

Chapter Six

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused upon a number of paradoxes in Victorian thought, tracing the collapsing boundaries between fertility and infertility, improvement and postponement, order and dispersion in a field of popular discourses. In the loosest of senses, I have sought to highlight a set of shared assumptions about the nature of non-productivity—not only among British scientists and lay popularizers, but also novelists, philosophers, and social critics. While working to represent a world released from providential order and interconnection, these writers attempted to make newly-realized forms of excess and waste into a foundation for improvement. My main point, then, has been to show how, for many thinkers at mid-century, models of non-productivity held remarkably positive potential for re-thinking the nature of organic relationship. But because these writers' interests lacked a single, shared focal point—a common ideology, lexicon, or philosophical creed—a few words are necessary to define what I have meant in reference to general cultural confluences and epistemological patterns. In the absence of a common discursive domain, it has been necessary for me to emphasize more tacit and often tenuous lines of relationship which, while resonant, resist reduction to empirical patterns of collaboration and response. In what follows, I survey the respective pitfalls and possibilities of this approach, and suggest some of the horizons of the dissertation more broadly.

First and foremost, it should be clear that I have resisted the impulse to trace teleological routes of identification and influence, absorption and appropriation. In lieu of a fully-articulated tradition of thought, I have tried to present four representative case studies within a much wider field of discursive relations. The expressive patterns of a novelist like Charles Dickens, for example, could inflect the theories of scientists such as Charles Darwin, and vice versa; neither novelists nor their scientific counterparts held any essential priority in the rise of non-productivist concepts. While observing the widespread prevalence of those viewpoints, then, the dissertation has not attempted to delineate a strict logic of development. It is certain that all of the novelists that I consider attempted to foster alternatives to the Victorian values of efficiency, work, and industry. Taken together, these writers challenged the quintessential standards of self-help promulgated within the main lines of British thought. But by the same token, the failure to produce could appear in many different, often competing circumstances, so that novelists' intentions translated into an assortment of moral and political positions—often within the parameters of a single text. *Alton Locke* reflects Charles Kingsley's Christian conservatism just as much as it does his latent radical sympathies, whereas George Eliot, in *Middlemarch*, aimed to actively synthesize Whig and Tory perspectives within a gradualist model of progress. These novels varied, too, in writers' attention to characteristics such as class, gender, sexuality, and race. If both Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins conceived alternative models of masculinity and male agency—namely, in terms of the failure of rational action and self-control—then they did so to drastically different effect. Dickens's more traditionalist values led him to pull his bachelors back into the terms of family and the future life of the community, whereas Collins cultivated a

more bohemian posture which continued to position his protagonist at the margins of British society.

To show the profusion of non-productivist theories in Victorian science and literature, then, is necessarily to note how those theories refused to resolve into a single moral, political, or philosophical program. Yet, important commonalities also aligned the writers and texts that I have examined. In every instance, novelists found that the needs of the group could best be served by refusing to incorporate individuals, albeit in ways which resisted reduction to the terms of domination, coercion, and social control. Another, related theme was writers' resistance to the politics of recognition. Rather than upholding an ideal of direct, dyadic relations between individuals, in the manner of a sympathetic exchange, all of these novelists emphasized more wayward routes of relationship. Even when sympathetic impulses failed to produce outcomes in the immediate conditions of the self, those impulses released the potential for further forms of influence within the community at large. We see this sort of model most prominently in Eliot, but it also informs *Armadale's* model of nervous delay (in which Midwinter fails to foster bonds with others in the present moment) and *Dombey and Son's* understanding of non-reproductive sexuality (in which Gills and Cuttle's refusals to reproduce actually impart a much richer legacy to the future).

In this sense, the dissertation has highlighted a series of conceptual conjunctions within an otherwise heterogeneous field of discourses. The efficacy of this approach lies in the fact that it shifts attention away from more visible, fully-articulated conventions of discourse, and attends instead to tacit and unspoken assumptions at work within a given cultural moment. While not necessarily recognized by authors themselves, these

assumptions served to define the nature of identity, difference, and belief in the texts that I have considered—all the while resisting reification into the terms of a single ideological system.

With this in mind, it is important to inquire into the reasons why concepts of non-productivity fell from prominence after the 1870s. One reason was the increasing secularization of knowledge and of science in particular. In light of the shift from providentialist explanations to more staunchly material ones, the appearance of excess, waste, and prodigality in nature was no longer the pressing problem that it once was for writers in the 1850s and early 1860s. If it remained impossible to account for waste within the framework of God's plan, then God's plan itself became increasingly less vital to accounts of the cosmos. The publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) was notably influential in this regard, as were the increasing professionalization of the sciences and the splintering of orthodoxies within the Anglican Church. By the late 1870s and early 1880s, former theodicies of nature were being challenged on many fronts. As a consequence, there existed a less urgent need to translate theories of organic breakdown into more palatable popular forms, in the manner of the novels under consideration.

Yet, concepts of non-productivity continued to persist in less obvious ways within the parameters of late-Victorian thought—namely, in aestheticist philosophies about the autonomy of art. While histories of aestheticism typically trace the origins of the movement to figures such as Matthew Arnold, Leigh Hunt, William Ruskin, and Walter Pater in the later 1860s and 1870s, I have sought to show how the high realist novel itself served to articulate a set of formative claims concerning the nature and effects of the aesthetic in the years leading up to this moment. Like Arnold and other authors of non-

fiction prose, all of the novelists under consideration here highlighted the inutility of art, and positioned their texts as antitheses to the protocols of productive labor that dominated the mid-century. We see this tendency take shape, for example, in *Armadale's* attention to the dynamics of delay, through which Collins's novel is defined against the canons of efficiency, work, and assertive action. But whereas writers like Arnold would proclaim art's autonomy from politics, the texts that I have analyzed attempted to show how forms of non-productivity could bring about a regenerated society. Accordingly, these novels stood in between inherited ideas about the social utility of art and a new emphasis upon art's purposelessness. Paradoxically, the failure to intervene in society could create the conditions of possibility for an influence which was "incalculably diffusive" (*Middlemarch*, 837).

To form a conclusion is necessarily to impose order and finality upon phenomena that remain stubbornly recalcitrant to those limitations--a tendency that is especially important to note given the specific nature of my objects of study. For the novels in question remained deeply skeptical about the prospects of any achieved telos. Instead, they insisted upon the endless effects of the individual in the conditions of posterity, in increasing incalculable channels of influence over time. This was, of course, to some extent a sign of novelists' inability to offer firm solutions to the problems that they raised. If their novels did not always arrive at acceptable answers to their concerns about agency, desire, and moral meaning, then their conclusions reflected this fact through the deferral of any absolute eschatology. Nevertheless, such forms of irresolution do not negate the importance of their project itself, which was to invest value in the dynamic tension between progress and postponement rather than to rest upon a final, privileged term. In

this sense, these texts found significance in the fact of irresolution and saw in the absence of endings a foundation for endless growth in the future.

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