

## Introduction

Representation was contested on two fronts in nineteenth-century England. In politics, the franchise was gradually extended by the three Reform Bills, first to the majority of the middle class in 1832, then to industrial workers in 1867, and finally to agricultural workers in 1884.<sup>1</sup> In the arts, there was a remarkable expansion of the “social frontiers” (Tillotson 75) of fiction, poetry, and painting, marked by a new popularity for realistic (and often heavily researched) depictions of poverty. In the years between the first two Reform Bills, in particular, the very people who were denied representation in government were increasingly represented in art and literature, due in large part to the efforts of middle and upper-class artists who were granted the franchise. By 1849, Charles Kingsley could pronounce in a review of “Recent Novels” that fashionable novels about the social elite had at last become “most *un*-fashionable” (419), a literary shift he dates to April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1848. Kingsley’s allusion to the exact date of the third Chartist petition and rally indicates the intimate relationship between the two battlefields for representation. Although individual authors did not necessarily endorse universal franchise, a diverse group of artists used literature and the visual arts to oppose poverty and lobby for social and political reform. Their efforts bore the mark of Chartist demands.

This dissertation examines the diverse body of narrative art that documented and imagined poverty during this period. While it is notoriously difficult to recover the

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<sup>1</sup> Women were not granted the franchise until the Act of 1918, which gave voting rights to women over thirty. It was not until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 that both men and women over the age of twenty one were granted equal voting rights.

readership of any text, particularly “which books were read by which classes” (Himmelfarb 411), the texts I examine were written by middle and upper-class authors and addressed themselves to “the conscience—not to mention the downright factual ignorance” (Kettle 171) of the middle and upper classes. By representing the poor for an enfranchised audience, artists attempted to change not only the attitudes and beliefs of individual readers, but the social and political policies of a nation. This is the body of literature I call “sentimental realism,” a genre that includes narrative fiction, poetry, and paintings. An exhaustive survey would be impossible, but relevant works include novels—Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849); Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Chimes* (1844), *Bleak House* (1852-3), and *Hard Times for these Times* (1854); Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil: or The Two Nations* (1845); Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), and *North and South* (1854-5); Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast* (1848, 1851) and *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet* (1850); Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Helen Fleetwood* (1841) and *The Wrongs of Woman* (1843-44); and Frances Trollope’s *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840); poetry—Caroline Bowles *Tales of the Factories* (1833); Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children” (1844), “A Song for the Ragged Schools of London” (1854), and *Aurora Leigh* (1856); Thomas Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt” (1843) and “The Bridge of Sighs” (1844); Caroline Norton’s *A Voice from the Factories* (1836), “The Weaver” (1840), and *The Child of the Islands* (1846); Adelaide Anne Procter’s “Homeless” (1862), and Henrietta Tindal’s “The Cry of the Oppressed” (1852); and paintings—William Maw Egley’s “Omnibus Life in London” (1859); William Powell Frith’s “The Derby Day” (1856-8) and “The Railway Station” (1862); Richard Redgrave’s “The Governess” (1844) and “The Sempstress” (1844); and George Frederic Watts’ “The Song of the Shirt”/“The Seamstress” (1848).

Much of the critical work that has examined these texts has been limited to the fiction, novels which are called, depending on the critic, industrial novels, social problem novels, “Condition of England” novels, romans à thèse, novels of social reform, or novels of purpose.<sup>2</sup> I want to propose a new name for two reasons. First, I want to incorporate poetry and paintings that have been excluded from studies of the novel and thus designate a “genre” that crosses generic boundaries. Second, and more importantly, I want to forward a particular argument about the social role of these texts, one that stems from their integration of the affective appeal of sentimentalism with the referential claims of realism (I will develop this argument at length in Chapters 3 and 4). Sentimentalism and realism have often been viewed as antithetical categories. I argue, on the contrary, that the genre’s unique ethical role stemmed from its integration of the two. Sentimentalism asked readers to form emotional and empathic relationships with individual poor characters, imagining and identifying with them in their suffering. Claims to realism, meanwhile, instructed readers that characters served a metaphorical function in their social milieu: each individual stood for hundreds and thousands of their contemporaries. This confluence of generic identities allowed sentimental realism to mobilize readers’ feelings for fictional characters for “actual” poor individuals in their social world. The genre’s sentimentalism did not undermine its realism (or vice versa); rather, they work in tandem to heighten its emotional appeal and social relevance.

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<sup>2</sup> The most significant studies of these novels include: Patrick Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832-1867*; Louis Cazamian, *The Social Novel in England, 1830-1850: Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs. Gaskell, Kingsley*, trans. Martin Fido; Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867*; Arnold Kettle, “The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel”; Sheila Smith, *The Other Nation: The Poor in English Novels of the 1840s and 1850s*; Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the 1840s*; Raymond Williams, “The Industrial Novels” in *Culture and Society*. The emphasis on industrial fiction that characterizes much of the criticism is a result of Marxist bias towards certain economic transitions. These critics favor novels that take place in the new industrial cities at the expense of rural and even London poverty. Dickens is often excluded for this reason, but he is central to my account.

Sentimental realism incorporates a diverse group of texts, ranging from thinly disguised social treatises to richly woven narratives to passionate *cris de coeur*. The authors I discuss are similarly diverse, with a wide range of political beliefs, religious affiliations, and artistic abilities. The range in faiths, for example, is considerable: Charles Kingsley was a Church of England pastor, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna a fervent Evangelical, Adelaide Anne Procter a converted Catholic, Elizabeth Gaskell the wife of a Unitarian minister. As for politics, authors not only held different political positions and party affiliations but were sometimes in direct conflict. The Christian Socialist Charles Kingsley, for instance, makes jabs at Benjamin Disraeli, one of the founders of the “Young England” movement that attempted to unite the interests of the upper-class with the poor. Disraeli himself was originally a Radical, later a progressive Tory, and ultimately the leader of the Conservative party who introduced the Second Reform Bill as Prime Minister. Dickens, meanwhile, was a devout believer who rejected most forms of organized Christianity and a political activist who alternately gratified and infuriated liberal and conservative alike.

Despite this diversity, however, the genre is unified not only by its topic of poverty but also its self-conscious use of literature for explicitly social objectives. While Victorian literary history often traces a trajectory in which art is increasingly divorced from its moral, political, and didactic effects, many artists at mid-century embraced *l'art utile* over *l'art pour l'art*. In 1859, the writer, critic, and professor of English literature David Masson wrote in *British Novelists and their Styles* that the mid-nineteenth century was seeing “a great development” of “Novels or Poems of Purpose,” due in large part to the vast political changes in Britain and Europe (264). The author and critic William Henry Smith also observed the rise of didacticism. Significantly, he identifies two trends in modern fiction since Scott:

- 1) The past was discarded for the present, persons from the lower classes were brought prominently forward, and portraiture was aimed at more than narrative.
- 2) The interest both of narrative and portraiture was subordinated to some useful purpose, or some system of opinions which the author was desirous of forwarding or expounding. (“Debit and Credit” 59)

Although Smith’s review traces developments in the subject matter and function of literature as two distinct phenomenon, I will argue that the use of fiction for “some useful purpose” was intimately related to—and dependent upon—the rise of modern-day realism, especially its representation of contemporary life and poor and working-class characters.

The use of literature for social commentary was not universally acclaimed; Thackeray, for one, satirized novels “with a purpose” in his “Plan for a Prize Novel,” and Trollope parodied Dickens, “Mr. Popular Sentiment,” in *The Warden*. Some critics complained about “political pamphlets, ethical treatises, and social dissertations in the disguise of novels” (“Triad of Novels” 575). But to an unprecedented and unparalleled degree, artists were confident that literature was an appropriate and a powerful means of transforming society, and audiences largely accepted this social and ethical function. As George Ford puts it in *Dickens and His Readers*, “there were not many readers [during Dickens’ lifetime] who objected to the didactic as such” (81). In 1849, Disraeli described his own decision to use literature as one emerging from the cultural and historical moment: “It was not originally the intention of the writer to adopt the form of fiction as the instrument to scatter his suggestions, but after reflection he resolved to avail himself of a method which, *in the temper of the times*, offered the best chance of influencing opinion” (*Coningsby* xi, my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the idea that literature “is or can be an instrument of social amelioration” (Brantlinger *Spirit* 1) is distinctly Victorian, a period when literature was mobilized for any number of social movements—abolition, temperance, animal rights, the

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<sup>3</sup> *Coningsby* was written in 1844; this preface was added in the 1849 edition.

franchise, and factory reform come to mind. Even when literature's powers of persuasion were feared rather than lauded, it was widely recognized that novels and poetry had a powerful "influence...upon [the] age" (Greg 85). Convinced that the "false morality" of women novelists threatened to degrade the nation as a whole, W. R. Greg warned that fiction "assuredly demands the most thorough study and the closest censorship on the part of those who wish to comprehend, or who aspire to modify, the causes which mould humanity" (87).

Sentimental realism shares Greg's faith in the power of literature to "mould humanity," but it is also characterized by the conviction that literature can *improve* the society it represents. As Dickens wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell about his newly formed journal *Household Words*, its "general mind and purpose" is "the raising up of those that are down, and the general improvement of our social condition" (*Writings* XXX, 275).<sup>4</sup> Dickens was especially anxious to solicit the work of "the authoress of 'Mary Barton'" and assured Gaskell that "your reflection or observation in respect of the life around you, would attract attention and do good" (275).<sup>5</sup> Tellingly, Dickens emphasizes both the contemporaneousness of Gaskell's work and its ethical effects; her observations about modern life, he promises, will "do good." The social agendas of the authors I examine could be more or less specific: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London" was an immediate and localized plea for donations to her sister's fundraising bazaar; Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* encourages charity in a much more general sense, beginning with its condemnation of Scrooge's miserliness and ending with his effusions of largesse. The most essential goal of sentimental realism, however, was less tangible than

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to Elizabeth Gaskell, 31 January 1850.

<sup>5</sup> Gaskell subsequently contributed a number of pieces to *Household Words*. Dickens' own *Hard Times for these Times* was also published in the journal, as well as much of Adelaide Anne Procter's poetry (under the pseudonym "Mary Berwick").

charitable giving. In her preface to *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, Gaskell describes her own desire to “give utterance” to the “the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy” (xxxvi). Although the poor suffer from deprivation and want, it is the lack of sympathy, she suggests, that is most painful. The workmen’s “woes,” which “come with ever-returning tide-like flood,” seem to those suffering to “pass unregarded by all but the sufferers” (xxxvi). In order to disabuse them of “so miserable a misapprehension,” Gaskell recommends “public effort...in the way of legislation, private effort in the way of merciful deeds, [and] helpless love in the way of widow’s mites” (xxxvi). Gaskell’s formulation gestures towards the relationship between sympathy, charity, and reform: we demonstrate the former, she suggests, through legislation and merciful deeds.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout this dissertation, I investigate this relationship between what we now call empathy and real-world ethical behaviors. Empathy incorporates a cognitive act—imagining ourselves in another’s place—and an emotional result—feeling with, and for, another person.<sup>7</sup> On the cognitive level, empathy is the fundamental mechanism by which we predict, understand, and “know” what other people think, feel, desire, and believe. On the affective level, empathy allows us to feel with other people, to share in another person’s

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<sup>6</sup> In a common rhetorical move, Gaskell pairs altruistic motivations with ones of self-preservation. If their suffering is not mitigated, she warns, the “lamentations and tears” of the poor will be replaced by “curses” and “hands clenched and ready to smite” (xxxvi). I will examine this kind of threat at greater length in Chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> Not all definitions of empathy incorporate both cognitive and affective components. “Primitive,” or non-cognitive instances of empathy, are typically automatic, uncontrollable, and unintentional. With emotional contagion, for example, the moods or feelings of one person “infect” another involuntarily and often unconsciously. Psychologist Martin Hoffman, who has dedicated the last twenty years to the study of empathy, has identified at least six modes of empathy. Only the final stage, on his model, is the intentional cognitive act of “imagining oneself in another’s place.” Martin Hoffman, “Interaction of Affect and Cognition in Empathy,” 106. I emphasize the cognitive dimension of empathy because it is essential to narrative empathy as a linguistically mediated process. More unconscious forms of empathy like motor mimicry and contagion are typically predicated on face to face contact or at least visual cues. In both empathy with people and with characters the cognitive, perspective taking dimension of empathy is often unconscious.

sadness, for example, even as we maintain our own separate affective states. Over the last twenty years, empathy has emerged as a central category in the analysis of how we understand and interact with “other minds.”<sup>8</sup> A leading philosophical theory of mind holds that our understanding of others is mediated by a process of cognitive simulation in which we imaginatively assume another’s perspective.<sup>9</sup> Research in neuroscience and primatology suggests a neural substrate for empathy and even an innate moral mechanism.<sup>10</sup> Most relevant to the current project, psychologists have identified a strong correlation between cognitive and affective perspective taking and a wide range of prosocial and altruistic behaviors. This research suggests that ethical interventions are often dependent upon imagination and emotion; we intervene in suffering when we vividly imagine what that suffering is like and experience a strong emotional response.

While much of the research on the ethics of empathy has focused on relationships between people, I argue that narrative empathy, in particular empathy for literary characters, is critical in shaping readers’ beliefs and behaviors. As readers empathize with characters, we imagine what their lives are like “from the inside,” aided by the details provided by an author as well as our own memories, experiences, and beliefs. As a consequence, we often feel connected to characters; we identify with them. In his manifesto for ethical criticism, “Ethical Criticism: What it is and Why it Matters,” Marshall Gregory declares, “Most of us cannot evade the deep intuition that identifying with characters in stories can exert a

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<sup>8</sup> In social and developmental psychology the cognitive process of empathy is sometimes referred to as “role-taking” or “perspective taking” while cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind sometimes employ the term “simulation.” Empathy has also been a significant category in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, although I do not consider these fields in this dissertation. See, in particular, the work of Carl Rogers and Heinz Kohut.

<sup>9</sup> I discuss Simulation Theory at greater length in Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Because I am interested in higher order cognitive and affective processing as it is shaped by narrative I will not examine the neuroscientific and ethological evidence for an underlying neural component to empathy. For more, see in particular the work of neuroscientists Jean Decety, Vittorio Gallese, and Giacomo Rizzolatti and primatologists Frans B. M. de Waal and Marc Hauser.

powerful influence on the quality and content of our own lives. To analyze how fictions exert this influence and to assess its effects is ethical criticism's job. What literary criticism needs in particular is a theoretical basis for inquiries into and judgments about the potential ethical effects of literature and narrative art in general" (194). This dissertation is an attempt to provide such a theoretical account of empathy and its "powerful influence" on readers' lives, or, as Wayne Booth put it in *The Company We Keep*, readers' own "character." I do not evaluate the texts themselves on ethical terms, nor do I want to suggest that the authors I discuss are morally commendable (although some of their motivations might be salutary). Rather, I am interested in the way that the formal features of literature shape readers' ethical commitments and move them to implement their ethical codes. Empathy, I argue, is the pivotal crossroads between aesthetics (how we read texts) and ethics (how we should act).

Before I proceed I need to make one note on terminology. One advantage that the modern critic possesses is the ability to look back on an historical period with the critical vocabulary that has emerged in the interim. The risk of this strategy, however, is superimposing a conceptual framework that is anachronistic or inappropriate for the period. The study of empathy—a term not coined until the beginning of the twentieth century—escapes anachronism not only because it is a cognitive and affective mechanism that "exists" beyond, and before, its terminology, but also because the modern notion of empathy is closely aligned with a concept and terminology that was available in the Victorian period. Between the nineteenth century and the twenty-first, an etymological and conceptual shift has greatly curtailed the meaning of sympathy to the less radical notion of pity or condolence. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, sympathy indicated "the quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other; the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the

feelings of another or others” (*OED*, s. v. “sympathy”). Although the history of both terms is complex, the modern notion of empathy has its conceptual, if not etymological, heritage in this nineteenth-century understanding of sympathy. I use the later term both to avoid confusion with contemporary definitions of sympathy and because my project relies on modern research on empathy that postdates the Victorian period.<sup>11</sup>

Despite my emphasis on contemporary research, my interest in narrative empathy emerges directly from the texts I examine. In the century before empathy was defined as a mode of aesthetic appreciation and a critical component of interpersonal understanding, sentimental realism was centrally invested in the project of imagining and feeling with another person’s experience. As Suzanne Keen observes in *Empathy and the Novel*, sympathy is a term that appears throughout Victorian criticism and fiction because it was “at the center of [nineteenth-century] novelistic practice” (53). Sentimental realism, in particular, is predicated on the belief that if readers can imagine the subjective experience of poor characters, then they will gain a new understanding of poverty that will motivate social change. This optimism wanes as the century progresses; late-century authors like George Gissing and Arthur Morrison are dubious about the possibility of bridging social division, and this skepticism continued into the twentieth century. In *British Writers of the Thirties*, Valentine Cunningham describes the fear that class distance cannot be overcome. And so Virginia Woolf “came gloomily to realize her social distance, the ‘impassability’ of the class

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<sup>11</sup> The complex relationship between empathy and sympathy is evident in the current state of Roget’s Thesaurus, which lists the two terms as synonyms for each other. For a discussion of the two terms see Nancy Eisenberg, “Empathy and Sympathy.” To make issues more complicated, the initial definitions of empathy and “*einfehlung*,” coined in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, are substantially different from our modern usage. Although both historical and modern notions of empathy involve a relationship between self and other, the earlier definition is less about understanding the subjective experience of another and more about projecting one’s own self into the object of contemplation. For discussions of the history of empathy, see Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer, “Critical Issues in the Study of Empathy” in *Empathy and Its Development* and Lauren Wispé, “History of the Concept of Empathy.”

barrier. ‘One could,’ she confesses in her Introductory Letter to *Life as we Have Known It, By Cooperative Working Women* (1931), ‘not be Mrs. Giles [of Durham] because one’s body had never stood at the wash-tub: one’s hands had never rung and scrubbed and chopped up whatever the meat may be that makes a miner’s supper,’ and so, [she concludes], ‘Our sympathy is fictitious, not real’” (250). Sentimental realism’s own optimism, I argue, was tempered by questions about its imaginative limitations. Rather than abandoning the project altogether, however, mid-century authors instead took as their own topic the perceptual difficulties they tried to overcome.

Mid-century literature is especially critical for the study of narrative empathy because of its own critical premium on emotional response. In fact, one critic has suggested that Victorian narratives share this constant above all others, “the desire and ability...to move an audience, to make that audience empathize and be transformed emotionally in some way by the joys and sorrows of human life” (Davis 243). The German reader-response critic Evelyne Keitel agrees, crediting the relative lack of emotion of twentieth-century fiction with the modern critical bias against accounts of emotional responses to reading. “The reading of Victorian novels aroused emotions,” Keitel concludes, “whereas the reading of modernist or post-modernist fiction is surprisingly unemotional” (736-7). The emotional effects of reading were especially pronounced in the mid-nineteenth century, a period when, as Kathleen Tillotson has described, “tears were shed more readily, and by men as well as women” (49). This eager response to affective cues is evidenced in the demonstrably emotive responses to Dickens’ novels; *The Old Curiosity Shop*, for example, is often cited as a paradigm of nineteenth-century readers’ intense emotional engagements with characters. When Little Nell died, “readers all over England wept” (Himmelfarb 407), and American readers were similarly moved; the story goes that 6,000 New Yorkers lined the docks waiting

news of her fate.<sup>12</sup> A similar response met the death of Paul Dombey, a reading of which, Dickens reported, made grown men cry “undisguisedly” (*Writings* 84). Lord Jeffrey, famously, was racked with tears: “I have so cried and sobbed over it last night, and again this morning; and felt my heart purified by those tears” (Forster 361).<sup>13</sup> And *The Sun* concurred, avowing, “We envy not the man who can read for the first time the account of the death of little Paul Dombey with a heart unmoved and an eye tearless” (Tillotson 49, citing *The Sun*, April 13, 1848).

Even by the late-nineteenth century this embrace of readerly emotion—and sentimentalism—had dramatically waned. As George Ford describes, the tears and raptures that greeted *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Dombey and Son* were gradually replaced with critical disdain: “It would be difficult to find in literary history a more dramatic example of tides of taste than the story of the vogue and decline of Little Nell and Paul Dombey” (60). Mary Lenard identifies this critical shift away from sentimentalism and moral literature as early as the 1860s, with critics like George Henry Lewes and Fitzjames Stephens rejecting what Francis Jeffrey had embraced in the 1830s and 1840s. It is not coincidental that the decline of sentimentalism corresponded with the widespread rejection of didacticism in literature. Sentimental realism was predicated on the assumption that readerly emotion would lead to ethical behaviors; if readers cried for fictional suffering, then they would try to ameliorate the actual suffering they encountered around them. But as the critical premium on emotion diminished, so too did the belief that literature could fundamentally alter belief and social structures.

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<sup>12</sup> In 1850 the poet Edward Heavisides described his own response to the book: “It must be a hard heart indeed that can read with indifference the history of the life and death of this promising child” (Ford 60).

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey’s letter to Dickens was from January 1847, after the fifth installment of the novel. Jeffrey’s response was also included in *The Life of Lord Jeffrey by Lord Cockburn*, first published in 1852.

## Narrative Impact

Although I also document the potential failures of narrative empathy, my critical approach shares this fundamental premise with the texts I examine: Literature is influenced by its social context, and it can in turn influence its social context. This is a double thesis that, as Patrick Brantlinger observes, “Victorian writers themselves never tire of repeating” (1). While the former claim is widely reflected in modern historicist criticism, however, we have not taken as seriously the latter. As Jane Tompkins argues in her own defense of sentimental literature, the twentieth century has devalued texts that took seriously their own historical role: “In modernist thinking, literature is by definition a form of discourse that has no designs on the world. It does not attempt to change things, but merely to represent them...Consequently, works whose stated purpose is to influence the course of history...do not qualify as works of art” (125). The criticism of social problem novels has suffered from this bias, a result perhaps of their own optimistic view of literature’s impact. Raymond Williams’ 1958 account of the industrial novels in *Culture and Society* is paradigmatic of critics’ assumption that the objectives of the writers themselves—sympathetic imagination and ethical intervention—would not be realized: “Sympathy was transformed not into action, but into withdrawal” (109). In fact, not since French literary critic Louis Cazamian’s seminal and capacious study of the “action and reaction of novels and life” from 1902 has a critic taken seriously the social effects of reading these novels in “changing mental attitudes” and “arous[ing] social conscience” (9, 117).<sup>14</sup> The relationship between text and context, Cazamian contends in *Le Roman Social en Angleterre*, is “reciprocal.” In his argument that mutual social responsibility emerged as a national ideal in the nineteenth century, for

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<sup>14</sup> Published in French in 1903, translated into English in 1973.

instance, Cazamian suggests that the novels of Dickens and Kingsley were “at the same time cause and effect of this process” (61). Literature has a “dual historical interest”: “It has the *a priori* value of a historical fact: it contains a certain amount of documentary evidence related to its didactic purpose; and it has exerted some definite influence on the public” (9). Novels (and poetry) are not merely a reflection of history, in other words, but a determining factor. While many critics have attempted to trace what Cazamian calls “the documentary value of the novel” (292), few have credited them as he did with such a pervasive (and improving) influence.

Ironically, some of the very critics who dismiss the positive social impact of reading nonetheless credit mid-century literature with negative effects like suppressing dissent, pacifying the working classes, or instigating fear of trade unions and mobs. If we are willing to admit that literature can play this repressive role, however, then we should also give serious attention to its potentially ameliorative effects. One of the reasons that the industrial novels have faced particular criticism, I would suggest, is the nature of their ethical objectives. In a general sense, the genre promotes middle-class reform as opposed to, and at least in part to prevent, working-class revolution. The Marxist perspective is generally hostile to this approach to social and economic change, and it has influenced much of the criticism since Williams’ account in *Culture and Society* and Arnold Kettle’s “The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel,” which appeared in *From Dickens to Hardy* the same year. As Marx himself argued in *The Communist Manifesto*, “A part of the bourgeoisie is desirous of redressing social grievances in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society”; in this group he places “economists, philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the condition of the working class, organizers of charity, members of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, temperance fanatics, hole-and-corner reformers of every

imaginative kind” (252).<sup>15</sup> Reform, on this view, is necessarily hegemonic. A modern scholar of Victorian social-problem literature, A. Susan Williams, makes a characteristic argument along this vein: “Those who campaigned for reform appear to have been motivated less by faith in the possibility of a better future than by dread that events in France would be repeated on British soil” (122). In both Raymond Williams’ and Susan Williams’ readings it is self-preservation, rather than altruism, that inspired middle-class interventions. Undoubtedly ensuring domestic security was one motivation of mid-century authors, but reform is not only a means of maintaining and reifying current power structures. The three Reform Bills represent gradual change, but nonetheless a real expansion of political power. Moreover, in many cases gradual political and social reform is ultimately more beneficial to the working classes—both in economic and social terms—than violent revolution. It is often, if not usually, the poor who pay the highest price for civil unrest.

The particular social policies that sentimental realism endorsed—philanthropy and personal charity, most notably—can also seem paternalistic or inadequate in our modern welfare state. But in the historical context of the genre, they were not only beneficial (in the most tangible sense of preventing human suffering), they were also highly controversial, condemned by an onslaught of political and social philosophies. Charitable giving flouted the non-interventionism of *laissez-faire* doctrine and was in direct opposition to the principles of Malthusian population control. Samuel Smiles’ hugely popular philosophy of *Self-Help* held that it was not the duty of the wealthy to help the poor, but that the poor should help themselves.<sup>16</sup> And inspired in part by Malthus, Parliament redesigned poor relief, effectively abolishing aid at the local level and instituting in its stead the repressive regime of the 1834

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<sup>15</sup> From his discussion on “Conservative, or Bourgeois, Socialism,” Chapter 3, Part II.

<sup>16</sup> First published in 1859, this work sold 20,000 copies in the first year and was translated into at least 17 languages.

New Poor Law. As *The Westminster Review* concluded in its review of *A Christmas Carol*, Bob Cratchit's turkey was bad political economy. In this context, the calls for relief and reform by sentimental realism were not middle-class do-gooding but radical political statements.

Surprisingly, the most significant treatment of narrative empathy to date, Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel*, also does not give much credence to the ethical consequences of reading, concluding that those critics who credit reading with improving real-world attitudes and actions exaggerate the effects of relationships with fictional characters. This conclusion is all the more unexpected given that Keen sets out to explore the complex relationship between "novel reading, empathy, and altruism" (vii). Although she powerfully demonstrates the prevalence of narrative empathy as an "affective transaction" (xv), she ultimately downplays its ethical significance. Keen is quick to credit reading with an array of real-world consequences—from improving readers' vocabulary and knowledge base to creating emotionally satisfying communities of readers to social advancement through cultural literacy (xv-xvi), but she remains, in her words, "skeptical about [ethical] consequences beyond immediate feeling responses" (viii-ix).

In part Keen's skepticism is in reaction to the sometimes panglossian accounts of the impact of reading. In this regard she cites evolutionary psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker, who argues that storytelling has made us a "nicer" species (48, cited in Keen 2007, xviii). Most notably, philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that novel reading leads to heightened empathy, compassion, and love, which in turn creates better "citizens of the world."<sup>17</sup> As Keen is right to point out, accounts of the positive consequences of reading often fail to appreciate the complexity of affective (and cognitive) response and minimize the ways in which empathy might result in ethically neutral or even deleterious results. Keen

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<sup>17</sup> See Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, and *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*.

also makes several provisos that are essential to any account of narrative empathy: Empathy is not always evoked in readers, even when a narrative is emotionally evocative, a function both of individual disposition and personal history as well as the “timing and context of the reading experience” (xii). Moreover, even if reader feels empathy for a character, that emotional response might have no subsequent effects on ethical behaviors. But in her own attempt to cast a more critical gaze on the role of reading, Keen does not give the same attention to the ways in which particular authors and texts might have positively shaped the attitudes and actions of historical readers. It is essential that we examine the potential failures of narrative empathy, but also that we give an equally rigorous account of its potential successes. Although we both employ empirical, interdisciplinary research about reading and engage in the larger field of cognitive approaches to literature, I defend the opposite conclusion to Keen’s, that empathy and reading can have substantial ethical effects. Throughout this dissertation, I propose to take seriously the proposition that narrative empathy can have tangible effects on the social world.

Paradoxically, fields outside of literary criticism—sociology, communications, and psychology in particular—have often given the most weight to our ostensible topic of study. Although the scientific study of persuasion has traditionally shown its own bias against the social effects of fiction, privileging rhetoric over poetics (Green, Strange, Brock 2), recent studies in the interdisciplinary field of narrative persuasion demonstrate that fictional narratives have profound effects on readers’ beliefs about the real world, regardless of their “real-world truth status” (Green and Brock 703).<sup>18</sup> In comparative studies of persuasive

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<sup>18</sup> For evidence that engagement with fictional narratives can result in changes in belief and attitude, see Melanie Green, Jeffrey Strange, and Timothy Brock, Ed., *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Perspectives*; Richard Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*; Richard Gerrig and Deborah Prentice, “The representation of fictional information”; Richard J. Gerrig and David N. Rapp, “Psychological Processes Underlying Literary Impact”; Melanie Green, J. Garst, and T. Brock, “The power of

texts labeled as “fact” or “fiction,” fiction proved to be as persuasive to readers as non-fiction (Green, Garst, Brock, and Chung). In fact, despite the fact that fictional texts are putatively unreliable, there is increasing evidence that they are often more persuasive than non-fiction because readers process them with decreased scrutiny while still internalizing truth claims. Marcus Appel and Tobias Richter found that the persuasive effects of fictional narratives actually increase in magnitude over time due to an “absolute sleeper effect” (114) by which persuasive evidence is remembered and discounting cues (i.e. the fact that a story is not true) are forgotten. In other words, literature’s epistemological status as “fiction” might actually increase its persuasive powers.

Even more importantly, the stylistic or formal features that are conventional to narratives have unique effects on readers’ beliefs and behaviors. Psychologist Raymond Mar provides a useful distinction, cautioning that “[o]ne must be careful not to confuse the discrimination between narrative and expository texts with that between fiction and nonfiction” (“Neuropsychology of Narrative” 1416). Narrative and fiction are not coterminous; many “expository” texts embed narrative techniques (e.g. anecdotes), and many non-fictional texts are really narrative in style. Psychologists have observed that expository and narrative texts are not merely different modes of writing, but also invite different “styles” of reading. Two of the leading scholars in the field of narrative persuasion, Melanie Green and Timothy Brock, suggest that narratives might result in more persistent attitude change because they invite cognitive *and* affective processing, a combination that has

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fiction: Persuasion via imagination and narrative”; Deborah Prentice, Richard Gerrig, Daniel Bailis, “What readers bring to the processing of fictional texts”; Jeffrey Strange and Cynthia Leung, “How anecdotal accounts in news and fiction can influence judgments of a social problem’s urgency, causes, and cures”; C. Wheeler, Melanie Green, & Timothy Brock, “Fictional narratives change beliefs: Replications of Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis (1997) with mixed corroboration”; Melanie Green, Jennifer Garst, Timothy Brock, and Sungeun Chung, “Fact Versus Fiction Labeling: Persuasion Parity Despite Heightened Scrutiny of Fact” Markus Appel and Tobias Richter, “Persuasive effects of fictional narratives increase over time.”

been shown to have more long-lasting results than “cognitive elaboration” alone (“The Role of Transportation” 719). This shared feature of empathy and narrative processing suggests why the *pathos* of sentimentalism might have more profound effects than the *logos* of more expository texts. Ironically, because “data” does not engage readers in the same way that stories do, the “facts” might not make suffering feel as real as fiction can.

The modern skepticism of the ameliorative role of literature can be seen in one critic’s dismissal of Cazamian’s work. It has “limited value,” Sheila Smith concludes, because he shares the Victorians’ “optimism” (*Other Nation* 266). Modern literary criticism that takes seriously the social and ethical goals of sentimental realism risks being similarly dismissed as optimistic or naïve. But a critically rigorous account of narrative impact does not entail sanguine speculations about readers’ reactions; nor is it an unreflective reiteration of a text’s or author’s stated goals.<sup>19</sup> Instead, it requires a scientific account of the long-term effects of reading coupled with precise analysis of the formal techniques, rhetorical strategies, and narrative structures that instruct and guide a reader’s experience of the text. My dissertation reflects this interdisciplinary and formalist methodology. Throughout the dissertation I integrate empirical research about reading into my own literary readings as I investigate the narrative strategies that shaped cross-class empathy in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, I hope to contribute to our understanding of how and why narrative texts might be uniquely suited to influence readers’ ethical beliefs and behaviors.

Philosophical and psychological accounts of reading offer a sense of how crossing disciplinary lines can bring new insights to literary criticism, allowing us to explore how empathy plays a role in Victorian—and modern—reading lives. Although literary critics are

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<sup>19</sup> “Narrative Impact” is the title of a new interdisciplinary collection of essays edited by Melanie Green, Jeffrey Strange, and Timothy Brock that examines “the key role that stories play in shaping our memories, knowledge and beliefs” (ix).

often reluctant to account for their own affective experience of reading, research in other fields suggests that empathy with characters has a significant impact on how many readers view themselves and others. In fact, established and emerging research in philosophical aesthetics and psychology suggests that most readers empathize with characters, imagining themselves in the place of protagonists within a fictional world. This kind of research allows us to tackle categories like empathy by investigating a broad spectrum of subjects without falling prey to myopic portraits of “the reader” based on one scholar’s experience of reading. The limitations of empirical research, however, suggest why literary criticism is indispensable in the study of narrative empathy. Psychologists and philosophers have offered generalized models of identification, but they have not historicized the act of reading itself, nor have they analyzed the relationship between narrative impact and literary form. In order to fill these critical lacunae, I ask two related questions: How do formal and rhetorical techniques shape the experience of reading? And what are the effects of these aesthetic choices within the social context of Victorian Britain?

Disciplinary cross-fertilization is especially useful in historical studies that face particular methodological obstacles in tracing reception. After all, we cannot interview historical readers or have them complete reader response questionnaires. Louis Cazamian acknowledged these difficulties in 1903, conceding, “it is impossible to produce exact documentary evidence of a book’s moral and emotional impact” (*Le Roman Social* 293). Kate Flint makes a similar point; what happens between readers and words on a page, she observes, “is very hard to recover, except through hypothesis” (“Victorian Novel” 31). Looking back at the mid-nineteenth century in particular, it is difficult to determine the precise nature of the relationship between literature and its historical context—the rise in philanthropy, for instance, or the push for reform. Is it a relationship of correlation or

causation, and, if the latter, what is the precise nature and direction of influence? It is much easier to demonstrate how authors responded to political and social events than how readers responded to literary narratives. The methodological solution I employ is suggestive of how literary criticism can investigate the social and ethical role of reading even in the absence of personal accounts of reception. I do not propose to uncover the particular reading habits of individual readers (beyond several accounts in this introduction and Chapter 1), nor do I trace subsequent ethical behaviors that would “prove” the correlation—or causation—between text and response. Rather, I augment formalist interpretive criticism with contemporary research on reading in order to construct a model of reception that is both historicized—emerging from and affecting a particular cultural and literary context—and trans-historical—based in practices of reading and interpretation that are not limited to any one period. Throughout this project, my attention to a contemporary Victorian audience suggests the potential impact of reading within its particular cultural context. While psychologists tend to focus on narrative impact at the level of individual readers’ behaviors, I suggest that the imaginative work invited by Victorian artistic representations contributed not only to ethical behaviors but to the expanded political representation marked by the Second Reform Act.

In Chapter 1, “‘A Great Gulf Betwixt Us’: Theorizing Empathy,” I begin by briefly contextualizing sentimental realism within its historical and literary context in order to emphasize the effects of empathy where the “target” is from a cultural group different from the subject. Although modern studies on empathy are often skeptical of imagining across cultural difference, sentimental realism is characterized by the confidence that literature could bridge class division and foster the ethical responsibility to ameliorate poverty. Turning to two scenes of Victorian reading, I argue that despite the fact that interpersonal

empathy is constrained by cultural difference, barriers like gender, class, race, and nationality do not preclude our empathic identification with particular *characters*. I propose a two part argument: first, that the nature of empathic bias has frequently been misidentified in the scientific and social scientific literature, and second, that the act of reading can overcome the bias that scholars have observed in relationships between people. After surveying important findings about the ethics and aesthetics of empathy, this chapter defends empathy against cultural and literary critics who condemn the act of imagining across difference and offers a positive counterargument that the ethical potential of empathy is actually most pronounced within dynamics of cultural difference. Understanding empathy as a metaphorical relationship—"I am you," "I am like you"—allows us to conceptualize of it as a comparison between two things that illuminates similarity and shared characteristics while at the same time maintaining the distinct identities inherent to difference.

The second chapter, "I have drunk of the cup of which they drink: Poverty and Point of View," continues to examine empathy across difference by investigating the relationship between point of view as a psychological state experienced by readers and point of view as a literary technique employed by sentimental realism. Although literary critics tend to foreground narrative voice, I turn to research in text processing and narrative comprehension that suggests readers routinely imagine themselves in the spatiotemporal place of central characters and process emotions from a protagonist's point of view. I argue that narrative foregrounding serves to establish this empathic relationship with particular characters, regardless of cultural similarity or difference. Focusing on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, I trace extended imaginative experiments in which readers learn to imagine and identify with the perspectives of poor individuals and argue that sentimental realism both thematizes and enacts the process of perspective taking. The perspectival mobility of

middle-class authors, narrators, and characters, I argue, instructed readers in the psychological mobility of empathy and established sympathetic imagination as a model to emulate. Perspectival shifts are especially significant when they entail audience members imagining the poor looking at the rich, a dynamic in which readers not only inhabit the perspective of the poor but also see themselves as subjects of their own self-reflexive gaze. This dynamic helps readers reconceptualize not only poverty, but also their own ethical responsibility.

In the third chapter, “‘Separating the sea...into component drops’: The Personification of the Poor,” I argue that literature’s generic focus on character—what I term here “personification”—makes it particularly suited for narrative empathy. In particular, I argue that the construction of individual, personal subjectivities gave emotional and ethical force to the otherwise abstract or quantified social issue of poverty. Focusing on Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Gaskell’s *North and South*, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, I argue that the representation of discrete individuals helps counteract the distancing, menacing effects of the masses. If massing the poor—both semantically and socially—creates a uniform cohort undifferentiated by personality, then differentiating individual poor people allowed readers to distinguish between members of that cohort and, in turn, form imaginative relationships with individual characters. Within each of these texts, formal techniques associated with personification were buttressed by a thematic commitment to personal contact between classes, a dynamic that sentimental realism attempted to recreate between reader and character.

If the personification of poverty contracted readers’ focus from the group to the individual, then authors’ referential claims dilated that focus, making the individual representative of a larger group. In the fourth chapter, “‘Lazarus at Our Gates’: The

Metaphors of Empathy,” I argue that sentimental realism was defined by a system of synechdocal reference between fictional characters and actual poor individuals they represent. These “metaphors of realism” mean that readers’ empathic relationships with characters are extended beyond the boundaries of a fictional world. Despite the *lack* of realism that many contemporary and modern critics argue characterizes many of the texts, I argue that the genre’s ethical objectives were predicated on its claims to referential truth. Using Dickens as a case study, I describe how sentimental realism emphasized topicality and contemporaneity while maintaining sentimentalism’s signature pathos. Although the frequent object of critical scorn, Dickens’ “fantastic fidelity” (Forster 351) whetted fictional emotion—both humor and compassion—while ensuring its real-world relevance. In addition to Dickens, I survey the truth claims inherent to sentimental realism and argue that texts offered a “parabolic” system of reference that was structured on, and frequently invoked, the parable of Dives and Lazarus. Interpreting realism as a metaphorical and parabolic mode of representation allows me to investigate the unique ethical ramifications of the genre’s emotional appeals. If the genre’s sentimentalism engaged readers’ emotions, then its *realism* gave those emotions a real-world ethical application.

In the final chapter, “‘Do ye hear the children weeping’: Apostrophe and the Making of a Nation,” I examine the use of direct address to the readers of sentimental realism and argue that apostrophe attempted to redefine English national identity in terms of ethical obligation to the poor. Much of the genre augments its epistemological truth claims with explicit textual demands, instructing readers on how to respond to poor characters as well as their poor contemporaries. By privileging the sympathetic consideration of suffering as a moral imperative for the English middle classes, authors attempt to shape audience response, entreating them to help, admonishing them to repent, commanding them to

extend their engagement beyond the momentary act of reading. While apostrophe to audience might serve to disrupt narrative empathy by reminding readers of their own scene of reading, I argue that it nonetheless attempted to “animate” readers as ethical subjects by invoking a shared national duty.

Throughout the dissertation, my concern is with the ways in which English authors “told stories” about themselves, their readers, and their country. Why did sentimental realists find poverty to be irreconcilable with their conception of English national identity? How did they represent and shape this national identity for an audience of middle-class Britons? And how did the construction of English values as antithetical to poverty help create English nationalism? In order to answer these questions, I investigate the ways in which sentimental realism represents English subjects—both rich and poor—and their relationship and responsibilities to each other. In the conclusion to the dissertation, “Poverty and the Politics of Empathy,” I expand my discussion of the national myth-making that I argue was the concomitant project of sentimental realism. Although nationalism is frequently criticized for its exclusion and divisiveness, it can also affirm relationships across difference and sustain structures of community in an otherwise alienated social milieu. Sentimental realism did not entertain naïve visions of England as a country without division; rather, the idea of nation served to reaffirm members’ mutual loyalties and obligations. Ultimately, I hope to suggest the ways in which the formal techniques associated with “I am you” contributed to and helped create the first person (“we”) of nation.

Although the methodological approach that I have described does not focus on first-person accounts of reading, let me conclude this introduction with just two anecdotes that suggest the profound emotional—and ethical—response that greeted sentimental realism. When the painter Paul Falconer Poole saw Richard Redgrave’s painting, *The Sempstress*, he

responded both with emotion and the resolution to intervene: “I think it is the most powerful for truth and touching from its pathos of any picture I have ever seen. Who can help exclaiming ‘Poor Soul! God help her?’ If any circumstance could make me wage war against the present social arrangements, and make us go down shirtless to our graves, it is the contemplation of this truthful and wonderful picture” (Redgrave *Memoir* 45).<sup>20</sup> Poole’s reaction to the “pathos” of the picture is not merely to cry out, but to resolve to combat the condition it represents. Significantly, he credits a painting with an effect greater than any other circumstance; art is not merely “affecting” in an aesthetic or emotional sense but effective in instigating political change. Poole’s response indicates the potential political and social ramifications of personal, emotive responses to art. He is not merely moved, but moved *to* remedial action. Indeed, he is not merely moved to pity for the woman or even personal charity; he wants to “wage war” against the “social arrangements” it represents. It is impossible to know how this one man followed through on his good intentions, but there is evidence that more tangible results than tears greeted sentimental realism. For convincing evidence of narrative impact one need look no farther than Dickens’ hugely popular *A Christmas Carol*, which sold six thousand copies in its first week in 1843 and was soon reprinted for the first of hundreds of times. In the spring after its release, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* credited the story with a surge in charitable giving: “More extensive kindness has been dispensed to those who are in want at the present season than at any preceding one” (170).

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<sup>20</sup> Redgrave would have been pleased with Poole’s response. He described his own ethical as well as aesthetic motivation: “It is one of my most gratifying feelings, that many of my best efforts in art have aimed at calling attention to the trials and struggles of the poor and oppressed...I have had in view the ‘helping them to right that suffer wrong’ at the hands of their fellow men” (Roberts 60).

## Chapter One

### “A great gulf betwixt us”:<sup>21</sup> Theorizing Empathy

“We are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as  
Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us.”  
Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*

On June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1870, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, Dean of Westminster, stood in the Abbey and began his Sunday sermon. “There are some passages of Scripture which, when they are read in the services of the Sunday, almost demand a special notice from their extraordinary force and impressiveness. Such,” he concluded, “is the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, read as the gospel this day.”<sup>22</sup> The reading that the Dean selected was so well known and frequently cited in the nineteenth century that artists could refer to it by its protagonists’ names—Dives and Lazarus—without any need to explain their allusion.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the century, and particularly in the years between and around the first two Reform Bills, the parable enjoyed a cultural resonance unparalleled before or since. It was, Reverend John Head avowed, “possibly the most interesting parable which our blessed Lord ever delivered” (65).

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell. *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Preached on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1870, Westminster Abbey. Dean Stanley’s sermon was first published by Macmillan & Co. that year. The parable is the gospel reading for the First Sunday after Trinity according to The Book of Common Prayer.

<sup>23</sup> Luke, chapter 16, verse 19-26. Although Dives is not named in the Bible itself, the rich man of the parable has been called Dives since the fifteenth century, a result of English speakers transforming the adjective that describes the rich man in the Vulgate (“quidam dives”) into a proper noun, Dives. This name was popularized in sermons, songs, and publications about the parable, although it never entered the Bible itself.

The parable of Dives and Lazarus captures what historian Asa Briggs has called a “particular (and favourite) Victorian contrast,” the contrast between “poverty and plenty” (“Poverty and Plenty” 198). On earth, Dives has all the trappings of wealth. He is “clothed in purple and fine linen,” and “fare[s] sumptuously every day” (19). Lazarus, on the other hand, is the beggar at his gate, “desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table” (21). Dives does not help him, and only the dogs come to him and lick his sores. When the two men die, however, their respective positions are reversed; Lazarus is “carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom,” and Dives is sent to hell. There he is made the beggar, beseeching Abraham to allow Lazarus to slake his thirst with water. Abraham denies the request, however, just as Dives denied Lazarus on earth: “Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented” (25).

Lazarus’ unheeded suffering at Dives’ door was resonant for its forceful illustration of the class alienation endemic to mid-nineteenth century England. Literary and cultural allusions to the parable appeared not only in sermons and religious tracts, but novels, poems, journalism, social commentary, political cartoons, illustrations, songs, and broadside ballads. In 1848, the “Year of Revolution” on the continent, cholera and starvation throughout Britain, and the third Chartist petition and mass meeting on Kennington Common, P.L. Macdougall lamented that the entire country was divided: “The contrasts of this great country are appalling; Dives and Lazarus elbow each other in our crowded thoroughfares by day; by night, the unsurpassed luxury and the unsurpassable misery lie down side by side, separated only by the thickness of a brick” (3). That same year Thackeray satirized Dives in *Vanity Fair*: “‘There must be classes—there must be rich and poor,’ Dives says, smacking his

claret” (569).<sup>24</sup> And in *Jane Eyre*, St. John Rivers advises Jane to “Remember the fate of Dives, who had good things in this life” (518).<sup>25</sup> In the epigraph to this chapter, Elizabeth Gaskell’s complex working-class hero John Barton protests that rich and poor are to live “as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us” (8). Later in the novel the narrator wonders if the parable “haunt[s] the minds of the rich as it does those of the poor” (114).

Allusions to Dives and Lazarus were even more ubiquitous than it first appears, because it was the origin of the most powerful and enduring metaphor of the mid-nineteenth century—that of the “great gulf” between rich and poor.<sup>26</sup> It would require a hefty volume to anthologize Victorian use of the metaphor, but typical is Thomas Beames’ warning in *The Rookeries of London* that “a gulf yawns—[and] is daily growing wider” (65) or the portrait, in an anonymous poem called “Love-Truths,” of a “gulf / That darkly yawns ‘twixt rich and poor” (1-2).<sup>27</sup> In the parable itself, the gulf is not between rich and poor but between heaven and hell. When Dives asks Abraham to send Lazarus to him, Abraham answers that it is impossible: “Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence”

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<sup>24</sup> *Vanity Fair* was first serialized from January 1847 to July 1848 and was published in a single volume in 1848.

<sup>25</sup> The first edition of *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, the second and third in 1848.

<sup>26</sup> The power of the metaphor is perhaps best seen in its longevity; perform an internet search on the phrase and one discovers entries not from the nineteenth century but the twenty-first. President Clinton invoked it in his final State of the Union Address, hoping to “meet the challenge that is presented to our planet by the huge gulf between rich and poor.” The extent to which the metaphor has reached out of the industrial and into the information age is signified by the recent paper “The Growing Gap between the Information Rich and the Information Poor, Both Within Countries and Between Countries.” (A Composite Policy Paper by IFLANET, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, Bangkok, 1999, Alfred Kagan, editor. <http://www.ifla.org/VII/dg/srdg/srdg7.htm>). In this article disparity is not defined merely by wealth, but also by access to information.

<sup>27</sup> “Love-Truths” is an anonymous poem that prefaces the fifteenth chapter of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*. The poem later asks, “Where is the wisdom that shall bridge this gulf, / And bind them once again in trust and love?”

(26). Because of the parable's vivid illustration of class disparity and segregation, however, the "great gulf" in the afterlife was conflated with the "great gulf" on earth, and of all the expressions of contrast and rupture in the nineteenth century, no image was as commonly invoked or as widely understood as that of the "gulf" between the classes.

The popularity of particular biblical passages, historian David Newsome has observed, is a useful tool in identifying cultural trends. Frequent nineteenth-century allusions to the forty-fourth chapter of Ecclesiasticus, for instance—"Let us now praise famous men"—can help diagnose the Victorian preoccupation with heroism (153). The whole canon of allusions to Dives and Lazarus reveals a collective anxiety about class antagonism and its repercussions, in this world and the next. But the parable did not only expose concerns about Victorian society; it also reflected upon the Victorian literary enterprise. Sentimental realism echoed the content of the parable and its form: both used stories to accomplish their ethical goals. In his sermon on the rich man and Lazarus, the Dean of Westminster considered the sacred lesson of the parable, which he heard echoed in nineteenth-century literature, but he also called attention to its "*form of instruction*" (324). Parables, he argues, are tales from real life, but they are also fictions, "drawn from the inspired imagination of the sacred writer" (324). Rather than reiterate earlier church suspicions about the immorality of fiction, the Dean illuminates its sacred antecedents. Parables, he reminds the congregation, were used by none other than Christ as his "ordinary mode of teaching"; citing Matthew and Mark, the Dean reminds his audience that "'without a parable,' without a fable, without an invented story of this kind, He rarely opened His lips...If we were to ask for the most perfect exposition of the most perfect truth respecting God and man, which the world contains, it will be found not in a Discourse, or a Creed, or a

Hymn, or even a Prayer, but in a Parable—a story” (325). “The Bible itself,” the Dean concludes, “sanctions [this] mode of instruction” (325).

The Dean’s thoughts about the sacred form of fiction were tailored for the occasion. For this was none other than the memorial sermon for Charles Dickens, preached the Sunday after he was buried in Poet’s Corner. As Tennyson and Wilkie Collins sat close by, the Dean traced a genealogy from Christ to Sir Walter Scott, Jane Austen to Elizabeth Gaskell, and finally to Dickens, a “vivid exemplification,” Stanley eulogized, of that “heaven-sent power of fiction” (326). Not only is fiction a sacred form, but it is one uniquely realized in nineteenth-century England. “In a special sense,” the Dean continues, fiction is “God’s gift to our own age”: “It is perhaps not too much to say that in no age of the world, and in no country of the world, has been developed on so large a scale, and with such striking effects as in our own, the gift of ‘speaking in parables.’” Extolling this sacred paradigm, the Dean elevates contemporary literature to its biblical predecessor and compares modern authors to Jesus himself. Moreover, both “the Divine Parable in the Gospels” and the “modern human Parables” were advocates “of the absent poor, of the neglected, of the weaker side, whom not seeing we are tempted to forget” (329). Dickens, the Dean recalled, used the same form as Christ and taught “the very same lesson” (328).

The Dean’s comparison of literature and parables suggests their shared didactic function, and sentimental realism reiterated the emphasis on intervention and compassion found in Dives and Lazarus. But what I want to investigate in this chapter is not any particular ethical teaching of sentimental realism but instead the ethical function of interpersonal and narrative empathy per se. That is, what are the ethical consequences of imagining other minds, actual and fictional? The ethics of empathy are particularly significant in the social context of sentimental realism because of the “great gulf” that

characterized Victorian class relations. At its most essential level, the gulf between rich and poor was an economic one. But wealth and income have profound effects on virtually every other aspect of life, and economic disparity in Victorian England led to fundamentally different experiences of both life and death. The economic gulf between rich and poor, in other words, was also epistemological and affective, shaping what (and how) individuals know and how (and what) they feel. Authors who represented “the absent poor” for a middle and upper-class audience were faced with the task of conveying a subjective experience fundamentally different from their readers’ own lives.

As I will describe, empathy is the fundamental mechanism by which we understand others’ subjective experiences and it motivates a wide range of ethical behavior. The ethical dimension of empathy is constrained, however, by inherent biases. Psychologist Martin Hoffman, who has studied empathy for thirty years, has observed that individuals empathize more readily and more willingly with people who are directly in front of them (*Empathy and Moral Development* 209-213). This “here and now” bias means that suffering that is geographically—not to mention temporally—removed from one’s immediate vicinity is more easily ignored and less easily comprehended. Empathy also faces a demographic limitation; we tend to empathize with people who are similar to ourselves. These findings have significant implications for the project of sentimental realism, which invited empathy for individuals who were both geographically and demographically removed from middle and upper-class readers. After theorizing the significant role of empathy in ethics and aesthetics, I will argue that literature was uniquely suited to offer Victorian readers the dramatic details necessary for imagining across the twin gulfs of distance and difference. Not only does this argument suggest that narrative empathy can fill a critical void that characterizes empathy with other people, but it also offers a positive counterargument

against critics of cross-cultural imagining, who suggest empathy across difference constitutes cultural appropriation. Echoing a sentiment of contemporary Victorian criticism, I argue that narrative empathy can expand readers' circle of acquaintance in such a way that broadens ethical commitment.

### **Empathy and Other Minds**

While mid-Victorian England posed particular sociological obstacles to cross-class relationships, cognitive impediments to empathy are not unique to the nineteenth century. In his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith described the profound isolation between one person and another that is not economic or social, but epistemological. "Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers" (12). Even as he is strapped to the rack, so too are we locked up in our own consciousness, comfortably insulated from our fellow man and his misfortune. Smith describes a particularly evocative case of what philosopher Alvin Goldman calls a "perennial problem in philosophy of mind"—how we understand others, how we "identify the feelings, thoughts, and designs" of the people around us (*Simulating Minds* vii). As Dickens described the problem in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the minds of others are locked away, buried within, "hidden under almost as many wrappers from the eyes of the mind, as from the eyes of the body" (13). The result is an epistemological crisis difficult to overcome. On Dickens' account the inscrutability of other minds seems impregnable. "Every human creature," he concludes, "is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other" (17). Proximity is no help in forging this distance; although three passengers ride side by side, pressed against each other in a mail coach, they have "the breadth of a county" (18) between them.

How, then, can we ascertain what another person is thinking and feeling? How can we understand the subjective or phenomenological experience of another subject— “what it is like” to be him, what it *feels* like to be him? While our own mind and mental history, our personal and private repository of thoughts and feelings, is accessible to us through introspection, we have no such capacity when it comes to other people. Moreover, while we can observe the physical world and bodies in it, we cannot observe the thoughts and feelings of another. This philosophical difficulty emerges, most prominently, from Descartes’ model of dualism, in which the mind is perceived as a substance wholly distinct from the world of physical things. This dichotomy between mind and body is not merely a metaphysical thesis, but also an epistemological one. While our knowledge of the physical world, and hence our bodies within it, is public and observable, our knowledge of our mental history is entirely private, privileged by what philosophers call first-person authority. Others’ mental lives can be *deduced* from the observation of outward physical behaviors, but inner life is apparent only to its owner.<sup>28</sup>

Our ability to overcome this epistemological gulf is constrained by our *inability* to access other people’s mental states; in order to understand the experience of other subjects we can rely only on an indirect knowledge of their minds. Philosopher Gilbert Ryle describes the problem in *The Concept of Mind*: “[I]n his inner life each of us lives the life of a ghostly Robinson Crusoe. People can see, hear and jolt one another’s bodies, but they are irremediably blind and deaf to the workings of one another’s minds and inoperative upon them” (13). Unable to use our capacity for sensation or our powers of introspection to

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<sup>28</sup> Although the metaphysical assumptions of Descartes’ distinction have eroded, its epistemological repercussions have remained intact. In fact, the problem of other minds is even more fundamental than I address here. That is, not only can I not know *what* another person thinks, feels, etc, but I cannot even know *that* other people have thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

ascertain another's thoughts and emotions, we are trapped in the insular world of our own mind. In his influential article, "What it is Like to be a Bat," Thomas Nagel has given us good reason to believe that this problem of the unknowability of other minds is empirically intractable. Using an ethological example, Nagel argues that even if a biologist were to gain exhaustive understanding of the physical properties of a bat, he or she would nonetheless be unable to understand how the bat *itself* experiences the world. This barrier is not limited to the difference between species; it confronts any subject who seeks to understand the subjective or phenomenological experience of another subject. This experience, Nagel argues, can neither be characterized in objective terms nor acquired through empirical investigation. Thus, it cannot be communicated fully between individuals.

Thirty years later, there has been no convincing answer to Nagel's call for an "objective phenomenology" (224). And yet, despite the fact that our access to other minds remains frustratingly out of reach, we do in fact take ourselves to have a rich and varied knowledge of the inner lives of others. But how does this occur? Empathy provides one of the most compelling "solutions" to the problem of other minds. In effect, empathy is for an "other" what introspection is for the self, as Lauren Wispé describes in his history of the term: "Empathy is the capacity by which one person obtains knowledge of the subjective side of another person. Just as my sense tells me who *I* am, this capacity allows me to learn about the difference in the 'foreign' other" (35). Although Nagel himself hopes that the future might offer an objective system by which we can measure and describe subjective experience, he concludes that we are, at present, dependent not on a scientific solution but an imaginative one. We can attempt to "tak[e] up the point of view" (224) of another subject and thus experience the world as they would.

Common metaphors associated with empathy and point of view speak to their intimate relationship; if sharing another person's perspective is described as seeing "through her eyes," then empathy is compared to walking "in her shoes." In each case, the metaphor invokes a physical transference of position; individual A enters the body (or at least the garments) of individual B. In both cases, however, the metaphor of physicality is shorthand for a more profound sharing. A rudimentary form of empathy might entail imagining what I (with my relevant beliefs, knowledge, emotions, and history) would feel in the situation in which another person finds herself. A more sophisticated version of empathy, however, entails imagining what I would feel in that situation if I *were* that person, with *her* relevant beliefs, knowledge, emotions, and history rather than my own. This distinction is significant because "putting oneself in another's place" cannot be a mere physical transference. To empathize with our brother on the rack, for example, it is not sufficient merely to place ourselves upon it (just as to work in a factory is not to adopt the point of view of a factory-worker). While what one experiences there might be the same, how one experiences it would be vastly different. In addition to imagining ourselves in his spatiotemporal situation, we must also imagine ourselves in his psychological situation.

Smith suggests a similar solution to understanding the suffering of our brother on the rack, and his work is significant, in part, for its insight into the radical role of imagination in understanding other minds. "It is by the imagination only," he declares, "that we can form any conception of what are [another's] sensations" (11). While our senses "never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person," with imagination we are transported into our brother's suffering. As Smith realized, the gulf between one mind and another is not merely a cognitive dilemma, but also an affective one. Without knowing what another person feels, how can we feel for—and with—his emotions? The answer lies in perspective

taking: “We place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him” (11). By thus “changing places in fancy with the sufferer,” we attain intimate knowledge of another person and, subsequently, emotional engagement with him; we “conceive” of and are “affected by” what he feels (12). Imagining ourselves in another’s place, in other words, allows us not only to understand what he feels but allows us, in turn, to feel ourselves. “His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels” (12).<sup>29</sup>

Simulation Theory, one of the leading theories of mind in philosophy, suggests just how ubiquitous this process might be.<sup>30</sup> Although some people use the term empathy to refer to a relatively limited set of cases where we feel emotionally attached to another person, simulation theory suggests that the cognitive dimension of empathy—where we imaginatively project ourselves into another person’s perspective—is involved in virtually every attempt to understand another person. According to the simulationist account, we project ourselves into another’s situation and let our psychological processes run “off line,” that is, without the behavioral responses that would be generated if we were in that situation ourselves. To understand an individual’s emotional response to heartbreak, for example, we

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<sup>29</sup> Smith’s view of sympathy was part of a larger trend in eighteenth-century thought. For a concise yet capacious survey of sympathetic imagination in eighteenth-century criticism, see Walter Jackson Bate’s “The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century English Criticism.” The “Scottish Common-Sense School” of philosophers, in particular, believed that “the imagination, by an effort of sympathetic intuition, is able to penetrate the barrier which space puts between it and its object, and by actually entering into the object, so to speak, secure a momentary but complete identification with it” (144). For more on how this criticism affected Romantic notions of the imagination, see Bate’s *Negative Capability: the Intuitive Approach in Keats* and *From Classic to Romantic*, 131-147.

<sup>30</sup> See Gary Fuller, “Simulation and Psychological Concepts.” Jane Heal, “Simulation and Cognitive Penetrability.” Alvin Goldman, “Empathy, Mind, and Morals.” Although I won’t address it here, the main rival of Simulation Theory is Theory Theory.

imagine ourselves similarly heartbroken (without any of the maudlin behaviors that might otherwise accompany this state). In order to account for differences in our background, beliefs, and so on, we adjust our mental simulation, imagining ourselves having the beliefs, desires, or attitudes that we take the other person to have. These simulations can be more or less complex, depending on what we know about another person (and ourselves). This sort of “pretend play”<sup>31</sup> enables us to imagine the experience and beliefs of another individual and consequently understand his point of view.

Philosopher Ted Cohen has offered a helpful metaphor for understanding this process as one of metaphor-making. Cohen argues that our understanding of other people is based in what he calls “metaphors of personal identification,” in which  $A=B$  and  $A$  and  $B$  are both people, or,  $B$  is a person—myself—and  $A$  is a character in a text. The phenomenon of “identifying” with another person or character entails the construction of a metaphor: “Here I am,  $B$ , the one person I think I know, trying to understand another,  $A$ . I grope for an understanding by trying to grasp  $A=B$ ” (408). Cohen follows in the steps of cognitive theorists, most notably George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argue that metaphor is central to virtually all human understanding.<sup>32</sup> On this view, metaphor is a fundamental mechanism of mind that structures our perceptions and conceptual framework. Cohen describes metaphor this way: “A common and persistent human enterprise is the attempt to understand one thing in terms of another” (399). This is a broader definition of metaphor than one delimited by the use of figurative language, and it is infinitely more significant. If we begin to look at empathy as a metaphorical relationship and metaphor as a

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Gordon’s term. See “Folk Psychology as Simulation.”

<sup>32</sup> See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, for the original statement of this thesis.

primary method by which we understand the world, then our imagination of people and characters becomes only one part of a more general process of human understanding.

Although he did not use the term metaphor, Victorian journalist and critic E. S. Dallas anticipated Cohen's designation in his 1866 volume of poetic criticism, *The Gay Science*. Like Cohen, Dallas views the relationship between one thing and another as central to human understanding: "The truth is, that every effort of thought, from the least to the greatest, any the faintest twitch of consciousness, is an act of comparison. There is no thought in the mind but has two factors, one to be compared to the other" (266). Not only does comparison compromise all human thought, but there are only three classes of similitude or likeness which the mind "either finds or generates":

1. I am that or like that.
2. That is I or like me.
3. That is that or like that. (273)

Significantly, Dallas designates the first "class" of similitude as sympathy, "that strange involuntary force which impels me to identify myself with you, and you to identify yourself with me" (274). Structured as a metaphor or simile between "I" and someone or something else, sympathy is "the most potent of the social forces" (275). Along with the second class of similitude, sympathy allows us to compare other people and things to ourselves—how they are similar to us and how they are different from us.<sup>33</sup> Like Cohen, Dallas identifies sympathy as a process in both aesthetic appreciation and interpersonal interaction, or art and life: "And so throughout all art and life the formula of sympathy is this: I am you, or like you; I am, or am like, or at least I wish to be, or to be like, something which is not myself" (276). This formulation allows us to understand better both ourselves and other people.

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<sup>33</sup> Dallas credits the first class, sympathy, as the ruling principle of dramatic art, the second class as the ruling principle of lyric art, (associated with personification and anthropomorphism), and the third as the principle of epic or historical art (associated more traditionally with metaphor and simile) (274).

“There is no form of imaginative activity,” he concludes, “more wonderful than sympathy” (275).

### The Ethics of Empathy

Smith argues that empathy can help us to understand any type of subjective experience; it allows us to feel “any passion whatever” (11).<sup>34</sup> It is not coincidental, however, that his example of our brother on the rack focuses on our understanding of another person’s suffering, our “fellow-feeling for the misery of others” (11). This subset of sympathy, which Smith calls pity or compassion, is contained in the etymological history of the latter term: *com*, together, and *pati*, suffer. That we “often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others,” Smith argues, “is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it,” even “the greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it” (11). Smith was especially attuned to the ethical implications of empathy with distress, which is the basis of his moral philosophy. This is the opening hypothesis of *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, in which Smith first grapples with the notion of sympathy:

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. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. (11)

As Smith’s description suggests, empathy “interests” us in the fortunes of others and motivates us to act for their benefit. Imagination, in other words, has profound repercussions both for our feelings for another individual and for our subsequent behaviors.

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<sup>34</sup> See Part I, Section III of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* for Smith’s discussion of the relative strength and “liveliness” of sympathy with sorrow and sympathy with joy.

While any emotion can move us, it is suffering that moves us to action. The comparative importance of empathy in situations of distress likely accounts for the etymological fate of sympathy, which is now used solely to describe our interactions with suffering, sadness, pain, and loss. In these contexts, the emotional dimension of empathy—how would I feel if I were he?—is coupled with an ethical one—how should I act since I am not?

A forerunner to Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) remains one of the most important statements of the connection between sympathy and morality. Working against Hobbes' position that humans are fundamentally self-serving, Hume argued that sympathy provides a non-selfish motivation for helping other people. When we see someone in pain, he suggests, we imagine pain and consequently experience the pain ourselves. This tendency to share "sentiments" gives us a natural impetus to alleviate the pain of others. A few years before Smith's account, Edmund Burke also described the significant effects of sympathy on our behavior. It is by sympathy, he argued, that "we enter into the concerns of others; that we are moved as they are moved, and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost anything which men can do or suffer" (*Philosophical Enquiry* 41). Burke has a complex take on our emotional response to suffering. He observes that witnessing suffering—both real and fictional—brings us a certain amount of pleasure. But this pleasurable response does make us callous; instead, it serves to guarantee that we do not turn away. Our simultaneous distress, meanwhile, motivates our intervention: "the pain we feel prompts us to relieve suffering in ourselves in relieving those who suffer" (42)

Elaine Scarry captures the relationship between imagination and ethics in the opening salvo of her suggestive essay, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons": "The way we act toward 'others,' is shaped by the way we imagine others" (277). The difficulty of

imagining other people, Scarry suggests, is evidenced by the proliferation of acts of aggression—both on a personal and national scale. When we do not or cannot imagine the subjective experience of another person or group of people, it is easier to hurt them; this lack of imagining “permits one to inflict [pain] and amplify it in the body of the other person while remaining immune oneself” (279). Although Scarry emphasizes active injury—torture, beatings, the firing of nuclear weapons—the correlation holds true for “passive” injury and non-physical injury as well—complicity in economic or social systems that hurt the poor, for example, the refusal to intervene in suffering that one does not directly cause (the bystander), or perhaps even does not see (the remote bystander). This latter case reminds us of the Dean’s invocation of “the absent poor...whom not seeing we are tempted to forget;” in this type of case imagination is particularly significant because the physical perception of another’s suffering is impossible.

Scarry emphasizes what we might call a negative ethics (absence of imaginings equals proliferation of injury). But this correlation suggests the profound effects of imagining in both a positive and negative sense. The converse of Scarry’s argument is that the *presence* of vivid imaginings results in the proliferation of socially beneficial behaviors, ones that alleviate suffering rather than propagate it. Empathy, in other words, makes us less likely to hurt other people and more motivated to help them. This hypothesis has wide-ranging support. Indeed, the ethical significance of imagining is the most important dimension of modern and historical empathy studies, critical not only to how we “read” the cognitive life of others, but also to how we interact with them. Philosopher Mark Johnson has argued for the fundamental role of imagination in moral reasoning in *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*. Although he examines a diverse spectrum of imagination, Johnson has particular claims for the imagination entailed in empathy: “Unless we can put ourselves

in the place of another, unless we can enlarge our own perspective through an imaginative encounter with the experience of others, unless we can let our own values and ideals be called into question from various points of view, we cannot be morally sensitive” (199). The significant ethical dimension of empathy can perhaps best be seen in its absence; the lack of empathy has been associated with psychopathy, criminality, and antisocial behavior.<sup>35</sup> Empathy’s moral dimension is evident in its deficiency in these last three categories; as one philosopher puts it, “if we do not have an adequate pathway to other people’s minds we shall be unable to think in terms of their interests, or to understand why their interests matter” (Kennett 342).<sup>36</sup>

Over the last two decades psychologists have demonstrated the robust correlation between empathy and a wide range of ethical responses—altruism and prosocial behavior, moral development, interpersonal bonding, and improved intergroup relations.<sup>37</sup> According

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Carl Elliott, “Diagnosing Blame: Responsibility and the Psychopath.” John Deigh, “Empathy and Universalizability.” Vernon Wiehe, “Empathy and narcissism in a sample of child abuse perpetrators and a comparison sample of foster parents.” Dustin Pardini, John Lochman, and Paul Frick, “Callous/unemotional traits and social-cognitive processes in adjudicated youths.” S. B. G. Eysenck, “Impulsive and antisocial behavior in children.”

<sup>36</sup> Empathic imagination is not the only motivation for ethical behavior, despite their strong correlation. An individual who is a strict adherent to a system of moral principles, for example, might pursue ethical behaviors with no imaginative or emotional involvement. Kennett makes a similar proviso using the case of autism, which is characterized by the inability to empathize with others but not the lack of ethical codes. This stipulation, however, does not diminish the significance of empathy for interpersonal interaction, a relationship all too evident in the difficulties autistic persons face. Jeanette Kennett, “Autism, Empathy and Moral Agency.” See also, Simon Baron-Cohen, A. Leslie, and Uta Frith, “Does the Autistic Child Have a ‘Theory of Mind?’” Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: an essay on autism and theory of mind*. Uta Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*.

<sup>37</sup> On altruism and prosocial behavior, see Mark Barnett, “Empathy and Prosocial Behavior in Children.” Mark Davis, *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach*. Nancy Eisenberg, *The Roots of Prosocial Behavior in Children*. Nancy Eisenberg, ed., *The Development of Prosocial Behavior*. Nancy Eisenberg, ed., *Empathy and Its Development*. Dennis Krebs, “Empathy and Altruism.” Dennis Krebs and Cristine Russell, “Role-Taking and Altruism: When You Put Yourself in the Shoes of Another, Will They Take You to Their Owner’s Aid?” Patricia Oswald, “The Effects of Cognitive and affective Perspective Taking on Empathic Concern and Altruistic Helping.” For an overview of psychological research on empathy and prosocial behavior, see Hans-Werner Bierhoff, *Prosocial Behavior*, especially Chapter 9, “Empathy;” Chapter 13, “Altruistic motive system;” and Chapter 14, “Empathy-related responding and emotional regulation.” On moral development see Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, “Development of Prosocial

to the “empathy-altruism hypothesis” proposed by social psychologist C. Daniel Batson (building on earlier theories of Hume, Smith, Hoffman, and Krebs), altruistic behaviors are motivated by imagination—adopting another person’s perspective—and emotion—feeling “other-oriented” emotions like compassion and tenderness.<sup>38</sup> In a typical study, Batson and his colleagues offer test subjects varying processing instructions meant to manipulate empathy; readers are either instructed to imagine how a person feels and feel the full impact of those emotions themselves or to disengage emotionally and remain objective and detached. Subjects who are directed to pursue high empathy conditions not only show more positive attitudes towards others, but are also more likely to help them when given the opportunity to do so. Finlay and Stephan used a similar protocol to study the effects of empathy on racial prejudice, and they report similar results. White participants asked to imagine how an African-American subject feels and identify with those feelings subsequently report improved attitudes towards African-Americans as a group (“Reducing Prejudice”). Emotional perspective taking (trying to understand the feelings of another) has proven especially significant in prompting subsequent helping behaviors; in a study by Patricia Oswald, participants who were instructed to focus on a subject’s feelings volunteered 220% more time to help similar students than those who focused on the subject’s thought

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Motivation: Empathy and Guilt,” and “The Contribution of Empathy to Justice and Moral Development.” On interpersonal relationships see Christiane Brems and Marie Sohl, “The Role of Empathy in Parenting Strategy Choices.” Peter Cousins and John Vincent, “Supportive and Aversive Behavior Following Spousal Complaints.” On intergroup relationships see Krystina Finlay and Walter Stephens, “Reducing Prejudice: The effects of empathy on intergroup attitudes” and Walter G. Stephen and Krystina Finlay, “The Role of Empathy in Improving Intergroup Relations.”  
<sup>38</sup> C. Daniel Batson, *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer*. See also, “Empathy and Altruism.” There has been much debate in psychological and philosophical circles about what constitutes a truly altruistic action, i.e. one meant to help another rather than oneself, or even if there is such a thing as true altruism. I will bracket this conversation for now, although Chapter 5 will discuss how sentimental realism appealed to egoistic motivations (preventing civil strife, for example) in order to encourage prosocial—or other-helping—behavior.

processes, and over 280% more time than those who did not engage in any imaginative perspective taking.<sup>39</sup>

In a related line of research, Batson has investigated the relationship between perspective taking and moral motivations like fairness. In an article appropriately titled “...As You Would Have Them Do Unto You: Does Imagining Yourself in the Other’s Place Stimulate Moral Action?” Batson and colleagues report that subjects are more likely to behave in ways that advantage another person when they are directed to imagine themselves in that person’s position and to imagine that other person’s feelings. Interestingly, these results were limited to subjects in a position of relative advantage to the other person, a finding which suggests that empathy might have particular relevance for the asymmetrical dynamics of sentimental realism. While subjects whose circumstances were “equal” to the other participants were more likely to behave in their own interest, even after imagining themselves in the place of the other, subjects who were better off were more likely to behave “as the Golden Rule prescribes” (1200). In these cases, the adoption of another’s perspective “sensitize[d] participants to the other’s plight” (1200) and made them more likely to pursue actions that benefited the other, even at an expense to one’s self.

Although these studies are primarily concerned with the ethical effects of imagining other people, their research methodology suggests the pivotal significance of *reading* in soliciting empathy and ethical behaviors. While non-experimental reading, i.e. reading outside of the psychological laboratory, does not come with comparable processing instructions, sentimentalized narratives like the ones I examine carry *de facto* directions to imagine and feel with particular characters in distress. In the following section, I will

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<sup>39</sup> Patricia Oswald, “The Effects of Cognitive and Affective Perspective Taking on Empathic Concern and Altruistic Helping.”

theorize the role of empathy in our relationships with characters so that I can then discuss the particular ethical implications of narrative empathy.

### **The Aesthetics of Empathy**

Since the term empathy was coined in the early twentieth century, it has been used to describe not only how a person relates to another person, but also how a person relates to art. In fact, empathy is a concept born of the union between psychology and aesthetics; early accounts of *empathy* in German and empathy in English were psychological accounts of how a person relates to an art object.<sup>40</sup> Only later was the definition expanded to describe interactions between people; empathy is now most commonly understood as the act of imagining oneself in another's place and thus "feeling with" another person. In more recent years, scholars have integrated the aesthetic and interpersonal notions of empathy in order to describe our relationships with the "people" within art, that is, with characters. As philosopher James Harold puts it, empathy is "a phenomenon common to our experiences both in friendship and in fiction" ("Empathy and Fictions" 342). The relationship between our "reading" of other minds and our reading of literature is powerfully suggested by empathic disorders like autism, which is characterized not only by cognitive deficits in mental ascription but also a lack of interest in fiction and even an inability to process narratives. Conversely, studies have shown that the frequency of role playing in children, which is closely associated with narrative comprehension in adults, correlates with stronger

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<sup>40</sup> Philosopher Robert Vischer's *Über das optische Formgefühl: Ein Beitrag zur Aesthetik* (1873) was the first significant treatment of *empathy*, which was the critical term in his psychological theory of art. In *Ästhetik* (1903-1906), psychologist Theodor Lipps drew further connections between how a person relates to an art object and to other people. Edward Titchener, who translated *empathy* into English in 1909, was a psychologist who applied the concept of empathy to a theory of aesthetics, and Vernon Lee, who defined *empathy* and later empathy as a key feature of aesthetic perception was an author, art critic, and amateur psychologist.

performance on theory of mind tasks (Harris 29-55). These findings suggest a complex causal connection between interpersonal and narrative empathy: Individuals who are better at perspective taking might be more drawn to narratives, which allow them to “try on” multiple perspectives (see Lisa Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction* for a version of this argument), or narratives might actually hone empathic abilities, an argument I will forward towards the end of this section. Regardless of causation, these correlations suggest the powerful similarities between our relationships with actual and fictional minds.

Recent work in philosophical aesthetics supports the idea that empathy plays a central role in our relationships with characters.<sup>41</sup> The question for philosophers has been “how best to characterize the relationship between readers of fictional narratives and the characters in those narratives” (Coplan 141). Although few would claim that empathy is the exclusive model of engagement, many philosophers have concluded that it plays an important, if not primary, role in our interactions with characters. Kendall Walton puts it this way: characters are “fictional sentient beings,” and “we often respond to them, empathize with or simulate them, in much the way we do actual people” (“Projectivism” 428).<sup>42</sup> We might suppose that characters’ lack of consciousness is an impediment to empathy, but we must make similar imaginative leaps in granting any other person a conscious life. In fact, our relationships with characters are remarkably similar to our relationships with other people, and although we know that characters are not conscious subjects, we empathize with them in much the same way we empathize with other people.

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<sup>41</sup> The work of Gregory Currie is especially important to this field. See also, Amy Coplan, “Empathetic Engagement with Narrative Fictions;” Susan Feagin, *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation*; James Harold, “Empathy with Fictions” and “Flexing the Imagination;” Kendall Walton, “Projectivism, Empathy, and Musical Tension” and “In Other Shoes: Empathy, Simulation and the Arts.”

<sup>42</sup> Walton’s theory of artistic empathy goes beyond our relationships with characters to address our relationships with works of art themselves, including non-representational art like music.

In “Flexing the Imagination,” James Harold describes the process of “identifying with a character, that is, imagining what it would be like to be that character, and empathizing with a character” (248). This “fictive imagining” can take several forms: “One might imagine what it would be like to have some of the character’s qualities and experiences, or what it would be like to be in the kinds of circumstances that character faces, or both” (248). Harold describes his own experience of empathizing with individual or multiple characters in “Empathy with Fictions”: “It is difficult for me to read *Pride and Prejudice* without empathizing either with Elizabeth Bennet, or sometimes with her father, Mr. Bennet” (340).

The most notable opponent to this view is Noël Carroll, who uses the affective matching component of empathy to reject the idea that our psychological states correlate with those of fictional characters.<sup>43</sup> We can have non-emotional reactions to a character (judgment of her behavior, for instance), and we can have, as Carroll argues, emotional reactions that involve neither imagining ourselves in her place nor sharing her emotions. Carroll uses our interactions with an unsuspecting character in danger to illuminate this point: we can feel fear for her even though she does not feel fear for herself. Pity or love for a character operates similarly; these emotions are not shared with a character per se. But this type of response does not negate or preclude empathy. On encountering a young girl crying, for example, we might feel not only pity, an emotion felt for the girl, but sadness, an emotion shared with her. This distinction between “feeling with” and “feeling for” is the essential difference between empathy and our modern notion of sympathy. Sentimental realism, in particular, invited both types of emotional response. In fact, the confluence of empathy and sympathy was critical for the ethical response that authors urged upon their

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<sup>43</sup> See Carroll’s *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, *The Philosophy of Horror: Paradoxes of the Heart*; *Interpreting the Moving Image*, and *A Philosophy of Mass Art*.

audience. If the former made suffering imaginatively vivid, then the latter made it charitable, rather than self-serving, to ameliorate it. Moreover, simulation theory suggests that we employ perspective taking in order to identify a character's emotions, regardless if we experience subsequent affective matching.

Given that empathy is an act of the imagination, it is not surprising that it has been closely linked to authors' creative endeavors. Keats described this role of the poet in pithy fashion: "[I]f a Sparrow comes before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel."<sup>44</sup> In the nineteenth century in particular sympathetic imagination was considered an essential skill of artists, who were often evaluated according to their sympathetic capacities. Unsurprisingly, sympathy was considered especially critical for the creation of successful characters, as E.P. Whipple describes in his review of *Hard Times*: "There is no authorized, no accredited way of exhibiting character but this, that the dramatist or novelist shall enter into the soul of the personage represented, shall sympathize with him sufficiently to know him" (355).<sup>45</sup> John Stewart Mill credited the "best writers of the present day" with this capacity of imagination, the power by which "one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another." Sympathy, Mill concludes, "constitutes the poet, in so far as he does anything but melodiously utter his own actual feelings. It constitutes the dramatist entirely" ("Bentham" 354).<sup>46</sup> Critic E. S. Dallas also credited sympathy as "the ruling principle of dramatic art" (274). This quality of the artist

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<sup>44</sup> Letter to Benjamin Bailey, November 22, 1817. For more on the significant relationship between sympathy and Romanticism see Thomas McCarthy, *Relationships of Sympathy: The Writer and the Reader in British Romanticism* and James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism*.

<sup>45</sup> This relationship between author and character is reminiscent of the relationship between an actor and his role. As Earl Wasserman observes in "The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Acting," "the extent to which, and the means whereby, the actor enters into his role has been central to almost all studies of the function of the actor" (264).

<sup>46</sup> Mill's critique of Jeremy Bentham, significantly, lay in his lack of sympathy, a flaw resulting from his "deficiency of Imagination" (353).

underwrote the exalted reputation of Shakespeare in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. William Hazlitt famously praised Shakespeare's ability to enter into his characters through imagination: "The poet may be said, for the time, to identify himself with the character he wishes to represent, and to pass from one to another, like the same soul successively animating different bodies. By an art like that of the ventriloquist, he throws his imagination out of himself, and makes every word appear to proceed from the mouth of the person in whose name it is given" (50).<sup>47</sup> Goethe noted a similar ability in the German animal painter Johann Heinrich Roos, although that particular artist's ability was limited, he believed, to "gentle, grass eating animals": "[I]t is most wonderful how Roos has been able to think and feel himself into the very soul of these creatures, so as to make the internal character peer with such force through the outward covering (*Conversations with Goethe* 68). When Eckermann asks if Roos' "great gift of assuming a mental state foreign to himself" (68) carried over to humans, or even beasts of prey, Goethe replied that they lay outside of his "sympathy."<sup>48</sup>

Whereas the Romantics and Victorians hailed the superior imaginative capabilities of artists, I am interested in the imaginative labor entailed in *reading*. Ted Cohen describes both the writing and the reading of character as "a miracle of imagination": "First is the miracle of the artist imagining himself to be an aged king, a forlorn and betrayed middle-aged woman, a wanton seducer. And then there is the presentation of this imagining—of the old King Lear, of the Countess Almaviva, of the insatiable Don Giovanni, of the worldly but vulnerable Marlow—so that an audience can use this presentation as the instrument of its

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<sup>47</sup> Originally given as part of a lecture series on the English Poets at the Surrey Institution in 1818 (where Keats was amongst the audience). Published that year and in a corrected version in 1819.

<sup>48</sup> E. S. Dallas reported this exchange in *The Gay Science*: "And so Goethe came to say of an artist painting a tree or a sheep, that for the time he enters into and becomes that which he delineates, he becomes in some sort a tree, in some short a sheep" (274).

own imagining” (407). The author’s imagining, in other words, facilitates a reader’s imagining; these are two different, but related acts. Goethe’s comments about Roos illuminate this connection in comic terms. “‘I always feel uneasy,’ said Goethe, ‘when I look at these beasts. Their state, so limited, dull, gaping, and dreaming, excites in me such sympathy, that I fear I shall become a sheep, and almost think the artist must have been one’” (68). Eighteenth and nineteenth-century critics also praised artists for their ability to prompt imaginings on the part of readers, or inspire “sympathy” within their audience. Elizabeth Montagu presaged Hazlitt’s position when she praised Shakespeare’s ability to “throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his sentiments.” She went on, however, to argue that he was uniquely capable, in doing so, of “command[ing] our sympathy” (Bate 157, my emphasis). Alexander Gerard’s *Essay on Taste*, published in the same year as Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, outlines this role for art, describing “an instinctive ‘sensitivity of heart,’ by means of which, in poetry and drama, ‘we become interested for some of the persons represented, and sympathize with every change in their condition’” (Bate 153). In his “Defence of Poetry,” Shelley also describes imagination as something the reader does, suggesting that poetry “act[s] upon” a reader’s imagination. Significantly, Shelley explicitly connects literary imagining with morality: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause” (17). Unlike sentimental realism, Shelley denied that poetry should have any direct “moral aim” (18), but he suggests that all poetry enriches morality because it “enlargens” and “strengthens” imagination, the moral organ of man, “in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb” (17).

Shelley's argument that poetry enhances empathic imagination is corroborated by a new body of psychological research, although this field is in its infancy. According to Lilian van der Bolt's study, "The connection of reading books and the development of sympathy and empathy," children who read more frequently report higher rates of empathic and sympathetic involvement, suggesting that the reading of books "sharpens" emotional intelligence in ways similar to interpersonal relationships. Van der Bolt even suggests that reading has certain advantages over "interactions in our social milieu"; readers can enter into a "limitless" number of emotional scenarios with fictional characters and examine emotional experiences they might not otherwise have (247). A recent study led by psychologist Raymond Mar demonstrated similar results for adult readers of fiction. Individuals who read more fiction, Mar found, have higher rates of empathy and perform better on tests of social understanding and awareness; the opposite correlation was true for non-fiction.<sup>49</sup> Although the causal relationship of Mar's study is not clear (reading fiction could result in more empathic people, or more empathic people could be drawn to fiction), the researchers hypothesize that reading fiction can improve empathic and social abilities in two ways. Fiction exposes readers to concrete social knowledge embedded within stories (affording the kind of "familiarity" with characters that I will discuss below), and it allows readers to hone social-inference and monitoring skills that can then be applied to real-world interactions ("Bookworms" 698). The latter feature is particularly relevant to studies on empathy. Because of the cognitive impediment to knowing other minds—the lack of direct access to the thoughts and beliefs of others—we must "read" (my term) another person's behavior and speech in order to interpret his "invisible internal states" (696). This ability to "infer and

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<sup>49</sup> Since self-reporting of reading is notoriously unreliable (people tend to overreport reading habits), Mar and his colleagues designed a test to more accurately measure rates of reading. They embedded the names of fiction and non-fiction authors in a long list of names and asked test subjects to identify authors they knew to be fiction or non-fiction authors.

monitor the mental-states of numerous autonomous agents” (696), Mar suggests, is one we employ when we read about characters; it “underlie[s] our capacity to understand drama and narrative” (696). Reading narratives, in other words, can help train powers of inference by allowing us to simulate the skills that we use in “our real social environment” (695).<sup>50</sup>

### **Empathy Across Difference**

If literature exercises the cognitive “muscle” needed for imagining other minds, then the subject of narratives is peripheral to an ethical account of narrative empathy. On this model, literature and the arts are inherently ethical insofar as they cultivate empathic acumen—which can then be deployed in non-reading contexts. As James Harold puts it, “Engaging with literature can increase one’s powers of empathy” (“Flexing” 247).<sup>51</sup> But narratives have a more immediate ethical impact when they prompt perspective taking that would otherwise not occur. In the social and literary context of Victorian England, reading took on enormous weight, becoming an important, if not the primary, source of information about poverty and the poor. In contexts like these, narratives can provide a way into peoples’ minds that is not readily available through other means. I will argue in the following chapter that formal techniques like foregrounding, coupled with informational cues about characters’ beliefs and experiences, guide readers as they engage in cognitive and affective perspective taking. But at an even more fundamental level, the fact that reading

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<sup>50</sup> In a related vein of research, a study on children engaged in drama lessons showed marked improvement in adaptive social behavior, a result that suggests that education in narrative art improves prosocial conduct. Although E. Glenn Schellenberg set out to prove the positive correlation between music lessons and an increased I.Q., he unexpectedly demonstrated these socially beneficial results of drama.

<sup>51</sup> This is a correlation recognized by the new field of “narrative medicine,” which uses literature to train doctors and medical students in empathic identification. For a discussion of this field, see Melanie Thurnstrom, “The Writing Cure.” See in particular the work of Rita Charon, “Medical interpretation: Implication of literary theory of narrative for clinical work,” “The narrative road to empathy,” and “Narrative contributions to medical ethics: Recognition, formulation, interpretation, and validation in the practice of the ethicist.”

can overcome the “here and now” empathic bias is a function of what Raymond Mar calls the “parasocial” dimension of narratives. Narratives allow us to extend our circle of acquaintance from the actual minds we encounter in our daily lives to the fictional minds we encounter in texts. Sentimental realism gave middle- and upper-class Victorians the opportunity to encounter poverty and meet “the poor,” not in the rookeries of London or the Manchester slums, but within the pages of fiction and poetry.

This parasocial function of literature was applauded in the nineteenth century. This is the function of art famously praised by George Eliot in “Natural History of German Life”: “Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot” (263-4).<sup>52</sup> Victorian critic George Brimley proclaimed that the “high aims of fiction” are “to conduct us through a wider range of experience than the actual life of each generally permits—to make us live in the lives of other types of characters than our own, or than those of our daily acquaintance—to enable us to pass by sympathy into other minds and other circumstances” (294-5). E. S. Dallas echoes Eliot’s and Brimley’s emphasis on relationships that otherwise wouldn’t be formed and also suggests that literature transports readers to places they otherwise wouldn’t go. The role of fiction, he argues, is “To transport us into new villages which we have never known, to lodge us in strange houses which we would never have dreamt of, to make us at home among new circles of our fellow-creatures, to teach us to sympathize with all their little pursuits” (Vol. II, 286-287). He can think of no better employment, Dallas says, than that of the man who “widens through fiction the range of our sympathies” (287).

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<sup>52</sup> While Eliot’s fiction is outside the scope of this project, she was one of the most eloquent defenders of the role of reading in cultivating sympathetic imagination. For more on Eliot’s conceptions of sympathy see Hina Nazar, “Philosophy in the Bedroom: *Middlemarch* and the Scandal of Sympathy” and Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth’s “George Eliot’s Conception of Sympathy.”

Dallas's emphasis on narrative space can help us conceptualize representations *as* space in which readers themselves enter and move. The space in which readers encounter characters is a "virtual" one; there is no physical contact and no bodily entry into a tangible home. Indeed, the only tangible home is the reader's herself, and poor people do not enter it, a book does. But the representation of material spaces grounds the virtual space in which reader encounters character in a recognizable, physical one, so that Victorian readers had the *sensation* of entering the homes and neighborhoods of their working-class contemporaries. Poor and working-class characters, in turn, "enter" the homes of readers, tucked discreetly between the covers of novels and poetry.<sup>53</sup> This understanding of narrative as a virtual social space reformulates Mary Louise Pratt's notion of contact zones, "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (35). Pratt's work is suggestive in that she brings together two seemingly diverse social spaces—the national space of colonized Peru and the pedagogical space of the diverse classroom. But nation and classroom are similar in that they are both the site of *physical* encounters between people from different cultural groups. Narratives create a different order of contact zone, one that exists not in a physical or geographical space but in an imaginative one. While in physical contact zones encounters between cultural groups occur in person, in "imaginary" contact zones they occur in the imaginative sphere of representation and reading. People don't encounter people, in other words, they encounter representations of people. Within this virtual space, Victorian readers

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<sup>53</sup> It is a noticeable feature of some of the texts I will examine that readers do not enter the *working* spaces of the working class—the factory, the mill, or even the field. This has been a frequent complaint about "industrial" fiction in particular. Many mid-century texts *do* represent workspaces—the tailoring workshop, sweated dens, and garrets in Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet*, for instance, or the mines and factories in Caroline Norton's *A Voice from the Factories*. But the role of representing the *homes* of the poor cannot be underestimated. In a period when middle-class domesticity was elevated and apotheosized, imaginative access to working-class homes gave readers a sense of how the homes of the poor were similar to, and different from, their own domestic interiors.

were able to see an intimate side of working-class life from which they would otherwise be excluded. Dean Stanley commended this feature of “modern parables” in his sermon, praising “the assistance which can be given by lively imagination, by keen sympathy, by the dramatic power of making things which are not seen be as even though they were seen.” It is through fiction, he argued, that “the rich man, faring sumptuously every day, [is] made to see and feel the presence of the Lazarus at his gate” (330).

This parasocial and spatial understanding of narrative allows us to rethink the role of literature and the nature of class relationships in the nineteenth century. Not only was reading highly accessible, much more so than personal relationships across class, but it also allowed readers to circumvent the power dynamics and inevitable hierarchies that characterized most cross-class relationships. Of course, Victorians also encountered *actual* people from other classes, whether they lived in tight-knit rural communities or the modern urban and industrial landscape. Many, though not all, public spaces were shared by rich, poor, and in-between, a phenomenon captured by one of the most well-known paintings of contemporary Victorian life, William Maw Egley’s *Omnibus Life in London*.<sup>54</sup> In Egley’s painting at least fourteen figures crowd into a horse-drawn carriage—and the 18 by 16 inch canvas. Although physical spaces like the omnibus host “in-person” encounters, they are inherently fleeting and superficial. Significantly, the wealthy mother and children in the right foreground of Egley’s painting do not look at the servant woman on the left, although she sits only a few feet across from them. Not only did the ephemeral nature of these contacts inhibit any meaningful conversation, but a largely unspoken—and rigidly enforced—protocol narrowly defined the permissible range of interaction. As if to emphasize the effects of cultural and social disparity, the old woman and young girl in the foreground are a

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<sup>54</sup> *Omnibus Life in London* was also reproduced on the front cover of the *Illustrated London News* in 1859. The original is in the permanent collection at the Tate Gallery.

study in contrast: rich and poor, young and old, urban and rural, fashionable and rustic. Encounters like the ones Egley depicts were constrained by visible, audible (and even olfactory) signs of difference like clothing and dialect that were easily “read” by contemporary Victorians.

Even in less ephemeral encounters, relationships between the classes were circumscribed by clearly defined class difference. Tellingly, the “highly asymmetrical relations of power” (35) that characterize Pratt’s notion of contact zones were typical to most relationships between rich and poor: master (or foreman) and worker, doctor and patient, mistress and servant, philanthropist and beneficiary, minister and parishioner, social investigator or journalist and subject of investigation, “lady visitor” and those she visited. Relationships between reader and character do not supplant or negate the power dynamics that occur in person, but they do have the potential to engender much different responses than contacts “on the ground” by facilitating an imaginative identification with poor characters rather than an oppositional stance towards them. In fact, relationships with characters allow readers to experiment with multiple and varied imaginings that they would not otherwise pursue. As psychologist Jeffrey Strange puts it, stories “thwart social as well as psychological defense mechanisms. In the guise of entertainment, they allow readers and viewers to openly consider viewpoints and themes that are proscribed in the social and public spheres they frequent” (280).

This is a promising account of how narrative empathy can help readers imagine subjective experiences different from their own, but does it really happen? Modern scholarship on interpersonal empathy has been almost entirely predicated on models of similarity—at the most basic level, similarity in cognitive make-up, more complexly, similarity in identity and cultural background. As the philosopher James Harold puts it, “it is

much *easier* to imagine being someone who shares your background and experiences than to imagine being someone who does not” (“Flexing” 249). Roy Sorenson puts it even more bluntly. “Stepping into the other guy’s shoes works best when you resemble him...The greater the isomorphism, the more dependable and precise the results” (75, 76). Thomas Nagel is also pessimistic in his assessment of adopting another point of view: “The more different from oneself the other experiencer is,” he argues, “the less one can expect from this enterprise” (222).<sup>55</sup> These claims have a long history. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume identified a similar role for “resemblance” in his discussion of sympathy.

“Resemblance must very much contribute to make us enter into the sentiments of others, and embrace them with facility and pleasure. Accordingly we find, that where, beside the general resemblance of our natures, there is any peculiar similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language, it facilitates the sympathy” (318).

Empirical research supports the hypothesis that people are more likely to empathize with those who are similar to themselves. In a foundational study on the topic, “Empathy and Altruism,” psychologist Dennis Krebs measured the psychophysiological responses of observers to a roulette game. Half of the observers were led to believe they were similar in personality and values to the performer playing the game while half of the observers were led to believe they were dissimilar. Krebs’ study demonstrated that subjects who believed themselves to be similar reacted more strongly to the performer’s pleasure and pain and reported identifying or empathizing more strongly with the performer. In a wide array of psychological studies, similar results have been reported.<sup>56</sup> This empathic bias means that

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<sup>55</sup> As one can surmise from Nagel’s example of bats, his primary interest is biological difference rather than the sociological, but his work is also applicable to the differences among humans.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Mark Barnett, “Empathy and Related Responses in Children,” Martin Hoffman, “Empathy: Justice and Moral Judgment,” Stefan Sturmer et al, “Prosocial Emotions and Helping: The Moderating Role of Group Membership.” Barnett’s summary of the research reveals a

markers of difference—race, gender, class, culture, age, language, time—have been taken to be “significant barrier[s] to the imagination” (Harold “Flexing” 249) and significant impediments to intersubjective relationships. The assumption that similarity leads to more willing and more successful empathy has gone largely unquestioned. In what follows, however, I will examine two scenes of Victorian reading that suggest that *narrative* empathy is not limited to nor constrained by relationships of similarity.

In an 1849 review of “New Novels,” the critic and Shakespearean scholar William George Clark gives a striking account of his experience of reading *Jane Eyre*, one he assumes he shares with his own reading public. “We took up [the novel] one winter’s evening,” he recalls, “somewhat piqued at the extravagant commendation we had heard, and sternly resolved to be as critical as Croker. But as we read on we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr. Rochester about four in the morning” (692).<sup>57</sup> Clark’s “marriage” to Rochester tests the limitations of imaginative identification—he cannot, after all, *be* Jane, and his own reality (it is four o’clock in the morning) is not entirely effaced in the act of reading. But his account captures the sensation of empathy: by “identifying ourselves with Jane,” we feel ourselves in her place, so completely, in Clark’s case, that the actions of the novel are transposed from character to reader; *she* doesn’t marry Rochester, *we* do.

Although himself a literary critic and scholar, Clark approaches the novel less from a place of critical distance than emotional proximity. He opens the book resolved to be as “critical as Croker,” but as he “reads on” he loses himself in the narrative, and most

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significant qualification. “Children have been found to respond more empathically to those who are *perceived* as similar to the self than to those who are *perceived* as dissimilar (154, my emphasis). This perception of similarity, I will argue later in this chapter, can be altered through narrative empathy.<sup>57</sup> This review is misattributed to George Henry Lewes in Kathleen Tillotson’s *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, 20. Lewes did write a review on “Recent Novels” in *Fraser’s* in December of 1847, two years earlier than Clark’s.

particularly its young protagonist. Later in the review Clark elaborates on his experience: “In *Jane Eyre* the reader accompanied the heroine throughout, saw with her eyes, heard with her ears, in short, lived over again one life.” The language Clark employs—seeing with her eyes, hearing with her ears—is reminiscent of a common idiom for empathy—walking in another’s shoes. Each of these metaphors captures the intimacy inherent to empathy. We travel with the protagonist, so immersed in her experience that we encounter her fictional world through her own embodied physicality.<sup>58</sup> Needless to say this is a figurative description; our immersion is imagined, or fictional, not physical. But the feeling of intimacy with a character can be so intense that we feel not only like we are near her, but somehow with her or within her. As Clark puts it, we “live over again one life.”

Clark’s account captures not only the emotional dimension of reading—we identify with Jane “in all her troubles”—but also its perspective taking component. He describes events not from his own point of view in the “audience,” but from the point of view of the character with whom he has imaginatively identified. Both of these qualities are echoed in a Victorian spectator’s account of a staged version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The performance “played absolute hell with our emotions,” he recalls. “We felt every stroke of the lash of the whip” (Rose 383). Undoubtedly, the spectator experiences pity and compassion; he feels *for* the slaves who are beaten. But his experience is an even more profound one than sympathy would suggest. As the slaves are beaten, he feels the whip land on himself. “*We* felt every stroke of the lash of the whip.” Just as Clark feels with Jane, this spectator feels *with* the slaves on the stage. Although the spectator describes sharing a physical experience—the lashing of the whip—it is translated into an emotional sensation: “It cut us to the quick, heart and soul.” This is the nature of empathy—we imagine ourselves in the place of

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<sup>58</sup> I will present empirical research to this effect in the following chapter.

another, but the “feeling” of empathy is just that, a feeling. Our hearts and souls are stroked by the whip but our backs remain unscathed.

Significantly, both of these accounts indicate the kind of metaphorical identification Cohen and Dallas describe. Each employs a first person pronoun to describe the events that occur in the novel or on the stage—“*we*...married Mr. Rochester” and “*we* felt every stroke of the lash.” The pronominal exchange inherent to these descriptions captures the metaphorical dimension of empathy: “I am you” or “I am he.” Clark and the spectator describe more radical forms of empathy, in which one feels not only *like* another (simile) but also like he *is* another (metaphor). The fact that the pronouns they employ are plural is, to some degree, coincidental. Their experiences happen to be in communal settings (Clark speaks for himself and the audience of his review, and the spectator to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was surrounded by an audience), but a reader could just as easily empathize with a character on her own. Their use of “we” is evocative, however, not only for what it says about the shared experience of reading, but also because it suggests the relationship that empathy forms between the subject and object of empathy. When “I” imagine myself as “you,” then there is a relationship formed between us, a sensation of “we.” This is another way to conceptualize the “feeling with” inherent to empathy.

These two scenes of reading suggest that empathy can be motivated for a wide range of characters, regardless of their proximity or similarity to readers. Relationships between reader and characters, then, can overcome the empathic bias that scholars have observed in most human relationships. One explanation for this result, I would like to suggest, is that bias for *similarity* is at its heart bias for *familiarity*.<sup>59</sup> In order to adopt another point of view, we must know something about it; we must know about the beliefs, emotions, history, and

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<sup>59</sup> Martin Hoffman also describes our bias for familiarity in “Empathy: Justice and Moral Judgment.”

experience that inform it. Accordingly, we empathize more readily with people whom we know well. Similarity acts as a kind of shorthand—we assume we know someone because we are like them, and thus have an insight into their beliefs, experiences, and so on. But it is really familiarity that affords the kind of intimate knowledge necessary for empathy. Familiarity is often impeded, however, by the very kinds of cultural difference that have been taken to hamper empathy. The class segregation in the nineteenth century, for example, curtailed the kind of close personal contact from which one can glean the social and emotional cues necessary for perspective taking. In contexts like these, literature can provide the kind of intimate detail about characters that can in turn facilitate empathic imagination. As I will describe in the following chapters, the narrative strategies of sentimental realism realign readers' identification, regardless of characters' similarity to readers. In accounting for this dynamic, the study of literature can incorporate difference into the models of similarity that have dominated empathy studies.

This feature of reading suggests that narratives might be particularly suited to facilitate empathy across cultural difference. Notably, in the same essay in which Eliot promotes the use of fiction to extend our “contact with our fellow-men,” she also credits literature and the arts with their unique ability to overcome class division:

When Scott takes us into Luckie Mucklebackit's cottage, or tells the story of 'The Two Drovers,'—when Wordsworth sings to us the reverie of 'Poor Susan,'—when Kingsley shows us Alton Locke gazing yearningly over the gate which leads from the highway into the first wood he ever saw,—when Hornung paints a group of chimney-sweepers,—more is done towards linking the higher classes with the lower, towards obliterating the vulgarity of exclusiveness, than by hundreds of sermons and philosophical dissertations.  
(263)

Eliot does not invoke sermons and philosophy in order to capitalize on their authority or ascribe their efficacy to fiction; literature, she proclaims, far surpasses these other forms of rhetoric. Several years later she wrote to the philosopher and reformer Charles Bray about

her hopes for her own fiction. “The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures” (*George Eliot’s Life* 86, letter from July 5, 1859). With this impromptu manifesto Eliot describes the unique capacity of literature to foster empathy in the face of distance and difference. As art makes familiar individuals who are beyond our “personal lot,” we are able to “*imagine* and *feel*” experiences markedly different from our own.

Although my project is historically grounded in mid-nineteenth century England, it has implications for diverse contexts in which the “Other” is imagined and produced through textual representation. Essential to the model of reading that I have proposed is *difference* between author and character and/or reader and character. In this dynamic, narrative empathy entails epistemological and affective access not only to another person, but also to another social or cultural group. Empathy across difference, in other words, is not only intersubjective but also intercultural. I have begun to suggest the positive social role that this sort of imagining can play. Critics of cross-cultural imagining, however, are skeptical that empathy across difference is possible and convinced that it is in some way immoral. Adherents to “standpoint epistemology” assume that one’s identity limits what one can possibly know, and implicitly, what one should attempt to know. Accordingly, “imagining across difference” (Harold “Flexing” 249), as one philosopher describes it, has been treated with epistemological and political suspicion over the last two decades. This stigma is evident in critical responses to literature that tries to account for subjective experiences not shared by the author: Native American author Sherman Alexie’s lambasting of non-Native Americans writing about Native life; the controversies surrounding William Styron’s representation of Nat Turner in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*; and the scandals

regarding the true authorship of ostensibly “authentic” fiction and life narratives such as *My Own Sweet Time*, *Fragments*, and *The Education of Little Tree: a True Story*.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, these suspicions are most aroused in contexts where identity politics come into play. Critiques based on “cultural appropriation” or “appropriation of voice” suggest that something has been taken from the cultural or demographic group that is represented. Kathleen Lundeen characterizes these reservations in “Who Has the Right to Feel: The Ethics of Literary Empathy”: “While a show of empathy may enhance a person’s profile in real-life encounters, it has of late raised suspicion when directed towards fictional subjects. Writers or readers who appear to empathize with another’s life experiences are often accused of arrogating a cultural authority to which they have no natural claim” (261).<sup>61</sup> To some extent these epistemological suspicions constitute a straw man argument. After all, if it were only legitimate for one to write, and read, a narrative in perfect accordance with one’s own identity, then the creative aspect of writing would all but disappear. As Lundeen puts it, “By this logic, autobiography would emerge as the sole legitimate creative genre and it would be suitable only for a readership of one: its author” (261). And yet critics of cross-cultural

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<sup>60</sup> *My Own Sweet Time* was published under the Aboriginal pseudonym “Wanda Koolmatrie,” but it was later revealed that it was written by Leon Carmen, a white man. *Fragments* was published under the name Benjamin Wilkomirski and claimed to be the memoir of a Holocaust survivor, but it was later revealed that it was written by Bruno Doessekker who is not Jewish and was never in a concentration camp. *The Education of Little Tree: a True Story* was published under the name Forrest Carter, a name assumed by Asa Carter who was not only not Cherokee but was also a virulent segregationist and racist propagandist. James Harold discusses the controversy surrounding Styron’s novel in “Flexing the Imagination.” See also John Henrik Clarke, ed., *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*.

<sup>61</sup> Empathic understanding, or *verstehen*, has also lost credence as a methodology in the social sciences, particularly in cases of cross-cultural ethnographic research in which attempts to know the “Other” have been denigrated as arrogant at best and another form of cultural imperialism at worst. Interestingly, Rob Shields invokes the “gulf” of experience as he traces this critical shift. “New political barriers to understanding appear to be being erected on the basis of a gulf of experience. For example, we are told it is not ‘politically correct’ for novelists to assume the position of these racial or gender Others, ventriloquizing the oppressed with the words written by a more successful author” (277). For an account of this shift see Rob Shields, “Meeting or mis-meeting? The dialogical challenge to *Verstehen*.”

imagining leave little room for the kind of imaginative capacities praised by critics and authors in the nineteenth century.

Understanding empathy as a metaphorical relationship can help defend against critics of empathy across difference, who suggest that it claims absolute identity (in the logical sense) with another person (A=B). This “I am you” formulation of empathy suggests that the “I” somehow co-opts or appropriates another person’s subjective (and “authentic”) experience. But a metaphor does not assert literal identity; rather, it uses the *conceit* of identity to illuminate the similarity (ground)—and differences (tension)—between tenor and vehicle or, in Lakoff’s terms, target and source. To use a more traditional example, metaphor helps us understand how the world is *like* a stage (populated by “players,” having their “exits and entrances”) but also how they are *not alike*. As E. S. Dallas puts it, “In all comparison there is implied difference as well as resemblance, and the perception of the one brings with it that of the other” (268). A similar tension operates within metaphors of personal identification. We can simultaneously empathize and sympathize with an individual in distress; the first suggests an affective matching, but the second requires a differentiation between self and other.<sup>62</sup>

Viewing empathy as a metaphor can also help us understand the provisional and incomplete nature of “identification.” Although a shorthand for empathy might be the indicative, “I am he,” the relationship is more accurately described with the past subjunctive, “if I *were* he.” While the indicative is a *realis* verb form, indicating something that is actually

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<sup>62</sup> Amy Coplan makes a similar point in “Empathetic Engagement with Narrative Fiction”: “When a reader empathizes with a character she simulates that character’s experience but at the same time maintains her own separate identity. This self-other differentiation allows the reader to simultaneously simulate the character’s psychological states and experience her own separate psychological states” (148). Coplan uses the example of a character who is afraid; we can empathize with the character, and feel fear as a result of that empathy, but we can also feel pity for the character.

the case, the subjunctive is an *irrealis* form, indicating something that is not the case. Thus, empathy entails a subjunctive (or counterfactual) conditional, an if-then statement that indicates what *would* be the case if its antecedent were true. The use of the conjunction “if” with the past subjunctive signals that the question is a hypothesis rather than a reality; the prosthesis (condition) is contrary-to-fact. When we empathize with someone, then, we attempt to answer the interrogative, “How *would* I feel if I *were* he?” But although we imagine ourselves sharing another person’s perspective we neither abdicate our own nor do we arrogate his. To return to Shakespeare’s metaphor, when we imagine the world as a stage neither the world nor the stage loses anything. And just as a figurative metaphor can enhance our understanding of both world and stage, so too can a metaphor of identification offer a heightened understanding of another person and ourselves. In this light, to represent (and to read representations of) people unlike yourself is not ethically suspect but productive.

“Standpoint epistemology” has obvious consequences for middle-class artists’ attempts to portray the plight of the underclass, and the criticism of social problem fiction has reflected the broader political and critical climate of suspicion. Critics have ranged from outwardly hostile to condescending, the former adhering to some version of the social control thesis, the latter viewing the authors as well meaning but misguided. This project of representation cannot be successful, the argument goes, because neither the artists nor the readers have experienced poverty for themselves. As Gertrude Himmelfarb characterizes the critique, it derives “from the supposed gap of sensibility, sympathy, and knowledge between the middle class novelists and the lower classes they purported to describe, so that the novelists would inevitably see their characters through the distorting lens of their own values” (404). This criticism is especially pronounced because the novelists themselves

invoked language of sociological investigation and cultural exchange. This language, Kate Flint has argued, “serves as a reminder of the social distance between investigator and subject. The sense of exploration, of turning up unknown marvels, adds a taint of voyeurism to the task of observation and recording” (*Victorian Novelist* 8). The sense of spectacle and spectatorship implicit to Flint’s critique also emerges in Arnold Kettle’s influential discussion of the novels. While he concludes, for example, that it would be unfair to compare Disraeli’s scenes of poverty with the “mode of exhibition” more appropriate to a zoo, it is his denial that constitutes the comparison (179). Where the novelists claimed to “bridge the gulf” between rich and poor, critics have either dismissed their attempts or accused them of reaffirming and reifying that gulf in their attempts to overcome it. Herbert Sussman, for instance, describes the project this way: “As a middle-class scout, the novelist returns with word of this unknown territory, but in doing so maintains and even strengthens the bourgeois perception of the workers as Other, reinforces as inevitable the distance and the difference between the two classes, the two nations” (249). While Joseph Childers acknowledges that the novels could function as a “bridge across that divide,” he concludes that they ultimately served “as a sort of *cordon sanitaire* insulating the middle classes, defining and broadening the gap between the two nations” (79).

I would suggest another interpretation. Sentimental realism did not deny that there were fundamental differences between rich and poor in England; instead, it took as its own topic the process of imagining what those differences were and how they affect individual perspectives. Empathy is not merely a goal for its readers, in other words, but central to the narrative structure of many of the novels. In multiple narratives you have a central middle-class character who learns what it is like to be poor—Charles Egremont in *Sybil*, Margaret Hale in *North and South*, Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times*. Elaine Scarry suggests that this kind of

self-reflexive examination is especially valuable: Literature “is most helpful not insofar as it *takes away* the problem of the other...but when it instead *takes as* its own subject the problem of imagining others” (“Difficulty” 287). In these cases, literature “makes visible the perceptual disability that gives rise to otherness” (290). Although the authors I examine were optimistic about the role of literature, many were also astute critical readers of their own imaginative project. Even as they claimed imaginative access to the lives of their poor characters—and asked readers to do the same—they simultaneously questioned the possibilities and limitations of empathy across class. Throughout the dissertation I will examine how authors diagnosed the perceptual difficulties they tried to overcome. In the following chapter, for example, I look first at the ways authors describe the difficulty of overcoming one’s own inherently classed point of view, and only then at how they try to accomplish this narrative goal. Arguably, the complex dynamics of difference involved in sentimental realism (middle-class authors representing the poor for middle-class readers) were particularly suited to guide readers in their own imaginative work. Authors could use their similarities with readers (their shared background, knowledge, values, etc.) to direct the spatiotemporal and psychological simulation necessary for empathy. Writing across difference, on this model, can help readers perform their own higher-order cognitive experiments in which they learn to imagine across distance and difference.

Unfortunately, modern reading habits often reflect the assumption that one should write, and read, about people “like” oneself. Scarry associates this trend with the “latent nationalism or tribalism of great literature” (“Difficulty” 287). Reading demographics in the United States, for example, are often divided on gendered and racial lines. Scarry identifies this tendency as one of the major limitations on literature’s ethical potential. The “tribalism” of literature, she argues, can make it a “seductive vehicle for an exercise in self-reflection and

self-identification, rather than reflection on and identification with people different from oneself” (287). Sentimental realism is remarkable for the extent to which it took both of these tasks seriously. On the one hand, it asked readers to think about, imagine, and identify with people who were otherwise defined by their difference; on the other hand, it asked readers to reflect on their own lives and ethical responsibilities in light of their imaginings of “others.”

This readerly work does not only lead to a greater understanding of other people, it can inspire a range of ethical responses, as the wide body of research on empathy and prosocial behavior suggests. Charles Kingsley suggests this correlation in *Yeast*: “Even with the meanest, we cannot gain a glimpse into their inward trials and struggles, without an increase of sympathy and affection” (59). Even Krebs’s roulette study supports the relationship between empathy and altruism. I have raised questions about the necessary correlation between similarity and empathy, but it is the second part of Krebs’s study that is more significant. Subjects who responded most empathically to the performer subsequently behaved most altruistically towards them, making choices to help the performer at the expense of themselves rather than help themselves at the expense of the performer. If it is not similarity but familiarity that leads to this heightened empathy, then the kind of detail that literature can provide promises significant ethical consequences.

The correlation between familiarity and empathy offers one response to Suzanne Keen’s skepticism about the ethical effects of reading. In Chapter 4, I will argue that narrative empathy can have more immediate effects on readers’ beliefs and behavior through a “synechdocal” interpretation of character. But even if a novel or poem does not inspire any immediate ethical response, it can shape a reader’s imaginative capacities in such a way that affects future ethical choices. Moreover, narratives can offer particular insight into

subjective experiences far removed from a reader's own life. In the nineteenth century as well as our own, a social "problem" like poverty is difficult to conceive of in vivid terms. We know that poverty exists, and we can even characterize it quite effectively, but often we do not or cannot perform the kind of imaginative work necessary to "feel with" individuals who are poor. Later in the century William Morris would offer his own incisive analysis of the obstacles to imagining poverty. Even when the rich "know that the poor exist," "their sufferings do not present themselves in a trenchant and dramatic way" ("How we Live" 394). In closing, I would like to suggest that the ethical impact of narrative empathy is particularly apparent when we consider texts that attempt to represent suffering, the category of experience that I have argued places the most immediate demands on ethical commitments. I have already suggested that the act of reading transports readers into scenes of poverty which they could otherwise ignore, giving them the powerful sensation of "here and now" despite their own physical distance from the scenes which are described. How might this form of narrative transportation make suffering "trenchant and dramatic" in such a way that contemporary suffering otherwise does not?

Although Smith argues that empathy with suffering is universal, we face particular epistemological obstacles when we encounter individuals in distress. Suffering is somehow ineffable; it eludes our imaginative grasp. Virginia Woolf warned that pain is virtually incommunicable; when one attempts to articulate it, "language runs dry" ("On Being Ill" 194). Elaine Scarry elaborates on this idea in *The Body in Pain*. Pain "ensures [its] unsharability," she argues, "through its resistance to language" (4). Although Woolf and Scarry both refer to physical pain, "psychic" or emotional pain is similarly difficult to communicate. In the same way that we often cannot remember our own pain once that pain is alleviated, imagining the suffering of others—when we do not presently experience that

suffering ourselves—is a sometimes impossible task. Even in the case of another’s pain, however, its unknowability and unshareability is not entirely intractable. As is evident from his description of our brother on the rack, Smith himself was extremely sensitive to other people’s pain and able to describe it with unusual vividness. Woolf, too, gives shrewd insight into her own pain even as she describes its incommunicableness.

Despite Scarry’s concerns about the “difficulty” of imagining other people, she suggests that “there is a place—namely, the place of great literature—where the ability to imagine others is very strong” (285). The imaginings prompted by reading, moreover, often have a “vivacity” and “vividness” that we can rarely attain without this kind of imaginative guide. This is an important distinction, one that Scarry articulates in terms of “imagining-when-daydreaming” versus “imagining-when-under authorial-instruction” (285).<sup>63</sup> Although many aesthetic discussions view these acts as continuous, she argues that the latter is far more successful: “The flatness and two-dimensionality of the one gives way in the other case to a vividness that approximates the vivacity of perception” (285). Daydreaming is actually too limited a category; it suggests a casual, almost lackadaisical quality to one’s imagining. But even when we more consciously and conscientiously try to imagine on our own, we often cannot attain the same kind of vividness we might with a rich narrative guide, especially when the object of our imagination is outside of our “real-world” experience. This “vividness” is critical; tellingly, the word descends from *vividus*, living, animated, lively, and *vivere*, to live. Vivid imaginings can bring suffering “to life.”

Indeed, Scarry’s suggestion that “[g]reat books, great poems, [and] great films often achieve the vivacity of the perceptual world” (285) does not go far enough. The vividness of

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<sup>63</sup> Scarry elaborates on this distinction in “On Vivacity: the Difference between Daydreaming and Imagining-Under-Authorial-Instruction.”

rich imagining like that guided by narratives can actually *exceed* perception rather than match it. The lack of transparency between one's internal states (emotions, beliefs, etc.) and one's physical appearance means that perception is often woefully inadequate. Although facial expressions and bodily deportment can give some insight into another person's subjective experience, they are neither reliable nor complete. Scarry herself has described these limitations numerous times; as she observes, we can be standing right next to a person in pain and not even know it. Scarry's overestimation of perception and the physical world leads to her underestimation of imagination. She frequently invokes Sartre's "The Imaginary Life" in order to demonstrate the shortcomings of imaginings, or what he calls their "essential poverty." But the example she takes from Sartre is a restricted case. He describes our difficulty in picturing the face of a friend when that friend is not present. But seeing a face in our "mind's eye" is trying to imagine a perceptual event. Imagination *can* be visual, but it comprises a more vast array of qualities than perception would suggest—we can imagine another person's beliefs, for instance, or his fears, things that we could rarely perceive in the physical world. When compared to perception, imaginings are multi-dimensional and complex.

Scarry's overestimation of the physical—the physical body, physical pain, physical injury—also results in an underestimation of the quality and extent of human suffering. Suffering is a much more capacious category than Scarry's work would suggest, and can be even more painful than physical pain—the anguish of a father who cannot bring home enough food for his children, for example, or the grief of a mother who would rather kill her infant than have her live in destitution (both experiences described in nineteenth-century literature). For these kinds of suffering, perception gives us little help at all. It might be beneficial to imagine or see the physical surroundings of such scenes of distress, or to

visualize emaciated bodies or ragged clothes. But to understand these experiences richly and vividly, an attention to the suffering of bodies is insufficient. Narrative empathy is most salient when we try to bring to mind sensations and experiences that are not merely physical but mental, emotional, even spiritual. Authorial instruction can help readers imaginatively “perceive” a fictional world (indeed, psychologists have identified visualization as one of the most significant features of narrative text processing), but it can also help them imagine those features of human experience and suffering that elude perception.

## Chapter Two

### **“I have drunk of the cup of which they drink”:<sup>64</sup> Poverty and Point of View**

“Being rich, and associating wholly with the rich, they have...  
little sympathy for distresses which they have never felt.”

Robert Southey, *Letters From England*

In order to “feel with” someone, we must imagine what it is like to see the world as she does; we must adopt a point of view other than our own. This kind of perspectival shift is the essence of empathy; it allows readers to “see” differently, not from their own point of view but from that of the poor. Although the wide range of metaphors associated with point of view (including the term itself) privilege its visual dimension, point of view transcends physical sight. Indeed, insofar as it is perceptual, point of view is not merely visual. One’s point of view or perspective is how one “sees” the world, not merely by way of vision, but also the ideas, beliefs, experiences, emotions, and knowledge that inform one’s perceptions. One’s “view,” in other words, is both what one perceives and what one believes. Individuals’ views, Victorians themselves realized, are invariably affected by the place and sphere from which they do their viewing. In a tragic literalization of this phenomenon, weavers and seamstresses were often blinded by their labor. Factory workers’ visages, meanwhile, looked different because they had to look differently. “Like the faces of many of his order,” Stephen Blackpool’s face “had acquired the concentrated look with

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Kingsley. *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet*, 22.

which we are familiar in the countenances of the deaf” (*Hard Times* 62). Stephen’s view, as well as our view of him, change as a result of class.

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between point of view as a psychological state—one we possess ourselves and confront in other people—and point of view as a literary technique. Whereas classic narratology typically stresses the perspective from which a story is told, I argue for a more complex definition of narrative perspective, one that incorporates not only who tells a story but also which characters within a story readers are asked to imagine and feel with. In the first section of the chapter, I review research from cognitive psychology that establishes cognitive and affective perspective taking as a fundamental feature of text processing. Using the example of Richard Redgrave’s painting “The Governess,” I argue that the technique of foregrounding realigns readers’ perspectives by establishing particular characters as the “appropriate” object of narrative empathy. Once this theoretical basis for perspective taking is established, I go on to examine more complex thematic and formal treatments of point of view in mid-century literature and art. Sentimental realism challenged its readers to try on perspectives other than their own and to attempt to understand suffering that they had never experienced. In *Alton Locke*, Charles Kingsley describes this objective humbly: “There may be those among my readers, to whom it is not uninteresting to look, for once, at even the smallest objects with a cockney workman’s eyes” (125). At the same time, authors acknowledged the perceptual and perspectival obstacles to imagining another person’s point of view. Kingsley captured the disparity between perspectives in pithy, and characteristically caustic, fashion: “You see, we workmen too have our thoughts about political economy, differing slightly from yours, truly—just as the man who is being hanged may take a somewhat different view of the

process from the man who is hanging him” (251). The “view” from the gallows, Kingsley suggests, is not the same as the one from the ground.

By locating these obstacles to perspective taking *within* the texts I examine, I reveal mid-century authors’ own anxieties about the potential of empathy across class difference. In *Aurora Leigh*, for example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning suggests that “fair and gracious” ladies cannot see, from their elevated vantage point, the suffering of the unfortunates below them. Satirizing the problem as one of literal perspective, Barrett Browning scoffs that “however willing to look down” (1171), “Ladies who / Sit high...[w]ill scarce see lower than their dainty feet” (1170-1, 2). Even as authors acknowledged obstacles to perspective taking, however, they simultaneously invited readers to overcome their own classed perspective. The text’s perspective, in other words, helps readers embark upon imaginative experiments in which they imagine poor characters’ points of view and experience an affective response. This process is especially significant when it entails audience members imagining the poor looking at the rich. In these perspectival shifts, readers not only inhabit the perspective of the poor but also see themselves from that point of view. The hangman, that is, imagines himself as the man he hangs. Focusing on Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1848 novel *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, I argue that sentimental realism invoked the difference between reader and character in order to instruct readers in the complex perspective taking of empathy across class. In the final section of the chapter, I argue that the perspectival mobility of middle-class authors, narrators, and characters who flag their own privileged class position helped to model and to commend the psychological mobility entailed in empathy.

### **Narrative Empathy: An Empirical Account**

Some of the most compelling accounts of narrative empathy are emerging not in the humanities but in the more “objective” fields of cognitive science and psychology. These disciplines offer experimental measurements of cognitive and affective perspective taking, providing empirical evidence to support the claim that empathy is central to our experience of reading. Research in cognitive and discourse psychology demonstrates that as we read narratives we create situation models, “mental representations of the people, objects, locations, events, and actions described in a text” (Zwaan 15), rather than observe textual features like grammar and syntax.<sup>65</sup> Within this imagined narrative world, readers adopt a perspective from inside the narrated situation rather than outside of it. Psychologist Paul Harris describes these findings: “[R]eaders mentally situate themselves at a particular locus within the scene being described, typically one that is coincident with or close to a central character. From that locus, a cognitive ‘spotlight’ is emitted that illuminates certain objects and events in the narrative and leaves others in darkness” (49). As is evident in more traditional literary studies of perspective, the amount of information we have about a given protagonist can vary: we can have full access to his point of view in the first person or encounter him in the third person; we can be privy to his innermost thoughts or only to his outer behaviors and speech; we can even have more information about a situation that he encounters than he does. But regardless of narrative perspective, Harris argues, “we begin to share the same spatial and temporal framework as the protagonist. What is subjectively near or far, in the present versus in the past, must now be measured not in terms of the real world but in terms of the narrative world” (49).

A series of studies on text processing and narrative comprehension have supported this conclusion that readers typically adopt the spatiotemporal perspective of protagonists

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<sup>65</sup> The most important proponent of situation models is Rolf A. Zwaan; for his review of the field see “Situation Models: The Mental Leap into Imagined Worlds.”

and further encode narrative events from his or her point of view.<sup>66</sup> In Black, Turner, and Bower's seminal study on this topic, readers were introduced to a story character and subsequently read sentences from various points of view. Subjects read sentences more quickly when they used deictic verbs consistent with the protagonist's point of view (i.e. *come* if they describe a movement towards the protagonist and *go* if they describe a movement away from the protagonist) and were also more accurate in remembering verbs that were consistent with that perspective. Rall and Harris demonstrated similar results for children as young as 3 and 4, who remembered deictic terms more accurately when presented with the point of view of the protagonist but made substitution errors on verbs that were inconsistent with that perspective. Ziegler, Mitchell, and Currie report similar results in children from 4 to 9 years of age. From very early in our cognitive development, in other words, readers (or listeners) of stories situate themselves in an imagined world and process events from the point of view of the protagonist within that world. Rinck and Bower further demonstrated that this perspective can "update" with a character's movements. After being directed to remember the layout of a building, subjects subsequently read an account of a protagonist traveling through the building. When probed about the location of various pieces of furniture and equipment within the house, readers were more prompt in locating items that were closer to the current location of the protagonist. These findings suggest that readers not only identify with the subjective position of a character, but mentally travel through

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<sup>66</sup> See John B. Black, Terence Turner, and Gordon Bower, "Point of View in Narrative Comprehension, Memory, and Production." Jaime Rall and Paul Harris, "In Cinderella's Slippers? Story Comprehension from the Protagonist's Point-of-view." Mike Rinck and Gordon Bower, "Anaphora Resolution and the Focus of Attention in Situation Models." Mike Rinck, Pepper Williams, Gordon Bower, and Erin Becker, "Spatial Situation Models and Narrative Understanding: Some Generalizations and Extensions." David Bryant, Barbara Tversky, and Nancy Franklin, "Internal and External Spatial Frameworks for Representing Described Scenes." Fenja Ziegler, Peter Mitchell, and Gregory Currie, "How Does Narrative Cue Children's Perspective Taking?" Amy Coplan discusses the significance of some of this research for aesthetics in "Empathetic Engagement with Narrative Fictions."

narrative space with that character. Finally, Bryant, Tversky, and Franklin found that even when a narrative does not specify a certain perspective, readers still take up an internal perspective, or a perspective from within the narrative space, that is consistent with the position of a central character.

Although the spatial component of perspective taking has constituted the bulk of this research, further studies reveal that readers also process the emotional implications of narratives from the perspectives of particular characters, resulting in the affective matching—the “feeling with”—inherent to empathy.<sup>67</sup> Paul Harris describes the relevance of perspective taking for these findings: Because of readers’ “vantage-point within an imagined spatio-temporal framework,” the events within the imagined world “drive our emotional system” (65). Since we view those events “alongside, or from the perspective of, the main protagonists,” we also “share their aspirations and disappointments” (66). In a study by Gernsbacher, Goldsmith, and Robertson, subjects read stories with concrete actions and then sentences that either matched or mismatched the implied emotion of a particular character. Sentences that matched the implied emotion were both read and spoken more quickly by readers, suggesting that readers encode the emotional implications of a narrative from a particular character’s perspective. De Vega, León, and Diaz further demonstrated that this kind of emotional processing changes or updates as the plot of a narrative unfolds, and Harris and Martin showed that emotional perspective taking occurs even when the emotions of a protagonist run contrary to the objective situation of a narrative. In the case of a naïve or ill-informed protagonist, in other words, readers were still

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<sup>67</sup> See Tammy Bourg, “The Role of Emotion, Empathy, and Text Structure in Children’s and Adults’ Narrative Text Comprehension.” M. de Vega, I. León, and J. M. Diaz, “The Representation of Changing Emotions in Reading Comprehension.” Morton A. Gernsbacher, H. Hill Goldsmith, and Rachel R. W. Robertson, “Do Readers Mentally Represent Characters’ Emotional States?” Jaime Rall and Paul L. Harris, “In Cinderella’s Slippers? Story Comprehension from the Protagonist’s Point of View.”

quicker to read sentences that accorded with the protagonist's point of view, suggesting that although readers understand dramatic irony and can process the emotional implications of the objective situation, they nonetheless process narratives through the emotional perspective of a protagonist. A related body of research suggests that readers not only understand or process the emotions of protagonists in a "cool" manner but also experience comparable emotions themselves.<sup>68</sup> Most of this research has centered around narratives that describe frightening encounters because fear is easily measured with physiological responses like heart rate and skin conductivity as well as reflex actions like startle responses. Notably, physiological changes are especially strong among adults who score high on role-playing ability, suggesting a correlation between perspective taking and emotional empathy (Harris 71).

There has been some debate as to whether readers actually imagine *themselves* in the place of a character, thus creating an internal perspective on the narrative, or whether they might instead maintain an external perspective on the narrative by "mentally locating themselves outside the space as an observer" (Rall and Harris 206). Given the results that I have described, if readers do maintain an external perspective then they must simultaneously identify the place of a character as an anchor point and subsequently code events in terms of that location (see also Ziegler, Mitchell, and Currie). This difference between internal and external perspectives is central to philosopher Richard Wollheim's distinction between central and acentral imagining; central imagining, on Wollheim's account, is imagining an event from the point of view of one of its characters, from the "inside" of one of the

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<sup>68</sup> Harris reviews this research in *The Work of the Imagination*, 70-73. See Peter J. Lang, "Cognition and emotion: concept and action." Peter J. Lang, B. G. Melamed and J. D. Hart, "A psychophysiological analysis of fear modification using an automated desensitization procedure." Peter Lang, M. Kozak, G. Miller, D. Levin and A. McLean, "Emotional imagery: conceptual structure and pattern of somato-visceral response." S. R. Vrana and Peter Lang, "Fear imagery and the startle-probe reflex."

participants in the scene. Acentral imagining, on the other hand, does not occur from any point of view, or at least it does not occur from a point of view of one of the characters.<sup>69</sup> But there is no reason to think that central and acentral imagining or internal and external perspectives are mutually exclusive. In fact, importing a simulation model from philosophy of mind can help us understand that even as we imagine ourselves in another's place we do not vacate our perspective or somehow dissociate from our own affective states. Moreover, we are quite capable of simulating multiple perspectives of other minds. This model of empathy suggests that rather than maintain one perspective on or in a narrative world, we can simultaneously imagine ourselves in the perspective of a character or multiple characters, a narrator, and a spectator or observer external to the scene. This clarification is especially significant when we turn not to simplistic narratives designed for empirical research but to complex literary texts. At the same time, it is important to remember the primacy of empathy with characters, as is evidenced by our natural tendency to locate ourselves cognitively and emotionally with particular people within a narrative.

With this proviso, let me return to a more fundamental problem: How does a narrative establish one or more protagonist's "status" as a central character? And how do narratives maneuver readers' perspective taking such that there is a consensus about who a protagonist is, as is evidenced in the results I have described? Although a text's "sympathies" are not often as explicit as a proclamation of partisanship—as when the narrator in *The Chimes* exclaims, "I take my stand with Toby Veck" (95)—the negotiation between "I," the reader, and "he" or "she," a character, does not exist in a vacuum.<sup>70</sup> Later

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<sup>69</sup> See Wollheim's *On Art and the Mind* and *The Thread of Life*. In *Beyond Aesthetics*, Noël Carroll makes a case for acentral imagining in his own argument against simulation in narrative comprehension.

<sup>70</sup> In this example from Dickens, the sympathetic narrator's affiliation with a character places implicit demands on a reader's identification, but in the case of an unreliable or unsavory narrator, a reader's sympathies are often directed *away* from those of the narrator.

in this chapter I will examine more complex negotiations between reader, character, narrator, and author, but let me begin with a relatively straightforward example in Richard Redgrave's popular 1844 painting, "The Governess."<sup>71</sup> (Redgrave's "The Sempstress," from the same year, had an even more profound impact on the Victorian social and artistic scene, but since it has only one figure there is an obvious candidate for protagonist). Although the narrative "form" of visual and verbal representation are obviously different, I have selected a painting because I want to emphasize the technique of foregrounding. In a visual representation this is often more literal, determining what image or character appears closer in space to the viewer, but a similar foregrounding occurs in literature, a kind of privileged focus that establishes the status of a protagonist within a text.

In "The Governess," the young teacher sits in the foreground of the canvas. Dressed in black, she looks down with a pensive, pained expression, holding a black-rimmed letter that signifies somebody's death. In the background to the right, meanwhile, two girls dressed in colorful clothing are immersed in sunlight, looking, by comparison to their teacher, very happy indeed. Between the governess and the two girls is an intermediary figure, possibly a cousin like a young Jane Eyre or another companion who will take up governessing duties herself in the future. She looks out at the two happy girls but sits inside in the shadows, her pose a reverse image of the governess. Although in many ways the happy girls are the more attractive figures in the painting, its composition and details align us, as spectators, with the governess's plight; we stand (or sit) with her and feel her sorrow. Although the painting is not *from* the governess' point of view, its composition uses our own point of view (as spectators) to establish our intimacy with her: her proximity to us (again,

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<sup>71</sup> "The Governess," commissioned by John Sheepshanks, was an adapted version of Redgrave's "The Poor Teacher" (1843). The earlier painting does not include the figures of the girls discussed here.

she sits in the foreground of the painting) makes us feel close to her; likewise, our “distance” from the girls distances us from them. The details that are consequently available to us—the governess’s expression, the music on the piano, the clues about the letter she is reading—further establish this intimacy by giving us insight into her life, while the girls’ distance makes them generic rather than particular. Not only does the composition foreground the teacher, so too does the painting’s title and its epigraph, “She sees no kind domestic visage near.” Each of these cues signals to us the governess’s primacy in the painting, and we duly follow, aligning ourselves with Redgrave’s “protagonist,” and to a lesser extent her (smaller) mirror image in the young girl. Paradoxically, her aloneness is itself an invitation to intimacy; *we* are the kind visage that is near, even if she does not see it.

The cues that Redgrave’s painting provides—she is alone, she is far from home, she has lost someone she loves, she has no one near to feel her sorrow—invite spectators to embark upon an imaginative experiment that *begins* with the painting itself but also goes beyond it. By “reading” the details of the painting, we can begin to answer the question, “what does the governess feel?” with little emotional engagement of our own. Sensitive spectators, however, may go beyond this initial query by imagining themselves (intentionally or not, consciously or not) in her place. What would *I* feel like if I were in her situation? What would I feel like if I *were* she, with her history, with her beliefs, with her loss, with her future? In order to understand the subjective experience of another subject, Thomas Nagel has suggested, one must be able “to adopt his point of view,” to understand it “in the first person as well as in the third” (222). In order to answer, “what does she feel?” in other words, we need first to answer, “how would I feel?” In the case of “The Governess,” spectators might find themselves experiencing a sense of absence and loss, and then attribute those feelings to her. As I have described, the imaginative work of empathy is frequently

coupled with feelings of sympathy; spectators to the painting might feel not only sadness, an emotion shared with the young woman, but also pity, an emotion felt for her.

Redgrave's painting is significant not only because it invites an empathic response to the governess, but because it does so despite the fact that most, if not all, of its viewers would be predisposed to identify with other points of view (like the girls') or none at all (a young gentleman, for instance, might feel little identification with either the governess or the girls). The audience for "The Governess" was limited to those viewers who could afford admission to the Royal Academy's annual show, a prerequisite that excluded most viewers who would see in her a reflection of their own life experiences. But even wealthy spectators, spectators who might themselves employ a governess or who were taught by one, are directed to empathize with her, not with the girls who resemble their own youthful selves or, perhaps, their daughters. Their "natural" sympathies might lie with the girls, but the painting's composition and narrative cues direct them to empathize, and sympathize, with their teacher. Significantly, this identification with the governess instigates a secondary disidentification with her pupils. Once spectators' sympathies have been enlisted for the suffering teacher, the students' mirth appears as evidence of their own lack of sympathy. In this way, empathy with the governess allows spectators to investigate critically their own responses (or the responses of those who are like them) to individuals in social positions like Redgrave's protagonist. Not only are spectators aligned with the painting's protagonist, but they are subsequently distanced from the wealthy girls.

As we begin to see in this reading of "The Governess," the points of view of readers themselves are critical to any examination of point of view as a literary technique. In *Alton Locke*, the same novel that offered to help readers "look...with a cockney workman's eyes," Kingsley includes a telling anecdote about the effect of *readers'* perspectives on their

interpretation of texts. Alton himself reads the Bible and finds “deliverers from...tyranny and injustice” like Moses, Gideon, Samson, and David (28), “heroes” and “models” who rise up against their oppressors. Reading the same book, however, the young men of the upper classes wrest the Bible “into proofs of the divine right of kings, the eternal necessity of slavery” (28). The audience for the Bible, Kingsley suggests, is divided along class lines, and it is virtually a different book to its different readers. Where one sees tyranny, another glory; where one sees righteous rebellion, another mutiny. “I have often wondered since,” Alton recalls, “why all cannot read the same lesson as I did in those old Hebrew Scriptures” (28). Invoking the familiar language of sight, he gestures to the perceptual impact of each individual’s educational history and background: “The eye,” he concludes, “only sees what it brings with it the power of seeing” (28). Alton, an unschooled, impoverished child, possesses vastly different “power[s] of seeing” than the public school boys of England, raised on “the glories of Salamis and Marathon” (29).<sup>72</sup>

As Kingsley’s anecdote suggests, literary point of view and psychological point of view intersect in every act of reading, and each reader brings his or her own unique perspective to bear on the text. Part of this effect is that different readers emphasize different passages of the Bible, a selective process of reading that results in different impressions of the overall text. Kingsley is sensitive, too, to the divergent physical conditions of reading experienced by different audiences. Alton describes his own reading—sick, cold, hungry, without adequate light or ventilation—and then addresses his audience: “Look at the picture awhile, ye comfortable folks, who take down from your

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<sup>72</sup> Kingsley expresses a similar sentiment in *Yeast*. “A man’s eyes can only see what they’ve learnt to see” (31), says Tregarva, an intelligent but uneducated working man. The educated and upper-class hero of the book is surprised to hear Tregarva repeat his own “favourite *dictum*,” but their shared philosophy is attained through very different means: while Lancelot encountered the sentiment reading Carlyle, Tregarva understands it “by seeing” (31).

shelves what books you like best at the moment, and then lie back, amid prints and statuettes, to grow wise in an easy-chair, with a blazing fire and a camphene lamp. The lower classes uneducated! Perhaps you would be so too, if learning cost you the privation which it costs to some!" (50). The physical act of reading, as much as interpretation, is determined by perspective. Texts are not entirely open to interpretation, however, despite discrepancies in biblical hermeneutics. Kingsley himself does not imply that there are equally valid readings of the Bible; he asks his readers to understand the effects of perspective on reading in order that they may question their own interpretations. Most texts place tacit pressure on readers to sympathize with particular characters (and *not* to sympathize with others), and most readers obey, at least according to the evidence I have described above. Kings and slaves, in other words, are rarely treated equally. In this way, texts are not passive objects to be superimposed with each reader's perspective; rather, a complex negotiation ensues between the reader's point of view and the point of view of the text itself.

### **Sympathy and Shared Experience**

The significance of narrative cues directing a reader's narrative empathy towards particular characters is most evident when one considers the social barriers to adopting other points of view. As I argued in the previous chapter, empathy is predicated on the kind of information one can glean from intimate familiarity with another person. Because Victorian society was fractured economically, geographically, and socially along class lines, however, social spaces where upper and lower classes could interact were severely circumscribed. The most basic impediment to wealthy Victorians' identification with the poor was that poverty could be *out* of view entirely. Strikingly, within the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, suffering is immediate and visible—Lazarus lies outside of Dives' gate. In the years between

the first two Reform Bills, however, poverty could often be virtually invisible. Even when rich and poor lived in close proximity, city planning was such that poor neighborhoods and slums could be unseen by wealthier inhabitants of the city. Engels famously described the policy of lining the city streets with shops in order to “hid[e] from the eyes of wealthy ladies and gentlemen” the “misery and squalor” that lay behind (55). In Manchester, he observed, “One is seldom in a position to catch from the street a glimpse of the real labouring districts” (87). Chadwick’s *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population* reported similar conditions in London, reporting that many of the “inhabitants of the front houses...have never entered the adjoining courts, or seen the interior of any of the tenements, situate [sic] at the back of their own houses, in which their own workpeople or dependents reside” (342). This physical gulf was maintained even in church, where there was an ostensible brotherhood in Christ and where the parable of Dives and Lazarus was the frequent subject of sermons. The custom of private pews meant that the rich who could afford them were safe from contact with the poor. Disraeli describes one such scene in *Sybil*, as the aristocracy are “ushered into the invisible interior of a vast pew” (54), sheltered and set apart by the luxury of their quarters.

Critics worried that poverty that was largely “out of sight” (Engels 33) was also out of mind. In his lecture on “The Habitations on the Industrial Classes” delivered in 1850, Hector Gavin described the vast expanse between posh Belgrave Square and meager Whitechapel. Invoking Dives and Lazarus, Gavin describes the effects of being “separated by a great gulf” on the consciousness of the “lord of the mansion”: he “knows nothing of their wants, sees nothing of their misery, hears little of their complaints” (68). Elizabeth Gaskell meditates on this problem throughout *North and South* (1855), a novel that follows one woman’s growing sympathetic identification with the poor around her. In Gaskell’s

novel it is the ladies of the mansion who are “separated by a great gulf.” Margaret Hale’s wealthy aunt lives a life of ease and luxury, content enough that she “forgets to love the absent” (341) and forgets to care for the suffering that she does not see. Not poor herself for twenty years, she has “forgotten all grievances” (17) except those that she currently suffers herself. Her daughter’s life, meanwhile, is “like the deep vault of blue sky above her, free—utterly free from fleck or cloud” (68). Without “clouds” of her own, Edith is insensible to those of others. She is not cruel exactly, but she is not conscious either.

Although Margaret Hale is Gaskell’s sympathetic heroine, her life, too, is at first one of “plentiful luxury” and “untroubled ease” (68). While she is never as wealthy or as selfish as her cousin, Margaret’s own lack of empathy is evident in her view of the labor she encounters early on; on hearing a farmer reprimand his servants she is “only reminded...pleasantly that other people were hard at work in some distant place, while I just sat on the heather and did nothing” (101). When she moves from the country to her aunt’s home in London that gulf of separation becomes absolute. “There might be toilers and moilers there in London, but she never saw them; the very servants lived in an underground world of their own” (364). Gaskell diagnoses not only the isolation and segregation between classes but also the apathy that emerges from it. Wealth, she suggests, is inherently selfish, an idea reinforced by her own allusion to the rich man and Lazarus. When she describes a life of “household plenty and comfort,” it is characterized by the “purple and fine linen” (207) of Dives.<sup>73</sup> The implication is that with Dives’ earthly goods comes his callousness and negligence.

By identifying the ignorance and indifference of her wealthy characters, Gaskell implicates her wealthy readers too, warning them of their own thoughtlessness of that which

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<sup>73</sup> “There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day.” Luke 16:19.

they cannot see. If Gaskell's fear that people who do not suffer cannot feel for the suffering of others betrays itself in Aunt Shaw and Cousin Edith, however, then her hopes manifest themselves in Margaret. When Margaret's father leaves the Church of England the Hale family is expelled from the "smooth sea of that old life" (68) and begins a much different chapter in Milton, an industrial town based on Manchester. In her new surroundings Margaret encounters the far more visible suffering of the Higgins family, factory workers whose eldest daughter, Bessy, suffers from a disease contracted through her work at the cotton mills. At first, Nicholas Higgins accuses Margaret of being "just like th'rest on 'em; it's out o'sight out o'mind wi'you" (90). But in Milton, poverty is *in sight*—indeed, it is right outside of her window—and Margaret's political views and personal values are radicalized by her contact with industrial poverty. Indeed, her move to the industrial north retroactively challenges her idyllic view of the rural poverty with which she was raised, and she realizes that even in Helstone there was suffering. When she returns to a life of plenty in London, Margaret is unable to forget what she has seen; left with a "strange unsatisfied vacuum in [her] heart and mode of life" (364), she is called to the charitable impulses that baffle her aunt. Tellingly, Margaret is now acutely aware of the invisibility of poverty. Enconced in her aunt's home, she struggles to detect the mere existence of suffering: "She found herself at once an inmate of a luxurious house, where the bare knowledge of the existence of every trouble or care seemed scarcely to have penetrated" (363). Rather than perceive Aunt Shaw's home as a refuge from outside cares, however, Margaret (and Gaskell herself) see it as a prison in which she is "inmate." She is not relieved by its walls but stifled, afraid "lest she should even become sleepily deadened into forgetfulness of anything beyond the life which was lapping her round with luxury" (364). If the house is a prison, then luxury itself is a kind of drug, one that instead of alleviating her suffering threatens to inure her to others'.

The “forgetfulness” that Aunt Shaw enjoys and Margaret fears goes to the heart of empathy across difference, particularly difference that turns on suffering. Margaret’s refusal to “forget” is the exception to the rule; even a group of well-fed servants in *Mary Barton* have forgotten what they themselves do not currently experience; they are “like the rest of us, and not feeling hunger themselves, forgot it was possible another might” (123). The negative implications for sympathy and charity are clear; the servants leave a hungry factory hand unfed, not from parsimony or heartlessness, but because his “clemming” (hunger) does not cross their minds. Suffering like hunger, Gaskell suggests, is a sensation that eludes those who do not experience it themselves. The servants’ and Aunt Shaw’s lack of sympathy is especially striking because they experienced deprivation in the past; their lack of sensitivity suggests that even those who used to be poor can no longer imagine that point of view.

The collective forgetting that Gaskell describes (the servants are “like the rest of us”) is a central dilemma for sentimental realism. Given their audience and their subject, Victorian authors were faced with the question, if one does not suffer oneself, how can one empathize with the suffering of others? How can the rich feel for (and with) the poor when they do not themselves experience poverty? The negative conclusion that the rich cannot feel for the poor is embedded in Alton Locke’s gratitude for his own suffering in Kingsley’s novel. “I do not complain that I am a Cockney. That, too, is God’s gift. He made me one, that I might learn to feel for poor wretches who sit stifled in reeking garrets and workrooms, drinking in disease with every breath—bound in their prison-house of brick and iron, with their own funeral pall hanging over them, in that canopy of fog and poisonous smoke, from their cradle to their grave (22). His own suffering, Alton contends, allows him to feel for the suffering of others: “I have drunk of the cup of which they drink” (22).

Alton’s argument that sympathy comes from shared experience, underwrites a

commonplace of sentimental realism, that it is the poor themselves who are most sympathetic to the plight of poverty. “Who should sympathise with the poor but the poor?” Sybil asks in Disraeli’s novel. “Alas! None else can” (121). John Barton agrees: “It’s the poor and the poor only, as does such things for the poor” (*Mary Barton* 8). “He feels for the people,” Crossthwaite concludes of Sandy Mackaye, “for he has been one of us” (*Alton Locke* 59). With these sentiments, Kingsley, Disraeli, and Gaskell simultaneously combat the widespread belief that the poor cannot feel as acutely as those with a better education and question the sympathetic capacities of the rich.<sup>74</sup> An early poem by L.E.L., “The Poor,” begins by invoking this maxim: “Few save the poor, feel for the poor” (1). This truism is more than a critique of the callous indifference of the rich; it is an incisive investigation into the imaginative limits of empathy. L.E.L. chooses to emphasize not charity, but sentiment. The rich may *give* to the poor, but they do not *feel* for them. The poor can feel for the poor, Landon suggests, because only they can “know” what poverty is like. “The rich,” however, “know not how hard / It is to be of needful food / And needful rest debarred” (2-4). The stanza as a whole constructs a causal relationship between knowledge forged through personal experience and feeling. The effect is stated first—“Few, save the poor, feel for the poor”—and its cause is enumerated in the subsequent lines. The rich do not know the experience of hunger and exhaustion; therefore, they do not feel for those who do. The following stanzas further develop the relationship between knowledge, experience, and empathy: because the rich enjoy beds of “silk and down” (6), they “never think how heavily / The weary head lies down” (7-8).

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<sup>74</sup> This suspicion might be confirmed by contemporary statistics on charitable giving; according to the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, America’s poor give almost 30% more of their income to charity than the rich.

This causal relationship is even more explicit in “Manchester Song,” an anonymous poem with which Elizabeth Gaskell prefaced the sixth chapter of *Mary Barton*. As in Landon’s poem, “Manchester Song” catalogues the experiences that the wealthy *do not* share with the poor, and as in “The Poor” it associates these disparities in experience with a lack of feeling on the part of the rich.

How little can the rich man know  
Of what the poor man feels  
When want, like some dark demon foe,  
Nearer and nearer steals! (1-4)

The lack of shared experiences proliferates in the following stanzas; *he* (the appellation used for “the rich man” in the poem, each time marked with italics) has never searched for work in vain, *he* has never come home to his family without food or bed, *he* has never faced his children’s cries for food. The poem’s use of the word “can” in the opening line (“How little can the rich man know”) makes intractable the causal relationship between shared experience and understanding. His lack of suffering not only frustrates his ability to empathize; it renders empathy impossible. Shared experience, these poets imply, is a necessary precondition for shared feeling. The very claim that it is the poor who feel for the poor suggests that people feel for those who are like themselves and that they sympathize with problems they themselves share.

As we begin to see in “The Poor” and “Manchester Song,” “knowing” and “feeling” are mutually dependent. Impediments to “feeling,” then, are rooted in an epistemological obstacle: how can one “know” what one has not experienced first-hand? Mr. Bounderby captures this dilemma when he observes, in *Hard Times*, that “people...accustomed from infancy to lie on feathers, have no idea *how* hard a paving-stone is, without trying it” (39). One’s own experience limits the ability to conceive of another’s, especially when it is as wildly divergent as a feather bed from a paving-stone. While elsewhere Dickens lauds the

unique capabilities of imagination, here Bounderby cautions us to its limitations. Without first-hand experience, “without trying it,” there can be no knowledge of suffering.<sup>75</sup> The italicization of “*how* hard [it] is” indicates that the problem is one of degree; a prosperous individual can surely know *that* a paving-stone is hard, and easily surmise that it is an uncomfortable place to sleep. They cannot fully grasp, however, *how* hard is the paving-stone, or how hard, in the other sense of that word, is the experience of sleeping upon it. It is not coincidental that Dickens picked Bounderby to articulate this opinion; the industrialist’s own misunderstanding of the lives and desires of his workers is manifest in all of his contact with them. This misunderstanding is all the more notable because of Bounderby’s frequent claims to an impoverished past and, thus, to a first-hand experience of poverty. He has slept, he speciously claims, on those very paving-stones. Perhaps it is his fabrication of personal history that makes him so aware of the necessity of first-hand experience.

Indeed, Bounderby’s observations indicate that the affective and epistemological obstacles of difference are even more obstinate than “The Poor” and “Manchester Song” suggest. Through him, Dickens calls our attention not only to the epistemological difficulties of difference, but also to the way that language can contribute to, rather than remedy, that difference. The divide between haves and have-nots, Bounderby opines, makes even conversation difficult: “[I]t’s extraordinary,” he brags, “the difficulty I have on scores of such subjects, in speaking to any one on equal terms” (39). The problem, as Bounderby sees it, is that vastly different experiences result in language that means differently, or means different things, for different people. When speaking of the Italian Opera, for example, one’s concept of the place is entirely determined by one’s relationship to it, one’s point of

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<sup>75</sup> Thomas Nagel expresses a similar view: “Our own experience,” he argues, “provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited.” (“What Is It Like to Be a Bat” 220).

view. While Mrs. Sparsit was on the right side of the theatre—inside, that is—Bounderby was (putatively) on “the wrong side,” sleeping on the pavement of its arcade. Their understanding of the Opera is so determined by their access or lack thereof that the concepts they hold are antithetical to each other: “the Italian Opera” carries two entirely different referents. The question that Bounderby raises is, how can a “tumbler” and a theatre-goer converse in any meaningful way? His answer is that they cannot converse, at least successfully. The referentiality of language breaks down when two people do not share a set of experiential references.

Elizabeth Gaskell addresses similar linguistic impasses in *North and South* and *Ruth*. After befriending Bessy Higgins, Margaret Hale tries to describe her former home in the forest to the poor girl who has never left Milton. When she describes sunlight on ferns as “just like the sea” (101), however, the metaphor falters. “I have never seen the sea,” murmurs Bessy (101).<sup>76</sup> In *Ruth*, Gaskell is even more explicit about the perceptual effects of class, and the linguistic barriers that the poor seamstress confronts are even more painful than Bessy Higgins’s. When Ruth encounters a group of partygoers, “bright happy people—as much without any semblance of care or woe as if they belonged to another race of beings” (17), she pauses to think about their contradictory perspectives on winter:

Here was cold, biting mid-winter for her, and such as her—for those poor beggars almost a season of death; but to Miss Duncombe and her companions, a happy, merry time, when flowers still bloomed, and fires crackled, and comforts and luxuries were piled around them like fairy gifts. What did they know of the meaning of the word, so terrific to the poor? What was winter to them? (17).

This linguistic barrier of difference—“What did they know of the meaning of the word?”—speaks to the perceptual effects of difference and distance—“What was winter to them?”

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<sup>76</sup> Although this inability to communicate does not result directly from class, the divide between “North and South” and industrial and rural are important corollaries, in Gaskell’s novel, to the divisive relationship between classes.

Depending on one's point of view—most literally, inside or outside—winter can be “a happy, merry time” or “almost a season of death.”<sup>77</sup> In Gaskell's passage we see again the intimate relationship between language and experience. The term “winter” means different things because it is lived differently by Ruth and that “other race” of happy girls. Language that diverges across class compromises the possibility for successful communication between classes.

Significantly, this is the scene of Ruth's fatal misreading of her future seducer's sympathy for the poor: “But Ruth fancied that Mr. Bellingham looked as if he could understand the feelings of those removed from him by circumstance and station. He had drawn up the windows of his carriage, it is true, with a shudder” (17). Ruth misinterprets Mr. Bellingham's “language” of revulsion (his shudder) as the language of sympathy and understanding. While she credits him with an almost perfect definition of empathy across difference—“understand[ing] the feelings of those removed from him by circumstance and station”—he is in reality expressing his own irretrievably classed view of poverty. Gaskell's use of dramatic irony alerts readers to Ruth's naiveté as it gently reminds them of their own classed perspective. Readers' ability to interpret successfully Mr. Bellingham's shudder might bolster their sympathies with Ruth, but it also attests to the similarities between their own points of view and that of the dastardly seducer.

When “toilers and moilers” were not entirely out of sight, poverty was often seen from afar. And poverty from a distance risked if not invisibility then distortion. Gustave

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<sup>77</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe's *We and Our Neighbours* captured the same phenomenon; for the author and the audience, Stowe observes, cold is the “condiment of the season,” an “appetizing reminder of how warm and prosperous and comfortable are all within doors” (346). For those without, however, cold is painful and winter dangerous. Stowe reminds her readers of these divergent perceptions in order to challenge the perspective of her audience. “Did any one ever...try to imagine himself...outcast, forsaken, and penniless?” (346), she asks, inviting her audience to perform just such imaginative work.

Doré's drawing "Over London by Rail" captures this remote view and the kind of aloofness that it could engender. As audience members, we are not in the slums but above them, "looking" from what we can presume is a view from the train tracks, approximating the view of the passengers in the train that billows in the distance. From this perspective, tiny working-class apartments stretch into the horizon and tiny figures of working-class people proliferate in a series of identical yards. While we get a sense of the enormity of poverty (it stretches into the horizon), it is impossible to make out faces or identities and it is impossible, too, to make out the more unpleasant features of working-class life. Indeed, from this view the buildings look almost picturesque; from over and above, we catch no glimpse of inadequate plumbing, pools of slop, or other visceral effects of overcrowding. Our view, determined as it is by the perspective of the train, is not only inaccurate but obfuscates many the most significant features of poverty. Indeed, while as spectators of the picture we can pause long enough to make out some details of working-class life, as passengers speeding by on a mid-century train we would not have even that perceptual possibility. Dickens captured a similar phenomenon in *Hard Times*, describing how the great factories looked to those who whisked by rather than labored within them. A far cry from the "melancholy madness" (22) that is apparent to the narrator, the factories appear, "when they were illuminated, like Fairy palaces—or the travelers by express-train said so" (52). Perspective metamorphoses a factory into fantasy; the site of hard labor is transformed, from a distance, into a fairy tale.

Doré's and Dickens' "illustrations" of the view from the train capture at once an epistemological reality of contemporary life and a potent metaphor for the contact between classes. Trains were a technological innovation that allowed the wealthy to bypass poverty quickly, creating, in the process, a unique view from a safe distance. But this literal view

from afar (and, as in Doré's drawing, from above) is also emblematic of the perspectival effects of the gulf between rich and poor. Our "view" of poverty, Doré and Dickens indicate, cannot easily overcome the physical and sociological distance inherent to Victorian class segregation. Indeed, while both Dickens' novel and Doré's illustration carry an implicit critique of the distortion inherent to the view from the train, it is important to note that both had difficulty switching perspectives in order to show what working class homes and factories looked like from the *inside*. In Dickens' novel of industrial life, for instance, we are repeatedly left "at the door" of the factory. While he can critique the distortion of poverty from a distance (factory as fairy palace), he is unable to replace that view with one of proximity, much less one from inside the factory walls. Doré, meanwhile, might critique the view from the train, but he also recreates it. The "point of view" of the painting is not from one of the bricked-in yards, nor, for that matter, from within one of the homes; we do not look *up* towards the train but *down* from its windows.

Ironically, with the innovation of railway bookstalls, passengers' "view" of poverty could be transformed again, from looking out upon the slums to looking down upon a book in one's lap. Novels and poetry about poverty hold out the possibility of a more intimate view, but they also risk reifying the perspective from the train if artists' own remote perspectives distort their representations. Representing poverty, in other words, could easily become misrepresenting it. George Eliot makes a similar point in "The Natural History of German Life," arguing that English artists perpetuate the myths of English literature, both misinterpreting the "life" of the poor because they observe it only from afar: "Observe a company of haymakers," Eliot instructs. "When you see them at a distance, tossing up their forkfuls of hay in the golden light, while the wagon creeps slowly with its increasing burthen over the meadow, and the bright green space which tells of work done gets larger and larger,

you pronounce the scene ‘smiling,’ and you think these companions of labour must be as bright and cheerful as the picture to which they give animation” (262). It is only when you “[a]pproach nearer” that you realize their laughter is “as far as possible from your conception of idyllic merriment” (262).

This kind of distortion was a hazard for all of sentimental realism, which risked transforming poverty from a harsh reality into an aesthetic tableau. Dickens, for one, was aware of the risk, even if he was later accused of falling prey to it. In his second Christmas book, *The Chimes*, he satirizes artists who observe poverty from “over yonder” (154) and in so doing metamorphose the harsh reality of a meager cottage—a “bitter hard” (154) place to live—into a pretty picture. The distortion of their view is apparent when Will Fern, the cottage’s occupant, speaks out against its commemoration in ink. “I’ve seen the ladies draw it in their books, a hundred times. It looks well in a picter, I’ve heerd say; but there an’t weather in picters, and maybe ‘tis fitter for that, than for a place to live in” (154). The absurdity of their artistic project is evident in its complete irrelevance to the putative subject of their drawings; Will can barely recognize in his life and home the “picter” of poverty that the ladies paint. His trenchant observation, “There an’t weather in picters,” speaks to the limits of verisimilitude. Representations of poverty, however realistic, cannot fully capture the lived experience of being poor. Even if the ladies ventured out in the rain, the pictures could not convey the experience of being rained upon (just as the ladies themselves could not recreate the experience of being poor and vulnerable to the elements). The social and psychic distance between artist and subject, rich and poor is embodied in the sunk fence standing between Will and the ladies. From a safe remove, Fern’s cottage provides a picturesque view; the view from *inside*, he makes clear, is far more “bitter hard” (154) than they could imagine. Significantly, C. Stanfield’s accompanying illustration of “Will Fern’s

Cottage” depicts not only Will Fern in the background but also the genteel observers in the fore. The distance between artist and subject is the subject of the illustration. Along with Dickens’ text, the illustration provides a self-conscious commentary on the epistemological limitations of cross-class representation. It is worth noting, however, that the composition of the illustration falls prey to some of the same features it critiques. By placing Will Fern at great remove and the lady artists in the foreground, Stanfield recreates the picturesque quality of the cottage and its surroundings.

It is important to remember these potential hazards of narrative perspective as we proceed, especially since middle-class authors potentially restrict rather than expand readers’ points of view. Even Elizabeth Gaskell, arguably the most empathic of social problem authors, had her own imaginative limits. As Raymond Williams recounts, *Mary Barton* was originally intended as the story of the John Barton, “my hero, *the* person with whom all my sympathies went” (88). But once he commits murder, John Barton’s point of view is no longer represented in the novel, and under pressure from Chapman and Hall, the novel’s title was transferred to the daughter, and with it, Williams argues, Gaskell’s sympathies. While literature risked reifying distance, however, it also offered an opportunity to collapse it by bringing poor characters into the homes of the rich. As the Dean of Westminster admonished, one task of literature was to make “the rich man, faring sumptuously every day...see and feel the presence of Lazarus at his gate” (330). Gaskell in particular created vivid portraits of poverty in order to overcome the perceptual and perspectival barriers that she critiqued within her fiction. Williams’ critique of *Mary Barton* does not adequately account for Gaskell’s self-conscious treatment of the profound effects of point of view on her characters and readers alike.

## Imaginative Experiments

It is not coincidental that the very texts that articulated the epistemological obstacles to empathy were the same texts invested in challenging them; the distance between reader and subject was sentimental realism's reason for being. Moreover, the ongoing commitment of middle-class authors to representing poverty suggests that it is not *impossible* for the rich to feel for poverty, even if it is difficult. In "The Poor," L.E.L. argues that because theirs are "paths of plenteousness" (5), the wealthy do not feel the paths of poverty; because they "know not how hard / It is" (2-3), they do not think of starvation and sleeplessness. Despite Landon's model of causation, however, she is circumspect about its inevitability. Although those who sleep on silk and down "never think" (7) about "harder" beds (like paving-stones), Landon does not say that they *cannot*. Significantly, she opens the poem not with the majority of the rich who do not feel for the poor but the few who do ("Few, save the poor, feel for the poor" (1)), and her own poetic production testifies to Landon's sympathy for their suffering. More importantly, Landon uses her account of the limited perspective of the rich in order to expand her readers' own perspectives. As the poem enumerates what the rich do *not* see and feel, in other words, it simultaneously provides a catalogue of what they *should* see, with the vivid detail necessary to prompt imagining.

Few, save the poor, feel for the poor:  
The rich know not how hard  
It is to be of needful food  
And needful rest debarred.

Their paths are paths of plenteousness,  
They sleep on silk and down;  
And never think how heavily  
The weary head lies down.

They know not of the scanty meal,  
    With small pale faces round;  
No fire upon the cold damp hearth  
    When snow is on the ground.

They never by the window lean,  
    And see the gay pass by;  
Then take their weary task again,  
    But with a sadder eye. (1-16)

The poem's repeated shift between the limited perspective of "the rich" and the painful experience of "the poor" calls further attention to the shifts in perspective the poem facilitates. Even as we learn that the rich "never think" about the weary head and "know not" about the scanty meal, we as readers are asked to think about them and granted the imaginative access necessary to do so.

The structure of "Manchester Song" is strikingly similar. By detailing what "the rich man" does *not* know, the author is able to impart that knowledge to the poem's readers.

How little can the rich man know  
Of what the poor man feels  
When want, like some dark demon foe,  
Nearer and nearer steals!

*He* never tramp'd the weary round  
A stroke of work to gain,  
And sicken'd at the dreaded sound  
Telling him 'twas in vain.

Foot-sore, heart-sore, *he* never came  
Back through the winter's wind,  
To a dank cellar, there no flame  
No light, no food, to find.

*He* never saw his darlings lie  
Shivering, the grass their bed;  
*He* never heard that maddening cry,  
'Daddy, a bit of bread!' (63)

As we saw in "The Poor," readers of "Manchester Song" are asked to confront in the poem what they do not confront in life. Middle and upper-class readers would not hear that

“maddening cry” from their own children, but they do hear it in the poem itself. Both poems negotiate between two points of view—the rich who “know not” and the poor who do; its implicit imaginative demand is that the reader take up this negotiation. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, texts repeatedly addressed “you,” bringing the reader into the text. Readers, then, could imagine “I” in the place of “*He*,” not only, in the case of “Manchester Song,” the he who does *not* know suffering, but also the he who does.

Elizabeth Gaskell is especially useful for a discussion of how mid-century authors choreographed readers’ relationships with poor characters because, as we have seen already in *North and South* and *Ruth*, she was acutely aware of the effects of class on perspective. In her first novel, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, Gaskell is at her most conscientious about the particular difficulties of inviting readers into a narrative world that is unfamiliar to them. Near the beginning of the novel, a working-class family enters their apartment with friends, and the seemingly impenetrable darkness is made light by a stoked fire and lit candles. As readers, we can look inside the recesses of the home and see what was invisible a few moments before. The image of the dark home made light is significant because Gaskell illuminates a scene that few in her largely middle-class audience would be able to see, with their own or their mind’s eye, without the imaginative guidance of the novel. Entry to a working class home was rarely available to middle and upper-class Victorians, except those in carefully circumscribed roles like that of doctor or minister. As if to emphasize this point, Gaskell notes that the door is locked and the curtains drawn, and the geraniums, “unpruned and leafy,” form “a further defense from out-door pryers” (13). As the door to the Bartons’ home closes, however, readers are not left on the doorstep but brought into the home with the Bartons’ friends. As the novel proceeds, Gaskell invites her audience into a series of domestic interiors of the sort that would be hidden from her average reader—not only the

cheery warmth of the Barton's first apartment but also the scoured penury of Alice Wilson's single room and the dank, filthy degradation of the Davenports' cellar. As readers, we are granted the privilege that Gaskell herself enjoyed in her role as a minister's wife in Manchester; we are given entry to the homes and lives of the poor and working-class.

But Gaskell does not merely represent these domestic scenes so that her middle-class readers can visualize them; she comments on their own experience of reading in such a way that calls attention to their perspective and the unique access she is granting. The novel opens with the Barton and Wilson families on an outing in the countryside—a respite from their workaday lives in the factories of Manchester. As they return to the city, one family invites another for a visit, and they walk together to the Bartons' home. The poor neighborhoods in which the Bartons live were notoriously disorienting, with crowded and uniform architecture and a tangled web of streets. Gaskell's audience, she implies, would be lost if they were alone. The narrator addresses her readers and predicts their disorientation: “The party proceeded home through many half-finished streets, all so like one another, that you might have easily been bewildered and lost your way” (11-12). The “you” she addresses is “we,” her middle-class readers, and by speculating about our own “bewilderment” she acknowledges that the scene she describes is an unfamiliar one and that the streets the families are walking down are, to us, foreign. The foreignness of a twenty-first century American audience represents an intensified version of Gaskell's own contemporary, domestic audience. By predicting her contemporaries' disorientation in the slums of Manchester, she makes the difference—and the distance—between her audience and her subject integral to her narrative.

Even as the narrator concedes that “we” would be lost if we were alone, however, she reminds her audience that our fictional companions call the slums of Manchester

“home.” “Not a step, however, did our friends lose; down this entry, cutting off that corner, until they turned out of one of these innumerable streets into a little paved court” (12). If Gaskell began by acknowledging our difference from her characters (we would be lost), she goes on to establish our affinity with them (they are our friends). She turns from direct address to a first-person pronoun—the our in “our friends”—using the appositive to align us, as readers, as well as herself, as narrator or author, with those who call the slums home. Our sympathies, and hers, are with the two families. Furthermore, we accompany the Barton family, and to them the streets are not foreign but familiar. As readers, and friends, we are whisked through the streets without a misstep. We are not lost but found, not going away but going “home,” or going to the Barton’s home at least. With these companions the slums do not seem to be slums at all—with all of the distancing, alienating qualities which that appellation connotes—but a neighborhood filled with friends and acquaintances who hail “our friends,” and so extend our circle of friendship. As we travel through this passage we can see Gaskell is constantly negotiating our point of view as middle-class readers who are lost in the slums and the characters’ point of view, as friends who do not fear the slum but live there. As readers we are learning to navigate the streets as they would, to look around and see the neighborhood as it looks to their eyes.

When we enter the Bartons’ home, the narrator surveys the domain, and we too see crockery and a japanned tea tray, checked curtains and hardy geraniums, domestic details ranging from the layout of the apartment to the small triangles of glass used to keep silverware from staining the tablecloth. But the narrator does not allow this access to remain unquestioned. After the lengthy description of the home, she addresses her audience again. “If you can picture all this,” she assures us, “with a washy, but clean stenciled pattern on the walls, you can form some idea of John Barton’s home” (14). Even as Gaskell brings us into

the scene, she acknowledges our distance from it. Her statement is conditional: “If you can picture this,” then “you can form some idea” of the home. Of course, the narrator is there to guide our mental representation, and she fastidiously provides details to aid our mental simulation of the domestic interior. With the novel as guide, and with our own willing imagination, we readers can accompany the Wilsons on their visit. There we are privy to the private goings on of the two families, and if we can’t partake in tea and Cumberland ham, we can, at least partake of the intimate details of working-class life—the furniture, the décor, the preparations for tea and the conversation that accompanies it. But as readers we need to perform our own imaginative labor as well; we need to picture the house in our own mind’s eye. And Gaskell reminds us of our perspectival limitations even as she enjoins us to overcome them; we can only form “some idea” of the home. By constantly reminding readers of the ways in which class identity defines and limits perspective, Gaskell both invites her readers into relationships with characters and alerts us of our limitations.

As the novel progresses, the narrator continues to guide her readers through imaginative experiments, but the degree of difficulty in these maneuvers intensifies quickly from our initial imagination of the Bartons’ home. The same night that we meet the Bartons, Mrs. Barton dies in childbirth along with her baby. After her husband’s initial grief, his anger heightens over “the differences between the employers and the employed” (23), which he blames, in part, for the suffering that has come to his family. We learn, too, that penury was responsible for the death of their first son, who could not be cared for when he fell ill because John Barton was let go from the mill. After describing Barton’s history, Gaskell invites readers to imagine, too, his emotions: “You can fancy, now, the hoards of vengeance in his heart against the employers” (25). Her words are both reassuring and instructive; we *should* imagine vengeance. Vengeance is a more complex and frightening

emotion than sadness; its sympathetic corollary is not merely pity but also fear. Gaskell's narrative intervention is necessary, in part, because of the relative difficulty of the imaginative work she demands. While "The Governess" merely suffers, John Barton responds to his suffering in anger, vitriol, and revenge. Gaskell seems to presage her readers' difficulty, offering, in advance, her encouragement and guidance.

Implicit to each of Gaskell's imaginative demands is that her audience cannot understand Barton and those like him until they fully understand his point of view. Repeatedly acknowledging that her readers are *not* poor themselves, that they are *not* workers themselves, she nonetheless resolves, "Now let us turn to the workmen's view of the question" (200). This imaginative work, Gaskell suggests, is a necessary predecessor to any moral judgment. When describing opium use among the poor, for instance, she admonishes her audience to suspend their verdict. "Before you blame too harshly," she pleads, "try a hopeless life" (198). Try hunger; try suffering; try "seeing all around you reduced to...despair...sinking under the pressures of want." By placing themselves imaginatively, if not physically, in the place of the poor, Gaskell hopes that her readers will see not only their differences, but also their similarities. After she has asked readers to "try" this series of tests, she addresses her audience again: "Would you not be glad to forget life, and its burdens?" (198). Even as Gaskell acknowledges the differences between reader and character, then, she asks her readers to see too the similarities. Living under conditions of poverty, Gaskell argues, each of "you" would behave similarly.<sup>78</sup> This is a radical interpretation of empathy: if

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<sup>78</sup> In *North and South*, Nicholas Higgins expresses a similar sentiment when describing Boucher's suicide: "I'm not saying he did right, and I'm not saying he did wrong. All I say is, may neither me nor mine ever have his sore heart, or we may do like things" (292). Alton Locke agrees: Addressing the "respectable gentlemen and ladies" who judge the sins of the poor, he cries out, "if you had ever felt what it is to want, not only every luxury of the senses, but even bread to eat, [then] you would think more mercifully of the man who makes up by rare excesses, and those only of the limited kinds

one not only imagines the feelings, desires, beliefs, and experiences of another person but also experiences them, then one would not only feel like the other person but also behave like them. This dynamic is implicit in the familiar admonishment to “walk a mile” in another’s shoes before you pass moral judgment.

Turning to the other “view of the question” is not merely a narrative technique for Gaskell; it is the central concern of the novel. Thematically, the novel concerns the dangers of ignoring other points of view; structurally, it revolves around the effects of doing so. After Barton loses his son, baby, and wife, he is increasingly filled with rage towards the “masters.” Ultimately, the factory owners’ callousness to the workers’ plight drives Barton and his compatriots to desperate measures; they resolve to murder one of the factory owners. Barton is selected to perform the deed and, with callousness comparable to that which he is avenging, he kills the son of one of the prominent owners. The loss of his own son is thus repaid with the taking of another man’s; by pairing Barton the worker and Carson the factory owner (even their names are separated by only two letters), Gaskell unites them in suffering and in sin, and both employer and employed have been guilty of the same crime—they have not looked at things from the other’s perspective. Barton’s lack of imagination, Gaskell observes, led to the murder: “He had no more imagined to himself the blighted home, and the miserable parents, than does the soldier, who discharges his musket, picture to himself the desolation of the wife, and the pitiful cries of the helpless little ones, who are in an instant to be made widowed and fatherless” (431-432). Carson, in turn, had not imagined the poverty of the workers, the “grinding squalid misery” (436) that could drive a man to such desperate actions. In the novel’s denouement, the two men meet, and each imagines the other’s suffering and his own role in it. The socially redemptive power of

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possible to him, for long intervals of dull privation, and says in his madness, ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die!’” (62).

empathy is cemented as Barton repents and Carson forgives. Gaskell's objective, for both her characters and her audience, is articulated by Job Legh, a voice of thoughtful wisdom throughout the novel: "I see the view you take of things from the place where you stand" (456). Paradoxically, the ultimate act of division between the classes, the murder of Carson's son, provides the opportunity for Legh, a working-class man, to converse with Carson and subsequently understand his point of view. His newfound empathy for the master comes at a high cost, but it promises the potential for better relations across class difference. Carson, in turn, institutes factory reform that will help prevent future misunderstandings.

As Barton and Carson's experience confirms, seeing "the view you take of things from the place where you stand" is a challenging demand. The gulf between rich and poor appeared radically different from its opposite sides; Gaskell asked her readers, in effect, to envision it from where Lazarus stood. Gaskell reveals John Barton's view of the great gulf, for instance: His "overpowering thought, which was to work out his fate on earth, was rich and poor; why are they so separate, so distinct, when God has made them all?" (198-199). In order to shift perspective, readers must imagine not merely the poor, but also the rich. They must imagine themselves, in other words, not from the perspective of their own side of the "great gulf" but from the opposite bank, not as they appeared to themselves but as they appeared to the poor. Look, for example, to Gaskell's description of the "view" of a poor weaver:

It is a bewildering thing for the poor weaver to see his employer removing from house to house, each one grander than the last...while all the time the weaver, who thinks he and his fellows are the real makers of this wealth, is struggling on for bread for his children, through the vicissitudes of lowered wages, short hours, fewer hands employed, etc...Large houses are still occupied, while spinners' and weavers' cottages stand empty, because the families that once filled them are obliged to live in rooms or cellars. Carriages still roll along the streets, concerts are still crowded by subscribers, the shops for expensive luxuries still find daily customers, while

the workman loiters away his unemployed time in watching these things, and thinking of the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough of food,—of the sinking health, of the dying life of those near and dear to him. The contrast is too great. (23-24)

Much of Gaskell's audience lived in the kind of house that the weaver envies. They rode in carriages and sat in concert halls and shopped in stores. Seeing these ordinary features of life reflected in the eyes of a poor weaver, however, is "bewildering." As middle- and upper-class readers observe the workman observing individuals like themselves, their own lives are denaturalized—daily comforts seem opulent indulgences and luxuries; held up against the suffering of his family, they seem callous and indifferent. By imagining the perspective of the weaver, then, readers can see themselves in their own self-reflexive gaze; there, too, perhaps, the contrast might seem "too great." Unfortunately, Gaskell is so sensitive to her audience's point of view that she pulls back from the full repercussions of the imaginative experiment, suggesting that the weaver's perspective is not accurate: "I know that this is not really the case," the narrator says, "and I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks" (24).

As we begin to see with the narrator of *Mary Barton*, Gaskell not only prompted her readers in perspective taking, she also performed her own. In this way, sentimental realism dramatized the process of adopting other points of view by broadcasting its own empathic engagement. Critics of sentimental realism have dismissed this dynamic, arguing that middle or upper-class authors, narrators, and characters maintain and even reinforce boundaries of difference; the poor, consequently, are foreign objects of study, irretrievably detached from readers because of their difference. Herbert Sussman, for example, contends that the novelist as "middle-class scout" "maintains and even strengthens the bourgeois perception of the workers as Other" and "reinforces as inevitable the distance and the difference

between the two classes, the two nations” (249). James Eli Adams makes a similar argument for middle-class characters, describing their entry into working-class homes as a “proto-anthropological contact with alien cultures” (132). Critics have seen this compulsion to differentiate self from other, rich from poor, as an indication of authors’ inability to identify fully with poor characters. The most well-known interpretation in this vein is Williams’ reading of *Mary Barton*, a novel he credits as “the most moving response in literature to the industrial suffering of the 1840s,” but which he nonetheless indicts for Gaskell’s inability to escape her own classed perspective. The beginning of the novel, Williams argues, is a combination of “sympathetic observation” and “imaginative identification” (88); it documents the conditions of poverty from the position of an observer or reporter even as it offers a “genuine imaginative re-creation” of the characteristic feelings of the working classes (87). Clearly Williams prefers the latter stance; he regrets that Gaskell never manages a sense of “full participation” (88).<sup>79</sup> Kettle’s critique of *North and South* reflects the same sentiment, although he is more generous in his reading of *Mary Barton*. The power of the earlier novel, Kettle argues, comes from Gaskell “transcend[ing] the limitations of her conscious outlook” (181); the later novel does not compete because it “presents its picture of English life entirely from a middle-class point of view” (181).

Despite Kettle’s distinction, both novels flag their middle-class production—*Mary Barton* through the preface and narrator’s voice and *North and South* through the middle-class protagonist. But what I want to argue in the rest of this chapter is that this acknowledgement of class difference was critical to, rather than disruptive of, readers’ own ability to confront difference and adopt other points of view. By calling attention to their

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<sup>79</sup> If the novel had continued in its original vein, Williams argues, it “might have been a great novel of its kind” (88), but *Mary Barton* ultimately fails, on his account, when Gaskell’s sympathies betray their limits in John Barton’s murder of Harry Carson.

own imaginative work, authors were able to offer their experience of imagining across difference as a model for their readers. In fact, the efforts of middle- and upper-class authors were especially instructive because, by virtue of their own difference from the characters they imagined (and created), they needed to overcome a set of affective and epistemological obstacles similar to their readers'. Acting under the aegis of authors who had themselves imagined divergent points of view allowed readers to replicate this process of perspective taking.

Authors frequently explicated their own class identity in prefatory material or editorial apparatus; in the preface to *Mary Barton*, for example, Gaskell describes her sympathetic investigation of poverty, through which she has been able to form an idea of “the state of feeling” (xxxvi) among the workers. Intratextually, the class identity of middle- or upper-class authors was frequently embodied in middle- or upper-class narrators; especially in the fiction, narrators thus share the “views” of their middle-class readers. The narrator of *Mary Barton* displays middle-class sensibilities, speech, and political convictions, helping readers understand that her point of view is similar to their own. She and other wealthy narrators model in their own discoveries the experience of encountering and adopting other points of view. In this way, narrators’ perspectives—literary point of view in the strictest sense—was pivotal to negotiating readers’ imaginative relationships with poor characters. The narrator of *Mary Barton* is especially useful for examining narrative perspective (and is an especially helpful guide for wealthy readers) because she signals her own imaginative work as she acknowledges readers'. As she addresses the “you” of the reader, in other words, she frequently marks the text with her own “I.” “We,” she implies, encounter poverty together, a relationship that is linguistically cemented when she turns to

her audience: the Bartons are “*our* friends” (12), she assures us, “Now let *us* turn to the workman’s view of the question” (200, my emphasis).

By aligning readers with herself, *Mary Barton’s* narrator is able to draft them for her own imaginative experiments; just as her point of view has altered so too should “our” own. In a lengthy passage in which she describes the “sufferings and privations of the poor,” for example, the narrator describes her response to what she has “heard” about poverty in order to demonstrate what our own response should be:

It is so impossible to describe, or even faintly to picture, the state of distress which prevailed in the town at that time, that I will not attempt it; and yet I think again that surely, in a Christian land, it was not known even so feebly as words could tell it, or the more happy and fortunate would have thronged with their sympathy and their aid. In many instances the sufferers wept first, and then they cursed. Their vindictive feelings exhibited themselves in rabid politics. And when I hear, as I have heard, of the sufferings and privations of the poor, of provision shops where ha’porths of tea, sugar, butter, and even flour, were sold to accommodate the indigent,—of parents sitting in their clothes by the fireside during the whole night for seven weeks together, in order that their only bed and bedding might be reserved for the use of their large family,—of others sleeping upon the cold hearthstone for weeks in succession, without adequate means of providing themselves with food or fuel (and this in the depth of winter,—of others being compelled to fast for days together, uncheered by any hope of better fortune, living, moreover, or rather starving, in a crowded garret, or damp cellar, and gradually sinking under the pressure of want and despair into a premature grave; and when this has been confirmed by the evidence of their careworn looks, their excited feelings, and their desolate homes,—can I wonder that many of them, in such times of misery and destitution, spoke and acted with ferocious precipitation? (97)

While the narrator begins with the familiar warning that “it is...impossible to describe, or even faintly to picture” the suffering of poverty, she goes on not only to describe it, but also to describe the profound effect she has experienced on “hearing” the same details. The culmination of the passage—“can I wonder”—speaks to the narrator’s own imaginative experiment; she has so felt the “state of distress” of the poor that even while disapproving of their “rabid politics” and “ferocious precipitation” she is nonetheless able to understand and

empathize with these reactions. The paradigm of the narrator's own understanding is instructive to her readers, as is her less than subtle invocation of their Christian duty: even if this suffering is known "so feebly as words could tell it," the narrator predicts, the "happy and fortunate" will (read: should) respond with sympathy and aid.

Even when narrators were not as self-conscious as *Mary Barton's*, their imaginative access to the beliefs, emotions, and thoughts of poor characters demonstrated their empathic work. Third person omniscience and free indirect discourse are proto-empathic techniques, dramatizing narrators' mobility within and between other minds. The narrator of *Mary Barton* was able to broadcast her narrative mobility between rich and poor, a type of imaginative access confirming her own empathic skills. When the Carson's mill closes, the narrator describes the response of both the Carson family and the families of his workers. "There is another side of the picture" (64), she reminds us, signaling her own ability to imagine, and represent, both "views." The narrator of Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* is similarly flexible, seamlessly moving between the "two nations" of the novel's subtitle. The form of the novel emphasizes this mobility; the twin chapters 10 and 11, for instance, both describe dinner parties, but while one is a factory workers' dinner at the "Temple," a local bar, the other is an elegant dinner party at the Fitz Warene estate. A ball at Deloraine House, meanwhile, is coupled by a description of the homeless poor gathered outdoors in Hyde Park. Phrases like "On the same night" (316) and "In the meantime" (318) emphasize the narrator's movement and help orient readers to their own imaginative shifts.

First-person narration signals an even more radical access to the minds of poor characters, as middle-class authors imaginatively "inhabit" and speak from a character's

point of view.<sup>80</sup> This technique was most typical to poetry, like L.E.L.'s "The Dying Child" and Henrietta Tindal's "Cry of the Oppressed," although Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, a fictional autobiography of a "tailor and poet" (the novel's subtitle) also fits this description.<sup>81</sup> Like middle and upper-class narrators, first-person speech calls attention to its own performative quality, flagging the author's imaginative labor and dramatizing the process of imagining oneself in the shoes (and speaking with the voice) of a poor individual. In "The Dying Child," for example, a prostitute laments her own life and the life of her child, resolving to let her baby die rather than live the "life I've known" (23). Readers hear, in her own voice, "what it is like" to experience her anguish. Even as the poem purports to offer an unmediated working-class voice, however, it simultaneously flags its own middle-class production. In the preface to the poem, Landon describes the speaker in the third person—"The woman was in abject misery—that worst of poverty." By calling attention to the fact that the lament is not her own, Landon signals readers to the poem's dramatic, rather than lyrical, identity. Kingsley's multiple prefaces to *Alton Locke* play a similar role, leaving readers with no doubt of Kingsley's own class or his difference from the novel's narrator. In case readers were to forget, Kingsley includes an embedded reminder, in the form of a footnote, in later editions of the book: "It must be remembered that these impressions of, and comments on the universities are not my own. They are simply what clever working men thought about them from 1845 to 1850; a period at which I had the fullest opportunities for knowing the thoughts of working men" (141). Even when authors did not explicitly

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<sup>80</sup> First-person narration was also employed in the abolition movement. The bulk of Amelie Opie's "The Black Man's Lament," for instance, is spoken from the point of view of a black slave. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" is perhaps the most famous English poem with a slave narrator.

<sup>81</sup> Tyndal's poem is an especially interesting example because it speaks not in a single voice but in a collective voice of suffering: "Bondmen, and helots, and serfs were we / Slaves in plantation and stifling mill" (1-2).

differentiate themselves from poor speakers, the very presence of their names and their choice of language (a legible—and audible—marker of class identity) served to differentiate one from the other. Dialogue and speech offer a particular difficulty for sentimental realism; if authors chose to use dialect for working-class speech then characters were marked by their difference (especially if the narrative voice was not in dialect); if they did not use dialect, however, then they risked superimposing their own language on poor characters. In “The Dying Child,” the speaker is ostensibly a poor prostitute, but speaks in educated English (and rhyme!). Kingsley’s solution for *Alton Locke* is a bit tortured; Locke is self-educated so that he can “speak” in Kingsley’s language (and share many of his “views”).

If prefatory material served as external confirmation of authors’ class identity, then the construction of middle and upper-class characters was internal proof. In the novels in particular, characters like Margaret Hale in *North and South*, Louisa Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, Lancelot Smith in *Yeast*, and Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* are defined not by their difference from but their similarity to author and reader. Each of these characters brings his or her own sympathetic point of view to bear on poverty, and readers who encounter poverty through their perspectives are invited to respond in kind. Charles Egremont of *Sybil* is perhaps the most intriguing of these figures. An aristocrat whose family was involved in the dissolution of the monasteries, “the condition of the people was a subject of which he knew nothing” (47). But after meeting Sybil, a “daughter of the people,” her father, and a radical working-class journalist, Egremont realizes how circumscribed his own point of view is. As Egremont learns of the things “which had never crossed his mind” (131), readers also learn, and as they see his response—he feels his “sympathies” become “more lively and more extended” (132)—they are given an example to follow. Tellingly, although Charles shows little interest in social justice as a young man, his physiognomy betrays him: “his

mouth breathed sympathy” (32). His brother, on the other hand, who is no friend of the people, lacks both the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy; he is “devoid of sentiment” and has “no imagination” (43). Egremont takes a radical approach to the project of adopting another point of view; he “becomes” another person—with another class. Resolved to “learn something of [the People’s] condition” (177), and perhaps something of Sybil’s heart, he is convinced that he must disguise his own past. He poses, appropriately, as “a kind of traveler...a reporter” investigating the “real state of the country” (135). As a commoner, he is able to “live without suspicions among my fellow-subjects who were estranged from me” (245), gaining an intimate glimpse into poverty and hearing an “authentic” account of suffering. When “Mr. Franklin” must return to his own identity—and seat in Parliament!—his point of view, and politics, are radicalized, or Tory-ized, as it were.<sup>82</sup>

Although other middle and upper-class characters do not perform empathy so literally, they each gain first-hand knowledge of suffering, gaining access to the homes of the poor and learning about poverty from the poor characters whom they encounter there. They can, in turn, educate the readers of sentimental realism, not only by conveying the information that they have learned but also modeling their own act of learning. By *teaching* about learning about poverty, these characters were useful exemplars of how readers, too, might “bridge” the gulf between their own classed perspective and that of poor individuals. At the same time, readers empathize with those middle- and upper-class authors, narrators, and characters. It might be assumed that this dynamic mutes the effect of empathy across difference by allowing readers to identify with figures who share similar perspectives. On this model, readers’ relationships to poor characters are triangulated through sympathetic

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<sup>82</sup> Disraeli’s political ideals, as evidenced in *Sybil*, were based in the aristocratic obligation to the poor.

intermediaries. But as I argued early in this chapter, narrative empathy is more complex than one single act of perspective taking. Readers of sentimental realism might imagine themselves in the place of authors like Gaskell, characters like Margaret Hale, or narrators like the one in *Mary Barton*, but at the same time imagine themselves in the place of poor characters that they encounter. This dynamic could prove particularly fruitful for readers resistant to empathy with poor characters, who can at least identify with middle-class exemplars of empathic engagement. Readers could sympathize, in other words, with Gaskell's own "deep sympathy with the care-worn men" (xxxv), navigating difference by forging a relationship of similarity.

In closing, I would like to consider one more set of homes, not the homes of the poor that Gaskell represented in her novels, but the homes of her wealthy readers, in which they could remain safely ensconced as they imagined themselves in much different homes within the slums of Manchester. On one hand, these conditions of reading are a barrier to empathy; it is impossible for even for the most sensitive reader to feel fully the experience of suffering when one's own experience of reading is warm and fed and very comfortable. But the very safety and comfort of reading also made it accessible in a way that physical visits to the slums were not. The examples of middle-class characters in sentimental realism are instructive not only for the profound effects of learning about poverty, but also the profound difficulties. Mr. Franklin can gain unfettered access to "the People," but Lord Egremont cannot, however sympathetic he might be to the plight of poverty. Despite Disraeli's political ideals, Egremont's experience suggests that the "great gulf" between classes is enforced not only by the wealthy but by the poor; Sybil, the daughter of the people, is "walled out from sympathy by prejudices and convictions more impassable than all

the mere consequences of class” (246).<sup>83</sup> Other characters face similar obstacles; in *North and South* Bessy Higgins responds to Margaret Hale with obsequy rather than equality; in *Hard Times* Stephen Blackpool is too formal with Louisa Gradgrind to admit any real exchange. These obstacles within personal relationships suggest how the act of reading might actually be more conducive to cognitive and affective perspective taking than personal exchange. Middle-class Victorians would alter any “scene” of poverty by virtue of entering it; even Elizabeth Gaskell, who was welcomed into the homes of poor parishioners, could not see what their lives were like when she was not present. In the act of reading, however, readers can vividly imagine themselves in the spaces of poverty and the place of poor characters without their presence adulterating the scene.

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<sup>83</sup> Significantly, Sybil’s own prejudices are ultimately overcome by her contacts with Egremont and other wealthy people. It is not hatred on the part of the rich, she concludes, but “mutual ignorance between the classes” that has led to the “want of sympathy that unquestionably exists between Wealth and Work in England” (290). I will discuss the significance of this kind of personal exchange in the following chapter. The “radical” potential of Disraeli’s Tory politics is ultimately muted, however, when Sybil herself is revealed to be of noble birth, thus making her marriage to Egremont a marriage of “equals.”

## Chapter Three

### “Separating the sea...into component drops”:<sup>84</sup> The Personification of the Poor

“We are softened by the sight of one hungry child, but hardened by the sight of thousands.”  
James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*

“An orator may discourse very eloquently on injustice in general, and leave his audience cold; but let him state a special case of oppression, and every heart will throb.”  
George Eliot, “Worldliness and Other-Worldliness”

Perhaps more than any other period, Victorian readers enjoyed the powerful sensation of being “intimately acquainted” with fictional persons. In 1856, Victorian critic W. C. Roscoe argued that the development of political democracy and the growth in personal liberties had led to a new interest in character—one’s own character, the characters of others, and, as a consequence, the characters that populated the modern novel. In fact, Roscoe argues, the novel developed in order to satisfy this desire, and character in turn was the defining feature of modern literature: “The examination and representation of character has been the most universal object of modern imaginative literature, its most special characteristic, and its highest excellence” (223).<sup>85</sup> In a review of the state of modern fiction two years later, the *Blackwoods’* critic and author William Henry Smith described the feeling of familiarity with Dickens’ characters as ubiquitous: “Every reader will tell you...that he has made acquaintance with Sam Weller and several other remarkable persons and that he

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<sup>84</sup> *Hard Times*, 119.

<sup>85</sup> Originally published in the *National Review* in 1856; republished in *Poems and Essays* in 1860.

shall never forget them as long as he lives” (60).<sup>86</sup> Smith echoes Roscoe’s apotheosis of character when he contends that readers’ relationships with characters are the single most important element of modern fiction: “There lies the greatest triumph a novelist can have.” Tracing a literary history from *Waverly* to *Pickwick*, Smith argues that “narrative,” or a novel’s sequence of events, has been usurped by “portraiture” (59). Scott may have been a master of plot, but Dickens is a master of persons; even *Pickwick Papers*, whose narrative structure is like “a half-built house, of which one wing only has been completed” (60), is still a triumph because of its characterization. Although Smith credits Dickens’ later novels with better “artistic structure,” his real object of praise is the relationships formed between reader and character: “[W]e are engrossed with a few favourite personages, are delighted when they appear, look with eagerness for their return, and, when the book is closed, have some vague impression that we may possibly catch sight of them somewhere about the world” (60). Trollope echoes this account of reading in his *Autobiography* as he describes the desire of a novelist to “make his readers so intimately acquainted with his characters that the creatures of his brain should be to them speaking, moving, living, human creatures” (123-4). In order to do so, Trollope contends, the author must “know those fictitious personages himself” (124).

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between characterization and narrative empathy and argue that the representation of individuals, one of the most fundamental features of narrative, is central to any account of the ethical effects of literature.<sup>87</sup> Scholars of sentimentalism, in particular, have emphasized several key stylistic and thematic

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<sup>86</sup> This piece of criticism is occasioned by a review of Gustav Freytag’s *Debit and Credit*. The thoughts on the history and state of English literature come in response to the preface by Chevalier Bunson, who places a critical premium on novels’ plots, in particular their *denouements*.

<sup>87</sup> As psychologist Jeffrey Strange defines it, narrative “animates the lives of specific individuals in pursuit of concrete goals...It is this characteristic that sets narratives apart from analytic treatments of issues” (275).

elements—the prevalence of death scenes, for example, the use of biblical allusion and direct address, and the pervasive presence of pathos and didacticism. But at an even more fundamental level, the choice to illuminate a social problem like poverty with an individual's experience heightens the emotional effects of reading. Moreover, while critics of sentimentalism can dismiss the emotion that is so “offensive to the sensibilities of twentieth-century academic critics” (Tompkins 127), the affective appeal of characterization was central to sentimental realism's ethical agenda. This argument is familiar from the feminist rehabilitation of sentimentalism forwarded most notably by Jane Tompkins, but I turn to recent research in moral psychology and behavioral decision theory<sup>88</sup> to substantiate the claim that emotions play a primary role in prompting moral behaviors.

In the following chapter, I suggest that the affective dimension of characterization operated together with the epistemological claims of realism to make readers' feelings for individual characters relevant to poverty at large. Taken together, these two chapters argue that sentimental realism solicited individual compassion for poor characters in order to facilitate “statistical compassion” for the poor.<sup>89</sup> In this chapter, however, I focus on the formal and affective differences between story and proof, anecdote and data, and argue that it is impossible to engender compassion for a statistical set without imagining richly particularized case studies. This chapter's focus on characters' subjectivity, then, is crucially related to the potential for intersubjectivity that is central to my overall project: the

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<sup>88</sup> Important journals in this field include *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* and *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*.

<sup>89</sup> The term statistical compassion was coined by Dr. Walsh McDermott. If individual compassion is felt for a “particular fellow human being,” then statistical compassion is felt for a group of people “whom one can never see as individuals and, indeed, can know only as data on a graph” (National Academy of Sciences 298). This description is from his *Textbook of Medicine*, which is cited in the chapter about McDermott in the National Academy of Sciences Biographical Memoirs. Significantly, McDermott describes statistical or “group” compassion as “imaginative” (298); because we cannot perceive large groups of people we must imagine them.

representation of individuals is necessary for the creation of an imaginative community.

Mary Poovey has dismissed this feature in social problem novels, arguing that the “genre’s conventional focus on individual characters” comes at the expense of “reforming politics or politicizing the novel” (*Social Body* 143). I argue the exact opposite: it is the very focus on individuals that makes the novel—and its artistic kin—such an effective political tool.<sup>90</sup>

### Characters and Emotion

In *The Wrongs of Woman* (1843), Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna explains own her decision to use a fictional account of three families—the Kings, the Smiths, and the Clarkes—in her exposé of “feminine” trades like millinery and dress-making.

The abstract idea of a suffering family does not strongly affect the mind; but let the parties be known to us, let their names call up some familiar images to our view, and certain facts connected with their past lives be vividly brought to our recollection when they are spoken of, we are enabled much more feelingly to enter into their trial. For this purpose, a case of constant recurrence has been fixed on, and the same individuals have been kept in view throughout, in order to engage the reader’s sympathies, while concentrating her attention more effectually than the pages of a formal report, necessarily prolix and full of repetitions, could do. (128-9)

Tonna’s account suggests the intrinsic relationship between characterization—in the most general sense of creating fictional characters—and emotional response. The “abstract idea” of suffering, she maintains, lacks affective power. We might know that poverty exists, but it

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<sup>90</sup> This is not to say that literature and the arts were the sole proprietors of what a young Elizabeth Barrett termed, in her review of Carlyle, that “masterly method of individualizing persons” (*Horne New Spirit of the Age* 398). As is evident from the object of Barrett’s praise, characterization can also describe the rich delineation of nonfictional people. In the mid-nineteenth century in particular there was significant generic “crossover,” so that journalism and social commentary frequently integrated the narrative techniques that proved effective in fiction. Just as novelists incorporated research from empirical studies, ostensibly empirical or positivist texts represented individuals in order to illustrate their social analysis with the subjective experience of imagined or “real” people. A notable example is Henry Mayhew, who complemented the tabular, statistical, and graphic data of *London Labour and the London Poor* with personal anecdotes from his subjects.

is difficult to realize this suffering in our mind, to imagine it and feel it for ourselves, if we do not associate it with particular individuals. “Let[ting] the parties be known to us,” however, lends vivacity to our imagination: the names of the poor “call up some familiar images to our view” and details about their lives are “vividly brought to our recollection.” Indeed, the very act of imagining has an effect that factual knowledge cannot convey; if the “idea” of suffering does not “strongly affect the mind,” then imagining suffering—picturing individuals in distress, “remembering” details about their lives—engages a reader both cognitively and emotionally. Strikingly, Tonna herself employs the language of empathy in her defense of fiction: when we “know” the individuals who suffer, we are able “more feelingly *to enter into* their trial” (my emphasis).<sup>91</sup>

Despite her comparatively negative evaluation of “prolix” formal reports, Tonna herself wrote both expository and fictional prose and included both as editor of the *Christian Lady’s Magazine*. Her most significant piece of nonfiction, *The Perils of the Nation: An Appeal to the Legislature, the Clergy, and the Higher and Middle Classes*, was published just a few months before *The Wrongs of Woman* and documented many of the same abuses chronicled in her fictional work.<sup>92</sup> It is all the more striking, then, that Tonna herself credits stories, and in particular their delineation of individual characters, with the unique ability to “engage the reader’s sympathies.” Immediately preceding her defense of fiction, Tonna describes the respective roles of fictional narrative and factual corroboration.

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<sup>91</sup> Contemporary journalists, politicians, and activists understand the power of stories to compliment more objective—and consequently “dry”—data. The heightened “feeling” of personification was evident to the editors of *The New York Times*, who did not merely report the death count of 9/11 but also contributed substantial column space to personal profiles of the victims. And it is well understood by the fundraising arms of contemporary charity organizations like “Save the Children,” whose campaigns focus not only on horrifying statistics, but on the individual “faces” of poverty.

<sup>92</sup> *The Perils of a Nation* was commissioned by the Committee of the Christian Influence Society, based in large part on Tonna’s extensive contributions to *The Christian Lady’s Magazine* and her role as editor of that journal. Published anonymously, it was misattributed to Robert Benton Seeley, a publisher of the volume, early in the twentieth century.

All that has been described, it may be admitted, is very distressing; but, happily, it is a mere fiction of the writer's imagination. This brings us to the proof. We have fallen far short of the reality—intentionally so—in order to prove how much less than what does actually and systematically occur every day, in all parts of the land, will harrow up the feelings of a benevolent person, when in some degree individualized. (128)

Tonna's "happy" revelation that her story is "a mere fiction" is quickly overturned; the "reality," she assures us, is far worse. But her choice to write from imagination is not a withdrawal from contemporary reality; instead it is a function of readers' diminished response to generalized "proof." She credits her audience with benevolence, but even the most benevolent reader is not equally affected by the reality of their contemporary world—what "actually and systematically" happens "in all parts of the land." When reality is "individualized," however, characters "harrow up the feelings" in a way that factual exposition cannot.<sup>93</sup>

Contemporary research substantiates Tonna's intuitions that abstraction dulls emotional and ethical response. These empirical findings suggest that human perception and cognition are characterized by a fundamental deficiency in our response to large groups, an effect of our evolutionary development in small, face-to-face communities. In fact, our ability to empathize with individual characters is indicative of our perceptual disability when it comes to groups, a condition exacerbated by the social and semantic conditions of "massing" that I will describe in this chapter. Our perception of a group qua group stems from this limiting condition on empathy—because we cannot imagine the subjective

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<sup>93</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe makes a similar point about the relative weakness of "generalities" in *A Key To Uncle Tom's Cabin*, her collection of expository documents that supported her novel. "The atrocious and sacrilegious system of breeding human beings for sale, and trading them like cattle in the market, she writes, "fails to produce the impression on the mind that it ought to produce, because it is lost in generalities." Stowe's observations defend her own use of fiction, in particular its focus on individual characters to illuminate the institution of slavery. Her invocation of cattle in the market is telling; not only does *slavery* transform humans into products to be bought and sold, but so also do the "generalities" used to represent slavery.

experience of individuals, we perceive instead an undifferentiated whole. Sentimental realism capitalized on this psychological bias for individuals with its narrative delineation of poor characters as well as its thematic emphasis on personal relationships. I will focus on three central texts that explore the difficulty of empathizing with groups and the ethical and political force of engaging with individuals—Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856). As with its treatment of narrative perspective, sentimental realism shows a remarkable self-consciousness about the problems associated with perceiving the poor, even as many authors belie their own inability to empathize with working-class groups.

Sentimental realism's emphasis on character is not only pivotal to the genre's affective appeal, it also accounts for many of its signature features: the latent fear of mobs and the crowd that is meliorated through personal contact; the underlying critique of statistics, utilitarianism, and philanthropy as discursive modes that obscure the individual; and narrative resolutions in which social problems are "solved" with highly personal plots such as Mary Barton's and Jem's emigration in *Mary Barton*, Sybil and Egremont's marriage in *Sybil*, or Marian Erle's rescue and redemption in *Aurora Leigh*. This latter feature is one of the most criticized elements of social problem fiction; as Raymond Williams says of the conclusion of *Mary Barton*, "there could be no more devastating solution" (91). Williams' critique lies in the limited purview of these denouements, and indeed, they can feel a bit like bringing Lazarus in from the cold while the rest of the paupers are left begging at the gate. But Williams makes a category mistake about how literature affects social structures. It is not important what happens *within* the novels, but rather how readers' beliefs are shaped by novels such that their own subsequent behaviors will be altered. Contemporary readers were not misled into thinking that poverty was abated by the happy ending of a novel; it might

provide narrative satisfaction but it does not ameliorate the ongoing social problem. In her own discussion of Gaskell's work, Mary Poovey argues that social problem novels "often link their hopes for 'improvement' not to specific government policies but to the utopian potential culturally ascribed to love" (153). Poovey's scorn is evident in her use of *utopian*, a term that implies not only unrealistic goals but also naïve ones. But Poovey underestimates the role of individual attitudinal change in transforming social structures, especially when those changes in attitudes are distributed across a large audience like that of sentimental realism. Placed in the context of the generic commitment to characterization, the endorsement of individual relationships as the basis of political reform is integral to sentimental realism's larger argument about the ethical viability of narrative.<sup>94</sup>

While I have used the term "characterization" thus far, I have subtitled this chapter "The Personification of the Poor" because characters gave a "face" to the social condition of poverty and "personhood" to individuals who were frequently denied that status in representations of the collective poor. While personification is typically a figure of speech reserved for the non-human—we personify when we attribute human qualities to inanimate objects or abstract concepts, not to people—the widespread fear of mob revolt in the mid-nineteenth century altered perceptions of the poor *en masse* in such a way that made them appear less than human.<sup>95</sup> This distortion colored not only perceptions of the poor, but consequently altered interactions with them, so that in *North and South* Margaret Hale could

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<sup>94</sup> Poovey's and Williams' accounts of *Mary Barton's* conclusion are not entirely fair. While it is true that the novel's main cast escapes to Canada, Gaskell also reports significant improvements in the factory system, inspired largely by Carson, the factory owner and father of John Barton's victim. After Carson's meeting with Job Legh, he becomes convinced that future suffering like his can only be prevented by a "perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love...between masters and men" (457), and consequently he endorses working-class education and factory reform.

<sup>95</sup> The more traditional model of personification can be seen in *A Christmas Carol*, where Man's children are personified as "two children; wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable": "Ignorance" and "Want" (66, 7).

enjoin the manufacturer, Thornton, to “[s]peak to your workmen *as if* they were human beings” (175, my emphasis). The personification of poverty re-humanized the poor, giving “character” to representatives of a class. Just as personification in the more conventional sense imbues non-human entities with human qualities, personification as I use it imbues individuals that do not *seem* human with human qualities. Moreover, it constructs poor characters as human insofar as it creates subjective experiences for them. Of course, the means through which authors reveal characters differ widely; characterization in this sense might be direct or indirect, explicit or implicit, and characters in turn can seem “flat” or “round,” two-dimensional or three-dimensional. Regardless of method or depth of characterization, however, the very act of naming a character has significant effects. Like Adam naming the animals, it creates a fictional subjectivity.

### **The Difficulty of Empathizing with Groups**

*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* remains one of the most eloquent arguments for the moral power of sympathy, but Adam Smith also identified significant constraints on our moral imagination. Smith imagines a hypothetical “man of humanity” hearing word that “the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake” (106):

He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general. And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquility, as if no such accident had happened. (106)

Smith's scenario gestures towards each of the empathic biases we have already identified: the "here and now" bias might diminish the man's response to events at a great geographical remove; the similarity bias might dull his response to people who are unlike himself; the familiarity bias might blunt the force of suffering with which he has "no connexion" (106). But Smith's "man of humanity" suggests another empathic limitation—the difficulty of feeling with large groups of people. Smith twice reiterates the massiveness of the disaster—"the ruin of a hundred million of his brethren," "the destruction of that immense multitude" (106)—but it is as if the very massiveness diminishes the spectator's response. Rather than his distress increasing in proportion to the magnitude of loss, it seems instead to have an inverse relationship.<sup>96</sup>

For scholars of moral psychology, conditions that prompt and dissuade ethical behaviors are of obvious significance. Over the last several years, there has been a groundswell of evidence to support the complementary claims that individuals stimulate empathy and helping behaviors and that groups of people discourage them. Behavioral research suggests that individuals invite a fundamentally different kind of information processing than groups, signaled by more extensive processing, clearer impressions, and greater subsequent recall.<sup>97</sup> This difference has significant effects on moral evaluations and behaviors. Thomas Schelling first identified the "identifiable victim effect" in his seminal 1968 analysis of the economic worth of preventing human death, "The Life You Save May be Your Own." Schelling observed that people show a greater willingness to help individual

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<sup>96</sup> Stowe echoes Smith's argument about the relative weakness of numbers in her account of slavery. "It is like the account of a great battle, in which we learn, in round numbers, that ten thousand were killed and wounded, and throw the paper by without a thought" (151-152). Paradoxically, it is the vastness of slavery that "fails to produce the impression on the mind;" the sheer magnitude of loss minimizes our response.

<sup>97</sup> See Hamilton and Sherman, "Perceiving Persons and Groups" and Susskind et al, "Perceiving Individuals and Groups: Expectancies, Dispositional Inferences, and Causal Attributions."

victims over “statistical” victims, even when it deviates from economic rationality. Numerous empirical studies have corroborated Schelling’s predictions and shown that statistics have a relatively weak impact on ethical behaviors. Paul Slovic describes these findings in “If I look at the mass I will never act’: Psychic Numbing and Genocide,” in which he argues that humans are characterized by a fundamental psychological deficiency when it comes to the perception of groups. Slovic’s title, taken from a statement by Mother Teresa, indicates the strong correlation between perception and behavior; because humans cannot perceive masses of people as “psychologically coherent units” (89), they are not moved to intervene in large-scale suffering. While Slovic focuses on mass murder and genocide, his findings apply equally well to widespread social problems like poverty, starvation, and disease, in which it is impossible, to use Tonna’s language, for each victim to be “known to us.”<sup>98</sup>

The question for behavioral decision theory has been why, given that most people will exert great effort to help an individual who is suffering, there is diminished compassion and exertion for groups of suffering people? As Slovic puts it, “most people are caring and will exert great effort to rescue ‘the one’ whose needy plight comes to their attention. These same good people, however, often become numbly indifferent to the plight of ‘the one’ who is ‘one of many’” (80).<sup>99</sup> The answer seems to lie in dual-process models of human cognition, which have proliferated in neuroscience and cognitive psychology over the last

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<sup>98</sup> In a similar vein, scholars of modern warfare have argued that the extreme violence of modern conflict is not merely a function of “improved” technology but also the lack of identifiable victims. See, for example, Jonathan Glover’s *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*.

<sup>99</sup> This phrase calls to mind Alex Woloch’s *The One Vs. The Many*. But where Woloch is comparing minor characters to protagonists, Slovic’s focus is on one identified victim as opposed to the group of victims of which they are a part. In terms of my treatment of narrative, I am interested in the effects of individual characters who are enumerated as “one” among a much larger social group.

two decades.<sup>100</sup> Researchers have identified two systems of cognition, a more rapid affective or experiential system that is centered on emotions and encoded in images and narratives, and a slower analytic or deliberative system centered on logic and reasoning and often encoded in numbers and abstract symbols. While humans regularly employ both systems of cognition, the affective or experiential system has been shown to play a substantial role in decision making, particularly in motivating behaviors. For this reason, dual-process models are playing an increasingly important role in contemporary theories of moral judgment, which many researchers now believe is primarily determined by unconscious or affective responses rather than conscious and rational deliberations about what is right.

This model of moral judgment indicates the pivotal role of emotion in motivating ethical behaviors, but the affective system also suffers from fundamental deficiencies like the “impoverished meaning” (Slovic 86) associated with large groups. Scholars have offered an evolutionary explanation for this perceptual and cognitive shortcoming. Because of the localized, immediate dangers of early human life, our affective system of processing (which is located in the relatively early limbic system) did not evolve to help us respond to distant, “massive” problems like those conveyed by statistics. Our analytic system of processing, on the other hand (which is located in the more recently evolved neocortex), can process statistical information and complex evidence but does not prompt the kind of affective response that motivates spontaneous helping behaviors. As evolutionary biologist Mark Hauser argues in his own compelling case for an innate moral instinct, this kind of “appeal to our evolutionary history” can help resolve “some of the tension between [responses to an]

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<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgement,” Epstein, “Integration of the Cognitive and the Psychodynamic Unconscious,” and Kahneman, “A Perspective on Judgement and Choice: Mapping Bounded Rationality.”

injured child and...starving children” (*Moral Minds* 10). Affect inspires action but is limited by size; analysis can comprehend size but does not prompt action.<sup>101</sup>

If emotions are a primary motivation in decision making in general and helping behaviors in particular, then rhetorical and representational strategies that intensify emotional response are particularly significant for the study of ethics. Slovic identifies two cognitive mechanisms that are central to the affective system and triggered by individuals: imagery, which includes visual images as well as “words, sounds, smells, memories, and products of our imagination,” and attention, which is greater for individuals and loses “focus and intensity” when targeted to groups (83). Together, imagery and attention produce feelings, which in turn help motivate helping behaviors. Given the importance of imagery, it is unsurprising that vivid and concrete details about specific cases are key in prompting emotional responses, and this will prove especially significant given our discussion of individualized narratives. But even without vivid detail, humans respond more strongly to individuals, a finding that suggests why “two-dimensional” characters can still have a significant impact on readers’ attitudes. In “Helping a Victim or Helping *the* Victim: Altruism and Identifiability,” Deborah Small and George Loewenstein demonstrated that merely having a person “determined” *as* an individual significantly affects helping behaviors. Participants were asked if they would like to donate funds to a “victim” who had lost money. The only difference between test groups was that one was asked how much they would like

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<sup>101</sup> The next horizon of moral theory might very well be biology and neuroscience. In a recent article in *Nature*, researchers including Hauser and noted neuroscientist Antonio Damasio found that patients with damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain strongly associated with emotion, demonstrated an abnormally “utilitarian” pattern of moral judgement, evaluating aggregate welfare more highly than “emotionally aversive behaviors” like killing one person to save multiple other people. These findings not only confirm the significant role of emotion in moral judgment but also suggest the ways in which utilitarian evaluations of morality might be fundamentally irreconcilable with normal human cognition. See Koenigs et al, “Damage to the prefrontal cortex increases utilitarian moral judgements.”

to donate before they picked out an ID number for the victim; the other was asked after they picked out the ID number. Even though participants knew nothing about the victims, this very weak form of identifiability had a substantial impact on the level of contribution.<sup>102</sup> Israeli psychologists Tehila Kogut and Ilana Ritov have shown that added detail intensifies response. But while providing a child's name, age, and image elicits greater contributions than an unidentified child, it has virtually no effect on contributions to a group of children identified with the same information, which they attribute to the difficulty of empathizing with groups.<sup>103</sup> In order to test this hypothesis, Kogut and Ritov also measured emotional responses to victims and found a strong correlation between reported distress, which they associate with subjects' empathy, and helping behaviors. Loewenstein and Small also argue that decreased altruism is a function of the limitations of empathy, concluding in "The Scarecrow and the Tin Man: The Vicissitudes of Sympathy and Human Caring" that unidentified or statistical victims are "more difficult to imagine and empathize with, and hence are less likely to elicit sympathy and aid" (119).

Taken together, these findings can help us understand the potential power of vividly imagined narratives, for good and ill. Because our moral feelings are constrained by psychological limitations, portraits of individuals can help evoke affective and ethical

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<sup>102</sup> In a comparable field study, potential donors received a letter requesting money for Habitat for Humanity. One group was told that the recipient family "has been selected," another that they "will be selected." The previous group gave significantly more to the organization, indicating that a concrete family inspired more caring. In a related study ("The Devil You Know"), Small and Loewenstein found that people also demonstrate more punitive behavior towards identified wrongdoers than unidentified ones, suggesting that the identified victim effect is applicable to emotions and actions beyond sympathy and caring.

<sup>103</sup> "The 'Identified Victim' Effect: An Identified Group, or Just a Single Individual" describes willingness to help in lab conditions; "The Singularity Effect of Identified Victims in Separate and Joint Evaluations" reproduces their earlier findings with actual contributions. In an unpublished follow-up study, Västfjäll, Peters, and Slovic demonstrated that their results hold true for a group as small as two. Slovic describes their conclusions in "Psychic Numbing and Genocide": Emotional engagement is at the greatest when the number of lives is one, begins to decline at two, and "collapses at some higher level" when the number of lives becomes merely a statistic (90).

responses to social problems that might not otherwise trigger a response. However, our ethical behaviors can also become distorted, as when we give disproportionately to one individual rather than, say, combating national or global poverty.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, our relative susceptibility to vivid cases means that anecdotes can strongly affect readers' attitudes and beliefs, but it also means that we often give disproportionate weight to stories, regardless of whether or not they accurately represent a larger social phenomenon.<sup>105</sup>

Sentimental realism can be critiqued on these grounds, especially given the vivid portraits of labor and mob organizers that almost certainly skewed the perceptions of Victorian readers. But sentimental realism also helped readers navigate the crowded social landscape of mid-nineteenth century England, effectively creating "identified victims" for readers who could not otherwise perceive them. In the following section, I will compare the discursive and sociological effects of "massing" with sentimental realism's personified representations of poverty. If massing the poor creates a uniform cohort undifferentiated by personality, then literature's ability to isolate and vividly represent one individual amongst the multitudes allowed readers to distinguish between members of that cohort and subsequently feel with an individual who is poor. The texts I examine guide readers through imaginative experiments in which their focus could narrow from the whole to the part, from

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<sup>104</sup> For behavioral decision theorists, this result is especially problematic because it typically does not maximize social benefits. A discouraging follow-up study by Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic ("Sympathy and Callousness") showed that informing people about the typical discrepancies in contributions to identified and statistical victims succeeded only in diminishing contributions to the former, not increasing contributions to the latter.

<sup>105</sup> An early study to this effect (Hamill et al, "Insensitivity to Sample Bias") demonstrated that reading a vivid account of a single welfare recipient had a stronger effect on readers' attitudes than probative statistics about welfare recipients, a finding that held true even when readers were informed that the story of welfare abuse was not typical. These results suggest that humans regularly make unwarranted generalizations about entire populations from vivid examples. Philosopher Hilary Kornblith describes the fatal flaw in this kind of extrapolation: "We tend to draw inductive inferences on the basis of extraordinary small samples" (90).

the group to just one person. As the psychological research that I have described suggests, this kind of narrative focus gives emotional weight to an otherwise abstract social condition.

**“Let us now return to individuals”<sup>106</sup>**

The very ubiquity of characters in narratives can make it more difficult to recognize their effects. But it is the comparison of stories with other discursive modes that makes the effects of characterization most evident. In the mid-nineteenth century, poverty was not only the topic of fiction, poetry, and the visual arts; journalism, government reports, social commentary, and statistics all grappled with the best way to represent contemporary suffering. Although the content of narrative and exposition frequently overlapped, their form—as well as their effects—were profoundly different. Compare, for example, the “terrifying statistics of differential mortality” (Briggs *Social History* 246), which readers could have encountered in Hector Gavin’s 1848 treatise *Sanitary Ramblings*, with a vignette about a poor child dying of hunger, which the same readers might encounter that year in *Mary Barton*. The “genre” of statistics means that its representations of human lives are by their very nature generic, based on generalities quantified with numbers. Gavin’s tables and charts state a powerful empirical generalization—poorer people live shorter lives—but the novel dramatizes those lives that are only numeric counters in Gavin’s graph, as a series of working-class characters die: Mary Barton’s mother and brother in childbirth, the young Wilson twins, George Wilson, Alice Wilson, John Barton, and Mary’s aunt Esther. More importantly, Gaskell’s novel helps readers imagine the experience of John Barton, who watches his only son fall ill from scarlet fever, falter from his lack of food, and die while the employer who has left the family without an income prepares for a celebration. An

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<sup>106</sup> *Mary Barton*, 203.

exceptionally empathic reader might be able to simulate his experience from reading Gavin's report, but *Mary Barton* guides its audience in imaginative work: What is it like to lose a child? What is it like to be unable to succor them in illness? What is it like to watch others thrive while your child dies?

The answers to these questions (what is it like?) result in the kind of knowledge that is the basis of empathy—what philosophers call phenomenological knowledge, or “knowledge of what it is like.” To return to the comparison with Gavin's report, the empirical text might convey “knowledge that” (knowledge that life expectancy decreases with poverty, for example). A fully realized narrative with individuated characters, however, can convey knowledge of what it—a son's life, and death—would be like. Noël Carroll has described the difference between these two kinds of knowledge and argued that phenomenological knowledge is the unique ethical contribution of art: “The first presents the fact; the second suggests the flavor” (“Art and Ethical Criticism” 362). Of course, fiction can also convey expository or factual knowledge, as is evident in Carroll's example of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel argues *that* slavery is evil. But its particular value lies in its presentation of the “feeling” of slavery: “By providing richly particularized episodes of cruelty and inhumanity—of families callously sundered and savage beatings—the novelist engages the reader's imagination and emotions, thereby giving the reader a ‘feel’ for what it was like to live in slave times” (362). Critical to Carroll's description is the necessity for specificity; it is “richly *particularized* episodes” that carry imaginative weight. Tellingly, the specificity of literature is related to the very cognitive and affective dimensions that characterize empathy; it “engages the reader's *imagination* and *emotions*” (my italics).

Often sentimental realism entailed its own translation of “rational” or empirical texts into emotional, imaginative ones. Benjamin Disraeli famously made extensive use of blue

books and parliamentary reports, but a qualitative change occurs in the translation of the facts of poverty into the story of *Sybil*. As we can see in both Gaskell's and Disraeli's novels, "fictionalization" does not entail changing facts, but representing them as the lived experience of individuals. In his description of tommy shops (proprietary shops run by employers), for example, the facts Disraeli conveys are almost identical to those one would find in a blue book report: tommy shops involved long lines, sparse rations, coerced purchases, and high prices. But in Disraeli's treatment these facts are seen through the eyes of Mrs. Page and Mrs. Grisby, Liza Gray and Mrs. Mullins—hungry, tired, impatient, and desperate for respect. Factual detail is translated into their personal narrative, and the effect is heartrending.

It is difficult to think of a narrative that does not represent individuals in some form. We need only look so far as the parable of Dives and Lazarus—it is not a story of the rich and the poor; it is a story of a rich man and a poor man. For much of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, however, poor characters were either excluded from literature altogether or so generalized and abstracted that they existed more as types than tokens.<sup>107</sup> In setting out to study representations of poverty in the late-eighteenth century, Sandra Sherman began by asking why, despite widespread economic distress and an outpouring of expository literature on the subject, there were so few vivid portraits of poverty in the novels of the period. The answer, Sherman argues in *Imagining Poverty: Quantification and the Decline of Paternalism*, lies in "the new, impersonal modalities for rendering populations" (2) that emerged with the Industrial revolution. Sherman's work considers a wide range of documents—"soup-house reports, workhouse accounts, scales calibrating bread and work, experiments with 'cheap' foods, serial budgets reducing the poor to ledger entries, officious

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<sup>107</sup> In the type/token distinction drawn by philosophers, the former term refers to a category or class, the latter to a particular individual or item within that category.

recommendations from the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor” (11)—but their diversity is belied by their uniform effect: “Readers were encouraged to imagine the poor (or, rather, left little choice but to imagine them) as a uniform cohort configured by numbers, uninflected by personal anecdote” (3). Together, the quantification of poverty “submerge[d] individual narrative—subjectivity—in statistics, input/output ratios, and institutional accounts that flattened personal distinctions” (3). Even early social problem novels either did not attempt or did not succeed in giving subjectivity to poor characters. While Sherman considers *Caleb Williams* the most important novel-of-purpose at the end of the eighteenth-century, she still claims that Godwin portrays laborers “in just two dimensions” (19).<sup>108</sup>

Fiction of the mid-nineteenth century does not always escape this flaw; a common critique of Tonna, for example, is that her characters are “generic types rather than fleshed-out individuals” (Gibson 315). But the attempt to represent poverty not as an abstract condition but as an individual experience is one of the key features of sentimental realism as a genre. “That these writers could even contemplate the poor as central, individualized characters,” Sheila Smith proclaims, “establishes the period” (3). Tracing this development in *Making a Social Body*, Mary Poovey argues that the emphasis on the individual in the fiction of the 1840s was a critical response to the aggregating discourses popular in the 1830s, in particular political economy and social analysis.<sup>109</sup> As Poovey puts it, social and political economists privileged “normative abstractions and calculations about aggregates” over “a

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<sup>108</sup> Arnold Kettle critiques the “Godwinian novelists” along these same lines: “The weakness of their novels is that they are disastrously and often ludicrously abstract. Again and again, with Holcroft and Charlotte Smith, with Mary Hays and even Godwin himself, one has the sense that what is being written about is not life but ideas about life. Even when they become involved with a specific social situation...they manage to dehydrate the reality into an abstract generalization” (172).

<sup>109</sup> See in particular Chapter 7, “Homosexuality and the Psychological: Disraeli, Gaskell, and the Condition-of-England Debate.” This essay was first published in *The Columbia History of the English Novel* in 1994 and republished in *Making a Social Body* the following year.

mode of representation that individualized characters and elaborated feelings” (*Social Body* 133). In response, novels “abandoned abstractions for the kind of individualizing narratives that were conventional” to fiction (153). Poovey also attributes this shift to conventional expectations of romance, the “conventional site of readerly identification by the 1840s” (153).<sup>110</sup> Certainly romance plots are significant to fiction throughout the nineteenth century and social problem literature is no exception, but I would like to propose a different account of sentimental realism’s personification of poverty, one that responds not only to aggregating discourses but also to the new demographic realities of urban life which threatened to obscure the individuals sentimental realism wanted to represent.

The well-rehearsed statistics of population growth in the nineteenth century are widely known, but it is difficult to conceive of how profound a change they represent (at least in part because of the psychological limitations I have discussed). Between 1831 and 1871, roughly the years between the first two Reform Bills, the population grew from 13.9 million to 20.0 million inhabitants. At the same time the percentage of people living in rural areas steadily dropped, with much of the population coalescing in cities and large towns (Briggs *Social History* 245). This new concentration of people profoundly changed the English social landscape, so that in 1843 the *Edinburgh Review* proclaimed, “Our great cities have extended with a rapidity wholly unexampled” (77: 193). In the north of England, mill and factory towns were transformed both by the new industries and the migration of the Industrial Revolution. In 1745, Manchester was a small town with 17,000 residents; by 1801 that number had grown to 70,000; and between that year and 1851 it grew to 303,000

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<sup>110</sup> Poovey presents an explicitly gendered argument; political economy, she argues, was “considered a masculine epistemology, while the aesthetic appreciation of concrete particulars and imaginative excursions were considered feminine” (133). This argument seems especially forced, however, when one considers the incredible popularity of Dickens, not to mention Kingsley, Disraeli, Hood, and Redgrave, each of whom used the vivid portraits of individuals to heighten emotional response.

(Newsome 22). Between 1801 and 1891 the number of towns with a population of over 20,000 inhabitants more than quadrupled, from fifteen to sixty-three (*Social History* 194), and the number of towns with a population of over 100,000 inhabitants grew from zero to twenty-three (Briggs *Victorian Cities* 59).<sup>111</sup> London, meanwhile, was the largest city in the world and growing ever larger. Between 1841 and 1891 its population more than doubled, from 1,873,676—11.75% of the total population—to 4,232,118—14.52% of the total population (*Victorian Cities* 59). Hyppolyte Taine registered its awe-inspiring size in 1862: “Three million five hundred thousand inhabitants: it adds up to twelve cities the size of Marseilles, ten as big as Lyons, two the size of Paris, in a single mass...Enormous, enormous—that is the word which recurs all the time” (cited in Newsome, 22). John Plotz puts it quite simply in the opening of his definitive study of the “the crowd” in the first half of the nineteenth century: “Quantity changed the quality of the city’s life” (1).

William Powell Frith’s popular paintings of the newly crowded English landscape help capture the perceptual effects of this crowding. Paintings like “The Derby Day” (1856) and “The Railway Station” (1862) are overwhelming for their sheer size and even more so for their sheer numbers of people. Each painting has over one hundred figures on canvases that are larger than grown men. On first glance, the numbers baffle perception. People become merely shapes, marks of light and dark, parts of a whole organism that fills the bottom half of the canvas. As a spectator one can parse the painting, slowly scanning the horizon to differentiate the various figures and decipher clues to their identity (clothing, behavior, facial expressions). This is a privilege, however, retained for the artistic gaze; if one were actually observing Derby Day or the railway station (and it would be a difficult task

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<sup>111</sup> Ironically, because of the technical qualifications for a city in the nineteenth century, many of the new industrial cities were not cities at all: Manchester did not become a city until 1853, Birmingham in 1896, Liverpool in 1880, and Leeds in 1893 (Briggs *Social History* 32)

to find a vantage point to do so), it would be virtually impossible to see all of the participants. From within the crowd itself this problem would be even more pronounced. Even as a spectator to the painting, it takes a conscientious effort to differentiate figure from figure. It is worth noting that Frith himself needed individuals to pose for him in his studio; it was impossible for him to perceive, much less represent, “the crowd” without isolating its constitutive parts. One of the reasons why the paintings *can* be accessed, on careful examination, in a way that the actual crowd cannot, is Frith’s own artistic differentiation of bodies.

As I have described in the previous chapter, the segregation of working-class and wealthy neighborhoods further obscured contemporary poverty. At the same time, much of the linguistic apparatus that surrounded poverty created a threatening homogeneity among the poor, at least to middle and upper-class Victorians who observed poverty from afar. Collective terms such as “the people,” “the masses,” and “the mob” constructed poor individuals as part of a massive whole; metonymic identifications like “the hands” effaced their personality in favor of their productivity; and metaphors that conflated the poor with their “bestial” or “monstrous” brutality and “mechanical” capabilities obfuscated human variation behind various forms of dehumanized uniformity. Even the terms “poverty” and “the poor” semantically conceal the people they describe; by emphasizing only their shared experience individual identities are submerged into group affiliation.<sup>112</sup> Categories like “the masses” not only imply uniformity, but also create a feeling of alterity and difference. Raymond Williams has cautioned us to this effect: “The masses are always the others, whom we don’t know, and can’t know...I do not think of my relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances, as masses; we none of us can or do” (*Culture and Society* 299). By

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<sup>112</sup> Mary Poovey makes a similar point about representations of the social body, “an aggregate that effaces the individuality and agency of poor people” (137).

“convert[ing] the majority of one’s fellow human beings into masses,” he continues, they are converted into “something to be hated or feared” (300). As early as the 1840s a Leeds clergyman was cautioning his readers about the deleterious effects of the term “masses”: “Our judgments are distorted by this phrase,” he warned. “We unconsciously glide into a prejudice. We have gained a total without thinking of the parts. It is a heap, but it has strangely become indivisible” (Briggs *Victorian Cities* 62).

The distancing, menacing effects of terms like “the masses” emerge from—and contributed to—the perception of the poor and working classes as a potentially threatening whole. Signs of combination and revolt were feared throughout the nineteenth century, and nearly all representations of large groups of working-class and poor people are informed by anxieties about revolution, riots, and the wrath of the monstrous or bestial mob.<sup>113</sup> James Kay, an ardent supporter of reform, betrayed his own fears when he described Chartism as “an armed political monster” (*Recent Measures* 230), and in “Locksley Hall” Tennyson represents the Chartist mobs as a lion waiting to attack: “Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion, creeping nigher, / Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire” (139-40). Despite sentimental realism’s commitment to the sympathetic representation of poor individuals, it shares the fear of revolt and revolution ubiquitous in the middle and upper classes. This disconnect between sympathetic individuals and the threatening group goes to the heart of the imaginative limits of empathy. As A. Susan Williams observes, the ruling classes “were afraid not of the individual worker, but of the ‘mob’ that he belonged to: It was not the rat-like nature of a single working man that worried Dickens, but the idea that the rodent poor swarmed from ‘Fifty thousand lairs’” (101, citing *Little Dorrit* 68).

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<sup>113</sup> This anxiety was not only a conspicuous feature of the social and political landscape but of the physical. As historian David Newsome observes, fears of the mob can be diagnosed in the urban architecture of the time; the grand London houses are “little fortresses” replete with waterless moats, heavily shuttered windows, and iron railings (49).

In the novels in particular, representations of trade unions and mobs are marked by the kind of depersonalized, animalistic, monstrous imagery that was typical to the nineteenth century. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna might have been sympathetic to the Smith family in *The Wrongs of Woman* and the heroine of *Helen Fleetwood*, but she betrayed her own fears of the mob in her reactionary anti-trade union novel *Combination* (1832). Caroline Norton was a fervent defender of the poor and oppressed in *Voice from the Factories* and *The Child of the Islands*, but “Letters to the Mob” reveals her opposition to Chartist demands. Dickens was widely regarded as the most important champion of the poor, but his fear of the mob appears throughout his career, in the menacing, “maddened” labourers in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the bestial mob in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the demonic rioters in *Barnaby Rudge*. Even Elizabeth Gaskell, who stands above most mid-century authors in her sympathetic appreciation of the working classes of Manchester, is subject to her own suspicions of trade unions and the mob. In *North and South* the striking laborers threaten not only the factory owner but their own fellow workers, and in *Mary Barton*, a meeting among strikers results in the horrific resolution to kill one of the masters of the factories. “Combination,” the narrator concludes, “is an awful power” (202).

Most tellingly, representations of the mob were characterized by violent ruptures in narrative empathy for the poor. The perception of the poor as an undifferentiated and threatening mass was a critical block to empathy on the part of authors and readers alike, undermining intersubjective relationships and inhibiting the imaginative work necessary to take up another person’s point of view. In novels like Brontë’s *Shirley*, Gaskell’s *North and South*, and Disraeli’s *Sybil*, there is a shift in perspective immediately preceding mob attacks so that readers identify not with the poor but the victims whom they attack. Noticeably, each of the perspectives is female: Caroline Helstone and Shirley witness the attack on the

mill and their report is flavored not only by their own fears but their sympathies with and concern for the millowner; Margaret Hale arrives at the Thornton house just in time for the uprising of Thornton's workers, thus placing her not on the outside, with the workers, but on the inside, with the manufacturer and his family; and immediately before the mob's attack on Mowbray Castle, Sybil, the figurative daughter of the people and the biological daughter of one of their most important leaders, Walter Gerard, visits the castle and is thus within with the aristocracy rather than outside with the poor. The vulnerability of the characters accentuates the dangers of the collective poor, as Caroline and Shirley huddle exposed in the woods, Margaret Hale is hit by a rock by the rioting workers, and Sybil is faced by a "band of drunken ruffians" who physically accost her.

Many critics have read these threatening depictions of working-class groups as an inherently conservative stance, suggesting that any sympathetic portraits of lower-class individuals are belied by the menacing bodies of the collective poor.<sup>114</sup> And indeed, it seems contradictory, if unsurprising given the cultural climate, that authors invested in forging imaginative intimacy between the classes would resort to intimidating representations of the masses. But these suspicions of the mob are also a function of the formal and thematic commitment to the individual that characterizes sentimental realism. The mob subsumes individual beliefs, desires, and feelings under the power of the whole; "mob mentality" describes just such a process, whereby the individual is overwhelmed and swept away by the group. On this view, unions and mobs were not only threatening to the middle and upper classes, but to individuals who were themselves in "the masses." It is not surprising, then, that Job Legh and Stephen Blackpool resist the labor unions in *Mary Barton* and *Hard Times*, that Kingsley's tailor and poet is himself a victim of the mob in *Alton Locke*, or that one of

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<sup>114</sup> See, for example, Patrick Brantlinger's "The Case Against Trade Unions in Early Victorian Fiction."

the most stirring declarations against the mob is made by a strikebreaker in *North and South*: “Yo’ may be kind hearts, each separate; but once banded together, yo’ve no more pity for a man than a wild hunger-maddened wolf” (154).

More importantly, even as mid-century authors betray their own fear of the mob they simultaneously demonstrate an astute awareness of the ways that large groups distort perception and inspire fear. In other words, despite—or perhaps because of—their own failings, mid-century authors illuminate the perceptual problems that arose from “massing” and help readers discern individuals among the threatening whole. It is not coincidental that Gaskell’s edict in *Mary Barton*, “So much for generalities,” follows her description of the “awful power” (203) of combination. Gaskell’s own fears of the mob were mitigated by the personal experiences of John and Mary Barton. “Let us now return,” she resolves, “to individuals” (203).

Despite his own fears of the mob, Dickens offers one of the most insightful accounts of the perceptual effects of massing in his portrait of Louisa Gradgrind in *Hard Times*. Raised in careful seclusion from the working classes of Coketown, Louisa has no conception of individuals among the workers in her industrial town. She knows of the poor only by “hundreds and by thousands” (119), a number so vast that it is difficult to conceive of, and even more difficult to imagine the individuals it contains. Accordingly, she sees them only as a crowd, “passing to and from their nests, like ants or beetles” (119), and she is as unable to distinguish one person from another as she would be to distinguish one insect from another. Dickens gestures towards the threat of revolt contained in the mass: the crowd was “something that occasionally rose like a sea. And Louisa “had scarcely thought more of separating them into units, than of separating the sea itself into component drops” (119). The metaphors Dickens employs—ants, beetles, the sea—each evoke the uniform

similarity of the poor. The sea is composed of individual units—“component drops” of water—but from a distance the parts are subsumed into the whole and it appears to be a single entity, identified by a singular noun. From Louisa’s perspective, the poor have no discernable faces or identities; they are a whole, a total, a heap. Dickens associates this effect with the generic term “the Hands,” the name given to the “multitude of Coketown” (52). Again, individual units are merged into their common identity, signified by the elimination of individual names in favor of a mass appellation. The term is especially offensive for Dickens because it effaces personality in favor of potential productivity. The Hands, he quips, are “a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs” (53). The capitalization of the term indicates Dickens’ awareness that it is not just a common but also a proper noun; the workers have been merged under the fundamental signifier of identity.

Louisa’s distorted perception is due in large part to her Gradgrindian upbringing. In her father’s school the poor appear only as nameless counters; in one of Mr. M’Choakumchild’s exercises, for example, individuals who starve to death are transformed into a fraction,  $25/1,000,000$ . When the teacher argues that this represents a good percentage of survival, Sissy Jupe, the novel’s moral center (and a hopeless student in Gradgrind’s school), can think only of those who perished: “And my remark was—for I couldn’t think of a better one—that I thought it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million. And that was wrong too” (48). This is part of Dickens’ larger critique of utilitarianism, which he perceived as reducing human experience to equations that cast up happiness as a cost/benefit analysis. The fact that Sissy Jupe cannot master the “elements of Political Economy” (46) taught at the school

is evidence of her own ethical principles; asked for the “first principle” of the science, she replies with the “absurd” answer, “To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me” (46). In stark contrast to Sissy’s reliance on the golden rule, Gradgrind himself spends his second career as a politician proving, “in the main, that the Good Samaritan was a Bad Economist” (160).<sup>115</sup> The reforms of the “national dustmen” in Parliament were futile, Dickens suggests, because they cannot see the individual, and do not even try. Mr. Gradgrind “had no need to cast an eye upon the teeming myriads of human beings around him, but could settle all their destinies on a slate, and wipe out all their tears with one dirty little bit of sponge” (75). Stephen Blackpool’s response is Dickens’ own. The problem lies in “rating ‘em [the working class] as so much Power, and reg’latin ‘em as if they was figures in a soom, or machines; wi’out souls to weary and souls to hope” (114). The narrator makes a similar critique: “So many hundreds Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators 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” (56). “Supposing,” he concludes, “we were to reserve our arithmetic for material objects, and to govern those awful unknown quantities by other means!” (56). Tellingly, Dickens considered three other names for the novel, each of which captures this quantification of human experience: *Two and Two are Four*, *Simple Arithmetic*, and *A Mere Question of Figures*.

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<sup>115</sup> Dickens cements the association between Gradgrindery and political economy by naming the two younger Gradgrind children Adam Smith and Malthus. Although both Smith and Malthus believed in the long-term benevolence of their positions, critics in the mid-nineteenth century were quick to accuse them of inhumane and inhuman neglect. Dickens reviled Malthus for his matter-of-fact arguments against interventionism and amelioration, and he believed that Smith’s laissez-faire philosophy (or as Stephen Blackpool describes it, “Let ‘em be. Let everything be. Let all sorts alone” (54)) authorized negligence and ignored the suffering of individuals in favor of the health of the economy.

In addition to the discursive effects of quantification, Louisa's lack of discernment epitomizes the perceptual disorder endemic to the urban landscape. If the semantics related to "the masses" obscured the individual linguistically, then the social phenomenon of massing did so tangibly. Surrounded by vast numbers of people, the experience of many in the Victorian city was a profound sensation of anonymity and isolation. The surrounding people were similarly anonymous, singular units in the sometimes oppressively proliferating crowd. Paradoxically, as individuals were crowded together they appeared to disappear or dissolve, no longer people with identities, histories, and names but sheer numbers. In the opening of *Bleak House*, London is filled with "tens of thousands" of foot passengers "jostling" for place (11).<sup>116</sup> The landscape bears the mark of this multitude, who have been "adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud...and accumulating at compound interest" (11). This accretion of dirt is a physical reminder of the multiplying population; like the mud that is figured with a mathematical system of deposits and interest, the people have been reduced, or rather expanded, to exponentially swelling numbers. Dickens frequently employed "liquid" metaphors to capture this sensation of crowds of people who seemingly melt into one another. And if Coketown was a "sea," then London was an "ocean" (*Bleak House* 233). Jo the crossing sweep sits with "the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams (*Bleak House* 291); Nicholas Nickleby watches "streams of people apparently without end [who] poured on and on" (307). The individual, Dickens fears, is an insignificant drop in this vast sea of people, and he risks being lost in its wake. Jo's own invisibility is evident in the novel, as he disappears time and time again. Little Charley, too, disappears "like a dewdrop in an ocean" as she "melt[s] into the city's strife and sound" (233). It is only because Esther and Jarndyce—and Dickens—rescue her from this

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<sup>116</sup> In *North and South*, Margaret Hale similarly imagines "the grand inarticulate roar of tens of thousands of busy men" (54).

anonymity that she is not lost altogether. In *Dombey and Son*, meanwhile, a stream of travelers fear just this sort of disappearance. On their way to London, they “gaz[e] fearfully at the huge town before them, as if foreboding that their misery there would be but as a drop of water in the sea, or as a grain of sea-sand on the shore” (404). Dickens’ repetition of the metaphor—a drop in the sea, a dewdrop in the ocean—indicates his concern. How can the individual retain her individuality in the vast numbers of the city? How can she be seen by the people who stream by? These travelers fear becoming one of the masses that Louisa Gradgrind was unable to distinguish from one another.<sup>117</sup> Tellingly, Dickens’ readers can focus on the individual only because of his own narrative attention. Because Jo and Nicholas are at the center, the crowd seems to split around them, flowing by “in two streams.” Without this narrative focus, however, they would simply become part of the flood.

In working-class neighborhoods, with their dense populations and uniform architecture, discerning individuals proves especially problematic, a difficulty apparent in the frequent comparison of slums with hives. In Disraeli’s description of Wodgate in *Sybil*, for example, he describes the “thronged” streets: “an infinite population kept swarming to and from the close courts and pestilential cul-de-sacs that continually communicated with the streets by narrow archways, like the entrance of hives” (85-86). With the human crowds transformed into swarming insects and their homes imagined as countless cells of one larger structure, slums seemed, to the unacquainted eye, to be filled with thousands of people just

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<sup>117</sup> An author in *Bentley’s Magazine* echoed this liquid imagery: “The ocean stream of life flows down the Strand, whose courts, lanes and alleys, are so many creeks, and inlets....The rolling masses that flood a living tide along London streets...have a character peculiarly their own.” Cited in Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 313.

like one other.<sup>118</sup> Dickens captures this phenomenon in his description of Coketown, in which everything and everyone appear, in their multiplicity and uniformity, exactly alike. Coketown “contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work” (22). Dickens’ repetition of “like one another” and “the same” emphasizes the perceptual effects of the architecture, city planning, and scheduling related to industrialization. Louisa’s initial inability to separate the sea of poor into its “component drops,” then, is a function of the social landscape itself, marked as it is by the profound changes in population—growth, migration, concentration, segregation—that defined the period.

This perceptual disorder has significant ramifications for empathic identification. If you cannot even identify a stranger in a crowd then you cannot perform the imaginative experiments necessary to share their point of view. Aurora Leigh’s experience of “the outdoor crowd” illustrates this impediment. “So strange and gay and ignorant of my face” (VII.1276), the people around her do not even see her pain (they are “ignorant” of it), much less share in it (they remain “gay”). “[M]en you know not,” she concludes, “are as good as trees” (VII.1278). That is, they are as bad as trees, or at least as insensible. Dickens describes a similar experience in *Hard Times*: “the stranger in the land...looks into ten thousand faces for some answering look and never finds it” (109). And Margaret Hale has a similar experience at home in England. “London life is too whirling and full,” she

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<sup>118</sup> The “hives” of England is part of Caroline Norton’s critique of “Merchant England” in *A Voice from the Factories*: “Is her commercial avarice so keen, / That in her busy multitudinous hive / Hundreds must die like insects, scarcely seen, / While the thick-thronged survivors work where they have been” (22).

concludes, “to admit of even an hour of that deep silence of feeling which the friends of Job showed” (58).

In order to facilitate narrative empathy, sentimental realism needed first to guide readers through the impenetrable uniformity of the slums and the bewildering superfluity of the masses. A scene in *Hard Times* illustrates this navigation of the crowd. Dickens first represents a crowded neighborhood inaccessible in its congested, degraded uniformity. He goes on, however, to focus on not the whole but the particular, not the crowd but the individual. The effect is a wide-angle shot that then zooms in to focus on one particular point in the panorama:

In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man’s purpose, and the whole an unnatural family, shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death; in the last close nook of this great exhausted receiver, where the chimneys, for want of air to make a draught, were built in an immense variety of stunted and crooked shapes, as though every house put out a sign of the kind of people who might be expected to be born in it; among the multitude of Coketown, generically called “the Hands,”—a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence has seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs—lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age. (52)

Dickens not only acknowledges the overwhelming appearance of the slum to the outsider, he recreates it in the description itself. The sentence is vast, and the reader risks losing herself in its complicated syntax and sheer size. His incrementally tightening focus, however, guides the reader through the neighborhood just as the punctuation guides her through the sentence; semicolons mark the narrowing concentration. Beginning with the working-class neighborhood of Coketown, Dickens narrows to its “innermost fortifications,” then to the “the heart of the labyrinth,” and finally its “last close nook.” He

proceeds to tighten similarly the focus on its inhabitants, describing first “the multitude of Coketown” and only then contracting his gaze to “a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age.” Dickens initially recreates the overwhelming uniformity in order to combat it; he first represents the “swarms” of the poor only to focus on one individual. In this way he shapes his readers’ perception—showing the slum as a whole, and then as a part, and finally refocusing his readers’ attention to an individual. When he finally converges on Stephen—a conclusion set off by the long dash—he emphasizes specificity. Naming Stephen counteracts the effects of the mass appellation “the Hands,” and Dickens immediately gives him another distinguishing characteristic: he is forty years old. The audience of *Hard Times* is granted access to the inaccessible slum and can then meet and sympathize with not the entire population, but one man, “a certain Stephen Blackpool.”

Ironically, in a novel about the difficulty of perceiving individuals, Stephen Blackpool is not a terribly successful example of a vividly realized character. Raymond Williams calls him “little more than a diagrammatic figure” (*Culture and Society* 93). His two-dimensionality might be due in part to the fact that *Hard Times* was an unusually short novel for Dickens. But even with this deficiency *Hard Times* provides an extraordinarily self-conscious analysis of different “ways of seeing” the poor. In case his readers do not feel the effects of individualizing Blackpool, Dickens models the appropriate response in none other than Louisa Gradgrind, who embodies the shift in perspective through which Dickens guides his readers. After Stephen is summoned to the Bounderby house to discuss his role in the strikes, Louisa in turn goes to his home and sees him and Rachel. It is the first time Louisa had “come into one of the dwelling of the Coketown Hands” and “for the first time in her life she was face to face with anything like individuality in connexion with them” (119). The

sea has been split into its component drops; the “hundreds of thousands” have become just two; and Louisa responds with sympathetic intervention on their behalf.

Margaret Hale’s experience in *North and South* echoes Louisa’s depersonalizing perception of “the masses” and the subsequent effects of personal interaction. Margaret’s move from the agricultural south to the industrial north is bewildering. “Whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets” (60), she experiences the isolation and alienation of the crowded urban landscape. Trucks and wagons throng the roads as “people thronged the footpaths” (60). The Hales’ new home is on a thoroughfare for factory workers, and out of the mills “poured streams of men and women two or three times a day” (72). When Margaret ventures out, the workers flood around her, making loud comments and jests. Gaskell is attuned to the ways in which this experience is disorienting, but her narrative intervention critiques Margaret’s initial fear of the crowd. The men’s “very out-spokenness marked their innocence of any intention to hurt her delicacy,” the narrator observes, “as she [Margaret] would have perceived if she had been less frightened by the disorderly tumult” (72). It is our false perception of the masses, informed by fear, Gaskell suggests, that makes us unable to discern the true nature of the poor.

Margaret is able to correct her perceptions, however, once the “stream” is broken into a “component drop.” On one of her outings, Margaret is addressed by a middle-aged workman, who compliments her smile, and rather than offering her normal haughty response, she reciprocates with “an answering smile” (72). This one instance of human connection fundamentally changes Margaret’s perception. She no longer perceives the workers as a “stream” because in their midst she has identified a single person. Subsequently Margaret’s experience in the street is no longer one of isolation: “A silent recognition was established between them whenever the chances of the day brought them across each other’s

paths. They had never exchanged a word; nothing had been said but that first compliment; yet somehow Margaret looked upon this man with more interest than upon any one else in Milton” (73). This change is intensified after she is introduced to the man, Nicholas Higgins, and his daughter Bessy. “From that day Milton became a brighter place to her. It was not the long, bleak sunny days of spring, nor yet was it that time was reconciling her to the town of her habitation. It was that in it she had found a human interest” (75). She is not only less frightened by the workers, but also more at home in Milton. This “human interest” intensifies after she visits the Higginses at their home. When she next ventures out the experience is a much different one: “As she went along the crowded narrow streets, she felt how much of interest they had gained by the simple fact of her having learnt to care for a dweller in them” (100). Significantly, Margaret perceives all of Milton differently after she “care[s] for” two of its inhabitants.

It is not surprising that Gaskell is the strongest advocate of personal interaction between the classes, as she herself was in close contact with poor individuals through her husband’s ministry. It was this contact, she claims in the preface to *Mary Barton*, that allowed her to capture the “state of feeling” (xxxvi) among Manchester’s workers. Despite her own access to poor families, however, Gaskell makes the obstacles to personal contact between the classes apparent in *North and South*. While Margaret might arrive unannounced at the homes of her poor neighbors in rural Helstone (in part because of her role as minister’s daughter), when she moves to the urban north, where her father is no longer minister, there is no such social arrangement. In fact, when she suggests visiting the Higginses, Nicholas Higgins is initially surprised, and even offended by her impertinence. Margaret’s subsequent visits with the family and the friendship she forms with Bessy Higgins are unusual, not at all indicative of the new industrial model in which there was little room for personal

relationships between the classes. The industrial system, in particular, discourages this kind of relationship because of its “deep selfishness of competition” (*North and South* 408). As Margaret Hale puts it, there is no “equality of friendship” because “every man has had to stand in an unchristian and isolated position, apart from and jealous of his brother-man: constantly afraid of his rights being trenched upon” (122).

Gaskell’s pastoral idealism is in large part rooted in this critique of urban, industrial relationships. In close-knit Helstone Margaret’s relationship with the surrounding poor is almost familial, as is evoked in Gaskell’s reference to the Book of Ruth: “Its people were her people” (19). The relationships she enjoys there do not erase class, but they are friendships nonetheless: “She made hearty friends with them; learned and delighted in using their peculiar words; took up her freedom amongst them; nursed their babies; talked or read with slow distinctness to their old people; carried dainty messes to their sick...she was continually tempted off to go and see some individual friend—man, woman, or child—in some cottage in the green shade of the forest” (19). It was this kind of individual contact, Gaskell believed, that could potentially effect class reconciliation. In Milton, Gaskell does not represent a reconciliation of “the classes” per se, but instead orchestrates friendships between individuals like Margaret Hale and Nicholas Higgins. “Yo’ see,” Higgins says of this friendship, “North and South has both met and made kind o’friends in this big smoky place” (73). These two individuals can then begin to broker a friendship and understanding between their respective social groups. Higgins introduces Margaret to his daughters; Margaret introduces Higgins to her father and to the factory owner Thornton; Thornton in turn meets other workers who are friends of Nicholas. The personal expands into the social, as Thornton’s “friendship with one” evolves to an “acquaint[ance] with many” (420).

Underlying Gaskell's belief in personal interaction is the conviction that hatred or fear of a group is challenged by acquaintance with an individual within that group, and that sympathy for an individual can lead to more sympathetic treatment of the group to which he or she belongs.<sup>119</sup> She repeatedly describes characters' prejudice against a class (in the more general sense) of people, only to have that prejudice falter in the face of personal contact. In *Ruth*, Mr. Farquhar is able to judge criminals harshly and contend that not "one criminal in a thousand is restored to goodness" (217), and yet, when that one in a thousand is his gardener, he hires him on again and believes in the possibility of reform. Faith Benson is similarly judgmental, subscribing to the cultural condemnation of unwed mothers. She is only able to maintain her cold judgment of Ruth's behavior, however, so long as she does not know her. "When she saw her, she could no longer imagine her to be an imposter, or a hardened sinner" (121). Similarly, she judges illegitimacy harshly, except when she recalls the illegitimacy of one whom "she had known and esteemed" (121), a memory that softens her verdict. In *North and South*, Mr. Hale's rejection of the Anglican Church is similarly received. His friends "might have felt shocked or grieved or indignant at his falling off in the abstract," but "as soon as they saw the face of the man" (340) their judgments are tempered. And just as Margaret's initial response to the masses is mitigated by her contact with the Higginses, her prejudice against "shoppy people" (20) and "repugnance to the idea of a manufacturing town" (60) are mitigated by her contact with an individual manufacturer, Mr. Thornton.

The real political potential of this sort of personal contact is seen not in Margaret's relationships but in the relationship between Thornton and Higgins (which is formed as a result of her own relationship with each of them). As a factory owner, Thornton has "no

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<sup>119</sup> This supposition is supported by recent social psychological research on empathy and reading which I will discuss in the following chapter.

general benevolence,—no universal philanthropy” (211). He is an unfeeling master who can coolly calculate the costs and benefits of economic principles and talk of the ruin of men as it were an “entirely logical” (151) consequence of economic law. Once he meets Nicholas Higgins, however, Thornton begins “cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere ‘cash nexus’” (420).<sup>120</sup> As Margaret puts it, they need to “speak out together as man to man,” not in their inflexible roles of master and hand. “If Higgins would forget that Mr. Thornton was a master, and speak to him as he does to us—and if Mr. Thornton would be patient enough to listen to him with his human heart, not with his master’s ears—” (302). Margaret does not finish her thought, but her hope is realized when Higgins, at Margaret’s urging, approaches Thornton about work. This “accident (or so it seemed)” of their “acquaintance” (409) allows each man to revise his opinion of the other. “Once brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him, and (take notice) out of the character of master and workman, in the first instance, they had each begun to recognize that ‘we have all of us one human heart’ (409). Thornton is able to see his workers not as “hands” but as men, and Higgins, in turn, is able to see Thornton as “a man, not a measter” (331, sic). Concomitant to this nascent relationship are Thornton’s “experiments” with more progressive leadership and the workers’ willingness to look at things from their master’s “point of view.” This kind of “intercourse” (410), Gaskell implies, is the only hope for class reconciliation. “[T]hough it might not have the effect of preventing all future clash of opinion and action, when the occasion arose, [it] would, at any rate, enable both master and man to look upon each other with far more charity and sympathy, and bear with each other more patiently and kindly” (410). Gaskell has the reformed Thornton articulate her own doctrine of personal contact, his very reformation

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<sup>120</sup> The cash nexus was most famously critiqued by Carlyle in *Chartism*: “For, in one word, *Cash Payment* had not then grown to be the universal sole nexus of man to man” (162).

evidence of its power. “I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions...can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals and the different classes into actual personal contact. Such intercourse is the very breath of life” (421).

Louisa’s and Margaret’s initially distorted perceptions and subsequently revised impressions are testament to the extraordinary novelty and significant results of personal contact with the “personified” poor. It was unlikely that Dickens’ and Gaskell’s middle- and upper-class readers had comparable access to the homes of their poor contemporaries, much less intimate relationships like the ones they imagine between their characters. While mid-century readers might not have direct, physical access to the homes of the poor, however, they could and did accompany these middle-class heroines into the private, intimate, interior spaces in which poor and working-class characters lived. By attending to the plight of specific characters, sentimental realism attempted to recreate individualized cross-class relationships through the act of reading. Sentimental realism did not often represent its own potentially transformative effects (i.e. the transformative effects of reading literature). Instead, it represented the transformative effects of relationships between middle- and lower-class *characters*, and then modeled and simulated that contact for readers. While relationships with characters might not carry equal force as relationships with people, they have one clear advantage: compared to an actual person, characters can meet a vastly wider “audience.”

Throughout *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s verse *künstlerroman* about a young female poet, Barrett Browning meditates on the social role of poetry: it contains, she wrote in its dedication, “my highest convictions upon Life and Art.” Confined in her aunt’s repressive home and constrained to “womanly” accomplishments like needlepoint and

modeled wax, Aurora finds freedom in her father's books and most of all in her discovery of poetry. On her twentieth birthday, Aurora crowns herself as poet. Her cousin Romney surprises her as she places the wreath of ivy on her head, and brings her her own book of poems, "lady's Greek / Without the accents" (II.75-6), that he has discovered by the water. What follows is a pointed debate about women's poetry, and at its center are the relative merits of individualized portraits of suffering. Women's poetry cannot influence the world, Romney argues, because it cannot generalize:

You generalize  
 Oh, nothing,—not even grief! Your quick-breathed hearts,  
 So sympathetic to the personal pang,  
 Close on each separate knife-stroke, yielding up  
 A whole life at each wound, incapable  
 Of deepening, widening a large lap of life  
 To whole the world-full woe. The human race  
 To you means, such a child, or such a man,  
 You saw one morning waiting in the cold,  
 Beside that gate, perhaps. You gather up  
 A few such cases, and when strong sometimes  
 Will write of factories and slaves, as if  
 Your father were a Negro, and your son  
 A spinner in the mills. (II.183-196)

Romney's critique is Barrett Browning at her most ironic and self-reflexive. She herself wrote just this sort of poetry, most famously in "The Cry of the Children" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point."<sup>121</sup> But while Romney captures the anxiety that personified suffering is inadequate to capture the "world-full woe," his response to women's writing also suggests the relationship between poetry and personal contact. By capturing "a few such cases," poetry not only expresses the poet's feelings of connection with "such a child, or such a man," but also allows readers to experience the kind of emotion one might feel for a father or a son. Although Barrett Browning is elsewhere self-deprecating when she

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<sup>121</sup> "The Cry of the Children" was first published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1843; "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" in *The Liberty Bell*, an abolitionist giftbook, in 1848. They were published consecutively in Barrett Browning's *Poems*, 1850.

says that she has “only known / How the heart melts and the tears run down” (“A Curse for a Nation” 39-40), this account of women’s verse suggests that it is the emotional quality of poetry that gives it its unique power over readers.<sup>122</sup>

Tellingly, even as Romney chastises women for their inability to feel—“Why, I call you hard / To general suffering” (II.198-199)—he acknowledges that the lack of individuals is a pivotal obstacle to affective engagement. Women cannot weep for the world, he concedes, but only one who suffers in it.

[D]oes one of you  
Stand still from dancing, stop from stringing pearls,  
And pine and die because of the great sum  
Of universal anguish?—Show me a tear  
Wet as Cordelia’s, in eyes bright as yours,  
Because the world is mad. You cannot count,  
That you should weep for this account, not you!  
You weep for what you know, A red-haired child  
Sick in a fever, if you touch him once,  
Though but so little as with a finger-tip,  
Will set you weeping; but a million sick.  
You could as soon weep for as the rule of three  
Or compound fractions. (II.206-218)

As Romney’s comparison suggests, weeping for “a million sick” is as difficult as weeping for the dry bones of a mathematical theorem. His use of numbers is not coincidental; statistics might engage our intellect, but it is a “red-haired child” who engages our emotions. Like St. John Rivers, Romney tries to inspire Aurora to her own good works, turning away from poetry toward the public good. While he speaks passionately about poverty and the social imperative to ameliorate suffering, however, he realizes that his talk is “arid” (II.379) because it cannot sufficiently evoke the suffering individual among the “heap of generalized distress”:

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<sup>122</sup> Barrett Browning’s staged debate between Aurora and Romney is part of a larger conversation about women’s inherently “emotional” personalities. We can see this view in W. R. Greg’s review, “False Morality of Lady Novelists,” published a few years before *Aurora Leigh*. Greg describes the popularity of novels among female readers, “who are always impressionable, in whom at all times the emotional element is more awake and more powerful than the critical, whose feelings are more easily aroused and whose estimates are more easily influenced than ours” (86).

[A]ll my talk can only set you where  
You look down coldly on the arena-heaps  
Of headless bodies, shapeless, indistinct!  
The Judgment-Angel scarce would find his way  
Through such a heap of generalized distress  
To the individual man with lips and eyes (II.380-385)

The repetition of “heaps” (“arena-heaps / Of headless bodies;” “heap of generalized distress”) echoes the minister’s admonition that the masses is a heap that has “strangely become indivisible.” Even as Romney acknowledges this perceptual difficulty, however, he reproves women for their inability to feel for “the great sum / Of universal anguish” (208-9). But Romney himself has diagnosed the failure. Faced with the enormity of suffering the poor do not even appear human; they are “headless bodies” whose identities cannot be discerned. This figural decapitation marks their lack of subjectivity; poverty has robbed them of their personhood, at least in the eyes of the distant observer.

Romney is confident that personal contact will combat the “arid” quality of “generalized distress” and inspire Aurora in a way that the “arena-heaps / Of headless bodies” cannot.

Ah my sweet, come down,  
And hand in hand we’ll go where yours shall touch  
These victims, one by one! Till, one by one,  
The formless, nameless trunk of every man  
Shall seem to wear a head with hair you know,  
And every woman catch your mother’s face  
To melt you into passion. (II.385-391)

His repetition of “one by one” emphasizes the remedial aim of Romney’s mission and echoes Dickens’ and Gaskell’s faith in personal relationships with the poor. It is only through this kind of contact that the poor will be recuperated as individuals with identities signified by names and heads with “lips and eyes” (II.384). If Romney laments that Aurora can only look “coldly” at generalized distress, he predicts that meeting individuals will “melt you into passion.” But while Romney extols the affective response engendered only by

personal relationships, Barrett Browning grants poetry the same affective power and uses Romney's critique to reveal its strength. Romney argues that women cannot be great poets because they are too "personal and passionate" (II.221). His own case for philanthropy, however, reveals that passion is always personal. And just as the stranger who "catch[es] your mothers face" can "melt you into passion" (II.390, 391), so too the spinner who is viewed "as if" he were a son can inspire feeling in a way that "the human race" cannot.

In staging the debate between philanthropy and poetry, "bread or verses" (VII.636), Barrett Browning suggests that Romney's own philanthropic mission has obscured his view of individuals. Where Aurora reads poetry, Romney's books are filled with "mere statistics" (I.525), and he admits that he thinks of the poor in generic terms, poring over "the long sum of ill" (II.309) and calculating "statistical despairs" (II.313). If Romney accuses women's poetry of being too personal, Aurora's critique of Romney is based upon his own too-public feelings: "As if man / Were set upon a high stool at a desk / To keep God's books for Him in red and black, / And feel by millions!" (III.747-750). Unsurprisingly, Barrett Browning comes down on the poet's side, and despite Romney's utopian goals his plan fails disastrously, as his phalanstery and family home is burned to the ground by the mob, aided by the very people he has tried to help. Ultimately Romney concedes the fatal flaw in his approach:

There's too much abstract willing, purposing,  
In this poor world. We talk by aggregates,  
And think by systems, and, being used to face  
Our evil in statistics, are inclined  
To cap them with unreal remedies  
Drawn out in haste on the other side of the slate. (VII.800-805)

Not only do poets look more closely at suffering than statistics allow, but they can have a more profound impact than tending to man's material needs. Aurora articulates this creed for poetry at several points in the book: "plant a poet's word even, deep enough / In any

man's breast, looking presently / For offshoots, you have done more for the man / Than if  
you dressed him in a broad-cloth coat / And warmed his Sunday potage at your fire"

(VI.221-225). While Aurora's hopes for poetry are more about the spiritual elevation it can offer a working-class audience, she also suggests the power of illuminating individual suffering in representations of the contemporary poor.<sup>123</sup>

Despite Barrett Browning's high hopes for poetry, however, she uses Aurora, not Romney, to illustrate how distance skews the young woman's response to the masses. After the cousins' romance falters, Romney proposes to Marian Erle, an impoverished woman he has nursed back to health. Like the marriage itself, the wedding brings together rich and poor—"St. Giles in frieze / Was bidden to meet St. James in cloth of gold" (IV.538-9). The poet's response is reminiscent of Louisa Gradgrind and Margaret Hale, as Barrett Browning has Aurora use various dehumanizing metaphors in her description of the working-class guests: "They clogged the streets, they oozed into the church / In a dark slow stream, like blood" (IV.553-4); "As bruised snakes crawl and hiss out of a hole" (IV.566); "What an ugly crest / Of faces rose upon you everywhere / From the crammed mass!" (IV.569-571). Strikingly, there are no names given and no names recorded; Aurora's impression is only of the hideous mass. Her description of the wealthy guests, on the other hand, is not only punctuated by bits of overheard dialogue but by a number of names—Lady Ayr, Miss

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<sup>123</sup> Significantly, even as Dickens, Gaskell, and Barrett Browning praise private charity, they attack public, professional philanthropy, "almsgiving," as Barrett Browning puts it, "through a door that is / Not open enough for two friends to kiss" ("Curse for a Nation" 23-24). Dickens' lampoon of female philanthropists in *Bleak House* is infamous, but contrary to what many critics have assumed, Dickens' critique does not imply that *women* should not be public and professional, but rather that *philanthropy* shouldn't be. Mrs. Jellyby might chastise Ada and Esther for their lack of "sympathy with the destinies of the human race" (352), but the girls are superior, in Dickens' view, because they can feel sympathy for the suffering individual. Gaskell was also suspicious of sympathy for the race: when Margaret considers a life of more public works as a nun, she concludes that she could never substitute "love for individuals" with the required "love for my species" (390). Although deeply impressed with Florence Nightingale, Gaskell expressed a similar reservation about her work, concluding that her only flaw, was her "want of love for individuals." "Florence does not care for *individuals*," Gaskell reported to Emily Shaen, "but for the whole race" (*Letters* 217).

Norris, Lord Belcher, and so on. Of course, Aurora sits on the groom's side of the church, the division in the pews symptomatic of the gulf between the classes that cannot be overcome through marriage. And so Aurora's own upper-class perspective contributes to her inability to decipher individuals, a failing that is intensified when Marian does not arrive and "the turbulent masses" (IV.849) revolt, like a pack of dogs "In heaps of fury" (IV.853).

Like Aurora, Barrett Browning cannot fully escape her own classed perspective; even as she attempts to overcome the great gulf between rich and poor she cannot suppress her fears of the working-class mob. But this empathic threshold is as much a testament to the affective power of individuals as Dickens' and Gaskell's commitment to personal relationships as the ultimate hope for political reconciliation. Together, these complementary thematic elements represent the recognition that characters—the signature feature of narrative discourse in the face of the new science of statistics—offer readers the opportunity to see beyond the threatening masses, and potentially recognize in the poor thinking and feeling subjects like themselves. Rather than diminish the impact of artistic representations, this emphasis on the individual is fundamental to the powerful ethical effects of literature.

## Chapter Four

### **“Lazarus at our Gates”:<sup>124</sup> Metaphors of Realism**

As I have argued, empathy for people in distress is one of the most powerful motivations for ethical behaviors, significant not only for how we feel towards other people, but also how we act towards them. But empathy for characters in distress invites a more complex relationship between imagination, emotion, and ethics. Readers’ emotions can be engaged for fictional suffering, but not their subsequent behaviors. This limiting condition poses an interpretive—and ethical—dilemma for any account of empathy with fictional minds. In this chapter, I argue that narrative empathy affects readers’ real-world beliefs and behaviors through a “synechdocal” interpretation of character, through which emotional responses to fictional individuals are parlayed into an affective and ethical response towards members of a larger social group. The most serious criticism leveled against narrative empathy is that it might serve as an escape from real-life ethical demands, allowing readers to congratulate themselves for feeling with fictional characters while simultaneously doing nothing for actual people. Turning to research in psychology and empirical approaches to literature, I argue that the representation of fictional suffering makes readers more likely to intervene in their contemporary world. In addition to these tangible ethical consequences of readers’ narrative empathy, I argue that authors’ ethical commitments had a profound impact on Victorian literary history. Concerns over the ethical failure of narrative empathy and the

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<sup>124</sup> Anonymous. “The Lazarus at Our Gates.” *The Basingstoke Tracts*.

attempt to prevent that failure by using characters synecdochally was integral to the new critical premium on verisimilitude and the rise of realism as the dominant discursive form.

In Chapter 1, I argued that all of our relationships with characters have ethical significance insofar as they are analogous to our relationships with other people. Empathy with characters can hone our empathic skills, which can in turn be employed in our “real world” interactions. In this chapter, I argue that sentimental realism promoted a more immediate ethics of reading by establishing a metaphorical relationship between its representations of suffering and the suffering of poor and working-class people in Victorian England. Using Dickens as a case study, I argue that sentimental realism betrays its own anxiety that the representation of fictional suffering will not result in an appropriate ethical response. In order to mitigate this potential failure of empathy, however, sentimental realism repeatedly reminds its audience that the suffering it describes is “rife, aye—rife” (Tindal 46). Accordingly, vivid portraits of fictional suffering are coupled with epistemological claims about their accurate and faithful relationship to modern society. If the genre’s sentimentalism aroused emotional responses to fictional scenes of pathos, then its realism allowed readers to act on those responses in their contemporary world. In this way, the genre’s dual generic identity allowed authors to use affect as an effective tool for social change.

I have described empathy as an inherently metaphorical structure, in which  $A=B$  where  $A$  is a reader and  $B$  is a character in a text. These “metaphors of personal identification” help us to understand another person or character by imagining ourselves in his or her spatiotemporal and psychological “place.” In this chapter I want to propose another level of metaphorical understanding, in which  $X=Y$  where  $X$  is a feature of a fictional world and  $Y$  is a feature of the actual world. If metaphors of personal identification

signal “that extraordinary human achievement, thinking of oneself as another” (Cohen 400), then these “metaphors of realism” indicate our capacity to extrapolate from literature to life. Given my emphasis on narrative empathy, I am particularly interested in metaphors of realism that help readers interpret the characters they encounter in narrative texts. In this case, X=Y where X is a character in a fictional world and Y is a person—or people—in the actual world. As with metaphors of personal identification, there is not an “identity” between character and referent; indeed, the names of fictional characters are technically “absent referents,” or a word with *no* referent. But readers’ own understanding of textual “reality”—bolstered by narrative claims of verisimilitude—means that characters are routinely interpreted as having real-world designation. Characters in sentimental realism were thus understood to be *representative* of poor individuals in England. “Standing in” for the group of people to whom he or she belonged, one poor character becomes metaphorically related to “the poor.” This type of metaphor, what we might call a synecdoche of realism, means that the affective bonds forged through personification could potentially emerge beyond the virtual social space of reading.

Ultimately, metaphors of personal identification and metaphors of realism act in tandem, so that readers’ empathic relationships with individual characters like Tiny Tim extend to incorporate the people whom they represent. By forging a referential “bridge” between character and referent, sentimental realism asked readers to feel not only for (and with) characters, but their poor and working-class contemporaries. The dynamic of reading thus involved a complex navigation of real and fictional worlds in which (actual) readers felt for (imaginary) characters who were understood to represent (actual) people. While the relationship between reader and character bridged the “great gulf” between self and other, it was limited to a “cross-world” bridge, that is, between the actual and the fictional. This

second bridge between character and referent crosses back out from the fictional to the actual world. In other words, readers could forge an imaginative relationship with *actual* poor people through their intimacy with fictional characters.

Sentimental realism is particularly suited for this theory of synechdocal interpretation because it explicated its metaphorical reference in society. Accordingly, the fictional worlds of sentimental realism were designed to resemble so closely the “real” world that readers’ imaginative relations with one could alter their perceptions of, and interactions with, the other. But while explicit (and sometimes excessive) claims of epistemological truth suggest an underlying anxiety about the use of fiction to refer to the real world, contemporary studies of reading demonstrate that readers routinely interpret fiction “metaphorically” even in the absence of these epistemological claims. In “How Fictional Tales Wag Real-World Beliefs,” psychologist Jeffrey Strange observes that stories about “invented characters in imagined situations” often lead readers to make “judgments about people, problems, and institutions in the everyday world” (264).<sup>125</sup> This feature of interpretation is evidenced in his own studies of narrative impact, which demonstrate readers’ tendency to draw conclusions about the causes and solutions of larger social problems from anecdotal accounts about individuals (Strange and Leung 437). As Strange observes, much of our time is spent engaged in “virtual encounters” with people, places, and events that do not exist, but despite the “imaginal nature” of these encounters, fictional stories often refer or relate to real social issues like poverty, racism, or, in Strange and Cynthia Leung’s study, high school dropout rates. As their findings demonstrate, even when stories are explicitly marked as fictional (in the sense of not being true), narrative interpretation is characterized by a process of “causal generalization” from “narrative case” to “social category” (445). In other words, readers

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<sup>125</sup> See also, Jeffrey Strange and Cynthia Leung, “How anecdotal accounts in news and in fiction can influence judgments of a social problem’s urgency, causes, and cures.”

extrapolate from individual characters' experiences in order to draw conclusions about "society at large" (275). Stories thus operate on readers' beliefs in two ways: they provide "in-depth understandings of specific cases" and an understanding of social phenomenon more generally. The "wider influence" of narratives, Strange concludes, lies in this "propensity to generalize" (275). Strange's emphasis on the role of anecdote suggests that the interpretive process of generalization is dependent upon the specificity that I emphasized in my previous chapter. Our beliefs about the world at large and the people who inhabit it are based on our encounters with individual characters in richly particularized episodes.

This tendency to make "case-to-category generalizations" is even more pronounced when narratives make direct claims to represent reality. Strange uses the example of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the *locus classicus* in studies of narrative impact. Certain narratives, he observes, occupy a liminal ground between fiction and non-fiction. To say something is "fiction" implies that "*something* is consciously and openly 'feigned'" (265), but the "nature and extent" of this feigning is "genre- and work- specific." Like sentimental realism, the "mode of pretense" in Stowe's novel is one in which characters and plot are fictional, but nonetheless analogous to real people and real events. Furthermore, the novel's narrative world is designed to reflect contemporary, American society such that Stowe can use the novel to "seriously refer to the historical world" (266). This system of reference is key to the novel's ethical claims on readers. Unlike "pure fantasy," Stowe's novel maintains "the illocutionary force of assertions about real-world institutions and relationships" (266). Significantly, Strange invokes the language of empathy to describe the experience of reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe "invites her readers to enter this [narrative] world, to empathize with and adopt the perspectives of its inhabitants, and, having done so, to pass judgment on the extratextual institution of slavery" (265-266). It is not coincidental that *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

was published in America and Britain during the heyday of sentimental realism. Not only did readers in the mid-nineteenth century embrace the didactic function of literature, but the popularity of Stowe's novel about slavery and the diverse literature about poverty coincided with, and contributed to, the rise of realism. (The term realism was first used in English to describe literature in the 1850s). As with Stowe's novel, sentimental realism used fiction to comment on and critique modern society; its explicit epistemological claims serve to alert readers to narratives' relevance to their own, historical world.

Paradoxically, for a genre which zealously proclaims its truth, sentimental realism might not fare well in evaluations of its veracity. Much of the modern criticism of social problem literature has been devoted to revealing the ways that the literature about poverty was *not true* to the experience of actual poor individuals in Victorian England.<sup>126</sup> But whether or not texts attain perfect verisimilitude is not critical to my argument. I am interested in the epistemological claims themselves, and the effect on readers who accept those claims. In fact, the term verisimilitude is particularly apt—it refers not to the truth but the appearance of being true. This is not to say that the actual truth of representations is insignificant. George Eliot was adamant on this score: “[O]ur social novels profess to represent the people as they are, and the unreality of their representations is a grave evil” (“Natural History” 262). Catherine Gallagher makes a related critique in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, suggesting that the industrial novelists made “excessively naïve mimetic claims” that presented fictions as “unmediated presentations of social reality” (xii). But as Gallagher herself observes, the “naïve” claims of the genre were essential to its ethical aims; they were

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<sup>126</sup> See, for a notable example, Sheila Smith's *The Other Nation: The Poor in English Novels of the 1840s and 1850s*.

motivated by authors' "polemical purposes" (xii). In this chapter I investigate how these claims to realism are integral to the ethical claims made on readers.

### The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy

In 1746, Henry Layng described the intense reaction to "Spectacles of Misery," even when spectators are "apprized that the whole Representation is a Fiction."

Our Heart smites us, and our Flesh creeps, when Spectacles of Misery present themselves to us...It is sufficient to appeal to every Man's Breast, whether he does not feel a strong Sympathy, an unaccountable Disturbance, at the Appearance of a miserable Object, nay, even at the hearing of a tragical Story, wherein he is no way concern'd; nay, when he is apprized that the whole Representation is a Fiction, yet will it extort a Sigh, a Tear, even against the Bent of our Wills, and the Assistance of our Reason. (5, 6)<sup>127</sup>

Layng's sermon captures the paradoxical nature of our response to fictional narratives. We might know "the whole Representation is a Fiction," and yet we respond emotionally—and physiologically—as if the suffering were real. This "unaccountable" response anticipates one of the single most debated issues in modern aesthetics, the so-called paradox of emotional response to fiction.<sup>128</sup> Philosopher Jerrold Levinson provides a useful summary: "Since fictional characters do not exist, and we know this, it seems we cannot, despite appearances, literally have towards them bona fide emotions—ones such as pity, love, or fear—since these presuppose belief in the existence of the appropriate objects" (79). As it is addressed in most of the philosophical literature, the paradox of fiction is limited to discussions of

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<sup>127</sup> From a sermon for Northampton County Infirmary (also published to benefit the infirmary) 1746. Also cited in Dorice Elliott, *Angels in the House*, 18. Layng's observations about the "universal" sympathy for suffering are in refutation of Hobbes' observations that men are, as Layng puts it, "Enemies to one another, and are inclined to prey upon their own Species" (6).

<sup>128</sup> Since the paradox was first articulated by Colin Radford in 1975, it has been addressed in some form in virtually every edition of *The British Journal of Aesthetics* and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Significant treatments include: Peter Lamarque, "How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?," Kendall Walton, "Fearing Fictions" and *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, and Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction*. See also Part 1, "The Paradox of Fiction," in Mette Hjort and Sue Laver's excellent collection, *Emotion and the Arts*.

these seemingly contradictory premises.<sup>129</sup> But the impact of the paradox is most evident when we consider not its premises but its repercussions for readers' beliefs and behavior. Whether or not our emotional responses are "bona fide," most readers have had the sensation of being moved by fiction. Indeed, early accounts of sympathy assume that our emotional response to characters in a tragedy is no less universal than our response to the suffering of other men. As Adam Smith notes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "We weep even at the feigned representation of a tragedy" (52). But if "deep distress" (52) exists on the stage—or in the pages of a book—then what is our response beyond weeping? If suffering is "real" then a spectator can try to ameliorate it, but if it is a "feigned representation," then a reader can do nothing to intercede. What, then—if any—are the ethical effects of our emotional responses to literature?

Dickens is particularly suggestive for the study of the ethical potential—and problems—of fictional emotion because of his own premium on emotional response. During his lifetime, Dickens was as loved as a humorist as he was esteemed as a moralist, but it was his readers' tears, not their mirth, that he solicited in his role as advocate for "the poor, the suffering, the oppressed."<sup>130</sup> His use of pathos to inspire social change is evident throughout Dickens' career—in his portraits of the workhouse orphan in *Oliver Twist*, the crippled boy in *A Christmas Carol*, the little sweep in *Bleak House*. As editor and journalist, Dickens could bring an expository approach to the various social and political causes he endorsed, but as an author, his primary methodology was empathic: he asked his readers to

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<sup>129</sup> I will not catalogue the "solutions" to the paradox here, although a number have been proposed. The two main camps deny either the premise that existence beliefs are necessary for emotional responses (e.g. Peter Lamarque, who argues that we "mentally represent" characters or events rather than "believe" in them) or the premise that we have bona-fide emotional responses towards fiction and fictional characters (e.g. Kendall Walton, who argues that we instead have "pretend" or "make-believe" emotions).

<sup>130</sup> From the inscription to Dickens' tombstone: "He was a sympathiser to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England's greatest writers is lost to the world."

imagine suffering and consequently feel with his characters in distress. The power of imagination is a recurrent theme in Dickens' writing and activism. "Do not let us," he exclaimed in 1858, "in the laudable pursuit of the facts that surround us, neglect fancy and the imagination" (*Speeches* 284).<sup>131</sup> In part, Dickens wanted to enrich the lives of the working classes with stories and storytelling, but he also saw the power of imagination in stirring sympathy and good works. If middle- and upper-class readers could vividly imagine the suffering they did not themselves experience, then presumably they would be moved enough to intervene.

Dickens' high hopes for literature are embedded in his wildly popular first Christmas book, which makes a vigorous plea for Christian charity and launched his now-familiar critique of political economy. At the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge is characterized not only by his miserliness but by his utter lack of imagination: "Scrooge had as little of what is called fancy about him as any man in the city of London" (14). As a young boy, a lonely Ebenezer had read so eagerly that the characters of *Arabian Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe* appeared as friends, "wonderfully real and distinct to look at" (31). As an adult, however, Scrooge no longer reads fairy tales or novels, and he no longer imagines; he only counts his horde of money. Dickens' "carol" of the miser's transformation and redemption is structured thematically and narratively around the moral value of imagination, a cognitive skill Scrooge learns (or relearns) in the course of his "haunting." Exploiting his supernatural conceit, Dickens literalizes imagination, as Scrooge is led by his spectral guides

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<sup>131</sup> *Hard Times* is Dickens' most well-known meditation on this theme; Thomas Gradgrind's educational system of "nothing but Facts," along with his methodological commitment to statistics and philosophical loyalty to Utilitarianism, leaves no room for imagination or the arts. It leaves no room for charity, either; Gradgrind's later political writings argue "in the main, that the Good Samaritan was a Bad Economist" (160). Tellingly, Gradgrind stridently disapproves of imaginative literature; when his children are caught spying on the circus, he wonders if they have been "reading anything? Whether, in spite of all precautions, an idle story-book can have got into the house?" (20).

through visions that simulate empathy for the character and model it for the reader. It is only when Scrooge's own empathy has been cultivated by the four ghosts—when he learns to imagine what it is like in the Cratchit household and feel with Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim—that he is transformed into a philanthropist.

Although this section of the story is often left out in its modern retellings, Scrooge “imagines” not only his own past, present, and future, but also what it is like in scenes of suffering, transported by one of the Spirits to “sick beds...on foreign lands...by struggling men...by poverty...In almshouse, hospital, and jail, in misery's every refuge” (66).<sup>132</sup> Subsequently, Scrooge's beliefs and behaviors are altered dramatically, evident not only in personal charity—the Cratchit Christmas turkey—but public philanthropy—at the end of the novel he promises a munificent subscription to the “Poor and destitute” whom he refused to help at the beginning. In writing his “Ghostly little book” (4), Dickens wanted to reproduce his protagonist's redemption, and beneficence, in his audience. Accordingly, the story itself plays a role analogous to that of Marley and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come; it helps readers imagine distress and spurs them to intervene. As readers we too are “transported” to scenes of suffering, a kind of imaginative vision that suggests the similarities between our own reading of literature and the visitations of the ghosts. Dickens evokes this role of literary imaginings in the story's preface; as he says of his readers' relationship with his “Ghost Story of Christmas” (subtitle), “May it *haunt* their houses pleasantly” (4, my italics).<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> This abridgement is telling. Not only were Victorian audiences more comfortable with openly didactic narratives, but the nature and possibilities of readers' responses are different for contemporary and historical readers. Because the suffering Dickens recounts is no longer “here and now” it does not place the same kind of implicit ethical demands on modern readers, who cannot ameliorate distress that no longer exists.

<sup>133</sup> Dickens revisited the power of imagination in his second Christmas book, *The Chimes*, which is even more explicitly structured around one man's education in empathy. Significantly, Toby Veck's

The causal relationship between “fancy” and charity suggests the ethical power of imagination, and Dickens’ claims have been substantiated by modern research on empathy. As I reported in Chapter 1, psychologists have demonstrated the robust correlation between empathy and a wide range of ethical responses—altruism and prosocial behavior, moral development, interpersonal bonding, and improved intergroup relations. But while Dickens’ aspirations for his “little Christmas book” demonstrate his optimism about the moral power of emotion, they also raise significant questions about whether fiction can inspire in readers the kind of ethical endeavors that Scrooge ultimately pursued. After all, a reader in the actual world cannot help a character in a fictional one; Scrooge can aid the Cratchit family *within* Dickens’ narrative, but Dickens’ readers can do nothing for Tiny Tim. In fact, our inability to intervene in characters’ lives (to alleviate distress, for instance) is one of the key differences between our emotional interactions with people and characters.

The research that I have described suggests that our response to distress in the real world often involves an emotional component and a behavioral one; we *feel* and we subsequently *act*. The risk for representations of distress, however, is a divorce of these two responses: emotion without action. The feeling might be the same, but its effect on our subsequent behavior is radically different. Robert Yanal describes the problem in *Paradoxes of Emotion and Fiction*: “[F]iction arouses emotion with motivational force, but with little or no opportunity to exercise it” (61). In fact, as Leda Cosmides and John Tooby write, emoting without acting is a paradigmatic response to fiction: “[F]ictional worlds engage emotion

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suspicions that the poor are “all bad” is evidence of the power of representations; after reading endless newspaper accounts of criminality he is convinced not that poverty is evil, but that the poor are. But when Veck denounces a mother who commits infanticide as “Unnatural and cruel!” (136), he is haunted by the spirit of the bells who helps him imagine what could have driven her to such an act. In his vision, Veck sees the process by which his own daughter is led to the same fate, as she falls into more and more dire financial straits until faced with either prostitution or suicide. Ultimately Veck forgives the mother and begs forgiveness for his own swift judgment, having learned to “trace and track with pitying eye” (145) the details excluded from a newspaper’s account.

systems while disengaging action systems” (8). If a real lion were to lunge at us it he would evoke “terror *and* flight—the emotion program and behavior are linked” (9). But a fictional version of a lion—however terrifying—does not motivate us to flee.<sup>134</sup> And so, Yanal says, “[o]ur emotions...remain unconsummated” (121). Philosophers have pointed to this feature of reading as proof that readers do not believe in the existence of characters and do not forget their “fictional” status (if we did, the argument goes, we *would* flee the lion).<sup>135</sup> But the disconnect between emotion and action also has significant ramifications for any ethical theory of literature. We may want to intervene in a literary text—in philosopher Kendall Walton’s example, we might want to save the heroine—but we cannot. As Walton’s example suggests, this limiting condition often affects the one realm that Dickens most tried to influence: the ethical response of his readers.

The fact that we cannot act on fictions is unproblematic for literature that places no demands on readers’ behaviors, but it poses a significant problem for sentimentalism, a genre whose pathos and didacticism were intimately related in the nineteenth century. While later readers were more circumspect in their reactions (Oscar Wilde famously laughed rather than cried at Little Nell’s death), the powerful emotional responses of Dickens’ contemporary readers are well known. The reassessment of sentimentalism by feminist critics like Jane Tompkins has emphasized this capacity “to move its audience” (127). But

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<sup>134</sup> Scholars have offered different explanations for this phenomenon. Literary critic Norman Holland proposes a neurological account in “The Power(?) of Literature: A Neuropsychological View,” arguing that two different brain systems operate when we read fictions: the prefrontal cortex suppresses behavior while the corticolimbic system continues to process emotions as in real life. Developmental psychologist Paul Harris develops a similar model in terms of cognitive and emotional appraisal systems. When we process a fictional story, he argues, we appraise emotions as if the events were real while we simultaneously perform an ontological analysis that asks whether events are real or fictional. While the results of the latter inhibit behavioral responses, they “do not necessarily impinge on, or redirect, the [emotional] appraisal processes” (66).

<sup>135</sup> Thus, *contra* Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” we do not forget that what we are watching or reading is not real. Paul Harris presents evidence that children can distinguish between reality and make-believe from a very young age, even when immersed in highly fantasized worlds. See *The Work of the Imagination*, in particular “Imagination and Emotion.”

the risk of sentimentalism—particularly when it represents a contemporary social condition like slavery or poverty—is that it will move readers to tears but not to action. Americanist critics like Tompkins and critics of Victorian literature like Mary Lenard are right to evaluate sentimentalism on its own critical terms rather than those retroactively applied under Aestheticism, Modernism, and New Criticism. My concern, however, is how sentimentalism might fail on its own terms. If authors inspire affective response without influencing readers' subsequent behaviors, then they cannot realize their didactic intentions.

A decade after *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens betrayed his own fear that readers' tears would have no ethical impact in his portrait of Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*. Skimpole's improvidence, indolence, and childlike demeanor were widely read as a caricature of Leigh Hunt, the essayist and poet. (Dickens insisted upon Hunt's death that Skimpole's manner was Hunt's, but not his "character").<sup>136</sup> Less examined, however, and much more damning, is Skimpole's response to art. An amateur artist and musician himself, Skimpole's acute feelings for art do not translate into any ethical commitments. At first glance, Skimpole is a model of affective engagement: "He is all sentiment," Jarndyce says, "and—and susceptibility, and—and sensibility—and—and imagination" (620). Skimpole himself proclaims to have "sympathy for everything" (625). But if Scrooge's meanness stems from his lack of imagination, then Skimpole's artistic temperament has no more beneficent results. His own lack of sympathy is evident in his recommendation for Jo, the little sweeper boy sick in the next room: "You had better turn him out...He's not safe, you know...get rid of him!" (454). With Jarndyce, Esther, and Charley helping the sweep, and all of the servants "compassionating his miserable state" (456), Skimpole is unmoved and unconcerned. He *is*

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<sup>136</sup> "Leigh Hunt: A Remonstrance" was originally published in *All The Year Round* (December 23th, 1859) after the publication of *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, edited by Hunt's son. For more on the literary scandal of Skimpole, see Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens*, volume III: 5-8.

moved by art, however, and even as Jo lies sick he plays “snatches of pathetic airs” with “great expression and feeling” (457). In fact, when Esther and Jarndyce return he plays them “The Peasant Boy,” a ballad that came “into his head, ‘apropos of our young friend’” (457). But where he pities John Parry’s ballad (“It was a song that always made him cry” (457)), he feels nothing for the boy. His feelings for the song are safely insulated from their modern social referent, even as he realizes that the ballad is “apropos” of the sweeper’s condition.<sup>137</sup>

Skimpole’s sensibility without social conscience demonstrates Dickens’ own awareness of the risks of “pathetic” art, and his portrait of Skimpole is a coded warning to his audience about their own interpretive choices. By representing Skimpole’s response to the ballad, Dickens calls attention to his readers’ own scene of reading. The ethical failure of his character will be reiterated in his readers if they cry for the little sweeper in the novel, but not for the boys they encounter in the streets. Skimpole’s reaction also suggests a related “failure” of aesthetic emotion: his tears stem not from vicariously experienced suffering but merely from the pleasure of hearing it recounted. This is the paradox of tragedy first identified by David Hume: “It seems an unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy” (237). While the pleasure that accompanies tragedy does not necessarily preclude simultaneous empathy or sympathy (Burke argued that the pleasure of witnessing suffering ensures that spectators remain long enough to help), Skimpole’s case suggests that spectators to fictional tragedy often shut their eyes to the tragedies played out around them. Readers turn away from actual suffering, in other words, in favor of the representations of suffering that “please.” Moreover, this turning away has

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<sup>137</sup> Like Jo, the peasant boy of Parry’s song is an orphan “thrown on the wide world doom’d to wander and roam” (1).

tragic consequences; when Jo is left alone on the streets (after Skimpole is bribed into revealing his location) he succumbs to his illness and dies.<sup>138</sup>

In “The Cry of the Oppressed,”<sup>139</sup> Henrietta Tindal levies a similar indictment against aesthetic responses to fictional suffering, and she goes even further by directly implicating her readers in Skimpole’s negligence:

Ye lack emotions who live at ease  
In bright warm chambers of prosp’rous life;  
Ye tales of terror and sorrow please—  
Look out around ye, they’re rife, aye—rife,

As berries in autumn, as leaves in May,  
Seek! Ye will find in the neighbouring street  
Tragedies acted before the day,  
That stir the heart to a quicker beat,  
And draw the tear from its deepest seat. (43-53)

Addressing “Ye...who live at ease” allows Tindal to appeal to her middle- and upper-class readers, and by invoking their enjoyment of “tales of terror and sorrow” she suggests that they are “pleased” by the tragedies she and other poets tell. But as with Jo, there is a tragic end to this turning away from the actual “Tragedies” being acted out on neighboring streets. Earlier in the poem, she describes “those we have left to die / Beyond your hearing, walled out from sight, / In the black close lane to the palace nigh—” (37-39). Readers who turn to their books or spectators who turn to the stage do not investigate the sights and sounds of poverty that are all around them. Tindal’s use of the first person plural suggests shared responsibility for this oversight and negligence; “*we* have left [them] to die.”

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<sup>138</sup> Skimpole’s aesthetic sensibility is so rapacious that he takes pleasure even from the experience of American slaves. “I dare say they are worked hard,” he concedes, “I dare say theirs is an unpleasant experience on the whole; but they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence” (273).

<sup>139</sup> “The Cry of the Oppressed” is part of Tindal’s *The Eve of All-Souls*, a collection that was privately printed. Excerpts including “The Cry of the Oppressed” appeared in *The New Monthly Magazine* in 1852 and 1853.

The fear that fictional suffering will make readers neglect actual suffering is a central concern of Elaine Scarry's "The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons." Scarry credits imagination with significant ethical consequences: when we imagine other people we are less likely to hurt them, and conversely, when we do not imagine them we are more likely to inflict injury or pain. Literature, on this account, would seem to have inherent ethical benefits insofar as it invites and guides readers' imaginings. But literature also poses an inherent danger, Scarry warns, because it encourages readers to turn away from real people to fictional ones: "[T]he very imaginative labor of picturing others that we ought to expend on real persons on our city streets, or on the other side of the border, instead comes to be lavished on King Lear or on Tess" (287). Scarry cites William James, who revealed a similar anxiety about the unethical effects of narratives in "Habit." Invoking Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, James contends that "[t]he weeping of a Russian lady over the fictitious personages in the play, while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside" is "the sort of thing that everywhere happens on a less glaring scale" (63). Tellingly, James associates this tendency to expend emotion on characters with the habit of "excessive novel-reading and theatre-going"; immersing one's self too deeply in narrative worlds, he concludes, "will produce true monsters" (63).

Scarry and James both worry that imagining is a zero sum game; imaginings "expended" on fiction come at the expense of actual people in need. But there is no inherent reason that one's fictional imaginings need to forestall or prevent one's imagination—and amelioration—of actual suffering. In fact, modern psychological research suggests that engagement with art can make us more attuned to suffering rather than less so, and therefore more likely to help than to turn away. Although C. Daniel Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis has not focused on the effects of fiction, his research methodology

suggests the significant role that characters can play in shaping readers' beliefs and behaviors. Inducing empathy for a member of a stigmatized group, Batson and his colleagues demonstrated, *even when she is a fictional member*, improves attitudes towards the group and inspires actions that help that group.<sup>140</sup> In fact, related research suggests that the narrative focus on individuals may actually result in a more profound impact on readers' beliefs and behaviors than non-fictional, expository accounts of groups. In a study by Jémeljian Hakemulder, one group of subjects was given a fictional account of an Algerian woman and the other group a non-fictional account of Algerian women and the conditions under which they live. The first group demonstrated more significant changes in attitude, which Hakemulder attributed to readers' ability to empathize with individuals.<sup>141</sup> Thus, the narrative convention of characterization—notwithstanding the lack of belief inherent to fiction—actually increased ethical response.<sup>142</sup>

Batson's and Hakemulder's research suggests the potential impact of artistic representations whenever a character is representative of a social group. Batson hypothesizes that there is a three-stage process by which attitudes towards groups can change: First, subjects experience empathic concern for an individual in distress; second, empathizing with the individual leads the subject to value the welfare of the individual target; and third, concern for the welfare of the individual leads to more positive beliefs and feelings

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<sup>140</sup> These findings are summarized in two papers that work in tandem: C. Daniel Batson et al, "Empathy and Attitudes: Can Feeling for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Improve Feelings Toward the Group?" and C. Daniel Batson et al, "Empathy, Attitudes, and Action: Can Feeling for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Motivate One to Help the Group?"

<sup>141</sup> "How to make alle Menschen Brüder: Literature in multicultural and multiform society." For more of Hakemulder's research, see *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept*.

<sup>142</sup> Of course, changes in belief or attitude do not necessarily precipitate any subsequent ethical behaviors, a proviso that Suzanne Keen emphasizes in *Empathy and the Novel*. But even some of Keen's own surveys suggest how changed attitudes might subsequently result in changed behaviors; one undergraduate student reports that although she has never been moved "to any direct or specific course of action" through reading, she has been "moved to adopt stances" that have "indirectly changed my outlooks/behaviors" (107).

(and subsequently actions) for the group. In this manner, the inaction inherent to the paradox of fiction is mitigated by a character's synecdochal relationship with a "class" of people, in the more general sense of a group of people defined by a shared or similar characteristic. In the case of Victorian literature about poverty, these findings suggest that readers' relationships with individual poor characters can affect their attitudes about poverty and their behavior towards poor contemporaries. They might not be able to save the heroine, but they can intercede on the behalf of someone "like" her. Significantly, Batson's study revealed that readers' changes in attitudes were still present two weeks after the students read the scenarios, suggesting that empathy with a character can have long-term ethical effects.

Thus far I have argued that the act of reading prompts an emotional response which can in turn shape readers' beliefs and, potentially, their subsequent ethical behaviors. For this last step to occur, however, readers must interpret fictional characters to be representative of a social group that they identify in the world around them, i.e. a member of a group of people whom they can help because they are not fictional. In the preface to his collected Christmas books, Dickens recalls that the books were "intended to awaken loving and forbearing thoughts" (v) in his readers. But he did not merely want his readers to have loving thoughts; he wanted them to engage in concrete ethical behaviors. Without a connection between (aesthetic) emotion and (real world) action, readers' feelings for fictional suffering have little impact on their subsequent ethical choices. The rise of realism, I want to argue, was due in part to mid-century authors' attempt to ensure this final interpretive move. The emotional effects of reading were common in the mid-nineteenth century, but the subsequent leap from emotion to ethical intervention is always more difficult; after all, readers must leave the scene of reading in order to "reengage" their action system. Mid-

century authors made explicit the relationship between fiction and reality in order to instruct readers in their own interpretive—and ethical—choices. On this account, realism emerged in an attempt to alter the very reality that it represents, a literary “intervention” in the actual world.

Paradoxically, Dickens has historically been critiqued for his “attack on realism” (Stang 153). But while his portraits of poverty can appear to the modern eye—and some contemporary ones—to be mired in melodramatic conventions, Dickens consistently proclaimed the veracity of his work, larding “fiction” with frequent assertions of “fact.” As if anticipating Batson’s and Hakemulder’s results, Dickens emphasized the metaphorical role of his characters; the suffering of imagined individuals, he reminded his audience in numerous ways, is like the suffering of “your” contemporaries. Echoing the comparison between “The Peasant Boy” of the ballad and the modern, urban sweeper of his own novel, Dickens goes on to make Jo’s representational role even more apparent with his short, generic name. And when Jo dies, the narrator intervenes in the text: “Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day” (677). The first four expostulations refer to the little sweeper, but the fifth gestures outwards; it is not merely Jo who has died but a much larger group of people who are “dying thus around us, every day.” Will Fern makes a similar widening gesture in *The Chimes*, as Dickens dramatizes the poor criminal proclaiming that he is only one member of a larger “class” of people. In describing himself Will evokes the “great gulf” between rich and poor: “I only want to live like one of the Almighty’s creeturs. I can’t—I don’t—and so there’s a pit dug between me, and them that can and do” (130). He goes on, however, to claim that he is not standing alone but with a whole community of unfortunates.

“There’s others like me. You might tell ‘em off by hundreds and by thousands, sooner than by ones” (130).<sup>143</sup> Like Tindal’s invocation of the daily “Tragedies” in Victorian England, Dickens asked readers to look out at their contemporary world even as they looked in to his fiction, and he suggests that the suffering in his novels is England’s suffering.

This synecdochal role of characters is emblematic of the “on the ground” realism that characterized sentimental realism and its popular reception. While critics like George Henry Lewes lambasted Dickens’ work as “exaggerated, untrue, fantastical, and melodramatic” (143), characters like Jo and Will Fern were nonetheless understood by Dickens’ readers to represent actual people who inhabited the contemporary world.<sup>144</sup> Dickens’ characters did not have specific real-world referents (although Jo’s experience at the inquest echoed an actual case); instead, one poor character “stood in” for the poor. Tellingly, Lewes himself observed this tendency to interpret Dickens’ characters for their representative function, or as tokens of a type: “His types established themselves in the public mind like personal experiences...Every humbug seemed a Pecksniff, every nurse a Gamp, every jovial improvident a Micawber, every stinted serving-wench a Marchioness. Universal experiences became individualized in these types; an image and a name were given, and the image was so suggestive that it seemed to *express* all that it was found to *recall*” (146). Although these examples do not carry the ethical implications of Tiny Tim or Jo, they speak to the kind of case-to-category generalization that modern scholars have observed. Lewes goes on to argue that while Dickens’ distortions of reality are obvious to the critic and “cultivated” reader, they go unnoticed by his enthusiastic audience:

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<sup>143</sup> In a similar move, a suffering weaver in Disraeli’s *Sybil, or The Two Nations* considers himself one of “six hundred thousand” all “driven from our innocent and happy homes” (115).

<sup>144</sup> For John Forster’s defense of Dickens against Lewes’ critique see *The Life of Charles Dickens, “Dickens as a Novelist, 1836-1870.”*

Give a child a wooden horse, with hair for mane and tail, and wafer-spots for colouring, he will never be disturbed by the fact that this horse does not move its legs but runs on wheels; and this wooden horse, which he can handle and draw, is believed in more than a pictured horse by a Wouvermanns [*sic*] or an Ansdell. It may be said of Dickens's human figures that they too are wooden, and run on wheels; but these are details which scarcely disturb the belief of admirers. Just as the wooden horse is brought within the range of the child's emotions, and dramatizing tendencies, when he can handle and draw it, so Dickens's figures are brought within the range of the reader's interests, and receive from these interests a sudden illumination, when they are the puppets of a drama every incident of which appeals to the sympathies. (146)

Lewes' analogy tells us much about realism as he conceives it and as the "mass of men" (146) do. The wooden horse lacks technical skill and verisimilitude; the horse paintings of Richard Ansdell and Philips Wouwermans, on the other hand, are both characterized by their technical proficiency and almost photographic mimesis.<sup>145</sup> It is the wooden horse, though, that is "believed in" by the child, because it is "brought within [his] emotions, and dramatizing tendencies." His condescension suggests that "popular" readers are simply unable to see through Dickens' distortions, but Lewes does not fully appreciate the distinction inherent to his analogy. While he finds the paintings more "realistic" because of their style, both toy and painting refer to the same subject. And just as a child does mistake wheels for legs or "wafer-spots" for a naturalistic coat (but nonetheless interprets a toy as a representation of the animal), readers were moved by Dickens' "fantastic" style while at the same time understanding it to refer to something very real.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Richard Ansdell and Philips Wouwermans were a contemporary English painter and a Dutch baroque painter, respectively. Both specialized in hunting scenes.

<sup>146</sup> While Lewes meant the analogy as an insult, his comparison has actually become pivotal to one of the most influential modern theories of narrative, postulated in philosophical aesthetics by Kendall Walton's *Mimesis and Make Believe* and in developmental psychology by Paul Harris's *The Work of Imagination*. On both Walton and Harris's account, narratives act similarly to "props" in children's make-believe; they guide imagination and stimulate emotional reactions even as readers remain aware of their fundamental unreality.

In a recent “sourcebook” on *Bleak House*, critic Janice Allan similarly fails to appreciate the distinction between our modern expectations of a realistic style (informed in part by Lewes’ influential criticism) and Victorian readers’ interpretation of realist subjects. Allan describes realism as endorsing a particular relationship between art and reality, signaled by the language of “mirror, portrait, *daguerreotype*, transcript, etc.” and also a particular style: “[T]he novelist’s language and style should be as unobtrusive as possible” in order “not to draw attention to the novel’s inherent and inevitable artificiality” (20). Dickens, she concludes, was obviously not a realist, and moreover, “did not see himself as a realist” (20). His style “is actually much closer to that associated with fantasy, fairytale, and grotesque” (21). Allan turns to the preface of *Bleak House* for corroboration, in particular Dickens’ claim that “I have purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things.” But she ignores that in the same preface Dickens goes to great pains to support the “truth” of his representations, going so far as to defend the scientific evidence for spontaneous combustion! In fact, Dickens was often an eloquent defender of realism, despite his own penchant for romanticism and sensationalism. His introduction to *Oliver Twist*, for example, was a manifesto for a new kind of realism in response to the sensationalist Newgate novels. Both Lewes and Allan disregard what Dickens himself suggested about the relationship between what one describes and how one describes it. As recounted in the *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Dickens argued that “the exact truth” must be in any description, but “the manner of stating the truth” is what sets literature apart from exposition. “It does not seem to me to be enough to say of any description that it is the exact truth. The exact truth must be there; but the merit or art in the narrator, is the manner of stating the truth. As to which thing in literature, it always seems to me that there is a world to be done. And in these times, when the tendency is to be frightfully literal and catalogue-like...the very holding of popular

literature through a kind of popular dark age, may depend on such fanciful treatment” (Forster 353). The stakes as Dickens describes them are high: literature will only survive because of the “fanciful treatment” of truth. But this version of fancy does not so much oppose reality as it presents reality in an emotionally and imaginatively engaging fashion. Tellingly, Lewes himself remarked upon this appeal; Dickens’ characters “are brought within the range of the reader’s interests,” he argued, because every incident of his dramas “appeals to the sympathies” (146).

Despite Lewes’ and other critics’ complaints that his characters were caricatures, more sympathetic reviewers praised Dickens’ representation of “real,” contemporary suffering. *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, for example, argued that his scenes of humble life have such “force and accuracy” that they “exonerate him from the charge of either exaggeration or flights of fancy” (170). *Britannia’s* review *A Christmas Carol*, meanwhile, praised Dickens’ “sympathy for human suffering...not for imaginary and fictitious distresses but for the real grinding sorrows of life.” If this critic is any indication, then Dickens’ readers demonstrated the kind of metaphorical interpretation of fictional characters that gave their reading a real-world application. While the reviewer suggests that Dickens, and by extension, his readers, experience sympathy not for “fictitious” but for “real” distress, I have argued that there is instead a causal relationship between the two. Readers who respond emotionally and empathically to characters can then extend their empathy and compassion beyond the confines of the text. This model of narrative empathy is pithily contained in a cabman’s spontaneous eulogy of the author upon his death. “Mr. Dickens was the gentleman who looked after the poor man. We cabmen were hoping he would give us a turn next” (reported by Henry Dickens, Ford 81). These remarks not only reflect Dickens’ reputation as a defender of the poor, but also reveal the cabman’s confidence in the ethical

consequences of fiction. If Dickens dramatized one member of his profession, then it would transform readers' responses to the profession as a whole.

### **Empathy and the Rise of Realism**

As we see in Dickens, mid-century realism is not characterized by detachment and objectivity; instead, it relies primarily upon its referential quality. In order to emphasize their characters' synechdocal function, mid-century authors frequently turned to the parable of Dives and Lazarus, itself a sustained metaphor that conveys a figurative meaning. Like sentimental realism, parables use the delineation of individual "characters" to represent the experience of larger groups of people. In fact, parables are a useful way to describe the ethical effects of uniting sentimentalism and realism. If imagining Dives and Lazarus as individuals makes them more imaginatively vivid, then conceiving of them as representatives of a class or type makes them more ethically salient. Even though they are not "round" characters in the narratological sense (Lazarus especially is a sort of cipher for the suffering and diseased), the very delineation of individual men is pivotal to the story's emotional appeal, for all of the reasons I have described in the previous chapter. The parable would have little value as moral teaching, however, if one could not also recognize its relevance to individuals in the world. Consequently, "characters" in parables are both fictional creations and understood to have referential truth. The Dean of Westminster highlighted this role of the two men in Dickens' funeral sermon: "It is a tale of real life—so real that we can hardly believe that it is not history. Yet it is, nevertheless, a tale of pure fiction from first to last. Dives and Lazarus are as much imaginary beings as Hamlet or as Shylock" (Stanley 324). If the "fiction" of Dives and Lazarus lies in the fact that they never lived, then their reality

comes from their representational status. Dives' lack of a name in the parable itself further emphasizes this representational role; he is "a rich man" among many.

Significantly, the Dean himself interprets Dives and Lazarus for their historical and contemporary relevance: "The spirit of the Parable belongs to the West as well as to the East. The contrast, the inequality of deserts, on which it insists, meets us in the streets of London, no less than in the streets of Jerusalem...Close beside the magnificence, the opulence, the luxury of this great metropolis, is that very neighbor—those very neighbors—whom the Parable describes" (329). The Dean's semantic shift, from "that very neighbor" to "those very neighbors," makes Lazarus's referential function apparent. He is not one historical man, but all of the contemporary poor. The figures of Dives and Lazarus functioned similarly in countless Victorian novels, poems, songs, and social commentaries, serving as a vivid shorthand for contemporary suffering and negligence. Although some authors invoked the parable in order to naturalize the divide between rich and poor (as did Mrs. Alexander's hymn of 1844, which described "The rich man in his castle / The poor man at his gate / He made them high and lowly / And ordered their estate"), most used it to critique contemporary society and condemn the negligence of modern-day Dives. In her 1861 poem "Homeless," for example, Adelaide Anne Procter indicts the "fair lady" who turns a blind eye to the suffering around her. She concludes with the judgment, "And so Lazarus lies at our doorstep / And Dives neglects him still" (27-28). Procter's gesture through time—"Dives neglects him *still*"—suggests that the problem of the parable is ongoing. Furthermore, England bears a collective responsibility; Lazarus lies at *our* doorstep. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* makes a similar move through time as Romney diagnoses the divide between rich and poor as both a problem of "the ages" and, particularly, of their own.

And rich men make the poor, who curse the rich,  
Who agonise together, rich and poor,  
Under and over, in the social spasm  
And crisis of the ages. Here's an age  
That makes its own vocation! here we have stepped  
Across the bounds of time! here's nought to see,  
But just the rich man and just Lazarus,  
And both in torments. (47)

By stepping “Across the bounds of time,” contemporary Victorians see the very same men immortalized in the Bible millenia before. In 1858, William Gilbert (father of W. S. Gilbert) wrote about the life of the London poor in a novel he titled *Dives and Lazarus*, and the anonymous poet of “City Contrasts” saw a similar alienation: “Dives and Lazarus elbow / Each other whene'er they meet, / And the crumbs from the rich man's table / Feed the beggar upon the street” (382). Reviews of both Gaskell’s *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* and Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet* invoked the parable, both in praise of the novels and as a critique of the society they represent. After reading *Mary Barton* the Edinburgh Review concluded that “Lazarus lies at the gates of Dives...by the park palings of the square as well as on the hall-steps of the cotton lord” (434). “Dives and Lazarus elbow one another in the street,” Blackwood’s echoed in its review of *Alton Locke*. Only novelists, the review implies, paid attention to the beggar’s experience, for “our political economists select Dives as the sole type of the nation” (594).

Parables do not explicate their characters’ synecdochal role; rather, it is conventional to their interpretation that they are “symbolic.” As is evidenced by the exegesis within sentimental realism, however, mid-century authors were not willing to leave this interpretation to chance. Just as they glossed the contemporary relevance of Dives and Lazarus, authors explicated their own characters’ representational role. In Thomas Hood’s “Song of the Shirt” (1843), he uses syntax to establish a relationship between his own personified representative and the group she represents. The poem represents a woman

alone in her garret, sewing, starving, and singing “the song of the shirt.” But when she addresses the rich she makes her own representational status clear, accusing them of killing not just her, but a whole group of people. “It is not linen you’re wearing out, / But human creatures’ lives” (19-20). The transition from a singular into a plural noun (lives) and the possessive apostrophe shifted from the singular to the plural position (creatures’) both mark her place among other women who are being “worn out” by work. Her “Song of the Shirt” might be sung in the singular first person, but it is sung, Hood suggests, by all seamstresses.<sup>147</sup>

Significantly, Hood’s seamstress lacks a name, a rhetorical move that emphasizes her representational function by signaling her generic status as seamstress. Inspired by Hood’s poem, Richard Redgrave’s and G. F. Watts’ portraits of seamstresses, were titled “The Sempstress” (1844) and “The Seamstress” (c1850), respectively. Each depicts a single woman working by candlelight, desperation and fatigue evident in her face. Each has all of the affective appeal of personified suffering. The titles of the two paintings, however, emphasize not her individuality but her typicality, and spectators to the paintings are invited to imagine not one woman alone in the night, but a multitude of women similarly alone. This multiplying effect is exacerbated by the proliferating portraits of seamstresses. Readers who encountered Hood’s poem might also have seen Redgrave and Watts’ paintings and the surfeit of seamstress “portraits” that appeared across genres.<sup>148</sup> Portraits like Redgrave’s

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<sup>147</sup> A similar dynamic operates in Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” a poem “sung” by a slave woman. Her song shifts, however, between private and communal narrative, signaled by her use of first person pronouns as she moves between singular (“I am black, I am black” (22)) and plural “*we* who are dark, we are dark!” (36).

<sup>148</sup>In addition to Hood’s poem and Redgrave’s and Watt’s paintings see John Galt’s “The Seamstress,” Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *The Wrongs of Women*, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, Dickens’ *The Chimes*, Caroline Norton’s *A Child of the Islands*, William James Linton’s “Rich and Poor,” Anna Elizabeth Blunden’s “The Seamstress (A Song of the Shirt)” and Ralph Barnes

“The Poor Teacher” (1844) and Erskine Nicol’s “The Emigrants” (1864) perform a similar function for their “type,” as do poems like Caroline Norton’s “The Weaver” or characters in poems like “The Sempstress,” “The Trapper in the Mines,” and “The Weaver at his Loom” from Norton’s *The Child of the Islands*. In each case, the iconic status of the individual as a representative of her profession takes precedence over her unique qualities.

The risk of this approach is that the group being represented will once again collapse into a “heap”; since one person is the representative of the whole, individual variation is lost in favor of uniformity. The benefit, however, is that the character’s referential status is harder to miss. A reader cannot dismiss a character’s suffering as atypical if the artist has insisted upon her very typicality. Furthermore, although a reader cannot help the particular seamstress or weaver or teacher (especially if they are not modeled on an actual person), they *can* help someone like them. This was an especially effective technique for groups like seamstresses and weavers; if artists could inspire sympathy for seamstresses as a category, then the *particular* seamstress whom a reader employed might benefit from a newly beneficent employer. Norton’s “The Weaver” aimed for just this sort of effect. She represents just one weaver, plying his “incessant loom” (5) to answer “Luxury’s commands” (12), his fatigue and strain evident in his “dull, anxious eyes” (9) and “nerveless, thin, and trembling hands” (10). The responsibility for his suffering, however, is universal. Since he is not merely one weaver but representative of the “class” of weavers, anyone who benefits from woven goods has exploited his services. The weaver’s representational status is made even more broad as he is transformed, at the end of the poem, into “weary Lazarus” (14), with the poem’s audience implicated as a complicit Dives.

Another technique was available to poets; rather than making the specific general

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Grinrod’s *The Slaves of the Needle; An Exposure of the Distressed Condition, Moral and Physical, of Dress Makers, Milliners, Embroiderers, Slop Workers, &c.* (1844).

(that is, making a specific character representative of a larger group), they could simply construct a plural subject to begin with. In *A Voice from the Factories* Caroline Norton first imagines “a toiling **child**” (IX), but she quickly interprets this child’s place among many, widening her gaze to “that less favoured race—**THE CHILDREN OF THE POOR**” (26). Her use of the singular heightens emotion: “Sullen and sad the infant labourer creeps; / He joys not in the glow of morning’s light” (17), but she emphasizes the plural to make problem general: “His fellow-labourers (playmates hath he none) / Walk by, as sad as he, nor hail the morning sun” (17). When Norton exclaims, “Poor little **FACTORY SLAVES**—for You these lines complain!” (15), the “You” is both one and many. In effect, these plural subjects reverse the narrowing focus I described in Chapter 3 in Dickens’ description of Coketown; instead of parsing the whole into just one part, the poems remind readers that each part is from a whole. Although this technique eschews the use of a single character, the plural subject is marked by the “conventions” of individuality; they think, feel, and speak as if they were just one person. In Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children” and Tindal’s “The Cry of the Oppressed,” for example, a group of people speak with a single voice. As a marker of personhood speech retains the affective engagement of personification.

Assuring readers of the “parabolic” function of characters was part of a larger system of reference that established the metaphorical relationship between narratives and modern life. In order for a narrative to affect readers’ beliefs about contemporary society, it needed to represent contemporary society. Accordingly, sentimental realism was, as Arnold Kettle described Disraeli’s novels, “intensely topical” (176). Tellingly, Dickens was especially adamant about establishing the contemporary relevance and reference of *Bleak House*. As John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson describe in *Dickens at Work*, the novel was “a fable for 1852, related to a large extent in terms of the events, the types, and the social groups which

the previous year had thrown into prominence” (179). The treatment of Jo at the inquest, for example, was taken straight from the newspapers.<sup>149</sup> While some authors chose a more “retrospective” approach (i.e. the story was set in the past), it was either such a recent past as to be negligible (*Mary Barton* was published in 1848 and was set a few years earlier) or it was a period in time suited to contemporary political and social issues.<sup>150</sup> In his anonymous review of *Mary Barton*, Charles Kingsley reveals his own sense that sentimental realism’s immediate, local, and contemporary subject matter results in higher ethical demands:

Not of Indian cholera famines, or Piedmontese persecutions, or Peruvian tortures, or old Norman Conquest butcheries, or any of those horrors which distance of place and time makes us quiet, easy-going folks, fancy impossible in a civilized, Christian, nineteenth-century England; but of the life-in-death-life worse than many deaths, which now besets thousands, and tens of thousands of our own countrymen. (“Recent Novels” 430)

As Kingsley puts it, the “distance of place and time” makes suffering less immediate and less emotional; it makes us “quiet, easy-going folks.” But Gaskell’s fiction is contemporary in two senses of the word; it is not only recently penned, but also describes contemporary society—“civilized [note Kingsley’s irony], Christian, nineteenth-century England.”

Contemporary suffering, Kingsley implies, should stir readers in a way that suffering that happened in the past or is happening far away cannot. Integral to this heightened response is the potential for intervention. While readers are unable to intercede across space or time, suffering that is “here” (England) and “now” (1849) can be ameliorated. Significantly, Kingsley’s review extrapolates from literary characters like the Bartons to the experience of “thousands, and tens of thousands of our own countrymen.” This expansive gesture allows

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<sup>149</sup> As early as Humphrey House’s *The Dickens World*, critics have noted that Dickens himself was often “behind his times” in his social critique, despite his own claims to depict modern life.

<sup>150</sup> *Shirley*, for example, was published in 1849 but set during the Luddite rebellions of 1811-2, which raised timely issues of workers’ rights, the responsibilities of masters, and the effects of the mobs. Brontë herself was diffident about writing of the contemporary world; “I cannot write books handling the topics of the day,” she told George Smith, “it is no use trying.” Charlotte Brontë, “Letter to George Smith,” 30 Oct. 1852.

Kingsley to solicit “fictional” emotion for “real” people, while his use of the first person plural—this is the suffering of “our own countrymen”—further emphasizes his readers’ national responsibilities for the country’s poor. (I will examine this rhetorical move at greater length in the next chapter).

In order to ensure that her own readers look out at the “Tragedies” that surround them, Henrietta Tindal also emphasized her local, contemporary subject in “The Cry of the Oppressed.” Initially Tindal conceives of suffering in a capacious, transhistorical sense; the “Oppressed” of the title comprises feudal serfs, Peloponnesian Greeks enslaved in Sparta, African slaves, mill and factory workers, prisoners, paupers, apprentices. But although she illuminates suffering *through* space and time, it is local, contemporary suffering that is her true object. Alternating between the past and present tense, she illuminates the similarities between slavery, serfdom, and “modern” English poverty. The connection between African slavery is most evident; Tindal uses the terms slaves to refer both to inmates of “plantation[s]” and “stifling mill[s],” and she follows a stanza in which she describes slaves whose “lives were sold...For a trader’s gain” (13) with one about souls “pent within / The narrow street and the valley dim” (17-18). By associating slaves with millworkers and paupers, she associates too the English economic system with the institution of slavery, a rhetorical move that holds her wealthy audience (“Ye...who live at ease”) responsible for oppression comparable to the slave trade. Tindal’s contemporary emphasis is made most evident in the final two stanzas, which I discussed above. Having described historical suffering, the speakers of the poem maintain a consistent present tense as they command readers to “Look out around ye” (47).

As these examples suggest, sentimental realism raised significant questions about the relationship between imagination and “reality.” One need look only so far as prefatory

material for evidence that sentimental realism continually signaled its own truth content. Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, assures the audience of *Mary Barton* that “I have tried to write truthfully” (xxxvi) invoking both her own personal authority as witness to current affairs and the authority of her working-class sources who “had laid open to me the[ir] hearts” (xxxv). Caroline Norton’s defense of the “melancholy truth” in *A Voice from the Factories* similarly invokes her “eyewitness” authority and also appeals to the authority of governmental reports. “I will only add, that I have in no instance overcharged or exaggerated, by poetical fictions, the picture drawn by the Commissioners appointed to inquire into this subject. I have strictly adhered to the printed Reports; to that which I believe to be the melancholy truth; and that which I have, in some instances, myself had an opportunity of witnessing” (viii). Frances Trollope was especially vehement in her defense of the faithful accuracy of *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy*:

The true but most painful picture has been drawn faithfully and conscientiously. Of course voices have been raised to deny loudly the truth of all the author’s statements, and to assert the whole to be a mere tissue of invention and falsehood. The same charges have been made against her upon another occasion, and she has lived to see the truth of her statements, so impugned, universally admitted. She awaits with perfect confidence the time when similar justice shall be rendered to these pages. (iv)

The accusations of falsehood that Trollope defends against are themselves significant; defenders of the industrial system and the autonomy of factory owners were “of course” invested in discrediting reports like hers. In how dogged defense of the truthfulness of her accounts, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna brought into question the very fictionality of her texts. In *Helen Fleetwood*, she writes, “Let no one suppose we are going to write fiction, or to conjure up phantoms of a heated imagination, to aid the cause which we avowedly embrace... Vivid indeed, and fertile in devices must the fancy be that could invent a horror beyond the bare, everyday reality of the thing! Nay, we will set forth nothing but what has

been stated on oath, corroborated on oath, and on oath confirmed beyond the possibility of an evasive question” (59). The “Advertisement” that prefaces *Sybil* begins in a similar vein. Disraeli assures his readers of the accuracy of his reports and affirms that it is “written from his own observation.” But while he claims that there is no “exaggeration,” he concedes that there has been, by necessity, omission: “While he hopes he has alleged nothing which is not true, he has found the absolute necessity of suppressing much that is genuine. For so little do we know of the state of our own country, that the air of improbability which the whole truth would inevitably throw over these pages, might deter some from their perusal” (xxii). The truth, Disraeli suggests, is more “improbable” than his fiction.

Significantly, narrative representations of poverty were consistently evaluated—in praise and critique—in terms of truth, facts, and reality. As Paul Falconer Poole said in his praise of Richard Redgrave’s painting “The Sempstress,” it is “truthful and wonderful” (Alexander 60). Aesthetic merit was predicated on the painting’s truth claims; its *veracity* was critical to its value. A review of Kingsley’s *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet* in *Blackwood’s* recounts the dire straits of the poor in England and hails them not as fictional detail but as “stern realities—grim facts which it is impossible to gainsay” (594). And in *The White Slaves of England*, John Cobden describes Frances Trollope’s *Michael Armstrong: Factory Boy* as “a fiction merely in construction, a truthful narrative in fact” (162). The critical reception of *Mary Barton* is paradigmatic of the evaluation of sentimental realism in terms of its accurate depiction of society. The novel was both criticized and praised for its representation of “reality”; while critics disputed Gaskell’s facts, praise of the novel focused on its veracity. As the *Athenaeum* concluded, “we have met with few pictures of life among the working classes at once so forcible and so fair as *Mary Barton*. The truth of it is terrible. The

writer...has described misery, temptation, distress and shame as they really exist.”<sup>151</sup> The Examiner concurred: “John Barton...is very ordinary homespun stuff...There is no bragging, or telling of things fantastical. The book is an ungilded and sorrowful picture of the life of the class of workpeople in such a town as Manchester, with which circumstances seem to have made the writer more than ordinarily familiar.”<sup>152</sup> Kingsley, meanwhile, praised “the ‘talent’ of the book,” but goes on to argue that talent is beside the point. “The matter puts the manner out of sight. The facts—the facts are all in all; for they are facts” (“Recent Novels” 430).

The conflation of fictional worlds with Victorian England was accentuated by the intermingling of expository social documentation and fiction, a phenomenon that has been documented at length by critics like Martin Fido and Sheila Smith.<sup>153</sup> Disraeli famously integrated a range of non-literary sources, blending R. H. Horne’s report on the Children’s Employment Commission into his own descriptions of Wodgate in *Sybil*, quoting segments of Edwin Chadwick’s *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* and Thomas Tancred’s introduction to the *Report of the Midland Mining Commission* virtually word for word, and taking his description of the homeless poor in Hyde Park from *The Times* police report, Oct. 11, 1843. Although few were as brazen as the future prime minister,

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<sup>151</sup> Review of Mary Barton, *Athenaeum* 21 October 1848.

<sup>152</sup> Review of Mary Barton, *Examiner* 4 November 1848.

<sup>153</sup> See, for example, Patrick Brantlinger, “Bluebooks, the Social Organism, and the Victorian Novel.” Joseph Butwin, “Hard Times: The News and the Novel.” Martin Fido, “The Treatment of Rural Distress in Disraeli’s *Sybil*” and “‘From His Own Observation’: Sources of Working-Class Passages in Disraeli’s *Sybil*.” J. Michael Jefferson, “Industrialisation and Poverty: In Fact and Fiction.” Joseph Kestner. *Protest and Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867*. Ivanka Kovacevic, *Fact into Fiction: English Literature and the Industrial Scene, 1750-1850*. Ivanka Kovacevic, S. Barbara Kanner, “Blue Book Into Novel: The Forgotten Industrial Fiction of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna.” Sheila Smith, *The Other Nation: The Poor in English Novels of the 1840s and 1850s*, “Blue Books and Victorian Novelists,” and “Willenhall and Wodgate: Disraeli’s Use of Blue Book Evidence.” For a historian’s take on the relationship between this fiction and its historical context, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, in particular Part 4, “The Fictional Poor,” Section XVI, “Fiction as History.” Also relevant is Kate Flint’s anthology of social documents, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change*.

many authors took inspiration from expository social documentation; both Elizabeth Barrett and Charles Dickens also read the *Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission* and were moved to write "The Cry of the Children" and *A Christmas Carol*, respectively. Charles Kingsley, strongly influenced by Henry Mayhew's journalistic accounts of the sweated tailoring trade in *The Morning Chronicle*,<sup>154</sup> wrote his own exposés of the tailoring trade: "Cheap Clothes & Nasty," one of his "Tracts by Christian Socialists," and his novel *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet*, both published in 1850. In one of the most interesting examples of intermingled genres, Kingsley decided to exclude some of his own accounts of English poverty from *Yeast* as a way to forestall accusations that they were "copied out of the *Morning Chronicle*," while at the same time he describes his character, Lancelot, "buried...up to the eyes" in social documentation—"blue books, red books, sanitary reports, mine reports, [and] factory reports" as he educates himself on the "Condition-of-the-Poor question" (78).

The cross-germination between "factual" reports and "fictional" narrative further blurred the lines between social investigation and art. Portions of Augustus Mayhew's novel *Paved with Gold*, for example, are nearly verbatim copies of *London Labour and the London Poor*, which he helped his brother Henry research and compile. (See, for example, their accounts of the watercress sellers.) Dickens' visit to Preston in January of 1854 was a source for both his journalism—"On Strike"—and fiction—*Hard Times*. And Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's research for *The Perils of the Nation*, a treatise commissioned by the Committee of the Christian Influence Society and written on Lord Ashley's request, also formed the foundation *The Wrongs of Woman*. Much of Tonna's source material was taken from Richard

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<sup>154</sup> Mayhew's articles on the sweated tailoring trade were published in the *Morning Chronicle* on December 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of 1849.

Dugard Grainger's *Report for the Children's Employment Commission* of 1843.<sup>155</sup> Even within "imaginative" literature authors accrued documentation more conventional to an expository account; each section of *The Wrongs of Woman* concludes with a chapter of corroborating documentation, "Consequences," "Corroborating Evidence," "Authentications," and "The Finale."<sup>156</sup> Even some poetry accrued copious evidence; Caroline Norton's *A Child of the Islands* is prefaced by a series of quotations about poverty and followed by capacious footnotes that fill over forty pages.

This survey of the genre's claims to realism is not only meant to demonstrate mid-century authors' commitment to representing contemporary life, but the ethical goals driving this impulse. In *Bleak House*, Dickens offers a compelling analysis of how depicting the modern world (and modern dress) is integral to his own ethical objectives. Dickens mounts a scathing critique of those who insist on historical rather than contemporary subjects, "ladies and gentlemen of fashion...On whom even the Fine Arts, attending in powder and walking backward like the Lord Chamberlain, must array themselves in the milliners' and tailors' patterns of past generations, and be particularly careful not to be in earnest, or to receive any impress from the moving age" (173). Tellingly, these wealthy spectators refuse to be affected by art; in order to preserve their own "languid and pretty" lives, they banish "ideas" and agree "to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities" (173). Their aesthetic stance, Dickens suggests, does not only "keep down" modern life

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<sup>155</sup> Non-fiction could also bear striking resemblance to fictional accounts, as in William Dodd's *A Narrative of the Experience and Sufferings of William Dodd, a Factory Cripple*, which Lord Ashley arranged to be published. Ironically, the truth of this "true" narrative came under more question than the fictional ones; Dodd was vigorously attacked in the House of Commons as an unreliable "character." In yet another example of fictional and factual cross-germination, the epigraph to Dodd's more expository account, *The Factory System Illustrated: In a Series of Letters to the Right Hon. Lord Ashley* is the opening stanza of Caroline Norton's poem, *A Voice from the Factories*.

<sup>156</sup> Among other things, Tonna uses these chapters to define particular terms for her readers like tommy shop and the truck system drawing, running, mending, and pearling.

*realism*, but the reality itself. This satire of those who will only support historical art complements an earlier “glimpse of the world of fashion” (17): “There is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it,” he determines, “[b]ut the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller’s cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun” (17). Despite the “goodness” of the wealthy, Dickens suggests that they are willfully ignorant, stopping up one’s ears with cotton and wool so as not to be disturbed the reality of the modern world. The tastes of this “world of fashion” are in stark contrast to Dickens’ own contemporary subjects. Although readers can, like Harold Skimpole, insulate their aesthetic appreciation from their ethical commitments, Dickens insists that fiction penetrate the “jeweller’s cotton” that would shut out the suffering of the modern world.

The referential function of sentimental realism offers a further response to scholars who criticize the personal solutions to poverty emphasized in the denouements of social problem fiction. The titles of *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* and *Sybil: or, The Two Nations* reveal their dual role as personal and public narratives. Gaskell’s novel was both the story of Mary Barton (and her father John) and the story of Manchester in the 1840s; Disraeli’s heroine might have been one woman, but his novel was about the rich and poor in England. Dickens was so eager that *Hard Times for These Times* be read as representative of contemporary reality that he was actually uncomfortable with the association of Coketown with Preston. He did not want Coketown so narrowly connected to just one industrial city; this conflation, he complained, “localizes...a story which has a direct purpose in reference to the working people all over England” (*Nonesuch Letters* 595). By reiterating “times” in both title and subtitle, Dickens affirms the story’s contemporaneousness and indicates these times *are* hard times. The fact that many of these subtitles are not remembered by modern

readers—and not even printed on the covers of many modern editions—suggests that twenty-first century readers are not as sensitized to the effects of the genre’s metaphorical claims. Sheila Smith, for example, bemoans the tendency of these novelists to extrapolate and generalize, arguing that it “detracts from individualization of the poor” (*Other Nation* 170). But it is the integration of personified suffering with “general” claims that gives sentimental realism its unique ethical function. Literature’s vivid portraits of poor characters allow readers to conceive of poverty as the lived experience of individuals, but characters’ synecdochal role establishes their larger relevance in the contemporary world.

This synecdochal interpretation allows readers of sentimental realism to experience not only individual but statistical compassion. As I have emphasized throughout this dissertation, readers’ relationships with characters mimic “actual” relationships and arouse similar affective responses. Elaine Scarry suggests that this feature of literature “prepares us inadequately” for statistical compassion because our vivid imaginings are constrained to a few main characters. “Literature—even when it enlists us into the greatest imaginative acts and the most expansive compassion—always confesses the limits on the imagination by the structural necessity of major and minor persons, center stage and lateral figures” (287). “Secondary characters,” she observes, “(let alone second-hundredth or second-thousandth characters) lack the density of personhood that is attributed to the central character” (286). But by establishing metaphorical identity between individual characters and their social referents, readers’ empathy and compassion extend beyond the “major persons” of a novel, poem, or painting. In this way, the vicarious distress of readers is not a fictional exercise, but a radical experiment in empathy with contemporaries whom they might never meet. Furthermore, while empathy with a character cannot result in any kind of ameliorative action for the character herself, it can nonetheless lead to prosocial behavior. The audience of

sentimental realism might not be able to intervene in the text, but they could combat the conditions that it represented.

## Chapter Five

### **“Do ye hear the children weeping?”<sup>157</sup> Apostrophe and the Making of a Nation**

In “The Cry of the Children” (1843), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s indignant and emotional portrait of factory children working in England, the poet appeals to her middle and upper-class readers—“O my brothers”—and dramatizes her poetic subjects, the poor children, doing the same—“O cruel nation.” Although the ode form of apostrophe is not always so straightforward, direct address appears again and again in sentimental realism, as authors—and their characters—turn to readers and plead, expostulate, remonstrate, caution, and reassure. Even in the absence of any vocative expression, sentimental realism is essentially a second-person form of address, written for an audience it hoped to convince. Address is critical to all persuasive genres; classical rhetoric, most notably, is “fundamentally a vocative form of discourse, always explicitly or implicitly involving a second-person ‘thou’ or ‘ye’” (Kneale 142). The vocative is also a common feature in religious and political appeals, both genres designed to remind readers of their ethical and social commitments.

Although the relationship between speaker and audience is central to studies of rhetoric, it has been underappreciated in literary criticism. This is due in part to the prejudice against dogmatic or “propagandistic” narratives, which frequently use address to achieve their persuasive goals. Jane Tompkins has identified this critical bias in modern criticism, which often defines literature as “a form of discourse that has no designs on the

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<sup>157</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning. “The Cry of the Children,” 1.

world” (125). But one can find a much earlier iteration in Mill’s well-known distinction between poetry and eloquence in his 1833 essay “What is Poetry,” republished in 1859 as “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties.”<sup>158</sup> Mill figures the poet as soliloquist (poetry is “overheard”), but eloquence “supposes an audience” (71). Moreover, eloquence is defined by authors’ attempts at persuasion and often characterized by appeals to sympathy: “Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action” (71). To Mill, these objectives are irreconcilable with poetry: when “the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end,” it “ceases to be poetry” (98). Despite Mill’s critical demarcation, however, this “turn[ing] round” to audience is not only a visible feature of much of nineteenth-century fiction, but also its poetry. Indeed, the very terms of his distinction are the *raison d’être* for sentimental realism; it courts other minds in order to move them “to passion or to action.”

In this chapter, I reinterpret the figure of apostrophe in terms of address to readers and argue that sentimental realism’s construction of audience helped redefine English national identity in terms of ethical obligation to the poor. Before he wrote his first Christmas book, Dickens planned on publishing “An Appeal to the People of England on Behalf of the Poor Man’s Child.” Although Dickens ultimately abandoned the project in favor of *A Christmas Carol*, the title of Dickens’ proposed “Appeal” captures the dynamic of address inherent to sentimental realism: “I,” the author, address “you,” the people of England, “on Behalf” of the poor. Dickens’ title is especially apt because apostrophe to readers was typically not merely an address, in the sense of talking *to* someone, but an

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<sup>158</sup> “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” which I cite here, is in the second volume of Mill’s *Dissertations and Discussions*. This essay incorporated “What is Poetry” and “The Two Kinds of Poetry,” which were published in the January and October issues of *The Monthly Repository* in 1833.

“appeal,” in the sense of wanting something *from* them. The resulting dynamic is at once one of solidarity and opposition. It is assumed that authors and readers share fundamental similarities (they are not the poor on whose behalf the author speaks), but authors also represent themselves as already sympathetic to the poor, their literary enterprise evidence of their beneficence. In this way, apostrophe to audience does “embarrass,” to use Jonathan Culler’s term, but here it is the object of address who is embarrassed, shamed into intervention through comparison with the speaker.

In its most general sense apostrophe refers to address, but it has typically been associated with an absent listener, one who cannot hear either because they are inanimate, dead, or not present with the speaker.<sup>159</sup> Accordingly, the term is not typically used to describe addresses to audience, although they are, in a very real sense, absent from the scene of writing. But the “absence” of the listener or reader is the essential characteristic of address in sentimental realism, not because of death but because of the “great gulf” that is thematically and epistemologically central to the genre. Thus, the absence of the audience is twofold: they are not with the writer who is (ostensibly) in dialogue with them, and they are not with the actual or fictional poor. Thomas Hood’s hugely popular poem “The Song of the Shirt” (1843) meditates on this absence. Hood portrays a seamstress alone in her garret “[w]ith fingers weary and worn” (1, 81) sewing and singing the “Song of the Shirt” (8, 89). The seamstress calls out to (Hood’s) readers—“Oh, Men, with Sisters dear! / Oh, men, with Mothers and Wives!” (24-25), but it is integral to the poem’s premise (and the woman’s

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<sup>159</sup> Scholars of apostrophe, or *aversio*, have often emphasized the strictly defined sense of *diversio*, or turning away from one listener to another. Jonathan Culler, for instance, begins his chapter on “Apostrophe” with Quintilian, who defines apostrophe as a “diversion of our words to address some person other than the judge” (135, citing Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*, IV, I, 63). J. Douglas Kneale cautions that address without this “diversion” is more accurately called exclamation, *exclamatio*, or *ecphonesis*. His critique of Culler and other scholars of apostrophe stems from their own confusion of apostrophe and address. Kneale concedes, however, that this technical rhetorical sense of apostrophe is of relatively late origin (158).

suffering) that its readers cannot hear her pleas, much less those of an actual seamstress. In fact, although the poem's audience hears "her" song, it is only because it is recorded, or transcribed, for them by Hood.<sup>160</sup> Accordingly, the first and last stanzas are in Hood's voice, describing the seamstress in the third person; it is only in the middle stanzas that the seamstress sings her "Song of the Shirt." Hood's "Song of the Shirt" contains, or cites, hers. Hood's own plea—"Would that its tone could reach the Rich" (88)—further alerts readers to their absence from the poem's scene. The two stanzas in Hood's voice are identical except for this added penultimate line, an addition which calls attention to Hood's use of *indirect* address; he refers to his audience in the third person, calling attention to his desire to "reach" them in the second.

Even as apostrophe is predicated on absence, however, it simultaneously works to overcome it. As Barbara Johnson argues in "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," the addressee is "made present" (185) by apostrophe. In "The Cry of the Children," for example, Barrett Browning suggests that her readers cannot hear the children's cries but she goes on to record their tears, bringing her audience into the scene by invoking them—"O my brothers" (1, 9, 21, 101, 134)—time and time again. As the poem proceeds, the audience does not only hear but speaks, at least "off stage," engaged in dialogue with both poet and poor children. After the poet directs her listeners to "question the young children" (13), for example, the children respond to their queries. If readers are physically absent, they are "textually" present, summoned by apostrophe into the virtual social space of the text. Similarly, Hood's readers are reminded of their absence for the seamstress's song but simultaneously allowed to hear it; when Hood exclaims "Would that its tones could reach the Rich!," readers are implicitly congratulated for satisfying that desire. By virtue of reading

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<sup>160</sup> Tellingly, Hood's grave carries the inscription, "*HE SANG THE SONG OF THE SHIRT*" (my emphasis).

the words, they are “present” for the scene. In this way, the reader’s absence is the subject of the text, but it is mitigated by the act of reading.

My reinterpretation of apostrophe is also meant to invoke its relationship with *prosopopoeia*. In Chapter 3, I described how sentimental realism “personified,” or gave personhood to, poor characters. In this chapter, I want to examine how apostrophe personifies the audience of sentimental realism, invoking the subjectivity of readers who are subsequently held responsible for their response. Apostrophe animates the object of address, giving it life by making it a hearing, and potentially speaking, subject. Barbara Johnson describes this animating power, writing that apostrophe “manipulates the I/thou structure of direct address in an indirect, fictionalized way. The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic” (185). In the case of an inanimate object like an urn, this animation gives figurative life to an object that is not literally alive; in the case of already living readers, apostrophe *enlivens* in the sense of making them active rather than passive recipients of a text. Moreover, if an apostrophe to an inanimate object constructs the reader as spectator, observing a relationship between speaker and object of address, then an apostrophe to reader forges a relationship between author and reader. When a character addresses a reader, the effects can be even more striking, as readers have the sensation of being in an unmediated relationship with poor individuals.

As this model of apostrophe suggests, the use of address can make the ethical appeals of sentimental realism more vivid, as author, character, and audience are “made present” to each other. Noted discourse psychologist Arthur Graesser hypothesizes that a similar effect would attend second-person narration, effectively an extended address to “you,” predicting that it would “sweep up the readers as a participant in the microworld

[narrative world] and thereby increase reader involvement' (Graesser, Olde, Klettke 237).<sup>161</sup>

But other research on reading suggests that address might paradoxically diminish rather than heighten reader involvement. Address brings readers into the narrative scene and, in the case of sentimental realism, makes explicit ethical demands on their subsequent behavior.

But research in the field of narrative persuasion suggests that the effects of reading are most pronounced when readers “forget” themselves, not when they remember. Psychologists have identified a unique category of text processing that is found primarily in readers’ response to narratives, what scholars have termed absorption, entrancement, transportation, or becoming “lost in a book.”<sup>162</sup> The particular theories behinds these terms vary, but all of them describe the phenomenological experience of becoming immersed in a narrative world such that one’s sense of self and one’s immediate surroundings diminishes, replaced by a vivid mental representation of the narrative (comparable to the situation models I discussed in Chapter 2). Melanie Green and Timothy Brock, who have forwarded the theory of narrative transportation, hypothesize that this type of text processing may make “narrative experience feel more like real experience” (“Role of Transportation” 702), a form of mimicry that could affect attitudes and beliefs in a similar way to personal experiences.<sup>163</sup>

Significantly, readers who report high levels of transportation also report the most substantial impact on beliefs and attitudes after the act of reading is complete.

Most importantly, reminding readers of their own self and surroundings might serve to interrupt narrative empathy, which some psychologists argue is a signature feature of

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<sup>161</sup> There has been limited empirical research on second-person narration because of its scarcity in western literature.

<sup>162</sup> See William James, *The Principles of Psychology*; Richard Gerrig *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*; Melanie Green and Timothy Brock, “The role of transportation in the persuasiveness in public narratives”; Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*.

<sup>163</sup> Green and Brock’s use of “transportation” builds on Richard Gerrig’s metaphor of reading as travel, describing how a book can “transport” readers through time and space.

absorption. Paul Harris describes the phenomenon of being immersed in a narrative world this way:

Under normal circumstances, our everyday consciousness includes an awareness of time, space and identity as a constant backdrop. Barring a psychotic interlude, or a sudden awakening from a deep sleep in an unfamiliar environment, we are aware at some level of the current time, of where we are, and of who we are. Yet when we are absorbed in a narrative, current reality is temporarily held in abeyance while we focus attention on the world of the narrative. We start to locate ourselves inside that world rather than in the real world and events that befall the protagonists loom large in our consciousness...[O]nce the state of narrative absorption has been evoked, we begin to share the same spatial and temporal framework as the protagonist. What is subjectively near or far, in the present versus in the past, must now be measured not in terms of the real world but in terms of the narrative world. (49)

As Harris's description suggests, absorption is characterized by the perspective taking that I discussed in Chapter 2. When absorbed in a narrative, readers mentally travel alongside of protagonists and process emotional cues from their perspective. Unsurprisingly, readers who score highly on measurements of transportation also report especially strong feelings about characters. In fact, many psychologists assume that absorption is characterized by the affective matching component of empathy; in an attempt to increase absorption, Terwogt, Schene, and Harris instructed young "readers" to become involved with a story, to "feel sad along with the main character." These readers were much more likely to be moved by the fate of the main character than those who were instructed to remain detached ("Self Control of Emotional Reactions"). Absorption is also characterized by strong imagery and affect, which I argued in Chapter 3 are critically related to ethical decision making. Green and Brock have demonstrated that readers who are transported into fictional worlds tend to "see" that world around them (rather than their physical surroundings) and subsequently report experiencing strong emotions and motivations even though they know the events of the story are not true. These findings suggest that direct address might actually diminish the

ethical impact of narrative absorption even as authors most explicitly attempt to shape readers' beliefs and behavior. As the space and time of the reader are brought back to consciousness, the space and time of protagonists might be displaced, consequently threatening the emotional impact of narrative empathy.

Teasing out the effects of address is particularly complex in the context of sentimental realism because, as I argued in the previous chapter, it is pivotal to the ethical claims of the genre that the narrative and contemporary worlds are one and the same. On the one hand, readers might be more attuned to the plight of poor characters as they are “brought into” the narrative world through address; on the other hand they might be brought *out* of the narrative world by being reminded of their own “current reality.” But reminding readers of their own contemporary world might not be a bad thing, since it is in that world that readers must intervene. Moreover, the effects of address on Victorian readers might be somewhat different than on modern readers. To a contemporary audience, authors' attempts to “embarrass” with direct address can be off-putting because of our own critical resistance to moralizing. But Victorian readers were more used to sermonizing—both from the pulpit and within prose and poetry that took a didactic approach. They might have been more receptive to the ultimatums and imperatives of sentimental realism.

I will not adjudicate on these alternative interpretations of address, but rather let them both stand as viable possibilities within this chapter. Ultimately, apostrophe might serve not to heighten empathy, but nonetheless motivate ethical behaviors on different ethical foundations. I will focus on two of these foundations in this chapter: obligation and self-preservation. As will be evident from the examples I discuss, mid-century authors invoked various communities as they addressed their readers—“the rich,” most generally, Christians, mothers, consumers, and, my emphasis here, England as a nation. Reminding

readers of their membership in these communities allowed authors to call upon their own sense of belonging as they defined their shared duties as members of particular social groups. At the same time, sentimental realism appealed to readers' egoistic motivations by playing on fears of working-class revolt and cross-class contagion, ultimately holding the wealthy responsible for the physical and moral degradation that in turn threatened the nation. In an extended reading I examine a particularly "commanding" type of address—the imperative—with which authors demanded that their readers intervene and threatened them with a range of consequences if they did not. With this strategic move, authors who believed that poverty should be ameliorated for the sake of the poor were nonetheless willing to appeal to readers who might be convinced by threats to their own well being.

#### **"O Cruel Nation"<sup>164</sup>**

Addresses to the reader were familiar in a century which saw Charlotte Brontë pen, "Reader, I married him," but sentimental realism went further, invoking an audience defined by class and making clear attempts at persuasion. "O listener," hailed Dickens in *The Chimes*, "try to bear in mind the stern realities from which these shadows come; and in your sphere—none is too wide, and none too limited for such an end—endeavor to correct, improve, and soften them" (182). Dickens' imperative form is softened by the verbs he employs—"try" and "endeavor"—but it is the infinitives that are his real mandate: "correct, improve, and soften." Reminding his readers of the metaphorical relationship between "shadow" and "stern reality," Dickens cues the kinds of extratextual effects that I discussed in the previous chapter. He doesn't ask readers to lose themselves in the text but to remember ("bear in mind") that which it refers to. Indeed, the object of his imperatives is

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<sup>164</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning. "A Cry of the Children," 153.

not the shadows, but the stern realities; “soften *them*,” (my italics), he says. As if to forestall dissent, Dickens assures each listener that he can act “in your sphere—none is too wide, and none too limited for such an end.”

As apostrophe calls out to readers, they hear themselves hailed from inside a fictional world. Indeed, apostrophe brings readers into the text itself by naming them—“listener,” “reader,” “you”—within its pages. These various appellations transform readers into characters in a contemporary drama, named in the *dramatis personae* as themselves. As author and character address their readers, then, the fourth wall is broken, with the reciprocal expectation that readers will not only speak, but “act.” As we see in *The Chimes*, the “animation” of readers is not merely figurative. Direct address combines with the parabolic structure of reference I have described to make immediate and explicit textual demands and combat audience passivity. Readers who are tempted to turn away from scenes of suffering are called back by apostrophe. “You,” it says, “look here. Hear this.” And in many cases, “this is how you should proceed.” In the last lines of *Hard Times*, Dickens makes similar claims on his audience, exclaiming, “Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not” (219). Having described the world inside the narrative, Dickens gestures outwards to “our two fields of action,” that is, his own and his readers’. Significantly, his address to the reader follows his description of Louisa Gradgrind’s future, in which she embraces fancy and tries “hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures” and “beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights” (219). Louisa’s “duty,” Dickens suggests, is his readers’ to recreate. The denouement, then—what “shall be”—rests not within the novel but their own contemporary world. Dickens follows with one more exhortation, hoping that his readers will bring these things to pass: “Let them be!” (219).

By naming its readers, sentimental realism attempts to shape not only audience response, but the audience itself. Alternating praise and critique, authors defined and insisted upon a particular set of ethical commitments; their audience, in turn, faced images of themselves that they needed to live up to or avoid. As readers learned to imagine themselves in the place of poor individuals, in other words, they simultaneously gained a heightened awareness of their own social “place” and its responsibilities. In this way, sentimental realism was not merely ethnographic—representing the domestic Other—but also self-reflexive, a product of the middle and upper classes representing themselves to themselves. Consequently, sentimental realism had repercussions not only in the lives of the Victorian poor, insofar as it affected policy and reform, but also for wealthier Victorians who grew to conceive of their own roles and responsibilities differently.

While the use of apostrophe places personal claims on individual readers, it also creates an audience bound together by ethical obligation. Sentimental realism frequently employs forms of address that are inherently communal, hailing “readers” who are made aware by virtue of this plural address that they are part of a wider whole. But even when address is singular it creates a community of readers; Dickens’ apostrophic singular—“O listener”—appeals not to one reader, but to his entire audience. This is the familiar function of the second person—“you” speaks to both individual and group. The generic quality of titles like “listener” allow them to operate similarly, referring to the singular listener but making that reference many times, so that they create a group of listeners who are all hailed with the same greeting. As authors call on “you, my reader,” the use of the singular heightens the pressure on individuals who have the sensation of being called out by name, while the term’s generic quality means that the singular case is multiplied thousands of times, creating a group of people who face the same demands. Indeed, the second person singular

not only presumes but creates a second person plural, a community of readers bound by their relationships to texts.

In its most dramatic form, the community building function of sentimental realism was a nationalistic endeavor, one which called on national pride even as it shaped what it meant to be English. Sentimental realism was frequently explicit as it constructed a national audience; these were, truly, appeals to “the people of England.” In the preface to *Michael Armstrong: Factory Boy* (1840), for example, Frances Trollope addresses herself to “her countrymen,” recalling in her preface that it was “her intention...to drag into the light of day, and place before the eyes of Englishmen, the hideous mass of injustice and suffering to which thousands of infant labourers are subjected, who toil in our monster spinning-mills” (iiv). Not only does Trollope apostrophize “her countrymen,” but her use of the first person possessive, “*our* manufacturing towns,” and “*our* monster spinning-mills” (iiv, my emphasis), reminds readers that the “infant labourers” are their shared national responsibility. Later in the novel a gentlewoman, Mary Brotherton, begins to investigate the “dreadful distress” (151) of the factory laborers. When she questions three young sisters about the conditions of their lives she is horrified and convinces herself it must be an anomaly.

A moment's thought sufficed to convince her (as it has done multitudes of amiable-minded ladies and gentlemen besides), that it was perfectly impossible such horrors could exist on the glorious soil of Britain, unless indeed, as in the case before her, the unhappy drunkenness of the father plunged his helpless family into a degree of poverty, which nothing, perhaps, but the unnatural degree of labour described by this poor motherless girl, could avert. (155)

Mary's own sense of the “glory” of England makes it impossible for her to believe the girls are typical working-class children; instead, she blames the moral corruption of their father. Even so, their example disrupts her feelings of national pride: “I could not have believe that

it was possible in such a country as England, to find human beings in a state of such degraded ignorance as that poor girl” (156).

Trollope’s contrast between the “glorious soil of Britain” and the degraded poor who inhabit it is echoed in Caroline Norton’s book-length poem *The Child of the Islands* (1845). The title of the poem refers to the Prince of Wales, whom Norton addresses repeatedly throughout the poem, an apostrophe that establishes sympathy with the poor as both a royal and national obligation.<sup>165</sup> As an object of address the future monarch is likely an unheeding one; the volume was published when he was still a toddler. But he serves a significant rhetorical function, allowing Norton to consider the responsibilities of England as a nation and the wealthy and powerful as a “class” of people. Norton explicates the royal’s metaphorical role: “The Child of the Islands was chosen, not as the theme of a Birthday Ode, or Address of Congratulation, but as the most complete existing type of a peculiar class—a class born into a world of very various destinies, with all the certainty human prospects can give, of enjoying the blessings of this life, without incurring any of its privations” (10). When she enumerates these “blessings,” as she does throughout the poem, Norton is speaking not only of the prince but of her privileged readers—a category not limited to the elite but incorporating the middle classes as well. As she addresses the prince within the poem, she reiterates that he is the exemplar of a “type” and useful insofar as he helps her convey a larger poetic lesson:

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<sup>165</sup> Norton’s more immediate dedication is to her brother, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, “IN TOKEN OF SYMPATHY WITH HIS UNWEARIED EFFORTS / TO AMELIORATE THE CONDITION / AND PROMOTE THE HAPPINESS / OF ALL WHO ARE IN ANY WAY DEPENDENT UPON HIM” (vii). This dedication, to a sibling rather than a monarch, is more intimate than the poem’s conceit, and Sheridan’s efforts, too, are of a more personal than political nature. Her brother’s aid is for “all who are in any way dependent upon him,” a category that suggests family, employees, and perhaps the local poor. Social action, in other words, is not merely a political stance but a personal obligation, and one that Norton’s readers can emulate with their own “dependents.” Significantly, Norton calls attention to her own sympathy with her brother’s efforts, offering herself and her sibling as models of sympathetic engagement.

Beautiful Royal Child, that art to me  
Only the sculptured image of a thought:  
A type of this world's rank and luxury  
Through whom the Poet's lesson may be taught: (191)

Even as Norton claims that her “Poet’s lesson” is taught *through* the prince, not to him, she makes admonitions that are particular to her royal subject. The experiments in empathy she recommends, for example, are particular to his monarchical point of view:

Bend to the lowly in their world of care,  
Think, in thy Palace, of the labourer's cot;  
And justify the still unequal share  
By all thy power to aid, and willingness to spare! (16)

Norton’s wish that the prince “Bend to the lowly” and imagine the suffering that is so removed from his own privileged “lot” (11) is the collective endeavor of sentimental realism, while her subsequent instruction, that he “justify” his privilege by helping the poor, is a personalized version of Norton’s demands on her readers. The prince’s synecdochal relationship with the nation he will rule affirms that his royal duty is also a national one. Norton’s final appeal is to the countrymen who share the obligations she outlines for the prince: “BROTHERS, be gentle to that ONE appeal,— / WANT is the only woe God gives you power to heal!” (192).

Like *The Child of the Islands*, establishing a shared national duty to the poor is the central goal of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children” (1843), in which she laments the bitter irony of a free and prosperous England that is populated with suffering children. Barrett Browning’s opening address—“Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers”—introduces familial relations, and the poem goes on to emphasize the shared national family of poet, audience, and poor children. The penultimate lines of the first two stanzas each describe the children weeping: “They are weeping in the playtime of the others” (11), “Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers” (23). The final lines then

emphasize that their tears fall in England— “In the country of the free” (12) and “In our happy Fatherland” (24). England’s freedom and happiness, Barrett Browning suggests, are compromised by the tears of the children. How can a country be free when its children are confined to factories; how can it be happy when its children weep? By coupling the children’s actual “mothers” with the national “Fatherland,” Barrett Browning constructs and critiques a national family. Repeatedly she addresses her readers as “my brothers” (1, 9, 21, 101, 134) and she emphasizes their common lineage: it is “*our* happy Fatherland” (24, my italics). The weeping children, then, are either the readers’ surrogate children or their siblings, cast out by their shared Fatherland. In either case, Barrett Browning’s readers are bound to the children by familial obligation, and England is a negligent parent responsible for the tears they shed.

The epigraph to the poem, from Euripides’ *Medea*, supports this interpretation. It contains another apostrophe, spoken by Medea to her children right before she murders them: “Alas, my children, why do you look at me?” Although this could refer to the mothers of the poem who stand before their weeping children, Barrett Browning suggests that while the mothers are helpless, it is the cruel fatherland that bears responsibility for their suffering. On this reading, England apostrophizes her children as she sends them to their deaths. Alternately, England is figured as Jason, who is ultimately responsible for Medea’s actions even if he does not perform them himself. The children’s mothers, like Medea, are abandoned by the fatherland, and respond by sacrificing its children. At the close of the poem, the children respond to the apostrophe in the epigraph, apostrophizing in turn the nation:

“How long,” they say, “how long, O cruel nation,  
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child’s heart,—  
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,  
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?”

Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,  
And your purple shows your path!  
But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper  
Than the strong man in his wrath." (153-160)

England is actually apostrophized twice—"O cruel nation" and "O gold-heaper." Together the implication is that England sacrifices its children for the sake of power and financial gain. The personified nation is shown trampling a child's heart with its armored heel, killing the youth in order to reach its "throne," significantly located in the mart, or marketplace. In addition to economic power, Barrett Browning gestures towards Britain's quest for imperial control by claiming that its disregard for the children is in order "to move the world"; its throne, she indicates, is on a global scale. But the "path" to empire is a bloody one, not just on foreign soil but in England. Ending the poem with the graphic image of England's purple robes (reminiscent of Dives' attire) stained with the red blood of its children is a "curse" levied by the children and the poet herself.

The nationalist critique of "The Cry of the Children" is intensified in Barrett Browning's "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London," a poem written for her sister Arabella's Ragged School bazaar in 1854.<sup>166</sup> Although Barrett Browning betrayed some embarrassment when sending the pamphlet to a friend (calling it "a sixpence worth of rhymes" and saying "they would not be worth your accepting but for the fact of their not being purchaseable elsewhere"<sup>167</sup>), she nonetheless selected the poem for inclusion in her final volume of poetry, published posthumously in 1862. The poem's immediate concern is support of the so-called ragged schools, charitable schools that provided free education for poor children. Between the time the Ragged School Union was founded in 1844 and the Brownings' pamphlet, over 200 free schools were established in Britain, and since they

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<sup>166</sup> The poem was published for the occasion in an 1854 pamphlet along with Robert's poem "The Twins."

<sup>167</sup> Letter to Mrs. Martin dated February 13<sup>th</sup>, [1855].

received no public funding, efforts like Arabella's were essential, as were donations by philanthropists such as Angela Burdett-Coutts. "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London" thus has a specific and localized agenda, and its extratextual effects were presumably very tangible, in the form of donations to its cause. But the poem also provided a platform for a broader critique of a powerful nation that ignores its weakest members. In a move appropriate for a fundraiser for schools, Barrett Browning's subject is "children small" (45), and although she invokes the "Women leering through the gas" (41) and "Men, turned wolves by famine" (43), her real subject is those who cannot "speak themselves, and curse you" (44). Barrett Browning employs the second person as she describes the children huddled "on *your* doorsteps" (55, my emphasis), invoking not only individual readers but a nation who has turned its back and shut its doors on its poor children. This image of the children on a nation's doorstep is reminiscent of Lazarus at the gate, and this comparison is only heightened by Barrett Browning's account of "your footman" (56) who forbids the children to rest there. With the familiar imperative, Barrett Browning addresses the "Lordly English" (33) and commands them to "Take them up into your pity!" (48), a mandate that places sympathy as an individual and national duty.

Having moved to Italy with her husband, Barrett Browning's perspective in "A Song for the Ragged Schools" is simultaneously as a native and a foreigner, a poet observer who can look back upon her homeland with a critical eye. Although she writes the poem as an Englishwoman (it is "my land" (22)), she prefaces the poem with "Written in Rome" and reiterates her foreign location in the first line and later in the poem: "I AM listening here in Rome" (1, 77). Significantly, the foreign voices to which she is privy are in praise of England; "England's strong" (2), they say, "England's rich" (5) and "England's righteous" (9). But despite England's obvious commercial and military success and its ostensible moral

authority, Barrett Browning challenges its reputation as a military and moral superpower with her own perspective as an Englishwoman. As she listens she hears not only foreign voices but one “sweeping” over the Alps, the voice of the poor saying, “England’s cruel, save us some / Of these victims in her keeping!” (15-16). The syntax of these lines is ambiguous; “save” can mean either except (England is cruel *save* for its victims) or could be an imperative verb (England is cruel; save us, its victims). Regardless, England’s poor are construed as the victims of its prosperity, unaided by their country and countrymen even though they are “in her keeping.”

This perspective on England is a direct challenge to those who praise its financial and military strength and moral rectitude. Barrett Browning compares this acclaim to the clamor at a Roman spectacle and suggests that the voice of the poor is like the cry of an old Roman crushed beneath a wheel, barely heard because of the raucous cries of the crowd. Although most disregard his cries (“the show was spoilt for no man” (20)), Barrett Browning believes that the cry of one should pierce the shouts of many. She will not join in the clamor: “Let others shout, / Other poets praise my land here: / I am sadly sitting out, / Praying, ‘God forgive her grandeur’” (21-24). For the poem’s speaker, England’s “grandeur” is not her glory but a sin to be forgiven; rather than a paean, she says a prayer. Inspired by her environs, Barrett Browning compares the expanding British empire to the fallen Roman one: “Shall we boast of empire,” she asks, “where / time with ruin sits commissioned?” (25-26). As she looks at Rome she sees not glory but evidence of its demise. “Lordly English,” Barrett Browning apostrophizes, “think it o’er, / Cæsar’s doing is all undone!” (33-34). Reminding the English of the fate of the Roman empire carries an explicit warning. Although Britain was currently an imperial power, it was itself a conquest of the Roman empire, and just as Caesar’s conquest was “undone,” so too could Britain’s be. Furthermore,

Barrett Browning argues, imperial power comes at too high a price. As she surveys the Roman landscape it is “Heaped with jawbones of a people” (32). Empire is built at the expense of the weak and quite literally on the bodies of those it sacrifices.

Later in the poem, the English people defend their own treatment of the poor, asking, “Is it our fault,” when “throughout civilization, / Every nation's empery / Is asserted by starvation?” (93, 94-6). Yes, Barrett Browning responds; if victory is only won through sacrifice, like the crushing of the Roman underneath the chariot’s wheel, then she cannot endorse it. Returning to the image of Rome’s demise, Barrett Browning suggests that England is already in “ruins,” not architectural or political, but moral. She continues her address of her countrymen:

You have cannons on your shore,  
And free Parliaments in London;  
  
Princes' parks, and merchants' homes,  
Tents for soldiers, ships for seamen,—  
Ay, but ruins worse than Rome's  
In your pauper men and women. (35-40)

The English landscape, graced as it is with signs of military and political might, is also marred—not by decaying buildings or even the bones of the dead, but the living bodies of the poor. As the poem proceeds Barrett Browning picks up on the idea of poverty as a blight on the urban landscape, not in order to impugn the poor but to show how their existence undermines English superiority and taints its moral purity. The poor children are “spilt like blots about the city” (46), “Scurf and mildew” (90) who “Spot our streets” (91).

Barrett Browning’s language could be mistaken for a critique of the children themselves or a reactionary appeal for urban cleansing, but rather than purge the poor, she wants her country to purge itself of poverty. Indeed, twice she affirms the children’s English pedigree by mentioning their blue eyes—“those blue / English eyes” (73-74)—as if to make

it clear that the children too are “countrymen.” And she uses the possessive pronoun—they “spot *our* streets”—not in order to suggest that the children are trespassing, but that the English are their custodians. This reading is confirmed in the second half of the line; their presence, she says, “convict[s] us all / Till we take them into pity” (91-92). With this proclamation, Barrett Browning preemptively answers the question that follows—“Is it our fault?” (93)—but in such a way that shares the blame with her readers and the nation. If in the first half of the poem she commands her readers to “Take them up into *your* pity” (48), by the final line of the poem she more gently entreats, “Let *us* take them into pity” (128, my italics). With the shift from the second person to the first, Barrett Browning positions herself not as outsider but fellow citizen, and the mood shifts from the imperative to the cohortative, with the phrase “let us” constituting a softer form of plea.

As Barrett Browning creates a shared community of responsibility, her address narrows from the nation to the nations’ mothers, appealing to the women who would shop at the charity bazaar with “O my sisters” (86, 113). Within this gendered audience, Barrett Browning calls on the shared experience of motherhood to heighten empathic response. “Can we bear / The sweet looks of our own children” (87-88), she asks, “While those others, lean and small...Spot our streets, convict us all” (89, 91). This is a powerful rhetorical move; Barrett Browning challenges mothers with their own maternal instincts, using the first person plural while implying that the joy “we” feel looking at our own children *should* be disturbed by these other mothers’ children. Pointing out the disparity between their own children and those huddled on their proverbial doorsteps further pulls at maternal heartstrings. Barrett Browning makes it explicit, however, that helping the children of the poor will not come at the cost of their own.

O my sisters, not so much  
Are we asked for—not a blossom

From our children's nosegay, such  
As we gave it from our bosom,

Not the milk left in their cup,  
Not the lamp while they are sleeping,  
Not the little cloak hung up  
While the coat's in daily keeping (113-120)

By enumerating what the mothers are *not* asked for, Barrett Browning circumvents critiques that caring for the poor could undermine women's domestic and maternal responsibilities. Rather than Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle ignoring their own children for philanthropy, Barrett Browning suggests that philanthropy is integral to caring for one's own children. "Our own babes," she says, "cry in them all: / Let us take them into pity" (127-8). Helping the poor, in other words, is helping our own.

### **"Tom has his revenge"<sup>168</sup>**

Trollope, Norton, and Barrett Browning each appeal to a nation of readers, simultaneously invoking and creating an English national community. But even as mid-century authors imagined England they simultaneously imagined it under threat, warning readers that if they do not ameliorate suffering then the entire country will face collapse. The repeated threats of mob violence that I discussed in Chapter 3 serve this ethical function; although these scenes betray and potentially inspire fear of the poor, they simultaneously place the need for amelioration in stark relief. If the working classes suffer too much, they will not suffer it for long. In his "Discourse on Dives and Lazarus," Reverend Head warns his readers to "Reflect in time, ere it be too late!" (92). The structure of his imperative, "Do this, or else" is the crude version of sentimental realism's demands. The Reverend's threat makes vivid the warning that was implicit in each allusion to the rich

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<sup>168</sup> Charles Dickens. *Bleak House*, 657.

man and Lazarus—do on earth what Dives did not, or suffer in the afterlife as he did. Mid-century literature and social criticism typically emphasized more earthly fates—the violent uprising of the poor and the unimpeded spread of contagion—but like the parable, the authors I discuss invoked the specter of modern-day Dives, insensible to the suffering that surrounded him in contemporary England. Dives pays a high price, but as Abraham reminds him he reaps in death what he sowed in life: “Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented” (Luke 16.25).<sup>169</sup>

Like Abraham, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna warns her readers of the price they will pay if they do not alter their conduct. In the finale to *The Wrongs of Woman*, she predicts that if the current economic system is not remedied, the entire country will be thrown into the “fierce and fiery tumult of universal insurrection” (301). Women, she argues, are the key to maintaining domestic peace. So long as “the humblest of England’s wives and mothers” (301) are able to keep their homes and tend to their husbands and children they will serve a domesticating and calming function, “a great but most effective opposing force...against the pernicious effects of political incendiarism” (301). She goes so far as to argue that “the quiet home, the clean-swept hearth, the industrious wife, and [the] rosy prattling children” are “better than fifty treatises on loyalty and contentment to reconcile him to his lot” (301). But if poverty and necessity force women out of the home and away from their domestic duties, then the men will revolt. Playing on the double meaning of domestic as she subverts an

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<sup>169</sup> Although my focus is on threats to nation, authors could also invoke deleterious consequences for faith; in the preface to *Yeast*, for example, Kingsley warns of the erosion of Christianity: “This tale was written,” he says, “in the hope that it might help to call the attention of wiser and better men than I am, to the questions which are now agitating the minds of the rising generation, and to the absolute necessity of solving them at once and earnestly, unless we would see the faith of our forefathers crumble away beneath the combined influence of new truths which are fancied to be incompatible with it” [i].

image of happy family life, Tonna imagines not the nation's children but rebellion "cradled, fostered, [and] matured in the ancient nurseries of pure old English loyalty" (301). Invoking the nation's monarch further allows Tonna to demonstrate the threat to the nation through the figure of a vulnerable female body: "The fair inheritance of England's Queen," she warns, "is becoming but as a throne whose pillars rest on an awakening volcano" (301). The people's political awakening is associated with the first stirrings of an active volcano, and it threatens to destroy both queen and country.

While Tonna appeals to her readers' fears of the masses, she simultaneously blames her audience, not the poor, for the uprising. As she exposes the current suffering of poor women she predicts the future suffering of rich women, who will feel the full force of the people's wrath if they do not alleviate the "sin and the sorrow" that currently blight the nation:

[W]ho in that scene of turbulence and violence, of blood and desolation, will not in the wild plainings of those daughters of the land who now dwell quiet and secure, averting their eyes from the sin and the sorrow, the consequences of which they never can avert from their devoted heads—who will not in that unpitied plaint, recognize a dreadful attestation that the cruelties now heaped upon the poorest of our sex, are in the broadest, most inclusive sense, THE WRONGS OF WOMAN? (301-2)

Even as she foretells her readers' cries at the hands of the revolting poor, Tonna suggests that they will have caused their own "plainings." She has a particular warning to those women who would ignore poverty and desperation. If they "avert their eyes" to the suffering of poor women, then they will similarly suffer in their future, echoing the "unpitied plaint" that they currently ignore in the poor. This is empathy made literal; if they do not imagine themselves in the place of the poor and consequently aid them now, then they will be in the place of the poor in the future, with the same cruelties "heaped" upon them.

Tonna does not merely emphasize the price that rich women will pay, but also the price they can pay now to prevent such a fate. Her emphasis on female apparel—lace, pins, embroidery, dresses, hats—and the female workers who manufacture them allows Tonna to emphasize women’s unique role in reforming the clothing industries. After all, purchasing power was a realm in which women were able to exert significant economic and political pressure, even without the vote. Just as with the sugar boycotts in the Abolition movement, sentimental realism’s appeals to readers were frequently directed toward the middle- and upper-class women who made the commercial choices within their households. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, Tonna addresses herself to the “Ladies of England!” (299):

Under such circumstances as we have laid before you, are the materials of your daily attire prepared by manufacture and embroidery, the article made up by dress-makers and milliners, and the very pins with which you secure them, formed to answer the purpose. At such a price you make your toilet—we have gone no further than that one branch of the almost numberless productions of British industry, and we will not wrong you by any appeal—if such FACTS do not speak, all language is utterly vain. (299)

The second person is repeated (five times in just this short passage), as Tonna affirms the individual and national responsibility of her readers—“At such a price *you* make *your* toilet” (my emphasis). Using the language of cost and benefit, Tonna asks her readers to weigh the price of their apparel against the value of the human lives expended in their manufacture. As she informs readers of their ethical and economic responsibilities, Tonna also warns of retribution, not merely from the poor but from God himself, who sees all of the “untold horrors” (300) in England. Alluding to the Book of Jeremiah, Tonna writes that “England’s sin” is worse than that of the Israelites, and she invokes God’s warning: “Shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation?” (300).

In *The Chimes*, Dickens identifies a similar causal relationship between the negligence of the rich, the spiritual and moral collapse of the poor, and the subsequent threat to the

nation as a whole. Dickens stages an address to the “Gentlefolks!” (154) gathered at Lady Bowley’s birthday celebration. In his satire of inter-class relationships, Sir Joseph Bowley, “Friend and Father of the Poor” (149), invites labourers for cake and a match of skittles. Will Fern, a man driven in and out of jail by poverty, speaks out on behalf of the labourers gathered at the celebration to characters who are metaphorically related to Dickens’ audience: “[G]entlemen, gentlemen, dealing with other men like me, begin at the right end. Give us, in mercy, better homes when we’re a-lying in our cradles; give us better food when we’re a-working for our lives; give us kinder laws to bring us back when we’re a-going wrong; and don’t set Jail, Jail, Jail, afore us, everywhere we turn” (156). If they do as he asks, Fern says, working men will be “ready and grateful,” and prepared to take any “condescension you can show.” If they don’t, however, working men will remain “divided from you,” and even the Bible will become perverted in their eyes, seeming to read, “Whither thou goest, I can Not go; where thou lodgest, I do Not lodge; thy people are Not my people; Nor thy God my God!” (156). Fern’s allusion to The Book of Ruth mirrors the I/you structure of address within his own speech, but where the original passage is a meditation on the union of families—“Whither thou go, I goest”—Fern’s revision suggests resentful alienation on a national scale. You, the rich, go where I, one of the poor, cannot. This allusion constructs England as a family brought together by marriage, but here there is bitter familial strife. The last two clauses are most alarming, suggesting that the English “people” will be split apart and that even the Christian God will not unite them.

In addition to revolt and revolution, the most recurrent warning at mid-century is that the “ills” of poverty will come home to plague the rich, a play for self-preservation that augments more generous motivations. Infection is a literal threat and a metaphorical one; not only could the wealthy be struck down by the communicable diseases that were tragically

common in poor neighborhoods, but the entire nation was at risk for contamination in the sense of being tainted by exposure. Victorian medical theory played on the first of these worries. The miasmatic theory of disease transmission held that poisonous vapors, or miasma, carried and transmitted disease.<sup>170</sup> This theory has significant repercussions for congested urban centers; even in the absence of physical contact contagion might spread through the very air that moved between the classes. Thomas Miller described the potential threat in *Picturesque Sketches of London, Past and Present* (1851): “The air which now blows through the open windows of the emblazoned carriage in which the diamonded duchess is seated, a few seconds ago swept over the poisonous avenues of Church-street and Carrier-street, and is laden with odours from the sink and sewerage of St. Giles’s” (230). The open windows of the carriage signify the permeability of upper-class life; the duchess can try to ensconce herself in luxury, but she cannot keep out the “poison” of poverty. In case the implications are not clear, Miller makes the threat explicit, addressing “my lady” and enlisting her help—for her own preservation: “How essential is it, then, fair lady, for thy own sake, to aid us in cleansing these Augean stables, in purifying these pest-houses of poor humanity. You may build yourself a fine house, my lady, and hem it round with a lofty wall; but you must, while in town, still breathe the poisonous air which they breathe, until these grievous evils are remedied” (230). The inadequacy of “lofty walls” to impede invisible, poisonous air means that the rich are under threat even within their own homes. Insecure of more altruistic motives, Miller entreats the lady, and those like her, to help “for thy own sake.”

Miller’s rhetoric is not merely fear mongering; the threat of contagion was very real. Britons of all classes were terrified of the illnesses that struck in waves throughout the 1830s and 40s—cholera, influenza, typhus and typhoid, tuberculosis, smallpox, scarlet fever,

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<sup>170</sup> For more on Victorian medical theory and the role of disease in English society and class relations, see A. Susan Williams’s *The Rich Man and the Diseased Poor in Early Victorian Literature*.

measles, whooping cough, dysentery. As Bruce Haley put it in *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*, “no topic more occupied the Victorian mind than Health”—and the lack of health I would add—“Not religion, or politics, or Improvement, or Darwinism” (3). This preoccupation is in full evidence in sentimental realism, in which the miasmatic theory of transmission and related issues like sanitary reform and proper burial rites appear repeatedly. In *Sybil*, Disraeli explicitly constructs contagion as a national threat. Describing Wodgate’s “gutters of abomination, and piles of foulness, and stagnant pools of filth; reservoirs of leprosy and plague,” Disraeli imagines the pools breathing out, their “exhalations...sufficient to taint the atmosphere of the whole kingdom, and fill the country with fever and pestilence” (165). In a similar vein, Dickens describes disease emanating from Tom-all-Alones, his fictionalized slum in *Bleak House*. In a novel obsessed with contagion, Dickens personifies “Tom” as a vengeful invader bent on waging retribution throughout English society.

But he has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom’s corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say Nay to the infamous alliance. There is not an atom of Tom’s slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. Verily, with what tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge. (654, 657 illustration in between).

Dickens’ passage makes clear the multiple levels of corruption, contagion, infection, and pollution. Obviously he shares Disraeli’s fear of disease, but he also suggests a contagion less tangible and even more corrosive. Tom’s “slime” does not merely carry pestilential gases but “obscenity,” “degradation,” “ignorance,” “wickedness,” and “brutality.” As Dickens imagines Tom avenging the nation, his invocation of tainted bloodlines makes his

revenge an explicitly classed one. Even the “proud” and the “high” will be brought low by his “corrupted blood.”

As we can see in Disraeli’s and Dickens’ descriptions, representations of poverty and disease risk playing on and intensifying reactionary fears of the poor, whose “foulness” threatens the rest of the nation. This risk is even more evident when national threats are made personal, and wealthy characters are infected by poor ones. In *Yeast*, for example, Argemone dies of typhus after visiting fever patients in their hovels; in *Bleak House* Esther is infected and ultimately disfigured by smallpox contracted in Tom-all-Alones; and in *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s parents die from typhus her father contracted while visiting his poor parishioners. (The poet Adelaide Procter was similarly infected; she contracted tuberculosis through her philanthropic work and ultimately died after a protracted illness.) These cases of cross-class contagion betray their author’s ambivalence; personal philanthropy comes at a high price for the novels’ heroines. Ultimately, however, sentimental realism does not endorse separation but intervention—the only hope to save both rich and poor. By demonstrating that the classes are already united by the air they breathe and the disease it can carry, authors suggest not merely that the poor were dependent on the rich, but that the rich themselves were dependent on the successful amelioration of poverty.

While it is not clear that Disraeli read Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843), Dickens certainly did, and his description of a family line tainted by disease evokes Carlyle’s powerful image of a nation united through contagion. Carlyle recounts an anecdote from Dr. William Alison’s *Observations on the Management of the Poor in Scotland*, in which an Irish widow infected with typhus is turned away from all of the charitable establishments of Edinburgh. As a result of their negligence the widow dies on the street and ultimately infects seventeen others. Carlyle dramatizes Dr. Alison confronting those who would dissuade charitable

giving: “The humane Physician asks thereupon, as with a heart too full for speaking, Would it not have been *economy* to help this poor Widow? She took typhus-fever, and killed seventeen of you!” (III.2). Carlyle does not name the seventeen victims; rather, he names a generalized “you” from whom the dead are taken. He goes on to imagine a sort of dialogue between widow and public in which she asserts her kinship to them: “The forlorn Irish Widow applies to her fellow creatures, as if saying, ‘Behold I am sinking, bare of help: ye must help me! I am your sister, bone of your bone; one God made us: ye must help me!’” (III.2). Her “fellow creatures” deny their relationship, however, saying, “No; impossible: thou art no sister of ours” (III.2). Using the language of kinship allows Carlyle to meditate on the relationship between rich and poor and their responsibilities to each other. The widow’s claims on the public are couched in familial terms; they share descent through God and Adam; with the public’s denial of aid, they deny their responsibilities outside of their own immediate families. But their kinship is proven, Carlyle argues, by the contagion that claims all of their lives: “But she proves her sisterhood; her typhus-fever kills *them*: they actually were her brothers, though denying it! Had man ever to go lower for a proof?” (III.2).

Carlyle’s rhetorical strategy can be compared to James Phillips Kay’s (later Kay-Shuttleworth) analogy of society as an organism in which each “order of the community” is like a different organ in *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture of Manchester* (1832). Not only does the comparison invoke a type of “kinship” between the members of society, it makes implicit claims about the potential repercussions if we do not attend to our “brothers.” After all, if one organ fails the entire organism risks death. Pain, Kay argues, is the body’s way of knowing if one of its organs is in trouble, and society would benefit if a “similar faculty preside[d], with an equal sensibility,

over its constitution; making every order immediately conscious of the evils affecting any portion of the general mass, and thus rendering their removal equally necessary of the immediate ease, as it is for the ultimate welfare of the whole social system” (17-18).<sup>171</sup> The “evils” of one order of society, in other words, affect the whole, and if they are not removed they will “threaten to convulse the whole social constitution” (18). If his audience does not attend to those evils, then they too will be struck “ill”—literally, by disease, and metaphorically by the political and social effects of poverty. Kay’s repeated use of the term “constitution” is especially significant; he at once refers to his metaphor of society as a human body and invokes the document which outlines that society’s political system. Both, Kay suggests, are under threat. Since society does not have the “pervading consciousness” of the body, it is up to writers like Kay to disseminate knowledge about the conditions of the working classes.

Kay’s medical analogies are not surprising; he was a doctor as well as a social reformer and his pamphlet on *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes* was an exposé of the cholera epidemic of 1832, which Kay investigated as secretary of the Manchester Board of Health. As we see in the passage above, disease is both the topic of the pamphlet and a useful metaphor. Cholera—“a singularly malignant contagious malady” (19)—is an immediate threat to the rich but it is only one of the “evils” which emerges from poverty. “The political safety of the wealthy,” most notably, “is truly endangered when ignorance and immorality pervade amongst the poor” (12). But contagion is Kay’s most

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<sup>171</sup> Mary Poovey discusses Kay’s treatise, although not this particular passage, and its relevance for English national identity in “Curing the Social Body in 1832: James Phillips Kay and the Irish in Manchester.” Although Poovey examines Kay’s representations of the native poor, her emphasis is on the representation and vilification of the Irish, an example, she argues, of the ways “that a proponent of one set of issues—in this case, social reform at the national level—mobilized prejudices against a particular group of people by constructing an image of the nation that excluded this group” (*Making a Social Body* 65).

immediate concern and the threat that he thinks will have the biggest persuasive impact on his audience. In the preface to the second edition he describes cholera “invading” the homes of the rich, a fate that should be feared, he writes, of anyone who is bound to anyone else by “sympathies.”

The ingression of a disease, which threatens, with a stealthy step, to invade the sanctity of the domestic circle; which may be unconsciously conveyed from those haunts of beggary where it is rife, into the most still and secluded retreat of refinement—whose entrance, wealth cannot absolutely bar, and luxury invites, this is an event which, in the secret pang that it awakens, at the heart of all those who are bound to any others by sympathies which it may harshly rend, ensures that the anxious attention of every order of society shall be directed to that, in which social ills abound. (12)

Kay does not hide the political expediency of his threats. “Some circumstance was wanting,” he writes to Rev. Thomas Chalmers in the preface, “to disturb the apathy which paralyzed [individuals’] energies” (12). Demonstrating the risks poverty poses to the wealthy gives “additional force” to “the arguments suggested by sympathy” (12).

Charles Kingsley’s concerns about contagion appear throughout his literary career as well as his activism in the sanitary reform movement. Not only did he write about the relationship between disease and sanitation in novels like *Two Years Ago* (1857) and sermons like “First Sermon on the Cholera” (1849), as well as his most famous book, *The Water Babies* (1862-3), he also performed such tangible actions as hauling clean water in areas beset by illness. Kingsley’s roles as Sanitary Reformer and Christian Socialist came together in his novel, *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet*, and political tract, *Cheap Clothes and Nasty* (published under the pseudonym Parson Lot), both published in 1850.<sup>172</sup> In both Kingsley cautions his readers that ongoing abuses in the garment industry threaten to bring diseases out of the slum and into the homes of middle and upper-class consumers. Middle and upper-class

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<sup>172</sup> This timing is not coincidental; Henry Mayhew’s series of articles on *London Labour and the London Poor* ran in *The Morning Chronicle* in 1849 and 1850 and prompted widespread outrage and a flurry of fictionalized accounts of the conditions he reported.

Victorians were familiar with the dangers of being *poor*: journalistic exposés, the “terrifying statistics of differential mortality” (Briggs *Social History* 246), and the individualized portraits of suffering in sentimental realism all recorded the deprivations of poverty and the drastically curtailed lifespans of poor Britons. Kingsley used the threat of contagion to alert his readers of the real and present dangers of being *wealthy* and dependent upon the material commodities—in the most literal sense of goods manufactured from fabric or cloth—that were made by poor tailors, weavers, and seamstresses.

Representations of the manufacture and purchase of clothing were particularly evocative of the ways in which middle and upper-class consumers were personally implicated in conditions of poverty and responsible for its amelioration. Even when authors did not explicitly address their readers, invoking the individuals who made their clothing serves as an implicit address and admonishment. If apostrophe makes the reader “present” for a narrative’s scenes of poverty, then clothing makes the poor present in the homes of readers, embodied not only in the garments they manufactured but also the texts that represent them. In Kingsley’s novel and political tract, clothing acts as a conduit between rich and poor, bringing with it the tainted air of the slums and the illnesses that thrived in such poor living conditions. The very materiality of cloth makes it a viable carrier of disease—and a tangible sign of the commercial transaction. As his texts circulate between author, publisher, and reader, Kingsley imagines clothing and infection circulating between poor manufacturer and wealthy consumer, offering his middle and upper-class readers a visceral motivation to alleviate the harsh conditions in the slums.

Kingsley was not only outraged by the iniquities of the garment trade, but also concerned about its effect on workers’—and consumers’—health. The insalubrious conditions of slopshops and lodgings in the tenements and slums—coupled with the scarcity

of food, fire, and adequate clothing—meant that tailors and seamstresses were especially vulnerable to contagious diseases. In *Cheap Clothes and Nasty* Kingsley shows how this vulnerability is transmitted to middle and upper-class consumers along with the clothing they buy:

These wretched creatures, when they have pawned their own clothes and bedding, will use as substitutes the very garments they are making. So Lord \_\_\_\_\_'s coat has been seen covering a group of children blotched with small-pox. The Rev. D. \_\_\_\_\_ finds himself suddenly unrepresentable from a cutaneous disease, which is not polite to mention on the south of Tweed, little dreaming that the shivering dirty being who made his coat has been sitting with his arms in the sleeves for warmth while he stitched at the tails. The charming Miss C. \_\_\_\_\_ is swept off by typhus or scarlatina, and her parents talk about 'God's heavy judgment and visitation'—had they tracked the girl's new riding-habit back to the stifling undrained hovel where it served as a blanket to the fever-stricken slopworker, they would have seen *why* God had visited them, seen that his judgments are true judgments... (22)

The image of cold bodies covered with opulent garments gives new intimacy to the commercial transaction, and brings “home,” quite literally, the working conditions of the poor to the houses of the rich. Not only do the garments relocate from the garret to the mansion or parsonage, but so too do their makers' diseases, as each of Kingsley's representatives of the wealthy classes—a Lord, a minister, and a young gentlewoman—are brought “low” by their garments. Significantly, Kingsley eschews names, giving only initials and underscores as if to emphasize the figures' representational status (and their shame). The case of the minister in particular puts a new spin on empathy, as he literally puts his own arms in the sleeves worn by the diseased tailor and is subsequently struck by his affliction. Subsequently the minister wears the evidence of his, and the tailor's, disease “on his sleeve,” made “unrepresentable” by a disease that cannot even be named. This pair of corollary images, the poor body covered with clothing that will be worn by the rich and the rich body wearing clothing sewn by the poor, serves as an unspoken address to each of Kingsley's readers, prompting them to the kind of empathic imagination that is literalized by the

minister's disease. The purchase of clothing is universal enough that Kingsley's indictment of the garment industry is one that "touches" each of his readers. The garment worn by both manufacturer and consumer encourages readers to imagine themselves in the place of the seamstress or weaver and to imagine the seamstress or weaver in their own social and domestic places.

Kingsley "fictionalizes" similar working conditions in *Alton Locke*, in which the eponymous tailor and poet—and with him Kingsley's readers—encounter the new working conditions of garment labor in England. In a series of scenes within the novel, Kingsley emphasizes the image of a poor and often diseased body in contact with the clothing that will soon be donned by the rich. In a pivotal scene, Alton's mentor Sandy Mackaye—a character based on Thomas Carlyle—takes the young tailor and poet on a tour of St. Giles. Mackaye wants Alton to see the harsh reality of poverty and realize the "poetic element" in the lives around him (101). There he finds a much different kind of clothing manufacture from his own tailoring workshop; as they enter a mansion turned tenement, an old woman sits on a broken chair, the only furniture in the room. She tries to warm her hands at the hearth, that symbolic and material center of the Victorian home, but the hearth gives no life and no warmth; its embers "had long been cold" (97). Three girls sit on the floor stitching "a large handsome new riding-habit" (97). In a vivid image of future contagion, one of the girls is described as "small-pox marked, hollow-eyed, [and] emaciated," her "only bedclothes" the skirt of the lush garment (97). Although all three girls work, they don't make enough money for coal or food or medical attention for the sick girl or old woman. The lady who will benefit from their labor, meanwhile, gives little thought to their hardship, much less their possible illness. As Alton leaves, the girl tells him they will be up all night without sleep because "My lady" wants to ride early the next morning (100).

Kingsley shows an even more tragic side of the clothing trade in a chapter titled “The Sweater’s Den,” in which he describes men so poor they are virtual prisoners in their employer’s home, beholden by debts and stripped even of adequate clothing to go outside. When the owner shows off one of their commissions, a uniform for a “markise in her Majesty’s Guards” (197), it becomes apparent that even the British military is implicated in the iniquitous sweated trade. As Alton enters the “den,” one of the men appears, desperate and almost naked, “his only garments...a ragged shirt and trousers; and—and, in horrible mockery of his own misery, a grand new flowered satin vest, which to-morrow was to figure in some gorgeous shop-window!” (198). The “mockery” of embroidered flowers and sumptuous fabric over the man’s ragged underclothes is echoed by the contrast between the squalid workspace and the “gorgeous” shop window in which the vest will be displayed. But Kingsley’s real emphasis is not the contrast between the two scenes but the one object that figures in both—the flowered vest that is worn by the poor tailor and the wealthy consumer. Although Alton alerts the police and they “free” the workers, most soon return to the shop and its system of penalties and debts. Kingsley cannot contain his outrage—or his irony—as he describes their virtual imprisonment in an ostensibly free England. Note his use of scare quotes: “That, even that dungeon, was their only home—their only hope—as it is of thousands of ‘free’ Englishmen at this moment” (202).

The novel’s final image of poor bodies covered with the clothing they sew is the most disturbing. When the owner of the sweaters’ den reappears later in the novel, he is himself now a sweated laborer driven mad by illness, alcohol, and the demise of his family. Locke stops him from committing suicide and the man brings Alton back to his home. There his wife and children lay dead and gnawed by rats, “the grand new three-pound coat” (315) that the man has been stitching covering their naked corpses. Although the tailor

himself is not an appealing figure, the novel pauses for a powerful apostrophe to the British legal system that reminds readers that it is not the poor who create disease, but the conditions in which they are forced to live. “Careless, superstitious, imbecile law!” the narrator explodes—“leaving the victims to die unhelped, and then, when the fever and the tyranny has done its work, in thy sanctimonious prudishness, drugging thy respectable conscience by a ‘searching’ inquiry’ as to how it all happened—lest, forsooth, there should have been ‘foul play!’ Is the knife or the bludgeon, then, the only foul play, and not the cesspool...Go through Bermondsey or Spitalfields, St. Giles’s or Lambeth, and see if *there* is not foul play enough already—to be tried hereafter at a more awful coroner’s inquest than thou thinkest of?” (319). If Kingsley foretells a harsh verdict at Judgment day, he also predicts a more immediate punishment for those in power. The graphic images of the girl with small pox keeping warm under the riding cloak or the dead family covered by the gentlemen’s coat provide a vivid sign that the “great gulf” between the classes will not insulate wealthy Britons from the suffering that the poor endure. The warning to readers, and it would have been a fearful one, is that each article of clothing can make them suffer as much as the poor in England. This threat is realized in the end of the novel, when Alton’s cousin catches typhus from his newly ordered garments and dies.

While the particular threat of contagion was part of Kingsley’s push for sanitary reform and the reform of the garment trades, it was also part of his larger warning about the potential ramifications of class conditions in England. In both *Alton Locke* and *Cheap Clothes and Nasty*, another threat circulates—not disease but working class revolt. Both, Kingsley suggests, will destroy England and all of its people if the economic system is not reformed. “The thing must be done, and speedily,” Kingsley proclaims at the end of *Cheap Clothes and Nasty*, “For if it be not done by fair means, it will surely do itself by foul...[T]he boiler will

be strained to bursting pitch, till some jar, some slight crisis, suddenly directs the imprisoned forces to one point, and then— / What then? / Look at France, and see” (30). Comparing “fair means” and “foul,” Kingsley invokes revolution in France in order to stress the need for reform in England. This is his argument about the garment trades writ large: If the rich do not invest in reform (along with higher priced goods made in fair working conditions), then the poor will insist on revolution, at the cost of the health of the social body. Like the threat of contagion, this threat of political upheaval affirms the nation’s unity and makes the amelioration of poverty an imperative for the survival of the rich just as much as the survival of the poor.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the use of address appealed to readers’ sense of national pride and threatened their sense of national security. As I suggested in the introduction, this strategy does not necessarily heighten empathy for the poor, although it was intended to prompt ethical interventions on their behalf. In closing, however, I would like to turn to a poem that commands its readers to sympathetic imagination, even for the outcasts of Victorian society. In Thomas Hood’s “The Bridge of Sighs” (1844), published to great acclaim the year after “The Song of the Shirt,” the speaker employs a series of imperative verbs. After describing “One more unfortunate” (1) who has jumped to her death, he says “Take her up tenderly, / Lift her with care!” (5-6), “Touch her not scornfully! / Think of her mournfully” (16-17), “Cross her hands humbly, / As if praying dumbly,” (100-101). Of course the actual recovery of a body from the Thames is one that cannot be performed by Hood’s collective audience. Rather, when Hood asks his readers to “take her up,” a phrase he repeats three times in the poem, he refers to a metaphorical embrace, one of forgiveness and empathy. In the most striking passage of the poem, he asks his readers to imagine her history, the moments before her death, and the cold water engulfing her body.

“Picture it — think of it...Lave in it, drink of it, / Then, if you can! / Take her up tenderly, Lift her with care” (76, 78-81). Hood himself “imagines” her past as he asks his readers to, describing how she is cast out of her home and finally casts herself into the river. In charging his readers not only to “picture” and “think of” her history, but to wash in and drink it, Hood suggests that in imagining her life they can feel even her watery death. This is the hope of sentimental realism, that through the act of reading, readers can imagine and feel with suffering.

## Conclusion

### Poverty and the Politics of Empathy

Throughout this dissertation I have emphasized empathy as a crossroads between ethics and aesthetics, but my focus on the years between the first two Reform Bills is also meant to suggest the intimate relationship between aesthetics and politics. In this conclusion, I want to consider the relationship between reading, reform, and nation and argue that the national myth-making of sentimental realism helped pave the way for the expanded political representation of the Second Reform Act. Both empathy and nationalism are predicated on the imagined relationship between self and other; conceiving of one's self as a member of a national community can be described as empathy writ large. Implicit in Benedict Anderson's seminal account of nations as "imagined communities" and nationality as a cultural artifact is empathic imagination, which allows individuals to conceptualize themselves as sharing a cohesive identity with other national subjects. As Etienne Balibar argues in "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," nations are always presented as subjects engaged in a project of emerging self-awareness, which is, in part, enacted by a "fictive" community of citizens. As authors of sentimental realism represented the contemporary poor and appealed to their audience's self-conceptions as middle and upper-class Britons, they simultaneously shaped readers' understanding of the national community they shared.

The relationship between nation and narrative has been powerfully illuminated by Anderson's account as well as by more recent work like Craig Calhoun's *Nationalism* and

Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein's *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. Calhoun describes the relationship between nation and discourse in this way: nations are constituted by a "way of talking and thinking and acting" (5) about what it is to be a nation. While the particular "rhetoric of nation" can vary by case, discursive formations serve to "produce collective identity, to mobilize people for collective projects, and to evaluate people and practices" (5). Nationalism, similarly, is rhetorically and discursively constructed, "a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness" (3). In fact, Calhoun goes on to argue, the only common denomination in different nationalisms is the "*discourse* of nationalism" (22). The prime example of a national "story" is the mythic narrative of national origins that is central to the imaginative construction of all nations. I am less interested, however, in a "retrospective illusion" (Balibar 86) of a collective past than a narrative of identity that occurs around a contemporary political and social movement.

It is not coincidental that nineteenth-century texts should play an important role in the national imagination of England. As scholars of nation have argued, the development of print capitalism and national print-languages in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries was integral to the formation of modern nations and nationalisms. Print-capitalism, Anderson argues, "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate to others in profoundly new ways" (36). Calhoun concurs; not only did print culture help "spread nationalist ideology and shared culture," but the very practice of reading "helped to reinforce a notion of social interconnection among the members of large-scale categories linked only by weak and not very dense social relationships" (116-7). Anderson and Calhoun both illuminate the ways in which the act of reading helps people conceive of themselves as part of a larger community even when they do not meet its other members. The arts are pivotal to this process because they contribute

to a nation's representation (and conceptualization) of itself. The very act of reading creates feelings of community, as one reader performs an act he sees replicated in thousands of others.<sup>173</sup> The content of narratives, meanwhile, helps shape readers' ideas of a shared national culture even when they do not mention nation.

Significantly, the technologies of print capitalism proliferated at the same time as social movements like abolition and the opposition to poverty, and stories about the British role in abolishing slavery and ameliorating poverty helped generations of Britons conceive of themselves as a uniquely moral people. In his study of the social problem novels, Louis Cazamian claims that “[s]ocial conscience was born in England around 1840” (305). In actuality, the first half of the century saw not one but many social movements gain currency. The “spirit of reform” that permeated many spheres of public life in Victorian England—Parliament, the judiciary, the Church—is evidence of a new self-consciousness about what it meant to be English. In particular, the first half of the nineteenth century saw a surge in the concern for suffering and the duty to ameliorate it—the suffering of slaves and prisoners, the suffering of animals, the suffering of the poor. In the movements that resulted—abolition, anti-vivisection, prison and factory reform—social conscience was conceived as a national ideal, key to Britain's moral, if not imperial, domination. Abolition in particular served as political leverage throughout the century, and it was a point of pride that Britain stopped the trade of slaves and emancipated their own slaves first. Sentimental realism tried to claim a similar moral standing for the amelioration of poverty by apotheosizing empathy with the poor. With the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 in very recent memory, the authors I have discussed were well aware of the power of popular protest, and sentimental realism attempts to stir outrage like that felt for slavery. Caroline Norton dedicated *A Voice From the*

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<sup>173</sup> This is the sensation of Anderson's newspaper reader, who feels connected to the network of readers whose eyes glance at the same (or at least identical) pages (35).

*Factories* (1836) to Lord Ashley (later 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury) and likens him to John Howard and William Wilberforce in order to place the cause of factory reform on par with prison reform and Abolition.

Just as Abolitionist literature called upon English moral superiority even as it chastised the nation for its failures, literature about poverty at once lauded English ideals and condemned their collapse. Authors frequently imply that poverty is a national shame, a blight that undermines English claims to superiority. In *Bleak House*, for example, Dickens contrasts British imperial conquests with the suffering that occurs on the domestic front. Describing his fictionalized slum, Tom-all-Alone's, Dickens concludes that "in truth it might be better for the national glory even that the sun should sometimes set upon the British dominions, than that it should ever rise upon so vile a wonder as Tom" (657). By subverting the familiar boast that the sun never sets upon the British empire, Dickens argues that the cost of British glory is not worth the expense of its most vulnerable people. Disraeli similarly contrasts the powerful empire and the suffering nation in *Sybil; or Two Nations*. He praises "the Queen of every sea, and of nations in every zone," but it is not of empire that he would speak, "but of a nation nearer her footstool" (41). As her countrymen look at her "with anxiety, with affection, perhaps with hope," Disraeli asks: "Will it be her proud destiny at length to bear relief to suffering millions?" (41). Disraeli's use of the Queen is similar to the function of John Bull in Abolitionist propaganda; each serves a metonymic function, a single figure who stands for a nation. Asking if the queen will "bear relief" to the poor establishes the relief of poverty as a national ideal.

Modern scholars have shown that nations carry not only geo-political but emotional power, commanding "profound emotional legitimacy" and arousing "deep attachments" (Anderson 4). This power to "move people emotionally" (Calhoun 126) means that

nationalism can be used to shape both individual and collective action. Victorian authors who invoked nation and empire were savvy in exploiting this potential, lauding England as a model of virtue and critiquing it for failing to live up to its own lofty ideals. Sentimental realism described a country divided—Dives and Lazarus on a national scale. At the same time, however, it wrote class rapprochement as the new narrative for England, emphasizing the duty of the rich to ameliorate poverty and combat physical and moral distress. If the ubiquity of Dives and Lazarus—in the literature and on the streets of England—marked it as a country divided, then the use of apostrophe insisted upon an England united. By conceiving of readers as part of a national community, albeit a stratified one, authors reminded readers of their relationships across classes.

Most significantly, nation offers an object for loyalty that is more inclusive than one's class or rank. "Loyalty to one's own group" is a primal urge and, as Calhoun puts it, "the dimension of nationalism that has the clearest claim to be primordial" (6). Individuals can have conflicting loyalties to their different groups, but the category of nation stakes a claim that trumps other, more exclusive loyalties. Not only does nationalism rhetorically collapse difference under a privileged category of sameness, it claims an individual's primary identification and loyalty over other collective affiliations such as class, race, or religion. As Etienne Balibar puts it, nationality does not suppress all differences, but it "relativ[izes] them and subordin[ates] them to itself" (94).<sup>174</sup> This is not to say that the rubric of nation erases the very real divisions within a society (not to mention the "outsider" status of foreigners). But nations do not merely mask division; they offer a category of unification. "Recognition as a nation," Calhoun argues, "requires social solidarity—some level of integration among the members of the ostensible nation, and collective identity—the recognition of the whole

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<sup>174</sup> Calhoun puts it this way, "nationalist rhetoric posits whole categories of people without reference to their internal differentiation, or claims priority over all such internal differences" (39).

by its members” (4). This integration is not merely a rhetorical flourish. Nationalism can create feelings of “mutual commitment among very large groups of people” (Calhoun 126). These feelings of commitment are the source of the second half of Anderson’s title; nations are “imagined as a *community*, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7).

This promise of a “horizontal comradeship” is particularly significant in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries when, as critics like Harold Perkin have observed, a restructuring of social ties was marked by a redeployment of loyalties. Perkins calls this moment “the birth of class,” as “the vertical antagonisms and horizontal solidarities of class emerged on a national scale and overlay the vertical bonds and horizontal rivalries of connection and interest” (177). In this historical and political context, ideas of national unity offered one way to overcome the ruptures between rich and poor by promising a vertically integrated community. Of course, the “horizontal comradeship” nation promises is to some degree illusory, and nationalism can be used to undermine rather than affirm the interests of the poor and working classes. If poor individuals grant their primary loyalty to nation, then they might feel obliged to sustain and preserve the national whole even when it does not serve their class interests. Unsurprisingly, this negative view of nationalism is more popular in readings of mid-century texts. James Buzard, for example, suggests that it was the middle-class fear of revolution, rather than any kind of altruistic motivation, that “gave rise to numerous compensatory ideas of the meaningful national whole that could reunite the polarized classes” (“Victorian Nation and Its Others” 451). Mary Poovey, similarly, argues that the embrace of nation as the most important category of self-definition “necessarily involves temporarily marginalizing other categories that could also provide a sense of identity.” The process “by which a national identity is consolidated and maintained,”

Poovey concludes, is one of “differentiation and displacement—the differentiation of the national *us* from aliens within and without, and the displacement of other interests from consciousness” (55-6).

What I want to suggest is not that nationalism is unequivocally good, but that it can have positive effects for a nation and its most vulnerable people. This is especially true when nationalism is used not merely to praise a nation, but to set high standards for its people and hold the country and individuals responsible when they do not satisfy them. Anderson reminds us that although progressive intellectuals tend to denigrate nationalism and insist on its origins in “fear and hatred of the Other,” it has often been used to “inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love” (141). In the case of sentimental realism, this love is not merely for the nation, but also for the Other within that nation. Although the self-preservation latent in sentimental realism should not be ignored, it is nonetheless true that much of the motivation and intent of the literature was based in helping the poor of England, regardless of the benefit—or expense—to its middle-class base. Paradoxically, the very economic and social transformations that cleaved social and communal bonds during the Industrial Revolution also helped form “imagined” cross-class relationships between reader and character. If capitalism exacerbated the distance and segregation between the classes, then print capitalism offered a forum in which rich and poor could meet. Indeed, the very lack of personal contact inherent to industrialized society created the need for these imagined connections; as Anderson suggests, “All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined” (6).

While I have argued throughout this dissertation that empathic relationships between reader and character can have significant ethical consequences, there is an inherent danger in relying on individuals to ameliorate suffering. Elaine Scarry acknowledges the profound

repercussions of imagining, but she is also skeptical that it is an adequate solution, particularly in cases where only some of a nation's residents have the right to vote. "The problem with discussions of the other," Scarry argues, "is that they sometimes allow the fate of the other to be contingent on the imaginer: now another person's fate will depend on whether we decide to be generous and wise, or instead narrow and intolerant" (293).

Although Scarry's essay focuses on the status of resident foreigners, it is suggestive for discussions of the Victorian poor, who were residents but not citizens in the sense of having political rights. The risk of sentimental realism, which asked middle and upper-class readers to empathize with the poor and subsequently advocate on their behalf, is that it puts too much faith in enfranchised citizens rather than empowering unenfranchised ones. "The work accomplished by a structure of laws," Scarry concludes, "cannot be accomplished by a structure of sentiment" (302).

Law and social policy can obviate the need for empathic imagining, either by replacing interpersonal commitments with social services or by exchanging other-centered imaginings with self-representation in the political sense. Scarry emphasizes this second solution in "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People," advocating constitutional reform over practices based on one group of people's "generous imaginings" about another (what I would term empathy). Scarry's call for constitutional reform is unquestionably correct; self-representation is pivotal to democratic principles and it has the inherent merit of constitutional fairness. But she does not give adequate credit to the potential *political* effects of empathy. Even a truly universal franchise is an inadequate guarantor of social policy that minimizes injury, and it certainly does not ensure the success of "generous" social policies that benefit oppressed, impoverished, or suffering individuals. In order to support her preference for constitutional design over "generous imaginings," Scarry compares two

hypothetical towns. In the first, dark-skinned residents are denied the vote but light-skinned residents use imaginings to vote in such a way that will best serve the needs of all residents, regardless of race. In the second, both light-skinned and dark-skinned residents are able to vote, and thus, “there is no longer the need for the light-skinned residents to act on behalf of the ‘others’” (294). To Scarry the choice is clear: “Even if we stipulate that in the first solution the light-skinned...residents act with maximum generosity and largesse, the second solution is obviously much stronger” (294). But this evaluation is problematic on several counts. Scarry gives no consideration to the limited power of populations who can vote for their own rights but still not win them because they are in the minority. This is not to mention the demographic reality that certain populations—most notably poorer ones—have lower voter turnout. This problem is self-perpetuating, as politicians feel little need to cater to populations whose political power is limited by virtue of limited voting power.

Ideally, principles of self-representation would be augmented with serious attention to generous imaginings so that citizens would vote in ways that are not merely self-advantageous. In contexts where disadvantaged groups are either in the minority or unable to take full advantage of the franchise, solely relying on constitutional reform will be inadequate, at least in terms of promoting ameliorative social policies. To return to Scarry’s example, if in the second town light-skinned residents are in the majority and feel no need to vote on behalf of their fellow dark-skinned residents, then the resulting social policies could actually be more regressive than in the first town, despite its constitutional “fairness.” Consider the case of health care in America. Even with our system of universal adult franchise (leaving aside the issue of non-citizen residents for the moment), this policy will only pass if it is voted for by citizens who already have health care coverage, that is, by citizens who will not personally benefit from a change in policy. Prompting empathy for the

suffering endured by individuals and families who *lack* healthcare could affect voting patterns in a way that our universal franchise has not.

Scarry ultimately concedes that both “generous imagining” and constitutional design are necessary to prevent cruelty, suggesting that the second “provides the frame in which the first can take place” (278). But I would also advance the reverse proposition, that imaginings or empathy can actually “frame” constitutional design. In nineteenth-century England, this framing was an active process, as successive Reform Bills expanded the number of citizens who could then vote for their own, and for others’, interests. There is no one factor that can be credited with these constitutional changes, and political machinations were surely a factor. However, I would suggest that artistic representations made many Britons more receptive to radical changes in their country’s system of political representation. This is not to say that universal franchise was the *telos* of sentimental realism, nor that the authors I discuss universally endorsed voting rights for the Victorian poor. But vividly imagining their fellow countrymen as thinking, feeling subjects might also have made it possible for the readers of sentimental realism to imagine them as fellow citizens.