectivity heretofore unknown in the discipline, or any discipline like it. It sought neither to decode the past, nor discipline the future. If anything, it was a repository of present facts for those who wished to undertake such work. The Society limited itself to social bookkeeping, or an arithmetic intended to account for urban populations.

The Society's stated mission of social bookkeeping is illuminated by Simmel's theory that the city gave rise to the so-called modern mind. "The modern mind has become more and more a calculating one," Simmel writes: "The calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money economy corresponds to the idea of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a mathematical formula" ("The Metropolis and Modern Life" 327). Statistics then was a science intended for the metropolis dependent upon

finance capitalism, for it was a way of decoding the urban experience in fixed mathematical formulas (social bookkeeping), and possessed the additional virtue of being able to assign financial amounts to that experience if necessary.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly in its early years, the Statistical Society prided itself on the degree to which it adhered to the practice of social bookkeeping. Many of the members thought it was beyond their competence and expertise to formulate social policies. Others thought that if appropriate policies did not suggest themselves from systematic inquiry, then it was only a dearth of information that was to blame. Around 1841, however, there emerged a distinct turn of mind, signaled by a shift away from surveys toward largely essayistic, historical discussions of more general questions of political economy—a shift due in part to the development of governmental institutions to gather statistics and the creation of royal commissions to investigate such subjects as the poor laws and factory conditions. This meant increased opportunities for individuals interested in reform to participate in more direct paths of reform than by conducting social research on their own. In the two decades between 1841 and 1860 some 130 commissions were appointed (Kent 30). At times, members of the London and Manchester Statistical Societies were employed as assistant commissioners to gather the data.

With expanded opportunity to intervene in social issues through commentary on statistics gathered by government agencies, the idea of reform evolved accordingly,

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<sup>6</sup>The increase in people trained in factory inspection led to an increase in people trained in administering statistical surveys. Also, interestingly enough, it was in criminology that some of the most sophisticated developments in statistical research took place. In 1851, Thomas Plint published *Crime in England*, where he calculated the correlation between crime and population growth. One of his main conclusions: “It is obvious, that the amount of criminal offences will be in the highest ratio, other things being alike, in those counties in which the operative classes are aggregated in the highest proportion; and as it is in the large towns and cities principally, that the criminal class find their prey, and their places of concealment also, it follows, that wherever the operative class exists, in a proportion to the whole population above the average, and the town and city population is in the same category, there, *caeteris paribus*, crime will be most

taking on a different meaning in the 1840s than it had previously. The members of the statistical societies that sprang up across Britain during the period were mostly middle class men (industrialists and other types of businessmen) who believed that one's physical environment, more specifically the urban environment, determined the habits and characters of the poor and working classes (32). These industrialists had no interest in creating a welfare state; they wanted, rather, to foster an environment that would mold a thrifty and virtuous working class. With this end in mind they set their sights on reforming—insofar as they deliberately set out to reform anything—education and public health. The data they gathered in their statistical tables reflects this interest in moral reform.<sup>7</sup> They expressed no interest in things like rates of unemployment, wages, expenditures, and so on, preferring instead to view society as consisting of “two nations,” as Benjamin Disraeli famously designated them. These two nations represented workers and employees respectively, and, though they existed in a state of mutual economic dependence, they nonetheless persisted in a state of conflict. This conflict arose not because there was an inherent flaw in the social fabric, but, the belief was, because of the lack of understanding and proper sentiment between citizens of the two nations. “Condition of England” novels, so-called because they treated this issue of the two nations, endeavored to mobilize sympathy for the plight of the workers and employers in order to steer popular opinion toward the conclusion that the cultivation of enlightened and benevolent employers, as opposed to the amelioration the urban environment's many ills, presented the best and most effective answer to the problem of mutual hostility

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abundant” (95).

<sup>7</sup> Kent also mentions that middle-class reformers cited as evidence of the relative moral development of their subjects such a thing as the number of “serious” versus the number of theatrical or amatory pictures decorating the homes these reformers visited.

between the two nations.

The principle of disinterested statistical research pervading reformism in the first half of the nineteenth century constitutes a surprising starting point for a text like Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (1844). The scion of a narrowly bourgeois family that ran a mill in the English Midlands, Engels innovated on social research by eschewing objective tabulation in favor of making systematic use of personal evidence to support his case. *The Condition of the Working Class in England* was also the first text to provide an account of the social ecology of a city, describing the social classes dwelling therein in biological as opposed to simply spatial terms. Engels, Kent writes, "interpreted the city as an interrelated social structure; as a living organism of mutually interdependent parts"; and, though the separation of the classes was built into the very structure of the city, one nonetheless discovers "unity in the separation" (41). For Engels, Kent continues,

hidden suffering and squalor was connected with the riches and the lives of the bourgeoisie; the chaos of alleys, the little courts piled high in human excrement, were all inversely and incredibly related to the life of the middle classes, to the work performed in the factories, but above all to the structure of capitalist society as a whole. (41)

Only England presented a situation in which Engels could examine the data in such a manner as to throw into relief the interrelated parts—riches and bourgeois lifestyle on one hand; chaotic alleys, dungpiles, suffering, and squalor on the other—because only England, with its advanced degree of industrialization and social development, generated sufficiently rich data in the form of documents, official reports, and inquiries.<sup>8</sup>

The concern with investigating social phenomena through these documents and

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<sup>8</sup> "Only in England is adequate material available for an exhaustive inquiry into the condition of proletariat" writes Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*: "Only in England do we have at our

official reports is, then, a British trait that did much to further the science of statistics. The British's desire to conduct "exhaustive" inquiries set their statistic data apart from their Continental counterparts.<sup>9</sup> (Germans also made heavy use of statistics, but their approach was not as reliant on direct observation, according to Kent.) As someone who himself hailed from the continent, Engels appreciated the details contained within these official reports, especially as they supplied him with the necessary material with which to critique the epochal event that gave rise to them. This event was, of course, industrialization.

Engels did not just rely on statistical reports, however; he also conducted first-hand interviews with his subjects. "I have met many workers and I have had long talks with them," he writes in the preface to *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, "through personal contact with the English workers I have learned something of their hopes and fears, their joys and sorrows" (3). For Engels, an adequate depiction of the condition of the working classes depended on first-hand accounts of their lives, as well as on minute descriptions of their emotional responses to the conditions of their lives. The emphasis on such details betokens a distinctly novelistic sensibility at work, particularly as compared to the sensibility characterizing the London Statistical Society, which insists that one should rely exclusively on "facts which can be stated numerically and arranged in tables." Engels considered such reliance inadequate when it comes to establishing that squalor suffered by the masses was inextricably connected to the luxury enjoyed by the bourgeoisie. This connection lends itself only to minutely detailed anecdotal—and,

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disposal a large number of official reports on various aspects of lives of the workers."

<sup>9</sup> Though the French too were heavily involved in statistical analysis. Formal academic sociology was established by Emile Durkheim in the late nineteenth century, and the term "sociology" was coined in 1780 by the French essayist Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, and was later defined independently by Auguste Comte in

indeed, literary—treatment, which must moreover be sentimentalized in order to elicit readers' sympathy. For pure statistics threatens to render the urban experience hopelessly abstract, to turn it into a parade of seemingly neutral fact and figures, whereas a more narrative, novelistic approach exerts a mediatory influence on abstract matters, making facts and figures palatable to an uninformed, and perhaps unreceptive, audience.

Certainly this emphasis on a sentimental (albeit objectively so) depiction of the working classes is something Henry Mayhew, an irrepressible journalist turned reformer, shared with Engels. Like Engels, Mayhew believed in the importance of first-hand accounts of the sufferings of the poor and the working classes. His masterpiece of social investigation, *London Labour and the London Poor*, published in four volumes between 1851 and 1861, was devoted to the idea that social change could be brought about through objective investigations into the plight of London's underclass. Mayhew was initially inspired to achieve this end by the cholera outbreak of 1849, having decided that only a comprehensive survey of the London poor could prevent another such public-health catastrophe. A journalist by profession, Mayhew demonstrated a natural affinity for social investigation, and he set about discovering the cause of the cholera outbreak with aplomb.<sup>10</sup> What he discovered during his investigations shocked him. The report of his findings, which he wrote for the *Morning Chronicle*, thus became the first of his famous articles on "Labour and the Poor" and launched his career as social historian.

The year following his report on the cholera outbreak saw the publication in the *Morning Chronicle* of 82 articles by Mayhew, who in very short order became an expert

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1838.

<sup>10</sup> Mayhew's first choice of profession was research chemist. But, in the 1820s, such a profession was neither respectable, nor something one could be trained for. Mayhew most likely wanted to model himself after Michael Faraday, who was a close friend of the family.

on the lives of the working poor. These articles grew progressively longer over the course of their first year of publication, but crafted with careful detail, offering vivid depictions of the lives of various urban denizens. Mayhew structured his articles with a general description of his subject's living conditions that was then followed by an interview with the subject. Gertrude Himmelfarb writes that the *Chronicle* described Mayhew's series of articles as "'a full and detailed description of the moral, intellectual, material, and physical condition of the industrial poor throughout England,' and confidently predicted that it would 'equal, perhaps surpass, official or Parliamentary reports in impartiality, authenticity, and comprehensiveness'" ("Mayhew's Poor: A Problem of Identity" 309).

Mayhew adopted a distinctive tone and style in his dispatches from the second nation. His accounts often wax markedly sentimental, as with the "tragic and touching romance" of an impoverished needlewoman fallen into prostitution (Mayhew 149). "I must confess that to myself the mental and bodily agony of the poor Magdalene who related it was quite overpowering," Mayhew writes about his needlewoman: "She told her tale with her face hidden in her hands, and sobbing so loud that it was with difficulty I could catch her words" (149). The description of Magdalene the fallen needlewoman seems right out of the world of fiction. Because of her "pathetic and romantic" statement, Mayhew felt he had to use "every means to test the truth of what he had heard" (149). By admitting he had done as much in his article on the needlewoman, Mayhew assures his readers that they can go ahead and indulge their desire to sympathize with the needlewoman's plight, which includes a thwarted attempt to commit suicide. Anne Humphreys writes that

the reaction to Mayhew's interviews with the East End [...] needlewomen was extensive. Partly it was preconditioned by a widespread 'iconology of

the seamstress' to use the phrase of T. J. Edelstein. Mainly due to 'The Song of the Shirt' by Hood, throughout the late 1840s there had been an image of the noble but pathetic sempstress in all forms of art—popular theater (Mark Lemon wrote a play called *The Sempstress* in 1844), painting (the subject of Edelstein's article), and literature. Mrs. Gaskell makes her working-class heroine Mary Barton a poor seamstress.[...] Edelstein uses Mayhew as an example of anti-sentimentality about seamstresses. (98)

"Still it is likely," Humphreys continues, "that the strong and widespread outrage caused by his revelations came from an audience already prepared for what he found" (98).

Indeed it seems that despite his supposedly anti-sentimental stance to his subject, Mayhew presented the needlewoman's story in a way that allowed his audience to receive it as they would certain sentimental works of fiction. Even Mayhew, in his report on the desperate needlewoman, confesses to his being seduced by her story and the need to ascertain the truth in what seemed a wholly fictitious account of desperate poverty.

William Makepeace Thackeray, a colleague of Mayhew on the *Chronicle*, praised the seductive nature of Mayhew's accounts characterizing them as "picture[s] of human life so wonderful, so awful, so piteous and pathetic, so exciting and terrible, that readers of romances own they never read anything like to it" (qtd. in Himmelfarb, 317). Thackeray observes that the "griefs, struggles, strange adventures [...] depicted [in Mayhew's accounts] exceed anything that any of us could imagine" (317) and that, despite their apparent exoticism, "these wonders and terrors have been here lying by your door and mine ever since we had a door of our own" (317). Thackeray admits, however, that "we [of the upper classes] have had hitherto no community with the poor. We never speak a word to the servant who waits on us for twenty years [...] Some clear-sighted, energetic young man like the writer of the *Chronicle* travels into the poor man's county for us, and comes back with his tale of terror and wonder" (317).

Thackeray essentially likens Mayhew to a tourist in an unknown and dangerous land venturing where no middle-class Briton had dared to venture before. The dispatches Mayhew sent from the locales he visited proved disarmingly seductive “picture[s] of human life so wonderful, so awful, so piteous and pathetic, so exciting and terrible, that readers of romance own they never read anything like to it,” writes Thackeray (317). According to Thackeray’s statement, Mayhew’s accounts of London’s poor bring that picture of human life to one’s very door and, in so doing, domesticate a subject which had to that point been shrouded in unnerving mystery.

Not all of Mayhew’s accounts for the *Morning Chronicle* enjoyed such popular success, however. His works on the Ragged Schools and Sailors Home, for instance, met with resistance and skepticism on the part of his reading public. It was apparently easier for his middle class audience to sympathize with impoverished needlewomen than with wild sailors, which suggests that the middle-class psyche could assimilate the plight of those real-life subjects who most closely resembled the fictional ones of bourgeois realist novels. After his reports on the Sailors Home, Mayhew decided to be more scientific in his approach to his investigations, using an inductive method of investigation—a decision that led him eventually to break with the *Morning Chronicle*, and it was with this break that Mayhew began developing material that he would later fashion into his signature work, *London Labour and the London Poor*.

In *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) Mayhew recorded interviews with beggars, street urchins, costermongers, prostitutes and laborers. His accounts of these denizens of the urban underworld supplied the reader with the minutest details about his subjects’ lives, offering descriptions of their clothes, food, entertainments and how and

where they lived. Mayhew writes in the preface to the first volume of *London Labour* (a work which ran to three volumes) that he hoped his work “will form, when complete, a cyclopaedia of the industry, the want, and the vice of the great Metropolis” (iii). This undertaking is particularly “curious,” he continues,

because it is the first attempt to publish the history of a people, from the lips of the people themselves—giving a literal description of their labour, their earnings, their trials, and their sufferings, in their own ‘unvarnished’ language; and to portray the condition of their homes and their families by personal observation of the places, and direct communion with the individuals. (iii)

Mayhew’s project indeed emerges as “curious” particularly in light of the approach taken by professional statisticians up to this point; his careful attention to detail represented a desire to move away from the so-called improvement-by-numbers approach that relied on statistical tables in order to get closer to the truth about his subjects and the causes of their immiseration.

A brief look at one of the accounts taken from this groundbreaking survey reveals this innovative approach to investigating the lives of the poor. In “The Rat Killer,” Mayhew interviews a professional rat killer from Chapel-street. Acting very much the part of a traveler in a poor man’s country, he begins the account by describing the locale in which the rat killer plies his trade. “In ‘the Brill,’ or rather in Brill-place, Somers’-town,” Mayhew writes, “there is a variety of courts branching out into Chapel-street, and in one of the most angular and obscure of these is to be found a perfect nest of rat-catchers” (413). Mayhew’s characterizing the rat-catchers’ habitation as a nest collapses the distinction between the habits of rat-catchers and the rats they catch, which suggests that, to the reader at least, rat catchers are something alien to middle-class society, or, perhaps more fittingly, they are a species of vermin themselves and, as such, are

unworthy of sympathy or fellow feeling. The account proceeds to an interview, where the rat catcher describes how rats, as Mayhew writes, were not “his only diversion” (413). The rat catcher shows his interviewer his pet bull-dogs, and then proceeds to relate an unusual story: “I don’t know whether you’ve heard of it, master, or not, but I’m the man as they say kills rats—that’s to say, I kills ‘em like a dog [...] I’ve killed rats for a wager often” (413). The account is undeniably shocking; details guaranteed to elicit a strong emotional response are readily made available to the reader. This is even more apparent when the rat catcher goes on to describe how he won a sovereign by killing eight rats, one of which bit him in the neck: “On the hind part of my neck, as you may see, sir, there’s a scar; that’s where I was bit by one; the rat twisted himself round and held on like a vice. It was very bad, sir, for a long time; it festered, and broke out once or twice, but it’s all right now” (416). That the rat catcher becomes as seemingly feral as the rat could not escape the attention of Mayhew’s middle class audience, and most likely confirmed certain beliefs about the animality of the lower classes.

As in the account of the seamstress, Mayhew’s narrative of the rat killer’s unusual profession, despite its purported objectivity, strikes distinctly sentimental notes intended to elicit pronounced emotional responses from the reader. However, the rat killer occupies the opposite end of the emotional spectrum from the seamstress in that the former elicits disgust rather than sympathy. Yet the rat killer, unlike the wild denizens of the Sailors Home, is not someone altogether alien or other, his unsavory profession notwithstanding. Rather, he is familiar insofar as he can be despised. He therefore falls within the emotional compass of the bourgeoisie, inspiring the very excitement and terror mentioned by Thackeray. Mayhew’s account of his unsavory dealings with a member of

the London underworld is very much akin to something the reader would find in dramas or sensationalistic romances that inspire extreme emotional responses from its audience.

### Henry Mayhew and Sentimental Fiction

The fact that Mayhew's sociological reports of the poor shares features with sentimental, bourgeois novelistic fiction comes as no surprise. Before becoming a social observer, Mayhew wrote a number of fairly successful plays and novels. He wrote for the popular stage and, together with his brother Augustus Mayhew, completed a series of novels, many of which dealt with his political and social philosophies. Mayhew's fictional works garnered much attention from his contemporaries. In the 1856 edition of *Men of the Time: Biographical Sketches of Eminent Living Characters*, Henry Mayhew is lauded for the novels and plays he wrote with his brother Augustus. The author, Frederic Boase, writes that Mayhew has "started a Pharaoh's host of reviews and periodicals [and his list of fictional works] would be almost Alexandre-Dumasian in its length" (541). Boase then goes on to list some of Mayhew's more popular fictional works, which he describes as enjoying "an extensive popularity," and cites as evidence for this extensive popularity the fact Mayhew's novel *The Greatest Plague* "sold more copies than any other serial since the days of 'Pickwick'" (541). Henry Mayhew is rarely thought of as having been a literary figure as popular as Dickens, but contemporary reports reveal that this was precisely the case. Indeed, Mayhew, like Dickens, wrote popular Christmas books, and his novels and plays number into the dozens.

One of Mayhew's more successful dramatic endeavors was *The Wandering Minstrel*, a comedy of manners whose performance length clocks in at a brisk forty-five

minutes. *The Wandering Minstrel* was, in Mayhew's words, an "infant effort." Like most farces of the 1830s, it concerns the middle and upper-middle classes, specifically the anxiety of one Mr. Crincum, a professedly anti-sentimental gentleman, and his wife, who is against the marriage of their niece to the son of an attorney for reasons of the latter's lack of a proper pedigree. The play's central focus, however, is the arrival of a cockney musician who is traveling through the country earning money by singing.

*The Wandering Minstrel* is a sentimental representation of certain class anxieties common for the period. "In 1834, Henry Mayhew wrote a play which illustrates this very condition" Deborah Vlock writes in *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre*: "*The Wandering Minstrel*, a one-act farce which played over seventy times in London, illustrates how street culture may insinuate itself into 'decent' society with the assistance of deceptive song or speech" (88). Certainly the character of Jem Bags, a drunken transient mistaken for a wandering nobleman minstrel, poses a threat to the social harmony of the Crincum household. The play opens with Mrs. Crincum announcing his intention to thwart for reasons of breeding the suit of Mr. Carol, Julia Crincum's beloved: "Well!—be he as rich and as liberal withal as you please, the blood of the Crincum's shall never be diluted with the wash that flows in the veins of the Carols" (*The Wandering Minstrel* 3). A certain paranoia regarding class divisions presents itself in the work, one which is only exacerbated by the appearance of Jem Bags, who is mistaken for a "well-known musical nobleman" who is "travelling through the country, under the disguise of a Wandering Minstrel" (5). This musical nobleman supposedly enjoys "the kindest receptions from the gentry of the different towns he visits, it being easy to perceive from his noble air and courtly demeanor that his character is assumed"

(5). That the musical nobleman should be recognized merely because of a “noble air” and “courtly demeanor” implies, for at least the first half of the play, that certain class cues are still in operation. Despite a beggarly appearance, the musical nobleman appears noble to those who share in that nobility. This model of knowing based on invisible cues only discernible by a select few implies an older social model, one that resembles Simmel’s small town social order, where identities are fixed and can be known through static cues and markers.

Jem Bags disrupts this older model of class relations, however. Sitting outside of the Crincum household, drunkenly singing a cockney song and playing the clarinet badly, Jem is mistaken for the disguised musical nobleman. After being brought into the house, Mrs. Crincum claims to be able to discern Jem’s obscured nobility. “The paper was very right,” she says, “he certainly has all the air of the nobleman” (8). And after asking after his name, she states, “Yes, now I am convinced that he is indeed a nobleman in disguise—I recollect hearing Mr. Carol, the attorney, say, ‘Old Bags’ was the name of a great lord, I trust, sir, you have every hope of being successful” (9). But despite claiming to know that Jem Bags is indeed the noble musician, there is a distinct miscommunication between Jem and the Crincums. In response to Mrs. Crincum’s statement about his nobility, Bags says, picking up on the word “bet”: “My bet! how should she know anything about Bet?—my intended, Betsy Bags what is to be!” (9). Such miscommunication happens throughout the play and points to distinct class divisions—something more akin to the urban model of class relations, which is marked by fragmentation and alienation and where signifiers do not necessarily match with assumptions about the thing signified.

Only Julia, the Crincum's niece who proposes to cross class lines by marrying the attorney Mr. Carol, can discern Jem's true nature. Together with Mr. Carol, she plots a ruse to uncover Jem's duplicity: "I have thought of a stratagem," she confides to Mr. Carol,

my aunt gives a concert this evening, in honor of a fellow whom she has found strolling about the village and whom she calls 'the Wandering Minstrel;' but which, I am convinced is not the fact. Now, if you could only obtain admission to the house disguised as the real wanderer, I think two or three songs on your guitar would be certain to gain her consent.  
(15)

Julia proposes to thwart Jem's assumed identity by having her fiancée assume the same identity. That Mr. Carol is no more a nobleman than Jem Bags does not matter, because, in the world of the play, all social relations have been called into question, and social mobility is achieved via subterfuge. Julia's plan succeeds. Mr. Carol gains entry into the family, despite being of the lower classes, and Jem is expelled from the Crincum's social sphere altogether. The play ends with the distinctly sentimental construct of the prospect of a future wedding. With the introduction of sentimentality, however, social wrongs, while not put right, become better than they might have been had there not been any interference from Mr. Carol. The play presents sentimentality as a means of defusing the most threatening attempts to upset the social order. But it also acknowledges that sentimental constructs can only do so much in the way of defusing those threats, especially when the underlying social constructs have been dismantled by social and economic forces beyond the control of the bourgeois family.

Like Engels's research for *The Condition of the Working Class*, Mayhew's career as a social investigator was conducted during a period of tremendous social and economic upheaval. Works like *The Wandering Minstrel* address the anxiety engendered

by the rapid changes occurring in British society, where urbanization and finance capitalism were unseating older, more stable social orders. “England changed from an agrarian, feudal country to a modern industrial society,” Mayhew’s biographer Anne Humphreys writes, “where power is in the hands of the industrialists who own ‘the means of production’ and the financiers who provide the money or ‘capital’ to develop the industry” (81). Clear-cut social relations of the agrarian, feudal community were dissolved with the advent of finance capitalism and the urban industrial centers dependent upon it for funding. “While social relations under feudalism were relatively clear,” Humphreys continues, “under the industrialists and financiers—the bourgeoisie—a new code governing class relations was needed. But instead of being based on ethics, the new code came to be seen as determined by a series of impersonal and immutable scientific ‘laws’ that worked like the laws of natural science” (81). The change from a society dependent on clearly delineated feudal codes to one ruled by finance capitalism required new ways of understanding class relations, which were conveniently supplied by the then nascent disciplines of the natural and social sciences. No longer could class be traced through lineage and property; finance capitalism simultaneously opened the floodgates between classes and instituted social structures, (i. e., the formation of classes based on industrial rather than agricultural models) that were even more fixed than those of feudal England. The owner of a bustling factory, for instance, would never open his doors to his workers as would a lord of a feudal manor during times of celebration. Yet, because denizens of urban industrial towns were not beholden to factory owners as they had been to feudal lords, they presented difficulties when it came to accounting for them. They could, like Jem, slip into the world of their superiors without attracting notice. Class

relations were not only complicated and buttressed by anxieties fostered in the new urban configuration predicated on finance and industrialism, they were also unintentionally liberalized as property-less—and hence identity-less—residents of urban areas could act the part of the upper classes and pass into their social spheres without much notice.

Mayhew countered the challenge of defining mutable urban class relations by instituting his own way of understanding London's lower classes. Mayhew's new way of surveying the lower classes required approaching his subject through sentimental discourse and objective scientific observation. Mayhew's proclivity for combining sentimentally charged prose with supposedly objective observation was not unique; the writers of the Blue Books also used elements of the dramatic in their reports. "The famous Blue Books—Royal Commission and Select Committee reports on sanitation, housing, health, interment, and the like—represented the Condition of the People in terms not very different from Mayhew's" Gertrude Himmelfarb writes: "indeed Mayhew himself drew upon the Blue Books for his own work" ("Mayhew's Poor: A Problem of Identity" 415). Most of the reports tried to be even-handed and were ostensibly concerned with the condition of the laboring classes as a whole. "But inevitably the tendency was to emphasize the worst conditions of the lowliest poor," Himmelfarb continues: "This was probably less the result of a conscious strategy to attract attention and promote reform than of an entirely natural and unconscious disposition towards the dramatic" (415). Modes of description pulled from the world of fiction—dramatic scenes intended to elicit sympathy or the desire for reform—were apparently integral to the work of the early social reformers, even if they were unconscious of the presence of its influence. Though the end result was not entirely beneficial because the overly dramatic depiction of the

“worst conditions of the lowliest poor” led to resignation and a belief that nothing could be done to rectify the situation, the presence of a distinctly dramatic sentimental prose in supposedly objective and scientific reports merits closer attention because it points to a “two-way street,” as George Levine has said, between the social sciences and literature. That is, the presence of sentimental prose in a supposedly scientific publication begs the question as to what purpose that sentimental prose serves. Furthermore, it calls into question the opposition suggested by Dickens’s phrase “the dismal science.” Rather than opposition, there appears to be a collaboration between the two disciplines, and this collaboration seems to have been of great interest to figures like Mayhew (and, as we shall see, Dickens).

In the case of Mayhew’s reports, however, it appears that the use of sentimental prose was deliberate. The influence of the Blue Books on Mayhew might have given him the idea to integrate dramatic prose into otherwise objective reports, but accounts like that of the Chapel-street rat killer point to a deliberate use of tropes borrowed from fiction that effected a domestication of a subject otherwise too alien and upsetting to a middle-class audience. The fact that Mayhew was also a dramatist lends further credence to the idea that he consciously used literary tropes and constructs to make the subject of his reports more domesticated. That is, the use of sentimental tropes allowed Mayhew to capture the attention of his middle-class audience with the promise of exotic tales from London’s underworld, all the while ensuring that the subjects of those tales would remain firmly embedded in discourses of comfortably bourgeois sentiment.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE BUSINESSLIKE SIN OF HABIT: DICKENS AND THE POLITICS OF SENTIMENT

Sentimental discourse was of concern to more than just statisticians; along with social relations, it occupied the forefront of Victorian concerns about social cohesiveness and collective morality. Charles Dickens, for instance, used sentimental discourse as a means for bringing certain social issues to the attention of a middle class audience habituated to seeing the urban environment in such a manner as to essentially to impose a purblindness to the iniquities and injustices Victorian British economic relations visited upon the lowest social strata. “The Victorian ‘sentimentalists’ believed that the alienating and dehumanizing pressures and strictures of modern culture, all of them dry-eyed exponents of misery and suppression, are more and more separating human beings from their natural sentiments, and that the desire to repress them is widespread even if dormant,” writes Fred Kaplan in *Sacred Tears*: “The novelist’s purpose is to awaken that desire and to help it fulfill its needs” (41). Certainly social reformers like Mayhew saw a need for the sentimental in their works. Already there was a connection between the social surveys and journalism, and, as Anne Humphreys observes, Mayhew’s accounts read as effectively as one of Dickens’s novels. “The power of his writing [...] explains why the readers of his initial articles in *London and the Poor* responded so strongly and with such shock to information that was not new,” she writes (100). Texts from the period reveal an

awareness of the sometimes violent effect of sentimental prose upon the reader's imagination.

Alexander Bain addresses himself to this phenomenon of sentimentality eliciting violent emotion in his 1888 treatise *The Emotions and the Will*. In reference to Butler's discussion of the effect of the sentimental on the reader, he writes:

What is tenable in Butler's position seems to be this,—that the repeated indulgence of pity as a sentiment, without any corresponding action, grows into a sentimental habit. The sentimental pleasure does not diminish, as his doctrine about passive impressions would make us suppose; what diminishes is the *active tendency*, which belongs naturally to our impulses of pity, and would be strengthened by exercise, while in the absence of exercise it may become feebler than it originally was. (459)

According to Bain, events that elicit pity without providing an outlet for action promote a habit of sentimentality. This habit of sentimentality is associated with inaction: the desire to rectify the situation that originally elicited pity is gradually tempered, until indulgence in impotent sentimentality becomes a habit. Yet because of its immediate appeal to the emotions, sentiment remained a powerful force for persuading an audience.

In similar vein, George Henry Lewes, writing about the effect of Dickens's sentimental prose, remarked on its immediate appeal to the feelings. Lewes argued that if at the time of reading the reader is personally moved, she cannot simply get away from the sheer fact of that experience—though she can of course, deny its facticity afterwards. The inaction engendered by sentimentality is thus coupled with an irresistible attraction and personal engagement to and with the scene of sentimentality, making it at once enervating and compelling. The sort of personal engagement with the fictive subject that elicits the emotional response momentarily breaks down the boundaries between urban dwellers, whether those boundaries are social or merely spatial. In *The Paris of the*

*Second Empire in Baudelaire* (1938), Benjamin writes of the “physiologies” that were so popular in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. These physiologies, Benjamin writes, were books which “investigated the human types that a person taking a look at the marketplace might encounter” (“The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” 18). They were a part of a genre of literature known as “panoramic literature,” individual sketches that provided a panoramic view of the city and its denizens. These works proved immensely popular as they helped to orient the otherwise alienated bourgeois urban dweller, making her view of the city narrower and thereby more familiar. “The long series of eccentric or appealing simple or severe figures which the physiologies presented to the public in character sketches had one thing in common: they were harmless and perfectly affable” (19). The harmlessness of the physiologies made the city in which their characters supposedly lived seem equally as benign. “In his *Eugene Aram*,” Benjamin continues,

Bulwer-Lytton orchestrated his description of big city dwellers with a reference to Goethe’s remark that each person, the most worthy as well as the most despicable, carries around a secret which would make him hateful to everyone else if it became known. The physiologies were just the thing to brush such disquieting notions aside as insignificant. They constituted, so to speak, the blinkers of the “narrow-minded city animal” that Marx wrote about. (20)

Like the secret that Jem Bags of Mayhew’s *The Wandering Minstrel* carried with him—a secret which had to be defused by the less threatening, but not quite acceptable, character of Mr. Carol—the secrets of the mid-century Parisian dweller needed to be domesticated through literary representations palatable to an anxious middle-class reader, representations that repressed details which threatened to disturb such a reader in favor of those that would seem to her entertainingly familiar. For the London denizen, the sentimental passages found in the work of early social scientists like Henry Mayhew

served the same purpose. Like the physiologies, they gave the bourgeois reader if not necessarily “a friendly picture,” as Benjamin terms it, of the lower classes, then at least one that falls within the limits of this reader’s intellectual and emotional understanding.

As to the origin and purpose of this type of sentimentality, Phillip Davis writes that the typical idea of sentimentality—that it “exists defensively and protectively, putting women and children first, and if men thereafter, only little weak, foolish, childish, or underprivileged men from the lower order”—seems to indicate that sentimentality is “not truly active, as Spinoza might have wished, but merely the re-active product of the harsh masculine world of the urban Industrial Revolution” (23). “When people moved from the countryside to the towns,” Davis continues, “and hardly knew where they were any more in that harsher and faster world, at least they still knew the communal heart was in the right place. Is that not what Victorian sentimentality is: a defensive part of urban social history, democratizing inarticulate good feeling, offering family feeling a new place in the world?” (23). In the nineteenth century, sentimentality served a similar purpose as the natural and social sciences. It provided order for a social world rendered chaotic by urbanization. That is, just as the sciences provided explanations and laws for why certain classes behaved in particular ways, sentimental novelistic discourse restored humanity to subjects rendered inhuman by the natural and social sciences, articulating “inarticulate good feeling,” a phenomena for which the sciences had no explanation. But this articulation of the inarticulate did nothing to address the means by which those feelings were made inarticulate in the first place, nor did it attempt to stem the alienation engendered by urbanization. If anything, the tendency of sentimental prose to articulate the inarticulate obscured the fact that those subjects had been disenfranchised, at least

ontologically, by disciplines beyond their knowledge. Sentimentality enacted a passive obfuscation of its subject and the social problems afflicting it.

This interpretation of the seemingly passive and at times duplicitous role of the sentimental differed markedly from earlier conceptions of it. The word “sentiment” came into the English language as early as the fourteenth century; originally the term alternately meant “physical feeling,” “own’s own feelings,” and “a thought or reflection clouded by proceeding or proceeding from emotion.” Nothing in these early definitions of the term indicate whether sentiment should indeed lead to action or whether the feeling engendered by it was false. Indeed, Adam Smith felt sentiment to be the foundation of ethical action. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), he writes, “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it” (1). It is this fellow feeling or sentiment that forms the foundation of ethical action within a community, because sentiment makes an individual imagine that his or her feelings are similar, if not identical, to those of other individuals. Sentiment was a wholly positive term, one that allowed for community building and ethical social interaction. The term did not have negative connotations until the late nineteenth century, when sentiment came to mean possibly excessive and hypocritically futile indulgence that was moreover opposed to reason. To indulge in sentimental feeling during the nineteenth century was potentially to engage in a type of overwrought and counterfeit form of feeling.

The Victorian idea of the role of the sentimental does, however, share with earlier ages a belief that, as Kaplan writes, sentimentality is an “offspring of Enlightenment

optimism” because it “assumes the existence of innate ‘moral sentiments.’”

“Historically,” Kaplan continues, “sentimentality found its propitious moment when both the latitudinarian and Puritan explanations of human nature were losing their effectiveness and the possibility of comprehensive alternative explanations, particularly of good and evil, seemed dim” (16). Sentimentality promised to fill the void left by these waning belief systems by locating the ground of moral performance in innate moral feelings. Morality was directed inward, ushered thither by individual feelings rather than by common mores. And, like the effect produced by the dramatically sentimental scenes in the Blue Books and reports of the social investigators, this concept of sentimentality did not demand that moral feelings produce moral actions. It was perfectly all right to indulge privately in pity or horror without acting on an impulse to rectify the source of the emotion. The sentiment found in statistics promised to restore the ethical dimension of sentiment that had been removed by habit, but this restoration was only a partial restoration because action need not follow the sentiment. If anything, the sentimental prose found in the works of social scientists promoted the illusion of Smithian fellow feeling and its attendant shared social values, but did not exhort those experiencing this feeling actually to act on it.

Sentiment offered the means by which a portion of the moral fabric of society might be restored without inciting the desire to change the status quo, and in so doing countered the distancing effects of modern ways of observing society. In *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (2001), Amanda Anderson writes, “Many Victorians were wary of certain distancing effects of modernity, including the overvaluing and misapplication of the scientific method as well as the

forms of alienation and rootlessness that accompanied modern disenchantment, industrialization, and the globalization of commerce” (4). Wariness about the alienating effects of scientific approaches to quantifying the human experience led “many writers [to] displa[y] a complex ambivalence toward the powers of modern distance, one that is legible, for example, in the opposing symbolism attached to representative figures across the literature of the period” (4). Such ambivalence manifests itself in the works of Henry Mayhew, who employed modes of representation drawn from fiction along with statistics in his social surveys. Novelistic discourse of the bourgeois–sentimental variety enabled Mayhew to domesticate his statistical subjects, situating them in a context that was familiar to the emotional and intellectual experiences of his readers. Thus discursivized, the subject elicits fellow feeling from readers, and in so doing transcends his at once familiar yet profoundly alien character as a representative member of that second nation of England’s poor.

The depiction of the poor as savagely alien was not confined to the writings of the social scientists. In his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), Thomas De Quincey describes his forays into the labyrinthine bowels of London. Through his use of opium, De Quincey manages to create the illusion for himself of communing with and understanding the poor. “I used often,” he writes, “on a Saturday night, after I had taken opium, to wander forth, without much regarding the direction or the distance, to all the markets, and other parts of London, to which the poor resort on a Saturday night, for laying out their wages” (80). The opium seems to dissolve any sense of unfamiliarity; De Quincey overhears the conversation of impoverished families, becoming familiar with “their wishes, their difficulties, and their opinions” (80). De Quincey admits that “the

poor are far more philosophic than the rich,” and his intoxicated state allows him to see the humanity in his subjects and even to enter into their mindset: “Whenever I saw occasion,” he continues,

or could do it without appearing to be intrusive, I joined their parties; and gave my opinion upon the matter in discussion, which, if not always judicious, was always received indulgently. If wages were a little higher, or expected to be so, or the quatern loaf a little lower, or it was reported that onions and butter were expected to fall, I was glad [...] For opium (like the bee, that extracts its materials indiscriminately from roses and from the soot of chimneys) can overcome all feelings into a compliance with a master key. (81)

That is, opium allows for the impermanent restoration of a sense of community based on fellow feeling.

Yet even De Quincey recognizes that his dreams of fellow feeling with the poor are only illusion. He speaks of entering into their realm as an adventurer enters into a land populated by so-called savages. “I could almost have believed, at times, that I must be the first discoverer of some of these *terrae incognitae*, and doubted, whether they had yet been laid down in the modern charts of London” (81). The faces of the poor that opium allowed him to commune with so openly come back to terrorize De Quincey:

For all this, however, I paid a heavy price in distant years, when the human face tyrannized over my dreams, and the perplexities of my steps in London came back and haunted my sleep, with the feeling of perplexities moral or intellectual, that brought confusion to the reason, or anguish and remorse to the conscience. (81)

Only the influence of opium allows De Quincey to break with intellectual and moral habits and to commune openly with the poor. During his sober moments the memory of their faces, now made alien and terrifying, cause him great moral and intellectual anguish. De Quincey’s description of his time among the poor reveals just how foreign the slums of London were to the middle-class observer; to enter them was like entering a

foreign and hostile land, and only the illusion of familiarity could make them tolerable. Once back in the habit of seeing the poor as creatures foreign to his lifeworld, De Quincey is wracked with anguish and remorse without necessarily acting on those emotions.

De Quincey was not alone in feeling London's poor were not quite British citizens, that instead they were something altogether far more savage and foreign. The poor were frequently referred to as savages in the literature of the time and were figures against which the middle class united. *In Darkest England: And the Way Out* (1890), William Booth writes,

The Dark Continent can show no lower depth of degradation than that sounded by the dwellers of the dark alleys in Cherry Hill. There isn't a vice missing in that quarter. Every sin in the Decalogue flourishes in that feeder of penitentiaries and prisons. And even as its moral foulness permeates and poisons the veins of our social life so the malarial filth with which the locality reeks must sooner or later spread disease and filth. (163-4)

The chaotic, lawless freedom preferred by the inhabitants of the Dark Continent nineteenth-century social reformers ascribe to the chaotic disease-ridden, sinful slums of Cherry Hill, and the potentially infectious appeal of such freedom they re-imagine as actual viral contagion.<sup>11</sup> Booth's text denies London slum dwellers the humanity Mayhew's text invests in them. For Booth, they represent so much biomass destined to be fed into the penitentiaries and prisons should they show temerity enough to wander from

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<sup>11</sup> One discovers an earlier example of the cultivation of fellow feeling around a social outcast in Immanuel Kant's "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch" (1795), a text that outlines a system for perpetual peace among states. The vision proffered therein is of a world of guaranteed safety and universal hospitality extended to visitors of every country—the basis for a constitution for "world citizenship" (438). This system of universal hospitality is dependent upon a shared system of feelings and values, of mutual sympathy. Yet membership in world citizenship is, according to Kant, less than universal; certain inhabitants of the world, savages, are always already excluded from world citizenship, preferring "lawless freedom" to "rational freedom." The savage stands as the figure against which the world community is defined. Part of the fellow feeling cultivated among world citizens depends on their not being savages; the latter partake of

their dark alleys. Yet the London slum dwellers' threat, imagined in terms of actual viral contagion, was greater than that posed by even De Quincey's imagination, which confined the threat posed by the poor to relatively abstract terms magnified by the imagination. For Booth, the threat from the poor is a miasma that rises from malarial filth. As such, it is dispersed, mobile, lacking definition and clear limits, but is no less real, nor less threatening, for being so, and is therefore more difficult to combat. Booth's text conjures an almost palpable horror: miasma observes no boundaries, no class lines.

Booth's remarks on the irrepressible contagion of low living represent a rare moment of honesty, one unembellished with sentimental flourishes. Given that *In Darkest England* was responsible for the Salvation Army's modern social-welfare scheme, such honesty suggests a deliberate agenda on Booth's part that does not necessarily take its cues from middle-class preoccupations. As founder of the Salvation Army, Booth's politics were quite different from his contemporaries, the social statisticians. He was a Methodist preacher, not an industrialist or financier. Yet, these differences notwithstanding, Booth's description of the London slums creates an impression which replicates with uncanny fidelity the impression characteristic of popular middle-class imagination. Fear of contagion and a belief that the lower classes engendered chaotic circumstances led the middle class to believe the lower class's lives to be at best utterly alien and at worst a deadly miasma threatening to spill forth and infect more affluent parts of the city.

#### Dickens and the Novel of Sentiment

Dickens felt quite differently about the use of sentiment in works of literature and journalism. He believed that rather than obscuring true emotion or presenting an accurate

depiction of a situation, sentiment helped move the reader closer to the truth of the work's subject. In this sense, Dickens's understanding is closer to an earlier conception that held that sentiment was a reflection of true emotion or of one's own feelings, and could break the reader of the habit of not "seeing" the character. This is evident in Dickens's early pieces on London life, which are collected in *Sketches by Boz* (1837-39). As with Mayhew, many of Dickens's sketches first appeared in *The Morning Chronicle*, and met with great enthusiasm from the paper's bourgeois audience. The paper employed him from 1834 to 1836, and his writings reflect a concern with the political and social upheavals that marked the period immediately preceding Victoria's ascension to the throne.

A brief look at one of Dickens's sketches reveals this attempt to make visible the invisible, that is, to make the bourgeois reader abandon certain blinders imposed by class and intellectual prejudices and see what is usually suppressed from popular consciousness. Indeed Dickens writes quite frequently about how the urban environment fosters a type of habit that in turns leads to further atomization of individuals. In "Our Next-door Neighbor" (1836) Dickens remarks on how in the absence of ways of knowing one's neighbors the urban dweller can only rely on superficial markers like doorknobs. While the piece is humorously wry, it does underscore the novel situations created by urban environments, which, as Simmel remarked, depend on visual rather than aural cues: "Someone who sees without hearing is much more uneasy than someone who hears without seeing. [...] Interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of visual activity over aural activity" (486). Aural activity is fostered by community relations in which individuals communicate by speaking to one

another. In “Our Next-door Neighbor” the anonymity of the urban environment makes spoken communication impossible; one must deduce the characteristics of other urban dwellers by visual cues. “We are very fond of speculating as we walk through a street,” Dickens writes, “on the character and pursuits of the people who inhabit it; and nothing so materially assists us in these speculations as the appearance of house doors” (58). House doors come to signify the personality of the dweller within more so than the individual’s actual countenance: “The various expressions of the human countenance afford a beautiful and interesting study, but there is something in the physiognomy of street-door knockers, almost as characteristic, and nearly as infallible” (58). It becomes almost habit to substitute the knocker for the face of the dweller within, a fact that is made apparent when this habit is disrupted by a new, faceless knocker: “We were greatly troubled a few years ago, by the innovation of a new kind of knocker, without any face at all” (60). Humor aside, this sketch provides insightful commentary on the plight of the urban individual, and it also betrays an anxiety about the fallibility of the material cues that serve as stand-ins for personal relationships. It shows how easily the urban bourgeois individual habituates him or herself to look for markers upon which to fasten stable presuppositions regarding the inhabitants of the city in which he or she lives. The individual within the house need never be looked at so long as the knocker on the door provides the social cues for which the viewer is looking. This offers a far more predictable reading than the individual within ever could.

“Thoughts About People” is another early sketch that comments on the unique situation facing the urbanite. “‘Tis strange,” the narrator remarks, “with how little notice, good, bad or indifferent, a man may live and die in London” (251). This anonymity

created by the urban environment is in marked contrast to a community whose social ties are founded on feeling and familial relations. The narrator describes the plight of the lone urbanite in detail:

There is a very numerous class of people in this great metropolis who seem not to possess a single friend, and whom nobody appears to care for. Urged by imperative necessity in the first instance, they have resorted to London in search of employment, and the means of subsistence. It is hard, we know, to break the ties which bind us to our homes and friends, and harder still to efface the thousand recollections of happy days and old times, which have been slumbering in our bosoms for years, and only rush upon the mind to bring before it, with startling reality, associations connected with the friends we have left, the scenes we have beheld too probably for the last time, and the hopes we once cherished, but may entertain no more. These men, however, happily for themselves, have long since forgotten such thoughts. (251)

The narrator of the sketch affirms the alienating effect of the urban environment. Whereas the small town offers the comfort of an identity forged through social ties and shared memory, the great city renders the individual meaningless, with no way for others to understand her, or for her to understand those individuals she in turn encounters. Instead, the narrator continues, the urban resident becomes lost “in the crowd and turmoil of some busy city,” gradually settling down “into mere passive creatures of habit and endurance” (251). One can suggest that it is habit itself that makes the urban dweller invisible to others and blind to most of the events and individuals that assail his senses on a daily basis. In reference to another sketch in the collection, Kevin McLaughlin writes that this inability to see certain realities of the city is indicative of repression: “The everyday is taken up by Boz in an effort to describe a sort of quotidian unconscious, a space where revelation and repression are in ceaseless conflict, and where what is revealed most of all is repression itself” (90). McLaughlin continues by claiming that this repression is aided by a foreground of habitual responses. “Thus the overarching aim of *Sketches*, it is

implied in this late sketch,” he writes, “is less ‘objective’ knowledge of everyday particulars (a theme of earlier sketches) than the designation or foregrounding of a kind of familiarity or habit (an imaginary relation to real conditions, one might say) that conceals such particularity” (90). Of course, the sketch itself helps to lift this desultory alienation, and implicit in it is the idea that journalism can reveal what is usually overlooked or ignored in the great metropolises.

Indeed, Dickens’s used sentiment as a way of breaking readers from habitual emotional and intellectual responses to certain subject matter. Answering the frequent criticisms that his characters were one-dimensional and his narratives vapidly cheerful, Dickens’s defenders saw his literary project as an attempt to develop a mode of writing that captured its subject in a truthful, or at least seemingly objective, manner. G.K. Chesterton is one such defender. He believed Dickens challenged contemporary ideas about objectivity and observation. In *Dickens: A Critical Study* (1911), Chesterton writes, “But when all is said, as I have remarked before, the chief foundation in Dickens of what I have called cheerfulness, and some prefer to call optimism, is something deeper than a verbal philosophy. It is, after all, an incomparable hunger and pleasure for the vitality and the variety, for the infinite eccentricity of existence” (289). According to Chesterton, Dickens’s interest in portraying the lives he did stemmed from his fascination with the vicissitudes of urban life, a fascination that manifested itself in a “philosophical gaiety” (289). This philosophical gaiety perhaps was what led Dickens to see what his contemporaries did not in the urban environment. Rather than depicting a world made monotonous through the habit of seeing only what one wants to see, Dickens made the infinite eccentricity of existence his subject matter, a subject that could not be pinned

down through scientific observation or shop-worn novelistic tropes.

If Chesterton took a special interest in Dickens, it was because Dickens mirrored his own belief that the sciences failed to accurately represent a reality that he found otherworldly and which defied representation through traditional means. In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton writes that it is men of science who are the sentimentalists. He complains that “they do really talk as if they had found not only a set of marvelous facts, but a truth connecting those facts.[...] They feel that because one incomprehensible thing constantly follows another incomprehensible thing the two together somehow make up a comprehensible thing” (93). To Chesterton, this logic used by scientists is distinctly sentimental: “A sentimentalist might shed tears at the smell of apple-blossom, because, by a dark association of his own, it reminded him of his boyhood. So the materialist professor (though he conceals his tears) is yet a sentimentalist, because, by a dark association of his own, apple-blossoms remind him of apples” (95). The scientist’s observations confuse knowing with ethical obligation; only the discernment of a pattern was used to justify the most complex truths. This arbitrary determination of values made the scientist an imperialist: “Herbert Spencer would have been greatly annoyed if any one had called him an imperialist, and therefore it is highly regrettable that nobody did. But he was an imperialist of the lowest type. He popularized the contemptible notion that the size of the solar system ought to over-awe the spiritual dogma of man” (110). Chesterton distrusted the increasing influence of science, particularly since it appeared to him as sentimental and arbitrary as the religious and social systems it sought to supplant. There is nothing wrong with the sentimental, Chesterton seems to imply. Only when it masquerades as something more objective and becomes an ethos does it become

abhorrent. Chesterton suggests that the claim on the part of men of science to possess truth about the world represents a threat to society—the same threat manifested by the aspiring imperialist.

Chesterton regarded Dickens as a novelist intent on reforming his narrative discourse of materialist tendencies. *Hard Times* (1853), Chesterton believed, represented particularly clearly this new way of seeing and interpreting the world. “[Dickens] felt, as a novelist should, that the question is too much discussed as to whether a man is in favor of this or that scientific philosophy,” Chesterton writes: “that there is another question, whether the scientific philosophy is in favor of the man” (232). Chesterton’s Dickens was a humanist disdainful of disciplines that would objectify humanity. More worthy of objectification in Dickens’s estimation, Chesterton claims, are those disciplines themselves. “[S]uch books as *Hard Times* will remain always a part of the power and tradition of Dickens,” Chesterton writes, because “he saw that economic systems are not things like the stars, but things like the lamp- posts, manifestations of the human mind and things to be judged by the human heart” (232).

The fact that Dickens opened *Hard Times* with a send-up of Benthamite pedagogy takes on added significance in light of Chesterton’s observations. “Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts,” Dickens has the pedant Thomas Gradgrind proclaim (5). Facts alone are wanted in life [...] You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them” (ibid.). Dickens follows this bold declaration of Gradgrind’s with a description of his person, all the while withholding his name: Dickens describes him as having a “square wall of a forehead” with eyes that “found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed

by the wall” and hair “which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside” (5). The image is absurd, but the fact Dickens does not reveal the speaker’s name until several paragraphs later, and instead describes him as essentially a collection of things rather than an individual with harmonious features, lends credence to Chesterton’s suggestion that Dickens places science, and the men of science, alongside things of the world, like lamp-posts. Gradgrind is a laughable collection of disparate things—a plantation of firs, plum pie crusts and warehouses—all of which reflect the inelastic and cluttered nature of his mind. That he is compared to such a bizarre collection of objects casts the hard facts stored inside his head into doubt, because they lack the connections that would render them meaningful in a larger context. It is moreover difficult to take a character whose head is like a crust of plum pie seriously. Gradgrind thus becomes another object among objects without purpose or context, a characterization which is consonant with the critically spirit of *Hard Times* generally. From its outset, the novel suggests that suspicion should greet adherents to systems of thought which valorize “hard facts” over other experiential phenomena.

The second chapter, wryly titled “Murdering the Innocents,” elaborates this skeptical attitude. The chapter opens with a description of Gradgrind’s general philosophy:

Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over.[...] With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. (6)

Much like the early statisticians, Gradgrind places his faith in numbers. With a “rule and a pair of scales” he surveys the world. He cannot be convinced of anything contrary to his preconceived philosophy of the world because he is “not to be talked into allowing for anything over” (6). A few paragraphs later, Gradgrind is described as wanting to blow his pupils “clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge.” He is Chesterton’s imperialist scientist, who wants only to blast away and neutralize anything that threatens to call his economic and social philosophy into question, and in this case that threat is the logic favored by children, a logic which eschews facts, relying instead on intuition and the perception of unique relationships between things and individuals.<sup>12</sup>

Sissy Jupe, a pupil in Gradgrind’s school, Dickens presents as the exemplar of “childish” logic. When asked by Gradgrind, “What is your father?,” Sissy Jupe responds with a number of personal details about his profession: He breaks horses, shoes them and treats them for physical ailments. Gradgrind assumes that, because her father’s profession, though unscientific in a strict sense, nonetheless involves a degree of specialized knowledge, Sissy should be able to define “horse.” However, Sissy, “thrown into the greatest alarm by this demand,” answers it with silence (7). Gradgrind then makes the same demand of another pupil, Bitzer, a boy described as so “light-eyed and light-haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out of him what little color he ever possessed” (7). Bitzer offers a satisfactorily scientific definition: “Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but

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<sup>12</sup> Dickens was never a fan of the statisticians. One of his earliest writings details minutes of a fictional conference of statisticians. Entitled “A Conference of Statisticians,” the piece details a meeting of the statisticians of Mudfog in which they discuss the “state of infant education among the middle classes of

requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth” (7). The boy’s answer is a list of facts that supposedly define the word “horse.” If Sissy Jupe was unable to answer Gradgrind’s question, it is because she could not make the leap from a personal to an objectively universal scientific definition of a horse as something other than that for which her father cares as his profession. For Sissy, “horseness” is tied up in a network of personal relations; her father defines horses as much as horses define her father. The latter are embedded in her life-world so deeply that she cannot extricate them for the intricate web of relations from which a subjective, experiential definition of “horse” is generated. Sissy’s reliance on her life-world and its attendant experiences can, then, only appear to Gradgrind as fatally erroneous reasoning; his system of thinking discounts individual experience as a means of understanding and defining the world.

The opening chapter of *Hard Times*, a novel about the abuses suffered by the working classes, challenges the idea that facts can convey objective knowledge. In order to understand and appreciate the narrative’s subject, therefore, one must abandon conventional means of observation and the recording of those observations. “Dickens’ recognition that the workers’ selves can never be completely known is directed at the purveyors of ‘fact’—compilers of Blue Books, utilitarians, laissez faire economists, etc.,” Stephen Spector writes, “but his own method of knowing (observing, reporting) is implicated also, since he bases his knowledge on that which is the bedrock of ‘fact’—the visible” (375). Spector thus observes that “Dickens’ intention in *Hard Times* is to move beyond a surface reading of the workers and to reveal them in their particular, complex reality” (375). Indeed, *Hard Times* does present a new theory of detailing individual experience, one that professes to come closer to the truth through sentiment than through

objective facts based on observation.

A discussion between Gradgrind and his daughter Louisa concerning Louisa's marriage prospects with the mill owner Mr. Bounderby takes a humorous turn when Louisa suddenly challenges her father to characterize the human individual's place within the scheme of "hard facts." "Father, I have often thought that life is very short," Louisa tells Gradgrind, who, because "this was so distinctly one of his subjects," in response to her enlarges upon it thusly: "It is short, no doubt, my dear. Still, the average duration of human life is proved to have increased of late years. The calculations of various life assurance and annuity offices, among other figures which cannot go wrong, have established the fact" (78). Louisa rejoins with the qualification that by "life" she meant herself, not a statistical datum: "I speak of my own life, father" (78). "O indeed?" Gradgrind replies, "Still, I need not point out to you, Louisa, that it is governed by the laws which govern lives in the aggregate" (78). Despite Louisa's plea for her "own life" as something unique and distinctive, Gradgrind nevertheless insists upon those laws "which govern lives in the aggregate" as governing Louisa's life as well. Gradgrind holds the notion (the same notion, incidentally, that inspired Chesterton's intense dislike of Spencer) that scientific dogma ought to over-awe the individual dogma of man, or, in this case, woman. Rather than recognizing his daughter as a discrete individual of a special relationship to him, Gradgrind can only regard her and her life through the lens of annuity tables. As he shows earlier in his interrogation of Sissy Jupe, Gradgrind demonstrates a second time that he cannot tolerate definitions, whether they define horses or individual lives, that privilege subjectivity, individual perspective over objectivity and universality. To accept such definitions would be to enshrine an epistemology irreducible to stable,

static categories, an epistemology that is mutable, as well as perception- and context-dependent.

For Dickens, however, it was exactly this latter epistemology that most adequately represents his subjects, presenting the means of revealing them in their particular, complex reality dependent upon social relations. It is perhaps an implicit commentary on this approach that Dickens does not practice it in *Hard Times*. Indeed, one of the greater criticisms of the novel is that its characters are lifeless, wooden and one dimensional. And it is perhaps for this reason the novel has frequently been overlooked by the body of Dickens' criticism. "*Hard Times* is not a difficult work;" F.R. Leavis writes, "its intention and nature are pretty obvious. To judge by the critical record, it has had none at all. If there exists anywhere an appreciation, or even an acclaiming reference, I have missed it" ("An Analytic Note" 187). If Dickens wanted to expose the plight of the working classes, it does not follow that he would write a novel that deliberately portrayed characters lacking in complexity. The two-dimensional characters of *Hard Times* point to a more complex approach to representing the industrial urban scene. Indeed to this effect, Stephen Spector writes, "The lifelessness of Dickens' industrial workers in *Hard Times*, when seen in the tradition, paradoxically may be taken as a sign of his humanness. Instead of allowing them to develop into savages or grotesque robots, he lets them fade into the colorless anonymity of moral personifications while quietly relinquishing the project of presenting the truth about them" (380). For Spector, the lifelessness of Dickens's characters is indicative of a unique approach to recording observations about his subjects. If Spector's theory is indeed correct, then Dickens's approach to his subjects is quite similar to that of Mayhew, who also sought to bend sentimentality to the purpose

of creating a new sort of objective discourse.

*Hard Times* exemplifies how sentiment and generalizing depiction of character can mount a successful resistance to the totalizing effect of scientific realism and, in fact, can produce a far more realistic treatment on the subject than any report or character sketch from a Blue Book. Stephen Blackpool presents the stereotypical idea of a working-class man:

Stephen looked older, but he had had a hard life. It is said that every life has its roses and thorns; there seemed in Stephen's case, whereby somebody else had become possessed of his roses, and he had become possessed of the same somebody else's thorns in addition to his own. He had known, to use his words, a peck of trouble. (52)

Stephen Blackpool suffers the same hard life as millions of other impoverished, overworked men in Coketown; the only distinguishing feature of the above description is that Stephen Blackpool articulates his situation in his own words: his life is a "peck of trouble." The opening of the next chapter presents the reader with an even greater generalization of Stephen's condition, one that relies on metonymy to depict its subject: Stephen bent over his loom, quiet, watchful, and steady. A special contrast, as every man was in the forest of looms where Stephen worked, to the crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism at which he labored [...] So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power" (56). Lacking individuality that could set him apart from other men who share his situation, Stephen Blackpool is consigned to the vast mass of the mill's "hundred Hands." Stephen's work defines him; the hand stands for the man, who seems almost overwhelmed by the work he completes: Stephen is literally mired in a "forest of looms." The man is juxtaposed with the machine, but the juxtaposition fails to shed light on either entity. In other words, the text's description of Stephen in opposition

to the “hundred horse Steam Power” does not reveal some special element of Stephen’s humanity. He remains a hand among hundreds of other hands, resisting attempts at humanization.

The next line articulates an approach to depicting workers like Stephen Blackpool that deviates from the approach, based on calculations and other numerical means of translating individual character and experience into fact, favored by social scientists:

It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculations of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions. (56)

Calculations are fruitless at attempting to peer into a man’s soul, but so too is the written word. The text does not purport to have any special insight into the working man’s character. Instead, it relies on sentimental, generalized depictions to create a canvas upon which the reader can impose their thoughts about the condition of the downtrodden classes. Leavis observes that Dickens “doesn’t write ‘poetic prose’; he writes with a poetic force of evocation, registering with the responsiveness of a genius of verbal expression what he so strongly feels and sees” (520). The character of Stephen Blackpool is an example of this “poetic force of evocation”: Nothing is explicitly stated, no firm lines are drawn in the delineation of Blackpool. Rather the text evokes the mere idea of the downtrodden working man—an idea the text encourages the reader to embellish and refine according to her own lights.

Dickens’s particular approach to his subject in *Hard Times* is perhaps rooted in his days as a journalist. In a nonfiction piece entitled “On Strike” (1854), which appeared in *Household Words*, Dickens purposes to “look at the strike” (289). In this piece, Dickens

relates how he is interrogated by a presumptuous gentleman—one of the “masters—who he calls Mr. Snapper. Mr. Snapper, upon asking whose side he is on in regard to the strike—”a friend to the Masters or a friend to the Hands”—receives the following answer from Dickens: “He may be a friend to both” (296). This answer in part explains the unique tactics used in *Hard Times* to present its subject in a manner that neither purports to know the truth of its subject nor risks alienating certain parties that might view that subject differently. Dickens elaborates on this point:

I believe [...] that into the relations between employers and employed, as into all the relations of this life, there must enter something of feeling and sentiment; something of mutual explanation, forbearance, and consideration; something which is not to be found in Mr. McCulloch’s dictionary, and is not exactly stateable in figures; otherwise those relations are wrong and rotten at the core and will never bear sound fruit. (296)

Sentiment presented a way for Dickens to reconcile the interests of the employee with those of his employer. He hearkens back to an earlier concept of sentiment, one that assumes an innate morality that need only be uncovered. Such an approach takes the problem of the working poor out of the hands of the statisticians and journalists and places it in those of the novelist, whose talent lies in uncovering subtle relations among individuals. Like Sissy Jupe’s horse, the working man of Dickens cannot be “stateable in figures,” but rather can be articulated only through the nexus of human relations in which he is involved—a nexus that inevitably includes his employer.

Rather endeavoring to demonstrate that the working man is quite different from his masters—those who commission the social surveys intended to perpetuate social distance and class hierarchies—Dickens instead insists that the first is the mirror image of the other. “In the main,” Dickens informs Mr. Snapper, “I am disposed to think that whatever faults you may find to exist, in your own neighborhood for example, among the

hands you will find tolerably equal among the masters also, and even among the classes above the masters” (297). In doing so, Dickens recreates the small-town model of human relations that Simmel describes in “The Metropolis and Modern Life,” in which every individual is connected to, and thereby defines, other individuals in his community.

Under this model, no one person is exempt from blame, or can feign social distance from his fellow townsmen. When attempting to understand conflict within such a community, one only has recourse to the subject, according to Dickens, who, as if to exemplify just this topic, answers Mr. Snapper’s inquiry about his business at the strike with a strikingly singular response: “Indeed I was going there, in my unbusiness-like manner, [...] to look at the strike” (297). His emphasis on the “unbusiness-like manner” underscores the deliberate humility, and, more importantly, the decided unprofessionalism, Dickens expresses in discursivizing his subject. Dickens’s attitude may be construed as an acknowledgement that there is no professional way of looking at such a strike, only a deeply personal manner that does not rely on ingrained reactions.

The key is to get out of the habit inculcated by such things as work and class and to look at the event without unnecessary blinders. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), Pierre Bourdieu writes of the confining role of the “habitus,” which he defines as “a system of schemes of perception and thought which cannot give what it does give to be thought and perceived without ipso facto producing an unthinkable and unnameable” (18). Bourdieu goes on to discuss the effect of habitus on an individual:

Native experience of the social world never apprehends the system of objective relations other than in *profiles*, i.e. in the form of relations which present themselves only one by one, and hence successively, in the emergency situation of everyday life. If agents are possessed by their habitus more than they possess it, this is because this *modus operandi* informing all thought and action (including thought of action) reveals itself

only in the *opus operatum*. (18)

That an individual's thoughts are narrowly governed by the circumstances of his or her life seems to be what Dickens inveighs against when he goes to the strike in an unbusiness-like manner. The action is an attempt to see the event without the blinders of social or economic prejudices. In *Dombey and Son* (1848), a character laments that his life was ruled by habit: "Habit is all I shall have to report to report, when I am called upon to plead to my conscience, on my death-bed [...] 'I was deaf, dumb, blind, and paralytic, to a million things, from habit.' 'Very business-like indeed, Mr. What's-your-name,' says Conscience, 'but it won't do here!'" To appease the conscience, then, one must go about observing life on its own terms, in an unbusiness-like way.

As a way of demonstrating this, the text includes descriptions of lower class life in the worker's own words. "On Strike" is more a pastiche of poems and impassioned placards than an example of objective journalism, though there are examples of such journalism in the piece. Descriptions of the workers and their environs are scattered throughout "On Strike." One particularly vivid passage details the arrival of the "scabs": "Four hundred people could find employment in [the mill]; there were eighty-five at work, of whom five had 'come in' that morning" (306). What follows is a description of the workers that is decidedly poetic: "They looked, among the vast array of motionless power-looms, like a few remaining leaves in a wintry forest" (306). And the final few paragraphs go far in explaining this touch of the poetic: "Political economy," Dickens writes, "is a mere skeleton unless it has a little human covering and filling out, a little human bloom upon it, and a little warmth in it" (307). "On Strike" is precisely one such attempt to flesh out political economy, showing the human side of a science otherwise

dominated by statistics. Yet the fact that half the work is comprised of primary documents from the workers themselves points to the absolute impossibility of constructing something that could ever fully represent the individuals observed. Dickens the journalist understands that the very act of looking is inevitably colored by certain expectations. That is why he professes to attend the strike in an unbusiness-like manner and allows placards and songs to speak for themselves.

But his depiction of the strike at the Sovereign Mill is, of course, a professional endeavor, representing a mix of journalism and novel writing. It is Dickens's attempt to sentimentalize his subjects that best reveals his professional intentions. The description of the scabs as winter leaves among the looms of the empty factory does much in achieving Dickens's agenda to convey "something of feeling and sentiment; something of mutual explanation, forbearance, and consideration; something which is not to be found in Mr. McCulloch's dictionary, and is not exactly stateable in figures."

We see also this attempt to use feeling and sentiment to forge an understanding between members of disparate classes in the final chapters of *Hard Times*, when Stephen Blackpool falls down the Old Hell Shaft. The machines of industry are indifferent to the catastrophe: "The smoke-serpents were indifferent who was lost or found, who turned out bad or good; the melancholy mad elephants like the Hard Fact men, abated nothing of their routine, whatever happened" (191). Without concern for the individuals in the community, the machines look to the larger picture—facts and statistics that define the population of Coketown as a whole. It is perhaps one of the most melancholy and poetic passages in the novel. Yet for Stephen, the experience of falling down into the Old Hell Shaft was transformative, akin to a trip through the underworld. His experience leaves

him even more attuned to the lives that surround him: “I ha’ fell into th’ pit, my dear, as have cost wi’ in the knowledge o’ old fok now livin, hundreds and hundreds o’ men’s lives—fathers, sons, brothers, dear to thousands an thousands” (203). Life for Stephen Blackpool is still a muddle—he is still an impoverished factory worker exposed to the vicissitudes of a hard life—but the enormity of the sins committed because of a lack of understand between “masters” and “hands” is brought home to him. “See how we die an no need, one way an another—in a muddle—every day!,” he declares, articulating the essence of his new found and bitterly won wisdom (203).

The character of Sissy Jupe offers a solution to the intractable “muddle” Stephen Blackpool sees as characterizing the entirety of human existence. The final passages present Sissy’s life as one to be emulated if one is to avoid the dangers of life determined solely by science. Sissy devotes her life to this philosophy, which is in stark contrast to that proposed by the statisticians:

[Sissy had] grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures, and to beautify the lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death, and the plainest national prosperity figures can show, will be the Writing on the Wall. (222)

The “Writing on the Wall” then is national degeneration—the very thing the social scientists claim to prevent through the application of their science. *Hard Times* proposes an alternative means of managing this problem. Its crucial lesson is that sentiment fosters mutual understanding between master and workman, clearing up the abiding muddle.

In his 1877 review of *Hard Times*, entitled “On the Economic Fallacies of *Hard Times*,” E.P. Whipple writes that “the fact that men like [...] Dickens can write economic

nonsense without losing intellectual caste shows that the science of political economy, before its beneficent truths come to be generally admitted, must go through a long struggle with benevolent sophisms and benevolent passions” (348). And, to add insult to injury, Whipple writes that *Hard Times* “is the one of all his works which should be distinguished from the others as specially wanting in that power of real characterization on which his reputation as a vivid delineator of human character and life depends” (350). Whipple’s criticism highlights the fact that, despite the central conceit that writing which proposes to decode life needs to be imbued with “imaginative graces and delights” in order to ascertain the truth of their subject matter, *Hard Times* fails to follow through with this philosophy, inasmuch as its characters lack vivid delineators of human character and life. An earlier review (1855) from *Blackwood’s Magazine* reiterates this point: “The book [*Hard Times*] is more palpably a made book than any of the manufactured articles we have lately seen. It is neither born out of the natural fruition of a mind and fancy always astir—nor, after it has begun to be, do its characters and events proceed with the natural compulsion and impulse of life” (454). That *Hard Times* seemed as manufactured as any product from a factory to Dickens’s contemporaries indicates that the larger point of the novel was missed by the critic.

Even the socialist John Ruskin writes that he wishes Dickens had used a lighter hand in crafting his characters for *Hard Times*: “The usefulness of [*Hard Times*] is with many persons severely diminished because Mr. Bounderby is a dramatic monster, instead of a characteristic example of a worldly master; and Stephen Blackpool is a dramatic perfection, instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman” (356). The flatness of the characters in *Hard Times* is a tacit acknowledgment that the best representations of

the working poor are those that do not profess, on the whole, to accurately depict their subject. There are moments of poetic inspiration in *Hard Times*, enough to touch readers' heartstrings, perhaps, but there is no pretense of a realist's—or a statistician's—verisimilitudinous rendering. Indeed, in *Hard Times* Dickens engages in a form of pamphleteering; he writes in such a way as to stage a direct intervention. Stephen Spector talks about this in terms of the novel's use of metonymy. "*Hard Times* asks at times whether metonymy generates truth," Stephen Spector writes, "especially in regard to individual workers" (367). But, Spector continues, "the limitations of metonymy become most apparent in *Hard Times* when Dickens, the virtuoso observer of character, must admit that no amount of observation will permit him to penetrate the 'mystery' of the worker's subjectivity" (367). Therefore the novelist who wishes to accurately represent his subject can only gesture toward those subjectivities through deliberately stereotypical characterizations of that subject.

Dickens's approach toward the working poor is quite unique. *Hard Times*, contrary to popular belief, is not a sentimental novel. If it does possess moments of sentiment, they are strange and poetic, like the forest of looms or the melancholy elephants of industry—images more likely to render their subject strange and otherworldly rather than familiar, frustrating any attempt at mimetic identification on the reader's part or desire to engage in habitual sentimental emotional responses. These are the scenes that most likely inspired F.R. Leavis to write of the novel's success as poetry, rather than its failure as drama. In this sense Dickens differs from his source of inspiration, Henry Mayhew. Mayhew used sentiment in his works to domesticate his subjects, to make them familiar to middle-class readers. His narrative flourishes are taken

from drama and sentimental fiction, and they have the effect of depositing something as unfamiliar and inexplicable as a man who fights with rats well within the emotional and intellectual ambit of the bourgeoisie. Dickens, on the other hand, refuses to domesticate his subjects within the emotional sphere of his readers. Rather, he allows stereotypes to gesture toward something beyond the reach of words or numbers. This was a philosophy in favor of the man, a philosophy that views economic systems, as Chesterton writes, as things like “the lampposts, manifestations of the human mind and things to be judged by the human mind.”

Dickens may have chosen this approach because, as Kaplan writes, he was “keenly aware of the danger of being duped by insincerity,” disdaining “those who tarnish spiritual gold by manipulating feeling to obtain material gold” (52). For Dickens the language of moral sentiment was something to be taken seriously; other means of conveying particularly complex or emotional subjects often only hint at their subject. The fact that the language of moral sentiment was not enough to adequately describe the condition of the working poor in *Hard Times* is an indication of just how seriously Dickens viewed the subject.

Yet, *Hard Times* was, ironically, responsible in part for creating an even larger rift between statistics and fictional accounts of the poor in Victorian scholarship, because it rendered a complex subject one-dimensional in its approach. While the novel argues for a more nuanced understanding of how seemingly separate disciplines can in fact aid one another, that argument apparently did not factor into the critical reception of both the novel and its relationship to the science of statistics. Figures like Mayhew and Dickens are opposed in the majority of the scholarship on the subject, much to the detriment of

understanding how they in fact influenced one another and were a part of the same social and professional spheres. But that is not to say there were not a few scholars who acknowledged the relationship between Mayhew and Dickens. In “Dickens and Mayhew: A Further Note” (1969), Peter Harvey Sucksmith discusses the likelihood that Dickens and Mayhew were familiar with one another, writing that “some evidence, though it is not very revealing, does show that a professional and personal relationship between the two men did exist” (345). A few years later Richard J. Dunn posited that Dickens’s description of Krook in *Bleak House* derived from a piece Mayhew had done on the rag-and-bottle shops, and Harland S. Nelson saw Mayhew’s influence in *Our Mutual Friend*. But these articles only mention the influence of Mayhew on Dickens but briefly, and they do not speculate how the two disciplines each man came to represent were, in fact, shaped in part by that representation.

And when Mayhew is mentioned alone in the scholarship, it is almost exclusively in relation to his work on the social surveys. Kevin Swafford’s *Class in Late-Victorian Britain: The Narrative Concern with Social Hierarchy and Its Representation* (2007), only mentions Mayhew in passing, stating in an endnote that “Henry Mayhew is known primarily for a series of articles that he wrote on urban issues for *The Morning Chronicle*, eventually collected and published as *London Labour and London Poor*” (114). An earlier piece of criticism that examines Mayhew’s work on the social sciences at length, Catherine Gallagher’s “The Body Versus the Social Body in the Works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew” (1986), does not mention Mayhew’s literary works and how they might have influenced his social surveys. It is clear that the dividing of Mayhew and Dickens, a practice that now seems habitual, has led to the simplification of

both figures: one into an almost Gragrindian personage intent only on the social sciences, and the other as an inveterate sentimentalist opposed to anything scientific. While the scholarship does acknowledge that Mayhew was one of the first social scientists, and that Dickens disliked the social sciences, very few scholars comment on how Mayhew was also a literary figure whose fictional work influenced his scientific work, or on the fact that Dickens did not uniformly condemn the social sciences but rather argued that they needed to be supplemented by the human imagination, and that sentiment was the means by which that could be achieved. And while the work of Dickens and Mayhew was quite different in its way, both produced texts that were quite revolutionary in their use of sentiment as a means of breaking certain readerly habits in order to more accurately represent their subject.

But as we have seen, *Hard Times* enjoyed a problematic reception by critics since its publication. George Gissing too took offense at Dickens's one-dimensional renderings. In a review of *Hard Times*, Gissing writes that

Dickens did not know the north of England. With adequate knowledge of a manufacturing town, he would never have written so unconvincingly as in his book *Hard Times*—the opportunity for dealing with this subject. Stephen Blackpool represents nothing at all; he is a mere model of weakness, and his great misfortune is such as might befall any man anywhere, the curse of a drunken wife. (356)

Gissing laments the novel's lack of specificity, but that is exactly its point: in text, Stephen Blackpool can represent only a stereotype of himself. What Gissing identifies as a "crude attack on materialism" is actually a subtle commentary on crude attacks on materialism in general, especially those modes of representation that objectify their subjects and claim that objectification is truth.

But Gissing has his own approach to the topic of the London poor, one that,

curiously enough, that shared quite a few traits with a text like *Hard Times*. But before moving on to a discussion of Gissing, the present writing will first consider how social scientific writing changed in the latter half of the nineteenth century; and will consider the literary and social work of Walter Besant, who sought to reshape the social environment through institutions like the People's Palace and literature that sentimentalized the lives of the poor.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### ALL SORTS OF CONDITIONS OF MEN IN THE CITY: WALTER BESANT, CROWDS AND THE LIMITS OF WRITERLY OMNISCIENCE

Walter Besant's popular 1882 novel *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, which recounts a social explorer's sojourn in the world of London's East End, did much to awaken Victorian readers to the horrors of slum life and continued the spirit of his work on London's East End. Like Besant's earlier writings, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* was at once lauded by both critics and fellow slum novelists for its sensitive depictions of the plight of the urban poor and derided as a patronizingly mawkish rendering of a little-understood class. Seldom discussed among Besant's contemporaries, as well as among later critics, however, is the fact that Besant tried to make manifest these mawkish renderings: In 1887 he founded The People's Palace, a social institution dedicated to educating London's working classes, primarily in response to an increase the end of the nineteenth century saw in population and, concomitantly, in the complexity of social constructs responsible for greater volatility in the social realm. A new mass of people appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century, one that threatened to upset existing social relations. This new mass of people, consisting mainly of working classes, achieved greater literacy as the fin de siècle wore on, and thus came to influence the literary market by dint of the aggregate demand this mass represented. But as it grew more populous and literate, and as writers condescended to satisfy its peculiar literary tastes,

this mass also grew more alien to the classes immediately above it, and the volatility that threatened to rend the social fabric derived largely from the former's intractably alien character. Founding The People's Palace represents Besant's attempt to counteract this volatility. This chapter analyzes the changes social-scientific writing underwent in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and examines early works of such prototypes of the social scientist as George Sims and Andrew Mearns as a necessary propaedeutic to a consideration of the literary and social work of Walter Besant, who sought to reshape the social environment both institutionally, by founding The People's Palace, and literarily, by penning narratives that that sentimentalized the lives of the poor.

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Walter Besant articulated his thoughts on the transformative power of literature in *The Art of Fiction*, a lecture which he delivered at the Royal Institution in 1884, with a meditation on the "modern novel" and the work it performs in Victorian society. "The modern novel converts abstract ideas into living models," Besant states, "it gives ideas, it strengthens faith, it preaches a higher morality than is seen in the actual world; it commands the emotions of pity, admiration, and terror; it creates and keeps alive a sense of sympathy" (10). According to Besant, the novel is not simply entertainment but a means of cultivating and reinforcing sympathetic bonds between individuals. The novel is a vitally active force in the modern world. It converts, gives, preaches, commands, creates, keeps alive Victorian society's moral code and emotional life, and, most importantly, inspires a sympathetic connection between reader and subject:

It is [...] the especial characteristic of this Art [fiction], that, since it deals exclusively with men and women, it not only requires of its followers, but also creates in readers, that sentiment which is destined to be a most mighty engine in deepening and widening the civilization of the world. We

call it Sympathy, but it means a great deal more than was formerly understood by the word. It means, in fact, what Professor Seeley once called the Enthusiasm of Humanity. (14)

The sympathy that the modern novel cultivates between men and women encourages a greater appreciation of humanity, which in turn serves to spread the civilizing influence of the novel's implicit morality—what Besant calls “civilization of the world.” The novel does not, however, spread this civilizing influence passively. Besant's description of this civilizing influence as being “a most mighty engine” conjures associations with the aggressive industrialization and finance capitalism that was then transforming the great cities of Europe and serves to remind the reader that Besant's world was one of rapid social and economic changes. These changes perhaps account for Besant's express determination to use the modern novel as a vehicle for civilizing elements that might otherwise resist the “widening and deepening” civilizing force of fictional representation.

Besant insists that the modern novel not only brings a deepening and widening of the civilization of the world, but grants a privileged—indeed, totalizing—glimpse into the lives of those individuals who inhabit parts of the world that have yet to be deepened or widened. “The modern Sympathy,” Besant writes,

includes not only the power to pity the sufferings of others, but also that of understanding their very souls; it is the reverence for man, the respect for his personality, the recognition of his individuality, and the enormous value of the one, the perception of one man's relation to another, his duties and responsibilities. Through the strength of this newly-born faculty, and aided by the guidance of a great artist, we are enabled to discern the real indestructible man beneath the rags and filth of a common castaway, and the possibilities of the meanest gutter-child that steals in the streets for its daily bread. Surely that is a wonderful Art which endows the people—all the people—with this power of vision and feeling. (14)

For Besant, the modern novel grants the writer an omniscience that he can then use to reveal the civilized individual hiding beneath a façade of “rags and filth.” This “modern

sympathy” allows the novelist to understand the “very souls” of those individuals who seem utterly foreign to him, caught up as they are in the crowds that pass endlessly through the slums, and to discover the possibilities for their inclusion in the world of civilized men and women.”<sup>13</sup> The modern novel allows the bourgeois reader to understand its subject matter, for it holds open the possibility that even the worst ruffian harbors within himself middle class sympathies and aspirations. Besant’s agenda is not so much to deepen and widen the civilization of the world, but to uncover it through the “newly-born faculty” of modern sympathy.

Besant discusses at length the “Great Masters” who he thought possessed this faculty for discerning the soul and potential for civilized living within the street urchin and ragamuffin. He gestures to Dickens as embodying this talent for observing with a sharp eye the souls of London’s inhabitants. “The materials for the novelist, in short, are not in the books upon the shelves,” Besant states, “but in the men and women he meets with everywhere; he will find them, where Dickens found them, in the crowded streets, in trains, tramcars and omnibuses, at the shop-windows, in churches and chapels: his materials are everywhere” (22). Besant admires Dickens’s knack for careful observation and for his unbiased and sympathetic portrayal of his subject matter. But, as was discussed earlier, Dickens’s selective use of sympathy and stereotypes of sympathetic representations was intended to upset the reader’s habitual responses to such scenes, rather than confirm him or her in established cultural or social biases, in order to elicit a truth of feeling between the reader and the novel’s subject. “The mythopoetic unity of the Dickensian novel is one of the century’s last great attempts to hold the individual and the

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<sup>13</sup> But despite his claims to objectivity, Besant goes on to write, “the modern English novel, whatever form it takes, almost always starts with a conscious moral purpose” (29)

social whole in a meaningful relation” Michael Bell writes (132). For Dickens, understanding between individuals from seemingly disparate walks of life was still a possibility, despite the overwhelming complexity of the urban environment. His work typified, Bell continues, “a broader Victorian outlook in that he saw the fate of the modern individual as inescapably social, although this did not encompass the meaning of an individual life” (132). If Dickens was one of the century’s last great novelists to delineate the delicate bonds holding the individual in relation to the social whole, then why does a novelist like Besant attempt to resurrect this older model of social understanding between individuals toward the end of the century, when the social and economic constructs of the city had undergone dramatic transformation?

Besant’s studies of London’s poor are informed by this desire to resurrect an older model of social relations between city dwellers. In his studies of London’s poor, Besant prided himself on seeing what other writers of slum narratives had missed. He was indeed a careful observer of urban life in the slums, and his writings on the London poor were immensely popular with his contemporaries. In fact, Besant was the late nineteenth century’s most commercially successful writer of slum narratives.<sup>14</sup> But the popularity of Besant’s work on the urban poor was not entirely due to the accuracy of his observations as a social explorer in London’s slums. His immense popularity among his middle class readership was, rather, largely due to his insistence on grafting extravagant romantic plots onto otherwise dour surveys of life in the East End. For instance, in his most popular work, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, Besant describes the explorations of a social explorer into the world of the East End of London; but the narrative ends with a

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<sup>14</sup> In *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (2004), Seth Koven writes that Walter Besant “was the most commercially successful slum novelist and philanthropic journalist of his generation”

sentimental romance when the social explorer falls in love with a wealthy philanthropist. The novel did much to awaken Victorian readers to the horrors of slum life, but it also ameliorated any discomfort it caused in its readership by offering a neat sentimental ending that detracts from any messiness or uncertainty introduced by the more objective descriptions of East End life.

*All Sorts and Conditions of Men* is representative of Besant's need to conduct real sociological work while catering to his readership's appetite for conventional sentimental narratives. This division of interests is frequently mentioned in criticism on Besant. He is usually discussed in contemporary criticism as an example of either a *fin de siècle* slum novelist or an outmoded sentimentalist who refuses to acknowledge changing literary and scientific approaches to urban life.<sup>15</sup> But reading Besant's work in this way confines it to rather limited categories that fail adequately to acknowledge his influence and popularity. It is more useful to see Besant as a transitional figure in literary representations of the poor, exemplifying a sea change not just in the work of writing and representing the social and economic challenges posed by the *fin de siècle* urban environment, but also in the management and dissemination of the end product of that work. That is, Besant is a manifestation of a change in the very *profession* of authorship toward the end of the century that was as radical as the aesthetic transformation that can be discerned in literary works of this period.

Anxiety about this change in the means and nature of authorial production can be discerned in Besant's works. In his criticism, novels and surveys of the poor Besant

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(217).

<sup>15</sup> For instance, in *Class in Late Victorian Britain: The Narrative Concern with Social Hierarchy and its Representation* (2007), Kevin Swafford writes, "Although few readers would rank Besant with the great realist and romance novelists of the nineteenth century, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* is, in many ways,

enacts the desire to resurrect a mode of literary knowing—to maintain the illusion of total authorial omniscience—in an urban milieu that no longer admits of such epistemological mastery. His work betrays an intense need to thoroughly know its subject matter, and its readership, but the changing nature of social relations toward the end of the nineteenth century resists this knowledge. Nevertheless, this desire is evident in Besant's text through the presentation of more sentimentalized depictions of the working poor in Besant's works, like those found in the novels of Dickens toward the mid-century. These distinctly antiquated depictions of the working poor appear alongside the works of other writers who are forging new, more modern and impressionistic ways of representing the city and its inhabitants in ways that underline Besant's depiction of his subject matter according to outmoded representational techniques.

By uncovering the latent markers of class and professional anxiety in Besant's works we can move toward a better understanding of not just the sea change in modes of literary representation that was taking place toward the end of the nineteenth century, but also of the ways that the new urban environment challenged what had become the traditional stance of the professional novelist and social explorer toward the poor. For while novelists had begun to question seriously the ability of the author or narrator to survey and discern the urban spectacle with its teeming crowds and overpopulated tenements, the social scientists, along with the natural scientists, were trying to work out what exactly constituted an objective view of their subject and how they could achieve that view without the aid of the older novelistic techniques associated with the Dickensian novel. That is, at the same time as novelists were experimenting with new techniques of representing the metropolis, social scientists were debating the best way to

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one of the most important slum narratives of the late-Victorian period" (21).

quantify and represent the social ills afflicting the urban poor.<sup>16</sup>

### The Science of Objectivity: Trying to See the East End

With respect to the representation of urban poverty the novelist and the social scientist were faced with a dramatically heightened crisis as the nineteenth century drew to a close. The older belief that the lower classes could be reformed through fictional and social scientific representation was called into question as urban centers swelled with the working poor and as threatening crowds and dangerously overcrowded tenements contributed an air of political and social volatility to areas like East London. “A large scale transformation had taken place in nineteenth century England,” Christine DeVine writes, “At the beginning of the century, roughly seventy-five percent of the population lived in rural areas, with only twenty-five percent living in cities; by the beginning of the twentieth century, these numbers had been reversed” (14). This explosion in population in the urban centers led to numerous social problems. “This rapid change caused a crisis of overcrowding in some of England’s cities,” DeVine continues, “leading to unemployment and lack of adequate sanitation and housing” (14). These mounting social problems prompted an intensified interest in the social and natural sciences and the solutions they offered to the problems posed by impoverished areas like East London. Devine goes on

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Culler provides a great amount of insight into the debate surrounding the concept of omniscient narration in the nineteenth-century novel. In this article (“Omniscience,” 2004), Culler charts the pitfalls and paradoxes into which critics have fallen in attempting to explain the position of the omniscient narrator. Culler dismisses theological explanations and claims of authorial omnipotence—which express power, not knowledge—and instead presents two alternatives: that omniscience is either really a manifestation of the collective mind, or, as Richard Maxwell first suggested in the article “Dickens’s Omniscience” (1979), that it is really the observations of a so-called “sharp operator,” that is, a discrete individual who surveys the events surrounding her. Culler favors the latter solution, but admits that the former leads to important questions. Is it really possible for a “sharp operator” to be omniscient if omniscience depends on objectivity, as some critics suggest? Would not the operator’s individual subjectivity, as Levine suggests, interfere with her observations? Is this objectivity then not better achieved through a collective, a corporate

to claim that the “very magnitude of the problems posed by large-scale urbanization” caused a distinct “shift towards a belief in the efficacy of science, including the new social sciences” (14). This belief in the power of the social sciences to explain the remedy the social ills plaguing the urban centers replaced, DeVine writes, “the Christian-based belief in philanthropic solutions” (14).

Though it professed to be dependent upon so-called objective and scientific means for understanding the problems posed by the urban slums, this interest in the social sciences as seen in the slum narratives of the time became all the more sensationalistic. “Although the narrative exploration of real and imagined conflicts between the working and middle classes had appeared in Britain well before the close of the nineteenth century,” Kevin Swafford writes, “it is during the late-Victorian period that such narrative concerns [in social scientific writing] often take on a heightened sense of urgency” (19). This is indeed true, and is in marked contrast to the narrative concerns of earlier writings on England’s social problems, such as those of Dickens and Mayhew. Although an 1887 edition of *The Athenaeum* described Henry Mayhew as “the originator of that school of journalistic philanthropists of which Mr. Besant and Mr. Sims, Mr. Clark Russell and Mr. James Greenwood are now the popular representatives,” the clear-cut ideological agenda of the later writers of slum narratives is missing in Mayhew’s work (“Mr. Henry Mayhew,” 181-82). Indeed Mayhew had a vague distrust of the supposedly objective explanations offered by the social sciences. For example, he observed that “Ethnologists have done little or nothing towards increasing our knowledge of the physical confirmation of the predatory and vagabond races of the world” (“Answers to Correspondents,” No. 11, 22 Feb. 1851). Rather, as has been shown earlier, Mayhew

depended on an idiosyncratic combination of observation and sentimental discourse to increase his knowledge of the “vagabond races of the world.”

Mayhew was not wholly disdainful of scientific explanations for social phenomena; he did recognize a certain utility in scientific modes of observation. In explaining the relation of the middle classes to the lower orders, he writes:

To this middle class we ourselves belong and if we ever wandered out of it, we did so but to regard the other forms of life with the same eyes as a comparative anatomist loves to lay bare the organism and vital machinery of a zoophyte, or an ape, in the hope of linking together the lower and the higher forms of animal existence. (*German Life and Manners*, vol. 1, 118)

Mayhew saw the utility of using a scientific approach for his study of “the other forms of life” in London’s slums. He asserts that the eyes of an anatomist can go a great way toward laying bare an organism wholly unfamiliar to the observer. And though Mayhew’s work does not indicate that he adopted the supposedly more objective approach offered by the sciences entirely to heart, he did recognize the value in a more scientific approach. In regard to Mayhew’s interest in ethnography, David Englander writes that “Ethnography, as presented here [in *London Labour and the London Poor*], was not a set of testable propositions, but a strategy that enabled the author to develop his role as social explorer and interpreter of the poor” (117). As we have seen in the first chapter of this study, Mayhew was more comfortable in the role of social explorer than social scientist; his work lacked the rigor and objectivity required by the social sciences. “Mayhew’s borrowings,” Englander continues, “were largely for purposes of illustration; his citations were included as a reassurance for disturbed readers rather than as an invitation for further research” (117). Indeed Mayhew’s use of novelistic prose helped to temper his more objective findings, allowing his middle class audience to engage his subject matter

both intellectually and emotionally.

Both Mayhew's work and the work of the later social scientists raise questions about the nature of objectivity in the nineteenth century and its relation to novelistic discourse, especially since many of the later writers of slum narratives pretended to omniscience when it came to their subject matter. A look at the fields of history and the social and natural sciences opens onto larger considerations about the way in which science transforms, and is transformed by, culturally constructed paradigms. To consider how the social sciences influenced literature and vice versa is to question the essential superiority of scientific epistemology. Important scholarly work in the history of science has taken up this question. For example, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison recently interrogated this process in *Objectivity* (2007). In this work they chart "the history of learning how to see scientifically," which means "how to see essences behind appearance, how to restrain the hand and leave imperfect things imperfect, how to see the artifact and pry it from right depiction" (668). They accomplish this ambitious project by examining how "scientific atlases exemplify rather than merely prescribe a way of seeing" (667). According to Daston and Galison, exemplification over prescription undermines the notion of static science, which presumes a fixed, immutable form of knowledge.

For Daston and Galison science is a way of seeing that transforms and is transformed by the media that record and exemplify that way of seeing. These media (in this case, atlases) testify to the cult of objectivity, as well as to the futility of that cult's apotheosis. They show that the idea of objectivity, like the science that is legitimated by it, is historically, and, by extension, culturally, determined. In order to lay bare such determinations, Daston and Galison trace the various forms that the science of objectivity

has taken in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They write that early-nineteenth century conceptions of objectivity viewed the mind as passive and impressionable, and, in order to compensate for this passivity by inverting it, so-called “savants” (proto-scientists of a sort) claimed that the truths of nature were of greater profundity and solidity than could be perceived by the senses. Influenced by a Kantian sense of the active mind, which, as Kant posits in his Copernican hypothesis, projects certain phenomena onto objects and events, mid-nineteenth-century researchers sought to confine the dangers of an overpowering will, and did so by developing a depersonalized form of objectivity that precluded human intervention in the production of knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

We can see this desire to develop a depersonalized form of objectivity in the work of Charles Darwin. In his autobiography Darwin presents a provocative idea about the nature of objectivity. “I have attempted to write the following account of myself,” he writes, “as if I were a dead man in another world looking back at my own life” (1). Darwin’s attempt to transcend the self, to shed all the attributes that constitute a personality in order to observe the details of a life without any connection to that life, harbors within it a desire for the destruction of the ego. Darwin does not write that he attempts to be a just another man in another world. Rather, he writes that he attempts to be a dead man, as though only death could grant the fully impersonal objectivity necessary to judge fairly the events of a life. The observer must die as an individual in order to observe the details of an individual life. In a single sentence, Darwin equates

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<sup>17</sup>In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes, “Similarly, the fundamental laws of the motions of the heavenly bodies gave established certainty to what Copernicus had at first assumed only as an hypothesis, and at the same time yielded proof of the invisible force (the Newtonian attraction) which holds the universe together. The latter would have remained forever undiscovered if Copernicus had not dared...to

objectivity—the desire to know without prejudice—with death.

Darwin's attempt to record his life as though he were a dead man is of a piece with nineteenth-century theories of objectivity. George Levine claims that the ideal of objectivity fostered in the nineteenth century was akin to death. "The metaphor of dying may be excessive," he writes, "but it is appropriate for registering the intensity of the passion for knowing and the price of that passion" (101). That price is a "virtually suicidal willingness to repress the aspiring, desiring, emotion-ridden self and everything merely personal, contingent, historical, and material that might get in the way of acquiring knowledge" (101). This suicidal drive, Levine points out, intersects with philosophical and ethical concerns about the means of acquiring knowledge by privileging those means that demand self-sacrifice and self-denial. In this sense, the Victorian quest for objectivity commingles with an element of Christian discourse: namely, the belief that self-effacement must precede knowledge.

Writers like Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens, finding distasteful the influence of the austere, self-forgetful prototype of the humble yet intellectually assertive scientist, questioned this suicidal willingness as a scientific ideal. Their respective uses of omniscient narration models alternatives to the scientific ideal. Levine presents Hardy's *Two on a Tower* (1882) as a novel that challenges the idea that the observer can repress the desiring, emotion-ridden self, creating a blank slate on which to record her impressions. The novel, Levine writes, embodies the "sense that knowledge cannot be abstracted in some pristine, acontextual laboratory" (26). Likewise, the novels of Dickens endeavor to "transcend the divisive and selfish energies that constitute the society"—

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seek the observed movements, not in the heavenly bodies, but in the spectator. (Based on Norman Kemp Smith's translation, B xxii, note.)

energies quickened by the realization that “to transcend requires both knowledge and the selflessness that allows acceptance of otherness” (170). According to Levine, both authors try to model an objectivity energized by feeling, to forward an “ideal of loving detachment” (170).<sup>18</sup>

But toward the end of the century, the more impersonal form of objectivity triumphed over that which was predicated on an “ideal of loving detachment.” However, this “ideal of loving detachment” is very similar to the approach taken by Besant in respect to his subject matter and is in marked contrast to the pretenses of fin de siècle science to an absolute and emotionally distant mode of objectivity. Both approaches betray an anxiety about epistemological limitations. It is these limits placed on omniscience that seem to trouble not just writers like Besant, but other major social explorers of the East End toward the century’s end. Indeed this concern was just as present in scientific treatises as it was in the novels of the time, and it is in the pamphlets and tracts of the social scientists and slum writers that we see the two disciplines working together to achieve specific political and social ends.

#### How the Poor Live: Popular Visions of London’s East End

Certainly during the late nineteenth century the social scientists who sought to depict accurately the plight of the poor in East London grappled with how to best record the lives of their subjects, and a brief look at their work sheds light on the work of a major

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<sup>18</sup> This loving detachment seems more in line with the mode of omniscient narration practiced in the eighteenth century. J. Paul Hunter writes that omniscient narrators in eighteenth-century novels, when they are not too busy exemplifying the authors’ extraordinary ability to “shift and sort” events, address the more complex issues of the world. Fielding and Defoe’s narrators “give us the world,” Hunter writes, so that readers can better understand that world. Levine’s “feelings–quickened” model of objectivity energized by feeling apparently wishes to return to that mode of narration, and this wish betrays the uneasy tension between aesthetics and science when it comes to ideas concerning the ability to represent the world.

novelist and social surveyor like Walter Besant. Not only did these fin de siècle social scientists want to record objectively the miseries suffered by the inhabitants of East London, but they also wanted to attract and keep the attention of their middle class audience, because by the end of the century the East End of London came to represent the worst ills of urban poverty as Manchester had been of industrial conditions in the 1840s.

“As with Manchester,” P.J. Keating writes,

novelists and journalists played crucial roles in establishing an image of the East End which was simple enough in outline to be grasped immediately by the general public: stark and emotive enough to stir consciences, yet inclusive enough to contain, in essence, the central problems already troubling late-Victorian social reformers. (585)

This required a delicate balance between disinterestedness on the part of the social surveyor and an engagement with the narrative of the subject so as to cultivate interest in the audience.<sup>19</sup> Like with the work of Henry Mayhew, the early pamphlets on East London used literary tropes and techniques to recreate the world of East London on paper for an audience that had never ventured into that so-called “Dark Continent.” But unlike Mayhew and the earlier social surveys, these late-nineteenth century social scientists felt themselves confronted by the inhabitants of a realm so totally foreign and new that it

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<sup>19</sup> The mention of narrative disinterest behooves us to consider briefly Matthew Arnold’s view of the relationship between science and literature. Amanda Anderson revisits the Arnoldian concept of disinterestedness in *The Powers of Distance*, claiming it has strongly influenced the development of Anglo-American literary studies, despite its distinct lack of systematicity. In an early piece of criticism on the subject, Fred Dudley claims that one of Arnold’s characteristic uses of the word “science” associates it “with his favorite formula, ‘to see the thing as in itself it really is,’ which meant that it signified disinterestedness” (“Matthew Arnold and Science,” 1942). A more recent article claims that Arnold’s poetry makes us “privy to a process of vision and revision that painfully mirrors the eroding mechanistic world it examines” (Lauren Caldwell, “Truncating the Coleridgian Conversation and the Re-Visioning of Dover Beach,” 2007). Kevin McLaughlin posits that Arnold’s later prose work represents “a form of enthusiasm that Kant calls ‘moral fanaticism (Schwärmerei)’ in that it is based on the preservation of subjective self-consciousness as the ground of ethical and political obligation [...] this claim is made in the interest of preserving a self fully conscious of its experience” (618). At any rate, it is clear that Arnold’s concept of “disinterestedness,” which denotes an attempt to understand the world by the scientific means that are transforming that world, is fraught with the same ambiguities as omniscience. In fact, Arnold’s concept of disinterestedness cultivates a sort of cosmopolitanism in its own right in an attempt to counter that which

called into question their ability to observe objectively or feign omniscience. At the same time, an increased anxiety about widening class divisions and the threat of social degeneracy and concomitant contagion made social investigations of the poor of paramount importance to the middle and upper classes.

It is no surprise, then, that these writings on East London proved immensely popular with the middle class. “In a sense, the popularity of late-Victorian slum narratives among the upper classes can be understood as a kind of symptomatic need for an objectification of indigents and working class people, whereby hard distinctions are made visible and thus concrete and knowable,” Kevin Swafford writes (20). “By putting the poor on display, late-Victorian slum narratives work to solidify and naturalize the boundaries of class” (20). A budding concern with the moral and physical degeneracy of the lower classes made this need to solidify class boundaries all the more necessary. These slum writers of the late Victorian period “had specific religious and political agendas to fulfill in their accounts of the slums,” Swafford continues, and that “lack of religion and moral guidance, mixed biological and environmental degeneracy, is the root of the evil within the slums for these writers” (115). These writers therefore thought it was necessary “to colonize and reform the ‘wilds’ of the slums” (115).

The movement toward mass democracy made this colonization of the slums even more imperative. “The image of East London created in the eighties was a mixture of passivity and suffering,” Keating writes. “Until the late eighties, even Engels had given up all hope of the vast mass of workers gathered in the East End. [...] Yet the form taken by late-Victorian politics—an inevitable movement towards mass democracy—gave this passivity a now terrifying aspect” (593). The way that the East End slum narratives

recorded the lives of the poor was not through cut-and-dry statistics that contemporaneous social scientists like Charles Booth attempted, but by narrative techniques borrowed from novels and travel literature. The writers of the East End slum narratives painted themselves as social explorers venturing into unknown and dangerous territory. They frequently refer to the East End as having more in common with the so-called Dark Continent than the more affluent areas of the city. But even despite the use of such literary tropes, these writers found it difficult to convince themselves they were representing their subject matter with any accuracy or completeness. This difficulty in representing the poor was compounded by the fact that the aim of the later slum writers was not just to elicit sympathy in the reader, but rather to inculcate a habit of thinking and feeling that would accord with their respective political and social agendas. They needed to manage the responses elicited from their readers as much as they believed they needed to manage the poor, either through cultural re-education or more scientific means like eugenics. Over and over one finds in the slum narratives admissions that there are certain populations within London that cannot be accurately represented, either through scientific or sentimentalized literary discourse. This contingent of the London poor, a remainder unassimilable to conventional nineteenth-century literary and social scientific modes of representation, reveals the fact that the rapid urban development of metropolises like London had outpaced the discursive capacity of the literary and scientific professions. The economic and social changes that occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century created an urban environment so new that no genre existed yet that could capture the complexities of the social formations that arose therein. Slum narratives therefore either treat these individuals, many of whom are depicted as existing or traveling in large

groups and crowds, in a cursory manner, or, more sinisterly, they intimate that social, political and labor reform becomes possible only once this unassimilable—and literally unrepresentable—*Lumpenproletariat* of London is eliminated

Perhaps the most popular account of slum life in East London, and one which best exhibits the problem of representation and the urban poor, is George Robert Sims's *How the Poor Live* (1883), a harrowing account of life in the East London slums. Like Mayhew, Sims was a prolific journalist, dramatist, social scientist, novelist and general bon vivant. He bred bulldogs, was an avid sportsman, and had a large circle of literary and artistic friends. He started his career writing satiric and humorous pieces for *Fun* magazine and *The Referee*, but soon turned to questions of social reform, especially in regard to the inhabitants of the London slums. His weekly column of miscellany, "Mustard and Cress" was so popular that compilations of his verses from the paper sold hundreds of thousands of copies and were constantly in print during the next thirty years. Sims also wrote travelogues and pieces on horse racing, boxing and leisure, which also proved popular with London's middle class readers.

Sims is best remembered for his dramatic monologue from *The Dragonet Ballads* (1879), which opens with the line "It is Christmas Day in the workhouse." The piece immediately attracted popular attention and made Sims a voice of social reform. Sims continued his work in social reform and exploration by contributing, from 1879 to 1883, a number of articles on the condition of the poor in London's slums in the *Sunday Dispatch*, *Daily News* and other popular publications. Many of these articles were later published in book form in works like *The Theatre of Life* (1881), *Horrible London* (1889), and *The Social Kaleidoscope* (1909). Like Mayhew, Sims challenges prevailing

conceptions of what makes a social scientist. Sims, like Mayhew before him, established himself as a novelist and dramatist before becoming a social scientist, and his early professions informed his later. Gertrude Himmelfarb writes that “Sims’s ‘poor,’ like Mayhew’s, were foreigners, denizens of ‘Outcasts’ Land’; they were ‘natural curiosities’ akin to such other savages as ‘the Zenanas, the Aborigenes, and the South Sea Islanders’” (58). To Sims the poor were objects of curiosity whose very exoticism belied attempts to discern inner psychic workings, but his work as a novelist and dramatist helped him to fill in those gaps in his narratives.

As a writer of social exploration narratives, Sims was prolific. In 1881, Sims and Frederick Barnard wrote a series of illustrated articles called *How the Poor Live*, which appeared in a new journal entitled *The Pictorial World*. These articles were published in book form in 1883 and proved immensely popular. Indeed Sims was quite cosmopolitan in his social surveys and was involved in a number of social studies of the poor both in Britain and abroad. This included an 1882 study of the social conditions in Southwark. Sims was also a witness before the 1884 royal commission on working-class housing, efforts that were important in raising public opinion on the subject and led to reform legislation in the Act of 1885. Sims also raised public awareness of other issues through his articles and books, including the seemingly unusual topic of white slave traffic, which he covered in a series of articles published in the *Daily Telegraph*.

*How the Poor Live* proves a unique document that outlines an approach to its subject which is putatively scientific and objective, but which nonetheless deviates from this program, and instead descends into sensationalism. It is a heavily illustrated work and only 64 pages long, but it presents a singular survey of the lives of the inhabitants of

London's East End. In the preface to the work, Sims apologizes for the unconventional tone of the narrative. "If an occasional lightness of treatment seems to the reader out of harmony with so grave a subject," he writes, "I pray that he will remember the work was undertaken to enlist the sympathies of a class not generally given to the study of 'low life.'" The "lightness of treatment" alluded to by Sims is a narrative that shares more in common with romances of the Orient or travel literature than it does with the social surveys that were being conducted at the time. For in his survey of the poor, Sims adopts the persona of the traveler who wanders into a dangerous land, and he does so in order to create a narrative his readers will find compelling. "I commence with the first of this series of papers, a book of travel," Sims writes in the first chapter of *How the Poor Live*. "An author and an artist have gone hand in hand into many a far-off region of the earth, and the result has been a volume eagerly studied by the stay-at-home public, anxious to know something of the world in which they live" (5). Sims and his illustrator are adventurers seemingly gone off to a distant land. But that land, though it may seem as alien as another continent, is simply another part of London.

In these pages I propose to record the results of a journey with pen and pencil into a region which lies at our own doors—into a dark continent that is within easy walking distance of the General Post Office. This continent will, I hope, be found as interesting as any of those newly-explored lands which engage the attention of the Royal Geographical Society—the wild races who inhabit it will, I trust, gain public sympathy as easily as those savage tribes for whose benefit the Missionary Societies never cease to appeal for funds. (5)

Sims presents himself as something more than an amateur adventurer. He is pleased to consider himself as professional and scientific a writer as any ethnographer of the Royal Geographical Society. And he believes his work will prove captivating for his middle class audience. Sims seeks, however, not so much to elicit a sympathetic response in his

readers so that they might feel moved to aid the so-called savages inhabiting the same island as they themselves, but so they might better understand the threat these savages pose to their bourgeois privilege and prerogatives.

Indeed, Sims warns his readers not to expect the heavily romanticized tales of the adventurer who travels solely for the sake of adventure. “Such perils as I and my fellow-traveller have encountered on our journey are not of the order which lend themselves to stirring narrative [...] these are not adventures of the heroic order, and they will not be dwelt upon lovingly after the manner of travelers who go farther afield” (5). Sims cautions his reader not to become too caught up in the narrative; rather, he insinuates that the reader should maintain an objective distance with respect to the subject matter and eschew any hope for a heroic and stirring story. Yet within that very paragraph Sims writes of “vilest outcasts” hiding from the light of day and the infection and poison that arises from “indescribable effluvia”—descriptions that rely on sensationalism to make an impression on the reader. The narrative vacillates between the intent on one hand to align itself with more scientific treatises and the desire on the other to elicit sympathy and interest from “a class not generally given to the study of ‘low life’” (4). This division makes for a document that is an interesting hybrid of objective fact and novelistic discourse that simultaneously invites the reader to invest emotionally in the narrative while cultivating the kind of scientific disinterestedness that would allow the reader to view the inhabitants of the East End as people akin to colonial subjects rather than fellow Londoners.

Sims himself recognizes that the inhabitants of East London defy accurate representation in his narrative, a quality he diagnoses as an effect of social fragmentation,

which followed from the new tide of wealth and affluence washing over London in the nineteenth century. “It is to increased wealth and to increased civilization that we owe the wide gulf which to-day separates well-to-do citizens from the masses,” he writes.

It is the increased wealth of this mighty city which has driven the poor back inch by inch.[...] It is the increased civilization of this marvelous age which has made life a victory only for the strong, the gifted, and the specially blest, and left the weak, the poor, and the ignorant to work out in their proper persons the theory of the survival of the fittest to its bitter end.  
(6)

Though wealth for Sims has strengthened social ties among the “strong, the gifted and the specially blest,” it has consigned the bulk of humanity to a bestial condition. In Sims’s imaginings, a crude sort of social-Darwinist mechanism determines who ascends to unprecedented levels of prosperity and “civilization” and who descends into total abjection and morbidity—a social situation of a fairly recent advent that owes its existence to the increasingly commodified nature of life within a burgeoning metropolis. He describes the almost surreal juxtaposition of the slums with the bustling marketplace:

And now, turning out of the busy street alive with the roar of commerce, and where the great marts and warehouses tower stories high, and where Dives add daily to his wealth, we turn up a narrow court, and find ourselves at once in the slum where Lazarus lays his head—even as he did in the sacred story—at the very gates of the mighty millionaire. (6)

The proximity of the slums to areas of commerce seems to make them all the more invisible. It is at this point that Sims must make literary references in order to convey the sense of mythic horror that pervades these areas. “Hey, presto! What a change of scene,” he writes, “Sleepy Hollow has come to life” (6). Unable to describe the scene before him with any pretence to truthfulness or accuracy, Sims relies on a literary allusion to stand in for what is ultimately incomprehensible (i.e., the seemingly inscrutable shiftlessness of the poor). Moreover, by referring to the scene in question as “Sleepy Hollow come to

life,” Sims is asking the reader to impose an older idea of privation and indolence (dating from 1819) upon a scene that cannot yet be assimilated into bourgeois ideas of poverty and the poor. The work of fiction comes to stand in for a scene that has no genre that can accurately represent it. This substitution for the real situation of the urban dwellers glosses over a reality made unrepresentable through a new urban milieu.

For Sims then the only way to convey the misery of a people rendered totally other through new urban relations was to present their situation through the lens of older fictional representations of the poor. He does this a second time in a description of an East End couple. Sims invites the reader to think of the average East End couple as Dickens’s Bill Sikes and Nancy from *Oliver Twist* (1838). “The spirit of murder hovers over this spot [in the East End], for life is held of little account. There is a Bill Sikes and Nancy in scores of these tenements, and the brutal blow is ever the accompaniment of the brutal oath” (10). Rather than attempting to describe the individuals in question, Bill Sikes and Nancy serve as the stand in for the nameless, faceless dwellers of the East End. These literary figures serve as a supplement to the actual denizens of London’s slums, becoming indistinguishable from that which they are supplementing. It is as if Sims supposes that readers of the slum narrative cannot yet imagine the individuals engendered by the *fin de siècle* metropolis, and must therefore rely on a familiar cast of characters to stand in for the actual inhabitants of the East End.<sup>20</sup>

Sims admits himself that “the surroundings, the ruin, the decay, and the dirt, cannot be reproduced” (7). The city creates a crisis of representation for which there is no

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<sup>20</sup> One could argue that even these characters, however, carry a vague threat to the middle classes: Bill Sikes and Nancy are involved afterall in a ring of thieves, and one of their activities is stealing handkerchiefs from middle-class passersby and plucking the initials from them, essentially erasing the owner’s mark from them and thereby insinuating that the class itself is under threat from the lower orders.

readily available solution. Sims laments the “monotone” nature of the East End, writing that

The difficulty of getting that element of picturesqueness into these Chapters which is so essential to success with a large class of English readers, becomes more and more apparent as I and my travelling companion explore region after region where the poor are hidden away. [...] There is a monotony in the surroundings which became painfully apparent to us, and were our purpose less earnest than it is we might well pause dismayed at the task we have undertaken. (28)

The problem then is not so much that the inhabitants of the East End defy representation or reproduction absolutely, but that they cannot be represented to the monied classes.

Because they are not involved in the market relations that define the *fin de siècle* metropolis, the inhabitants of the East End remain invisible, their lives cloaked by an impenetrable monotony of “somber grey deepening into the blackness of night” (29).

They can only be defined by what they are not—participants in the great markets roaring with commerce—and when even that fails, literary representations of the poor from forty years earlier have to serve as supplements to aid the middle class reader in imagining their circumstances.

The severity of this crisis of representation is apparent in the solution Sims offers for those individuals whose situation cannot be reproduced in the slum narratives. Sims broaches his plan for rectifying the social ills of the East End:

Education—compulsory education—has done much. The new generation is learning at least to be clean if not to be honest. The young mothers of the slums—the girls who have been at the Board Schools—have far tidier homes already than their elders. The old people born and bred in filth won’t live out of it [...] These people are irreclaimable, but they will die out, and the new race can be worked for with hope and with a certainty of success. (29)

Negative eugenics then is the only answer for “the old people born and bred in filth.” It is

in this passage that we can see the fear the slum dwellers inspired in the middle classes of the large metropolis. Since they defied understanding, remaining ultimately inscrutable to the bourgeois observer, the denizens of East London either had to be reeducated into something more comprehensible, or be allowed to “die out.” Nowhere does Sims mention the possibility of allowing this older generation of slum dwellers to live on their own terms, or to undergo a program of re-education.

Contemporary reviews of *How the Poor Live* are mixed. Many agree that Sims was not necessarily doing anything new. Surveys of the poor had been undertaken in a more thorough fashion by Henry Mayhew. An 1884 review of *How the Poor Live* in *The Church Quarterly Review* mentions this very point:

It must not be supposed, however, that any new discoveries as to the condition of the poor have lately been made, nor that either Mr. Sims or the London Congregational Union are pioneers in the work that they have undertaken. So long ago as 1851 Mr. Henry Mayhew made a most exhaustive inquiry into the condition of the London poor, and published the results on his research in several volumes, entitled *London Labour and the London Poor*, which contains facts greater in number, and more startling in character, than any lately brought to light. (422)

The review goes on to fault Sims for being too sensationalistic: “[The condition of the poor] is sad enough without conceiving all to be of the blackest hue,” the reviewer complains (423). Even contemporary reviewers found Sims’s work unconvincing in its sensationalism. When compared to earlier works by Mayhew, Sims’s *How the Poor Live* appears wanting in “facts,” a comment which perhaps points to an increasing interest in more scientifically objective approaches to the social problems plaguing London rather than works dependent upon eliciting emotional responses from the reader through sensationalism.

A later review (1893) in *The Westminster Review* also makes much of the

melodramatic nature of Sims's work:

Those books [...] that have raised the fire of public sympathy have frequently been melodramatic. *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* [and] *How the Poor Live*, are examples. They blossomed for an hour and died. [...] We believe that if Mr. G. R. Sims had chosen another style, simpler and more real, his books would have had longer life. But the final question is, Which does the greatest good? Some will say the people want stirring up; the sensational caught their sight in a moment. Yet it seems to us that sympathy so quickly kindled is quickly numbed. (128-9)

Contemporary reviews, such as the ones which appeared in *The Church Quarterly Review* and *The Westminster Review*, along with a host of others agree on one point: Sims's sentimental depictions of the poor were no longer as effective as they once were in Mayhew's time. They failed to keep the attention of their audience for a substantial period of time. A "simpler and more real" style, the reviewers posit, would produce more lasting effects on the reader. But what was this other style that was supposedly simple and more real? Unfortunately neither Sims nor other popular social scientific writers of this period show themselves as equal to the task of conjuring a new fictive discourse adequate to the faithful rendering of conditions of late-nineteenth London slum life.

Despite its shortcomings, Sims's *How the Poor Live* did have an enormous influence on another famous pamphlet on the poor from the time, Andrew Mearns's *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor*. The influence of Sims's work on Mearns was so evident that Sims wrote in the preface of *How the Poor Live* that he had "the permission of the author of 'The Bitter Cry of Outcast London' to say that from these articles he derived the greatest assistance while compiling his now famous pamphlet" (5). *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* is perhaps the most famous slum pamphlet of the time. "In the autumn of 1883," Himmelfarb writes, "one of the most sensational documents of the decade appeared, an anonymous penny

pamphlet called *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*” (57). This pamphlet, Himmelfarb continues, “exposed and dramatized” the problems of the East End “as if no one had ever been aware of it,” and the reception of *The Bitter Cry* “recalls that of Henry Mayhew’s *London Labor and the London Poor* in 1850” ( *Poverty and Compassion* 58). But unlike *London Labor and the London Poor*, *The Bitter Cry* had a distinct political and cultural agenda. Mearns writes that older models of dealing with the poor—namely, the work of religious charities—can no longer adequately address the problems of London’s East End:

We are not losing sight of the London City Mission, whose agents are everywhere, and whose noble work our investigations have led us to value more than ever, but after all that has been done the churches are making the discovery that seething in the very centre of our great cities, concealed by the thinnest crust of civilization and decency, is a vast mass of moral corruption, of heart breaking misery and absolute godlessness, and that scarcely anything has been done to take into this awful slough the only influences that can purify or remove it. (2)

Under a thin veneer of civilization, a “vast mass” of indescribable corruption festers within the burgeoning metropolis. According to Mearns, this area of London is so removed from civilization as to be absolutely godless, which can be taken to suggest that it exists without the order that organizes and governs the more affluent sections of the city. And like Sims, Mearns writes that the inhabitants of the East End are ultimately unrepresentable to his middle-class readers: “So far from making the worst of our facts for the purpose of appealing to emotion; we have been compelled to tone down everything, and wholly to omit what most needs to be known, or the ears and eyes of our readers would have been insufferable outraged” (3). Not only do the inhabitants of the East End inhabit a festering, godless realm that defies literary representation, but their very lives threaten irrevocably to insult the sense of Mearns’s bourgeois readership. Even

if there were a means of plumbing the “vast mass of moral corruption,” the social explorer would not be able to relay his findings to his readership. The denizens of the East End are literally unrepresentable.

A study of the East End slum narratives introduces us not just to the problems of representing a certain social class in the new urban environment, but also to a crisis in the possibility for omniscience. That the East End represents a region which cannot be penetrated by the social observer and challenges literary conventions which rely on omniscience to craft the world of their narratives. The fact that writers like Sims refer to earlier novels (those of Dickens’s, for instance) in which omniscience was still a possibility suggests an inability for more contemporary modes of literary representation to pierce the thoughts and motivations animating the inhabitants of the urban slums.<sup>21</sup> Sims hearkens back to literary representations predicated on the notion of a collective, omniscient mind, as in the work of Dickens. J. Hillis Miller posited that “characteristic work” exemplified by the Victorian novel comes into existence when the author uses the omniscient, collective mind to narrate the story’s events. The world of many of Dickens’s novels “contains many cases of an apparently mechanical and impersonal liaison between people who are either ignorant of one another, or who voluntarily refuse responsibility for one another,” Miller writes in *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (1958). Though “mechanical and impersonal” liaisons do not provide the groundwork for the older social

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<sup>21</sup> J. Hillis Miller reminds us that the idea of a collective, corporate mind is nothing new. “The characteristic work of each of these novelists comes into existence when he chooses to play the role not of a first person narrator who is an actor in the drama,” J. Hillis Miller writes in *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1968), “and not even the role of an anonymous storyteller who may be identified with an individual consciousness, but the role of a collective mind” (63). Miller’s insistence that the “characteristic work” exemplified by the Victorian novel comes into existence when the author uses the omniscient, collective mind to narrate the story’s events is akin to Levine’s observation that certain Victorian novels shy away from the scientific ideal of the detached, self-denying observer, choosing instead to model forms of knowledge based on community values and collective observations.

models of community as described by Georg Simmel, they do point to a framework that depends on a collective logicity, one which posits a predictability that is missing in the literary representation of the East End, with its chaotic masses and savage environs. Impersonal liaisons are liaisons nevertheless; they point to latent yet immutable social relations. But in the world of the fin de siècle East End even the most impersonal ties seem an impossibility, or, at the very least, resistant to representation.

It was Walter Besant, however, who took it upon himself to represent thoroughly the seemingly unrepresentable conditions of the East End's chaotic urban milieu, conditions which thwarted earlier social explorers and left them looking back at earlier modes of literary representations of the poor. Largely forgotten today except as an example of a stereotypical slum writer, Besant's works garnered popular attention, making him one of the century's most prolific and loved writers. "Walter Besant was an enormously popular writer during the nineteenth century," Kevin Swafford writes (21). He was heavily influenced by the works of Dickens, and during his days at King's College, London, Besant wandered London in Dickensian fashion, observing life in the city's many districts. He was an intellectually voracious man who spent much of his free time studying French poetry, and his studies he distilled into a series of essays that he published under the title *Early French Poetry* (1868). More importantly, however, Besant was the prime mover in a successful collective organization for authors in Britain called the Society of Authors, in which he worked to encourage collective action in support of copyright law reform, the promotion of the literary profession, and the protection of literary property. In 1890 he established *The Author*, which was the official journal of the Society of Authors. In 1892 he helped found the Author's Club, and he continued to

defend the rights of authorship until his death in 1901.

Besant's work with the Society of Authors represented only one part of his social contributions. Not only did Besant write one of the most important slum narratives of the time, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882), but he also envisioned in that novel the building and administration of the People's Palace in the Mile End Road of East London, which was opened on 14 May 1887. The palace featured a 4000-seat concert hall—ballroom, a library, a gymnasium, a swimming-bath, a winter garden, an art school, and a technical school. The People's Palace was a place where working-class inhabitants of the East End could devote themselves to acquiring the cultural tastes and attainments of the middle and upper classes. Such projects were prosecuted via lectures and other forms of cultural re-education—with Besant overseeing this re-education. Besant also chaired the library committee, ran the literary club, and edited the *Palace Journal*. In 1888, Besant wrote to *The Nation* that “the whole of the audience on Sunday morning, almost without exception, consists of genuine workmen” (526). Besant was careful to paint the average East End working man as innocuous: “The better class of workingmen, as a fact, dress in London as well as the clerks and the shopkeepers,” Besant writes (526). “Men in corduroys are not the sort of men for whom the Palace is designed” (526). Only those East End inhabitants who have donned the trappings of lower middle class comfort—i.e., the attire of clerks and shopkeepers—are allowed to frequent the People's Palace, because they are individuals that attest to the success of Besant's re-education program in the East End. P.J. Keating argues that Besant felt all the East Ender needed was “leadership, contact with the upper classes, and an awareness of art, books, and music, and all of these things can be achieved through vocational education” (590). “In each

case,” Keating continues, “Besant was drawing upon ideas currently circulating among social reformers. His fundamental faith in education and cultural consciousness has its roots [...] in Christian Socialism, and in the social theories of Ruskin” (590). Like Dickens, Besant believed that most of the social ills suffered by the poor could be alleviated by fostering an understanding between the upper and lower classes. Because capitalism neglected the complexity of human desires and alienated individuals from one another, there was a need for a mediator to help bridge the ever-widening gap between the classes, and the author of literature seemed the likeliest candidate for fostering understanding between the upper and lower classes.

Besant therefore took a great interest in the East End, claiming that he could represent its inhabitants in a way that other writers of slum narratives could not. His People’s Palace was only one part of his attempt to transform the East End into a space that was consonant with his middle-class audience’s sensibilities. Besant’s East End was populated with workingmen whose aspirations were to stand on an equal footing with clerks and shopkeepers, individuals who did not pose any threat to the interests of the more affluent parts of the city. It was an oasis of familiarity in an area of London that was growing increasingly more threatening and unassimilable. More than just cultivating individuals familiar with the taste and morality of the upper classes, however, the People’s Palace was also a way of cultivating a familiar audience for authors like Besant among the unfamiliar environs of the East End. In transmitting the cultural and moral values of the upper classes to the lower, the People’s Palace presented itself as a means of colonizing the East End in order to make it more receptive to, and perhaps opening a new market for, literature favored by the middle and upper middle classes. But more than that,

Besant's People's Palace was a way to assert a modicum of control over the increasingly complex and unpredictable set of economic conditions created by industrial and finance capitalism in the environs of urban London. The People's Palace allowed novelists like Besant to cultivate an easily recognizable audience within the anonymity of the large metropolis.

#### A New Cosmopolitanism: Walter Besant's East End and the Renaissance of Omniscience

Besant then wanted to domesticate the inhabitants of the East End through the People's Palace and its program of cultural reeducation, effectively recreating the possibility for authorial omniscience among a populace that proved resistant to such literary modes of description. Besant dedicated his social activities to making the urban more representable in order to create the conditions for its appearance in his literary works. In other words, social reform and literary works constituted two appendages of a single apparatus, the first making the second possible, and both working to reinscribe social roles easily understood by middle-class readers. Jacques Rancière writes that sociological analysis ensures that there are no "points of meeting and exchange between people of reproduction and the elite of distinction. [...] Everything happens as if the science of the sociologist-king had the same requirements as the city of the philosopher-king. There must be no mixing, no imitation." (189). Besant's social activities shaped a social class with discernable interests, and his literary representations of that class further delineated the psyches shaped by an institution like his People's Palace. This institution of cultural and social conditioning saw to it that lower class men and women would learn enough to keep them content with a particular mode of life, but not so much as to inspire them to

contest their social class.

Besant's lower classes did not just live and breathe work but also, as a result of increased leisure time and spending power, cultivated intellectual interests. This presented a problem. As Rancière writes, this stratum was neither included nor excluded in the life of the city but rather existed as "an unpardonable disturbance for the city" (xv). But the leisure afforded by changing social and economic conditions and the concomitant development of new interests allowed social reformers like Besant a chance both to mold and register—that is to say, to trammel—lower class tastes. As market conditions increasingly fostered the development of individuals who enjoyed free time to cultivate interests, but who lacked the education to determine the exact nature of these interests, writers and social scientists like Besant regulated the means by which these ill-defined masses cultivated interests and influenced cultural discourse. Social institutions like the People's Palace were part of this remaking of the lower classes.

Besant enacts a similar remaking not of audience, but of subject matter, in his literary accounts of East End life.<sup>22</sup> He begins this remaking of his subject matter by

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<sup>22</sup> In order to understand Besant's relation to his descriptions of the East End one must recognize much of what Besant has to say about the urban poor remains largely invisible to the reader. That is, the substance of Besant's argument stands dialectically counterpoised to the patent content of Besant's philosophy of work as its latent content in the sense defined by Pierre Macherey. According to Macherey, a text's latent content inhabits the silence that conditions expression. "By speech," Macherey writes, "silence becomes the center and principle of expression, its vanishing point" (86). Macherey's emphasis on perspectival elements highlights the fact that latent content is an effect of the total textual composition rather than from any of its syntagmata. Indeed, "[t]here is not even the slightest hint of the absence of what it [the text] does not, perhaps cannot, say," writes Macherey, "the disavowal [...] extends even to the act that banished the forbidden term." (85). Rather, "its absence remains unacknowledged" (85). The silence of disavowal remains for Macherey a significant one, precisely because it constitutes the locus of latent content's signification. A critical practice that seeks to fathom most fully a text must, then, acknowledge what the text does not or cannot say, and in fact, elaborate it alongside or against the text's patent content. Macherey prescribes "the task of measuring silences" as a way of giving the text's latent content its due (87). The Machereyan task of measuring silences recommends itself as a ready way of discovering the ideological implications of Besant philosophy of work; for the silences in Besant's work say more about his position as an urban novelist during the end of the nineteenth century than do his patent descriptions of the urban milieu, which enact a fantasy of urban relations based on older models of literary representation.

opening his most important work on London's slums, *East London* (1901), with a promise to fill in the silences committed by his contemporaries. In his introduction to *East London*, Besant writes,

The Unlovely City, he calls it, the City of Dreadful Monotony! Well, in one sense it is all that the casual traveler understands, yet that is only the shallow, hasty view. Let me try to show that it is a city full of human passions and emotions, human hopes and fears, love and the joys of love, bereavement and the sorrows of bereavement; as full of life as the stately City, the sister City, on the west. (16)

The allusion to the monotony of the city is a direct critique of slum writers and social explorers like George Sims, who insisted that it was the dreary monotony of East End life that kept him from accurately recording the lives of the poor. Besant, on the other hand, wants to demonstrate to his readers that the East End is as full of complexity and nuance as its tonier counterpart, the West End. The reference to a kinship between the two urban areas reveals a need to show that the inhabitants of the East End are not totally alien to the inhabitants of the more affluent parts of the city, but rather that they suffer inadequate representation in earlier narratives. "It will be my task in the following pages," Besant continues, "to lay before my readers some of the aspects of this city which may redeem it from the charges of monotony and unloveliness [...] We have here to do with the people; humanity may be always picturesque" (17). Besant's insistence on the de facto picturesqueness of all humanity suggests that such a representation can forge ties between the lower and upper classes based on common participation in a shared aesthetic principle. That the idea of the picturesque carries with it a connotation of class privilege is a contradiction that the text does not seem to reconcile.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Dickens was quite suspicious of the picturesque. In *Pictures from Italy* (1846) he writes, "But, lovers and hunters of the picturesque, let us not keep too studiously out of view the miserable depravity, degradation, and wretchedness which this gay Neapolitan life is inseparably associated" (232). Michael Hollington

The term “picturesque” originally was used to describe a view or human activity that was striking in appearance and was proper for painting. It came into vogue in the early eighteenth century as an anglicization of the French *pittoresque* or Italian *pittoresco* (vii). The idea of the “picturesque view” quickly came to denote privately owned works of art and “cabinets of curiosity” that appealed to the middle and upper classes. It was also an idea associated with tourism, and members of the leisured elite went in search of the perfect picturesque view or activity. “The tourists of the mid-eighteenth century onwards [...] headed away from London and up to Cumberland,” Malcolm Andrews writes, “and they went in search not of new ‘Fashions’ and ‘Philosophy’ but of primitive, obsolete ways of life, tinged with paganism” (82). These tourists were in search of the idea of the picturesque as it had been represented by the “Picturesque artist.” Discussing the use of the picturesque in the eighteenth century, Andrews goes on to suggest that “the Picturesque artist ‘appropriates’ natural scenery and processes it into a commodity. With the aid of his ‘knick-knacks’ he converts Nature’s unmanageable bounty into a frameable possession” (81). This frameable possession then becomes a commodity to be bought and sold. Andrews continues: The word [picturesque] is a valuable coin in the currency of tourism. It means ‘like a picture’ and implies that each scene fills some pictorial prescription in terms of subject-matter or composition” (vii). Following the pictorial prescription of the picturesque is what ensures the commodification of the subject matter. “There is a peculiar circularity in the tourist’s experience,” Andrews writes, “he values the kind of scenery which has been aesthetically validated in paintings, postcards and advertisements [...] Scenery valued in this way becomes a commodity” (xvii).

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writes that *Pictures from Italy* is “one of the central places where Dicken’s critique of conventional ideas of the ‘picturesque,’ and the bogus art connoisseurship associated with them, is mounted” (140).

But Besant does more than turn his romantically picturesque depiction of the East End into a commodity amenable to bourgeois tastes. By painting the East End as picturesque, Besant seems to suggest that a kinship exists between the East End and the West End. In depicting the crowds of the East End as merely another example of picturesque humanity, Besant creates an (artificial) understanding between seemingly disparate districts of London while simultaneously reforming, and, to a certain extent, bringing under authorial control the less desirable and seemingly impenetrable areas of the city. For Besant, the problem in earlier representations of the East End is that they failed to document the aesthetic shared between it and more affluent parts of London and were therefore unable to penetrate the lives of its inhabitants. If writers like Sims and Mearnes were to frame their narratives in more picturesque terms, they would not only discover pleasing details that had been previously hidden from the authorial eye, but they would also create work that would endure in popularity with an audience hungry for more positive depictions of the urban environment. In his own narrative, Besant enacts this stance, ignoring the abjection and grinding poverty in favor of those aesthetic features that most resemble what could be found in the West End. Playing the paternalistic tour guide, Besant takes his reader on a pleasant sightseeing stroll through an East End that, before Besant, had remained invisible to the writers of earlier slum narratives. In doing so, Besant essentially recreates the East End in the aesthetic image of the West End in *East London*, making a formerly unimaginable portion of the city imaginable to his middle class audience, and resurrecting the idea that omniscience is still a possibility in the metropolis, even if it is only facilitated through a shared aesthetic.

Besant's need to recreate the East End into something more aesthetically—and

ontologically—palatable to his bourgeois audience is clearly seen in his description of the East End crowds. An object of horror and a source of discomfort for earlier writers, the East End crowds in Besant's depiction become uncannily familiar and surprisingly comforting.<sup>24</sup> Besant begins by likening the city's crowds to a natural object familiar to child and adult alike, a hive of bees: "If you can use your eyes as well as your ears, look about you. It is really like looking at a hive of bees, is it not? There are thousands of them, and they are all alike; they are all doing the same thing; they are all living the same lives; they wake and work and rest and sleep, and so life passes by" (116). Likening the crowd to a hive of bees betrays an implicit desire to see it contained not just by physical borders (the walls of the hive), but by routine and labor.<sup>25</sup> Besant's tone is paternalistic, intending to comfort the reader and assure them that the masses of individuals swarming the streets of the East End are nothing more than men and women who lead predictable productive lives governed by the rules of industrial capitalism as they have existed for half a decade. Depicted thusly, the crowds of East London pose no threat; they are occupied by their work, and are as naturally suited to that work as the industrious insects to which they are likened. Besant reduces an incredibly complex and unique urban phenomenon to the simplest of metaphors.

It is not enough to see the East End crowds as just a hive of bees, however; the crowd is still too overwhelming in its faceless multiplicity. Besant invites the reader to take a closer look at the thousands of industrious individuals within the hive of their city:

If you look more closely you will observe differences. No two human creatures, to begin with, are alike in face. More closely still, and you will

<sup>24</sup> As De Quincey was terrorized by the human face in the crowds he encountered on his peregrinations through London.

<sup>25</sup> One cannot help but think (ironically) of Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), wherein Mandeville argues against the education of the poor.

discover that in the greatest crowd, where the people are, like sheep in a fold, huddled together, every one is as much for himself—there is as much individuality here—as in the places where every one stands by himself and has room to move in and a choice to make. (116)

The metaphor this time is more complex—the individuals of the crowd are “like sheep in a fold, huddled together”—and still suggests a need to discover the pastoral and picturesque within the otherwise ugly chaos of the metropolis. But here Besant insists upon the individuality of the individuals within the crowd. He emphasizes the uniqueness of the face and the presence of a will to self determination.<sup>26</sup> The participants in the crowd are just as fully realized as those individuals who have more space within which to stand alone and make choices (because, presumably, they have more resources at their disposal). Besant’s East End crowd is comprised of individuals with emotional lives for the authorial eye to discern, but who nevertheless remain subservient to the imperatives of economic activity.<sup>27</sup> They are as industrious as bees and as docile as sheep, but still they provide material for the author wanting to craft a sentimental narrative for his bourgeois readership.

Indeed, Besant assures his reader that there is a personality in each individual of the crowd ready for the omniscient observer to discover. Besant demonstrates this by concentrating on an individual in the crowd. “Let us take a single creature out of these millions,” he writes, “perhaps if we learn how one lives, how one regards the world, we may understand, in some degree, this agitated, confused, restless, incoherent, inarticulate mass” (119). Besant suggests that the author need only discover how the individual urbanite regards the world and conducts her life in order to discern the inner workings of

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<sup>26</sup> As Deleuze and Guattari discuss in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the face is a primordial or first-order signifier.

<sup>27</sup> One cannot help but think that Besant is trying to convince his reader that the social relations that are present in the country, with its small, close-knit town, are also available to the city dweller. For Besant,

the entire mass, which otherwise appears “agitated, confused, restless, incoherent, [and] inarticulate” to the observer unschooled in social observation.

Besant follows this remark with a demonstration to his reader that he does possess the means for discerning the motivations of his subject through total authorial omniscience. He presents to the reader an infant from the East End: “I introduce you to a baby. Her name is Liz. She has yet but a few days of life behind her. She is hardly conscious of hunger, cold, or uneasiness, or any of the things with which life first makes its beginning apparent to the half-awakened brain” (119). Besant’s description of Liz posits a mode of authorial omniscience that penetrates the very brain of this small crowd dweller and showcases the needs and desires of an individual that would otherwise be lost in the crowd. The text reveals that Liz is like any other baby; her half-awakened brain is no different from the infant brains of the West End. It is this very fact (or fiction), however, that makes the crowd in which she travels more comprehensible.

In addition to exposing the psychic landscape of the urbanite to the bourgeois reader, Besant presents her with a rare glimpse into East End domestic life. He penetrates the private sanctum of the East End home and describes the conditions in which Liz lives, pointing out lovely details that signify not just the type of domestic life of Liz’s family enjoys, but also their preferences in household commodities. In Liz’s home there is “a bird-cage with foreign birds” and a “vase full of artificial flowers,” all domestic touches that the middle class reader could identify (119). The details of Liz’s home are carefully framed, offering a seemingly comprehensive picture of the consumer preferences of the lower classes. The few “respectable” possessions that the inhabitants own are dwelt on in detail. Besant writes of one home that possesses “a table, with two chairs; there is a chest

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Simmel’s small-town social constructions are also present in the largest metropolis in Europe.

of drawers with large glass handles [and that] on this chest stands a structure of artificial flowers under a glass shade,” and refers to this structure as “the sacred symbol of respectability” (120). “It is for the tenement,” he continues, “what the Bible or the coral in the window is for the house. So long as we have our glass shade with its flowers we are in steady work, and beyond the reach of want” (120). Besant’s careful cataloging of East End household possessions reveals a people who are just as concerned with the power of signification inherent in certain consumer goods as their upper class counterparts. Whereas earlier slum writers dwelt on the absolute lack of belongings that seemed to mark the East End home, Besant concentrates on those few consumer goods that signify the slum dweller’s desire to transcend poverty and want. Besant’s imagining this desire is also perhaps another instance of his desire to transform the lower classes through social projects like the People’s Palace into a class of consumers situated at the lower strata of the middle class. The presence of consumer items in the lower-class home indicated the type of class awareness and competition--for the consumer item is to a large extent a Veblen good,<sup>28</sup> that is, an investment intended to signify to others that the family aspires to a particular class--a social institution like The People’s Palace was intended to foster. The domestic interior of the lower middle class home signified to what extent the lower classes had themselves been domesticated.

The fact that Besant dwells on these seemingly minor details and draws parallels to the middle-class home suggests a need (likely cultivated) to confirm that the denizens of the East End share the same concerns and interests as those of the West. The domestic

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<sup>28</sup> The fin de siècle American economist Thorstein Veblen, from whom the concept of a Veblen good derives its name, defines the latter as any good whose “marks of worth” are an effect of its “marks of costliness,” which confer on the good in question “high efficiency for the indirect, invidious end to be served by their consumption” (Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of*

space is thus of supreme importance to Besant's project of demonstrating that the lower classes hold a vested interest in joining civilized humanity. For the private space of the lower class individual reveals those psychic details that remain hidden from view. As with her bourgeois counterpart, the exteriorities of the home echo the more private psychic interiorities hidden from view. "The interior is not just the universe of the private individual; it is also his *etui*," writes Walter Benjamin, remarking on the importance of domestic interiors to the urban subject. "Ever since the time of Louis Philippe, the bourgeois has shown a tendency to compensate for the absence of any trace of private life in the big city. He tries to do this within the four walls of his apartment. It is as if he had made it a point of honor not to allow the traces of his everyday objects and accessories to get lost. [...] The traces of its inhabitant are molded into the interior" (20). By showing that the East End home is as populated by commodities characteristic of West End homes, Besant is making East End interiorities, both domestic and psychic, more legible to the middle-class reader. The lives of East Enders are also capable of being defined within the knowable and known terms of the urban marketplace. Besant's East Enders are therefore not inhabitants of some dark continent proscribed by the modern marketplace, as are Sims's East Enders, but rather are a part of that bustling marketplace, using its commodities to signify that they too participate in systems of exchange and represent a market in which goods can be bought and sold. With this in mind, Besant emphasizes again and again the "cheerful industry" found in the East End, signifying that its inhabitants are willing to play by the rules of the urban marketplace.

Of course underlying this cheerful representation of an East End bustling with industry and commerce is a fear that the inhabitants of the East End would not play by

the rules of the bustling London marketplace, choosing rather to undermine the pursuits of the middle and upper classes. Besant's portrayal of the East End inhabitant as a psychically transparent being whose home betrays an earnest desire to plays by the rules of class society arranged under Capital is more a fantasy of Capital's triumph than it is a verisimilar depiction of urban life.<sup>29</sup> "Besant believed there was not enough positive contact between classes," Swafford writes, "that the routines of everyday life and the transformation of modernity had created unnecessary barriers between various groups of people, leading to pervasive ignorance and understanding" (24). Besant's way of removing these barriers was the recreate, in works like *East London* and, a few years earlier, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, the image of the East End into something that resembled what his middle-class audience could understand and appreciate. That Besant also established the People's Palace points to a desire on his part to achieve this removal of barriers from the other end, that is, to make the inhabitants conform through a system of cultural re-education to the image of them he created.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Lukacs has much to say on the topic of how the commodity changes social relations: "The movement of commodities on the market," he writes in *History and Class Consciousness* (1920), "the birth of their value, in a word, the real framework of every rational calculation is not merely subject to strict laws but also presupposes the strict ordering of all the happens. The atomization of the individual is, then, only the reflex in consciousness of the fact that the 'natural laws' of capitalist production have been extended to cover every manifestation of life in society; that—for the first time in history—the whole of society is subjected, or tends to be subjected, to a unified economic process, and that the fate of every member of society is determined by unified laws" (92).

<sup>30</sup> Besant shares much with Matthew Arnold in his belief that culture can effect great change. Besant ends *East London* with a poem by the same name from Arnold. But, unlike Arnold, Besant was cultivating the opposite of an enlightened cosmopolitanism with respect to the vicissitudes of modern life. Rather, he was attempting to recreate and commodify his subject in order to bring it into accord with his desire to revive an older model authorial omniscience. Arnold, on the other hand, acknowledges the complexity of the present moment while still calling on culture as an anecdote to the seeming anarchy of that moment. In "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857) Arnold writes, "And what past literature will naturally be most interesting to such an age as our own? Evidently, the literatures which have most successfully solved for their ages the problem which occupies ours: the literatures which in their day and for their own nation have adequately comprehended, have adequately represented, the spectacle before them" (100). For Arnold, a literature that can capture the present spectacle has emerged into modernity: "Such a literature [is] modern, in the same sense in which our own age and literature are modern; they are founded upon a rich past and upon the instructive fullness of experience" (100). That Besant does not respect the spectacality of the

Besant's literary work and social projects, however, are less about the anxieties that informed earlier slum narratives—fears of degeneration or social upheaval—than about the formation of seemingly impenetrable and uncontrollable new markets. For along with exotic birds and artificial flowers under glass shades, more and more books were making their way into lower-class homes. This was due partly to radical changes in the publishing and pricing of books toward the end of the century. Authors like Besant were faced with a seemingly restless and, at least for many authors and publishers who were used to catering to bourgeois interests, incoherent mass of new readers who had the potential to drive demand in the new urban marketplace. This change was politically charged. “The politics of literature thus means that literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world,” Rancière writes. That the lower classes threatened to drive demand for literature also implied that they could also drive the polemics of a world that was becoming increasingly more socially common. Besant's attempt to shape and control the tastes and intellects of the literate mass through instruction and literary representation was an attempt to ensure that the polemics of the under classes did not threaten or comingle those of the upper.

### The Excluded East End and the Problems of Authorship

To overlook Besant's novels and works of social investigation, or to read him as a slum

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urban spectacle presented by the East End is the crux of his failure. For the spectacle is public in nature and does not embody any one signification, but is open to individual interpretation. Besant wanted to transform the urban spectacle of the crowds into the prettily picturesque, an idea or image easily bought and sold. Toward this end his work looks back at an earlier literary period, when authorial omniscience and sentimental depictions of urbanites was still a possibility within the city.

novelist eager to depict his subject in overwrought, sentimental terms, is to ignore the larger historical context in which he was engaged. Besant's work betokens the limits of omniscient narration in the late nineteenth century and implicitly points to the radical changes in political, economic, and social structures that were rocking the great metropolises of Europe. London, the largest metropolis in Europe at the time, was especially affected by these changes. Richard Altick writes that "the nineteenth century witnessed on every hand a sharpening of class consciousness. To the upper class and especially the older portion of the middle class, everything depended upon preserving the hallowed structures, though cautiously modified here and there to suit new conditions" (85). The lower classes, on the other hand, felt a "supreme need" for "sweeping social reconstruction in the direction of democracy" (85). When reading the works of Besant, then, we should not focus on what the text is saying, but what it is not saying in its attempt to recreate earlier modes of representation that new social and economic changes had rendered obsolete. Besant's *East End* is a city eminently amenable to middle-class interests (and middle class authors); it is engaged in the same market relations and its inhabitants have the same goals in mind: steady work and a comfortable home filled with the typical domestic commodities. There are no menacing, faceless crowds in Besant's *East London*. Crowds in that text have been made invisible behind a veneer of picturesque character sketches whose tropic and discursive flourishes are of the tried and true sort when it comes to pleasing the bourgeoisie. In *East London* Besant effects a literary Haussmannization of the East End, disappearing the disorder and chaos of the slum so as to reorder the city along lines comforting to the hallowed financial and social interests of the monied classes.

This is an invisible element in in Besant's text, however, that betrays the anxiety inherent in his work, as well as the anxieties *about* his work. For the invisible—those unpredictable masses of individuals in the East End living lives absolutely alien to the bourgeois reader—lies within the very heart of the city Besant makes visible for his reader. "*A certain relation of necessity* may exist between the visible and the invisible," Louis Althusser writes.

In the development of a theory, the invisible of a visible field is not generally *anything whatever* outside and foreign to the visible defined by that field. The invisible is defined by the visible as *its* invisible, *its* forbidden vision: the invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible [...] the outer darkness of exclusion—but the *inner darkness of exclusion*, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure. (27)

Besant's claims of making visible what other writers did not betrays the inner darkness of exclusion that is the East End and demonstrates that depictions of the city and the individuals who live there cannot be represented by extant literary modes of representation; they are visions forbidden to the author.<sup>31</sup> Besant's strangely sentimentalized portrayal of the East End crowds appears shopworn and out of step with his contemporary moment, as though he wished to superimpose outmoded sentimental tropes upon social phenomenon largely unrepresentable without the social conditioning effected by an institution like the People's Palace. This says more perhaps about Besant's discursive positionality as an author vis-à-vis the crowd than it does about the complexities of the crowd itself.

Indeed, Besant's cheerful depiction of the East End crowds in *East London* is

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<sup>31</sup> Certainly Besant tried to forestall this with his work on the People's Palace, which intended to bring the thoughts and desires of the East End inhabitants into conformity with the interests of the upper classes, and thereby making them more amenable to literary representation. As Wilhelm Worringer writes, "In the forms of the work of art we enjoy ourselves" (76).

strangely unlike contemporary depictions of that unsettling urban phenomenon. The crowd best symbolizes the social and economic uncertainty of the fin de siècle city yet it proved immensely difficult to represent in the novels of the time. Early sociologists, however, were quick to fasten onto the phenomenon of the crowd. In 1895 French sociologist Gustave Le Bon wrote *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, in which he explored the social and economic transformations taking place in the great metropolises of Europe. “The present epoch is one of these critical moments in which the thought of mankind is undergoing a process of transformation,” Le Bon writes (36). Le Bon cites two reasons for this social transformation: “The first is the destruction of those religious, political, and social beliefs in which all the elements of our civilization are rooted. The second is the creation of entirely new conditions of existence and thought as the result of modern scientific and industrial discoveries” (36).

The clash between the destruction of old social formations and modern discoveries results in a threatening instability of meaning, and the crowd carries within it both the ability to destroy extant economic conditions and facilitate them, a contradiction that appears anarchic in its inherent instability. “The ideas of the past,” Le Bon continues, “although half destroyed, being still very powerful, and the ideas which are to replace them being still in the process of formation, the modern age represents a period of transitions and anarchy” (37). For Le Bon, the *agents provocateur* of this social anarchy are the lower orders, who appear as a threatening mass against which older social formations cannot exist:

The entry of the popular classes into political life—that is to say, in reality, their progressive transformation into governing classes—is one of the most striking characteristics of our epoch of transition [...] To-day the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to

nothing less than a determination to utterly destroy society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism which was a the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilization. (37)

The crowd represented a threat to the capitalistic market relations facilitated by the urban environment. It is an entity difficult to define; “Little adapted to reasoning,” Le Bon writes, “crowds, on the contrary, are quick to act. As a result of their present organization their strength has become immense” (37). The seemingly invincible strength of the crowds defies representation, striking fear into the hearts of the middle class. The crowd is a force of nature that, as Le Bon suggests, carries with it the promise of a terrible justice—the destruction of a society founded upon capitalistic principles. “The process of history is a battle between weak and distant reason and the *forces of nature*,” Siegfried Krackauer writes, “which in myth ruled over heaven and earth” (459). The urban masses represent those terrible and unfathomable forces of nature. Yet the masses are also integral to industrial capitalism. “Since the principle of the capitalist production process does not stem purely from nature, it must destroy the natural organisms which it regards either as a means or as a force of resistance,” Krackauer continues.

Personality and national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] perish when calculability is demanded; only as a tiny particle of the mass can the individual human being effortlessly clamber up charts and service machines. A system which is indifferent to variations of forms leads necessarily to the obliteration of national characteristics and to the fabrication of masses of workers who can be employed and used uniformly throughout the world. (458)

The crowd’s threat to capitalism lies within the fact that the means of production in a capitalist society depend upon crowds producing and consuming. That these crowds can also topple the economic regime under which they produce and consume is a necessary risk that the regime must take in order to pursue its ends.

It is easy to imagine then how the fin de siècle author felt threatened by the crowd, especially if many of its members were literate. “As literacy and interest in reading spread,” Altick writes, “the ‘superior orders of society’—a term much in favor in the period—reacted to the phenomenon in terms of their special interests” (85). The “special interests” of the author, especially the professional author, was in selling books, which was easier than ever toward the end of the century thanks to changes in the pricing of books. “The 1890s saw the ultimate victory of the cheap-book movement,” Altick continues (316). Indeed in 1896, over three-quarters of books were in the low-price category, with thirty percent of books selling for six pence or under.<sup>32</sup> The emphasis with these cheaper editions was on generating a high volume of sales and catering to the new mass market.

This new mass market was quick to appear. With books more financially accessible and literacy rates on an upward trend, the reading public increased beyond markets established in decades past: “The reservoir from which the reading public was drawn [...] became larger and larger” Altick says of these changes (81). The larger the reading public became, however, the more mysterious it seemed to the authors and publishers vying for its money. In an 1883 piece on the expansion of readership in Great Britain, Wilkie Collins remarks on the appearance of an unknown public with a taste for cheap literature:

I got on to [...] buying specimens of this locust-flight of small publications, to making strict examination of them from the first page to the last, and finally, to instituting inquiries about them in all sorts of well-informed quarters. The result—the astonishing result—has been the discovery of an Unknown Public; a public to be counted by millions; the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel

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<sup>32</sup> According to Alexis Weedon in *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836-1916* (2003).

## Journals. (127-8)

These crowds of anonymous readers represented a new market for the aspiring author; at the same time, however, they threatened to undermine the author's control over his or her work through sheer numbers. For it was not just the British reading public that was rapidly expanding, but also audiences overseas and in parts of the world that did not necessarily adhere to British copyright law.<sup>33</sup>

Besant was very much aware of novels as commodities and he wrote extensively on the dangers the new mass market posed to an author's ability to profit off of his works. In the appendix to "The Art of Fiction" Besant advises the aspiring writer on how to best market his or her work to ensure the greatest profit from it. He places great stress on the aspiring author's need to exercise vigilance at all times. Above all, he warns, "that to be asked for money to pay for the expense of publication is to be told that your work is not good enough to be published" (46-47). Stephen Arata writes that Besant's "The Art of Fiction" is

usually described as a risible attempt to create a how-to manual for aspiring novelists [...] A respected man of letters with several successful novels under his belt, he was in 1884 also known for having co-founded the Society of Authors, which proved instrumental in educating writers in the 'business' of literature. Unsurprising but not unintelligently Besant insists on the novel's status as at once an aesthetic object and a market commodity [for Besant] the earning power of a particular novel can be an indicator of its use value. That is, the more popular and thus more widely disseminated a book is, the more chance it has to effect positive social change, which in turn is a plausible definition of a 'good' novel.

But this widespread dissemination of an author's work is only useful if the author retains

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<sup>33</sup> The United States was one of the countries that, for a long while, posed a threat to British authors. In *The Pen and the Book* (1899), G.H. Thring, the Secretary of the Society of Authors, writes that "There was one blot, however, on International Copyright which fell particularly hardly on British authors. America had not joined with the other nations, but still continued to pirate English authors, and to rob them of the efforts of their genius, without in many cases making the acknowledgment" (281). This situation was rectified in 1891

control over the copyright, something which the publishing houses, which had increased in power and complexity toward the end of the century, made increasingly more difficult. To this end Besant established his Society of Authors. Mark Spilka writes of Besant's desire to found the Society of Authors as a need to found "the brotherhood of novelists" (104).<sup>34</sup> This brotherhood was intended to protect the financial interests of authors, both in Britain and abroad. Robert A. Colby writes that Besant felt that "the product of the author's labors belonged to the author, not to the publisher" (112). The Society of Authors was intended to raise consciousness among a new professional class of authors and aid that class in maintaining a certain economic prerogative over their work.

In establishing the Society of Authors, Besant held the still flourishing French *Société des Gens des Lettres*, whose origins went back to 1838, as his ideal. "This organization," Colby continues, "grew out of a specific grievance by a number of French writers—the unauthorized reprinting by book publishers of feuilletons and magazine serials. Besant felt that the French Society of Authors encapsulated the ideal for its British counterpart" (115). Indeed one of the first publications of the Society of Authors Colbert writes "was a history of the *Société* published in 1889 to honor its fiftieth anniversary" (115). The first of the Society's objectives was "The maintenance, definition, and defense of literary property" (115). Colbert continues:

The first decade of its [the Society's] existence can be regarded as [Besant's] lengthened shadow. Its more fundamental significance is an articulate witness to a particularly yeasty period in the evolution of the literary marketplace. This period saw the rationalizing of copyright, the establishment of the royalty system, the entrenchment of the literary agent, the demise of the three-decker, the standardization of book prices, the

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when the American Copyright Bill became law, but the States still continued to cause British authors trouble with with the insistence that "books must be printed from type set up in the States" (281).

<sup>34</sup> Dickens too joined with a number of fellow authors to found the Society of British Authors, but the Society disbanded soon after forming.

expansion of outlets for the writer's wares, and technological advances that extended the meaning of authorships--all of which phenomena are amply covered in its pages. (115)

The Society of Authors established a protocol for managing the process of reproducing literary works on a mass scale for an audience that the writer could not imagine. "There were writers," Colbert writes, "who refused to join the Society of Authors because they thought it commercialized art. Besant's response was that a literary work was art so long as the author was engaged in the writing of it, but it became a commodity once it was ready for publication" (116). The commodification of the literary work on a mass scale laid it open to all sorts of risk—from piracy to the cheapening of its value through syndication and over production. Besant's aim was to defend against these risks to the best of his abilities.

It comes as no surprise then that Besant was an ardent champion of copyright and the property rights of authors. In *The Pen and the Book* (1899), Besant's book of instruction for those wanting to lead the "Literary Life," G.H. Thring, the Secretary of the Society of Authors, laments that "Literary property is treated in accord with the doctrines of modern socialism, as, after a fixed period, the period the public are allowed to scramble for it" (271). The crowd of unknown readers, with its latent revolutionary potential to unseat the mechanisms of capitalism, poses a threat to the aspiring author. They threaten his very livelihood. "Literary property has no doubt from the very earliest times been a source of livelihood, if a poor one, to its founder," Thring continues (271). Thring warns against the public's ability to scramble (and illicitly multiply) an author's work and proposes copyright as a means of protecting against such irresponsible socialism: "Copyright," was construed to mean 'the sole and exclusive liberty of printing

and otherwise multiplying copies of any subject to which the said word is herein applied” (277). The concern of utmost importance for an author, in the view of Besant and the members of the Society of Authors, was the maintenance of control over the multiplication of his work in the face of a milieu hostile to authorial prerogative.<sup>35</sup> Everything from the expiration of copyright to the inadvertent selling of serial rights and syndication overseas threatened to steal money from the author’s pocket.<sup>36</sup>

It seems natural to read Besant’s romantic fabrication of the East End crowds—and his attempt to instruct actual crowds in middle-class literary culture—as more about a need to know and contain the “unknown public” than about the actual conditions governing the lives of the inhabitants of the East End. Besant’s insistence on omniscient knowledge of this crowd betrays a desire to discern the intentions of an emerging market that is both lucrative and dangerous to the aspiring novelist in its ability to foster mass reproduction. By invoking an older means of representing the poor, one that relies on sentiment and a paternalistic authorial omniscience, Besant invokes an older model of social relations within the city that posit a society held together through implicit understandings between individuals within the metropolis—including an understanding between the author and his subject. But this older model depended on the exclusion of a large portion of the public. This was not a problem until literacy rates increased and, as a result, a new reading public emerged. Jacques Rancière writes that “[l]iterature weaves forms of community between things and beings which anyone can feel anything. In this

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<sup>35</sup> For publishers too caused fin de siècle authors much grief. Agreements between publisher and author frequently saw the author on the losing end of financial agreements. Indeed Thring talks of the “considerable importance” in putting “before the author the ways and means to protect his own property in these agreements” (283).

<sup>36</sup> Thring writes that “if the author is careless, he may find that he has sold all serial rights, that his story is being syndicated in the provinces and in America, and is bringing in moneys that he could have put into his own pocket, or that his work is being constantly reproduced in serial versions in the same paper” (293).

sense, it is part of the democratic subversion of social conditions, it ‘does’ politics” (9). Rancière goes on to posit that literature “contributes to the reframing of forms of experience. On the one hand, this reframing makes new forms of political subjectivization thinkable. On the other hand, it tends to break through the surface of political forms of equality to reach true equality or rather to dismiss equality in favour of the sympathy or fraternity of the subterranean drives or impersonal rhythms and intensities of collective life” (“A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière “ 9). It is the formation of new understandings between members of the mass that Besant feared would supplant the author/reader relationship of days past. The “new equality” discussed by Rancière had the potential to overturn existing political structures in favor of more democratic arrangements. But these more democratic arrangements depended on the destruction of the older model of authorial paternalism dependent on the sympathetic relationship between author and reader. That such a relationship between author and subject, and author and reader, underwent great change toward the end of the century makes Besant’s *East London* an illuminating text when considering how the social and economic complexities inherent in the urban environment challenged extant modes of literary representation.

George Gissing too lamented the loss of the author’s relationship with his audience and expressed dismay that he did not have a relationship with his audience in the way a writer like Dickens had—for Gissing the sentimental bonds that Dickens had established with his readers were no longer possible toward the end of the nineteenth century. Stephen Arata writes:

In his astute 1898 study of Dickens, George Gissing argues that the 1880s had witnessed a decisive break in the tradition of English realism. Prior to

that time, Gissing contends, the practice of realism had been grounded in a community of interest and outlook linking writers to readers. The conventions of realist writing—what subjects could be represented and by what means—adequately expressed social values novelists held in common with their audiences. Because he worked ‘in the strength of a faultless’ sympathy with his readers, Gissing suggests, Dickens was better able to critique ‘political folly, or...social injustice,’ since his critique was offered within the framework of a shared ideology. For writers of Gissing’s own generation, that bond was irreparably broken” (178).

Yet Gissing dealt with this unique problem in a way far different from Besant’s. The next chapter will examine Gissing’s *The Nether World* with a view to establishing the thesis that its treatment of the London poor forwards a new way of presenting a “realistic” representation of their lives that is in direct contrast to those cultivated and used by the statisticians and his literary contemporaries.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NETHER WORLD: GEORGE GISSING, CHARLES BOOTH AND THE  
PROBLEM OF THE MASS READING PUBLIC

Contemporary critics tend to pigeonhole Charles Booth and George Gissing as representatives of two different approaches to recording the realities of life in London's slums. They characterize Booth as the father of sociology, a staid statistician who considered too sensationalistic earlier representations of the poor. To redress this characteristic excess Booth professed to "make use of no fact to which cannot give a quantitative value." Indeed, this is the phrase critics most closely associate with Booth's approach to representing the poor—an approach that entailed a purportedly more scientific view of the problems attending poverty. It is true that Booth employed a team of investigators to conduct hours of interviews with subjects, and he developed a color-coded key to the streets of London that outlined the income and living conditions of inhabitants. Booth's approach to social investigation favored exactitude and objectivity, and his work is interpreted primarily in light of this view.

George Gissing, on the other hand, felt statistics and color-coded maps obscured the true condition of London's slums. Critics situate him as an author opposed to Booth's use of maps and color-coded keys to delineate the lives of the poor. In *Class in Turn-of-the-Century Novels of Gissing, James, Hardy and Wells*, Christine DeVine writes that in his novel *The Nether World*, Gissing "focuses on the poverty of Londoners and attempts

to lift the curtain that hides through misrepresentation the lives of the London poor” (13). Gissing is mainly discussed as lifting this curtain of “misrepresentation” through his slum novels, which favor a seemingly more impressionistic view of London’s poor. In doing so, Gissing purportedly offers an alternative version of truth to that of the statistician. He dismisses the idea that poverty can be understood through scientific objectivity alone and, in novels like *The Nether World*, offers a different interpretation of the lives of London’s poor.

Rarely are the similarities between the two men discussed. Contemporary criticism glosses over the fact that both men were confronting a new reading public and the problem of conveying their message to that reading public. The two men, seemingly disparate in their chosen professions, were united in their concern with the means by which the truth of their work could be represented to a mass public. Both of them were aware that they labored in the shadow of such a veritable institution as Charles Dickens, for whom an awareness of readers’ sympathetic appreciation of sentimental discourse proved the key to literary success. Changes in the publishing industry and the spread of universal education made this ideal of authorial agency impossible for Gissing and Booth alike, linking two seemingly disparate personalities.

This chapter explores this surprising affinity between Gissing and Booth with a view to interrogating the means by which both authors contended with the new phenomenon of mass reading publics and the new publishing technologies that favored mass production, both of which militated against the possibility of authorial authority in respect to published work.

The Old Model of Sympathy: Dickens's Unknowable Communities

In *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898) George Gissing remarks on the unique sympathy Dickens enjoyed with his audience. “Who can be more rightly called an artist,” Gissing writes, “than he who gave form and substance to the ideal of goodness and purity, of honor, justice, mercy, whereby the dim multitudes falteringly seek to direct their steps” (105). Gissing praises Dickens for his ability to evoke in his novels the ideals his vast audience held dear. Dickens comprehended intuitively those things for which his readers yearned, and he unhesitantly depicted for them their dreams and moral aspirations. “This was his task in life,” Gissing continues, “to embody the better dreams of ordinary men; to fix them as bright realities, for weary eyes to look upon” (105). Dickens’s art existed in a symbiotic relationship with his audience. His aim, Gissing theorizes, was to present his readership with values by which to orient their moral compasses, and Dickens knew, seemingly through intuition, what his audience needed of him. As Gissing explains, Dickens achieved this through “the strength of a faultless sympathy” by “following the true instincts which it is so unjust—so unintelligent—to interpret as mere commercial shrewdness or dullness of artistic perception” (105). This sympathy was an inextricable part of the authorial persona. “Sympathy with his readers,” Gissing continues, “was to him the very breath of life; the more complete that sympathy the better did he esteem his work” (83).

This “faultless sympathy,” which for Gissing constituted the essence of Dickens’s work, was closely tied to commercial success.<sup>37</sup> The success of a novel that inspired

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<sup>37</sup> As I discuss in the first chapter of the present work, Dickens believed that rather than obscuring true emotion or presenting an accurate depiction of a situation, sentiment helped move the reader closer to the truth of the work’s subject. In this sense, Dickens’s understanding is closer to an earlier conception that held that sentiment was a reflection of true emotion or of one’s own feelings, and could break the reader of

sympathy Dickens measured in numbers—volumes sold, money made—and his work conformed to what he felt were his readers’ desires for good fiction. “To write a novel in a spirit of antagonism to all but a very few of his countrymen,” Gissing continues, “would have seemed to him a sort of practical bull; is it not the law of novel-writing, first and foremost, that one shall aim at pleasing as many people as possible?” (84). Dickens wrote, Gissing tells us, “with an eye steadily fixed upon his publisher’s sale-room; never to lose sight of the index of popular approval or the reverse” (86).

Dickens’s concern with the financial success of his novels was not so much about amassing riches as it was about a need to please his audience and cultivate sympathy between author and reader. “A true democrat,” Gissing writes, “[Dickens] believed, probably without ever reflecting upon it, that the approval of the people was necessarily the supreme in art” (91). For Dickens there was no incongruity between mass popularity and artistic integrity. The widespread popularity of a novel attested to the success with which it fostered a sympathetic relation between reader and author, which in turn attested to the novel’s artistry. The more an author’s books sold, the wider his web of sympathy and, purportedly, the greater his artistic talents.

Dickens was one of the first authors to consciously cultivate a dependence on popular opinion as a barometer for his artistic talent. He associated popularity on a mass scale with financial independence. “Literature has turned happily from individual patrons,” he writes,

and has found there at once its highest purpose, its natural range of action, and its best reward. [...] From the shame of the purchased dedication, from the scurrilous and dirty work of Grub Street, from the dependent seat on sufferance at my Lord Duke’s table today, and from the sponging-house and Marshalsea tomorrow, from that venality which, by a fine moral

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the habit of not “seeing” the character.

retribution, has degraded statesmen even to a greater extent than authors, because statesmen entertained a low belief in the universality of corruption, while the author yielded only to the dire necessity of his calling,--from such evils the people have set Literature free. (*Speeches*, 156-7)

Dickens felt the multitudes liberated the author from having to obey the political and aesthetic whims of a patron. The very size of the new reading public ensured the talented, and sometimes untalented, author would find readers willing to buy his books and thereby support his singular artistic vision. That public tastes could prove as tyrannical as that of the degraded statesman Dickens does not discuss. Rather, he focuses on the benefits of a wide and varied reading public, the living product of new printing technologies and reforms in education. “Whatever the particular arrangements the writers made,” Lillian Nayder writes, “their profession was made possible by technical innovations that dramatically lowered publishing costs, and by the serialization of fiction in cheap monthly numbers and in weekly and monthly periodicals, and by the development of a mass reading public willing to purchase or borrow newly affordable literary commodities” (16). For Dickens this mass reading public promised not only financial security; it also provided the means to promulgate an aesthetic.

This aesthetic crucially involved bringing seemingly disparate individuals into a web of sympathetic relations that emblemized Dickens’s particular vision of community. For the very thing that militated against community—namely, the anonymity of overcrowded metropolises—also elaborated a positionality amenable to an artistic restoration of that community. Dickens’s aesthetic depended therefore on the urban character of his audience. Raymond Williams writes that “Dickens created a vast network of readers all sympathetic to the same ideals in order to shape ‘consciousness’” and thus “recognition and relationships,” as well (*The Country and the City* 155). Dickens situated

these relationships within an urban environment that with each passing year grew increasingly more hostile to his prescribed method of aesthetic reconstitution. “As the action [of Dickens’s novels] develops,” Williams continues, “unknown and unacknowledged relationships, profound and decisive connections, definite and committing recognitions and avowals are as it were forced into consciousness” (155).

Dickens writes into existence, or perhaps simply renders visible, a vast network of social relations within the modern metropolis. “These are the real and inevitable relationships and connections,” Williams continues, “the necessary recognitions and avowals of a human society. But they are of a kind that are obscured, complicated, mystified, by the sheer rush and noise and miscellaneity of this new and complex social order” (155).

Dickens untangles these “recognitions and avowals” of human society for his readers, and, in doing so, forges a sympathetic connection between reader and author as well as among readers. Dickens figures not so much as an author per se as he does as a medium in which meaning was consolidated and through which it moved in order to unite disparate individuals in mutual appreciation of his work. These connections were dependent on the author’s continuing commercial success, which not only attested to the strength of his vision, but also provided him with the financial incentive to continue forging that vision.

The communities of readers established through the shared appreciation of Dickens’s work are substitutes in the urban environment for what Williams calls “knowable communities.” Knowable communities are, as Williams writes, “communities both ‘whole’ and ‘wholly knowable’” that are forged as a result of direct contact between

individuals, a type of social interaction that is typically found in villages (165).<sup>38</sup> The knowable community “is still a matter of consciousness, and of continuing as well as day-to-day experience” (166). The urban environment precludes the development of these knowable communities. Because of the complexity of its labor and social structures, the urban environment made it impossible for individuals to establish relationships through regular contact. Instead, the city fostered the development of transient connections among large groups of individuals; city dwellers were not made aware of each other through intimate contact, but through shared activities: riding the train, sharing a sidewalk, frequenting the same shop. Relations between urban dwellers in the nineteenth-century metropolis were in constant states of flux, and were fostered more through individuals being together only temporarily than through organic, deep-seated, lasting affinities.

Dickens documented these transient and frequently obscure relations between individuals in a metropolis. In doing so, he encouraged the development of communities that are more unknowable than knowable—communities that grow out of tenuous, fleeting encounters and connections. By writing these communities into being—essentially making the unknowable knowable—knowable developed a kinship with his audience, one that depended on a mutual sympathy sustained through sentimentality.

Dickens did not foster these unknowable communities solely through novels. He went out among his readership and forged an even stronger relationship with them in his

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<sup>38</sup>Certainly the idea of the novel as promoting a collective, corporate mind is nothing new. “The characteristic work of each of these novelists comes into existence when he chooses to play the role not of a first person narrator who is a narrator who is an actor in the drama,” J. Hillis Miller writes in *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1968), “and not even the role of an anonymous storyteller who may be identified with an individual consciousness, but the role of a collective mind” (63). Miller’s insistence that the “characteristic work” exemplified by the Victorian novel comes into existence when the author uses the omniscient, collective mind to narrate the story’s events is akin to Levine’s observation that certain Victorian novels shy away from the scientific ideal of the detached, self-denying observer, choosing instead to model forms of knowledge based on community values and collective observations.

public readings. With these readings Dickens could bring together his audience not only psychically through shared sentiment but also physically through the act of reading his work aloud. Indeed Dickens meant his novels to be read aloud. “Versions of most of Dickens’s novels were staged during his lifetime,” Robert Graves writes. “He was a natural orator and actor. He seems to have spoken over to himself, under his breath, every sentence that he wrote; and he toured Britain and the United States, giving public readings from his works” (115). Graves writes that this practice of public reading was a popular convention that occurred on a smaller scale within families:

The popular Victorian novel (which was usually published in fortnightly parts, so that no member of a family could read on to the end, ahead of the rest) cannot be judged by modern solo-reading standards; its pictorial qualities, its frequent changes in atmosphere, the crowdedness that now make it such difficult going, explain themselves if it is read aloud dramatically to a roomful of leisured people of various ages in mid-Victorian costume. The practice of home-reading gradually lapsed at the turn of the century, and virtually ended with the First World War. (115)

The practice of public readings encouraged a familiarity between readers, strengthening familial and social bonds. When the author conducted a reading he strengthened the familiarity between the reader and himself. The mid-Victorian novel was more about community building than solitary reading. This was made possible by an audience that was large but not so large as to forget all claims to shared intellectual experience. But as the reading public grew larger and more socially and nationally diverse, and the gathering of like-minded individuals, all of whom were united, at least for an hour or two, through the act of listening to a novel read aloud occurred with increasing infrequency.

The familiarity fostered between audience and author and the development of unknown communities through a shared sentimentality was not limited to Dickens. Janice Carlisle writes that “the novelist at mid-century lived in a world rife with divisions.

Widespread commercial competition, religious controversy, political discussion and class distinctions all provoked [commenters] to declare divorce the keynote of contemporary society” (3). The novelist, Carlisle continues, countered such tendencies by turning “for his definition of morality to those principles of charity and common humanity that had constituted the central moral impulse of romanticism [...], to recognize, as Wordsworth puts it in ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar,’ that we have all of us one human heart” (3). This turning to a universal definition of morality was essential to the novelist, for the mid-century author depended on his (or her) audience for an imaginative supplement to the literary work. “The creative role of the writer is [...] only part of a more extensive process in which the audience’s imagination is an equally indispensable agent,” Carlisle writes, “novelists as diversely gifted as Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot [...] all adopted this focus on the reader as an essential aesthetic principle” (15).

This dependence on the reader as an essential aesthetic principle suggests a theory of narration predicated on a unique sympathy between author and reader. Carlisle writes that “narration, according to these novelists, is a mutual activity [...]. The prominent subject of Victorian fiction—community, man in his social relation to other men—is simply, then, the thematic equivalent of its formal characteristics” (15). Mid-century novelists depended on the sympathy between author and reader in order to foster sympathy in society at large: “The lesson of sympathy and common humanity that the novelist professed is, necessarily, a means as well as an end; it can be a goal only if it is also the process by which the reader apprehends and actually experiences its validity” (15-16). The novelist’s job was to cultivate sympathy between reader and the novel’s subject in order to define, as Carlisle writes, an “imaginative community composed of

storyteller, his audience and his subject” (20). Each part was dependent on the other and could not exist in the absence of any of the three. The sympathetic connection forged by reading created an author who could not exist without his audience and an audience that could not exist without the author’s work.

In this sense, the mid-century idea of sympathy is akin to Adam Smith’s idea of sympathy as outlined in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), in which sympathy can be transmitted from one person to another through discussion alone. “Upon some occasions sympathy may seem to arise merely from the view of a certain emotion in another person,” Smith writes “The passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously, and antecedent to any knowledge of what excited them in the person principally concerned” (5). This sympathy so easily transmitted between individuals is that which binds a community together. The mid-Victorian novelist sought to recreate and strengthen these bonds through his work. By communicating emotion through discourse to unknown individuals, the novelist created imagined communities united through sympathy. The author was the godhead from which these unifying emotions sprang and as such enjoyed a position of prominence in Victorian society.

#### Io, Saturnalia: Gissing and the Objectivity of Heteroglossia

Gissing’s critique of Dickens is in part a lament that by the fin-de-siècle writers can no longer foster the sort of connections between individuals theorized by Smith and effected by Dickens, having been rendered impossible in part by a dramatic increase in the reading public. In the time between Dickens’s death and the publication of Gissing’s

more influential novels, the nature and size of the reading public changed, increasing and transforming so as to prevent sympathetic communion between author and reader.

Emphasis in Gissing's time fell, rather, on selling the most amount of books to the widest variety of people. This was, of course, something that Dickens also set out to accomplish, but by the time Gissing arrived on the literary scene, fundamental changes in the way books were published, and authors paid for publication, altered the writer-reader relationship in such a manner that it became more impersonal, even to the point of antagonism, than it ever had been in Dickens's day.

The change from the earlier model of the writer-reader relationship could not have been more dramatic. In an early piece, "Dickens in Memory," Gissing remarks that "Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson—these were to me as the names of household gods; I uttered them with reverence between two of the framed portraits upon our walls" (1). Gissing regards the mid-Victorian author as a regular—and regulating—fixture in the Victorian household, with his portrait hung on the wall as one would keep a family member's portrait. The author brought a benevolent cohesion and order to family life, and therefore merited as much devotion as a benevolent deity. The construct of author as household god meant that the reading public empowered the man of letters. Though he relied on the public for his financial well-being, he was not its slave. If anything, the successful mid-Victorian author exerted as much power over his readership as older, more socially entrenched social institutions had.

But the *fin-de-siècle* author was no longer akin to a household god, a beneficent presence who crafted communities of readers and forged sympathetic bonds with and within that readership. The mass audience that liberated and venerated Dickens oppressed

Gissing, who articulated his concerns with literature's place in contemporary life and the work of writing in *New Grub Street* (1891), in which he writes about a "Literary Machine" that replaces the flesh-and-blood author. This machine appears in a dream of Marian's, who is oppressed by her literary work:

A few days ago her startled eye had caught the advertisement in the newspaper, headed "Literary Machine"; had it then been invented at last, some automaton to supply the place of such poor creatures as herself, to turn out books and articles? Alas! The machine was only one for holding volumes conveniently, that the work of literary manufacture might be physically lightened. But surely before long some Edison would make the true automaton; the problem must be comparatively such a simple one. Only to throw in a given number of old books, and have them reduced, blended, modernized into a single one for to-day's consumption. (195)

The passage suggests literary market relations in the fin de siècle deplete novels of import and authenticity; one book is as good as another so long as it sells. The production of "modernized" books emphasizes quantity rather than quality, and the author is merely one node among many in the production line. Indeed, the Literary Machine is more obliging and productive than the individual author, whose works it blends together for a mass readership of which little can be said except that it lacks taste, judgment, or discernment.

In her dream of the Literary Machine the protagonist likens literary production to industrial production. Works of varying talent and subject matter are modernized into a homogenous pap amenable to the palates of a modern audience. This passage critiques industrial production. N. N. Feltes writes that "The writer's work was produced [...] within relations of production analogous to those prevailing in a textile mill [...] fiction writers entered their pages as hand-loom weavers entered a factory" (63-4). The writer who worked under these conditions was as alienated from her work as a mill hand. "The

conditions by which novels were serialized made absolutely clear the extent to which ‘literature’ was part of the market economy and literary work was alienated labor,” Mary Poovey writes (104-5). Turning literature into another mass produced product ensured that any increase in demand for an author’s work was no longer indicative of a carefully crafted and managed sympathy the author and her audience, but rather meant that her work appealed to an amorphous mass of people whose tastes were unfathomable, but who would invariably demand more.<sup>39</sup> Increased sales translated into increased demand on an already overworked brain; rather than emancipating the author from banal necessity, the demands of a mass readership ensured she would more quickly deplete her particular capital: namely, her mind’s creative powers.

Appreciative of the fact that such rapid capital depletion typified the conditions of literary labor, Gissing understandably enjoyed a vexed relationship to the idea of authorial success, and this informed his spurning of popular tastes. Though *New Grub Street* is the most ready example of Gissing’s ambivalent attitude toward the reader–author relationship, it is in his slum novels that this attitude most clearly emerges, which, as Stephen Arata writes, espouses a “refusal to solicit readerly sympathy for the acutely suffering characters who people them” (179). Gissing’s slum novels offer plots that keep the reader at a distance, and “[t]he novelist too,” Arata continues, “remains at a distance” (179). This is especially true of *The Nether World* (1889), which follows in naturalistic detail the lives of the poor as they struggle with want of money, horrific living conditions and chronic underemployment.

The novel’s narrative structure deliberately mimics that of a typical Dickens

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<sup>39</sup> “The late nineteenth century literary market,” writes Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, “was ruthlessly competitive and commercial, and [...] professional writers who needed to earn a living with their pen were

novel, a point of interest for many contemporary critics. “It is in the earlier novels [like] *The Nether World*,” Simon James writes, “that Gissing’s engagement with Dickensian forms of narrative is most strongly felt” (38). Peter Keating has noted, in Gissing’s representation of London and “the urban working-class in particular he has to engage with Dickensian modes [...] Elements of Dickens’s plots, often discarded or parodied, recur throughout Gissing’s novels” (38). Stephen Gill writes that “viewed overall it is clear that most of the ingredients of the Dickens plot figure in *The Nether World*.” Indeed *The Nether World*’s plot echoes that of *Great Expectations* (1860-1); the storyline features the bestowal of an ill-gotten inheritance and the promise of a rags-to-riches redemption. But Gissing manipulates the Dickensian story arc to subvert its overall structure and meaning: the characters of *The Nether World* are never lifted out of their poverty; the novel resists the tidy, sentimental ending pleasing to the general reading public. “In the London of the late 1880s,” Nicholas Freeman writes, “the comforting fiction that stories had neat conclusions seemed increasingly untenable, at least among literary radicals. Obedience to it smacked of custom and compromise rather than objectivity, although it could reap impressive commercial rewards” (65). Gissing forfeited these commercial rewards in favor of a vision that he felt was suitably objective. That he did this while remaining in dialogue with the Dickensian narrative means he was aware of the authority the late-nineteenth-century author could no longer claim. This manipulation of the Dickensian plot line suggests ambivalence about the author’s ability to convey a unified and unifying message to his audience.

This ambivalence can best be seen in what is perhaps the most diegetically unconventional chapter in the novel. Entitled “Io, Saturnalia!,” it concerns the riotous

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in no place to resist or even contest these values” (10).

events of a bank holiday. The holiday is a raucous, confusing scene. Hundreds of lower-class men and women spill out into streets and make their way to the Crystal Palace, which once housed the Great Exhibition of 1851. There they drink, jostle and fight. The narrator describes these events from different perspectives, refusing to adhere to one point of view. He steps in and out of vantage points, becoming part of the crowd one moment, and the next, a haughty bourgeois observer. His mingling of voices and points of view presents the reader with a dizzying portrayal of the event, and it is almost impossible to discern the narrator's attitude toward the Bank Holiday. Indeed the chapter is an example of the carnivalesque as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, who argues that the carnivalesque is part of the novelistic principle. "Bakhtin's ideas concerning folk culture, with carnival as its indispensable component," Krystyna Pomorska writes, "are integral to his theory of art. The inherent features of carnival that he underscores are its emphatic and purposeful 'heteroglossia' (*raznogolosost*) and its multiplicity of styles (*mnogostil'nost'*). Thus, the carnival principle corresponds to and is indeed a part of the novelistic principle itself" (x). She goes on to write that "since the novel represents the very essence of life, it includes the carnivalesque in its properly transformed shape" (x). "One of the essential aspects of this relation is the 'unmasking' and disclosing of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks" (x). She continues: "Dialogue so conceived is opposed to the 'authoritarian word' (*avtoritarno slovo*) in the same way as carnival is opposed to official culture" (x). The chapter exhibits this unmasking and disclosing of unvarnished truth through a confusing chorus of false claims and multiple voices. But for Gissing this confusion of voices and points of view is the only way to objectively present his subject.

The confusion engendered by the narrator is evident from the chapter's beginning. With its classical allusion, the title marks the narrator as belonging to the educated classes, and the first paragraph informs the reader that the narrator shares nothing with the multitudes he is about to describe. "So at length came Monday," the chapter begins, "the first Monday in August, a day gravely set apart for the repose and recreation of multitudes who neither know how to rest no how to refresh themselves with pastime" (104). The narrator's tone is condescending. Wearied into animal subservience, the public, the narrator tells the reader, knows not how to pass the time on their day of rest. His condescending tone intensifies with another classical allusion, this time more closely juxtaposed with the subject it describes: "With joy does the awakening publican look forth upon the blue-misty heavens, and address his adorations to the Sun God, inspirer of Thirst. Throw wide the doors of the temple of Alcohol!" (104). Then occurs one of the many shifts in point of view that distinguish the chapter. The narrator adopts the voice of the multitudes: "Behold, we come in our thousands, jingling the coins that shall purchase us this one day of tragical mirth" (104). The narrator's voice—still oozing with condescension—melds with that of the multitude and articulates their base desires.

The narrator's point of view shifts quickly again in the paragraphs that follow, in which he focuses on the marriage of two minor characters, Pennyloaf Candy and Bob Hewett. The narrator relates that "Mrs. Candy was still sober at the hour of the ceremony" and "both were present in church" (104). But he does not stay with the Hewitt marriage; his attention moves from the events of the wedding to the multitudes thronging to the Crystal Palace: "At Holborn Viaduct there was a perpetual rush of people for the trains to the 'Paliss' [...] No distinction between classes today; get in where you like,

where you can” (105). The narrator’s voice undergoes another change: rushed, breathless almost, as though in sympathy with the crowds swarming to the trains. A few paragraphs later, the narrator whipsaws back to lofty condescension: “The philosophic mind would have noted with interest how ingeniously these games were made to appeal to the patriotism of the throng” and “how characteristic of a high-spirited people that nowhere could be found any amusement appealing to the mere mind, or calculated to effeminate by encouraging a love of beauty” (107).

Here the narrator’s tone of voice becomes violent, and he proposes an extreme solution to the problem of urban poverty. “Does not the prescription recommend itself?” he asks, continuing: “Is it jesting in earnest? For work as you will, there is no chance of a new and better world until the old be utterly destroyed. Destroy, sweep away, prepare the ground; then shall music the holy; music the civilizer, breathe over the renewed earth, and with Orpheum magic raise in perfected beauty the towers of the City of Man” (109). His proposal is akin to that of Walter Benjamin’s *Unmensch*, or the “destructive character” intent on “the radical dismantling of the bourgeois humanist subject,” as Terry Eagleton writes (31). But Gissing’s narrator envisions the destruction of the lower-class subject, whom he observes with disdain. Gissing continues: “Observe the middle-aged women; it would be small surprise that their good looks have vanished, but whence comes it they are animal, repulsive, absolutely vicious in ugliness? Mark the men in their turn: four in every six have visages so deformed by ill health that they excite disgust” (109).

Whether this is the narrator’s true sentiment, or another example of his adopting a tone of voice, is unclear. Before the reader can decide this point, he shifts tone again, this

time to wry pity: “A great review of the People. Since man came into being did the world ever exhibit a sadder spectacle?” (110). His voice then mingles with that of the people. Yet heated disdain surfaces once again and the masses are swarms of coupling insects: “As the dusk descends there is a general setting of the throng towards the open air; all the pathways swarm with groups which have a tendency to disintegrate into couples; universal is the protecting arm” (110). At this point the narrator’s descriptions verge on the chaotic, the riotous, the carnivalesque. “[G]irls linked by the half-dozen arm-in-arm leap along with shrieks like grotesque maenads” while “above them glimmers the dawn of starlight” (110).” A rush, a tumble, curses, blows, laughter, screams of pain—and we are in the carriage,” describes a train that appears in the scene. “[...] Off we go! [...] We smoke and sing at the same time; we quarrel and make love—the latter in somewhat primitive fashion; we roll about with the rolling of the train; we nod into hoggish sleep” (112). Shifting from a tone of condescension to that of bloodlust, and then to that of frenzied ecstasy, the narrative voice of “Io, Saturnalia” never grants the reader purchase. Rather, it veers from one point of view and tone of voice to another without warning. The effect is one of disorientation, perhaps the very disorientation the drunken masses feel as they crash into and carom off each other in their drunk and giddy celebration of a day of freedom.

Contemporary critics have remarked at length on Gissing’s vacillating narrators, claiming that such shifts in tone and viewpoint make Gissing’s intent difficult to determine. “This structured dissonance between discourse and story,” writes James, “can make it awkward, unsettling to read, and easy to misinterpret” (41). *The Nether World* prevents readers from knowing which voices Gissing presents as his own, and which

serve as screens for dissimulation. “Gissing’s narrators and characters are given comparable autonomy,” James continues, “the former is never to be explicitly identified with authorial position. Indeed, his narrators are rarely reliable judges of character and can even give the impressions of actively disliking certain characters” (43) Gissing’s narrators resist any sympathetic identification on the part of the reader. Without knowing how they feel, it proves almost impossible to relate to them. Fredric Jameson writes that “it is as though, in a world of reified language, even the author’s own personal language cannot be genuine any longer, and comes before us as virtually Flaubertian mimicry of received ideas of a disembodied, floating sort” (202). As Virginia Woolf notes, this results in a reader’s becoming “completely baffled.” And, as Ruth Capers McKay observes, Gissing’s readers “often [find themselves] in a quandary as to whether applaud or condemn.”

Gissing’s contemporaries shared in the general perplexity.<sup>40</sup> They remarked on how Gissing’s popularity was hampered by his unconventional approach to his subject. “The slow growth of Mr. Gissing’s reputation as a novelist,” writes a reviewer in an 1898 edition of *The National Review*, “must be regarded as one of the literary problems of the time” (258). Indeed most households did not own copies of Gissing’s novels. “To most households,” the reviewer continues, “Mr. Gissing’s books, with their rich qualities of dramatic force, realistic picturing, and trenchant style, are still strangers. He has steadily gained in favour, it is true, with a certain circle of readers, but on the great every-day world to which his novels, by virtue of their themes, must surely appeal, his hold would seem to have increased by almost imperceptible degrees” (258). The reviewer attributes

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<sup>40</sup> An 1889 review in the *Guardian* remarks specifically on the often scornful tone of the Bank Holiday chapter: “The account of the Bank Holiday at the Crystal Palace,” the reviewer writes, “is unnecessarily

this lack of popularity to “the vein of pessimism which runs through all his novels” (258). The pessimism of Gissing’s novels makes them seem somehow discordant, a quality that alienates the average reader. The reviewer continues: “It has long been a truism that there is nothing in fiction which most people dislike more than the failure of events to “rhyme with each other,” to use Thomas Hardy’s phrase, such as they witness in their own lives, and that the novelist who totally denies “poetical justice” to his characters must be prepared to defy popular prejudice (258). In other words, Gissing violates an aesthetic code when he adheres too closely to a realistic depiction of his subject, and that realism makes his novels unappealing to the reader who desires the brute facts of life to be subservient to aesthetics. In respect to the *The Nether World*, the reviewer writes, “Underlying the reader’s sense of disappointment [in the ending] must be some recognition that, in part at any rates, the book has a pathetic truth” (260). But this recognition failed to sell Gissing’s novels.

An 1889 piece in *The Dublin Review* also finds *The Nether World* difficult: “It is a very melancholy book, for it describes, in language which is only too truthful, grinding toil, hopeless poverty, and drunken degradation” (199). The reviewer is reminded of Dickens, but with a difference. “He has a felicity and liveliness of descriptive use of dialogue which not unfrequently remind us of Dickens,” he continues “but he differs very materially from Dickens in two points: he never paints the bright side of labour and poverty, and he talks a great deal too much in his own person” (199). Gissing’s contemporaries also saw that he was in dialogue with Dickens and that he purposefully deviated from the traditional Dickensian narrative in not acknowledging “the bright side” of slum life. Though the reviewer faults Gissing for talking “a great deal too much in his

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crude and painful; the want of refinement in the people seems simply to irritate Mr. Gissing” (140).

own person,” as has been discussed, Gissing talks too little in the voice of any one person.

That contemporary critics thought Gissing was talking in his own voice points to the newness of his approach to narration. Sales figures or popularity meant nothing to Gissing if they required him to write in bad conscience, that is, to write novels that failed to accurately portray the lives of the poor. For Gissing refused to adhere to the dictates of “poetic justice” or aesthetic pleasing to a readership weaned on sentimental fiction. Gissing’s allegiance was to realism, for which he developed a unique definition.

Gissing explains this approach in the short essay “The Place of Realism in Fiction” (1895), in which he rejects the idea, which Dickens lauded, that the author should consider the reading public’s opinion as he crafts his novels. “Let us have done with the conventional, that is to say, with mere tricks for pleasing the ignorant and the prejudiced,” he writes, “let the novelist take himself as seriously as the man of science; be his work to depict with rigid faithfulness the course of life; to express the secrets of the mind, to show humanity in its external combat with fate” (47). For Gissing literature should be conducted to be as objective and insular as science; just as the man of science ignores public opinion when he arrives at an experiment’s conclusion, so should the man of literature be as impervious to popular sentiment when crafting a novel. “The artist,” Gissing continues, “has no responsibility save to his aesthetic conscience [and he must] discard altogether the debated terms, and to inquire with regard to any work of fiction whether it is sincere, secondly, whether it is craftmanslike” (47). Here Gissing suggests that the novelist need be loyal only to his artistic vision – sincerity should trump sympathy. For a novelist to please his audience represents a violation of his duty to

“depict with rigid faithfulness the course of life” (47).

Gissing not only insists that authors adhere with rigid faithfulness to their aesthetic conscience but he also implies that no reality exists outside of that of the artist’s consciousness. “What the artist sees is to him only a part of the actual,” he writes, “its complement is an emotional effect. Thus it comes about that every novelist beholds a world of his own, and the supreme endeavour of his art must be to body forth that world as it exists for him” (47). The artist’s vision is purely subjective, and as many worlds exist as there are artists. The artist must therefore embrace a solipsistic view of the world. Any attempt to temper the author’s singular vision of the world in order to facilitate appreciation of common experience is neither sincere nor craftsmanlike. Gissing goes so far to posit that “a demand for objectivity in fiction is worse than meaningless [...] there is no science of fiction” (47). How Gissing reconciles this assertion with his earlier statement that the author must complete his work as seriously as the man of science is left unexplored. Perhaps this is another example of his tendency toward, as Jameson puts it, “Flaubertian mimicry.”

More likely, however, this contradiction illustrates a fundamental problem faced by authors in the *fin de siècle*: the impossibility of faithfully and objectively transmitting ideas to a vast and unknowable reading public, which had been expanded by the Education Acts of 1870 and 1871.<sup>41</sup> “For Gissing,” James writes, “the creation of a much larger reading public by the Education Act in the year of Dickens’s death means that Dickens’s popularity belongs to a different historical era entirely. Gissing, as much as any

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<sup>41</sup> The Education Acts of 1870 and 1871 were intended to bring public, elementary education to all children between the ages of five and twelve in England and Wales. Though the intended result of the education acts was to render British industry more competitive, they also created circumstances much different from the ones under which Dickens wrote.

writer of his generation, felt it impossible both to retain the artistic autonomy of the post-Romantic literary writer and to succeed as a producer of marketable commodities” (54). This perhaps explains his use of multiple voices in *The Nether World*. “All languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views each characterized by its own meaning, objects, and values,” Mikhail Bakhtin writes. “As such, they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people” (292). Bakhtin insists that “these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia (292). The heteroglossic nature of language itself prevents one from developing a unified view of the world. Gissing’s theory that novelists can only speak of worlds known and created only by them is an acknowledgement of this fact. And when they depict the world(s) of the lower orders, the meanings, objects and values multiply accordingly. “On the lower levels,” Bakhtin continues, “on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all ‘languages’ and dialects; there developed the language of the fabieux and *Schwänke* of street songs, folk sayings, anecdotes, where there was no language-center at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the ‘languages’ of poets, scholars, monks, knights and others, where all languages wore masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face” (273). Language for Bakhtin is “not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intention; it is populated, overpopulated, with the intentions of others” (294). Therefore, “expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process” (294). Gissing’s use of heteroglossia in his novels is a tacit

acknowledgement of this fact, and also of the fact that a growing reading public was making it even harder to justify a theory of unified and unifying language.

Critics have mostly discussed the problems caused by changes in the publishing industry and an increased reading public in relation to the production of literature. But the expansion of the reading public did not just present novelists with special challenges in terms of representation and authorial autonomy; social scientists likewise agonized over the apparent relativizing tendencies of language. Charles Booth, that exemplar of nineteenth-century objectivity, similarly expressed anxiety about how to relay his findings to a large and diverse reading public, he therefore looked to literature as a means of bridging the gap between author and reader.

#### George Gissing and Charles Booth: A Surprising Affinity

Critics like to situate Charles Booth on a spectrum upon which Gissing functions as his polar opposite. Good reasons exist for this polarized conception of the two writers: Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London* came out the same year as *The Nether World*. Critics tend to describe Booth as a hard-nosed social scientist who simplifies his subjects' lives. "There is something particularly disturbing about Booth," Christine DeVine writes, "with his fixation for numbers and facts, seeing the lives of those he studies as 'simple natural lives.' That he does not see these lives as complicated—even if only what must have been an ongoing anxiety about money—after pouring over his own statistics, demonstrates a singular lack of perception in Booth" (18). As will be demonstrated, it was not a lack of perception that prompted Booth to portray the lives of the poor as complicated, but rather a concern with the realism of that portrayal and the

impossibility of conveying it to a mass audience.

Raymond Williams also writes of Booth's impersonality, but he attributes it to having to conduct such surveys within a new urban environment. "Booth's deliberate impersonality—mapping and grading before visiting; systematic tabulation—is less readable and less attractive," Williams writes, "but it belongs to a way of seeing which the new society itself was producing" (222).

It is deficient in many respects: in its intrinsic reduction of the poor to objects of study; in its depersonalization by classification and grading; in its lack of general ideas about the character of society [...] But it has two corresponding strengths [...] the services themselves are a response of a new kind to the problems of the city. Moreover the statistical model itself, which to Dickens and other early Victorian humanists had seemed destructive and hateful, was a necessary response to a civilization of this scale and complexity. (222)

Booth himself recognizes the inadequacy of earlier modes of representing the poor. He deemed earlier ethnographic representations of the poor too sensationalistic. "[To] make use of no fact to which one cannot give a quantitative value" stood for Booth as the cardinal imperative of the discipline pioneered by Henry Mayhew (who Booth also considered sensationalistic), and by restoring this imperative to his discipline Booth led a revival of empirical social research. He took a more scientific view of the problems posed by poverty, and employed a team of investigators to conduct hours of interviews with their subjects. Critics contend that Booth sought to suppress any sentimental tendencies in his work by employing elaborate statistical tables and detailed maps to profile his subjects—and his *Life and Labour* was one of the last of such works that could be considered purely statistics. M. J. Cullen writes that Booth's *Life and Labour* represents "one of the last such works which could appear initially within the context of statistics" by dint of the fact that "statistics and sociology were parting company" as a result of "a

process institutionalized in the foundation of the Sociological Society in 1903” (149).

Booth’s methodology in *Life and Labor* seems like a means by which the social scientist could objectively survey a subject of tremendous scale and complexity.

A reading of Booth’s *Life and Labour* does indeed reveal a careful study heavily reliant on statistics. Unlike earlier accounts of the poor, which depend more on sensationalistic narrative than statistics, Booth’s work is systematic. Each chapter classifies its subject and then presents first-hand observations to justify that classification. In the first comprehensive biography of his life, *Charles Booth: Social Scientist* (1960), T. S. and M. B. Simey regard Booth as a paragon of scientific objectivity. They write that his work can only be understood “if it is also regarded as that of a sociologist who sought to introduce some of the objectivity and exactitude of the natural sciences into the study of the unstable world of social relationships” (3). The Simeys consider this aspect of Booth’s work revolutionary, because it fused together objectivity and obligation into “a new system of thought and inquiry” (3). Booth devised this new system, the Simeys go on to explain, through a marriage of “personal observation” with “statistical measurement” (4), an innovation qualifying Booth, the Simeys claim, as the founder of empirical sociology.

Earlier critics of Booth’s work thought much the same way as the Simeys. A 1917 note on his death that appeared in *The Journal of Political Economy* claims writers like Andrew Mearns and Walter Besant stirred the “social conscious of England” with “sensational stories of London poverty” while the recently deceased “quietly began his work of investigation [...] without partisanship” (197). The eulogist upholds Booth as a champion of objectivity: “His purpose was not to ‘state the case’ for the comfortable

classes to which he belonged,” he writes, “nor to state the claims of those who advocated or condemned any one of the social panaceas that were on the market. He only wished to gather the facts” (197). It seems that was the general impression Booth gave, both to his contemporaries and critics of today. His work was a seeming testimony to his disinterested interest in facts.

Booth himself says as much in the first volume of *Life and Labour*: “The materials for sensational stories lie plentifully in every book of our notes; but even if I had the skill to use my material in this way—that gift of the imagination which is called ‘realistic’—I should not wish to use it here. [...] My object has been to attempt to show the numerical relation which poverty, misery, and depravity bear to regular earnings and comparative comfort, and to describe the general conditions under which each class lives” (6). Booth presents himself as a champion of numerical objectivity, as though somehow numbers are a bulwark against irresponsible relativism. The imagination has no place in Booth’s work. But more recent criticism has challenged the idea that Booth was an unequivocal champion of fact. Rosemary O’Day and David Englander write, “To suggest that Booth was a mindless empiricist is [...] clearly unsupported” (56). Englander and O’Day speculate that Booth was troubled by the amorphous social interactions that resisted statistical tabulation. “Scholars should not examine just Booth’s statistical tables,” they write, “if those implied rigid separation between classes and occupations” (56). The Simeys note that “Booth was well aware from his personal experience, of relationships and interactions which became submerged in statistical tabulation” (56).

A closer look at Booth’s *Life and Labour* reveals an individual troubled by the elusiveness of an objective and quantifiable truth in his social observation. Booth’s

uncertainty is most apparent in one the final sections of the first volume of the series.

Entitled “Points of View,” the section introduces an element of doubt as to the objectivity of Booth’s study and questions the viability of his project:

East London lay hidden from view behind a curtain on which were painted terrible pictures:--Starving children, suffering women, overworked men; horrors of drunkenness and vice; monsters and demons of inhumanity; giants of disease and despair. Did these pictures truly represent what lay behind, or did they bear to the facts a relation similar to that which the pictures outside a booth at some county fair bear to the performance or show within? This curtain we have tried to lift. (172)

Booth accuses his forebears in social science as exhibiting all the scruples of a carnival barker. Distilling from the true human misery endemic to East London only stereotypical essences, these forebears “painted terrible pictures of [s]tarving children,” “suffering women” and “overworked men” that had the effect of placing “hidden from view from behind a curtain” into which these terrible pictures were woven. The originals for these representations of “horrors of drunkenness and vice,” these “demons of inhumanity,” these “giants of disease and despair,” gained little and, indeed, lost much for their sitting for such portraits. The fact that these pitiful subjects became caricatured thusly naturally led Booth to express skepticism that “these pictures truly represent[ed] what lay behind.” And his likening these East London subjects’ depictions to “the pictures outside a booth at some county fair,” serves to register Booth’s contempt for the exploitative sensationalism attending earlier representations of the poor. By trying to lift the garish, lurid curtain thrown in front of his subjects, Booth brings them into the light of what he considered proper scientific scrutiny.

But Booth’s choice of the carnival as a metaphor for his project exposes the general professional anxiety concerning social boundaries and the veracity of

observation. The carnival show is an incomplete event, and no amount of barking or lurid depictions can complete it. Only the imagination of the observer in the stands makes the carnival whole. There are, then, as many carnival acts as there are observers, and the social scientist is placed in a position much like that of Gissing's author as described in "The Place of Realism in Fiction"—what the observer sees is only part of a reality that depends on imagination, an emotional effect, to complete it. Thus every social scientist beholds a world of his own making.

The carnival is a place epistemologically untethered. It is impossible to locate the source of the viewer's knowledge of an event in its topsy-turvy world. "Carnival celebrated the temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order," writes Mikhail Bakhtin. "[I]t marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (10). The carnival is an event in which meaning is provisional, mobile, never fixed. "All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal," Bakhtin continues, "with a sense of gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities"(11). In the "gay relativity" of the carnival meaning cannot be pinned down. It is too riotous, too multiform and indeterminate.

Booth's recourse to the trope of the carnival can be understood, then, as an expression of anxiety about his work's truthfulness. "This curtain we have tried to lift," he writes. Booth does not claim the curtain has been lifted, only that he has *tried* to lift it. He does not speculate on the success of his project. Rather Booth leaves the reader to decide for himself about the project's objectivity, whether Booth was successful in

compiling a portrayal of the lives of the poor less sensationalistic than those of his predecessors.

It must be mentioned that Booth does attempt to limit uncertainty and speculation within his project, though he acknowledges the difficulty of doing so. He writes that in the service of realism he has confined his discussion to “showing how things are” (172). Booth accomplishes this by dwelling exclusively on situations as they exist at the moment of observation. He avoids all discussion about how things “come to be as they are, or whither they are tending” (172). Only by focusing on the present moment can the social scientist claim his work arises out of objective consideration. Yet Booth admits that this approach is reductive. He insists that any social scientist interested not only in objectivity, but also in truth must “interpret aright the life of [the people and] we need to lay open its memories and understand its hopes” (173). Booth acknowledged that the social sciences cannot lay open such subjective phenomena as memories and hopes, that they can only record, as impersonally as possible, data points evident from the material facts of a subject’s life. For Booth objectivity was not synonymous with truth, or the reality of his subjects’ life world, and this made undertaking a project like *Life and Labour* difficult.

Booth enlarges on the difficulty of executing such a project. He argues that not only must the social scientist contend with the amorphous dreams and hopes of his subjects, but he must also convey those subjective and idiosyncratic impressions to a large and varied reading public, whose sentiments are also amorphous and difficult to determine. Booth posited that the point of view of the reader contributed to the difficulty of compiling an objective survey of the poor, for the social scientist cannot anticipate

how his work will be interpreted by the reader. He elaborates on this point:

Nor have we yet exhausted the complicated relativities which are crowded into the phrase 'point of view'; for we have to take into account the condition of the on-looker's mind and of public sentiment generally, and the changes of feeling that occur, in this or that direction, by which it becomes more sensitive or more callous. (173)

Like Dickens, Booth is aware of "public sentiment" and how it renders conveying facts to a reading public even more difficult, because not only must the social scientist undertake the difficult task of fathoming the memories and hopes of the poor, but he must also consider that his knowledge might be distorted by the public, which, as Gissing also noted, was growing more unwieldy and amorphous by the day. These factors create, Booth continues, "room for great gulfs of difference in considering the same facts" (173). Within these "great gulfs of difference" meaning disappears and the intention of the author is obscured by misunderstanding.

It is in these final chapters of *Life and Labour* that one can see that Booth shares the same concerns as Gissing about the accurate representation of his subject and the successful reception of his work. Booth undertook a survey of an increasingly de-individuated and chaotic mass of people, and in *Life and Labour* he made evident his anxiety about the accuracy of his representation of that mass. This anxiety was exacerbated by the fact that many constituents of that mass, having acquired literacy thanks to the Education Acts of 1870 1871, sought reading material to consume. The reading public thus came to resemble the public as a whole: a diverse and riotous assemblage implacable in its demands and inscrutable in its tastes. Like Gissing, Booth had to come to grips with an altogether unprecedented social phenomenon engendered in large part by mass literacy, and his work betrays an anxiety about how to retain authorial

authority in an age that was increasingly marked by a staggering vastness—of cities, of crowds, and even of books and other publications, the latter of which were churned out relentlessly by the publishing industry.

*Life and Labour* is full of moments in which Booth expresses concern about the vastness of his subject. The trope of great gulfs and vast spaces occurs with regularity. When describing South London, for instance, Booth writes that “South of the Thames lies a huge Metropolitan suburb of which I have found it difficult to form any but the most vague conception, so immense is it in size, so invertebrate in character” (275). Booth goes on to write that the suburb’s “vast extent not only makes the study very difficult, but in eluding mental grasp has perhaps itself a depressing influence” (275). The vastness of the city harbors vast and impenetrable crowds. This “huge population,” Booth writes, “is found to be poorer ring by ring as the centre is approached [...] while at its very heart [...] there exists a very impenetrable mass of poverty” (290). Booth’s account of the vast expanses of London’s slums anticipates Gaston Bachelard’s discussion of “intimate immensity” in his signature work, *The Poetics of Space*. But whereas Bachelard writes that the word “vast” brings a “calm and unity” and “opens up unlimited space,” from Booth the vastness of the city—and the crowd—elicits nothing but disquietude (197).

Booth’s disquietude was perhaps exacerbated by the steady movement of vast crowds through the vast spaces of the city, a phenomenon that called for new modes of representation. Booth writes that “Streets [were] crowded as to be thoroughfares no longer” (66-7). Representing these shifting crowds demanded a medium as modern and elusive as the crowd itself. Booth felt photography answered this difficulty. “The special difficulty of making an accurate picture of so shifting a scene as the low-class streets in

East London present is very evident,” he writes,

and may easily be exaggerated. As in photographing a crowd, the details of the picture change continually, but the general effect is much the same, whatever moment is chosen. I have attempted to produce an instantaneous picture, fixing the facts on my negative as they appear at a given moment, the constant changes, the whirl and turmoil of life. In many districts the people are always on the move; they shift from one part of it to another like ‘fish in a river.’ (26)

The crowd was a new phenomenon, and its newness rested on the fact that in that it was in constant flux. It lacked a center, as well as any principle of continuity save a formal one—its being a crowd. If the social scientist wanted to accurately picture it he had to adopt the technique of a modern technology. The camera allowed the social scientist to conceive of fixing an image in time and space long enough to tease out the detail important to his project. Otherwise, the details of the lives of a people “always of the move” would be lost in the “whirl and turmoil” of urban life.

In his attempt to make an “accurate picture” by “fixing facts” on a negative “as they appear at a given moment,” Booth enacts the type of work done by the camera obscura. “The *camera obscura* performs an operation of individuation,” Jonathan Crary writes, “that is, it necessarily defines an observer as isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines. It impels a kind of *askesis*, or withdrawal from the world, in order to regulate and purify one’s relation to the manifold contents of the now ‘exterior’ world” (39). But Booth aspires to the opposite effect. Rather than making the observer isolated, enclosed and autonomous, he tries to make his subject so; only this way does Booth believe he can eliminate factors that might influence the objectivity of his observations.<sup>42</sup> The social scientist must isolate his subject in order to reveal it

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<sup>42</sup> The photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, in *The Mind’s Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers* (1976), writes, “Space, in the present, strikes us with greater or lesser intensity and then

objectively to his audience.

Booth's attempt at the creation of a written photograph is not new. In fact, he participated in the development of a little-known genre of his time: the social photograph. An early example of this unique genre is the 1858 anonymous book *Midnight Scenes and Social Photographs: Sketches of Life in the Streets, Wynds, and Dens of the City of Glasgow* (1858). The author, who calls himself "Shadow," remarks in the preface that he "does not wish the reader to imagine that their [the sketches] appearance arises from any supposed literary excellence, but rather because it is presumed they will be found to contain facts and observations not without value on a subject of great and increasing interest, viz., the condition of the poor, and the classes generally inhabiting the lower depths of society [...] They are not creations of the brain, but so far as the writer's knowledge of the arts extends—they are truthful" (v-vi). A later example from the social photograph genre is the English journalist Eustace Clare Grenville Murray's *Under the Lens: Social Photographs* (1885). Murray writes of being "thrown into contact with a vast number of people, many of them of no small social note" (v). He goes on to explain that "he has represented with all the photographer's unflattering fidelity, the images impressed upon his mind, and presents us with not merely physical but moral portraits of his subjects" (v). At this point Murray introduces the microscope as a metaphor for his

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leaves us, visually, to be closed in our own memory and to modify itself there. Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes a precise and transitory instant. He continues: "Memory and the instant: photography, through the frame of the lens, cuts a visible instant out of that which enlarges itself progressively toward infinity, presenting the eye with a crystallized version of what would otherwise fall prey to the vicissitudes of personal memory. Its instant superior to that of the mind, the camera's eye supplements that the mind's eye. Because of its precision, the photograph presents an image that is supposedly enhanced in comparison to the image retained in individual memory: it is an image immune to modification. Whether memory itself strives for this all along is not necessarily part of the question; rather, the desire to capture moments on film as they are simultaneously captured in memory reveals something far more complicated about the innate power inherent in the moment and subsequently the image" (27).

approach: “At the same time he has treated Society as the microscope student treats an assemblage of animalculae, placing each in turn beneath the lens, and calmly dispassionately, and at times piteously, describing and delineating its characteristics” (vi). Both the Shadow and Murray point to the utility of the idea of the camera in describing the characteristics of high- and low-born society. They consider its mode of capturing the world—or the impressions that the world leaves on the mind—more objective than that of unenhanced observation.

Booth too seems to believe in the ontological preeminence of the subject’s captured image. Despite using this supposedly objective medium as the model for his method of work, however, he questions the effectiveness and veracity of his observations. The concluding chapter of *Life and Labour*, entitled “The Road and Its Difficulties,” ends on a peculiar note for a purportedly scientific work, “The dry bones that lie scattered over the long valley that we have traversed together lie before my reader. May some great soul, master of a subtler and nobler alchemy than mine, disentangle the confused issues, reconcile the apparent contradictions in aim, melt and commingle the various influences for good into one divine uniformity of effort and make these dry bones live, so that the streets of Jerusalem may sing with joy” (216). Booth’s admission that statistics depends on a rough “alchemy” and demands a master “subtler and nobler” to commingle disparate observations so as to make “dry bones live” through “one divine uniformity of effort” is a tacit acknowledgement of the shortcomings of a scientific approach to observing the lower classes. The “dry bones” refer to the facts gathered from Booth’s field research. But they are merely bones, and therefore they require a wordsmith more attuned to what makes for a complete and compelling narrative to put flesh on them. Implicit in Booth’s

belief that his “dry bones” must come to life is the awareness of fiction’s role in reconciling contradictions in order to create a narrative that is not only convincing, but that will also sell on the market. Only by enchanting the minds of the public can Booth hope to achieve his social agenda, and this aim can only be achieved through means other than scientific discourse.

In the paragraph that precedes this meditation on fiction’s utility in crafting a compelling narrative Booth alludes to that wordsmith who could successfully weave together his seemingly disparate facts into a compelling narrative: “Perhaps the qualities of mind which enable a man to make this inquiry are the least of all likely to give him that elevation of soul, sympathetic insight, and sublime confidence which must go to making of a great regenerating teacher” (216). Booth posits that the scientific man is incapable of the sympathetic insight that might elevate a reader’s soul. Implicit in this statement is a desire for the power only a novelist like Dickens could wield. The “great regenerating teacher” is the author as he existed about fifty years ago.

Booth does, at times, attempt to wield the power of novelistic discourse. There are passages in *Life and Labour* in which Booth uses discursive flourishes that can only be described as novelistic.<sup>43</sup> His prose is at times overly mellifluous for a scientific work. When describing a common street scene, for instance, Booth’s prose assumes a distinctly lyrical tone:

In the streets the love of dancing bursts out whenever it has a chance; let a barrel organ strike up a valise at any corner and at once the girls who may be walking past, and the children out of the gutter, begin to foot it merrily. Men join in sometimes, two young men as likely as not, and passers-by

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<sup>43</sup> When it was first issued, *Life and Labour* was faulted for looking too much like a work of fiction. It appeared in a white vellum cover emblazoned with gold decorations and a green ribbon. Richie Mudie-Smith observed that the “volumes savor too much of the Englishwoman’s *Love Letters*” and the binding was “better fitted for a collection of poems than a work of reference.”

stand to enjoy the sight. A couple of ragged, perhaps even bare-footed children, dancing conscientiously the step of the latest trios-temps, are a pleasant sight to see. (117)

Booth's description of the merry street dancing loses the staid objectivity of earlier descriptions of the living habits of the poor. He seems to delight in the cheerful scene and imparts that delight to the reader. He remarks on the "pleasant sight" of the ragged children and the amused bystanders. His prose echoes the scene's antic pace, the lively dance of the gutter children, and he paints an almost picturesque scene of lower-class life. It is as though Booth wants to inspire a sense of sympathy between his subjects (the dancing poor) and the reader, who most likely had never seen such a scene. Indeed the reader, seduced by the picturesque scene, joins the passers-by, becoming one with the curious crowd. Social boundaries dissolve in a moment of aesthetic pleasure. Borrowing from a genre quite alien to the social survey, Booth elicits an emotional response from his readership and, in doing so forges a sympathetic relationship between reader, subject and author.

Reviewers of Booth's work noticed as well the presence of novelistic discourse in *Life and Labour*. An 1891 review from *The Contemporary Review* remarks on the work's excellent and compelling style: "It [*London Labour*] must be read entire; and any reader who begins it is not likely to stop in its course, though he may reflect with some surprise afterwards upon the strangeness of having found these facts and figures so engrossing" (219). This is in part due to Booth's use of novelistic discourse. "One explanation lies no doubt in the excellence of Mr. Booth's own style," he writes, "which is eminently readable. It is admirably lucid, temperate and impartial; yet it has no aloofness, coldness or inhumanity; it is on the contrary full of kindly human interest, and his pages are

lighted up, now by a picturesque touch, now by a humorous phrase that keep the descriptions living. Whatever there may be of dryness in the book proves merely a surface effect, one which quickly vanishes. The interest, the vividness, and significance of these chapters grow at every reading” (219). The few passages of novelistic discourse in *Life and Labour* work their magic; the reader can see the lives of the poor in all their tawdry glory in living detail. These touches the reviewer considers “of kindly human interest” (219). Their presence more than anything points to Booth’s awareness of how novelistic discourse bridges the gap between author and reader.

#### Gissing and Booth: Author and Social Scientist in the Age of the Crowd

Booth’s concerns about the problems posed by authorship in the late nineteenth century are more similar to those of Gissing than critics are inclined to admit. As has been discussed, the two works are frequently presented as two contrary ways of representing the poor: Booth is the staid and wintry statistician who focuses exclusively on facts, while Gissing values impressions and a disorienting heteroglossia to the assert validity of his claims, which, at least for the social scientist, makes them suspect. But this view of Booth and Gissing is simplistic and ignores that the two men were responding, each in their own way, to the changing nature of literary production in the late nineteenth century.

Gissing was more directly aware of Booth than is usually acknowledged by contemporary criticism. In his diary Gissing indicates that he read Booth’s work on the London poor, and that he counted a collaborator of Booth’s one of his closest confidants. “Went to museum, and read some more Booth,” one entry reads. Another mentions that he “wrote to Miss Collet, who is staying with the Chas. Booths at Leicester” (313). Clara

Collet was a Labour correspondent for the Board of Trade, and she collaborated with Charles Booth on the gathering of data for *Life and Labor*. “The social worker Clara Collet took up residency in the East End and began her work assisting Charles Booth in his monumental survey [...] as an affiliate of the university settlement Toynbee Hall, a District Secretary of the C. O. S.,” Martin H. Ryle and Jenny Bourne Taylor write, “and a participant in various reform-minded clubs, Collet was fully integrated into the philanthropic vanguard” (17). None of this negatively influenced her friendship with Gissing. Ruth M. Adams writes, in “George Gissing and Clara Collet,” of their relationship, which “began in 1893, continued to his death, and was then extended to Gabrielle Gissing-Fleury [and] after Gissing’s death, [as] one of the executors of his will, she struggled with the discouraging publishers, attempting to achieve at last the complete edition of the novels Gissing had so hoped for” (72). Ryle and Taylor likewise comment on the closeness of the friendship between Gissing and Collet: “Collet’s friendship was extremely significant to Gissing. [...] Their relationship centered on his domestic difficulties and her efforts to relieve them, and Gissing showed little interest in Collet’s social investigations. Yet Collet was a conduit through which Gissing could observe clashes in philanthropic theory and practice” (17). This friendship allowed Gissing to remain aware of developments the theory and practice of the social sciences.<sup>44</sup>

The strange affinity between Gissing and Booth demonstrates how in the late nineteenth century the sciences and humane letters were not as estranged from one another as critics like to claim. Indeed, changes in both the publishing industry and society at large conspired to bring the two disciplines into an intimate and surprising

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<sup>44</sup> Booth too benefitted from the Gissing-Collet friendship—he cited Gissing’s novel *Demos* (1886) as an insightful portrayal of working class life.

communion. Both the novelist and the social scientist shared an anxiety about how to best represent their work to a vast and ultimately unknowable reading public. Both the novelist and the social scientist considered closely how point of view affects the veracity of their observations. The shifting social and economic scene of the late nineteenth century momentarily united two otherwise disparate disciplines as they attempted to develop a way of seeing that would best represent and convey their subject matter to a mass audience.

Booth and Gissing faced a common problem of transmitting their information to this mass audience while still retaining a sense of their individual projects. Booth lamented the undeniable existence of the “complicated relativities” that went along with acknowledging different points of view, and Gissing exploited that element of human converse which Bakhtin terms heteroglossia, the incorporation of all points of views through different linguistic registers, in order to foster authorial objectivity.<sup>45</sup> Yet Gissing exploited heteroglossia in order to remove concerns about the complicated relativities introduced by his reading public. “For the sense of the great city was now, in many minds, so overwhelming, that its people were often seen in a single way: as a crowd, as ‘masses’ or as a ‘workforce,’” Williams writes of Gissing.

George Gissing [...] saw in the great majority of people this single quality or condition, and under the stress of this experience the problem of the individual and society acquired, as we shall see, a new and bitter dimension. The individual was the person who must escape, or try to escape, from this repulsive and degrading mass. Gissing looked back to Dickens and recognized that “he taught English people a certain way of regarding the huge city,” but in Gissing himself, and perhaps in London by the 1880s, the paradoxical Dickensian movement of indignation and recognition had separated out into a simpler structure: indignant or

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<sup>45</sup> Gissing also revered fact. Virginia Woolf wrote of Gissing: “Partly because he revered facts and had no faculty it seems (his language is meagre and unmetaphorical) for impressions, it is doubtful whether his choice of a novelist’s career was a happy one.”

repelled observation of men in general; exceptional and self-conscious recognition of a few individuals. (222)

Gissing dispenses with this concern over point of view by adopting all points of view at the expense of a unified narratorial voice and a satisfying (at least to the reading public) structure. His epigraph to *The Nether World* admits as much. It was spoken by M. Renan at the *Academie Francaise* in 1889: “A painting of a dung-heap might be justified if a beautiful flower grew out of it; otherwise the dung heap is merely repulsive.” It is an interesting quote to put at the beginning of a novel, for it insinuates, with a touch of belligerence, that *The Nether World* will not conform to such standards of beauty.

Indeed no beautiful flower grows from *The Nether World*—the narrative ends as murkily as it began. No comforting moral is extended to the reader, no values which he or she can imagine binding a community of like-minded souls. “Sorrow certainly awaited them,” Gissing writes of the protagonists, “but at least their lives would remain a protest against those brute forces of society which fill with wreck the abysses of the nether world” (392). A sorrowful life of protest in the abyss of London’s slums is all that awaits the novel’s protagonists.

Both Booth, with his “dry bones,” and Gissing, with his wreck-filled abysses, refuse the reader a satisfying ending, one which offers a vision of a world where meaning is made manifest. In doing so, they repine, each in his own way, the death of the storyteller. “In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers,” Benjamin writes, “But if today ‘having counsel’ is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, that is because of the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others” (145-6). For Benjamin the novel and the conditions attending its production and dissemination were supposedly indicative

of this decline in storytelling. But both Booth and Gissing hearken to the Dickensian storyteller, the authorial household god whose works gave him a position of prominence within the households of their readership and thereby united that readership into an easily imagined community. Though Booth looks forward to the return of the author, Gissing accepts that history cannot resurrect the storyteller. This has more to do with the material circumstance of each man, perhaps, than with any esoteric philosophy. For while Booth was a wealthy corn merchant who could well afford to wait for an author-messiah to make his facts more compelling, Gissing hovered between poverty and a precarious lower-middle class existence. Given the changes in publishing practices toward the end of the nineteenth century, his fate was more closely tied to the mass readership he refused to court.

For the royalty system made authors more directly dependent on their public. Rather than selling their copyright outright, authors were increasingly given to accepting payment through royalties. “While the likes of Dickens had been liberated from patronage,” Peter Keating writes, “Gissing’s generation was ‘liberated’ by the royalty system” (21). This system was fairly new at the time of *The Nether World*’s publication, and had yet to be widely adopted, perhaps because of prudent caution on writers’ part impeded its implementation. Not every writer felt liberated by the royalty system. Trollope, for one, preferred selling his copyright for a lump sum. “Trollope’s usual business method was to sell a novel outright to a publisher,” Keating writes. “Providing the sum was large enough—and the most he ever received for a single novel was 3,200 pounds—he was spared what he called further ‘bargaining’” (15). Trollope’s preference for selling his novels outright was also due to the uncertainty involved in half-profit

contracts: “His early unhappy experiences with half-profit contracts had convinced him that it was better to take a large lump sum,” Keating continues, “and get on with writing another novel, than to take a relatively small advance and risk earning either much more or nothing at all” (15).

Gissing similarly sold his novels outright: “When George Gissing had completed his classic study of poverty-stricken authorship in *New Grub Street* (1891),” Keating writes, “he took it immediately to Smith, Elder and sold the copyright to them for 150 pounds, ignoring not only the financial potential but even the message of his own book” (18).<sup>46</sup> This approach to selling his work only increased Gissing’s dependence on writing for money. “In the 1890s he was often ranked with Meredith and Hardy among the leading novelists of the time,” John Halperin writes, “yet he never earned much from his books. Because of his continual need for money he sold outright for ready cash the copyrights of many of his novels and rarely collected royalties under this arrangement” (18).

Gissing was not necessarily foolish to eschew payment by royalties for outright sale of his novels. Walter Besant, that champion of the professional author, claimed that royalties deceived authors. “Authors at first jumped at the proposal of a royalty, because they thought something, at any rate, would come to them. In this expectation, as you shall see, they have been deceived,” Besant writes in *The Pen and the Book* (1899).

Publishers, for their part, welcomed the royalty system first because it saved them from the trouble (and perhaps the shame) of falsifying accounts, but chiefly because the profound ignorance of authors as regards

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<sup>46</sup> N. N. Feltes writes of the risk George Eliot took when selling *Middlemarch*: “George Eliot [...] saw the proposed new format [the serialization of the novel] as reopening so basic a matter as who was to take the risk of publication, whether the publisher, who would then offer a cash sum of 6,000 pounds for the four-year English copyright, or George Eliot, freely writing out her own varying unfolding self, taking the risk and a 40 percent royalty on her own success” (49).

the cost of production and the management and meaning of literary property enabled them to offer the unfortunate author a very small fraction of the proceeds of his own property. (173).

Besant was wary of the royalty system.<sup>47</sup> He felt it could easily disempower authors that already lacked agency over their work and the proceeds it garnered. As Trollope noted, when an author accepts payment through royalties he must also accept that his financial security is completely dependent upon the whim of the reading public. Since this reading public was, by the end of the century, more an amorphous mass than an imagined community, it was impossible for an author to discern whether or not his work would sell. Therefore, authors like Gissing felt it safer and more expedient to sell their copyright outright.<sup>48</sup>

For Gissing the royalty system created a dependence on a phenomenon that he admitted, in his novels at least, was unpredictable and seemingly irrational in its puzzling complexity. The reading public was no longer the emotional complement that made the author's work complete, as it was in the middle of the nineteenth century, but merely the financial complement that made the author's work profitable. The modern author was expected to depend on the whims of the enlarged reading public for his financial sustenance. This was likely a source of anxiety for Gissing, who felt that a novelist's artistic vision could not, and perhaps should not, be transmittable to large masses of people. Truth could not survive mass dissemination, and therefore the author had to stress its relative nature. As Benjamin writes, painting suffered the same fate:

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<sup>47</sup> Yet, in the same chapter, Besant confesses, "It has been publicly stated that I have not practised what I preach—and that in one novel at least I published by commission. I have, in fact, published three novels on commission" (182). He then goes on to elucidate how he was able to do so without suffering financial repercussions.

<sup>48</sup> Some authors benefitted greatly from publishing their works on royalty. In *My First Book* (1894), George M. Sims writes, "'The sale [of *The Social Kaleidoscope*] ran into thirty thousand the first year of publication, and as I was fortunate enough to have published it on a royalty, I am glad to say it is still selling'" (80).

A painting has always had an excellent chance to be viewed by one person or by a few. The simultaneous contemplation of paintings by a large public, such as developed in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis of painting, a crisis which was by no means occasioned exclusively by photography but rather in a relatively independent manner by the appeal of art works to the masses. (285)

The same phenomenon occurred with literature. As changes in publishing practices and an enlarged reading public with more purchasing power facilitated the mass production of novels and other publications, the author became merely an input in the production process. He could cater to mass tastes, and reap financial reward, or he could write to a select few and remain mired in poverty.

Gissing refused the reading public visions of a world unified by sentiment and good cheer and he suffered financially for this decision. Writing in 1912, Virginia Woolf observes:

*Born in Exile* [...] is to be bought upon railway bookstalls for sevenpence. Nevertheless it is his own word 'respect' that seems to describe the attitude of the public towards him; he is certainly not popular; he is really not famous. If we may guess at the destiny of this new edition, we can imagine that it will find its way to houses where very few novels are kept. Ordinary cultivated people will buy them of course; but also governesses who scarcely ever read; mechanics; working men who despise novels; dons who place him high among writers of English prose; professional men; the daughters of farmers in the North. We can imagine that he is the favorite novelist of a great many middle-aged, skeptical, rather depressed men and women who when they read want thought and understanding of life as it is, not wit or romance. In saying this we are saying also that Gissing does not appeal to a great multitude. (530)

Gissing's readers were as disparate and protean as his narrative style. He brought together the mechanic and the English don not because they shared a common taste for his novels, but because, as Woolf continues, he appealed to people who use the phrase "life as it is," which "is always the phrase of people who try to see life honestly and find it hard and dreary" (530). Gissing's "hard and dreary" view of life set him apart as a novelist; he had

no community of readers united in love for his work. He had only those who acknowledged the honesty of his work, though they had not, and had no desire to, read that work.<sup>49</sup> In their lack of shared taste or even social status, Gissing's audience constituted more a crowd than a community of readers. Perhaps this collection of disparate individuals is what Gissing intended to create through his novels. Luisa Villa writes that "Gissing's crowds seem to (provisionally) authorize the individual's yearning to unfettered self-realisation, together with his/her restlessness under the pressure to conform exerted by economic necessity" (65). The larger and more disparate Gissing's reading public, the more he could cultivate the image of the solitary artist whose solitude is directly attributed to his faithfulness to an artistic vision. This antagonist yet liberating relationship to the crowd was the only way for Gissing to retain a sense of autonomy and individuality in an age that was drawing the author into an ever closer relationship with a mass reading public.

Truth cannot survive mass dissemination, whether it is the truth of the individual artistic vision, or the truth of so-called objective statistics. The sympathy between author and reader that grants both parties an agency and sense of meaning depends on social structures that foster a limited literacy and limit consumption to select groups that are large enough to support an author financially but not so large as to make writing an alienated labor. Certainly Dickens catered to a mass audience—lords as well as kitchen maids enjoyed his novels—but circumstances were such that he still enjoyed a close relationship with those readers. Whether this relationship was of his own creation or the result of simpler social and economic structures is open to argument. But the fact remains

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<sup>49</sup> Woolf also wrote of Gissing that "[w]here the great novelist flows in and out of his characters and bathes them in an element which seems to be common to us all, Gissing remains solitary, self-centered, apart."

that both the publishing industry and the complexion of urban society changed socially and economically toward the end of the nineteenth century. These changes were registered by contemporary authors and their responses can be read in their works.

That Gissing and Booth were simultaneously grappling with these changes suggests that the sciences and literature were not as polarized as is presently thought. But as the end of the nineteenth century drew to the close and the social and economic complexities attending the dawn of the twentieth century brought with them the pressure to specialize, Booth's "dry bones" would eventually be subsumed under the newly legitimated science of sociology (when the first sociology department was established at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1904), which was no longer concerned with effecting a "divine uniformity of effort" but rather with cultivating an objective specialization. The new discourse fostered a fragmentation of knowledge and disciplinary specialization that legitimated Booth's lack of context or compelling narrative. Indeed the new science provided a context in which Booth's dry bones could exist solely as dry bones. The threat posed by mass culture and mass reproduction spurred the sciences into ever greater realms of specialization and professionalization. Booth would be one of the last scientists to lament the intellectually aloof nature of his work.

But Gissing would prove only the first of many authors who lauded his work's lack of success among the masses. Literature too would splinter into genres and subgenres and high-brow, middle-brow and low-brow works. The next and final chapter will examine George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and how Orwell attempts to effect social change in an age that has dispensed with the reader/author relationship

and instead concerns itself with mass media.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### GEORGE ORWELL AND THE NEW ETHNOGRAPHY

By the beginning of the twentieth century the social sciences had distinguished themselves as a disciplinary field largely as a result of the putatively objective social research methods its practitioners had developed the century before. Social anthropology in particular stood poised on the leading edge of this development, and its characteristic approach, that of using field research to validate observations, came to be reflected in the work of the Victorian social researchers like Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth. Anthropologists of the young twentieth century sought to develop further the innovations of their forebears, the Victorian social researchers, and in so doing went as far as to assert a bold new conception of the ethnographer's positionality: namely, that somewhere within the many integuments of subjective impressions there lay a monad of pure objective perception from which the irrelevancies of the former could be stripped so as to isolate a strictly factual account of that which the ethnographer has observed. Social anthropologists of the new century believed it possible, in other words, to bracket subjective impressions and personal prejudices from so-called objective field observations. In Britain social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was the foremost proponent of this type of social research.

As attractive an idea as inhabiting this positionality proved, it failed to win over all of those whom it concerned. Some did not share Malinowski's conviction. Indeed,

they doubted that any kind of metacognitive *cordon sanitaire* could be drawn around objective perceptions so as to isolate them from subjective ones. George Orwell for one rejected this idea, and in response to it proposed an alternative method of doing field research, which he set forth in his 1937 account of the working poor in the north of England, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Orwell's alternative method found impetus in a desire not to effect divisions but to foster a rapport between the observer and his subject—a rapport that Orwell intended to extend beyond observer and subject to include the reader. Only by binding his subjects and his readers to him, and himself to them, in a matrix of mutual sympathy did Orwell believe true understanding could be advanced. The ways and the extent to which this alternative method became subsumed into Orwell's sociological investigations into the lives of the working (and unemployed) poor generally will be discussed in this chapter's final portion.

#### Highbrow, Lowbrow: Virginia Woolf and George Orwell

“If Gissing were still alive he would be younger than Bernard Shaw, and yet already the London of which he wrote seems almost as distant as that of Dickens,” George Orwell writes in his 1948 essay on the work of Gissing (“George Gissing” 429). “It is the fog-bound, gas-lit London of the ‘eighties, a city of drunken puritans, where clothes, architecture and furniture had reached their rock-bottom of ugliness, and where it was almost normal for a working-class family of ten person to inhabit a single room” (429). Orwell admits that “one can hardly read [Gissing’s] descriptions of lower-middle-class life, so obviously truthful in their dreariness, without feeling that we have improved perceptibly on that black-coated, money-ruled world of only sixty years ago”(429). (Yet

Orwell also confesses to identifying with that world.) Orwell writes that Gissing's themes were limited to "money and women" and that the fictive universes constructed around them typically expressed Gissing's wish to have "a little more money for himself and some others" (429). Orwell cautions, however, that one should not construe this wish as proceeding from some sort of political or ideological commitment on Gissing's part. Gissing, he writes, "was not much interested in what we should now call social justice. He did not admire the working class as such, and he did not believe in democracy" (429). If anything, Gissing in Orwell's estimation was an elitist. "He wanted to speak not for the multitude," Orwell continues, "but for the exceptional man, the sensitive man, isolated among barbarians" (429).

The exceptional, sensitive man against the multitudinous barbarians fairly describes a tendency that gathered steam in the early twentieth century and that accelerated rapidly after the First World War—the tendency among certain writers to make their works intelligible to an elite few, which is to say, unintelligible to a mass reading public. Certain conventional designations followed from this. Works were designated either "high-brow" or "low-brow," these designations serving as an index of a work's accessibility. Writers both promulgated and internalized this juridical discourse; they came to regard their work as either being the stuff of mass entertainment or the object of elites' appreciation.

Virginia Woolf, herself a high priestess of the cult of highbrow literature, offers perhaps the clearest definition of these categorical distinctions. In her 1932 essay, "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," she taxonomizes three categories of writer. The "highbrow writer" is "the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind

at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea,” Woolf writes. The highbrow writer is moreover “a person driven by his or her intellect,” a distinction that places him or her in opposition to the lowbrow writer, who “rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life.” Despite the great pride Woolf takes in being herself considered highbrow, she professes great affection for her opposites. “I love lowbrows,” she continues, “I study them; I always sit next to the conductor in an omnibus and try to get him to tell me what it is like—being a conductor.” As inaccessible as the highbrow’s writing—the various effects engendered by his or mind galloping after an idea—is to the lowbrow, so too the lowbrow’s very existence—the vector sum of his body’s pursuit of a living at a gallop across life—is to the highbrow. Woolf’s professed curiosity highlights the fact that highbrows and lowbrows occupy completely different worlds, and that no matter how quickly either may be galloped through, they seldom come into contact. Yet across the gulf dividing the highbrow’s world from the lowbrow’s a certain mutual dependence asserts itself. “You have only to stroll along the Strand on a wet winter’s night and watch the crowds lining up to get into the movies,” Woolf writes. Lowbrows’ willingness to endure the elements attests to their irrepressible desire “to see what their lives looks like” via cinema, a medium under the control of highbrow cultural commissars. This being the case, “the highbrows are the only people who can show them,” especially because the demands of highbrows’ lives are such that they need never gallop through life in pursuit of a living. “Since [highbrows] are the only people who do not do things,” Woolf continues, “they are the only people who can see things being done.” Lowbrows suffer a certain purblindness as to the condition of their own lives, a situation which cries out for highbrows’ intervention. Already naturally given to cerebral pursuits and emancipated

from banal necessity, these highbrows take upon themselves the cultural task of creating the cinematic and literary representations by which lowbrows' purblindness may be relieved. Within Woolf's conception lowbrow and highbrow worlds resolve into harmonious cooperation—and this despite the abyssal divide between them. Lowbrows do, while highbrows stand by to observe that which is being done. Yet highbrows observe lowbrows strictly as a preliminary to engaging in their own sort of doing: namely, crafting representations of lowbrows' doings.

Orwell detested highbrow elitism. Yet he nonetheless felt class anxiety with respect to the working class, from which as a member of the lower middle class he endeavored to distinguish himself his whole life long. Very little divided Britain's lower middle class from the working classes; indeed, working class men frequently made more than their lower-middle-class counterparts. Putting his class anxiety aside, Orwell set upon a socialist agenda directed at the lower middle and working classes. Instrumental to his agenda was the social ethnography he put into practice while writing *The Road to Wigan Pier*. This ethnography involved social contact of a far more committed sort than casually interviewing omnibus conductors. It required that Orwell live among his subjects and that he record his observations while immersed in their world. Thus situated, Orwell believed his ethnographic study would possess the virtue of eliciting great sympathy for the subjects treated therein.

Orwell strove to represent the lowbrows to the highbrows in such a manner as to undermine the very highbrow–lowbrow distinction. Orwell did not intend, however, to undermine this distinction in order to clear the way for a Woolfean “middlebrow” contingent to ascend to a hegemonic cultural position. His contempt for highbrow

snobbery did not prevent Orwell from sharing Woolf's disdain for the "middlebrow" individual who, Woolf writes, "ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige" ("Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow"). Wedded as it was to advancing socialism, Orwell's ethnographic method can hardly be said to aspire to middlebrow ambivalence as Woolf describes it. Yet it nonetheless endeavors to mix art and life indistinguishably in order to forge a discourse capable of producing both literary and emotional effects. Reformed of its mercenary bent, middlebrow discourse presents a powerful means of redressing the spurious ethnographic objectivity promoted by Malinowski and his sympathizers.

#### Malinowski and Weber: Toward a New Understanding of Society

Toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth, sociology did much to define itself as a social science separate and distinct from other disciplines of study. This new momentum derived partly from the desire to recreate, or discover rather, a sense of community within a social climate made alienating through the effects of industrialism and urbanization. Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, did much to distinguish sociology from the other social sciences and establish it as an empirical science. Durkheim established the first European department of sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1895, and published his *Rules of the Sociological Method* that same year. Two years later, his seminal monograph, *Suicide* (1897), a study of suicide rates among Catholic and Protestant populations, pioneered modern social research and went far toward distinguishing sociology as a science separate and distinct

from other social sciences, such as psychology and political philosophy.

A positivist, Durkheim promoted an epistemological realism as a programmatic principle in the field of sociology, which he viewed as a science of institutions intended to discover and analyze social facts. These social facts he defined as cultural norms and social structures external to the individual. In a 1900 essay, "Sociology and Its Scientific Field," Durkheim outlines the need for sociology to define itself as a science. Though admitting that it may be "asking too much of a science that it define its subject matter with excessive precision, for the part of reality that it intends to study is never neatly separated from other parts," Durkheim nevertheless asserts that such a definition is necessary (354). He theorizes that social life does produce quantifiable manifestations that emanate from groups, simple or complex. He writes that the "composition of society consists in certain combinations of people and things which by necessity are connected in space" (360). These combinations can be quantified, and he goes on to present a proposition that he considers axiomatic: "For sociology, properly speaking, to exist, there must occur in every society phenomena of which this society is the specific cause, phenomena which would not exist if this society did not exist and which are what they are only because this society is constituted the way it is" (361). These phenomena form the basis of sociology as a science. "A science can be established only when it has for its subject matter facts *sui generis*," Durkheim continues, "facts that are different from those of the other sciences" (360).

Durkheim believed that there were quantifiable facts which could be examined and used as evidence or means of explaining larger social phenomena. He situates himself against his contemporary, sociologist Georg Simmel, who, Durkheim writes,

defines sociology as a science concerned with abstractions:

In the complex usually called society, there exist [for Simmel] two kinds of elements which must be clearly distinguished: there is the content, the diverse phenomena that occur among the associated individuals; and there is the container, the association itself, within which such phenomena may be observed. Association is the only truly sociological thing, and sociology is the science of association in the abstract. (355)

Durkheim takes issue with what he calls “Simmel’s investigations” (359). He writes that he appreciates their “subtlety and ingenuity” but thinks “it impossible to trace the main divisions of our science as he understands it in an objective manner. No connection can be discovered among the questions to which he draws the attention of sociologists; they are topics of meditation that have no relation to an integral scientific system” (359). And for Durkheim, an “integral scientific system” was necessary to establish sociology as a legitimate science capable of explaining objectively social phenomena.

Durkheim posited instead a system that would merit sociology “the name of a science” (359). This system would not, as Simmel constructed it, be “philosophical variations on certain aspects of social life, chosen more or less at random according to the leaning of a single individual” but a “formulation of the problem” that would permit the sociologist to “draw a logical conclusion” (359). This “formulation of the problem” took the form of social facts and a science heavily reliant on statistics. It was a sociology that placed its faith in reason and the scientific method, in statistics and so-called facts. In this sense, Durkheim’s approach had much in common with British social investigator Charles Booth; both men sought to redress the wrongs of their predecessors through a positivist approach to social science.

This was an approach challenged by Durkheim’s German contemporary, Max Weber. Unlike Durkheim, Weber did not begin his career as a philosopher and

sociologist. He was introduced to sociology by way of his participation in various liberal reform associations, and in 1908 he was to prove instrumental in founding the German Sociological Association. J. Freund writes that

the originality of Weber's contribution lies in the fact that he did not sever social structures and institutions from the multifarious activities of man, who both builds them up and endows them with significance. Central to his sociology, therefore, is the concept of social action (*soziales Handeln*); he was concerned not with appraising or evaluating social structures as good or bad, useful or ill-advised, but rather with achieving the most objective understanding possible of how men evaluate and appraise, use, create and destroy their various social relationships. He thus sought to understand actual man living in society. (88)

Integral to this understanding of man in society is the notion that no objective understanding is possible. Man and his institutions are constantly in flux and changing, and any observable phenomena have more to do with the observer than the action being observed.

“There is no absolutely ‘objective’ scientific analysis of culture—or put perhaps more narrowly but certainly not essentially differently for our purposes—of ‘social phenomena’ independent of special and ‘one-sided’ viewpoints according to which—expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously—they are selected, analyzed and organized for expository purposes,” Weber writes (249), expressing a conviction that runs contrary to Durkheim’s belief that the social scientist can ascertain certain “social facts.” For Weber, culture is a “value-concept,” and “empirical reality becomes ‘culture’ to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas” (252). The social scientist can see only a fraction of reality because only “a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. [...] We cannot discover, however, what is meaningful to us by means of a ‘presuppositionless’

investigation of empirical data” (252). The sociologist remains captive to his own world of value judgments and interest, a condition which makes any objective observation of social phenomena impossible. “How is the casual explanation of an individual fact possible—since a description of even the smallest slice of reality can never be exhaustive?”. Durkheim asks, only to supply the answer himself:

A chaos of “existential judgments” about countless individual events would be the only result of a serious attempt to analyze reality “without suppositions.” [...] Order is brought into this chaos only on the condition that in every case only a part of concrete reality is interesting and significant to us, because only it is related to the cultural values with which we approach reality. (254)

The sociologist must work to set aside his cultural values and attempt to study the values of his historical subjects. This work demands that the sociologist must observe, as much as he can, the subjective world of his subjects without interfering with the unfolding of that world. The only way for the sociologist even usefully to observe his subjects is to acknowledge their value judgments and subjectivity without making ideals of them.

These ideals, or facts, must be avoided because they distort the reality of the observed subjects. “All knowledge of cultural reality, as may be seen, is always knowledge from particular points of view,” Weber continues.

When we require from the historian and social research worker as an elementary presupposition that they distinguish the important from the trivial and that they should have the necessary “points of view” for this distinction, we mean that they must understand how to relate the events of the real world consciously or unconsciously to universal “cultural values,” and to select out those relationships which are significant for us. (257)

Though significant, those relationship do not necessarily enjoy universal value. Weber warns that if “the notion that these standpoints can be derived from the ‘facts themselves’ continually recurs, it is due to the naïve self-deception of the specialist, who is unaware

that it is due to the evaluation idea with which he unconsciously approaches his subject matter” (257).

Weber’s idea that “scientific truth is precisely what is valid for all who seek the truth” (259) is part of what Bruce H. Mazlish refers to as the “famous ‘value-free’ position of Weber” (219). “He was firmly convinced that science could not prove or disprove any particular value,” Mazlish writes. “Values come from sources other than reason. Moreover, values are always plural and in conflict in one another. [...] The result is that the sociologist must study the values of his historical subjects, complicated as they are, and not impose his own values on these subjects” (219). Weber’s approach represented a more organic approach to sociology, one that did not impose outside scientific theories upon a community. Indeed, Weber’s approach required that the sociologist respect the bonds that held a community together. Mazlish attributes Weber and Simmel’s “core concept of the sociology” to the idea of community:

What, they were asking, are the bonds that hold Men together and thus form a society? [This question] took on ‘sociological’ form [...] in a culture where the scientific attitude became prevalent, where individualism became the dominant mode through which the unsocial-social appeared to bring on the dissolution of community, with the result being a felt breakdown of connections, expressed in terms such as alienation and anomie. (137)

Equipped with a methodological approach that involved making value-free judgments, the sociologist, Weber believed, could do much to uncover the remaining bonds that lie hidden from view.

Weber’s theory of value-free judgments signaled a shift in power from the object observed to the observer. Evidence of this shift one finds in Max Weber’s “The Vocation of Science” (1918) an essay that first appeared as a lecture Weber gave at Munich

University. In it Weber claims that “[s]cientific work is harnessed to the course of progress” (272). Science offers no universal truths or systems of value. It only offers clarity of vision and a means for understanding the world on a local level, because meaning, forever in transit, eludes any judgment whose horizon is that of the temporal. Twentieth-century science, in other words, allows the practitioner to survey objectively her discipline with a view to rendering judgments that do not invoke metaphysics. This shift, Weber claims, can cause anxiety among those who do not wish to “let the facts speak for themselves” (279).

The field of social anthropology presents one of the more intriguing examples of a social scientist’s letting the facts speak for themselves. Social anthropology enjoys much the same history as sociology. Like the early social scientists, anthropologists of the mid-nineteenth century were either gentlemen amateurs or professionals devoted to other areas of scholarly or scientific activity. These proto-anthropologists did not yet regard themselves as a professional class; rather, they were, as Jeremy MacClancy writes, “intellectuals who occasionally studied anthropological themes” (7). The discipline was not yet professionalized in the mid-nineteenth century, and anthropology was barely distinguishable from other social sciences that were themselves still coalescing into distinct disciplines. None of these early anthropologists “regarded themselves as ‘anthropologists’ but as intellectuals who occasionally studied anthropological themes,” MacClancy continues (7). “Those whom we may regard as the first true anthropological professionals only emerged in the last decades of the century, from the small group of full-time paid curators entrusted with the care of ethnographic collections” (7). It was through the founding of various societies and organizations that anthropologists became

aware of themselves as belonging to a particular discipline.

The foundation of the Ethnological Society in 1844, for example, did much to consolidate anthropology into a distinct discipline. Not entirely professionalized, the Society made its sole object the promotion and diffusion of ethnographic knowledge, and to realize this object it held two sorts of meetings: meetings for those interested in the more scientific aspects of the discipline, and meetings that appealed to a popular audience.<sup>50</sup>

The culmination of anthropology's attempt to engage the attention of a popular audience was the work of James G. Frazer, whose masterwork of anthropology, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890), influenced work across many disciplines, including literature<sup>51</sup>. MacClancy writes that "Frazer marks the endpoint, for he was the last prominent member of those generations of anthropologists who tried in their writings to establish a closeness between themselves and their readers" (10). Indeed, MacClancy continues, "Lubbock, Taylor, Frazer and their peers spoke as though from their armchairs, to people who were in a similar position" (10). The style of address adopted by Lubbock, Taylor, and Frazer and their peers is reminiscent of Henry Mayhew,

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<sup>50</sup> "John Lubbock, president of the Society in the mid-1860s, wrote both of his books, *Pre-historic Times* (1865) and *The Origin of Civilization* (1870), in such clear, engaging prose that they were extremely successful and reached a remarkably wide audience," writes MacClancy. A breakaway organization, the Anthropological Society, which was founded in 1863, was even more aggressive about finding adherents. It too embarked on an ambitious publishing program and issued the *Popular Magazine of Anthropology*, whose object was to "diffuse a knowledge of Anthropology amongst all classes of society" (6). Such publications were a vital part of the professionalization of the science. The formation of these professional organizations, Philippa Levine suggests in *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838-1886* (1986), can also be traced in the publications that grew up around them. She writes of the founding of the *English Historical Review*, the professional journal of a new class of historians who were fast discrediting the amateur antiquarians.

<sup>51</sup> Written by a Scottish anthropologist, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* was first published in 1890. It appealed to a wide audience, and offered a modernist approach to discussing religion. The work's influence on contemporary literature was substantial; references to it are found in the works of Robert Graves, William Butler Yeats, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, among many others.

who also strove to ingratiate himself to audiences through a type of discourse that appealed to the popular imagination. Yet Frazer's career also marks a transition, MacClancy writes, "from a broad conception of anthropology, produced by well-educated amateurs and museum curators, to a more fragmented form of the discipline, produced by tenured academics who specialized in one of its branches" (10-11). One of these "tenured academics" would in fact change the nature of the discipline, attempting to give it a patina of legitimacy while at the same time endeavoring to engage his subjects in a manner that remained faithful to Weber's vision of a value-free ethnographic positionality.

This agent of change was Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist and a contemporary of Weber's, whose work, which was integral to establishing the basic tenets of structural functionalist sociology, would make him the most influential social anthropologists of his time. Malinowski is credited with being the first anthropologist to bring anthropology "off the verandah," depositing it instead—and himself along with it—squarely in the everyday lives of his subjects. He advocated detailed participant observation and promoted daily contact with subjects, an approach which he believed was the only way an anthropologist could record the minutiae of everyday life that are so vital to understanding a culture. "Malinowski was a Central European natural scientist brought by peculiar circumstances to anthropology and the English-speaking world," writes Alan Barnard, one who "objected to armchair evolutionism and invented a fieldwork tradition based on the use of native language in 'participant observation'" (65-66). Indeed, Malinowski believe firmly that the goal of the anthropologist, or ethnographer, is, as he wrote in his 1922 study, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, "to

grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (1961).

Malinowski followed this tenet when during World War I he was interned as an enemy alien in Australia, where he spent two years living in a tent among the Trobriand Islands and developing the theory of social anthropological research that after his release he brought back to Britain. Though initially heavily influenced by Durkheim's literature, Malinowski underwent a change as a result of his experience in the field. This experience led him to fall "entirely out of touch with Professor Durkheim's philosophical basis of sociology," George W. Stocking writes, because "in the field [...] one has to do with the whole aggregate of individual souls, and the methods and theoretical conceptions have to be framed exclusively with the multiplex material in view" (273). Malinowski concluded that the "postulate of collective consciousness" was "barren and absolutely useless for an ethnographical observer" (273-4).

In place of Durkheim's social facts, Malinowski proposed living, full-blooded facts that could only be observed in the field. He writes that one "of the first conditions of acceptable Ethnographic work certainly is that it should deal with the totality of all social, cultural and psychological aspects of community, for they are so interwoven that not one can be understood without taking into consideration all the others" (48). In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski observes that one of the greatest difficulties for the anthropologist is to untangle the "innermost native mind" from the anthropologist's own conceptions and value-judgments.<sup>52</sup> He insisted that the only way to undertake this

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<sup>52</sup> James Clifford considers *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* one of ethnographer's seminal texts. "Argonauts is a complex narrative simultaneously of Trobriand life and ethnographic fieldwork," he writes. "It is archetypal of the generations of ethnographers that successfully established the scientific validity of participant observation" (29).

seemingly impossible task was to learn the natives' language, because only by learning the native's language can the anthropologist "grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life," can he partake of the native's "vision of his world" (25).

*Argonauts of the Western Pacific* carefully lays out Malinowski's approach to ethnographic research, which argues for the ethnographer's maintaining a division between his observations of his subjects, and his observations on those observations.<sup>53</sup> "I consider that only such ethnographic sources are of unquestionable scientific value," Malinowski writes, "in which we can clearly draw the line between, on the one hand, the results of direct observation and of native statements and interpretations, and on the other, the inferences of the author, based on his common sense and psychological insight" (519). For Malinowski the period that falls between the ethnographer's making his observations and his producing the final document of his findings must be observed, for only when "the distinction between inference and observation is always clearly drawn" can the ethnographer make claim to scientific objectivity (518). To this end, Malinowski lays out three principles of method necessary for objective ethnographic evaluation. The first of these principles, he writes, dictates that "the student must possess real scientific aims, and know the values and criteria of modern ethnography" (575). The student must be familiar with ethnography as a discipline, in other words. The second principle stipulates that the student must "put himself in good conditions of work, that is, in the main, to live without other white men, right among the natives" (575). This second

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<sup>53</sup>"In regard to method," writes Frazer, who supplies the introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, "Dr. Malinowski has done his work, as it appears to me, under the best conditions and in the manner calculated to secure the best possible results. Both by theoretical training and by practical experience he was well equipped for the task which he undertook" (391). Frazer also acknowledges that anthropology was in its infancy: "[W]e may also remember that anthropology is still a young science, and that the multitude of problems which await the student cannot all be attacked at once, but must be grappled with one by one" (392).

principle represents Malinowski's greatest single innovation, for it transformed ethnography from an armchair discipline to one dependent on fieldwork. Malinowski's final principle is similar to the first: The student "has to apply a number of special methods of collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence," a stipulation that has more to do with defining ethnography as a specialized discourse than anything else (575). The upshot of Malinowski's principles of method is that the ethnographer must do everything he can to mitigate any value judgments that might influence his claim to scientific objectivity.

Though Malinowski's idea of dispensing with value judgments and cultural preconceptions is seemingly Weberian in its approach, there is no evidence to suggest that Malinowski engaged with Weber's work. Rather, Malinowski's more obvious influence was William James, whose theory of radical empiricism distinguishes itself from everyday scientific empiricism with its fundamental tenet that the world and experience can never be halted for an entirely objective analysis, because the mind of the observer and the act of observation conspire to affect the phenomenon observed. Put simply, the mind, its experiences, and nature remain inextricably bound together. In *Pragmatism, A New Name for Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), James writes that the central point of his own doctrine of truth is, in brief, that "[t]ruths emerge from facts, but they dip forward into facts again and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truth (the word is indifferent) and so on indefinitely. The 'fact' themselves meanwhile are not true. They simply are. Truth is the function of the beliefs that start and terminate among them" (225).<sup>54</sup> Truth for James is mutable, remaining in a state of constant elaboration. It

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<sup>54</sup> James goes on to write that it is "quite evident that our obligation to acknowledge truth, so far from being unconditional, is tremendously conditioned. Truth with a big T, and in the singular, claims abstractly

is thus neither static nor readily discernible. Malinowski's field-research methods similarly acknowledge these qualities of truth, which are the reasons his methods so thoroughly depend on context and the disposition and cultural background of the observer.

Malinowski's apparent affinity with some of Weber's ideas can perhaps be attributed to his "strongly dualistic temperament," as Stocking writes. Malinowski was "pulled between intellect and passion, science and art; and it has been convincingly suggested that he was a product as much of the 'second romanticism' and of the 'second positivism.'" Stocking goes on to remark that "[a] recent Polish commentary suggests that Malinowski's 'creative personality was shaped, both in its better and its worse manifestations,' by his being 'brought up in the very specific and unique atmosphere of Polish modernism'" (17). This unique atmosphere most likely influenced Malinowski's particular brand of anthropology, which, as Patricia Rae writes, begins the "modernist epoch" in anthropology (72). Rae considers *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* the foundational modernist-anthropological text, because, unlike other anthropological texts that came before it, it attempts to "dramatize the Nietzschean principle that every observer is embedded in a culturally constructed linguistic system—that he is 'in a state of culture while looking at culture'" (72). Malinowski's approach effectively enshrined an idealized construct of the participant-observer as the sine qua non of responsible ethnography. This participant-observer sets out to provide a first-hand account of a foreign culture that redresses the misconceptions of its distant audience and the

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to be recognized, of course; but concrete truths in the plural need be recognized only when their recognition is expedient. A truth must always be preferred to a falsehood when both relate to the situation; but when neither does, truth is a little of a duty as falsehood" (232). Given the increasing interest in assuming "objective" assessments of various subjects, one can appreciate how James's propositions would prove

generalizations of deductive anthropology (72).<sup>55</sup> He presents not only the facts of the culture under observation, but also his own experience of those facts so as to mitigate the effect of value judgments by acknowledging the presence of those judgments in the field. Malinowski's romanticism influenced his intellectual aspirations, and together they converged to inspire an approach to anthropology that was entirely new. Indeed, Michael North deems Malinowski's approach an "entirely new kind of investigation, distinguished from casual collecting and armchair philosophizing of the past" (45).<sup>56</sup>

For all of his romantic and intellectual fervor, Malinowski proved no unwavering practitioner of his own method. He did not adhere faithfully to the tenets of the philosophy that informed his practice, and his occasional deviations came to influence his legacy. "Whatever Malinowski's insights into the alienating cultural prejudices of fieldworkers, it seems, he was not willing to expose *all* of his own,' writes Rae. "[F]ar from embracing the fulsome representations typical of 'radical empiricism,' he attempted to *divide* 'pure experience' into subjective and objective components, erasing the most offensive of the former" (74). Rae writes that Malinowski's field diary for *Argonauts of*

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troubling to the aspiring social scientist.

<sup>55</sup> The desire to move away from theory and armchair philosophizing also appeared in other branches of the social sciences. Sigmund Freud argued for a more hands-on approach with respect to the science of psychoanalysis. In his 1909 work *Five Lectures*, he writes, "It is not without satisfaction that I have learnt that the majority of my audience are not members of the medical profession. You have no need to be afraid that any special medical knowledge will be required for following what I have to say" (4). Freud indicts medical practice based purely on deductive reasoning as overly reliant on textbook models, and argues instead for an approach that depends on induction, where the practitioner must carefully decode the patient's unique psychopathology, considering everything from childhood traumas to dreams and fantasies. This approach involves significant amounts of work, and it also implies that the difference between health and illness is not as definite as it once appeared to earlier practitioners. By developing this approach, Freud makes a crucial break from an earlier mode of medical practice that relied on the rote memorization of symptoms without concern for individual pathology. The new model of medicine envisioned by Freud instead asks the practitioner to consider those symptoms that are particular.

<sup>56</sup> For all its innovation, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* was no dry tome intended for a specialized audience; rather, Malinowski deliberately ensured the work would appeal to both a popular and a specialized audience. Since anthropology was struggling to establish itself as a discipline, Malinowski depended as much on popular sales of the book as sales among anthropologists for the dissemination his theories.

*the Western Pacific* revealed that Malinowski, far from being the objective observer, considered the Trobrianders “niggers” and expressed a desire to be free of “the atmosphere created by foreign bodies” (qtd. in Rae 73). Malinowski deleted these sentiments from the published version of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. This elision was warranted, Malinowski believed, because it served the cultivation of scientific objectivity. “[I]t is necessary to transform ‘the *brute* material’ gathered in the field into the ‘*authoritative* presentation of the results,’” Rae writes, summarizing Malinowski’s own thoughts on the issue, “or, deploying a key metaphor, to ‘clean up’ the ‘dust of little bits of information’ and expose the ‘final ideals of knowledge.’”(74). Scholars claim that Malinowski’s advocacy of selective revision, more than his modernist romanticism, was his true contribution to ethnography.

And his contribution was great, indeed; Malinowski did much to transform and popularize social anthropology in Great Britain. His creation of a division between personal, nonauthoritative impressions and scientific observations created the sense that the ethnographer had the authority to divide so-called objective impressions from what he considered subjective observations. The ethnographer found license to lay claim not only to scientific objectivity but also to a method that allowed him to determine so-called “brute material” from an objective, “authoritative presentation of the results.” James Clifford writes that at “the close of the nineteenth century nothing guaranteed, a priori, the ethnographer’s status as the best interpreter of native life—as opposed to the traveler (26). It wasn’t until the twentieth century, Clifford continues, that “an authority both scientifically validated and based on unique personal experience” was created, and this creation was largely due to the work of Malinowski. But as demonstrated by his

expurgation of certain sentiments from his field diaries, the inner life of the observer Malinowski considered dispensable. Furthermore, his approach suggested that the observer could isolate subjective from objective observations and that it was possible to objectively observe the ethnographic subject. Invested in the efficacy of the scientific method to a greater extent than was even Charles Booth's method, Malinowski's method promised to rectify the conundrum that Booth confronted and failed to resolve: namely, that the dry bones of statistics could not fully explain the problems of London's poor. For Malinowski, the twentieth-century scientist had the authority to decide which facts would prove useful in fleshing out the life world of seemingly alien subjects. If they did not tell the whole story the ethnographer had the authority to elaborate them into a satisfying theory, picking and choosing among observations deemed satisfactorily objective. In Malinowski's theory of social anthropology, the ethnographer alone decides what constitutes scientific disinterestedness.<sup>57</sup>

### George Orwell Versus the New Ethnography

An investment in the efficacy of the scientific method was not made by everyone interested in writing ethnography; against the notion that subjective impressions had no place in ethnography was articulated a dissident position that the former did indeed enjoy its proper place. One of the most pointed attacks from this quarter came from George Orwell, who, Rae writes, was "set on *challenging* domestic ethnographic discourse in the 1930s, which was dominated by the principles and example set by Malinowski." This

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<sup>57</sup>Clifford, however, acknowledges that ethnography, like fiction, cannot legitimate its claim to omniscience: "In practice, however, the ethnography and the novel have recourse to indirect style at different levels of abstraction. We need not ask how Flaubert knows what Emma Bovary is thinking, but the ability of the fieldworker to inhabit indigenous minds is always in doubt. Indeed this is a permanent,

dissident position adopted by Orwell was “consistent with [...] a sense indebted to Clifford Geertz [sic],” Rae continues, which is best understood as “Orwell’s ‘anti-anti-modernism.’” Characteristic of this position was Orwell’s belief “that modernist experiments were elitist, escapist, and, socially irresponsible,” and for these reasons were inconsistent with politically progressive commitments. To Orwell and his ilk “Malinowskian domestic anthropology” contained little to distinguish itself from “the socialist realism officially sanctioned by the Soviet regime,” which like the former “eschewed excessive emphasis on the inner life of the observer.”(78).

For Orwell it was exactly the inner life of the observer that mediated an understanding the condition of other, whether they be Pacific Islanders or England’s own lower classes. In his essays and exposés of lower class life, Orwell makes a point of including personal reactions to his subjects, remarking on smells that disgust him and ways of life that repulse him. Critics find in Orwell’s squeamishness evidence of his elitism, and they fault him for it, believing that it detracts from the quality of his work. Yet more than simply elements of his critique of ethnography as it was practiced in his time, Orwell’s subjective reactions, considered in the aggregate, represent an altogether new type of ethnography that managed not only to expose the hypocrisy of Malinowski’s central conviction that scientific objectivity is not only desirable but possible, but also to encourage sympathy for the subject on the reader’s part, as well as for the author himself.

This matrix of sympathy between reader and subject, as well as reader and author, was also a critique of highbrow aesthetic. Believing the reading public to be served but poorly by elitist modernists, Orwell sought to elevate his anti-anti-modernist stance from its position of mere reaction or negation by imbuing it with more thoroughly

positive qualities. He sought, in other words, to develop a countermodernist aesthetic, one which fetched writing from the rare air of effête experiment and deposited it into the dust and mud of politics. To the *bon ton* of Bloomsbury *salonnières* Orwell directed bold notes of sympathy and pity, revulsion and disgust.

And to his more scientifically-minded contemporaries he directed notes of distrust, for he considered scientific objectivity a ponderous apparatus of dubious social value. In his 1945 essay “What is Science?”, Orwell asks, “But is it really true that a ‘scientist,’ in a narrower sense, is any likelier than other people to approach non-scientific problems in an objective way?” He himself supplies an answer: “There is not much reason for thinking so” (11). Orwell believes that scientific objectivity solves everyday problems no more effectively than irrationality. In fact, the former can prove downright dangerous, because it herds the human imagination into a narrow chute of empiricism, the accretive effects of which cannot but dull the sharpest minds. “Scientific education for the masses [...] boils down to more physics, more chemistry, more biology etc. to the detriment of literature and history,” writes Orwell. Bereft of exposure to these latter subject areas, “the average human being” would experience a narrowing of “the range of his thoughts,” which would have the effect of “mak[ing] him more than ever contemptuous of such knowledge as he did not possess.” More than simply a regrettable outcome from a humanistic point of view, this narrowing of the thoughts of the average human being brings real practical consequences. Namely, “his political reactions would probably be somewhat less intelligent than those of an illiterate peasant” who for all of his disadvantages vis-à-vis the modern mass individual enjoys the distinct advantage of

retaining “a few historical memories and a fairly sound aesthetic sense” (12).<sup>58</sup>

Rather than an improvement upon the superstitious, then, mystically influenced worldview of the peasant, scientific objectivity represents a plunge into a more profound ignorance, Orwell maintains, so long as it remains untempered by history, arts, and humane letters. Knowledge dependent wholly on scientific means of thinking falls victim to a contemptuous fragmentation; the scientifically minded individual disdains and thus refuses to countenance anything outside the purview of science. This persistent bias leads to a tremendous insularity as these scientifically minded individuals come to constitute both the disseminators of and audience for scientific knowledge. This small circle, in other words, coalesces into an elite no less supercilious and bigoted than Orwell’s despised literary modernists. For his part Orwell sought to promote modes of discourse whose accessibility could communicate knowledge, scientific or otherwise, as widely as possible, albeit in such a manner as to preserve its character as knowledge.

Orwell’s early documentary writings offer evidence of his working precisely toward this ideal. In “Hop Picking” (1931), an early essay that anticipated the themes and subject matter of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell demonstrates his anti-objective approach to ethnographic social research. He writes in detail of his experience of camping out in one of the “recognized rendezvous of down and out people in London”(52). Unlike Malinowski, who worked to strip his ethnographic accounts of all personal observations, Orwell makes quite explicitly how he feels about his subjects. He writes of his fellow tramps in a makeshift encampment as “fantastically dirty” (53). He does not conceal his disdain for one of the tramps at the encampment, whom he describes as “a thorough guttersnipe” (55). “I do not know when I have seen anyone who disgusted

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<sup>58</sup> This essay was one of many that addressed Orwell’s fear of fascism taking hold among the British.

me so much as this boy,” Orwell writes, “He was as greedy as a pig about food, perpetually scrounging round dustbins, and he had a face that recalled some low-down carrion-eating beast. His manner of talking about women, and the expression of his face when he did so, were so loathsomely obscene as to make me feel almost sick” (55). In another passage he discusses the “intensely disgusting” atmosphere of British workhouses, which to him “seem all alike” with their “grey-faced, ageing men living a very quiet, withdrawn life in a smell of WCs, and practicing homosexuality” (55). Yet as intensely as Orwell feels this revulsion, he finds it intensely difficult to communicate. “[I]t is not easy to convey what I mean,” he continues, “because it is all bound up with the smell of the workhouse” (60).

Whatever literary effects his words can muster offer no substitute for one’s actual presence at the scene described. Orwell thus confronts a classic crisis of representation: Passages of description, lavishly detailed and freighted with emotional and psychological import though they may be, only signal the always already prior disappearance of the object from the horizon of signification. Orwell nonetheless soldiers on in an attempt to, as it were, square the circle by conjuring effects of disgust, pity and outrage at precisely the site from which they cannot emanate—the text. Yet this constitutive impossibility fails seriously to impede Orwell. He shows himself intent on persisting in his failure to communicate his reactions and experiences to the tramp encampment and the workhouse, perhaps in the belief that, because emphasis rests on communicating subjective experience rather than objective knowledge, some sensuous whole will emerge from the sum of descriptive parts. Unlike scientific discourse, which simply produces a heap of facts, subjective discourse can retrieve from the dispersal characteristic of textual

representation as such a layering of impressions suggestive of some difficult-to-define affective consistency.

This subjective–affective approach Orwell would employ in his major work of ethnographic research, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). In the 1930s Orwell was sent by a socialist book club to investigate mass unemployment in the industrial north of England. He expanded his investigation, however, to the employed of the region as well. These were Lancashire and Yorkshire coal miners who, though they had work, had lives that were anything but easy. The book is divided into two sections. The first consists of Orwell’s ethnographic study of the unemployed and working poor. In the second, Orwell discusses the merits of socialism and the danger it faced from fascism.<sup>59</sup>

Orwell took as his inspiration for his research into the lives of the poor and

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<sup>59</sup>*Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), an earlier social-investigative work of Orwell’s that enjoys many similarities to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, interrogates the meaning of work as it relates to class and to notions of utility. Vying against the dominant conception, Orwell locates the value of work not in the profit it realizes, but in the effort that is expended in it. Orwell thus brackets work from capital, developing what one may consider a value theory of labor. he claims, for instance, that the beggar performs work of a most virtuous nature; he is diligent, industrious and honorable in his begging. But because the beggar does not earn ten pounds a week, he is scorned, and his work is seen as little more than thievery. Orwell challenges this claim, going so far as to maintain that it is the upper classes who generate meaningless forms of work. He writes: “Nearly everyone hates hotels. [...] No doubt hotels and restaurants must exist, but there is no need that they should enslave hundreds of people. What makes the work in them is not the essentials; it is the shams that are supposed to represent luxury” (119). For Orwell, most of the work in a hotel is make-work that responds to conditions of no appreciable social necessity. What is worse, “no one benefits except the proprietor, who will presently buy himself a striped villa at Deauville” (119). The labor of hundreds enriches only one man. For Orwell, then, the task becomes creating the conditions by which the labor of one man enriches hundreds along with himself.

As an example of this properly valued work, Orwell presents the situation of a workhouse garden, a project that would enrich those who contributed to its cultivation. Moreover, it would be an example of what Orwell considers “noble work,” simple, physically taxing jobs that the worker takes pride in doing.

This romanticization of certain types of work reveals Orwell’s prejudices. His talk of nobility and virtue points to, as Rob Breton posits in *Gospels and Grit: Work and Labor in Carlyle, Conrad and Orwell* (2005), vestiges of Victorian morality, which complicate his depiction of the poor in London and Paris. “No matter how debilitating poverty, unemployment, or degrading work may be,” Breton writes, “*Down and Out* represents highly individuated, non-rationalistic, and idiosyncratic ‘characters’ connected by a common code of *caritas*” (163). This is certainly evident in Orwell’s romanticization of tramps, or the *plongeurs* in the Paris hotels. The desire to romanticize these figures, however, is evidence of two competing paradigms at work in the text: the paradigm of Victorian morality that seeks to overlay a veneer of age-old universals—nobility, honor, truth—on the subject matter, and the paradigm represented by the modern observer, the narrator who objectively records his observations, reserving judgment. That Orwell vacillates

unemployed Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903), which details his forays into London's East End.<sup>60</sup> However, "[w]hile London seeks the same direct and documentary experience as Orwell did," writes Jeffrey Myers, "he lacks Orwell's emotional involvement and explores the strange slums of the East End as if they were the Arctic tundra"(76). Myers considers it Orwell's goal to allow readers "to understand the workers," and that Orwell pursues this object by "alleviat[ing] their fear and engag[ing] their sympathy" so as to make them "*care* about their countrymen" (76).

Care comes as a consequence of the literary effects wrought upon readers by Orwell's text. As Myers writes, Orwell "pricks their social consciences and awakens their sense of justice" (95). A passage in *The Road to Wigan Pier* anticipates Myers's observations. "[A]t least I could go among these people, see what their lives were like and feel myself temporarily a part of their world," Orwell writes. "Once I had been among them and accepted by them, I should have touched bottom" (150). Fathoming their plight ought to have brought with it an expiation of class guilt, Orwell believes. Yet this expectation he admits is "irrational." Orwell makes a rhetorical attempt to apportion a share of readerly sympathy to himself as well as to his subject. He adapts that famous formula of socialism—"From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."—to his literary ends.<sup>61</sup> From readers he seeks to draw a suffusion of sympathy, to his subject and himself he seeks to divert this suffusion in abundant, equal measure.

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between these two paradigms indicates his lack of comfort playing the objective observer.

<sup>60</sup> London's approach to surveying the lives of London's poor was fairly straightforward. In his introduction to the work, he writes, "I went down into the under-world of London with an attitude of mind which I may best liken to that of the explorer. I was open to be convinced by the evidence of my eyes, rather than by the teachings of those who had not seen, or by the words of those who had seen and gone before. Further, I took with me certain simple criteria with which to measure the life of the under-world. That which made for more life, for physical and spiritual health, was good; that which made for less life, which hurt, and dwarfed, and distorted life, was bad" (vii).

<sup>61</sup> This formula is Marx's, and it appears in his 1875 text *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

Orwell seeks to implement this redistributive emotional economy in an unorthodox way, however. *The Road to Wigan Pier* Orwell composes in the key of disgust, revulsion, and censure. Pity, pathos, and fellow-feeling stand in the same relationship to the latter as the notes of the vocal line of Robert Schumann's "Humoresque" do to the notes of the score: namely, as themes suggested but never actually established by the high and low piano lines.<sup>62</sup> In other words, Orwell does not elicit his readers' sympathy through sentimental depictions, as social scientists of the past did; rather, he registers his disgust with such vehemence as to provoke readers' own somatic aversion. "Here you come to the real secret of class distinctions in the West—the real reason why a European of bourgeois upbringing, even when he calls himself a Communist, cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal," Orwell writes (127). "It is summed up in four frightful words which people nowadays are chary of uttering, but which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. The words were: The lower classes smell" (127). That the lower classes smell presents an "impassable barrier" to Orwell (127). His brutal honesty is surprising, and would conduce to anything but readers' sympathetic identification. Yet Orwell insists it can be no other way by virtue of the fact that "no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a *physical* feeling" (128). It is the one emotion or prejudice that cannot be overcome. "Race-hatred, religious hatred, differences of education, of temperament, of intellect, even differences of moral code, can be got over; but physical repulsion cannot," Orwell continues (128). Indeed, Orwell argues that "a murderer or a sodomite" wins sympathy more readily than someone "whose breath stinks—habitually stinks" (128). The aversion occasioned by his bad

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<sup>62</sup> In his 2006 text *The Parallax View* Slavoj Žižek offers a theoretical consideration of exactly this peculiarity of Schumann's piano piece.

breath overrides whatever winning qualities he may possess. His “mind and character” may be of admirable purity and his bodily urges properly oriented, but they can do nothing to mitigate the deep hatred inspired by the stench issuing from him (128).

Orwell singles out the bad breath of the lower orders, however, to revive class hatred, which Orwell believes all too often gets papered over for the most craven and mercenary reasons. If class-hatred seems to be diminishing, it is because “it tends not to get into print,” he writes, “partly owing to the mealy-mouthed habits of our time, partly because newspapers and even books now have to appeal to a working class public” (150). Such mealy-mouthed habits developed in the interest of generating mass appeal conspire to create a spurious idea of class relations that is predicated on mere platitudes and bourgeois prejudices. These class relations, in other words, present an instance of Benedict Anderson’s concept of an “imagined community,” i.e., a community that “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail [...] is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7).

That Orwell deliberately seeks to uproot this imagined comradeship is in a sense a quintessentially modernist gesture. “*Épater la bourgeoisie*” has long been the avant gardists’ rallying cry. Orwell parts ways with modernists, however, with respect to the desired consequence of the shock delivered. Rather than inaugurate a new aesthetic (or perhaps create a career-making scandal) Orwell endeavors to undermine the discursive and ideological foundations of existing class relations in order to destroy them so that upon their rubble a more honest, equitable order may be founded. “Here I am, a typical member of the middle class,” Orwell writes. “It is easy for me to say that I want to get rid of class distinctions, but nearly everything I think and do is a result of class distinctions”

(161). Orwell's admission demonstrates his awareness of class consciousness as not simply a theoretical but very real structure of perception, and this awareness distinguishes his ethnographic practice from Malinowski's. Whereas Malinowski attempts to bracket factors of class in his ethnography, and insists instead on a construction of the ethnographer as a monad of purely objective perception, Orwell not only acknowledges the ineluctable reality of class consciousness, he embraces it and makes it instrumental in his ethnographic method. "When I grasp this [reality] I grasp that it is no use clapping a proletarian on the back and telling him that he is as good a man as I am," Orwell continues: "if I want real contact with him, I have got to make an effort for which very likely I am unprepared" (161). Unlike Malinowski, Orwell claims no authority or scientific objectivity; he becomes ill as another man would become ill upon smelling the rank air of a workhouse or an unwashed lower-class body. His discomfort betokens the notion that his writing is a form of work as real and taxing as that of coal miners.

With its emphasis on the laborious work of truly fathoming the conditions of Great Britain's lower orders, *The Road to Wigan Pier* sets itself apart from the "mealy-mouthed" books and newspapers of Orwell's time, which promoted a deep, horizontal comradeship among classes untroubled by hatred—or halitosis. Its forthright rhetoric presents an alternate model for social research predicated on the field worker's acknowledging his class-inflected subjective observations and incorporating them into his final work—a work which is not "authoritative," but rather authorial.

#### "What One Man Thinks and Feels": Orwell's Somatic Sympathy

This shift identified in Orwell's ethnographic practice allows one to bring into greater

resolution larger epistemic shifts discussed in late-nineteenth-and early-twentieth-century literature. The fear that metanarratives—traditional or spiritual constants that give body and consistency to lived experience—no longer offer adequate explanations for how and why the world works coincided with anxieties concerning new means of acquiring knowledge about the world and of managing individuals within that world. Theological and organismic metanarratives passed away during the nineteenth century and were replaced with political-economic tropes and themes. “Victorian critics jointly relocated the idea of ultimate value from a realm of transcendent spiritual meanings to organic ‘Life’ itself and made human sensations—especially pleasure and pain—the sources and signs of that value,” Catherine Gallagher writes in *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (2006) (3). Value could no longer be secured by noble abstractions, but rather had to be located in the real, in the fungible. For Gallagher this real is the body.

For Orwell the body presented the only means by which he could elicit the sympathy of his middle class audience for the lower class. His work explodes conventional ideas about the working classes by focusing not just on unpleasant bodily realities but on touching human details as well. Yes, the lower classes smell, but Orwell also remarks that a “working class family hangs together as a middle class one does” and they speak their opinions plainly and honestly (115). It is an approach that acknowledges the repulsive and the humanizing—the blunt honesty of the working classes and their stalwartness in the face of destitution and hardship.<sup>63</sup> Orwell records impressions and

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<sup>63</sup> Orwell also sentimentalizes his subjects at times. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* he writes of the comforts of the working class hearth: “I have often been struck by the peculiar easy completeness, the perfect symmetry as it were, of a working-class interior at its best. Especially on winter evenings after tea, when the fire flows in the open range and dances mirrored in the steel fender, when Father, in shirt-sleeves, sits in the

reactions that ethnographers would consider too personal to mention, and in so doing he bring his readers' into closer communion with his subject. Theological and organismic conceptions of community have been destroyed or rendered counterfeit by mealy-mouthed journalists eager to win mass audiences; the corporeality shared by each member of the social body becomes, then, the only thematic by which common experience can be represented. By re-establishing community on these terms, Orwell believes he can justify the underlying reason for his investigation: namely, the promotion of socialism.

Indeed, Orwell's interest in socialism was something he had to reconcile with his art. "Orwell's main argument was that the outlook of the successful writer is invariably at odds with the outlook of the effective politician," Philip Bounds writes (87). This had to do with the fact that "it [had] been customary to regard literature as a means of individual self-expression" but that "the writer under capitalism has been expected to provide an accurate record of what he thinks and feels, and this has meant that 'sincerity' has become a necessarily (though not sufficient) condition of literary excellence" (87).

Orwell anticipates Bounds's judgment when he writes, "The worst thing we can say about a work of art is that it is insincere" ("Literature and Totalitarianism"). This leads him to the rather absolute position on the criterion by which one ought to judge writing.

"Modern literature [...] is either the truthful expression of what one man thinks and feels," Orwell writes, "or it is nothing." According to Bounds, Orwell believed that the "problem with political movements is that they can only achieve success by peddling half

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rocking chair at one side of the fire reading the racing finals, and Mother sits on the other with her sewing, and the children are happy with a pennorth of mint humbugs, and the dog lolls roasting himself on the rag mat—it is a good place to be in, provided that you can be not only in it but sufficiently *of* it to be taken for granted" (117).

truths and lies to a credulous public.” The intervention of politically committed writers thus becomes necessary in order to eliminate this traffic in half-truths. “If a writer commits himself wholeheartedly to a political movement, in the sense of seeking to express its distinctive outlook and principles in his creative writings, he invariably poisons the wellsprings of his inspiration by subordinating his own beliefs to the strategic distortions of his colleagues,” Bounds continues. “Because political commitment is the enemy of self-expression, it is also the enemy of great art” (87).

In *The Road to Wigan Pier* Orwell sought to overcome precisely this divide between art and politics. This work, which is partly a compelling account of the lives of Britain’s most impoverished subjects and partly a socialist political tract, attempts to peddle the whole truth to a public surfeited on half truths by presenting a unique take on the problems of the poor and class tension, and in so doing critiques the notion that political commitment and self-expression are irreconcilable. Yet Orwell offers *The Road to Wigan Pier* as much as a corrective to socialism as a corrective to prevailing bourgeois perceptions of Britain’s lower classes. In Orwell’s estimation the socialist movement of his time has taken a turn for the bizarre, steered thither by adherents whose off-puttingly unconventional habits and appearances threaten to discourage staid middle-class joiners. Standing in the way of widespread adoption of this political program are, variously, “vegetarians with wilting beards,” “Bolshevik commissars (half gangster, half gramophone),” “earnest ladies in sandals,” “shock-headed Marxists chewing polysyllables,” “escaped Quakers,” “birth-control fanatics,” and “Labour Party backstairs-crawlers” (216). This deviant congeries empties socialism of its political significance by assigning it instead a symbolic importance. Like beards, birth control and

sandals, socialism comes to signify merely another appurtenance of bohemian lifestyle. “The idea of Socialism has become fragmented,” Orwell complains. “[It] does not smell any longer of revolution and the overthrow of tyrants; it smells of crankishness, machine-worship and the stupid cult of Russia” (216). Faced with cranks on one side and possible Soviet fifth-column members on the other, Britain finds itself exposed to the danger of a Fascist takeover. “Unless you can remove that smell, and very rapidly,” Orwell continues, “Fascism may win” (216). Only a socialist party capable of a wide and diverse circle of adherents can spare Great Britain from the fate that befell Italy and Spain.

In order to remove this smell of crankishness and machine-worship Orwell sought to accomplish politically that which Dickens accomplished literarily: namely, a form of sympathy between author and reader that weds each to a common outlook. “Orwell’s implied point,” Bounds writes, “was that socialist societies can only flourish if they combine political reform with a Dickensian emphasis on moral responsibility” (91), which was precisely that which Orwell found wanting in literary modernism. This lack of moral responsibility amounted to “political irresponsibility,” Bound continues, an accusation based “on the implicit recognition that many of the modernists were unhealthily obsessed with issues of literary form” (91). Like the Aesthetic and Decadent movement members who preceded them, the literary modernists insist that literature preserve its stony autonomy vis-à-vis all living contexts. “Orwell seemed to suggest [that literary modernists] rejected the idea that literature ‘reflects’ reality and instead regarded the poem, story or novel as a sort of self-enclosed world of its own,” writes Bounds (91).

For his part, Orwell cherished a notion of literature far more Marxian than Platonic in nature; rather than some serenely immutable and eternal Form, writing

instantiates a form of consciousness whose affinity with other forms rests on a base of the material conditions of a given society and whose expressive medium is sympathetic identification. He wrote extensively of his belief that Dickens, though on the right track in terms of encouraging such sympathetic identification, did not pursue it to its social and political end of universal economic justice. In his 1940 essay “Charles Dickens,” Orwell contends that his subject was “in the first place *not*, as Messrs. Chesterton and Jackson seem to imply, a ‘proletarian’ writer” by virtue of the fact that “he does not write about the proletariat” (50). Dickens was instead concerned with “human nature” (51). Any indictment of laissez-faire capitalism for the misery it visits on the laboring masses remain at best an interpretive possibility of Dickens’s oeuvre. “Dickens makes no such inference himself,” Orwell writes. He thus finds it especially surprising that it “is said that Macaulay refused to review *Hard Times* because he disapproved of its ‘sullen Socialism’” (51). Orwell surmises that Macaulay uses “‘Socialism’ in the same sense in which, twenty years ago, a vegetarian meal or a Cubist picture used to be referred to as ‘Bolshevism’” (51). Rather, Orwell considers *Hard Times* as a novel that extols capitalism, “because its whole moral is that capitalists ought to be kind, not that workers ought to be rebellious” (52). Though a proponent of social justice, Dickens presents no clear-cut agenda by which it may be achieved. Problems of the iniquity of class relations find strictly emotional solutions in Dickens’s works—solutions that effectively apologize for the status quo and thus allow it to endure unchallenged by any proposed alternative arrangement.

Perhaps barring the way to any political-economic *éclaircissement* on Dickens’s part is the fact that Dickens shared with Orwell a somewhat conflicted regard for the

lower classes, particularly when it the latter expressed itself in less than sympathetic ways. Yet this horror is for Dickens not without a certain relish that comes with, as Orwell writes, “the ‘dregs’ of the population [behaving] with atrocious bestiality” (55). Scenes in Dickens’s work that depict such behavior Orwell considers to be “of great psychological interest, because they show how deeply he had brooded on his subject” (55). So deeply had Dickens brooded on this subject, in fact, that the representations thereof cease to reflect present fact and instead instantiate the embellishments—indeed, inventions—of his fancy. “The things he describes can only have come out of his imagination,” Orwell continues, “for no riots on anything like the same scale had happened in his lifetime” (55). Against this exaggerated propensity for violence imputed to the lower classes—which moreover lack any basis in events of Dickens’s time—Dickens expresses, as Orwell observes, “a sort of generalized sympathy with them because they are oppressed,” and this despite the fact that Dickens “does not in reality know much about them” (55). The blindspots of Dickens’s awareness, when coupled with certain formative factors, thus explain his hyperbolic confabulations with respect to the lower orders. Orwell identifies these formative factors as eminently those of social and cultural position. Specifically, he indicates that Dickens “is a south of England man, and a cockney at that,” which therefore puts him “out of touch with the bulk of the real oppressed masses” who live and toil in the industrial midlands and the agrarian hinterlands,” and that as a consequence of events in his early life Dickens has an abiding “horror of proletarian roughness,” which he “shows [...] unmistakably whenever he writes of the very poorest of the poor, the slum dwellers” (72).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Because of their proximity to middle-class neighborhoods, the London poor were seemingly more threatening than their cousins in smaller industrial towns—perhaps because their rural counterparts were

Dickens's horror of proletarian roughness is something with which Orwell readily identifies. "To me in my early boyhood, to nearly all children of families like mine, 'common' people seemed almost sub-human," Orwell writes of his own formative experience (126). "They had coarse faces, hideous accents and gross manners, they hated everyone who was not like themselves, and if they got half a chance they would insult you in brutal ways" (126). Orwell admits, however, that this characterization is steeped not in objective fact but in perception inflected by such tremendous bias as to effectively disqualify it as anything even approaching the former: "That was our view of them, and though it was false it was understandable" (126). Orwell discovers in Dickens a similar impulse as that which motivates his own writing: namely, an impulse to draw the necessarily slender if not outright spurious distinctions between his own and the rough proletarian lower class, who in terms of income and status, stood too close for comfort.

Yet, like Dickens, who as a consequence of coming from a background of domestic service and of having briefly toiled in a blacking factory, sought, if by no other means than that of sheer imaginative insistence, on the one hand to circumscribe the lower class in violent, bestial otherness while on the other to extend to them the grail of human sympathy, Orwell feels compelled to isolate some scintilla of humanity in the brutalized condition of Britain's poor despite any abhorrence he might feel at the prospect of so doing. In an early chapter of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell writes of a train trip he took to the north of England. While looking out the window, he sees a young woman outside one of the many slum houses that dot the landscape in that part of the country. "At the back of one of the houses, a young woman was kneeling on the stones, poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe which ran from the sink inside and which I suppose was

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either working, or looking for work.

blocked,” he writes.

I had time to see everything about her—her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arms reddened by the cold. She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye. She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery; and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen. (18)

In this moment of recognition Orwell comes to understand class status as mere epiphenomenon from which arrive pat conclusions to vexingly perennial problems of poverty, misery, privation and toil: “It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that ‘It isn’t the same for them as it would be for us,’ and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums,” Orwell continues (18). “For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her—understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe” (18).

Orwell realizes that members of the lower class conceive of their condition in precisely the same way as do members of superior classes—that this condition, marked by privation, drudgery, misery and want, as such engenders a definite idea after which the poverty-stricken person’s mind can gallop as urgently as that of any Bloomsbury aesthete’s. Indeed, Woolf’s highbrow–lowbrow distinction conceals a contradiction that Orwell’s characterization of the drain-poking woman throws into stark relief. This contradiction involves the fact that the qualitative distinction between the highbrow and lowbrow, which Woolf assumes rests on such a priori elements as character, disposition, intellectual capacity, and so on, actually reveal itself to be irreducibly a posteriori in that

it depends on a whole raft of such contingent factors as family and class background, economic advantage, cultural distinction and its attendant privileges, and so on. Woolf fails to understand this for good reason, because her highbrow–lowbrow distinction instances the problematic of overdetermination as defined by Louis Althusser, which proceeds from a “‘contradiction’ [that] is [...] inseparable from its formal *conditions* of existence, and even from the *instances* it governs,” Althusser writes (101). Rather, the contradiction “is *radically affected by them* [i.e., its formal conditions and instances], determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates” (101). The contradiction, Althusser continues, “might be called *overdetermined in its principle*” (101). Woolf fails to recognize this dialectic that informs—indeed, structures—her highbrow–lowbrow distinction, the principle of which, the orientation of a given mind to either metaphysical or creaturely concerns, both determines and is determined by the distinction thus established, and consequently reveals itself as irremediably shot through with contradiction.

Rather than insist, as Woolf does, on a distinction whose overdetermination conceals a contradiction that, were it acknowledged and brought to light, would throw the distinction into acute crisis, Orwell endeavors to abide contradiction, to assimilate contradiction to his practice without seeking to resolve it. At the heart of his practice lies a constitutive paradox: The poor repulse him even as they elicit his sympathy, and they elicit his sympathy even as they repulse him. In either case the latter determines and is determined by the former. Every instance of repulse or sympathetic identification is governed by a dialectic engendered by the contradictory codeterminations of fellow-

feeling and disgust. Orwell's ethnographic positionality is as it were one of intimate distance—a distance at once maintained by disgust and bridged by sympathy. His feels disgust for his subject, yet he understands all too well her humanity.

Orwell devotes large portions of *The Road to Wigan Pier* to his own impressions—of the lower classes and of his disgust with their practices, their food, their odors. His tone of repulse, such as is acquired only through prolonged intimacy with one's subject, gives his writing sensuous immediacy. Orwell both observes and shares in his subjects' plight, and in so doing bodies forth a lived ethnography that privileges contradictory subjective relation over a spurious scientific objectivity. Unlike Malinowski, Orwell frankly expresses his reservations and prejudices with respect to his subjects. Revealing himself as eminently human, prone to natural prejudices and sometimes irrational dislikes, he upended a dominant modern tendency characteristic of Malinowski and Woolf, each of whom insist that divisions and distinctions were not only real but existed a priori. For Malinowski the field of ethnography divided into ethnographic subject and ethnographer—specifically, some portion of the ethnographer's conscious withheld from the ethnographic subject's lifeworld. For Woolf culture divided into highbrow and lowbrow. Against these dualisms, however, Orwell came to articulate a theoretical ethnographic monism in which merely relative divisions among constituents are, in the final analysis, overdetermined and riddled with contradiction, which in the case of *The Road to Wigan Pier* is manifested as a paradoxical dialectic of disgust and sympathy that, curiously enough, surmounts not only the divide between writer and subject, but writer and reader, as well.

Enlivened by a disgust–sympathy dialectic, *The Road to Wigan Pier* emerged as an experiment whose results opened new doors for amateur ethnographers to contribute to the public’s understanding of the lower classes. Orwell’s choice to live among his subjects, not as a scientist but as a man of decided prejudices and aversions, offered him a more authentic glimpse of greater authenticity into lower-class life than had he been a trained professional. He broached the problem of the unsurpassable gulf between the middle and lower classes without pretending to be able to solve it or, indeed, without ever even expressing such an ambition. He instead developed a method of observing the poor that attempted to convey their recognizable humanity without sentimentalizing it. In this “warts and all” approach was forged a sympathetic bond that Orwell hoped could advance the cause of socialism.

Despite wishing to promote socialism among his middle-class readership, Orwell expressed a fear of the lower classes and their potential to break from class norms. As did the Victorian social investigators who came before him—Henry Mayhew, Charles Booth, and to a certain extent even Charles Dickens—Orwell hazards an attempt to understand their condition while at the same time insisting that the class divisions he endeavors to span in fact remain insurmountable. The cause of socialism, which Orwell recognized as depending on its popularization among the middle classes (the broad base of his readership), never burned so fervently in his breast as to cure him of his fear of the lower classes, whom he worried would defy, if indeed not completely demolish, the expectation of them that had accreted since the advent of class society. Fast gaining power as consumers, the lower classes, Orwell worried, would come to dominate the literary marketplace, and thus dictate prevailing literary tastes, which, as if conceding some truth-

value to Woolf's highbrow–lowbrow dichotomy, could not but be vulgar.

Where economic relations no longer interposed themselves, culture preserved the various divisions around which classes were arranged. Such was the case in Orwell's time. At the end of the day, a bricklayer could bring home more money than a lower-middle-class man, but he could never exert any kind of influence over British culture, which until the First World War remained the purview of the upper and middle classes. With the war came the end of British bourgeois cultural hegemony. Joseph McAleer writes that the “continued demand of all classes for light fiction, coupled with the necessity to restore revenues drained during the First World War, accelerated the process of commercialization initiated by the Victorians and allowed a more intense exploitation of the market” (42). This exploitation involved recognizing the shift in purchasing power to the lower classes, which constituted an immense reading public. All over London appeared signs of their new power as consumers of literature. McAleer regards as one of “the more accurate indicators of reading activity among the lower-middle and working classes” the advent and expansion of “‘Pay-as-you-read,’ ‘No Deposit,’ or ‘tupenny’ libraries during the 1930s,” establishments which seemed to appear on every street corner (42). For middle-class readers these subscription libraries heralded the end of their cultural supremacy.

A change in their economic circumstances brought the lower classes new purchasing power. The first two decades of the twentieth century saw a reduction in the average working week, and as the working work decreased, real wages increased (51). The working class enjoyed not only more leisure time; they had more money to spend. As a result, they read more books. “Economic circumstances during this period enabled a

more dense exploitation of the publishing market,” McAleer writes. Publishers were forced to restructure and cater to this new audience; they printed cheaper editions of books guaranteed to sell in the new market. They promoted “blockbusters” rather than highbrow literature.

Connoisseurs of highbrow literature (Virginia Woolf, for instance) saw this move as a threat to the existence of works that lacked so-called “popular appeal.” In 1921 *The Manchester Guardian* reported that “all the best books are in trouble. [...] The lack of what is called ‘popular appeal’—meaning more often than not some element of trashiness or, at least, flimsiness—has become such a bar to publication as it never has been before” (quoted in McAleer 54). Liberation from privation and onerous working conditions brought a consequent liberation of the literary market from *salonnières*, genteel experimentalists, and other rarefied aesthetes and tastemakers.<sup>65</sup>

Never before had the lower and working classes exerted such power over the cultural production. The sheer magnitude of the consumer demand they represented came to alter their status. No longer the teeming, vaguely threatening crowds or the mute, disempowered objects of bourgeois pity (and entertainment) Victorian writers would have them be, lower classes of the twentieth century came to be regarded as consisting of factory workers and shop girls who, when considered in the aggregate, represented a vast resource of untapped wealth. The lower classes transformed, in other words, from a seething mass to an attractive market segment.

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<sup>65</sup> Orwell himself betrayed uneasiness with certain forms of lowbrow literature and the change in publishing practices. This uneasiness with the new mass reading public is best seen in his reverence for pre-nineteenth century political pamphlets. “For Orwell, the pamphleteer of the (almost) pre-capitalist or pre-industrial capitalist period is somehow different,” Andrew C. Long writes, “maybe freer, and also free of the taint of mass culture and the masses of new readers who emerged after 1870 and blossomed in the early twentieth century” (269-270).

The lower classes exercised their newfound demographic power by chafing against the cultural constraints that conventional British socioeconomic relations had reserved for them, and that early social scientists Besant and Booth sought more firmly to reinscribe in their sociological discourse. “Before being the ‘science of society,’” Jacques Rancière writes, “sociology was first historically the project of a reorganization of society”—albeit reorganized along the lines already described by custom and tradition (7). The social sciences sought “to reconstitute the social fabric such that individuals and groups at a given place would have the ethos, the ways of feeling and thinking,” Rancière continues, “which corresponded at once to their place and to a collective harmony” (7). In nineteenth-century Britain, this meant that the lower classes, though objects of bourgeois pity, should ideally never assume economic or cultural autonomy. They ought to remain, rather, as thoroughgoing cultural inferiors from whom their betters expect deference, dependence, and occasional diversion. That the lower classes found access to a culture once barred to them not only introduced dissonant notes into the collective harmony but also, and perhaps more importantly, cast older forms of feeling and thinking characteristic of that harmony into irrelevance.

As these older forms of feeling and thinking, which were predicated on shared sympathy, became irrelevant, so too did the concept of a knowable reading audience. For a demographic, though it is defined by statistics and other mathematical projections, is ultimately in some fundamental sense unknowable, because only acts of consumption instantiate its cohesiveness. Walter Besant, Charles Dickens, George Gissing and George Orwell all shared the fear of the lower classes and their potential to change the publishing and dissemination of books. Certainly these writers felt sympathy for the lower classes,

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and many of them wished to remedy the social ills afflicting the downtrodden and poor. But they also feared the potential of the lower social stratum to change not only the existing social harmony, either through mob action or politics, but also their potential to reshape British intellectual life.

It was not only the British who feared the potential of the lower classes to reshape bourgeois cultural institutions. In *The Nights of Labor: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, Rancière suggests that this anxiety is not historically unique to Britain. Indeed, he interprets the birth of the worker's movement as an aesthetic movement, where publicly invisible workers seized the means by which their experience could be articulated. He takes as his subject French joiner and floor-layer Gabriel Gauny, who lived during the 1830s, a time when the lower classes, tailor and typographers, had started to demand to be treated as 'men' (xxxiii). Gauny himself decided to live the contradiction of the manual laborer who philosophizes. This was not so much because Gauny and others like him were highly skilled or won new rights as laborers. Rather their need to be recognized as something other than beasts of burden stemmed from the fact that their trades brought them into contact with the bourgeoisie and its language of liberation and equality. This contact led many of these workers to look beyond their seemingly preordained working lives to the possibility of cultivating an intellectual life (xxxiii). In doing so the workers of Paris threatened to seize a power reserved for an 'other'—the educated middle classes with whom they rarely had contact.

This new desire to engage in intellectual activity introduced interruptions and suspensions of working life as workers capitalized on lulls therein by indulging their intellectual interests. Rancière considers this constructive disposal of leisure a

revolutionary act, because “[p]overty is not defined in the relationship of idleness to work but in the impossibility of choosing one’s fatigue” (8). Before the workers’ revolt, only the philosopher and the artist laid claim to the indulgence of intellectual fatigue. “Behind the falsehood of the image lay the power of the painter,” Rancière continues, “heir to the dream produced by the epic of those proletarian cavaliers whose image he fixed while retaining sovereignty for himself” (18). It was this sovereignty—the exclusive right to representation—that the working classes threatened when they filled their nights with intellectual labor. They threatened a collective harmony which dictated that the work of representation should be left to those who owned the exclusive right to such representation.

Those who had this exclusive right to representation did much to perpetuate the illusion that such was the natural social order. “To keep the worker in his place,” Rancière writes, “the real-life hierarchy must have it double in an imaginary hierarchy, the latter undermining the former not so much by offering emblems of popular power as by introducing duplicity into the very core of the worker’s activity in his place” (9). This duplicity depended on having the worker believe he was fully realized by his work, and that pleasure was only to be had in labor preordained by the existing social hierarchy. When the philosopher-workers of the 1830s began engaging in intellectual activity they challenged this spurious notion of self-realization in labor.

Sociology and literature vied against the democratization of representation after which strove these French workers and their British counterparts of a century later. Rancière asks: “Isn’t there some sort of dodge in the fascination with the mute truth of the popular body, in these evocations of a different culture that the workers—the masses,

the people, the plebs—practice with enough contentment to leave to others the laceration of conscience and the mirages of representation?” (11). Social scientists, writers and other arbiters of culture expected the working and lower classes to remain mute; social harmony dictated that only they could represent the social truth embodied by the lower classes. The sheer size of the popular body made this imperative; to grant them the privilege of self-representation endangered the intellectual and artistic hierarchies carefully crafted by their social betters through the sympathetic exchange of ideas among like-minded people. The circle of sympathy shared by the middle classes excluded the lower classes. Indeed, to invite them in would destroy the sympathetic bonds formed and reaffirmed through cultural, and hence class, exclusion.

The expansion of the publishing industry and the growth of the economic franchise in general allowed the lower classes if not to write their own representations then at least to determine through consumerism which representations would prevail in the literary marketplace, which became a sort of on-going cultural plebiscite. Culture thus came to assume more the trappings of an institution among literate individuals, its prior clubiness ebbing as elites lost their grip on it. Deeply ingrained habits of seeing the lower classes as wayward, foreign, or even threatening was forced to change with the expansion of literacy and the democratization of public discourse. Members of Britain’s lower classes were certainly literate before the early twentieth century. Maids read Dickens during moments stolen from seemingly endless hours of drudgery; the odd literate factory worker studied Marx on evenings when exhaustion did not compel him to sleep. But these individuals did not yet comprise a demographic that determined the type of literature produced by a publishing industry grown vast and powerful by the early

twentieth century. Once they did the effect on British culture was profound: Blockbusters fairly flew from the presses while more literary works were subject to suspicious scrutiny. “Will it sell?”, became the reigning question of the publishing industry. The capacity to consume thus came to supplant the capacity to sympathize, the former determining an individual’s place among the new audience for popular literature.

It was a fear of their ability to remake the tenets of social harmony that led many of the social scientists and writers of the nineteenth century to observe and attempt to understand the lower classes, an undertaking fraught with difficulty. Sociological works “convey powerfully the complex and claustrophobic impression which working-class life can make on an observer who tries to know it in all its concreteness,” writes Richard Hoggart, by which he means “the impression of being immersed in an endless forest full of the most minute detail, all of it different and yet all of it similar; a great mass of faces and habits and actions, yet most of them apparently not very meaningful” (18). The sense of claustrophobia elicited by the working classes is even more anxiety-provoking when the “endless forest” of faces and habits and action threatens to overwhelm the observer’s own life world. The observer must “see beyond the habits to what to habits stand for,” Hoggart continues (18). That is, the observer must see beyond the fruits of sociological surveys, which amount to little more than records of habits. He must peer into the subject’s interiorities. Yet much of the history of sociology and its various offshoots testifies to the impossibility of this adjuration. Authors such as Charles Dickens, Walter Besant, George Gissing and George Orwell saw the need to “see beyond the habits to what the habits stand for, to see through the statements to what the statements really mean” (18). Habit was indeed the problem, and not just the habits of the lower classes;

the middle classes were likewise accustomed to seeing the lower classes in a certain way, usually as pitiable and vaguely threatening.

The middle classes were also accustomed to owning the exclusive right to represent their social inferiors. Each writer addressed this problem of habituation in his own way. Dickens used sentimental discourse as a means of bringing certain social issues to the attention of a middle class audience used to seeing the urban environment in such a manner as to essentially encourage a purblindness to the iniquities of Victorian British economic relations. Besant aimed to perpetuate the habitual impressions the middle classes held of the lower classes through carefully crafted representations of the poor and through the People's Palace, a social institution designed to reinscribe class expectations and to sustain them through the various economic shocks and vicissitudes attending life in industrial, imperial Great Britain. Gissing offered a more impressionistic depiction of the lives of London's poor, and Orwell sought to advance his political cause through accounts of the poor that challenged the idea of scientific objectivity and instead modeled an approach to ethnographic observation that highlighted the author's own prejudices and fears. Together these writers forwarded alternative means for understanding the poor and garnering readerly sympathy for their plight. But in doing so they attempted to perpetuate an older model of writerly authority, once which was endangered by the very class they represented in their novels and sociological writings.

Sociologists also drew on literature in order to re-create an older model of writerly authority and to reinscribe the class ideology subtending the discourse of social harmony. The two disciplines, which were often at odds, were united by an anxiety about representing a class that threatened to change the rules of representation. The lower

classes not only defied representation; by the end of the nineteenth century they also determined which representations would find an audience and, as a consequence, which writers would find remuneration.

No clear cut line existed between the social sciences and literature during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Britain's social problems challenged even the most astute social scientists, who struggled to accurately represent what could not be quantified by statistics alone. "Perhaps more intensely than in any prior period," George Levine writes, "those possibilities [for representation] were conditioned by the discourse of science, which had begun to assume almost exclusive responsibility for reporting on that real" (12). That exclusivity however depended upon discursive promiscuity: In nineteenth-century and even some twentieth-century sociological texts, fiction and fact mix indiscriminately. Novelistic discourse offered a solution to the problem of inadequate representation and aided early social scientists in disseminating their work among a largely homogenous reading public. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that the social sciences abandoned such discourse altogether in their aim to cultivate a purely objective view of their subject. Whether this was because it was no longer possible, or even desirable, to convey findings to a reading public grown socially diverse, is left to conjecture. But the evidence points to a retreat from the ideal of sharing ideas with an engaged, knowable reading public to the exclusivity of hyperspecialization.

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