



Social Science and the Realist Novel's Turn to Character

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Social Science and the Realist Novel's Turn to Character

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by

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Abstract

From Marxist criticism to network theory, literary scholarship conceives of social representation in the realist novel as a function of narrative scope. In this reading, novelists illustrate our existence within a social body by forging unexpected narrative connections among seemingly disparate characters, across a wide range of socio-economic classes. My dissertation traces the rise of an alternative form of social representation in the realist novel, the representation of a society through an individual character who is its product. In mid-Victorian realism, character is increasingly figured as a static constellation of predeliberative affects, tendencies, and motives, while narrative, no longer a successful vehicle for an individuals'-eye-view synthesis of events, becomes increasingly fragmentary.

My project traces this new formulation of character to the introduction of positivist social empiricism into novelistic practices of representation. The resulting category of positivist literary realism marks a new stage in both technologies of literary representation and cultural interpretation of social scientific epistemology. Although positivism advances a sweeping diachronic narrative of social progress, its empiricist paradigm emphasizes the representative power of self-contained, particular social observations. In the novel, these become observations of character. Per Harriet Martineau, we are to read particular characters as representing the unfolding of general social laws under a particular set of circumstances. But in the fiction of Charles Dickens, John Henry Newman, and George Eliot, treating individual character as self-contained product of social forces ultimately points to the unknowability of the process that shaped that character. John Stuart Mill tries and

fails to reconcile this empiricist understanding of character with a more narratively integrated account of character development. Under these circumstances, narrative loses its putative realist function of connecting cause and effect. Instead, realist fiction recognizes the isolation and determination of character by conceptualizing social forces as operating within the mind of the individual. Positivist realism moves the novel toward a structure that depicts the cause and effect laws under which we operate as fragmented and situates social causality within individual consciousness itself.

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Introduction

This project investigates the encounter between the burgeoning field of social science and realistic modes of literary representation in the nineteenth century. Much has been written on the ways in which the rise of the social sciences broadened the scope of the nineteenth-century novel to accommodate the masses, both as a numerical reality and as a new socio-political form. The realist novel's narrative structure has been examined in relation to the ideas of communities both corporeal and abstracted; to crowds and mob behavior, collective political agency, and, most recently, globalization and network theory. But in order to understand the extent of the social sciences' influence on literary form in the nineteenth century, we must also examine the novel's techniques for positioning social causes within the consciousness of the individual himself, changing the narrative of social causality from one of contingent connection to one of inescapable determination. I seek to understand how the influence of social science reconstituted the core structuring idea of the novel, individual character, as the site of larger-scale social causality.

The positivist empiricism that helped to shape the emerging social-scientific perspective of the nineteenth century represented social phenomena not as aggregations of individual phenomena but as *sui generis* facts – an epistemological transformation that John Stuart Mill compares to a “chemical” change of state.¹ Auguste Comte's Positive Philosophy was a social epistemology designed to bring to sociological observation the same scientific rigor that characterized the study of physics by studying society through the prism of the “social fact”. If a mass phenomenon is transformed into a distinct entity, my project asks, is the literary individual transformed with it? The realist novel reinvented not only narrative, but also character, as a social

¹ John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. by John M. Robson, 1 edition. (London: Routledge, 2014), VIII. Pp. 879-880.

form in a new sense of the word shaped by the burgeoning field of social science. In the work of writers such as John Henry Newman and George Eliot, we can see the realist novel moving beyond situating the individual character within a social network to representing character as internally socially determined at the levels of thought and affect, while developing narrative structures that are no longer explanatory and connective, but fragmentary. In keeping with Caroline Levine's argument that we must read form not as static and sealed-off, but as dynamic and capable of traversing a range of discourses,² I trace the ways in which, from the fiction of Harriet Martineau onward, a positivist-inspired literary realism took up new sociological practices of description as aesthetic forms and applied them to the scope of individual experience.

The realist novel in the nineteenth century often depicted the mind as a space of fragmentary motives and tendencies that preceded rational thought. Mid-nineteenth-century accounts of the motives that we can neither recognize nor articulate to ourselves often attributed these motives to the influence of social forces on the individual. Even the Victorians' Darwinian accounts of mind frequently emphasize the workings of social forces as much as they do those of nature. Recent work by Nicholas Dames³ and Benjamin Morgan⁴ has traced the ways in which the realist novel shaped itself in relation to, and in turn helped to make a space in everyday life for, contemporaneous accounts of human psychology and physiology. While I make a similar argument for the novel's adaptation of sociological forms, in this case the significance of this

² Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

³ Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

adaptation lies in the mismatch between the two categories of thought, an incongruity of scope more fundamental and more consequential than any between psychology or its antecedents and the novel, both of which concern themselves with the individual mind. In importing sociological ideas into its structure, the novel translates a deliberately large-scale epistemology of society into terms of individual life, thereby applying social scientific modes of thought to a facet of experience and a scale of understanding from which social science sought to distance itself.

I. Character, Narrative, and Social Representation

Positivist philosophers such as Auguste Comte and Harriet Martineau, aspiring to elevate the science of “*sociologie*” to the rigor and order of astronomy, drew inspiration from Newton’s laws of physics. Universally applicable laws of social cause and effect made it possible to undertake social description on a large scale, allowing theorists to describe human behavior in terms of nations and societies rather than in terms of individual action. But at the same time, Martineau, Dickens, and Mill believed that propagating the knowledge of such laws would enable individuals to modify their behavior in accordance with various social goals. Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy* provide an apposite example of this way of thinking about social science. Martineau set out to communicate the principles of political economy to a popular readership in hopes that this knowledge would allow them to act more effectually in their own economic interest. Martineau imagined these principles as a set of parameters for human action. In this sense, while technically descriptive in nature, the causal laws that governed a society were also understood, if not to serve a truly prescriptive function, to provide a limited form of guidance for individual action. But representative particularity threatens this project because it is recursive in nature: particular characters don’t simply represent universal social laws, they represent social laws derived from particular empirical observation.

Both the larger-scale social data that realist characters represent and the realist characters themselves are presented as pointing back to universal laws of social causality. But to represent these universal laws through an individual who stands as a small fragment of a more broadly observable social phenomenon is to represent a cause and effect *process*, the unfolding of these laws under specific circumstances. This means that character in positivism-influenced realist novels always implies the existence of uncounted narratives of formation in addition to the narrative that unfolds explicitly over the course of the novel. Thus, ironically, a form that purports to offer an accurate representation of social life through narrative and character is marked by a deep formal skepticism about how much of the narratives that shape us and our neighbors we can really know. The positivist-inflected realist novel invites individuals to understand themselves, and others, through potentially endlessly recursive narratives of social determinism, rather than relative to more static, universal norms or experiences. Because the universal laws of society emerge from particular phenomena, but also because the realist novel represents those laws through a fragment of a particular phenomenon, the laws emerge as already-given determining conditions, the backstory that makes the novel's representative moves possible. The realist novel arrives at an account in which individuals, contrary to the aspirations of Martineau and Mill, can't do anything with the knowledge of these laws, and in fact may not be able to make calculations about their behavior on any universal basis. Because of its investment in positivist epistemology, realist literary representation is epistemologically and formally grounded in the particular and the narrative, rather than the universal and the static.

In "George Eliot: Eminent Victorian," Catherine Gallagher argues that the novel's treatment of character is marked by a tension between representation and "realization."⁵ Novelistic

⁵ Catherine Gallagher, 'George Eliot: Immanent Victorian', *Representations*, 2005, 61–74. P. 66.

characters are meant to refer to types, rather than to specific individuals in the world, but it is their fictional particularity that makes the characters in a novel “real.” Gallagher doesn’t dwell on the shift in scale that is contained within this shift from the particular to the general and back, perhaps because it is too obvious a component of the process to bear discussion. In the context of positivist literary representation, however, this shift becomes both as important and as vexed as that between the particular and the general. In the representative process that Gallagher describes, the shifts from particularity (or in other words, empirical observation) to abstract generalizations by definition include shifts in the *scale* of description. Positivist literary representation relies on the representative “triptych”⁶ that Gallagher describes, particular-general-particular. But the shift in scale is no longer tied to the shift from general to particular, because positivism introduces the idea of large-scale particularity. So the move is not small-large-small, but large-large-small. Particularity becomes a marker of a larger-scale *social* reality. It is necessary to “representative” novelistic characters; but it is not sufficient to constitute them as distinct, rounded (“real”) individuals. Instead it constitutes them as representative of a larger particular social whole. Particularity then has a representative, rather than “realizing” function. Over the course of this study, particularity becomes a sign of social determinism rather than fullness of individual character.

Realist fictional representation’s point of departure from the “representativeness” of the average or the type lies in this idea of character – not in the abstract, but the particular, idiosyncratic character of a particular, idiosyncratic individual. Necessarily, realist narrative always includes an element of particularity. And this particularity presents the individual as always already a social

⁶ Gallagher, ‘George Eliot’. P. 62.

product. Particular, unique character in realist fiction is the personal analog of Barthes's reality effect:⁷ it represents this individual as a real result of social forces rather than a constructed type. Paradoxically, neither "averageness" nor "typicality," but particularity of character becomes the marker of unknowable social forces. I do not mean that atypicality or pointed abnormality marks social determinism, in the sense that some individual's pronounced deviation from a norm must be attributable to the influence of some special social cause. Rather, at issue is the function of particularity in general, being a particular character and having particular characteristics. As Ian Watt famously recognized, from its earliest beginnings the realist novel has always been about the particular. And in a context where character is considered a reflection of social forces, a particular character reflects the real operation of these forces in a real context. Particularity moves the idea of social determinism out of abstraction and into the sphere of real life. But the idea of particular character also suggests a prior narrative that has always already played out, an unknowable narrative of which the resulting character becomes merely a static and representative. As the novels examined in this project take up the task of using particular individual character to represent particular societal character, narrative becomes fragmentary and implicative. The realist novel increasingly locates social causality within the individual, redefining the boundaries of character itself.

Not only did the social sciences shape the realist novel in ways that we haven't yet explored, the realist novel in turn gave shape to certain implications of empiricist social science. Through its representation of the modern, socially determined individual, mid-Victorian realism provided the cultural imagination with an alternative idea to "the average man" in its uptake of social scientific ideas of personhood. While the average man, as Audrey Jaffe argues, offered a

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (Macmillan, 1977).

framework against which individuals could compare themselves⁸, the particular, determined individual of the realist novel recast the idea of our individual particularity as itself a marker of social determinism. This account of character paved the way for understanding ourselves as socially determined because of, not in spite of, our particular experiences and attributes.

With this study I hope to expand our understanding of what it means for a novel to be doing social, or sociological, realism. As many of the writers included in this project would attest, breadth and variety of social representation will always be an important part of the realist project. But I hope to bring new attention to the importance of individual character to the novel's social representation by showing how the novel's changing formulation of character reflected its uptake and adaptation of sociological epistemology.

II Chapters

The story I want to tell begins with Harriet Martineau, the subject of my first chapter, who helps to import positivism to Britain. In her own writing, Martineau explicitly operates at the intersection of sociological and literary representation. Martineau translates positivism's epistemological commitments in more ways than one, deliberately incorporating them as formal principles into realist literary aesthetics. Her *Illustrations of Political Economy* provide the starting point for the tension that develops throughout this story between universal causal laws and particular empirical representation. This tension manifests as a formal, aesthetic conflict between a clear, complete narrative of the playing out of universal causal laws, and the representative significance of particular character. Although her initial defenses of the fictional "illustration" of social law tend to emphasize the power of narrative, Martineau also insists on character as a form

⁸ Jaffe, *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock-Market Graph*.

of social representation that bears the visible marks of social necessity. As Valerie Sanders has pointed out, Martineau bears much of the responsibility for introducing this tenet into the aesthetics of the realist novel.⁹ As realist aesthetics incorporate this idea of character as inherently representative of the social – and thus a form of social fact in its own right – the idea of social causality becomes strongly linked to the idea of individual character.

While Martineau sets out to “illustrate” universal economic laws in order to make her readers better economic agents, her *Illustrations*’ emphasis on empirical accounts of the workings of such laws instead presents a world of social determinism. Martineau makes powerful use of fictional narrative to convey the inevitable playing-out of universal social laws, or principles. But her simultaneous endeavor to represent the influence of economic law through character undermines her attempt to represent it through narrative. While her carefully plotted narrative successfully illustrates these abstract laws or principles within particular contexts, the particular characters who populate these contexts emerge, not as potential economic and social agents, but, rather, as pre-determined characters who have already been irrevocably shaped by these laws. Martineau makes an earnest and compelling argument that realist prose fiction focused on the lives of working class people is uniquely capable of representing abstract economic laws as real forces palpably operating in our lives. The necessity that certain effects follow certain causes exists in all walks of life – but, she writes, under some conditions, such as poverty, characters bear the marks of this necessity more legibly. Thus in addition to playing out in the course of Martineau’s narrative, such causality is “written in the countenances” of her characters, in different ways

⁹ Valerie Sanders, ‘Reason over Passion’, *Harriet Martineau and the Victorian Novel*. Brighton, 1986.

according to their different circumstances.¹⁰ But this double means of representing economic principles results in a double bind, for by presenting her fictional characters as particular representatives of the workings of social and economic causality, Martineau eliminates the very space of individual agency that she seeks to expand through education.

While many writers participated in Martineau's emphasis on the lived experience of the poor, the treatment of this category exposed the complexity of the issue of social representation. Martineau and Eliot, among others, at different times criticized Dickens's representations of the characters of the poor as dangerously sentimental, promoting unrealistic expectations of the nature and behavior of a class in the worst circumstances, rather than depicting the true and inevitable consequences of those circumstances. In perhaps one of the most markedly sociological moments in the *Illustrations*, Martineau defends her depiction of slaves on a plantation as mean and cowardly rather than as noble savages in chains (a la *Orinoko*), writing that "our sympathy for slaves ought to increase in proportion to their vices and follies, if it can be proved that those vices and follies arise out of the position in which we place them."¹¹ In this account, the depiction of sentimentalized characters who exhibit the highest qualities of human nature under the worst possible circumstances reflects a serious abdication of the writer's responsibility to show the full force of social law in operation.

Dickens, on the other hand, criticized both Martineau's "natural law" narrative and her emphasis on empirical fact as antithetical to a viable individual comprehension of the nature of society. My second chapter traces Dickens's critique of positivist forms of social representation

¹⁰ Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy*, 11 (Leonard C. Bowles, 1833), XI, p. 11.

¹¹ Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy: Demerara. A Tale* (Leonard C. Bowles, 1832), pp vii-viii.

through his novels *Bleak House* (1853) and *Hard Times* (1854). Writing against Martineau's epistemological optimism, Dickens suggests that privileging factual over more holistic representations of society leads to an epistemological impasse. As his treatment of empiricism in *Hard Times* demonstrates, Dickens fears that positivist epistemology may ultimately replace the synthetic work of representation with a proliferation of "facts" for their own sake. The sociological fact's status as a phenomenon in its own right rather than as a compound of smaller units threatens to undermine the project of social representation by presenting itself as an epistemological dead end. *Bleak House* games out this scenario, constructing a narrative of fragments and one-dimensional characters that resist synthesis. The depiction of facts, then, serves no universal descriptive purpose.

Staging the overarching social narrative in his novels not as a communicable set of "principles" but as the fragmentary experiences of individual characters, Dickens illustrates the unbridgeable gap between fact and holistic worldview. This fragmentation of meaning in turn does violence to the coherence of the individual character, which either becomes assimilated into a statistical world that it cannot explain, or escapes such assimilation by narrowly limiting itself to the sphere of interpersonal ethics. While Dickens's use of an intricate structure of "sentimental," subjective, metonymic, or what J. Hillis Miller calls "pointing" representation¹² allows him to avoid the pitfalls of representative realism of the Martineau school, the narrative breakdown ultimately casts his characters in the static role of "facts" as well, but facts without an evident social meaning. Dickens's innovation is to recognize that the realist novel cannot offer character as inherently and indexically representative of general social principles. The result is the staging of a confused and fractured experience, including fragmented, one-dimensional characters.

¹² J. Hillis Miller, *Victorian Subjects* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1990). P. 184.

Dickens's novels produce the experience of being caught within a much larger system that we cannot hope to understand. In effect, Dickens presents the experience of confronting the unrepresentable, rather than offering a particular character as a representative of social necessity. While characters such as Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* betray distinct epistemological complacency on the interpersonal level, Dickens's novels present the larger workings of social laws as unknowable, unpredictable, and unrepresentable. He mistrusts the implied move from particular observation to general descriptive law to representative particular character on which the realist novel's representation of society rests. In both literature and social science, Dickens suggests, positivist representation runs the risk of becoming unmoored from the universal social law that is supposedly its ultimate referent.

As product rather than agent and as part of a *sui generis* social entity rather than participant in an institution composed of many individuals, the representative individual of positivist literary epistemology is no longer a social unit in his own right. He is determined, contingent, and fragmentary. He is an arbitrary piece of the social whole, subject to pieces of those forces to which the social whole is subject. The positivist individual is stuck, like a Dickens character, with a bewilderingly small-scale perspective of the workings of large social causes playing out. Like the average man, he represents not a basic unit of this cause and effect narrative, but rather a fragment of it.

As Newman observes in his *roman à clef* *Loss and Gain*, however, the idea of the average man gives rise to extrapolations beyond the realm of the quantifiable, as people begin to conceptualize social phenomena such as opinions and values in the same language of the average: the average Englishman is a Protestant; the average Englishman has no doubts about the 39 Articles, etc. In his critique of men who claim that their erratic and inconsistent judgments allow

them to “observe the mean,”¹³ Newman illustrates how this line of thought results in the idea that our individual opinions and actions are somehow, through some unknown agency, brought into line with the “average” opinions and behaviors of our society.

Newman rejects such an idea as a fundamental misunderstanding of the ways in which our circumstances shape us: rather than molding our disparate opinions into a close approximation of the social average, he argues, our individual lived experience instead molds us into particular characters whose particular perspectives result in a coherent but idiosyncratic set of inclinations, value judgments, and intellectual commitments. In this account, the social conditioning happens, not after a position is staked out, as the putatively “average men” argue, but often before one has even articulated one’s viewpoint to oneself. Thus, *Loss and Gain* both is and is not a novel of development, in that its narrative emerges as that of an individual coming to know and understand his own latent “views.”

While the first two chapters represent social causality primarily through complex and (in various senses) “realistic” narrative structures, from the Newman chapter onward, narrative, while remaining a crucial tool in fictional representations of the social, is replaced by character as the single most significant locus of social forces. As Newman emphasizes in *Loss and Gain*, shifting social causality inside the individual renders it more profoundly inscrutable than it was even when represented via the fragmentary plot structure of *Bleak House*. The last three chapters of the dissertation thus explore the different forms through which writers attempted to make the shaping influence of social processes within the individual character visible and knowable, in hopes to account both for the individuals in question and for the societies that shaped them. Beset on both

¹³ John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain* (J. Burns, 1848). Pp. 15-16.

sides as a convert from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, Newman sets out in *Loss and Gain*, as in many of his subsequent writings, to justify his conversion as neither (*pace* Catholic concerns) an arbitrary personal choice, nor (*pace* Protestant attacks) a total, craven submission of the will. Through this defensive project, Newman develops a sociologically-tinged account of the sources of individual “assents” to particular beliefs, values, and institutions. The combined “accidents” of our experiences shape our ideological affinities, which lie latent and unknown in our character until called out unexpectedly. Thus individual judgment for Newman boils down to the process of coming to understand one’s own character. His protagonist, Charles Reding, does not so much become a Catholic by learning what Catholicism is as by learning who he is.

In his fiction as well as his philosophical treatise *A Grammar of Assent*, Newman elides the process of “private judgment” as something which can never be undertaken with sufficient self-awareness, instead using statistical phenomena as placeholders for the unknowable workings of the divine will and facts as stand-ins for revelation. Newman develops his novel’s narrative largely through dialogue and, increasingly as the story unfolds, monologue and interior monologue, eliding the sphere of individual judgment typically represented in the realist novel through free indirect discourse. When Newman does use free indirect discourse to represent Charles’s internal reflections, it is with a cynical sense that these reflections offer a distraction from the real story. As he argues in his sermon “Implicit and Explicit Reason,” the thought process that unfolds on a conscious level is largely irrelevant to the true process of character development that unfolds unconsciously and thus unknowably.¹⁴ Newman implicitly positions our lack of

¹⁴ John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between A.D. 1826 and 1843* (Notre Dame, Ind., (Baltimore, Md.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997). Pp. 173-189.

agency in the unfolding of a process of social determination of character, and still more the profound unknowability of this process, as an argument for the workings of a divine shaping will. In this account, the unknowable statistical noise that shapes our characters becomes meaningful only as a stand-in for the working of God's will. In a secularized reading of Newman's account of judgment, character no longer represents the unfolding of any knowable social law, but rather reflects the contingency and unknowability of our own development.

Ironically, whereas Newman embraces the implications of statistical accounts of the social as fundamentally consistent with his theology, John Stuart Mill rejects a statistics-based sociology, which he refers to as "the chemical method" of describing society.¹⁵ My fourth chapter explores Mill's attempt to reconcile the inexorable narrative trajectory of social law with his profound investment in individual agency and the capacity for individual, willed character development.

While three of the five major texts studied in this project could reasonably be considered narratives of development or of growing up, it is no accident that of these only the *Autobiography* of Mill, who insisted that sociology operate at the level of individual judgment, can be read as a *Bildungsroman* in the tradition of Austen and Goethe. In both the *Autobiography* and the *Logic of the Moral Sciences*, Mill argues against the positivist construction of the individual as a fraction of an irreducible social whole, developing instead a humanistic model of sociology that draws upon both reason and affect to cast the individual as a social cause in his own right. As the basic unit of his society, the Millian individual is representative not as a particular outcome of a set of social causes, but rather by virtue of his affinity to a universal, rational subject.

¹⁵ Mill, VIII. Pp. 879-880.

In contrast to Newman's account of a world shaped by (providential) "accident", in which we must accept that we cannot know how our characters are being shaped, Mill offers a sociological worldview fundamentally grounded in the perspective of a rational individual subject. In his account, sociology becomes a practice of detached judgment. Both the idea that individuals' behavior can be scientifically predicted and the idea that the individual character can be shaped by the "accidents" of experience are restated from the perspective of an abstracted rational individual. Mill mounts an impassioned defense of individual agency in a sociologically defined world by presenting sociological epistemology as fundamentally about relationships between individuals working from the same universalizable values and experiences. By focusing on the universal rather than the particular, Mill develops a form of social representation that doesn't rely on the idea of individual character as a predetermined social product. As George Eliot will do in the next chapter, Mill proposes a sociology of self-reflection; but unlike Eliot's, Mill's emphasizes the universally shared aspects of individual experience.

The final chapter traces a culmination of realism's sociological epistemology in George Eliot and Herbert Spencer's ethics of particularity and limited knowledge. Both Eliot and Spencer develop narratives of limited individual experience alongside (implicit or explicit) overarching, unknowable social trajectories. With Spencer and Eliot we are in a modified version of Martineau's Comtean positivism (blended with a measure of Darwinian evolutionary theory). Martineau's sense of universal cause-and-effect trajectories survives here, but not her great epistemological optimism. Both Eliot and Spencer believe in the existence of a large-scale historical trajectory of social progress, but both writers likewise warn individuals against the hubristic attempt to understand it, or even to understand their own place in it. At this point in my project, then, the trend toward an account of selfhood as contingent particularity that is less and less understandable

in terms of a coherent set of descriptive laws, and more and more presented as representing the contingency of social determinism, is explicitly taken up as an ethics as well as an epistemology – the counterpart to Mill’s ethics and epistemology of the universal, abstracted individual.

Both Eliot and Spencer argue, in different ways, that we can claim ethical agency only by embracing the limitations of our knowledge and the claims of our particular circumstances. And like Mill, Eliot reformulates the idea of social knowledge as a kind of social perspective, a particular way of looking at oneself and one’s world. Both Mill and Eliot develop this idea as a practice of detached, reflexive self-representation that results in a richer understanding of the individual’s social milieu – a practice that in both cases rests on the assumption that the character of the self-reflecting individual is in some sense representative of the character of his society. But whereas Mill’s sociological subject represents the individual as universal type, constituted by his rational judgment and his share in universal experiences, Eliot’s reflecting subject is constituted by his particular local experiences and committed to an ethics of local, rather than universal, sympathy. Eliot’s sociological subject thus emerges as a compromise between Mill’s detached liberal individual and Spencer’s “static” individual who must serve as an unreflecting conduit for “dynamical” social forces far beyond the range of his own vision.¹⁶ The resulting mostly embedded social perspective assumes that individual knowledge is profoundly limited, so that we are best positioned to understand, and to benefit, the people of our own place and time. By the same token, the individual emerges as, in a limited sense, better able to understand her own society than a detached scientific observer. Eliot’s sociology of self-reflection thus drives home the extent to which individual character has become the locus of social phenomena.

¹⁶ Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: The Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1995). P. 367.

Whether in Martineau's tales of the poor, in Charles Dickens's mystery story about the origins of a friendless orphan, or in any George Eliot novel, the presence of particular characters with particular tendencies, prepossessions, and idiosyncrasies implies the operation of another invisible narrative that makes the characters into the particular people we encounter in the text. Martineau believes that this is the work of a broader process that is still knowable to us, and in which we can have agency once we understand its laws. Newman of course is able to hedge on this question by using contingency as a placeholder for God's will, but his account of this process evacuates both individual agency and knowability. Character becomes itself the tangible representation of the secret unfolding of a deterministic social process. Newman argues that individuals' views are already socially determined at the level of our characters before we begin to make specific decisions and judgments. Novelistic character now represents, not knowable social laws, but rather the unknowability of the unfolding of particular social causes. The realist novel's generic emphasis on the particular comes at the expense of a broader synthesizing account of the social.

The realist novel's conception of character as representative of the playing-out of social laws formally fractures these laws. Rather than the tightly plotted cause-and-effect sequences that Martineau mapped out in her *Illustrations*, the causal laws governing social behavior come to be registered in the realist novel as forces or tendencies operating within the individual, fragments of larger social phenomena that manifest as aspects of an individual character. In addition to becoming internalized within the individual, the explanatory framework that Martineau had hoped to present in her *Illustrations* thus becomes hopelessly shattered. No longer even potentially graspable as a holistic descriptive framework of laws and principles, these social phenomena instead manifest locally as particular forces, particular motives, particular allegiances operating

within the individual. Social facticity is reformulated from universal causal relationships to contingent and circumstantial, local causes acting on a character.

Realism's particularization of social law reconfigures not only character but also narrative as a form of social contingency. When social causality moves inside the individual character, what was for Martineau a transparent sequence of cause and effect becomes an inscrutable process whose effects emerge unexpectedly. In *Bleak House* and *Loss and Gain*, this emerges through complex and fragmentary narrative structures, or staccato narratives that represent long phases of unknowable, unconscious development followed by sudden irruptions into the conscious level. George Eliot represents this process of the silent workings of social causes through an array of medical and, as Vanessa Lyndal Ryan observes, political metaphors – until in *Theophrastus Such*, arguably her most explicitly sociological work of fiction, she forgoes narrative structure altogether in favor of a constellation of affective tendencies that are never resolved into a temporal progression. As character becomes a representative result, to be taken as a given like the “social fact” of a particular institution's or phenomenon's existence, the narrative of unfolding social causality becomes a set of potent fragments, delineated through suggestion and implication, and presenting more questions than answers.

Over the course of the mid nineteenth century, the realist novel moved social causality inside the individual mind. Realism's application of positivist epistemological ideas to the literary forms of narrative and character helped to translate social scientific ideas into the realm of personal experience in ways that continue to shape our understanding of ourselves as individuals and as socially determined entities. Today we are used to thinking of ourselves, our behaviors, preferences, and biases, as objects of scientific study. This model of character breaks down personhood into a set of components – values, preferences, ideals – engendered by our social

conditions. Character is no longer conceived in relation to universal ideals, standards, or experiences. In a contemporary moment in which our media teem with clickbait articles promising to explain what our behaviors mean, our character and judgments are no longer ours to express or account for. Particular character, ultimately, represents social determinism as a narrative that must remain unknowable.

Chapter One

“The True Romance of Human Life:” Principle, Narrative, and Social Representation in Harriet Martineau’s Fiction

Decades before George Eliot took up novelistic narrative for the purpose of “extending the sympathies” of her readers,¹⁷ her contemporary Harriet Martineau began writing realist prose fiction with a different social aim. Where Eliot sought to foster through narrative focalization an ethical response to the particular (rather than idealized) people and situations that make up an ordinary life, Martineau sought to use realist narrative as a medium for propagating general economic principles to make the working poor more effective economic agents. Ultimately, however, her depiction of social causality through both inevitable narrative trajectories and empirical character descriptions injected the premise of social determinism into the form of the realist novel.

A staunch Ricardian whose view of political economy was shaped by the writing of popularizers like James Mill¹⁸ Martineau sought to introduce the principles of political economy to the working-class reader in narrative form. Amidst a raft of prescriptive didactic texts that exhorted the laboring classes to sober and frugal behavior, her *Illustrations of Political Economy* were intended to give such readers the fundamental information with which to form their own opinions – although Martineau was, perhaps, in too little doubt as to what opinions such knowledge would produce.

¹⁷ George Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Pp. 263-264.

¹⁸ John Vint and second Funaki, Keiko, ‘Harriet Martineau and Classical Political Economy’, in *Harriet Martineau and the Birth of Disciplines* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 61–80.

R.K. Webb identifies in Martineau's ethos of popularization "the advocacy of principle over empiricism, for political economy was a science": "Of one thing Miss Martineau was certain. If people wanted a better state of things, if they wanted reform, they had to begin by informing themselves, by learning the principles of political economy so that their interests, governed by those principles, would be properly looked to by government. That was the work to which she would contribute."¹⁹ Webb continues, "Certain great natural laws governed society; within that framework men had radically and fundamentally to reconstruct themselves and others, to teach them the natural laws on obedience to which their happiness depended."²⁰

In her 1838 treatise *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, Martineau anticipates sociology's rejection of the idea of universal prescriptive values, instead emphasizing that different cultures had moral systems particular to them. If anything, this departure from universal prescriptive morality heightened her emphasis on the universal significance of the descriptive laws of political economy. "She quoted [Samuel Butler] at length on the superb way in which political economy illustrated the doctrine of necessity: 'The principle which is at bottom of all the reasonings of political economy, is in fact the uniformity with which visible or assignable circumstances operate on the human will' -- an illustration she thought not only apt but beautiful."²¹

¹⁹ Robert Kiefer Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (Columbia University Press, 1960), P. 108.

²⁰ Ibid p. 133.

²¹ Ibid pp. 108-109.

Martineau's challenge, then, is to communicate these general principles to an audience who will be at best, bored, and at worst, confused, by "a very dry argument."²² To this end she does resort to a form of empiricism. She writes,

It is many years since we grew sick of works that pretend to be stories, and turn out to be catechisms of some kind of knowledge which we had much rather become acquainted with in its genuine form.... Once more we must apply the old proverb, 'Example is better than precept.' ... We declare frankly that our object is to teach Political Economy, and that we have chosen this method not only because it is new, not only because it is entertaining, but because we think it the most faithful and the most complete.²³

Martineau distinguishes her popularizing project from, on the one hand, the inaccessibility of abstract argumentation and, on the other hand, the conceptual incompleteness of the "precepts" typically directed toward working class readers. Not only are "catechism" and "precept" not "entertaining" expressions of social-scientific knowledge, they are also not "its genuine form." Rather, it is fictional narrative that offers "the most faithful and the most complete" account of the scientific laws of political economy.

I. Martineau Narrates and Describes

Martineau's choice of the narrative form reflects a commitment to holistic description before prescription. This commitment, like many of the choices Martineau makes in her writing, stems from her desire to popularize, to convey the principles of political economy as clearly and widely as possible. Her preference emerges subtly, though. It's important to recall that on the most basic level, every category of text that Martineau mentions in this passage – the scientific "catechisms" within nominally fictional works, the "precepts" of a "lecture," as well as "examples" and

²² Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy*, 1 (Leonard C. Bowles, 1832), i. P xii.

²³ Martineau, I. Pp xi-xii.

“narrative fiction” – offers scientific description of social phenomena. But the subtext of Martineau’s comparison is that fictional narrative is in some important way more descriptive than various (implicitly) dry nonfictional, scientific texts. At least, perhaps, it is more purely descriptive, less concerned with explicitly telling readers what to do with the social knowledge it affords them or what values should guide their implementation of said knowledge.

Comparing scenes from Zola’s *Nana* and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* in his essay “Narrate or Describe,” Lukács writes that literary representation “must go beyond crass accident and elevate chance to the inevitable.”

Is it thoroughness of description that renders something artistically ‘inevitable’? Or does inevitability arise out of the relationship of characters to objects and events, a dynamic interaction in which the characters act and suffer? Objectively, attendance at or participation in a race is only an incident in life. Tolstoy integrated such an incident into a critical dramatic context as tightly as it was possible to do. The race is, on the one hand, merely an occasion for the explosion of a conflict, but, on the other hand [...] it is far more than a mere incident.²⁴

Although the narration-description binary that Lukács sets up in this essay superficially runs counter to Martineau’s conception of narrative as a maximally descriptive form, in fact the descriptive potential that Martineau recognizes in narrative is closely tied to the characteristics of “epic narrative” that Lukács identifies. As social science expresses its findings in relation to large numbers of people, so too does it sometimes, especially in the case of Martineau’s principles of political economy, develop them in terms of large amounts of time (in contrast to the static, physical description that Lukács identifies in Zola). Martineau uses narrative as a form to allow “precepts” or principles to become manifest. It reveals the workings of a given social “law” holistically through the passage of time, making visible a cause and effect relation that can only

²⁴ Georg Lukács, ‘Narrate or Describe?’, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, 1970, 110–48. P. 112.

be abstractly stated in the form of a “lecture” or “chapter of moral philosophy.”²⁵ We get a time-lapsed description of social “laws” in action, presenting cause and effect in a solely descriptive form rather than the prescriptive injunction, “to bring about y, do x.”

Martineau’s principles become as tightly “integrated” into the picture of social life as, for Lukács, Tolstoy’s horse race is into *Anna Karenina* as a dramatic whole. Narrative manifests the “inevitability aris[ing] out of the relationships of characters to objects and events.” In making visible the laws governing social interaction, it “goes beyond crass accident” to “elevate chance to the inevitable.” In short, Martineau sees narrative as the formal embodiment of the idea of inevitable social progress over time.

Martineau’s account of writing the *Illustrations* reflects the centrality of this idea to her prose fiction. The elements of her story follow naturally, inevitably, from the principles she wishes to convey, with, she suggests, little effort on her own part. Deirdre David writes that Martineau began with the “Summary of Principles” that came at the end of each illustration, then “incorporated each leading Principle in a fictive character so that ‘the mutual operation of these embodied principles supplied the action of the story.’” Then Martineau would outline, and finally “fill[] in a structure dictated entirely by the received Principles it was her mission to illustrate.” After the preliminary work of relating the principles, Martineau writes, “all the rest was easy. I paged my paper; and then the story went off like a letter.”²⁶

In Martineau’s understanding of her work, the shape of her stories and the attributes of her characters are as predetermined by the principles being conveyed as she expects her readers’

²⁵ Martineau, I. P. xii.

²⁶ Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Springer, 1987). P. 41.

conclusions to be. Her story's structure, like its characters, is always "dictated entirely by the received Principles" she seeks to illustrate. The course of her narrative is a given once she places a group of economic principles into "mutual relation." Martineau describes a writing practice that excludes any intervening creative process, just as the formation of opinions from the facts she provides doesn't leave much room for an actual intervening process of judgment. Fittingly, as David's description above suggests, the drily scientific "Summary of Principles" that comes at the end of each tale does not actually represent a concluding synthesis of information gleaned from the story, but rather a set of constraints that have preordained the structure of Martineau's story from the outset.

Catherine Gallagher argues that the *Illustrations* demonstrate "the determinism that resides in the very form of 'illustrations' of abstract principles:" "Martineau's belief that universal laws were the primary reality and that daily experience was merely a manifestation of these laws led her to equate the ideas of didactic tale and realistic narrative."²⁷ As Alexis Harley observes, Martineau will eventually, in her *Autobiography*, narrate her own life as a microcosm of society's inevitable progression through Auguste Comte's three stages of civilization.²⁸ So predetermined is narrative for Martineau that she does not consider her writing process as, in David's term, a "sovereign" act. David writes that "plot in her didactic stories is a mechanical unfolding of events designed to show the effects upon society and individuals of deficient understanding of these principles. ... Martineau declares that 'creating a plot is a task above human faculties.'"²⁹ Narrative

²⁷ Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (University of Chicago Press, 1985). Pp. 58-59.

²⁸ Alexis Harley, *Autobiologies: Charles Darwin and the Natural History of the Self* (Bucknell University Press, 2014). P. 118.

²⁹ David. P. 75.

in Martineau's hands becomes a deterministic account of life that conveys principles of social science clearly and forcefully but leaves unclear how readers are to act on their knowledge of these principles, and even whether individuals can act on such knowledge in any meaningful way.

II. Transmission of Social Knowledge

One such predetermined narrative for Martineau is the progress of knowledge itself. As a popularizer, she believes herself to be part of an inevitable process whereby scientific knowledge that was at first dry and abstruse will gradually be presented in more accessible forms:

It is perfectly natural that when certainty began to be obtained and regularity to come out of the confusion, formality should be the order of the day; that truths should be offered in a cold, dry form, and should be left bare of illustration, and made as abstract and unattractive as possible. This is a very hopeful state of things, however: for when truth is once laid hold of, it is easy to discover and display its beauty; and this, the last and easiest process, is what remains to be done for Political Economy. When it is done, nobody must again excuse himself from learning, out of discontent at the way in which it is taught.³⁰

This passage is the crescendo of a much longer paragraph in the middle of the Preface to the *Illustrations*. Developing a rhythm through parallelism, Martineau delineates the phases of development of a new field of study, emphasizing the barriers to general comprehension at each stage of the process. “It is very natural that the first eminent book on this new science should be[...] in some parts very difficult,” etc.³¹ By steadily acknowledging the “naturalness” of the “complications and perplexities” of the early stages of any science, as well as the “natural” result that non-specialists then perceive that science as prohibitively difficult, Martineau enforces a sense that underlying laws structure the transmission of knowledge (or “truth”) – and that her role is simply, and evenhandedly, to recognize the existence of such laws. Technically, this moment

³⁰ Martineau, I. Pp. ix-x.

³¹ Martineau, I. P. ix.

marks the first narrative of the unfolding of societal laws in the *Illustrations* (albeit a more abstract type of narrative than Martineau sets out to use in general). She insists on the “naturalness” of every predicate account of the state of things, and her repeated return to that word (which she uses four times in the larger paragraph) also prepares her readers to think of social processes and modes of transmission as “natural” in the way that the world had come to appreciate underlying rules governing inanimate objects as “natural laws.”

This passage functions on two levels. As Martineau explicitly lays out the rationale for her project, locating it within the “natural” process of the development of an idea, she also puts her proposed methodology into action in tracing and articulating this process, rhetorically enforcing a sense of its natural inevitability and even “beauty.” She establishes her overarching concern with the clarifying power of identifying “natural phenomena” in multiple ways here, and provides a preview of her clarifying method.

It is, we may say, very natural that in the wake of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, and in the context of the increasing professionalization of the natural sciences for which these developments paved the way, the proponents of a new, or newly defined, field of study should try to lend authority to their field by analogy to natural science. Yet for Martineau this goes both ways. Later on in the same passage she compares her chosen field of study to the natural sciences on another score than that of its capacity to lay bare “natural” laws governing human behavior. She calls the sciences

only valuable as far as they involve the interests of mankind at large, and that nothing can prevent their sooner or later influencing general happiness. This is true with respect to the knowledge of the stars; to that of the formation and changes of the structure of the globe;

to that of chemical elements and their combinations; and, above all, to that of the social condition of men.³²

Martineau has asserted that the truth, once arrived at, is beautiful, but here she emphasizes utility as the only real end of a scientist's search for truth. The second clause of the first sentence above may leave some room for hedging, as the ability "sooner or later to influence the general happiness" is not easily measured in the service of utilitarian calculations. The indefinite time frame, with the suggestion even of possibly spanning many generations of study, offers an interpretation that places the implementation of this knowledge, and the judgment of its value, beyond the means of any individual. No amount of error can prevent self-evidently socially useful information from eventually being competently acted upon.

Martineau's positivist faith in the inevitability of social progress through the spread of knowledge will be criticized by Dickens, who fears that over-emphasizing the communication of social information may lead people to lose sight of their place in this scientifically described world. Martineau takes it as given that the propagation of such knowledge will eventually lead toward progress. Her turn to abstraction and large swaths of time, in contrast with her stated (and performed) commitment to immediate clarification and dissemination of knowledge, suggests an implicit reliance on a deterministic, agentive progress as the ultimate driving force behind the spread and implementation of knowledge, beyond the scope of any individual's power or experience. This dimension of Martineau's theory of the spread of knowledge may explain why she turns to fictional narrative for the *Illustrations*, thus, ultimately, reifying her deterministic vision of social progress in literary form.

³² Martineau, I. Pp. vii-ix.

In *French Wines and Politics*, Martineau contrasts the ignorance that leads a group of French revolutionaries to kill a man with the detailed knowledge of human biology that will one day render murder unthinkable for anyone:

What are the invisible issues of life there was no one present to think, [...] but such was the visible issue of a life which a stupendous and delicate natural apparatus had been appointed to create, sustain, and develop. [...] That the handywork of Providence should ever have been thus crushed, and its mysteries thus boldly made sport of, may in time appear as incredible as it would now seem that children had ever been encouraged to pull planets from their spheres in mockery [...] supposing such power to have been left in their hands. In the latter case, who would be answerable for the profanation? Surely those who taught mockery in the place of reverence. Who was answerable in the former case? Those who made the perpetrators ignorant through oppression, and savage through misrule.³³

At the climactic moment, Martineau's narrator intrudes to direct her readers to recognize what "there was no one present to think" of: the "issues," both "visible" and "invisible" of a human life. Martineau appeals to her readers' emotions during this scene, but not to their sympathy for the dying man. Instead, she awakens our sense of the sublime by gesturing – away from the dying man himself – toward a sweeping scientific account of human life.

Claudia Klaver has identified in the *Illustrations* a tension between the cold rationality of economic calculation and the sympathy for individual human suffering that is inevitably introduced by fictional narrative.³⁴ Martineau does often call out her readers' sympathy for the innocents injured by others' failure to understand the laws of political economy, such as (in Klaver's example) the little girl whose father, impoverished by his involvement in a workers' strike, must sell her beloved pet bird. Yet in the passage above, the monstrous deficiency that

³³ Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy*, 12 (Leonard C. Bowles, 1833), XII. Pp. 140-141.

³⁴ Claudia C. Klaver, *A/Moral Economics: Classical Political Economy and Cultural Authority in Nineteenth-Century England* (Ohio State University Press, 2003). P. 68.

Martineau bemoans in the killers is not a lack of human sympathy, but a lack of knowledge. Martineau's analogy to astronomy places the knowledge of "natural and moral appliances" of human existence on a par with the knowledge of the planets, and rests on the assumption that in both cases such knowledge would confer moral respect and even a sense of aesthetic awe for the systems in question. If it is unthinkable that anyone possessed of such knowledge of the human machine should commit a wrong against it, by the same token, it cannot be supposed that, without access to such knowledge, the executioners in the tale could "know better" than to take a life.

Rather than making a structural appeal to the reader's sympathy, Martineau's use of narrative in fact develops quite a different attitude toward the characters in her tale and the nature of their fates. The narrative intrusion in this passage presents a fixed vision of history as a trajectory of progressive improvement. The "executioners" (and their victim) simply have the misfortune to be ignorant creatures of their time. Martineau's double narrative presents them as such while also presenting the spread of scientific knowledge as a certain cure for the moral ills of society.

The many mob scenes that occur throughout Martineau's *Illustrations* echo this disparity of knowledge. Martineau's narrator almost always attributes such acts of mass violence to some form of knowledge problem, whether specific misinformation about an individual or group, or a more general ignorance of economic laws. Unlike the scene above, in which "no one was present to think" about what was being destroyed, many of Martineau's mob scenes do involve better informed would-be actors whose presence turns the mob itself into a form of knowledge disparity. Martineau's mobs are ignorant acting masses containing (or engaging) figures whose better knowledge is unable to produce any effect on the actions of the mob as a body. *A Manchester Strike* depicts the eponymous strike as the pernicious result of one such knowledge disparity. The strike develops as a series of empty gestures that reflect its participants' failure to think in terms

of the likely consequences of their actions. “Many had no clear idea of what was doing or going to be done: some had no idea at all, and those who knew best thought it a pity that such a display should have been made as might bear the appearance of being intended to intimidate the [factory] masters.”³⁵ Throughout the *Illustrations* it is a favorite trope of Martineau’s to depict the gradations of knowledge belonging to participants in any given undertaking, particularly the different orders of calculation involved in the behavior of a group.

In *The Loom and the Lugger, Part II*, Martineau juxtaposes mob behavior with a sample of what rational, comprehensive social and economic calculation might look like. In a particularly poignant scene of contrasting levels of knowledge, she offers this instance of big-picture calculation via the wistful interior monologue of the mob’s intended target. Nationalistic prejudice and ignorance of the evils of restrictionist policy lead to fear and misunderstanding. Angry townspeople surround the house of the honest French immigrant and silk merchant M. Gaubion and burn him in effigy, designating him “Monseer Go-be-hung.” Throughout the anxious interlude, Gaubion observes the individual members of the mob, first as an anonymous passerby, and later from a marginally safer vantage-point behind a curtain in his house. His interior monologue reflects the cognitive dissonance of facing an attack by those with whom he lives and works:

‘That boy who is pinning the effigy’s name – Monseer Go-be-hung – on its back, was taught to write by my order. There goes my green wicket! – off its hinges, and into the heap! The lads that pulled it down have often passed through it with my work under their arms, and my money in their pockets. – O, you fiend of a woman! Do you put shavings into your infant’s hand [to feed the bonfire], that it too may have a share in the inhospitality of your country? May that infant live to subsist upon my resources, and to make you thank heaven that the Frenchman came among you!’³⁶

³⁵ Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy*, 7 (Leonard C. Bowles, 1833), VII. P. 65.

³⁶ Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy*, 17 (Leonard C. Bowles, 1884), XVII. Pp 140-141.

In a sort of double exposition, Gaubion mournfully repeats the formulation, “The person who is now doing *x*, is the same who has done *y*,” simultaneously narrating the present violent scene as it unfolds and recalling its participants’ prior benign transactions with him. This chain of reflection implicitly contrasts Gaubion’s capacity for multidimensional reflection which captures a larger picture to the apparently monomaniacally nationalistic minds of the members of the menacing crowd. Furthermore, the passage, especially the concluding reflection, emphasizes that the crowd also seems to lack Gaubion’s capacity for causal thinking grounded in a sense of the passage of time. With each painful jolt of recognition, Gaubion realizes that a miseducation that fosters prejudice and suspicion of foreigners is powerful enough to override the combination of personal experience, economic self-interest, and the ability to draw cause-and-effect connections. In the present moment, he can only ruefully describe (narrate) their hateful and violent behavior; he cannot hope to influence it, or even hope that the reflections that influence him will occur to those venting their spleen against him. In the face of mass activity, his more enlightened view of the social and economic functioning of his town becomes irrelevant.

Martineau’s mob scenes thus further develop the problem raised in the episode of the French nobleman’s murder by depicting the inadequacy of individual knowledge to bring about change even when superior knowledge is present in someone on the scene. The problem is one of scale, laid bare by narrative fiction’s structural tendency to focalize events through the experiences of individuals. Martineau is using fictional tales to illustrate the workings of laws governing economic activity in actual social contexts. But economic laws, like all social laws, describe processes that play out only beyond the individual scale – whether over large numbers of people or large amounts of time; or both, in the case of Martineau’s account of the propagation of scientific

knowledge. Thus the large scale of description which confers cultural authority on scientific accounts of human behavior by creating, in John Milbank's phrase, "the social [whole] as a positive datum,"³⁷ simultaneously stages the inability of any given individual to alter the workings of the social whole by acting on this information.

Departing from the theme of political economy, Martineau attempts to deal with this problem of scale and the spread of knowledge in her 1839 novel *Deerbrook*, but the result is a plot driven more by the misinformation spread by an almost inhumanly malicious gossip than by any of the novel's protagonists. In plot *Deerbrook* resembles the Lydgate storyline in *Middlemarch* (which would be published more than thirty years later): a young, intelligent, and attractive country surgeon is accidentally manipulated into making an unwanted marriage and finds himself contending with domestic difficulties while also beset by slander and persecution in his professional capacity from an ignorant public. In both cases, these attacks are even traceable back to an ill-starred vote cast by the surgeon in question. But the similarity conferred by these like events ends here. Whereas the collapse of Lydgate's professional reputation is directly traced to his unfortunate marriage via overwhelming debt that eventually makes him financially dependent on the wrong person at the wrong time, Dr. Hope is a faultless individual apparently arbitrarily marked out for professional ruin by an impersonal Nemesis in the shape of gossip. The source of this gossip is the middle-class housewife Mrs. Rowland, whose putative reason for relentlessly conniving to destroy the reputation and livelihood of Mr. Hope is his marriage to the niece of a family for whom Mrs. Rowland cherishes an inexplicable but profound hatred. If this causal explanation leaves something to be desired, I propose that we can instead read information and

³⁷ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008). P. 51.

misinformation themselves as the plot-driving agents in this novel (and the really almost demonic Mrs. Rowland as a mere clumsy mouthpiece for them). In *Deerbrook*, information, including misinformation (not quite knowledge) has a mind of its own, independently of individual action or assertion. In the scale of an individual life (as represented in this novelistic world), the spread of information about an individual takes on the inevitability of the spread of scientific knowledge and must proceed through many predetermined stages of greater or less ignorance.

Some of the novel's most narratively compelling scenes are those depicting how an item of gossip takes possession of a character, driving her to spread it as far as possible. In a passage of protracted free indirect discourse, Martineau shows how Hester's cousin Sophia, once possessed of the news of Hester's engagement to Mr. Hope, becomes irresistibly impelled to share it with as many of her neighbors as she can find:

Sophia burst breathless into the summer-house to tell Miss Young, which she did in whispers so loud as to be overheard by the children. Matilda immediately found she had left her slate-pencil behind her, and ran into the house to give her mama the news, just at the moment that Mr Grey was relating it to his partner in the office. On returning, Sophia found her mother putting on her bonnet, having remembered that it was quite time she should be stepping across the way to hear how poor Mrs Enderby was, after the thunder-storm of three days ago. This reminded Sophia that she ought to be inquiring about the worsted which Mrs Howell must have got down from London by this time, to finish Mrs Grey's rug. Mrs Grey could not trust her eyes to watch shades of worsteds; and Sophia now set out with great alacrity to oblige her mother by doing it for her. On the way she met Dr Levitt,... [etc].³⁸

Martineau's narrative throughout this passage maintains as breathless a pace as Sophia's, Mrs. Grey's, and Matilda's endeavors to spread their information as soon as it reaches them, while her ironic use of free indirect discourse represents the desire to distribute the news as such an all-consuming motive that the characters' sudden awareness of subordinate motives requires no

³⁸ Harriet Martineau, *Deerbrook (Penguin Classics)* (Penguin, 2011). Pp 154-155.

explanation. It is unclear whether the true motives for these sudden errands are quite as transparent to the characters as to the reader, but this makes no difference to the result. Despite the feud between Matilda's family and the Greys, and independently of any potential individual motives, the three become linked as agents of the same distributive impulse of gossip.

Of course, the dominant tone of gossip in the novel – the gossip that most moves the plot – is far more insidious than the news of Hester and Hope's engagement. Unfortunately for Martineau's protagonists, misinformation propagates itself just as readily through the town of Deerbrook as correct information does – malicious or not, the intentions of the source are ultimately irrelevant to the spread of information. There are two major, plot-driving pieces of misinformation in the novel – both generated by the ever industrious Mrs. Rowland. One pertains to something very concrete, namely Mr. Hope's medical practice; the other translates into the currency of gossip something more private and ineffable, the romantic feeling supposedly subsisting between Mr. Hope and his sister-in-law Margaret. The former slander spreads throughout the town, and consists of the usual absurd suspicions of medical men – grave-robbing and all other manner of wicked exploitation of innocent patients. As Mr. Hope observes, it would be easy to refute such suspicions if his medical interventions were given their chance to help patients, but too often the ignorant townspeople violate his medical orders the moment his back is turned.

The second slander is more complicated, as well as much more limited in its spread. Mrs. Rowland, hoping to prevent her brother Philip Enderby's marriage to Margaret Ibbotson, amasses an exhaustive catalogue of evidence to support her claim that Margaret is in love with her sister's husband Mr. Hope. The truth, known only to Mr. Hope and to the readers, is that Mr. Hope did fall in love with Margaret rather than Hester, and that, although he struggled against it, he did

continue to love Margaret through the early part of his marriage to Hester. And that Margaret, knowing nothing of this, innocently loves Philip Enderby. In a rather remarkable scene toward the end of the novel, Philip confronts Hope with not his suspicions, but his information – and recounts much of the plot of the novel in the course of their dialogue, the actual plot events given a slightly different slant by additional, simply false information which Mrs. Rowland has helpfully contributed.

There seemed to be no circumstance connected with the sisters and their relation to Mr. Hope that Mrs. Rowland had not laid hold of. Mrs. Grey's visit to Hope during his convalescence; his subsequent seclusion, and his depression when he reappeared. ... Enderby connected with this his own observations and feelings at the time; his last summer's conviction that it was Margaret whom Hope loved, his rapturous surprise on hearing of the engagement being to Hester, and his wonder at the coldness with which his friend received his congratulations. He now thought that he must have been doomed to blindness not to have discerned the truth through all this. ... Then, after Hope was married, all Deerbrook was aware of his failure of spirits; and of Margaret's no less. It was a matter of common remark, that there must be something amiss, -- that all was not right at home. They had, then, doubtless discovered that the attachment was mutual; and they might well be wretched.³⁹

This excerpt represents a small fraction of Philip's protracted recounting of the novel's events in the service of the misinformation his sister has given him (which also involves going around town like a detective, soliciting eyewitness accounts of various trivial incidents that have occurred over the past year). In response to this relentless barrage of information about the state of his own heart and his own home, Hope attempts to tell Philip the truth – that Margaret has remained unswervingly constant in her own attachment to Philip. But no assertion, even from one so closely concerned in the case, can be worth more to Philip in this moment than the list of information he has amassed. His set of facts, not on their face any more probable than Hope's account of the truth, retains its sway over him. Indeed, it is almost as though he wants to believe in this easily graspable

³⁹ Martineau, *Deerbrook (Penguin Classics)*. Pp. 467-469.

and transmittable story rather than in Hope's account or even in the testimony of Philip's own feeling for, and intimate knowledge of, Margaret.

At such an impasse between trivial information and the deep truths of human feeling, it is unclear how truth, love, and justice can prevail over the hold of misinformation. In *Deerbrook*, the answer is a *deus ex machina*. Mr. Hope's medical reputation is restored only after his selfless attendance throughout the town during a convenient, almost providentially punitive outbreak of fever brings the townspeople, chastened by immense loss, back to their faith in his goodness as well as his medical expertise. The same outbreak chastens even Mrs. Rowland, whose young daughter's death is attributed largely to her refusal to call in Mr. Hope (instead of a different doctor) in time. In a fit of remorse, she confesses to Philip that she has lied to him about Margaret and frustrated Margaret's attempts to explain herself to him, resolving the final crisis of the novel and clearing the air of the misinformation that (like disease) had been circulating through the households and the town.

It's revealing that Martineau's novel requires the machinations of a seemingly demonic villain to spread the misinformation that will then drive both subplots, the medical and the love plot. But the fact that a happy ending and a proper understanding between the lovers proves to be wholly contingent on the willingness of that villain to spontaneously correct her lies is still more telling, and makes the world of *Deerbrook* seem a bleak one despite the novel's comfortable resolution. In effect, *Deerbrook* provides an account, reminiscent of the *Illustrations*, of the motivating power of bad information almost as an agent in and of itself – but without offering any clue to how individuals can fight the power of such misinformation, short of divine intervention.

Valerie Sanders observes that the protagonists' experience in *Deerbrook* "anticipates much of the struggle for stoicism and philosophy in novels by Charlotte and Anne Brontë."⁴⁰ An attitude of stoic or philosophic acceptance is associated with many of the novel's characters at times; Margaret, Hope, Enderby, and Maria all seek to submit to disappointments and losses with steady good humor. But as the victims of the two great calumnies in the novel, it is Margaret and Hope who become particularly associated with practices of stoic endurance. Although stoicism remains a struggle, both Hope and Margaret consciously choose paths of acceptance and fortitude under a regime of misinformation that they cannot directly alter.

The unsettling combination of stoic resignation and intense affective experience that would later characterize Charlotte Brontë's protagonists is associated in *Deerbrook* with both Ibbotson sisters as well as with Hope. The mercurial Hester's struggle for stoicism is a major, explicit subject of the novel as she fluctuates between cheerful calm and intense, fruitless jealousy in Martineau's poignant portrayal of what today might be diagnosed as Borderline Personality Disorder. But while Hester swings from one extreme to the other, Margaret unites them into a single attitude and course of action during her turbulent courtship with Philip Enderby. When Philip breaks off their engagement under the influence of a slander that remains a mystery to Margaret, Margaret takes a quick and decisive action that she does not believe will make any difference:

"Will you not wait, my dearest Margaret?" said Hester when, within half an hour of the arrival of Enderby's letter, she met her sister on the stairs, with the reply in her hand, sealed, and ready to be sent. "Why such haste? The events of your life may hang on this day, on this one letter. Can it be right to be so rapid in what you think and do?"

⁴⁰ Sanders. P. 60.

“The event of my life is decided,” she replied, “unless – No – the event of my life *is* decided.... I have written what I think, and it must go.”⁴¹

Hester urges Margaret to take time for deliberation before acting on Enderby’s letter. The explicit premise of her appeal is the supposition that “the events of your life may hang... on this one letter.” From this standpoint, Margaret’s letter is an exercise of agency undertaken in hopes of achieving a particular end – viz., the undeception of Enderby. Margaret answers Hester by countering this assumption: the event of her life is already “decided,” independently of any action of hers. She responds in haste instead of deliberating over her letter because she does not regard the letter as an act that can alter the situation. Rather, it is a necessary act of self-expression in the face of an unalterable fate. This choice, and especially this account of this choice, anticipates the bitter outcry of a Jane Eyre or a Lucy Snowe.

For Charlotte Brontë and other novelists, such accounts of resignation are often gendered. In *Deerbrook*, however, Mr. Hope has little more agency in the face of misinformation in his professional role than Margaret does with respect to her relationship with Enderby. After Mrs. Rowland’s malicious rumors rob Hope of his practice and turn the townspeople violently against him, he articulates a new ethos of righteous “struggle.” Although Mr. Rowland offers him financial backing to start a new practice in a new part of the country, Hope believes it is his duty to remain in Deerbrook. In an impromptu pep talk the morning after townsfolk mob his house and burn him in effigy, he tells his family,

When it pleases God that men should be overwhelmed by calumny, it is a dreadful evil which must be borne as well as it may; but not without a struggle. We must not too hastily conclude that this is to be the issue in our case. We must stay and struggle for right and justice – struggle for it, by living on with firm, patient, and gentle minds. This is surely

⁴¹ Martineau, *Deerbrook (Penguin Classics)*. Pp. 409-410.

what we ought to do, rather than go away for the sake of ease, leaving the prejudices of our neighbours in all their virulence, because we have not strength to combat them.⁴²

The vision of “struggle” that Hope offers is fundamentally a vision of stasis, of stoic endurance. His choice to struggle is a choice to be literally static, to remain in Deerbrook “rather than go away for the sake of ease.” This struggle consists of “living on with firm, patient, and gentle minds” in the face of lies and misinformation. It is a real effort of will, but a preservative rather than transformative effort that rests precisely on the acceptance that Hope et al cannot themselves combat bad information in more direct ways. To struggle against misinformation in this world is simply to wait it out in good faith as a matter of principle and hope that it will run its course.

Part of this account of agency as stoic endurance is an acknowledgment that Hope’s own knowledge is only slightly less limited than that of the rioting townspeople. To act rightly in such a way as to make a substantive change in the state of affairs in Deerbrook would require a better understanding of the timeline of social progress in town than Hope can possess. Hope’s description of struggle as “living on” rests in part on the limited scope of his own knowledge: “It is a simple truth, that we cannot see our way before us. We must be satisfied to discern the duty of the day, and for the future to do what we ought always to be doing – ‘to walk by faith and not by sight.’”⁴³

In Martineau’s secular-providential account of the gradual triumph of scientific knowledge over a range of social ills, it is of course understood that popularizing work like hers will contribute to the propagation of social knowledge, especially among the less educated classes. But the advent of total communal knowledge, and the social harmony it brings with it, remain distant (though

⁴² Martineau, *Deerbrook (Penguin Classics)*. Pp. 335-336.

⁴³ Martineau, *Deerbrook (Penguin Classics)*. P. 335.

predetermined) outcomes, and the means by which they will finally be achieved remain well beyond the ken of the current generation even of social scientists. This results in an ethics of “living on” in which individuals like Hope, and Margaret, base their ethical judgments on the assumption that their personal actions have no power to change what their community as a whole knows or believes itself to know. Behind the fortuitously happy outcome of the Ibbotson sisters’ trials in *Deerbrook* lies the picture of a social world in which the ultimate social ends are predetermined, the means of effecting them are unknown, and the individual is left with little choice but to suffer through his stage of the process.

III The “Conventions” of Society and “the True Romance of Human Life”

While *Deerbrook* valorizes an individual stoicism that waits for communal misinformation to run its course, Martineau’s writings on realist aesthetics often posit a still more constraining relationship between individual character and narrative inevitability. Throughout her oeuvre, Martineau argues for a literary realism grounded in the characters of the poor, who she argues are the most markedly shaped by economic necessity. Their characters therefore offer a particularly powerful representation of the principles of political economy. In making this argument, Martineau begins to shift the focus of literary representation of society from causal laws to the individual as an empirical specimen.

In the concluding chapter of the *Illustrations* volume *For Each and for All*, the tale’s aristocratic protagonist Letitia reflects on what she sees as art’s failure to depict the lives of the poor:

The true romance of human life lies among the poorer classes; the most rapid vicissitudes, the strongest passions, the most undiluted emotions, the most eloquent deportment, the truest experience are there. These things are marked on their countenances, and displayed by their gestures; and yet these things are almost untouched by our artists; be they

dramatists, painters, or novelists. The richest know best what is meant by the monotony of existence, however little this may appear to their poor neighbors who see them driving about as if their life depended on their speed, and traversing kingdoms and continents.⁴⁴

In this reflection on which aspects of human experience are worthiest subjects for artistic representation, Martineau returns to the idea of narrative as a crucial articulation of mankind's subjection to natural law. Her assertion that the lives of the rich are in some sense less "true" than the lives of the poor is consistent with her view that narrative is the aesthetic form imposed by the inevitable action of the laws of political economy upon human life.

Narrative is the defining, though never explicitly mentioned, term of the foregoing reflection; it seems to be what Martineau means by the more ambiguous "romance." Martineau's "true romance of human life" marks narrative as the most meaningful distinguishing factor between the lives of the rich and those of the poor. Although the rich introduce the appearance of variety into their lives by travel and, more importantly to Martineau's claim, introduce the appearance of necessity into their lives by "driving about as if their life depended on their speed," they are in fact as far removed from the cause-and-effect narrative urgency of life – its "rapid vicissitudes," "struggles, and toils" -- as it is possible to be. Their wealth, and the sediment of generations' worth of conventional trappings of their station (such as the Grand Tour) that set them apart from the poor, dampen the intensity with which the constant action of the incontrovertible principles governing social and economic interaction makes itself felt in their day-to-day lives.

In this sense, the "reality" to which Martineau refers here is the deterministic set of socio-economic laws that govern human interaction. It's not that the wealthy are not subject to these laws, it's that they don't feel these laws as a shaping presence in their lives the way the poor do;

⁴⁴ Martineau, XI. Pp. 168-169.

economic determinism is not “marked on their countenances,” as it is for example on the countenances of the slaves of Demerara in the *Illustration* of the same name, whose characters are visibly formed by their economic conditions.

A tale of enslaved people and slave owners, *Demerara* is a particularly striking instance of Martineau’s deterministic approach to narrative. In her examination of the economic impact of slavery, Martineau depicts a world in which not only events, but human characters, are predetermined by the economic context in which they occur. No essential human virtues, or universal human cares, can withstand the character-shaping pressures of economic principles in action. Economic principles trump all other considerations; ultimately, economic law *is* character.

Demerara criticizes the institution of slavery from the standpoint of economic efficiency. When she does address slavery’s moral impact on the individual, Martineau refuses to turn the enslaved figures into sentimentalized heroes in order to win readers over. Most of the individual enslaved people who Martineau describes, far from being noble figures, are ignorant and morally stunted (Old Mark, Nell, Becky) or even thoroughly evil and malicious (Rob and Sukey). It is more important to represent how this system has botched enslaved people’s moral education than to present them as noble sufferers.

If it be objected that the characters for which sympathy is claimed ought to have been made more interesting, I reply that our sympathy for slaves ought to increase in proportion to their vices and follies, if it can be proved that those vices and follies arise out of the position in which we place them... If the champions of the slave had but seen how their cause is aided by portraying him as he is, -- not only revengeful, but selfish and mean, -- not only treacherous to his master, but knavish to his countrymen, indolent, conceited, hypocritical, and sensual -- we should have had fewer narratives of slaves more virtuous than a free peasantry, and exposed to the delicate miseries of a refined love of which they are

incapable, or of social sensibilities which can never be generated in such a social condition as theirs.⁴⁵

Whether Martineau's account of vice and knavery is any more accurate than a sentimental narrative of delicate feelings and noble virtue, it is difficult to say. But she is making an unmistakably sociological – and strongly deterministic -- argument here in suggesting that the enslaved characters' personal traits are determined by “social conditions” and “the position in which we place them,” rather than focusing on essential aspects of their character according to any account, whether it relies on race-based distinctions or no. For Martineau, to report on character is to report on the socio-economic conditions that are its root cause. The argument here is negative: idealized, sentimental depictions are a missed opportunity to provide the realistic representation of enslaved character that in itself serves as a powerful indictment of the system of slavery. Portraits of character, properly understood, are really portraits of “social conditions,” social principles, and the socio-economic “position” in which such characters can arise.

“The true romance of human life” is not only perceptible in the experiences, but legible in the very “countenances” and hearts of poor and enslaved people; economic necessity shapes their characters as well as their appearances. By definition, the poor feel the effects of economic vicissitudes more keenly than the middle and upper classes because they lack a financial buffer. But for Martineau, it is not only money, but also man-made mores, or “conventions,” that intervene between the wealthy and the stark realities of economic law. Throughout her writing, Martineau pointedly distinguishes immutable, universal laws such as the principles of political economy from socially contingent “conventions” of polite behavior. In her essay “Achievements of the Genius of

⁴⁵ Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy: Demerara. A Tale*, 4 (Leonard C. Bowles, 1832), IV. Pp. vii-viii.

Scott,” she writes of Scott’s preference for high-born characters and courtly settings, “[H]e knew not that all passions, and all natural movements of society, that he has found in the higher, exist in the humbler ranks; and all magnified and deepened in proportion as reality prevails over convention, as there is less mix of the adventitious with the true.”⁴⁶

This idea of social convention as not “true” or universal, but rather arbitrary and contingent, is consistent with Martineau’s sociological thought in *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, which explicitly argues for a relativistic approach to the study of social values and standards of conduct, anticipating the methodology that would come to characterize sociology as a discipline. Yet, despite her explicit advocacy of a neutral attitude in the observation of different societies’ distinct conventions, in this critique of Scott’s aesthetics Martineau unfavorably compares the general phenomenon of social convention with the “reality” and “truth” that is to be found in “the humbler ranks.” Any given societal convention, that is, compares unfavorably to the unconstrained “natural movements of society” that are felt in the lives of the poor. This passage is a more explicit restatement of the claim in *For Each and For All* that the lives of the poor are in some sense more “real” because they feel the effects of economic laws more directly. Here Martineau attributes this “magnification and deepening” of the “natural movements of society” to the weaker hold of social convention on the lives of the humbler classes: where “adventitious” laws of conduct prevail, they dampen the effect of “true,” “natural” laws, such as the universal laws that govern political economy.

Martineau’s insistence that the lower classes are the fittest subjects for narrative fiction is thus at once a sociological and an aesthetic choice: their lives provide the clearest reflections of

⁴⁶ Harriet Martineau, ‘THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE GENIUS OF SCOTT.’, *The Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* (1822-1842), 22.130 (1833), 466. P. 471.

the operation of economic laws, and thus are the most narratively compelling. Even the middle-class protagonists of *Deerbrook* spend the most eventful period of the novel in abject poverty. Martineau's argument that narratives of the lives of the poor are more "real" than plots based on the social conventions of the upper classes marks a major step toward the realist fiction of the mid to late nineteenth century. Much as Martineau admired Austen⁴⁷, her rejection of social conventions as less real than economic conditions represents a shift away from the Enlightenment-era novel of manners, in which standards of conduct serve as imperfect stand-ins for moral absolutes, and the judgment of character via an individual's conduct is the top epistemological priority. Martineau's choice of "conventions" rather than "manners" in the passage from the Scott essay is surely significant: "conventions," unlike "manners," have no moral connotation. In her criticism and in her own fiction, Martineau resolutely moves away from the obfuscatory effects of "manners," toward a realist depiction of individuals' characters and stories as inescapably shaped by the workings of economic law.

For Martineau, realism in literature is the fullest narrative representation of the influence that the natural laws of society exert on our lives, and this realism is achieved through depicting the lived experience of the poor because their lives are most visibly shaped by these laws. But this emphasis on clear and accessible communication of the natural laws of society leads Martineau into a contradiction. As a popularizer, as an artist, and as a sociologist, Martineau consistently prioritizes universal social laws, whether the principles of political economy or the "passions... and... natural movements of society."⁴⁸ It is these laws, she believes, that shape everyone's lives, and that hold the key to the attainment of general happiness. Yet to achieve her ultimate aim of

⁴⁷ See Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and the Victorian Patriarchy*.

⁴⁸ Martineau, 'THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE GENIUS OF SCOTT.' P. 471.

communicating these laws clearly and effectively, she must resort to empirical representations, to showing the palpable imprint of these laws on the lives of particular individuals. The sociologist Frederick Bonser saw the *Illustrations* as the precursors to the modern case study.⁴⁹

As Michael R. Hill argues, not only Martineau's fiction, but also *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, reveals "an essential tension between abstract theory and concrete empiricism" in her project of communicating social law.⁵⁰ Even the form of *How to Observe* reflects this tension, as Martineau begins her text by arguing that travelers' observations should be geared toward understanding the fundamental laws governing moral life, then spends the remainder of the essay itemizing the particular facets of society that should be observed to this end. In this context, principle becomes the guiding idea that allows empirical observation to be properly understood:

It is not enough for a traveller to have an active understanding, equal to an accurate perception of individual facts in themselves; he must also be in possession of principles which may serve as a rallying point for his observations, and without which he cannot determine their bearings, or be secure of putting a right interpretation upon them. A traveller may do better without eyes, or without ears, than without such principles.⁵¹

The deaf Martineau speaks from her own experience as a sociological observer here. A guiding principle is required to derive social knowledge from "individual facts." Such observations must be understood as indices of a deeper universal causal law. The traveler's "first general principle is, that the law of nature is the only one by which mankind at large can be judged. His second must be, that every prevalent virtue or vice is the result of the particular circumstances amidst which the

⁴⁹ Harriet Martineau, *HOW TO OBSERVE MORALS AND MANNERS*, 1989. P. xxvi.

⁵⁰ Martineau, *HOW TO OBSERVE MORALS AND MANNERS*. P. xv.

⁵¹ Martineau, *HOW TO OBSERVE MORALS AND MANNERS*. Pp. 26-27.

society exists."⁵² In other words, “who would be so hardy as to treat” the vices of serfs, priests, and nobility under a feudal system of government “as any thing but the results -- inevitable as mournful -- of the state of society?”⁵³ To be an effective observer of morals and manners, the traveler must recognize his empirical observations of social customs, class characteristics, and even individual characters, as the inevitable “result of the particular circumstances amidst which the society exists,” as dictated by a universal “law of nature.” In Martineau’s sociology, the workings of universal social laws are manifested through particular, empirical observation, as long as it is understood that the particular phenomena and individuals in question are determined by the universal laws.

Hill identifies this tension between the abstract and the concrete as a fundamental methodological problem for early sociology, but for Martineau and her popularizing project, it is a problem of representation – thus an aesthetic problem – as well. Martineau spends much of *How to Observe* identifying areas of a nation’s social life that reward empirical observation – religion, literature, newspapers, schools, etc. But beyond this, Martineau fills this section on “What to Observe,” which makes up the majority of the book, with a wide variety of specific examples of each category of social phenomenon. Here, too, Martineau has applied the dictum that “example is better than precept,” filling her treatise with scenes taken from her own experience, from secondhand anecdotes, or from her reading. What would an outsider have thought, Martineau asks, “of the spectacle one day seen in Hayti, when Toussaint L’Ouverture ranged his negro forces before him, called out thirteen men from the ranks by name, and ordered them to repair to a certain

⁵² Martineau, *HOW TO OBSERVE MORALS AND MANNERS*. Pp. 38-39.

⁵³ Martineau, *HOW TO OBSERVE MORALS AND MANNERS*. P. 45.

spot to be immediately shot” – or of the men’s placid submission to this command? Both phenomena Martineau shows to have been necessary and even inevitable in this context.⁵⁴

Whereas in the *Illustrations* Martineau represents the workings of economic laws through a narrative of cause and effect playing out over time, in the context of this explicitly sociological text, she illustrates the idea of universal law through an abundant multiplicity of different examples. Either way, for Martineau, to describe universal laws necessarily involves empirical accounts of their particular effects in particular cases. And when she develops these laws through narrative rather than a list of wide-ranging vignettes, it is the lives of the poor that afford the fullest representation of their shaping effect on individual experience. If this successfully accomplishes Martineau’s goal of representing the natural laws of society in a clear and understandable way, a secondary effect of conveying universal law at the level of particular experience is to eliminate the space of individual judgment in relation to these laws. Rather than rules with respect to which individuals can calculate and make rational decisions, they become the factors that shape individuals’ circumstances and their very characters, determining outcomes for them. This move calls into question not only her didactic project, but also her use of literary form. In presenting characters as irrevocably formed before her narrative begins, Martineau raises the possibility that the cause-and-effect narratives that unfold on a larger scale in her fiction do not tell the whole story of social determinism.

⁵⁴ Martineau, *HOW TO OBSERVE MORALS AND MANNERS*. P. 56.

Chapter Two

“Nothing But Facts”: Dickens and the Broken Narrative of Induction

Although the formal tension between empirical observation of character and universal descriptive law seems to have gone unnoticed by Harriet Martineau, Charles Dickens recognized this tension as both an epistemological and aesthetic problem. Although he shared Martineau's interest in bringing the discoveries of social science to the general public, which he sought to do through his journal *Household Words*, as a novelist Dickens favored metonymic and associative modes of world-building over the particular empirical descriptions which Martineau used to point back to general social principles. Dickens indeed mistrusted excessive investment in facts in sociological or literary representation. He feared that a positivist emphasis on empiricism might ultimately lead away from the task of synthesis and toward a fixation on isolated facts for their own sake, an outcome that he explored most starkly in *Hard Times* (1854), where worship of facts replaces all affective and moral values, as well as in *Bleak House* (1853), where overinvestment in self-contained facts results in a devastating fragmentation of explanatory narrative. Dickens argues that we cannot expect facts to speak for themselves. Rather than pointing back to the narrative of unfolding causal law, facts in Dickens too often point to their own representative failure as the people who encounter them are left unable to synthesize them into a larger worldview. In addition to raising concerns about positivist epistemology, Dickens's critique calls into question realist fiction's ability to represent a society through empirical description.

I Representation and the Factory Controversy

A bitter public dispute between Dickens and Martineau over factory safety regulation illustrates their different approaches to this problem of inductive representation. The quarrel was

occasioned by four editorial articles that appeared in Dickens's journal *Household Words* between April and November 1855 addressing an ongoing legal dispute over the Factory Acts. Lord Palmerston threatened to sue some factory owners for safety arrangements that they purportedly believed to be in compliance with, and he believed to be in violation of, the Factory Act of 1844 requiring factory owners to fence off mill gearing to prevent worker injuries. The debate hinged on the necessity of fencing off shafts that were more than seven feet off the ground, and thus, it was assumed, already out of the way of workers' movements. The Factory Occupiers argued that the suspended fencing required would pose more of a safety hazard than the shafts themselves, and that such an interpretation of the law represented excessive intrusion by Parliament into the running of their factories. The *Household Words* editorials took the other side of the question, dwelling on the dangers of factory labor, the number of injuries and deaths that could have been prevented by better safety precautions, and the inhumanity of weighing such affliction against the company ledger.

It may not be to Martineau's credit that she should have immediately and aggressively sided with factory owners in this debate, but it is in keeping with her well established track record of advocacy for *laissez-faire* economic policy. Her vehement response took Dickens to task not only for the position espoused in the editorials, but also for gross exaggeration of the facts of the case. She suggested that fiction writers should not write about issues of political economy if they could not do so evenhandedly. His response in *Household Words* assumed a tone of compassionate embarrassment at Martineau's outburst, vindicating his statistical information, and emphatically

restating his original argument for full safety measures. She called Dickens a “humanity monger.”⁵⁵ In a private letter, he called her article a “vomit of conceit.”⁵⁶

Martineau’s dispute with Dickens cannot be fully understood independently of the context of his novels, especially those of the several years prior. Among the epithets that Martineau applied to Dickens in “The Factory Law Controversy,” she emphasized few so much as that of “Mrs. Jellyby;” while in his response “Our Wicked Misstatements” he implied that he had found in her a real life Bounderby. The unduly personal tone that Martineau took in her essay may be explained in part as a reaction to Dickens’s *Hard Times*, published just the year before, which she might reasonably have interpreted as a “personal” attack on theorists and popularizers of political economy. She may have seen an unflattering portrait of herself in “Body number three,” who “wrote leaden little books for... these unlucky infants... showing how the good grown-up baby invariably got to the Savings-bank, and the bad grown-up baby invariably got transported.”⁵⁷ More broadly, the novel as a whole seems determined to make the question of the value of political economy and of social scientific education into a personal question, insisting on applying the methods and perspectives used in political economy to all areas of intimate life and ethical value. Martineau cites “his Tale of ‘Hard Times’” as a sufficient example of “Mr. Dickens’s proved failure in the department of instruction on which he spontaneously entered”:

“[T]he plea of those who would plead for Charles Dickens to the last possible moment is that ‘Hard Times’ is fiction. A more effectual security against its doing mischief is that the Tale, in its characters, conversations, and incidents, is so unlike life, -- so unlike Lancashire

⁵⁵ Harriet Martineau, *The Factory Controversy: A Warning against Meddling Legislation* (Manchester: Aireland & Co, 1855).

⁵⁶ Kenneth J. Fielding and Anne Smith, ‘Hard Times and the Factory Controversy: Dickens vs. Harriet Martineau’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 24.4 (1970), 404–27.

⁵⁷ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times, for These Times*, 1854. Pp. 41-42.

or English life – that it is deprived of its influence. Master and man are as unlike life in England, at present, as Ogre and Tom Thumb: and the result of the choice of subject is simply, that the charm of an ideal creation is foregone, while nothing is gained in its stead.”⁵⁸

Independently of personal motives, Martineau raises a genuine aesthetic and didactic concern here. Obviously, her problem with *Hard Times* is not that it offers social critique through fiction. As she writes in the “Factory Controversy” pamphlet, “There is nothing like a true story, fully told, for illustrating truths of a moral or political class.”⁵⁹ Fictionality is neither a “security against its doing mischief,” nor a barrier against a text’s doing good: it is quite the opposite for Martineau, as we have seen. Rather, Martineau does not understand how Dickens’s fiction can be considered as representative of the social realities of “life in England, at present.” Her own commitment to realism in fiction stems from her firm belief that universal economic principle is made manifest in particular people, events, and experiences. Dickens’s “master and man,” who are more like “Ogre and Tom Thumb” than like their real-life counterparts in real Lancashire factories, do not stand in the indexical relationship to social law that shapes Martineau’s own characters.

A less doctrinaire social realist than Martineau might well question the didactic value of a social critique that functions through caricature and exaggeration rather than through an accurate presentation of the people and circumstances that are the objects of the critique. Martineau’s criticism of both *Hard Times* and *Household Words* reflects in large part an inability to reconcile her own didactic and aesthetic attitudes with Dickens’s project, in *Household Words* but also more broadly, of producing writing that could serve as an “agency of popular instruction and social

⁵⁸ Martineau, *The Factory Controversy*. P. 36.

⁵⁹ Martineau, *The Factory Controversy*. P. 7.

reform.”⁶⁰ Dickens sets out to represent the present state of society through his characters, but eschews the clear, indexical relationship between character and social necessity, effect and cause, that Martineau sees as the chief didactic benefit of narrative fiction.

The contrast between Martineau’s direct and Dickens’s oblique referentiality comes to the forefront in their dispute over their wildly different representations of a single statistic. Martineau (verifying the calculations on the spot for her readers) upholds the Factory Owners’ statistic that between 11 and 12 workers are killed annually by accidents involving the mill shaft in question. Dickens gives the number 2000 as his estimate. Martineau takes him to task for following an “exaggeration” of such “magnitude” with a moral indictment of the factory occupiers for their heartlessness in offering their own set of figures.⁶¹

Dickens’s “2000” number, like his fairytale “master and man,” does not directly represent the phenomenon in question. Dickens argues that his statistic, in its own way, is as true as Martineau’s carefully calculated percentage. “By our figures we abide,” he writes.⁶² “We said, in the passage above cited, that the deadly shafts ‘mangled or murdered’ so many persons a-year,” whereas Martineau’s statistic omits the number of people injured but not killed, limiting the number to “only the killed, and not all those: only a selection from them of the persons *actually killed on shafts*; advantage being taken of the use of the phrase, deadly shafts, to represent machinery in unfenced mills.”⁶³ Martineau’s percentage is a strictly accurate representation of the

⁶⁰ Martineau, *The Factory Controversy*. P. 36.

⁶¹ Martineau, *The Factory Controversy*. P. 37.

⁶² Charles Dickens, ‘Our Wicked Mis-Statements.’, *Household Words / Conducted by Charles Dickens*, 13.304 (1856), 13–19. P. 16.

⁶³ Dickens, ‘Our Wicked Mis-Statements.’ P. 16.

phenomenon it is meant to represent, deaths by factory shaft accidents. Yet Dickens's indignant tone here implies that by limiting herself to an accurate, indexical representation of these accidents, Martineau actually does violence to the truth. In her criticism of his essays, she has "taken advantage of" his "use of the phrase, deadly shafts, to represent machinery in unfenced mills": that is, she has mistaken his metonymic use of mill shafts for a literal reference to them:

The whole controversy is about obedience to this law, and the consequences of resistance to it. The most horrible and fatal accidents are those connected to the shafts; the unfenced shafts are the essential type of the whole question, and the fencing of them implies necessarily general consent to obey the law. For this reason we have, no doubt, in common with other people, frequently represented by such a phrase as unfenced shafts, the whole fact of resistance to the law.⁶⁴

Dickens defends his interpretation of what the mill shafts represent by appealing to common sense. (We will see similar appeals in Mill's writings on social science. In both contexts, the move serves as a useful shorthand for the author's alignment with individual subjectivity rather than an impersonal, scientific perspective.) For Dickens, it is Martineau's strictly empirical representation of the mill deaths which is alien and disorienting. The matter-of-factly stated sequence of connections in the second sentence above elucidates what Dickens presents as an intuitively graspable metonymic relationship between the shafts and the larger factory question. Dickens's indignation at what he calls Martineau's "sleight of hand" arises from his investment in a more subjective, individual-scaled perspective that connects ideas metonymically rather than mathematically or inductively. From his standpoint, Martineau's empiricism, and her use of statistics in defense of the factory occupiers, does not clarify but fractures and obfuscates the problem's relationship to any broader social narrative.

⁶⁴ Dickens, 'Our Wicked Mis-Statements.' P. 16.

As the statistician Stephen Stigler observes, one of the most radical innovations of the rise of statistics in the nineteenth century was the idea that “you can actually gain information by throwing information away” through aggregation and averaging. In his example, a scientist might disregard the different processes by which various data points were obtained in order to be able to combine the data points into an average.⁶⁵ The statistical process removes proximate connections in order to make farther-ranging ones possible. The workers maimed but not killed on the shafts, as well as those killed or maimed on other factory machines, must be removed from the picture before Martineau can arrive at an accurate statistic suitable for broader comparison. These mid-level connections have to be factored out of the picture to enable higher-level connections (e.g., a comparison of the 3.2 percent statistic with annual deaths in another line of work). Dickens objects to this severing of one piece of empirical evidence from other closely related ones in the service of assimilation into a much larger-scale social picture. It is a form of representation that favors obscure connections, between the individual data point and the social law, over graspable ones on a middle scale.

Dickens’s preference for metonymic over inductive representation also accounts for what Martineau described as Dickens’s strangely “ironical” tone, especially in his treatment of the deaths and disasters that were the primary evidence in what one might reasonably have expected to be a sentimental argument. As it turns out, Martineau, in her capacity as defender of the factory occupiers, rebukes Dickens for his unserious treatment of the death and human misery that he seeks to lay at the factory occupiers’ door: “Such cases as these, set off with ironical descriptions of spilt brain, puddles of blood, crushed bones, and torn flesh, are exhibited as spectacles for which

⁶⁵ Stephen M. Stigler, *The Seven Pillars of Statistical Wisdom* (Harvard University Press, 2016). Pp. 3-4.

the masters are answerable.”⁶⁶ We have seen Martineau’s own attitude of immense reverence and sorrow in the face of the destruction of the human organism. In this context, where we might expect something at least equally serious from the man caricatured by Anthony Trollope as “Mr. Popular Sentiment,” Dickens takes a tone neither solemn nor sentimental. Once again, Martineau’s sarcasm is perhaps closer to the mark than she fully understands. Gruesome deaths are, not quite “exhibited as spectacles for which the masters are answerable,” but rather, positioned as metonymic representations of the masters’ wickedness. For Martineau, as we saw, scenes of unnecessary violence and death were at once self-contained and presented as pointing to an ironic knowledge disparity on the broadest historical scale. Dickens, instead, operates on a middle ground of referential relation. Hence the strange levity of his tone in depicting worker deaths: they are not ultimately scenes describing the loss of a human life, but rather scenes representing a human evil which Dickens is perfectly justified in treating with a tone of bitter irony.

Like his “2000” number, these death scenes, for Dickens, always point back to the relationship between the workers and the masters. In them he depicts a form of social connection that nevertheless defies synthesis and conceptualization by typical scientific means. This particular positioning of statistics and empirical description as metonyms for a relationship may be the nonfictional analog of the technique in Dickens’s novels that J. Hillis Miller described as “pointing.” “His procedure [of indication] is ‘allegorical’ in the strict sense. It speaks of one thing by speaking of another [...] Everywhere in *Bleak House* the reader encounters examples of this technique of ‘pointing’ whereby one thing stands for another, is a sign for another, indicates another, can be understood only in terms of another, or named only by the name of another.”⁶⁷ In

⁶⁶ Martineau, *The Factory Controversy*. P. 44.

⁶⁷ J. Hillis Miller. P. 184.

the context of the factory controversy, Dickens's "procedure of indication" departs from the realm of allegory and emerges as a particular practice of social description operating somewhere between the level of individual experience and the level of mass behavior. Dickensian facts are neither *sui generis*, of inherent epistemological value in and of themselves, nor "illustrative" in the sense that Martineau favors of being almost a secular, scientific revelation, the empirical manifestation of the workings of some greater causal law. Facts in Dickens's treatment are inherently relational, but relational on a different level than that which Martineau's inductive representation offers. In his novels *Hard Times* (1854) and *Bleak House* (1853), Dickens stages the profound epistemological difficulty of trying to understand a society through induction from discrete empirical observations. Rather than helping to construct an overarching descriptive narrative, Dickens suggests, a focus on individual events and especially individual characters as self-contained, yet broadly representative, "social facts" produces a hopelessly fragmented social narrative. In a turn that aligns him with the social theory of John Stuart Mill and against, of course, the empiricist social realism of Harriet Martineau, Dickens formalizes this problem in his own novels through an emphasis on individual perception that allows him to represent the violence done to the individual's understanding of his world by an emphasis on particular facts that relegates synthesis to an afterthought. Dickens's critique of the inductive gap in empiricist representation opens up the problem of the relationship between social fact and novelistic character that I will pursue in the subsequent chapters of this project: causal narrative becomes increasingly fragmentary and unknowable, as Dickens represents it here, while particular character is represented with the self-containment of an established fact, as representing the *idea* of social causality.

II Dead-End Empiricism in *Hard Times*

In his 1854 novel *Hard Times*, Dickens depicts the end result of a misplaced faith in our ability to draw broad conclusions from empirical facts: a stunted epistemology in which independent facts are the beginning and end of knowledge, and the individual's ability to synthesize information through metonym or affective association is vitiated. Coketown, the fictional factory town that Martineau identifies as entirely unlike a real Lancashire town, is marked by the inordinately high value its residents place on "facts." This commitment to facticity is cited as the reason for a number of practices on which the idea of fact has no obvious bearing, such as whether children are allowed to go to the circus and whether horses are appropriate subjects for wallpaper. As Martha C. Nussbaum writes, "What makes this norm appear so odd to the reader of the novel is that it is taken seriously all the way down, so to speak: understood[...] as a commitment that determines the whole content of one's personal and social life." Nussbaum argues that instead of being a rhetorical misfire, this almost grotesque exaggeration of the role of the fact in a society is a pointed satirical move:

since [...] if it is really a norm, it seems fair to ask people to abide by it consistently, it seems perfectly fair to examine it in this way, asking what people who really and thoroughly saw the world in the way this norm recommends would be like, and whether such a vision does really seem to be a complete one.⁶⁸

Coketown's adherence to "facts," even in contexts where reference to facticity doesn't obviously make sense, represents a quasi-religious normative discipline. Mr. Gradgrind may not actually understand, any more than we do, why questions of aesthetics such as wallpaper choice must be settled with reference to "facts." What Dickens caricatures here is thus the idea of taking the value of "facts" on faith, accepting that they will help you know better and live better in the world,

⁶⁸ Martha C. Nussbaum, 'The Literary Imagination in Public Life', *New Literary History*, 22.4 (1991), 877-910. P. 881.

without quite understanding what it is that they will help you know. Far more than the throwaway remark about “leaden little books” written by Body Number Three, this is Dickens’s most incisive critique, not only of Martineau’s popularizing project, but also more broadly of empirical representation of social principles either in fiction or in sociology.

Mary Poovey observes that the 1830s and 40s saw the rise of a pro-statistics rhetoric that insisted on the “incontrovertible” authority of “facts” while “downplay[ing] the methodological problem of moving from whatever numbers were collected to general principles.”⁶⁹ Mr. Gradgrind and the other residents of Coketown live out this problem of induction, taking facticity as the ultimate authority without being able to give a coherent account of the epistemological end served by this practice. The famous definition of a horse scene in Chapter Two provides an excellent parody of this blind faith in the inductive process: after hearing a schoolmate list off a set of disparate and abstruse biological characteristics and Latinate terms for a horse, Sissy Jupe is told, now “you know what a horse is.”⁷⁰ But the statement is clearly an afterthought; it is young Bitzer’s performance of listing an overwhelming number of disparate horse-related facts that is the point of the exercise. Quoting Bitzer’s list, Dickens writes, “Thus (and much more) Bitzer.” The length of Bitzer’s list then, is arbitrary, and the point of the exercise is not to arrive at any synthesis but simply to produce as many facts as possible.

⁶⁹ Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1998). P. 314.

⁷⁰ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, A Norton Critical Edition, 3rd ed. / edited by Fred Kaplan, Sylvère Monod. (New York: WWNorton & Co, 2001). P. 8.

As Gradgrind announces in the previous chapter, “In this life, we want nothing but Facts!”⁷¹ This bald statement of Dickens’s thesis for the novel reveals a situation in which a phenomenon, the “fact,” that was originally intended to be a means to a broader epistemological end, instead comes to be perceived as a good in its own right. Thomas Gradgrind and his ilk believe in facts as, essentially, a substitute for, rather than a means to, a synthetic world-picture. The Coketown ethos represents Dickens’s *reductio ad absurdum* of the mystifyingly large gap between empirical fact and general causal law. The representation of empirical fact becomes a good in itself because we trust that it will, eventually, somehow, contribute to the formation of general principles – just as Martineau trusted that all knowledge production would eventually tend toward the understanding necessary for social progress. This problem of induction calls into question not only the value of facts and statistics, but also the realist novel’s aesthetic project of representing social principles through “empirical” character description.

The public buildings in Coketown serve as monuments to this pointless commitment to “facticity.” In an architectural context, this means featureless buildings that are gratuitously uniform. “All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike[....]The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction.”⁷² These buildings have been constructed to be interchangeable facts in the system of Coketown. Not only do they not bear the marks of their specific function, they are, paradoxically, so similar in appearance as to bear no visual marks of relation to each other. Rather than resembling of each other in ways that suggest their functional connection, the buildings are not distinct enough to refer

⁷¹ Dickens, *Hard Times*. P. 5.

⁷² Dickens, *Hard Times*. P. 21.

to anything. Their assimilation to a uniform state makes it more confusing to navigate the town, because normal symbolic associations are removed from the picture. They collectively evoke an ethos of uniformity rather than the possibility of specific forms of social connectedness. The buildings lose any metonymic or allegorical function because they're not distinctive enough to represent anything. Like Bitzer's barrage of horse facts, they end up representing the distant possibility, but not the actuality, of meaningful descriptive synthesis. A society this uniform precludes the kind of referential relationships through which Dickens represents the structure of a society in his fiction.

Instead, the buildings' uniformity affords the descriptively empty synthesis of statistical assimilation, the kind that Martineau modeled with her "comparative" rather than "positive" statistic: the uniform objects can be placed in mathematical relation to each other, just as they can be placed into mathematical relation to any other objects. But for Dickens, uniformity leads to a loss of meaning on a par with the treatment of facts as epistemological dead ends. As the latter puts aside all pursuit of broader connection, the former eliminates the possibility of subjective relationship in favor of statistical assimilation. A mathematical relationship allows for comparison (viz. Martineau's 3.2 percent statistic) and other forms of calculation, and, more importantly, evokes the possibility of arriving at a general principle through induction. But it eliminates the possibility of a particular object's serving in its own right as metonymic or representative or evocative neighbor of something else: one object cannot refer to another because for the purposes of the calculation they have become interchangeable. Placing objects into an assimilable form gestures toward the possibility of descriptive generalization, but the prospect of structures of particular relations is lost.

When Mr. Gradgrind expresses the misery he feels over Tom's having robbed the bank, Tom Gradgrind responds by converting himself to a mere number: "'I don't see why,' grumbled the son. 'So many people are employed in situations of trust; so many people, out of so many, will be dishonest. [...] You have comforted others with such things, father. Comfort yourself!'"⁷³ In keeping with his usual carelessness, he lets the general concept of the mass of men, measured statistically – “so many people, out of so many” – stand in for specific numbers. He apparently understands himself to be just another of these “so many people,” no better or worse than any other. Such an understanding of criminal behavior should dissolve any sense of particular relationship to any of the “so many people” who are dishonest, and Mr. Gradgrind should be comforted by being able to imagine his son as interchangeable with the other anonymous criminals who make up a certain percentage of society. Ironically offered as comfort, Tom's comment does not even provide an explanation for his behavior. He has representatively repackaged his crime, without moving from it to any general causal law. Instead of not knowing why Tom stole from the bank, we now don't know why “so many people, out of so many” cheat their employers.

In this umpteenth anagnorisis of Mr. Gradgrind, Tom's injunction to him to “comfort himself” by applying the same sort of calculation to his son that he has many times to people less closely related to him is of course an extra twist of irony. The suggestion that his son is statistically indistinguishable from any number of other common criminals offers a certain kind of formula for representing the situation, but it offers neither a large-scale causal explanation nor, on a middle scale, any affective experience of “comfort.”

⁷³ Dickens, *Hard Times*. Pp. 211-212.

Indeed, we get closest to large- and middle-scale causal description in *Hard Times* not through any process of scientific induction, but rather via the humanistic, subjective perspective of Dickens's narrator, who registers characters' affects and their reactions to each other in a way that would not be permitted under Gradgrind's factual regimen. In a formal move that will have its nonfictional echo in John Stuart Mill's social thought, Dickens optimistically frames his tale through an abstracted subject who is nevertheless capable of making affective and metonymic, as well as rational, connections.

Audrey Jaffe argues that Dickens develops his narrators through contrast with the more particular, defined characters who populate his novels. "The narrator remains indeterminate, except from the constructedness of character.... It is thus essential to recognize that character in the nineteenth-century novel is above all a material construct."⁷⁴ In this account, Dickens's narrator is given implicit form by contrast with the concrete structure of the novel's characters. Jaffe situates this within a broader Dickensian pattern in which entities representatively "point" to their own negation. The fact-centered epistemologies of the characters "point" by contrast to the more holistic world-picture afforded by the narrator's abstracted subjectivity.

The severe limitation of the scientific empiricism that is the subject of *Hard Times* allows Dickens to construct by contrast a narrator who combines subjectivity and omniscience. Since affective and metonymic ways of knowing are otherwise, as it were, banned from the novel, they come to be located in the open-endedness of the narrator himself, like the pain of Mrs. Gradgrind that is located "somewhere in the room," though she can't conceive of it as being contained within

⁷⁴ Audrey Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (University of California Press Berkeley, 1991). Pp. 13-14.

her in particular.⁷⁵ Rather than serving to emphasize the disparity between “objective” and individual knowledge, as is often the function of the third-person omniscient narrator, the narrator of *Hard Times* affords a contrast between the pointless factual knowledge of his characters and his own humanistic model of ethical and aesthetic judgment. As he writes of the factory and its hands, “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,... at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants.”⁷⁶ Instead of representing the limits of individual knowledge, this omniscient narrator represents the unbridgeable gaps in the model of empirical induction. While this authoritative viewpoint launches a pointed critique of the empirical methodology of the social sciences, *Bleak House* provides a more poignant account of the inductive gap from the standpoint of bewildered individuals.

III. Facts and Fragmentation in *Bleak House*

If *Hard Times* represents Dickens’s theoretical argument for the epistemological break created by excessive investment in facts, *Bleak House*, published a year earlier in 1853, reflects that argument in its narrative structure. Above we’ve discussed epistemology in terms of large-scale principles, small-scale empiricism, and a middle ground of observation and connection at the level of individual consciousness. Sociological induction is meant to take us from the small, local observation to large-scale description, but Dickens’s argument is that instead this facts-driven ethos wards off all connection in favor of a concatenation of fragmentary descriptions. In *Hard Times*, Dickens sharpens this critique by assigning a factual empiricism to the characters and a

⁷⁵ Dickens, *Hard Times*. P. 151.

⁷⁶ Dickens, *Hard Times*. P. 56.

richer subjective, affective, aesthetic perspective to the novel's omniscient narrator. In *Bleak House*, Dickens more pointedly, through the use of a first-person narrator, assigns the subjective narration to that middle sphere of humanistic synthesis that lies outside the domain of social scientific epistemology. This move is in keeping with *Bleak House*'s status as the formal representation of the epistemological problems that Dickens laid out as a thought experiment in *Hard Times*.

Bleak House's bivocal plot, half narrated by a third-person narrator and half in the first-person voice of one of the novel's protagonists, might seem at first glance to neatly constitute omniscience by placing it into direct contrast with the aggressively personal perspective of Esther Summerson, the subjective narrator. Yet as Jaffe points out, to divide the task of narration between one omniscient and one non-omniscient perspective is to create a paradox:

The double narrative, constituting as it does a boundary omniscience cannot cross, raises a problem for the very notion of omniscience.[...] The idea of omniscience as all-knowing is thus undermined by Esther's narrative, which, as supplement, to use Derrida's term, reveals a lack in what is supposed to be complete.⁷⁷

Thus, as in *Hard Times*, the large-scale perspective that aspires to universality of description is characterized by its failure to assimilate personal experience to its picture of social life. Replicating the "factual" dispensation of an empirical knowledge separate from affectively situated ways of knowing that Dickens critiqued in *Hard Times*, *Bleak House* constitutes a disjointed society through two different domains of experience which, like the omniscient and first person narration, fracture each other by their juxtaposition.

⁷⁷ Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience*. Pp. 128-129.

In this world, even for individual subjects, the problem of synthesis becomes overwhelmingly difficult. The middle range of humanistic synthesis is pushed out of experience and practices of knowledge devolve into different, fragmentary forms of empiricism. Characters either try to synthesize a world they can't possibly understand, or give up on synthesizing anything.

The novel's first-person narrator, Esther, makes the latter choice. She defines her own narrative realm so thoroughly in opposition to the ideas of information and knowledge that at times she seems almost like an inverse Gradgrind. Questions and mysteries are ignored in favor of affective and interpersonal relationships in the domestic sphere. Esther deliberately establishes this purview soon after her arrival at Bleak House in a pointed exchange with Mr. Jarndyce after he asks whether she "wish[es] to ask [him] anything" about her origins:

"Guardian," said I, venturing to put my hand, which was suddenly colder than I could have wished, in his, "nothing! I am quite sure that if there were anything I ought to know, or had any need to know, I should not have to ask you to tell it to me. If my whole reliance and confidence were not placed in you, I must have a hard heart indeed. I have nothing to ask you; nothing in the world."

He drew my hand through his arm, and we went away to look for Ada. From that hour I felt quite easy with him, quite unreserved, quite content to know no more, quite happy.⁷⁸

In this scene, Esther very deliberately transmutes an opportunity for epistemological engagement into something closer to a love test. From the moment that she puts her hand into his, their interaction is no longer about the hypothetical information Jarndyce might have to share with her, but rather about the relationship between them as expressed through their attitudes to said information. Esther believes that it is in the nature of Jarndyce's kind way of caring for her to volunteer any information that he thinks she needs to know; she in turn is more invested in

⁷⁸ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, 2002 Modern Library paperback ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2002). P. 99.

demonstrating this total “reliance and confidence” in her “Guardian” than in learning what he might have to tell her about her own origins. Knowledge of her origins and affirmation of her personal relationship with Mr. Jarndyce are, in this account, two opposite options. By rejecting the knowledge that he offers her, she invites and affirms the negative that it represents, a warm relationship between her and Jarndyce.

The two narrators divide *Bleak House* into an affective and an “objective,” institutional narrative of experience. What is remarkable, though, is that in different ways, both realms of experience rest on the same assumptions that characterized knowledge in *Hard Times*; namely, that facts and information are self-contained phenomena and epistemological dead ends. In that sense, the above interaction reflects the logical conclusion the Gradgrindian ethos: if the value of factual knowledge lies simply in its status as fact, rather than in its capacity to reflect a broader meaning, then it makes as much sense to reject such knowledge outright as it does to valorize it. Esther chooses to reject any investment in factual knowledge, a decision that often makes her appear wiser than the other characters who struggle to use the meager facts at their disposal to situate themselves in a vast, unknowable world. She successfully avoids this kind of bewilderment – so systematically, perhaps, because the mystery of her provenance would make a fruitless investment in facts even more unbearable for her than it is for the novel’s other characters.

The negation of Esther’s personal narrative – or, conversely, the scientific narrative mode negated by her – is the third-person omniscient narrative, which seems to offer a comprehensive vision of the novel’s various settings. Yet, as Jaffe observes, the existence of Esther’s narrative calls into question the capacity of the omniscient, scientific narrator to provide a total representation of the cause-and-effect narrative that unfolds over the course of the novel. Dickens heightens this sense of paradoxically fragmentary omniscience by seeming to adopt a specifically

delimited set of perspectives. Dickens focalizes his third-person narrative through various abstracted ideas, from the collective consciousness of Chancery to mists of Tom All-Along's to "the Fashionable Intelligence." These impersonal but strictly delimited perspectives resonate with Jaffe's description of statistical science as an inspiration for omniscient narration, "producing vast quantities of information attributable to impersonal agencies rather than to individuals. 'Semi-omniscience,' however, more accurately describes these knowledge-producing bodies, which can never succeed in fully capturing the subjects they set out to describe."⁷⁹ Dickens's semi-omniscient narrator in *Bleak House* might be expected to present a total representation of the novel's world. But instead, it operates from the high-level standpoint that this implies without being able to offer anything but a fractured narrative.

Dickens's "semi-omniscient narrator" indeed becomes marked by fragmentation, although in a different way from the deliberate limitation by which Esther Summerson disavows the inquisitive and speculative parts of her own character. While Esther rejects the seeming pointlessness of self-contained factual knowledge, Dickens's omniscient narrator, like the schoolboy Bitzer in *Hard Times*, seems to valorize the authoritative proliferation of such facts over the attempt to synthesize them into a general narrative. To this end, the "omniscient" narrator is occasionally broken up into different, as it were, disciplinary divisions – i.e., the legal world of Chancery, the partisan career politicians who gather round Sir Leicester Dedlock's dinner table, and the "fashionable intelligence" that occasionally provides a detached account of Lady Dedlock's movements:

My Lady Dedlock has returned to her house in town for a few days previous to her departure for Paris, where her ladyship intends to stay some weeks; after which her movements are uncertain. The fashionable intelligence says so, for the comfort of the

⁷⁹ Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience*. P. 15.

Parisians, and it knows all fashionable things. To know things otherwise, were to be unfashionable. ...

The pictures of the Dedlocks past and gone have seemed to vanish into the damp walls in mere lowness of spirits.... And when they will next come forth again, the fashionable intelligence – which, like the fiend, is omniscient of the past and present, but not the future – cannot undertake to say.⁸⁰

The fashionable intelligence is at once “omniscient” and limited. Its function is to “know all things” fashionable, but not to synthesize the things it knows into any general principles that might provide insight into the future. It simply knows things for the sake of knowing them. As in *Hard Times*, the authority of this knowledge is reinforced by its narrowly delimited sphere. “To know things” beyond the realm of the world of fashion would render the fashionable intelligence “unfashionable,” and its knowledge therefore illegitimate. Even the (multiple) voices of Dickens’s factual, “objective” omniscient narrator have as narrow a conception of their epistemological purviews as Esther Summerson has of hers. Whether rejecting or affirming the inherent value of factual knowledge for its own sake, both narrators profoundly limit their own accounts of the world by defining themselves in relation to facticity.

Like Thomas Gradgrind, these “semi-omniscient” narrators limit themselves to a narrow idea of empirical representation in the service of a hypothetical “omniscience” that consists of a Fiendish ability to know all things (in one’s field of vision) without being able to induce general descriptive (in the case of the fashionable intelligence, predictive) principles from this knowledge. In replicating this factual ethos, these semi-omniscient narrators likewise replicate the quasi-statistical conversion of objects, experience, and people into an assimilation and interchangeability that yet is empty of purpose. The Dedlock establishments boast multiple and seemingly

⁸⁰ Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 10.

interchangeable “Mercuries” at Chesney Wold and in town; we are only half aware that in referring to “Mercury” Dickens does not necessarily reference the identical person, but rather, quite literally, the office of messenger, actually occupied by multiple different individuals who have been meticulously dressed and liveried to be absolutely indistinguishable, whose appearance is literally uniform.

In the High Court of Chancery, the minor characters are reduced even further, to common nouns that reference their function synecdochally. These characters occur only in the context of the court and only all together – for each reference to them, Dickens repeats the formulation “maces, bags, and purses” in the same order. They appear as part of the Chancery set-piece in Chapter I: “The Chancellor rises; the bar rises; the prisoner is brought forward in a hurry; the man from Shropshire cries, ‘My lord!’ Maces, bags, and purses, indignantly proclaim silence, and frown at the man from Shropshire.”⁸¹ Dickens’s clipped, cumulative syntax here creates a sense of inevitability. Along with the detached tone of the third-person narration, this conveys a strong sense that we are witnessing a repetition, rather than an original event; this scene has played out a hundred times before, and will play out a hundred times again, with innumerable different individuals standing in as “maces, bags, and purses,” and thus becoming subsumed into the inevitabilities of this much larger system.

The most jarring moment of such assimilation, however, unfolds as a process over the course of the novel, across the domestic first-person and institutional third-person narratives. Richard Carstone is *Bleak House*’s naïve analog to Tom Gradgrind: where Tom describes himself as assimilating to a statistical figure, Richard unknowingly undergoes such an assimilation. Like

⁸¹ Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 8.

Tom, Richard is restless and ungrateful, looking for windfalls rather than committing to an ethos of hard work. Yet ironically, the much more debauched Tom is in an important sense more successful in his own epistemological world than Richard in his; not only because he lives long enough to beg forgiveness from his long-suffering sister, but, more importantly, because he demonstrates a truer understanding of the epistemological mode in which his world operates. Both Richard and Tom are invested in the pursuit of money and worldly goods; and in their pursuit thereof, both, with various degrees of willingness and various degrees of self-awareness, identify themselves with the faceless numbers of men who have come before them. Tom, as we have seen, understands himself as an interchangeable piece of a statistic, but Richard does not see that the same fate awaits him.

The signal failure of Richard's *Bildungs*-plot unavoidably raises the question of what manner of large-scale understanding of how the world works is accessible to the individual in this fractured world of seemingly unconnected facts. Richard's story, beginning as it does in the domestic confines of Bleak House, unfolds within Esther's first-person narrative. Yet, as it becomes more and more apparent that he will not have a successful *Bildungs*-plot, Dickens increasingly points towards Richard's subsumption into the impersonal world of the third-person omniscient narrative, in a manner similar to that in which Tom nonchalantly sees himself being subsumed into the percentage of Britons who become criminals. Although Richard's untimely death is affectingly presented through Esther's eyes, the true culmination of his engagement with Jarndyce and Jarndyce comes hundreds of pages earlier when Dickens shifts his story and his fate into the third-person objective register of a Chancery-focused semi-omniscient narrator.

Throughout her narrative, Esther (along with Mr Jarndyce) assesses Richard's character and state of mind. Together, she and Jarndyce attribute this unfortunate "indecision of character,"

of course, to his having been born into that “heap of uncertainty” Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Mr Jarndyce muses,

that Chancery, among its other sins, is responsible for some of it, I can plainly see. It has engendered or confirmed in him a habit of putting off – and trusting to this, that, and the other chance, without knowing what chance – and dismissing everything as unsettled, uncertain, and confused.⁸²

His upbringing as a ward in Jarndyce and Jarndyce has inspired in Richard a worldview strikingly similar to the one Dickens himself presents. He recognizes that the world is so uncertain and fragmented that he cannot approach it systematically. But because of the uncertainty of his own expectations, he “dismisses everything as unsettled, uncertain, and confused,” and puts his trust in “chance.” On the face of it, this seems like a relatively sensible attitude, given what we see of the hopelessness of characters’ attempts to know what they are about as the novel’s plot unfolds. But, as the proliferating language of uncertainty in Jarndyce’s description of Richard suggests, Richard’s problem is one of uncertainty in more ways than one.

On one level, the unknowable “chance” to which Mr. Jarndyce refers is the chance that Richard and Ada will be discovered to be the rightful heirs to the Jarndyce will. But on a deeper level, the “chance” in which Richard repeatedly invests his health and hope is the chance that through careful study of the minute details of Jarndyce and Jarndyce he will be able to arrive at a total view of the case, including its solution. This conviction that he can empower himself as a suitor by taking in the details of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is the overpowering motive that undermines all of his promising career choices. Even his brief tenure at Kenge and Carboy, which he sees as

⁸² Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 165.

the perfect opportunity to “have [his] eye on” Jarndyce and Jarndyce, ends as a function of his quixotic attempt to “master” every document in the case.⁸³

This ethos culminates, tragically, in Richard’s relationship with Mr. Vholes, the exploitative lawyer who entices Richard to give up his other interests in order to spend all his time and money monitoring his case or watching Mr. Vholes monitor his case. In a chapter titled “Attorney and Client,” Dickens presents the consequences of Richard’s problem of induction, giving Richard his place within the third-person narrative as a part of one of the statistics that point back to the widespread misery inflicted the legal system. In the detached voice of institutional description, Richard is no longer introduced by name, but as “the client,” and the third-person narrator shifts between this appellation and his name for the rest of the chapter, as though Richard were on the brink of losing himself and becoming another one of many interchangeable suitors.⁸⁴ Dickens captures this sense of identity flickering between individual and statistic in a poignant scene of Richard leaving Mr Vholes’s office:

On many such loungers have the speckled shadows of those trees often fallen; on the like bent head, the bitten nail, the lowering eye, the lingering step, the purposeless and dreamy air, the good consuming and consumed, the life turned sour. This lounge is not shabby yet but that may come. Chancery, which knows no wisdom but in Precedent, is very rich in such Precedents; and why should one be different from ten thousand?

... Two pairs of eyes not unused to such people look after him, as, biting his nails and brooding, he crosses the square, and is swallowed up by the shadow of the southern gateway.⁸⁵

⁸³ Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 231.

⁸⁴ Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 545.

⁸⁵ Dickens, *Bleak House*. Pp. 545-546.

Just as Richard is “swallowed up by the shadow” of the law buildings, Dickens presents him on the brink of being swallowed up by the shadow of the many failed suitors who have come before him – an ominous mass of “soured” lives which has been subsumed into the institution of Chancery as a “Precedent.” Richard’s body is picked apart into postures and tics that render him as indistinguishable from the other suitors as the Coketown infirmary is from the jail; “the bent head, the bitten nail, the lowering eye,” etc. combine to make up, not necessarily Richard Carstone, but any one of the “ten thousand” “such people.” Richard’s naive belief that learning all of the facts of the case will serve his “interests” is overshadowed by this reminder that even assimilation into Chancery’s epistemology is not a productive synthesis, but, for the “ten thousand” disappointed suitors as well as for the “maces, bags, and purses,” simply another kind of fragmentation. Rather than mastering the proliferation of unsynthesizable facts of the case, Richard becomes one of them.

The dramatic center of Dickens’s critique of the British legal system, Jarndyce and Jarndyce is the novel’s biggest emblem of epistemological impasse – literally synonymous with an investigative process that will never bear fruit. The pinnacle of Bitzerism, Jarndyce and Jarndyce operates by a gross proliferation of information and documents that do not shed any light on the broad outlines of the case. Ultimately, Richard’s epistemological optimism is his undoing; other characters learn to live in uneasy acceptance of their situation as part of a social puzzle that they can never hope to piece together. J. Hillis Miller writes that in *Bleak House* it is the task of the characters, as much as of the novel’s reader, to piece together the relations in which everyone stands to each other. “Each seeks his unrevealed place in the system of which he is a part. To find out how I am related to others will be to find out who I am, for I am defined by my connections, familial or legal.”⁸⁶ Over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that this system of relationships

⁸⁶ J. Hillis Miller. P. 185.

goes beyond preexisting familial or legal claims to other kinds of connection forged as the narrative develops.

The conscientious Mr. Snagsby, having doubtfully helped Mr. Bucket to locate Jo for purposes unknown, experiences the full psychological impact of his utter inability to put together the puzzle of which his own action has become a piece. When Mr. Tulkinghorn and Mr. Bucket enlist him to seek out Jo, Snagsby hesitates, out of a fear of how his actions will affect Jo that Mr. Bucket quickly divines. Bucket reassures Snagsby, “Don’t be afraid of hurting him; you an’t going to do that.”⁸⁷ This formulation captures the strangeness of *Bleak House*’s world of information collecting and Snagsby’s ambiguous part in it. Mr. Bucket can tell Mr. Snagsby what Mr. Snagsby will or won’t “do,” while Snagsby himself cannot calculate the ramifications of his action. Snagsby makes the best calculation he can with very limited information, but is haunted by his ignorance of the stakes of what he has done. His sense of having placed himself into new, unknown relationships with unknown people makes him feel precisely that he does not know, as Hillis Miller puts it, “who he is.” In the face of his wife’s unfounded suspicion, Snagsby “can’t say” whether he is innocent of Mr. Krook’s spontaneous combustion. “He has had something – he doesn’t know what – to do with so much in this connexion that is mysterious, that it is possible he may even be implicated, without knowing it, in the present transaction.”⁸⁸ In the knowledge economy of this novel, Snagsby’s inability “positively to deny” his position relative to particular events and particular people throws everything else into question.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 305.

⁸⁸ Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 452.

⁸⁹ Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 452.

In representing the narrative-shattering damage that this empiricist ethos does, Dickens ends up replicating it, creating isolated characters who must be understood independently of their knowable relationship to the broader narrative of the novel – and, more importantly, independently of any generalizable social knowledge. Like the *Household Words* article, his narrative separation of Esther’s consciousness suggests that the antidote to the major epistemological problem posed by the inductive gap is to focus on subjectivity rather than attempting to piece together a broader causal narrative. But such a narrowing of focus does not resolve the problem. In situations where we can’t understand character as a willed part of a narrative arc, we begin to read it as an isolated entity in its own right, precisely the kind of self-enclosed, *sui generis* fact that Gradgrind argued for – the fact that should point to something larger, but does not. Because it is impossible to understand Snagsby’s action in terms of deliberative decision making, we, like him, have to fall back on a narrower, static understanding of his character. (We know because of his defining characteristic of moral anxiety that he would not, indeed, go spontaneously combusting any person.) In this fragmented narrative situation, the factual ethos laid out in *Hard Times* inevitably extends to Dickens’s characters, many of whom are presented throughout the novel as static, self-enclosed “facts” in their own right. Like facts as understood by Gradgrind and Bitzer, they become epistemological dead ends, significant in their self-containment rather than in their knowable relation to a causal narrative either as agents or as products of a social process.

In this world, characters’ idiosyncrasies are neither accounted for through investigation nor corrected through character development, but simply accepted as unchangeable facts. To know how to maneuver through the interpersonal space of *Bleak House* is to know that Mr Jarndyce will run away if thanked, that Sir Leceister Dedlock is always susceptible to appeals to tradition, that Boythorn is not a dangerous madman but only expresses himself like one, that to consult Mr.

Bagnet is to consult his wife, ... the list could go on *ad infinitum*. Dickens of course is famous for the memorable peculiarities and tics of his minor characters that make them feel, as Alex Woloch has argued, less like well-rounded individuals with inner lives of their own than like figures who have been relegated to a small and static position within the novel.⁹⁰ The reader (and the other characters) comes to understand these characters, not by learning more about how they fit into this world, but rather by taking at face value that whatever strange tic they manifest is an unchanging part of their character. Like knowing what a horse is in *Hard Times*, knowing who a given character is in *Bleak House* means knowing what his particular idiosyncrasy is, without concerning oneself about what it means. Mr. Jarndyce's interaction with Dr. Woodcourt manifests the process by which one comes to "know" Mr. Krook. In response to Mr Jarndyce's concern that Krook is "deranged," Woodcourt offers an explanation that is in fact only description. Krook "was always more or less under the influence of raw gin," and "he was exceedingly distrustful, as ignorance usually was."⁹¹ What seems at first glance to be an explanation may perhaps be better expressed as a restatement of Krook's character on the authority of greater knowledge of him. Woodcourt's statements hint at the appalling social conditions that produce characters like Krook, but don't constitute a true explanation so much as a description of him. It boils down to: this is Krook, this is his mode of interaction, it means x but not y.

Similarly, we are sometimes told who a character is from the beginning, as Jarndyce lets his charges in on bombastic Boythorn's sweetness of heart. Jarndyce forewarns that "He is always

⁹⁰ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁹¹ Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 200.

in extremes, perpetually in the superlative degree.”⁹² Yet “as Mr Jarndyce sat enjoying the image of Boythorn, we observed the favorable omen that there was not the least indication of any change in the wind”⁹³ – a “knowing” reading of Jarndyce’s own idiosyncrasies that indicates his unalloyed appreciation of a person’s goodness. Again, this scene is not about understanding Boythorn on a deeper level (or even understanding on a basic level what is at the root of his running to extremes). Rather, Jarndyce’s wards now understand Boythorn. When they meet him they have a confirmation of Jarndyce’s description of him. On every subsequent encounter, Esther again remarks upon his rhetorical excesses, but as a confirmation of what she already knows. Even when we learn toward the novel’s end that Boythorn had once been betrothed to Esther’s aunt, it is presented as new information but not a new light on his character. Dickens’s minor characters, with their one or two peculiarities that once understood render them fully comprehensible, thus emerge as self-contained facts rather than narratively constituted selves.

Dickens’s critique of overzealous empiricism in *Household Words* and *Hard Times* is vindicated by the strange status of both narrative and character in *Bleak House*. Overinvestment in empiricism vitiates the causal narrative that our empirical observations are meant to represent. The truth that Dickens captures here, as in Mr. Jarndyce’s critique of Richard’s multiple uncertainties, is that this empiricism presupposes two distinct narratives: the descriptive causal narrative that represents a principle or a natural law of society; and the inductive narrative by which an empirical observation, or fact, is generalized into broader significance. To ignore the second narrative is to cut ourselves off from the first. Dickens gets around the aesthetic problem raised by his critique of the inductive gap by using his novels to represent the subjective experience of life in a hopelessly

⁹² Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 115.

⁹³ Dickens, *Bleak House*. P. 115.

fragmented and confusing world, rather than seeking to represent that world itself. But his argument and his aesthetic choices raise serious problems for the realist novel's project of social representation through character and narrative. If we can't assume that particular experiences or characters are representative of the workings of universal social law, must we take their characters – and our own – as products of contingency instead? Is the novel trying to represent through character a process that is fundamentally unknowable? Unmoored from an indexical relationship to general principles, character becomes a new kind of social problem for the novel.

Chapter Three

“Such Accidents are the Characteristics of Persons:” Representing Judgment in John Henry

Newman

Dickens’s novels captured the crucial narrative shift that arose from Martineau’s ethos of representing social laws through empirical examples. As both realist aesthetics and social science increasingly emphasized the value of empirical evidence as inherently representative of social phenomena, the specific link between such particular, “factual” evidence and universal social laws became obscured. Facts came to be presented as self-contained ends: no longer communicably representative of a clear or perceptible process, they instead stood as products of an unknowable and, paradoxically, unrepresentable causal narrative. Through his famously idiosyncratic minor characters, Dickens began to explore how such an attitude toward empirical, particular experience might come to shape our conception of character itself. Treating character as empirical social evidence, and empirical social evidence as an epistemological end in itself, inevitably raises the idea that our characters are fundamentally determined by social forces beyond our own control. For many (especially, as we’ll see in the next chapter, for John Stuart Mill), the possibility that individual character might be socially determined was psychologically disturbing, morally dangerous, or both. For the Catholic theologian John Henry Newman, on the other hand, this idea provided an unexpected framework for exploring the problem of judgment. By reformulating the phenomenon of private judgment in relation to the idea of predetermined character, Newman moves social determinism into the individual mind.

Newman devoted much of his oeuvre to the problem of how different people arrive at different conclusions from what seems to be the same starting point. As a priest and, for many years, a professor at Oxford, Newman was naturally interested in the arts of debate and persuasion.

Indeed, his writings make it clear that intellectual debate was as much a part of the atmosphere as oxygen during his time at Oxford. Throughout his life, Newman investigated problems of reason and judgment from a theological and philosophical standpoint. His *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870) represents his most explicit attempt to establish a new conceptual scaffolding for the slippery problem of judgment, but almost all of his work explores this problem in one way or another.

Like his autobiography the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1870), his 1848 *roman à clef* *Loss and Gain* sets out to tell the personal story that makes the question of judgment such a fraught and pressing one for Newman throughout his oeuvre, the story of his conversion from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. At the level of *Loss and Gain's* function as (an early) apologia, Newman's emphasis on this question reflects his uncomfortable position between traditional Protestant and Catholic epistemologies. In Britain's overwhelmingly Protestant culture, the Catholic's implicit submission to Church doctrine was the sinister stuff of Gothic novels; while in the context of the period's Roman Catholic theology, the convert's having arrived at his new faith by the path of private judgment renders that faith suspect. Newman is thus in the uncomfortable position of having to defend simultaneously his exercise of private judgment and his ultimate submission of that judgment to the Church of Rome.

Loss and Gain's doctrinally conflicted protagonist Charles Reding acknowledges the unreliability of private judgment when he longs aloud for an absolute authority who would circumvent the process of individual judgment by telling him what to think: "I'd give twopence, if some one, whom I could trust, would say to me, 'This is true; this is not true.' We should be saved this eternal wrangling. ... I've often said to myself, 'Oh, that I could ask St Paul this or

that!”⁹⁴ Newman feelingly depicts this profound wish for a guidance that precedes judgment throughout Charles’s long and anguished journey toward a profession of Roman Catholic faith. But alongside this persistent wish, Newman develops a narrative structure which reformulates individual judgment as precisely the result of such pre-rational necessity. Rather than from St. Paul, however, this unanswerable guidance comes from within the individual’s own character. The product of countless particular experiences, the latent tendencies within the individual character that predispose him to choose a certain course are thus something between “private” judgment and external guidance.

Both narratively in *Loss and Gain* and explicitly throughout his other writings, Newman argues that judgment is not a rational process of individual deliberation, but the work of a set of inclinations that exist within the individual character and shape his decisions without his knowledge. The process by which Charles arrives at his commitment to Catholicism is in fact a series of revelations of his own latent beliefs and preferences. In the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman once again transmutes the process of judgment into the static form of a revelation by focusing not on the process but on the eponymous endpoint of assent. Both “character” and its constitutive “assents” then emerge as the socially determined products of an untraceable narrative of particular experiences and multitudinous influences. Newman writes in the *Grammar* that these “accidents” of our particular experience “are the characteristics of persons.”⁹⁵ The net effect of these innumerable “accidents” emerges as fully-formed sentiments, opinions, and assents. The reduction of the narrative of a life to one or two unique points evokes the new statistical forms of social

⁹⁴ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 107.

⁹⁵ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979). Pp. 83-84.

description. For Newman, social science provided a valuable language for representing the shaping influence of the divine will in the mind of the individual.

The burgeoning field of statistics struggled to find a way to account for judgment. Cause and effect relationships were already a problem for the new field, which existed to represent social effects but had difficulty formulating their relationship to the large set of possible causes. Stephen Stigler writes that “not only the oldest, but the most radical” tenet of statistics is “aggregation,” or “the combination of observations,” which stipulates that, “given a number of observations, you can actually gain information by throwing information away!... The details of the individual observations had to be, in effect, erased to reveal a better indication than any single observation could on its own.”⁹⁶ This erasure takes us from Martineau’s and Dickens’s imagined holistic social world, which offered the possibility of tracing particular effects back to particular causes, to a mode of social description in which a general effect stands as a suggestion of an unknown multitude of possible causes.

This confusion only intensifies when the individual judgment is brought into question. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century the sudden ubiquity of statistics, along with the introduction of the law of large numbers, gave rise to widespread concern about the deterministic implications of statistical averages and tendencies. This concern often comes up in the context of criminal statistics: if we find a statistical law that says the number of murders committed in Britain remains constant year after year, can we really consider the would-be criminal free to refrain from murdering? The inexorability of the statistical law seems to elide the space of the individual’s

⁹⁶ Stigler. Pp. 13, 3-4.

moral judgment.⁹⁷ A subtler account of social determinism made possible by statistics took the form of an emphasis on the inescapable consequences of one's social conditions. Ian Hacking points out that this concern persists today in the idea of "extenuating circumstances," wherein statistical correlations between (in Hacking's example) being abused as a child and becoming an abuser in one's adult life once again seem to fill up the space between individual and action that might otherwise be associated with judgment and personal responsibility.⁹⁸

Theodore Porter cites the German scientist G. Rümelin as exemplifying one type of response to this problem. Rümelin argued that statistical "law" was an oxymoron, since statistics existed to describe particular facts that could not yet be accounted for by a universal causal law; once such a causal relation was discovered, statistics would no longer be needed. Yet for Rümelin, Porter writes, "the uncertainty of statistical knowledge" was not "a defect" but "a virtue, an accurate reflection of the reality it was meant to describe. Rümelin became persuaded that statistics provided the appropriate method for dealing with the collective behavior of highly diverse individuals -- social science -- precisely because it did not require the discovery of fixed and timeless laws."⁹⁹ The hypothetical empiricism of statistical thought, which emphasizes the importance of particular accidental causes without purporting to account for each individual accident, gives John Henry Newman a space to develop an account of judgment as shaped by an individual's particular experiences in ways that we can never fully know.

⁹⁷ Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820-1900* (Princeton University Press, 1986); Hacking, xvii. Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* offered a stridently deterministic reading of society that is often credited with having fanned the flames of this debate in the mid- 19th century.

⁹⁸ Hacking, xvii. P. 117.

⁹⁹ Porter. Pp. 183-185.

In an extraordinary passage in the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman writes that whatever the outcome of an individual's judgment, we can never know the multitude of possible causes that may have shaped it. Newman compares an individual's chances of converting to a particular belief system to his statistical odds of getting run over in the street:

That this particular man out of the three millions congregated in the metropolis, was to have the experience of this catastrophe, and to be the select victim to appease that law of averages, no statistical tables could foretell, even though they could determine that it was in the fates that in one week or day some four persons in the length and breadth of London should be run over. And in like manner that this or that person should have the particular experiences necessary for real assent on any point, that the Deist should become a theist, the Erastian a Catholic, the Protectionist a Free-trader, the Conservative a Legitimist, the high Tory an out-and-out Democrat, are facts, each of which may be the result of a multitude of coincidences which we have no means of determining, and which, therefore, we may call accidents. ... Such accidents are the characteristics of persons, as differentiae and properties are the characteristics of species or natures. ...¹⁰⁰

Here "accident" apparently encompasses both the characteristics with which a person happens to be born and the set of events that happen to befall him over the course of his life ("the particular experiences necessary for real assent on any point"). For Newman, these things are accidents because "we have no means of determining" them: we can neither predict what will occur (despite the law of averages), nor trace the trajectory of the "multitude of small coincidences" that in the aggregate determine "the characteristics of persons."

Here again we see the emphasis on static (statistical) revelation rather than causal narrative that characterizes Newman's model of "assent." The sets of accidents experienced in a lifetime "are the characteristics of persons." More pointedly still, Newman comes out with the syntactically unusual formulation, "That this or that person should have the particular experiences necessary for real assent on any point, that the Deist should become a theist, the Erastian a Catholic," etc., "are

¹⁰⁰ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Pp. 83-84.

facts.” The proliferating subjunctive clauses, “that the Deist should become a theist,” “that this or that person should have these particular experiences,” etc., encapsulate and contain individual narrative trajectories and register them as static “effects.” Newman’s emphasis on “hav[ing] the particular experiences necessary” to assent to a particular faith or ideology makes it clear that the effects at issue here are, in fact, life stories. Yet the number of experiences that determine one’s ultimate “assent” is so great, and their nature so various, that they can neither be “foretold” nor “determined.” We know them only implicitly, by attributing to them the assents and “persons” that they produce.

In keeping with his skepticism about both the reliability and the knowability of private judgment, Newman’s invocation of the law of averages falls on the frequentist side of the frequency/propensity divide in the statistical thought of the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰¹ Where propensity-oriented statistics purport, as their name suggests, to predict people’s “propensity” for certain outcomes, frequentist statistics are purely descriptive of observable phenomena, without offering any predictions or explanations. Indeed, Newman explicitly distinguishes his top-down (frequentist) description of how many instances of a given phenomenon will occur from the idea of calculating the probability that any given individual will convert to a given faith (propensity). The latter probability is unknowable.

Frequentist statistics here provide Newman with a descriptive, but not explanatory, conceptual framework for the arbitrary eventuality of a given individual’s assent to a given ideology. The statistical formulation becomes a placeholder for causal explanation. In *The*

¹⁰¹ On the distinction between frequency and propensity in statistical thought, see Desrosières. P 10.

Tamworth Reading Room, his 1841 response to a speech by Sir Robert Peel in praise of “useful knowledge,” he remarks,

Laplace is said to have considered he had a formula which solved all the motions of the solar system; shall we say that those motions came from this formula or from a divine fiat? Shall we have recourse for our theory to physics or to theology? ... The one hypothesis will solve the phenomena as well as the other.¹⁰²

This observation about natural science anticipates John Milbank’s argument that social scientific epistemology is, and has been since its inception, profoundly indebted to theology.¹⁰³ As Newman points out, religion and scientific law each offer the same level of causal explanation. Whether you attribute the motions of the solar system to Laplace’s formula or to God’s will, your line of questioning effectively ends there, because, like God’s will, the physical formula is taken as a given. Much of the structural similarity that Milbank identifies between scientific and Roman Catholic epistemology derives from this givenness of descriptive scientific laws, or what in religious terms is called an immutable “revelation” of God’s will on earth.

Newman thus argues that these two causal explanations, the scientific and the divine, in fact serve the same epistemological function. In the passage above, he insistently formulates this observation as a binary -- “formula or divine fiat?” “physics or theology?” – between which an arbitrary choice must be made. Yet, in the above passage from the *Grammar*, as well as throughout *Loss and Gain*, Newman himself pairs theological explanation, not with scientific law, but with modern science’s mathematical substitute for the certainty of scientific law, statistics. In the

¹⁰² John Henry Newman, *The Tamworth Reading Room: Letters on an Address Delivered by Sir Robert Peel, Bart. M.P., on the Establishment of a Reading Room at Tamworth*, Goldsmiths’-Kress Library of Economic Literature ; No. 32365 (London: JMortimer, 1841). Pp. 37-38.

¹⁰³ Milbank.

ineffable area of individual judgment Newman knows there are no scientific causal laws to rely on. Instead he turns to statistical forms as a means of representing, outside of the clarity of a causal narrative, the influence of particular, accidental experience on individual judgment.

I. Particular experience and real assent

In his 1870 *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman lays out a conceptual framework for the formative influence of contingent circumstances and experiences on individual judgment. Because he believes that our judgments are in some sense untraceable, however, Newman examines this idea via the endpoint, assent, rather than the process of judgment itself. Although “real assent,” like all assent according to Newman, is unconditional, a real assent is nonetheless a direct result of the accidents of our individual experience.

Newman describes the experience of assent in general as a separate, internal phenomenon that doesn’t stand in for or represent any thought process beyond assent itself. Assent remains connected with the idea of judgment, but Newman treats it as a distinct mental state. Unlike “inference,” or rational evaluation of a proposition along the lines of “if ‘x is y, and y is z, [then] x is z,’” assent is “unconditional” and absolute.¹⁰⁴ If inference is a line of progressive steps, assent is a discrete point, which may be arrived at via the process of inference but which no longer depends on that process once it is reached. It is “characteristic” of assent, the internal analogue to the act of “assertion” to be “in its nature simply one and indivisible, and thereby essentially different from inference, which is ever varying in strength, never quite at the same pitch in any of its two acts.”¹⁰⁵ For Newman, there is no room for tenuous or even remotely uncertain conclusions

¹⁰⁴ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. P. 29.

¹⁰⁵ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Pp. 28, 50.

in what should be a state of absolute conviction; a state of assent, however arrived at, is no longer contingent upon anything. An assent, like a social fact or a statistical measurement, is *sui generis*.

Although it is crucial to his definition of assent that all assents are equally absolute, Newman nonetheless draws a further distinction -- between notional and real assents; that is, assents made in the abstract and assents grounded in particular lived experience (aligning with the respective categories of abstract and concrete reasoning). Newman offers the example of the difference that age and experience make in a man's encounter with a work of literature:

Let us consider... how differently young and old are affected by the words of some classic author, such as Homer or Horace. Passages, which to a boy are but rhetorical commonplaces, neither better nor worse than a hundred others which any clever writer might supply,... at length come home to him, when long years have passed, and he has had experience of life, and pierce him, as if he had never before known them, with their sad earnestness and vivid exactness.¹⁰⁶

Throughout the text, Newman describes real assents in language redolent of natural and aesthetic power, characterizing them as "vital," "vivid," "direct and forceful," etc. These emerge as value-laden terms for Newman. They suggest -- like the metaphor of "piercing" in the above passage -- that much of the real assent's significance lies for Newman in its immediacy. To be sure, a notional assent, once arrived at, ceases to be conditional and thus does not require the assenter to constantly retrace his entire chain of reasoning in order to reaffirm the assent. But a real assent is at times almost a visceral experience, resembling the immediacy of instinct or ingrained habit but bearing the force of a revelation. Paradoxically, assents grounded in years of contingent experience are the ones that are most immediate and absolute. Thus the most powerful revelations a man experiences derive from the accidents of life in a process that -- unlike the line of reasoning that leads him to

¹⁰⁶ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Pp. 78-79.

an abstract or notional assent – he may not even be aware of. In other words, real assent can be understood as the end result of an unconscious process that has been going on perhaps over a lifetime and, like the individual himself, has been shaped in unknowable ways by the particular experiences of an individual's life.

Assent, then, has to be *sui generis* for Newman because it is the end result (and, often, the externalization) of a combination of factors that are both too many to count and untraceable in their influence. For Newman, then, the self-contained assent – like a statistic that compresses a range of stories into a single fact – stands in for the shaping presence of unknowable social influences.

II. Parties and Averages

Throughout *Loss and Gain*, characters moot their concerns about more perceptible form of social influence on individual judgment by reference to “party,” which is typically treated as a dirty word. To be a “party man,” to affiliate oneself with a particular team in an ideological debate, is to be too easily influenced by others.¹⁰⁷ In such discussions, characters frequently place party affiliation in contrast with averageness – to “follow the mean” in one's opinions is to be free of the influence of party, and to belong to a party is to deviate from the mean. In one such discussion, Charles and Carlton agree that party leadership is incompatible with average ability: the leader of a party must be “either much above or much below the average” if he is conscious of what he is doing, that is, if he seeks to deliberately create a group of men who share an ideological view.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 67.

¹⁰⁸ John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert*, ATLA Monograph Preservation Program ATLA Fiche 1991-2557, 6th ed. (London: Burns, Oates, 1874). P. 161.

As the party leader is contrasted to the man of average ability, so the “party man” is repeatedly contrasted to the man of average opinion, often by a character who holds his own adherence to the mean to be a mark of meritoriously independent judgment. Of one adherent to this style of judgment, Mr Vincent, Newman writes, “He... denounced parties and party-spirit, and thought to avoid the one and the other by eschewing all persons, and holding all opinions. He had a great idea of the *via media* being the truth; and to obtain it, thought it enough to flee from extremes, without having any very definite mean to flee to.”¹⁰⁹ Instead of building an ethical perspective on various questions around commitment to a particular value or set of values, Vincent seeks to adhere to “the mean,” although “the mean” in this case stands for nothing more than indefiniteness.

Alain Desrosières argues that the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet divorced the statistical construct of the mean from its original mathematical context, rendering it an available descriptive category for essentially any given set of objects or individuals. What began as the already radical move of “aggregation,”¹¹⁰ reducing multitudinous pieces of information to a single data point, evolved through Quetelet’s work into a construct not necessarily connected to any actual data point. Following Bertillon, Desrosières distinguishes three distinct “types” of mean in statistical thought:

When Adolphe Bertillon (1876) presented these distinctions thirty years after Quetelet, he designated them quite clearly. The objective mean corresponded to a real object, subjected to a certain number of measurements. The subjective mean resulted from the calculation of a central tendency, in the case in which the distribution presented only a form adjustable to that of the 'binomial law.... The third case presented itself as if the distribution did not

¹⁰⁹ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 67.

¹¹⁰ Stigler. P. 13.

have this 'normal' form at all. Bertillon termed it an arithmetical mean to emphasize the fact that it was pure fiction.¹¹¹

Bertillon's list reflects the mean's progression from representation of a particular effect in the world to abstract effect in its own right. "The objective mean corresponded to a real object." Quetelet extended the concept of the mean into cases that did not revolve around a single extant object. As Desrosières writes, "the subjective mean" corresponds to a "central tendency." This kind of mean is a step removed from the one-to-one referentiality of the "objective mean." In the example of height, this mean does not correspond to that of any one individual person, though it reflects what Desrosières calls a "tendency" in the group's heights towards this number. At this point, then, the mean no longer represents an individual effect, but rather an abstraction, albeit one that statisticians consider to be mathematically meaningful. The third kind of mean that Desrosières cites, the "arithmetical mean," is twice removed from real social or biological effects since it represents neither an individual object nor the mathematical fact indicated by the peak of the binomial graph. In other words, the "subjective mean" doesn't refer to any effect of a cause that appears in the real world; it represents only itself.

Thus, when they apply the idea of the mean – specifically, Desrosières's "third" or the "arithmetic" mean – to the range of available religious "views," people such as Vincent seem almost neurotically committed to negating any concrete view in favor of the nonspecific potential view represented by the mean. Newman's mean-oriented characters go a step further than Quetelet in abstracting the idea of a mean viewpoint: they consider the totality of their seemingly inconsistent particular viewpoints as reducible to a general "mean" perspective, a calculation beyond what can be justified by even suspect mathematics, that allows them to eliminate their

¹¹¹ Desrosières. P. 76.

particular views by aggregating them. It is this “averaging” of the set of all their individual positions that they believe places them in the “mean” of general opinion – a construct arrived at through a similarly reductive process. Thus to seek to match one’s “mean perspective” to the possible mean opinion is to do a strange violence to one’s particular views, negating them in favor of an unknowable potential viewpoint.

Newman’s narrator observes that men who invoke the mean as a guide for their judgment are in fact offering a negation of the idea of a concrete set of judgments and commitments. He writes,

Their lines of argument diverge; nothing comes to a point; there is no one centre in which their mind sits, on which their judgement of men and things proceeds. This is the state of many men all through life; and miserable politicians or Churchmen they make, unless by good luck they are in safe hands, and ruled by others, or are pledged to a course. Else they are at the mercy of the winds and waves; and, without being Radical, Whig, Tory, or Conservative, High Church or Low Church, they do Whig acts, Tory acts, Catholic acts, and heretical acts, as the fit takes them, or as events or parties drive them. And sometimes, when their self-importance is hurt, they take refuge in the idea that all this is a proof that they are unfettered, moderate, dispassionate, that they observe the mean, that they are ‘no party men;’ when they are, in fact, the most helpless of slaves; for our strength in this world is, to be the subjects of the reason, and our liberty, to be captives of the truth.¹¹²

Although these men, like Newman, use statistical formulations to account for their processes of judgment, they commit, according to Newman, a fundamental error. Newman draws this error out in his representation of the contexts in which they invoke the mean: “when their self-importance is hurt, they take refuge in the idea that all this is a proof that they are... moderate, dispassionate,” etc. Mr. Vincent likewise presents the idea of his “observation of the mean” as a counterweight to the influence of people or party. These men present the “averageness” of their views, not quite as proof of objectivity or any specific epistemological discipline, but rather as proof of the

¹¹² Newman, *Loss and Gain*. Pp. 15-16.

independence of their judgment. They proclaim themselves “no party men.” Where others may be subject to the influence of friends or of party, they congratulate themselves on their freedom. Such men claim the mean as part of their process of private judgment, suggesting that they espouse a range of conflicting opinions as a calculated attempt to attain an “average” ideological position. Thus they in essence invoke the idea of the mean as a stand-in for their own ideology of negation, “denouncing parties” and “eschewing persons.”

Note that there is no discernible difference between the judgment of Vincent in the first passage and that of these “miserable politicians or Churchmen” in the second, although the former deliberately seeks to keep to the “mean” opinion, while the latter seem only to profess the averageness of their views as an ex post facto justification of their failure to stake out a real position. In result as well as in procedure, a concerted effort to take positions that average out to something “moderate” is indistinguishable from random, purposeless scattering. Intention falls out of the picture. What these men conceive as a self-assertion, allowing them to be their own men rather than “party men,” is in fact the negation of their intention, of their judgment, and thus, Newman makes clear, of their freedom. Their idea of “observing the mean” by negating all possibility of taking a coherent and substantive set of positions is like a parody of Isaiah Berlin’s “negative liberty,”¹¹³ or “freedom from” rather than “freedom for,” applied to the realm of judgment.

Such men elide any space for coherent judgment in a misguided attempt to assert their independence from any particular influences. Their espousal of averageness reflects a fantasy of immunity to particular, accidental influences that might lead them to assent to something beyond

¹¹³ Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, 1st Farrar, Straus and Giroux pbk. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

the mean opinion. Newman is quick to point out that this is only a fantasy; denying their susceptibility to such influences does not in fact make them less susceptible. If anything, it makes them less aware that their judgments are “ruled by others” or “driven by events and parties.” While these men use the language of statistics to assert the freedom of their judgment, Newman uses it in *Loss and Gain* and the *Grammar* to represent the unknowable causes that he believes necessarily characterize the “private judgment” of any individual. In both cases statistics provide a language for describing what cannot otherwise be accounted for. The difference lies in Newman’s recognition that this unaccountable process operates on a level beyond that of individual comprehension. In this sense, rather than being presented as manipulatable quantities, statistical formulations become an acknowledged representation of the unknowable.

In his treatment of judgment and character formation, Newman reproduces statistics’ formal maneuver of “gaining information by throwing information away.”¹¹⁴ For Newman, this move is a formal acknowledgment of the unknowability of the multitudinous particular influences that shape our characters and our assents. The “accidents” of our experience that result in our assents are “thrown away” to produce self-contained assents, not because the accidents are unimportant, but because they are untraceable and unknowable; all we can know is their ultimate outcome. The clingers to the mean, on the other hand, believe they will arrive at a societal midpoint by throwing their assents away. But for Newman the shaping influence comes before the individual assent, before the conscious judgment – it comes at the point of character. The idea that it comes after that point is meaningless, and leads these men to just be swayed by arbitrary influences instead of attuned to their real assents. Opinion is vulnerable to outward circumstance, but is mysteriously shaped and created by the circumstances that make up your character. The “clingers

¹¹⁴ Stigler. P. 13.

to the mean” allow their assents to be shaped by individual accidents instead of molded by an infinitesimal number of smaller accidents that together add up to an untraceable fate.

Newman’s rejection of the idea of taking an average of opinions places his theory of society in stark contrast to that of Herbert Spencer, who, as we will see in a later chapter, argues that it is precisely by this method that society advances. It is exactly this kind of thinking that Newman critiques, emphasizing the qualitative rather than quantitative nature of assents given by individuals – as befits someone with a cogent set of views that made him an outlier in his own time. Newman’s critique of judgment by the “mean” extends to the kind of arbitrary compromise that he sees in the 39 Articles and even, ultimately, in the “Anglican Catholic Church” itself.¹¹⁵ The 39 Articles, according to Charles Reding’s naive colleague Bateman in *Loss and Gain*, seem to take on the status of an institutionalized “mean perspective” of the Anglican Church. Bateman tells Charles that because of the disparate convictions and commitments of their writers and primary interpreters, the Articles are essentially open to any interpretation, as much an empty form as the idea of a mean opinion.

The Bishops, Heads of houses, and other dignitaries and authorities... do not agree together; some of them are diametrically opposed to others. One clergyman denies Apostolical Succession, another affirms it; [etc.]... It is plain, then, that the Articles have no sense at all, if the collective voice of Bishops, Deans, Professors, and the like is to be taken. They cannot supply what schoolmen call the form of the Articles.¹¹⁶

Bateman here articulates one of Newman’s central arguments: that it does not make sense to interpret an aggregation of diverse viewpoints from a range of individuals with disparate agendas and value commitments as averaging to some middle view. Rather, interpreting the Articles

¹¹⁵ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 34.

¹¹⁶ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 120.

through “the collective voice of Bishops, Deans, Professors, and the like” leads to an understanding of the Articles as “hav[ing] no sense at all.” The set of contradictory views cannot be reduced to some mythical midpoint, and a set of unrelated positions thus “cannot supply... the form of the Articles.”

Bateman ultimately concludes that since the Anglican Church is “a part of the one Church Catholic,” the most solid and consistent interpretation of the Articles is as “the whole Catholic creed.” In other words, instead of attempting to “take the average” of the set of many disparate opinions accumulated around the Articles since the Sixteenth Century, he returns to what he considers to be the last coherent, holistic Church doctrine, “the whole Catholic Creed, the acknowledged doctrine of the Fathers, of St Ignatius, St Cyprian, St Augustin, St Ambrose.” The Articles “may be ambiguous in themselves; they may have been worded with various intentions by the individuals concerned in their composition, but these are accidents; the Church knows nothing of individuals; she interprets herself.”¹¹⁷

Bateman recognizes the impossibility of any attempt to make the meaning of the Articles square either with the range of contemporary views in the Church or with the disparate convictions of their original authors (let alone with both groups at once). Understood either as a freestanding body or as representative of a unified institutional perspective, the Articles have no clear meaning. Rather than trying to superimpose an imagined “average” viewpoint, Bateman turns instead to the last historical point at which he finds a recognizable ideological bent in the Church.

But Newman would certainly not agree with Bateman’s choice to dismiss either the ambiguity of the Articles’ language or the “various intentions” of their authors as mere “accidents.”

¹¹⁷ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 121.

The text may be hopelessly convoluted, but Bateman's interpretation of it arbitrarily invalidates the "accidents" of authorship and perspective it has accrued over the past several centuries in order to arrive at a desired sense of meaning. While Newman appears to endorse Bateman's objection to the conceptual incoherence of the Articles, his own model for developing a coherent institutional perspective allows for more interaction among "various intentions" than Bateman's strategy of returning to status quo ante. In Newman's later writings, he develops an idea of tradition as a living and evolving set of ideas that continue to develop through interaction with new individual perspectives shaped by various "accidents" of individual experience. In his 1845 *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, he writes,

As time proceeds, one view will be modified or expanded by another, and then combined with a third; till the idea to which these various aspects belong, will be to each mind separately what at first it was only to all together.... [T]his body of thought, thus laboriously gained, will after all be little more than the proper representative of one idea, being in substance what that idea meant from the first, its complete image as seen in a combination of diversified aspects, with the suggestions and corrections of many minds, and the illustration of many experiences.¹¹⁸

Because this is fundamentally a dialogic model for developing communal perspective, it resists any attempt to reduce it to a single, "mean" position. Newman conceives of the "body of thought" that develops around the original idea as "little more than the proper representative of one idea." This idea of a form of judgment that is knowable because communal presents a structural antithesis to the reductive move of Stigler's "aggregation." Rather, in this account, intellectual traditions thrive on the tension introduced by engagement with new individual perspectives shaped by a range of "accidents." The "mean" viewpoint of an institution is irrelevant, in Newman's view, for

¹¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman, John Henry, 1801-1890. Works of Cardinal Newman, 16th impression. (London, New York: Longmans, Green, 1920). P. 38.

two reasons. First, it rests on a synchronic, rather than diachronic, understanding of tradition, which is antithetical to Newman's beliefs about how tradition can be perpetually developed and made new by the introduction of new perspectives. Second, since the process of developing such an institutional perspective always take the form of some kind of dialogue, it is already empirically describable and thus does not need to be represented by reference to the mean or other statistical formulations. The investigation and evolution of a communal tradition does not pose the same kind of threat that private judgment does because the process, including the various "accidents" of personality and history that shape it, takes a knowable, representable form.

Newman views the development of theological and ideological traditions as an ongoing process of productive dialogue among the distinct "views" of distinct characters. But where this dialogue allows for a great deal of transparency in the collective development of a doctrine or tradition (something that is notably from the account that the "clingers to the mean" provide of the averaging of their own judgment), there is no such transparent analogue for the formation of individual assents, which, unlike tradition for Newman, are fundamentally self-contained and non-narrative.

III. Private Judgment

In his various attempts to account for his conversion, Newman seems irresistibly drawn to the epistemological transparency of a judgment or assent arrived at through dialogue, in contrast to the inscrutability of the process of "private judgment." Both of his major conversion narratives, the explicit account in the *Apologia* and the thinly veiled retelling in *Loss and Gain*, betray an almost obsessive reliance on quoted and otherwise documented dialogue to support Newman's story. The reader gets the impression that Newman feels the need to provide empirical evidence of his state of mind at a given point, to prove that he hasn't secretly been Catholic, undertaking this

journey in bad faith, from the beginning. Newman's heavy documentation depicts the "suggestions and corrections of many minds" that made up some part of the process of his conversion. The *Apologia* could easily be classed as an epistolary autobiography, as excerpts from Newman's correspondence make up at least half of the narrative.¹¹⁹ Newman's emphasis on forms of dialogue over internal forms of self-reflection replicates his ethos of "gaining information" about a person's views "by throwing information away." Here as in Stigler's account of statistics, the information that is cast aside is information about the process by which we arrive at a given result. For Newman, the result of judgment, assent, tends to emerge externally, often in conversation when an individual is asked to give an account of himself. The process, as it unfolds in the individual consciousness, is murky and unknowable – but, *pace* the clingers to the mean, what an explicit assent means for our character is not. Newman thus spends much of *Loss and Gain* tracing the narrative that unfolds alongside the process of Charles's judgment, in a way that yet elides and omits in some respects the narrative of judgment itself. The novel's subtitle is apt: it is "The Story of a Convert," not "A Conversion Story."

Newman occasionally resorts to the methods of the epistolary novel in *Loss and Gain*, but much more frequently relies on quoted dialogue to serve as a sort of hard evidence of the development of Charles's "views". Dialogue figures as prominently in *Loss and Gain* as documentation does in the *Apologia*. Indeed, conversations in the novel take on an almost epistolary quality, as characters take turns propounding their theological views in paragraphs-long blocks of text that provide the same experience of a protracted insertion of an outside perspective into the text. In a novel primarily concerned with investigating the knowability, sustainability, and

¹¹⁹ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, Penguin Classics (London, England ; New York, N.Y., USA: Penguin Books, 1994).

validity of convictions and other states of mind, dialogue stands as a form of empirical fact and register of “accident,” quotation marks indicating that this is an exact account of one part of the judgment process, unfiltered by private consciousness.

By contrast to the frequency with which Newman resorts to dialogue to track external manifestations of Charles’s views, free indirect discourse, the realist novel’s conventional tool for depicting the contents of an individual’s consciousness, is notably peripheral to the plot of *Loss and Gain*. Newman does occasionally resort to free indirect discourse, but seldom for the purposes of advancing the primary storyline of the development of the protagonist’s “views” on religion. Compared to other, more canonical novelists of development such as Austen and Eliot, Newman uses free indirect discourse for only half of its available function. Where another novelist might use free indirect discourse to represent first the limitation of an individual’s mind and then its eventual development into a broader and more mature perspective, Newman chooses to use free indirect speech, as well as regular indirect discourse, largely to call individuals’ perspectives into question.:

Freeborn smiled, and said that he hoped Reding would have clearer views in a little time. It was a very simple matter. Faith not only justified, it regenerated also. It was the root of sanctification, as well as of Divine acceptance. The same act which was the means of bringing us into God’s favour secured our being meet for it. Thus good works were secured, because faith would not be true faith unless it were such as to be certain of bringing forth good works in due time.¹²⁰

In this moment of regular indirect discourse, Newman elaborately ironizes Freeborn’s unselfconscious sophistry. Freeman’s condescending “smile” flavors the argument that follows. What is presented as perfectly “clear,” “a very simple matter,” becomes a more and more tortuous

¹²⁰ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 125.

mental exercise as Freeborn attempts to defend the Protestant belief in justification by faith not works.

While regular (quoted) dialogue is used in *Loss and Gain* to convey a wide range of opinions including many which Newman clearly believes to be self-evidently wrong, as direct quotation it becomes externalized as a sort of document of the historical record of Charles's (Newman's) experience of the Oxford climate at that moment in time. Freeborn's comically convoluted explanation of the faith-not-works doctrine of Protestantism, not articulated in this way and thus not explicitly answered by anyone, does not become part of the broader dialogue alongside which this conversion story develops, but remains, like Freeborn, self-contained and unchecked in its solipsism.

In the early part of the novel, Newman very occasionally uses free indirect discourse to provide a glimpse into his protagonist Charles's state of mind, as in this passage shortly after the death of his father:

He then understood the difference between what was real and what was not. All the doubts, inquiries, surmises, views, which had of late haunted him on theological subjects, seemed like so many shams, which flitted before him in sun-bright hours, but had no root in his inward nature, and fell from him, like the helpless December leaves, in the hour of his affliction. [...] What is called the pursuit of truth seemed an idle dream. He had great tangible duties to his father's memory, to his mother and sisters, to his position; he felt sick of all theories as if they had taken him in, and he secretly resolved never more to have anything to do with them. Let the world go on as it might, happen what would to others, his own place and his own path were clear. He would go back to Oxford, attend steadily to his books, put aside all distractions, avoid bye-paths, and do his best to acquit himself well in the schools. The Church of England as it was, its Articles, bishops, preachers, professors, had sufficed for much better persons than he was; they were good enough for him.¹²¹

¹²¹ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. Pp. 142-143.

This passage of free indirect discourse provides a sympathetic look at the way Charles's loss colors all of his thoughts and concerns, including the strong tinge of guilt with which he regards "all the doubts, inquiries, surmises, views, which had of late haunted him on theological subjects." Yet, at the same time, the passage suggests that this new outlook may not be the permanent readjustment Charles believes it to be, but rather an ephemeral emotional reaction. Not only the telltale non-compression of the pages, but Charles's insistence on categorical statements of "what was real and what was not," betray the mental distortion under which Charles labors at this moment. His dismissal of everything beyond the "tangible" duty to family as "flitting" "shams" reflects an understanding of what is important that is understandable but too narrow to dictate an entire subsequent life course of "putting aside all distractions" and eventually replicating his father's life. The equivocal reference to "what is called the pursuit of truth" suggests that he cannot yet feel fully disengaged from such a pursuit – not sufficiently at least to give it a different name, and the singular reference to "truth" calls into question the total authority of the "reality" on which he has been so fervently insisting.

Charles's aggressively binary thinking, his disavowal of all theological questioning as of a wicked temptation, and his inability to give a new name to "what is called the pursuit of truth," all suggest the underlying presence of a lingering inclination toward some spiritual bourn beyond the narrow path of the Anglican Churchman. The course of action that Charles develops at this moment is a reaction born out of serious grief and even a strong sense of guilt for concerning himself so deeply with "intangibles" (and entertaining subversive doubts) in the period leading up to his father's death. Despite what Charles tells himself, this is not a moment of clear-headed value judgment but a moment of great grief and confusion. This glimpse into Charles's mind betrays the persistence of underlying influences on his judgment that are neither directly representable, nor

knowable in this moment by Charles himself. This instance of free indirect discourse then apparently represents a small fraction of the causes shaping Charles's judgment, but, like the average, suggests the potential presence of numerous other causes that have been excluded from the explicit account given.

In the latter half of the novel, as Charles draws closer to his conversion to Catholicism, fewer and fewer such crisis points in his mental development are represented through free indirect discourse. Instead, shifts in Charles's perspective are increasingly revealed – both to the reader and to Charles himself -- through internal monologues, through dialogue, and even through external soliloquy. Free indirect discourse, the formal analogue of “private judgment,” is not a reliable space for the decisive moments in Charles's development to play out, or even for him to recognize the views he is on the verge of espousing. For Newman one's own mind is too often a space of profound obscurity, and the most significant moments of revelation for Charles must happen in other venues.

Private judgment's resistance to full representation on both the structural and experiential levels, in addition to raising serious formal and epistemological problems, poses a biographical problem for Newman as well. In the aftermath of his conversion from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, Newman has to defend his judgment not only against Protestants who objected to the unquestioning submission to Church dogma that Catholicism demands, but also against a Catholic suspicion of the very nature of the conversion process as a threat to such submission and an elevation of a more Protestant practice of “private judgment.” If Newman's assent to the Roman Catholic Church places it in the role of “some one, whom I could trust, [who] would say to me, ‘This is true; this is not true,’” then undertaking a long period of judgment and introspection prior to accepting the Church's account of ultimate spiritual truth must inevitably undermine Church

authority.¹²² The paradox of Newman's long and arduous intellectual journey to arrive at the submission of his judgment to Roman Catholic teachings is that the mere fact of the process having to take place threatens the validity of its conclusion. If the Church offers absolute truth and allows us to repose our trust in its teachings rather than in our own fallible judgment, recategorizing that truth as just one of a "diversity" of possible results of private judgment deprives it of its forceful immediacy.

In a protracted narrative intrusion in the middle of *Loss and Gain*, Newman proposes a narrative model for the way in which private judgment leads to our eventual assents. Newman is anxious to defend against the idea that his conversion process reflects what Thomas Pfau has described as liberal society's "reductive understanding of free will as 'multiple choice.'"¹²³ If he were indeed "choosing his religion by his own standard of what a religion ought to be," he would be judging little better than the men without party who take as their "standard" for judgment an imaginary construct with no moral content. In this case he would have arrived at Catholicism via a process of "multiple choice" that had nothing to do with the Church's absolute validity or truth; rather, his conversion could be understood as an arbitrary exercise of personal preference. If he could be understood as turning the use of his personal judgment on and off on a whim, Protestant critics would of course object to his ultimate abandonment of practices of judgment, while Catholics would ask how they can know that he won't turn to it again at his own discretion. Caught in this biographical double bind, Newman mounts an equivocal defense of the practice of private

¹²² Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 107.

¹²³ Thomas Pfau, 'Beyond Liberal Utopia: Freedom as the Problem of Modernity', *European Romantic Review*, 19.2 (2008), 83–103 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509580802030243>>. P. 97.

judgment that he so distrusts, arguing that “there is no absurdity... or inconsistency in a person first using his private judgment and then denouncing its use.”

Here we see what is meant when a person says that the Catholic system comes home to his mind, fulfils his idea of religion, satisfies his sympathies, and the like; and thereupon becomes a Catholic. Such a person is often said to go by private judgment, to be choosing his religion by his own standard of what a religion ought to be. Now it need not be denied that those who are external to the Church must begin with private judgment; they use it in order ultimately to supersede it; as a man out of doors uses a lamp in a dark night, and puts it out when he gets home. What would be thought of his bringing it into his drawing-room? what would the goodly company there assembled before a genial hearth and under glittering chandeliers, the bright ladies and the well-dressed gentlemen, say to him if he came in with a great-coat on his back, a hat on his head, an umbrella under his arm, and a large stable-lantern in his hand? Yet what would be thought, on the other hand, if he precipitated himself into the inhospitable night and the war of the elements in his ball-dress?¹²⁴

In a series of rhetorical questions, Newman asks what would be thought and said of a traveler who either failed to use his lantern outdoors at night or tried to keep using it indoors. His insistent emphasis on social judgment to enforce the point of his metaphor – “what would the bright ladies and well-dressed gentlemen say?” – reflects the same emphasis on external manifestations that led him to privilege various forms of quotation in *Loss and Gain* and the *Apologia*. In this case, he appeals to externalized collective judgment in terms of social convention or common sense, as though the analogy itself, of putting out a light once you enter a well-lit room, is somehow insufficient.

The simple image of a man on a journey returns Newman’s reflection on judgment to the travel analogy through which he illustrated the helpless waywardness of the followers of “the mean.” The period of judgment and reflection leading up to Newman’s conversion was a period of wandering “out of doors... in a dark night,” while his assent, or conversion, brings him to a

¹²⁴ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. Pp. 181-182.

“home” bright with “glittering chandeliers” and “genial hearth.” Once he has arrived, he no longer needs his own lantern to see his way; he can see, better than he ever could before, by the brilliant light of the drawing room. But in the dark, he needs some provisional light, however humble, to find his way by; to insist upon staying in the dark until reaching the perfect light of the drawing-room would be a prideful exercise in futility.

This analogy seems to offer a strong argument for the expediency of private judgment when there are no other lights to be had. Yet when considered as a defense of the validity of a spiritual or ideological assent arrived at by private judgment, it breaks down. The lantern, as used in this passage, represents the methodological side of judgment without the ethical pull that is so central to Newman’s conception of the “views” we develop – a pull that Charles Taylor terms a “moral orientation.”¹²⁵ Surely the well-dressed company who would be horrified if Newman’s traveler “precipitated himself into the inhospitable night and the war of the elements in his ball-dress” would be equally perplexed to see him go out into the darkness with no determinate destination, but with the assurance that the lantern would light his path. The lantern does not help the traveler decide where to go; it only helps him to see his way to an endpoint that he has already chosen. The lantern represents reasoning at the level of means. Conversion narratives are stories about reasoning at the level of moral ends. The utility of the lantern then does not resolve the paradox at the heart of the conversion story. If we are guided to a new faith through the exercise of our own private judgment, either we have, perhaps without realizing it, at some point made an arbitrary choice of orientation, arriving at our new faith by chance rather than as a testament to its irresistible truth – or another factor is at work within the individual.

¹²⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). P. 29.

Without any source of direction, the individual's wandering with the lantern begins to resemble the arbitrary movements of the men who profess to follow the mean. Like the mean, the lantern becomes a form with no value content that is superimposed upon the process of a value judgment. Indeed, the language with which Newman introduces this analogy undermines the importance of the lantern as a symbol of individual judgment. Newman describes Charles's assent as "the Catholic system com[ing] home to his mind, fulfil[ling] his idea of religion, [and] satisfy[ing] his sympathies."¹²⁶ Strangely, this first metaphor with which Newman introduces his extended analogy runs counter to narrative of the analogy itself. Newman writes that the man with the lantern uses this lantern to get home. But in this introductory phrase – which, we are told, is closer to the way in which real people tend to express such experiences – it is not the individual who (by the use of his private judgment) "comes home" to Catholicism. On the contrary, such a moment of assent is experienced as Catholicism "com[ing] home" to the mind of the individual. In all these initial turns of phrase, it is an idea, "the Catholic system," not an individual, that has agency in the conversion process. What unfolds in the mind of the individual during the process of judgment cannot be said to come from him, but rather to represent an external force operating as a part of his character. What Charles perceives as his internal life is in fact a space for the exertion of other forces that have become part of him but are yet beyond him. The discreetness of an assent thus points in part to the presence of something beyond the individual operating within his character. In light of this beginning, Newman's protracted lantern analogy feels strangely superfluous, an easily representable formulation of private judgment that Newman unfolds as a socially acceptable story while a wholly different, unnarratable, process guided by a different agency is playing out silently in the background.

¹²⁶ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 181.

IV. “Here was Charles:” Implicit Reason and Real Assent

Loss and Gain, especially the second half of the novel, is the story of Charles’s “unconscious reasoning” playing out beneath the surface narrative of his “conscious reasoning” expressed through large quantities of dialogue with many different figures representing different theological orientations. Over the course of the novel, both free indirect discourse and dialogue emerge as inadequate representations of the process of individual judgment. While dialogue holds out the promise of greater transparency and potential communal validation, it increasingly becomes a surface form into which Charles’s real views emerge like a sudden irruption. The benefit of dialogue is that it forces Charles to articulate his views, to himself as well as to others. But it doesn’t seem to help shape them; rather, the views unexpectedly emerge fully formed:

It is impossible to stop the growth of the mind. Here was Charles with his thoughts turned away from religious controversy for two years, yet with his religious views progressing, unknown to himself, the whole time. [...] He might not realise his own belief till questions had been put to him; but then a single discussion[...] would bring out what he really did hold to his own apprehension[...] He had not yet given names to these opinions, much less had they taken a theological form[...]; but here he was, a young man of twenty-two, professing, in an hour’s conversation with a friend, what really were the Catholic doctrines and usages of penance, purgatory, councils of perfection, mortification of the self, and clerical celibacy. No wonder that all this annoyed Carlton, though he no more than Charles perceived that all this Catholicism did in fact lie hid under his professions; but he felt, in what Reding put out, the presence of something, as he expressed it, ‘very unlike the Church of England;’ something [...] which had much behind it, which made itself felt, which struck heavily.¹²⁷

This glimpse into the “growth” of Charles’s “mind” is a sort of disruption, almost an irruption: the “yets” and “buts” with which Newman peppers this passage suggest all the immediacy of shock at the hints of Charles’s position which emerge: “but here he [is],” suddenly “professing,” it seems, he hardly knows what. “He might not realise” where he stands until called upon to articulate it

¹²⁷ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. Pp. 180- 181.

outright, at which point a direct inquiry will “bring out what he really did hold to his own apprehension.” Private judgment and self-interrogation do not help him to understand himself or his relation to these new, strangely inchoate inclinations and inklings. “He had not yet given names to these opinions, much less had they taken a theological form; nor could they, under his circumstances, be expressed in theological language.” While the latter part of the sentence obviously refers to the taboo around the profession of Roman Catholic ideas at Oxford, the earlier reference to “giving names to these opinions” and giving them “a theological form” seems to refer rather to Charles’s conscious internal engagement with these ideas. Although they exist within him he cannot immediately recognize them. Just as they exist as ideas independently of whether they can be expressed to the Anglican establishment at Oxford, it seems, they can be understood as ideas that have taken hold of Charles independently of his recognition that this is the case. The perspective we encounter here is that of the omniscient narrator, who can recognize and articulate the tendency of Charles’s opinions in a way that, as he points out, Charles cannot.

In this passage the development of a perspective, “the growth of the mind” is understood as a process going on without Charles’s knowledge and without his even being able to clearly articulate his position to himself. Further, it is a process that is not easily representable over the course of the novel. It unfolds in the background, unobservably, while Charles’s thoughts are “turned away from religious controversy” and focused on the concerns of day-to-day existence both at Oxford and at home.

In his eighth Oxford Sermon, and as a part of these sermons’ ongoing investigation into the phenomenological basis of religious faith, Newman introduces the ideas of implicit and explicit reason. While explicit reasoning is what we typically expect the process of rational thought to look like – clearly laid out, methodical, etc. – implicit reasoning refers to developing views that are

inarticulate, views that the “reasoning” individual may not even be consciously entertaining. Newman describes these two categories as “conscious and unconscious reasoning,” adding that “all men can reason, but not all men can give a reason.”¹²⁸ The distinction is between a reasoning process that a man can articulate to himself and the other parts of his reasoning process that operate on him without his knowledge. Newman’s use of free indirect discourse to show both Charles’s conscious thoughts and the possibility of other influences illustrates this idea.

It is not, of course, unusual for a novelist to use free indirect discourse to suggest the presence of motives of which a character may not be conscious alongside those which she names to herself. But in such cases the form is often used to ironize such unself-consciousness with the implication that the individual ought to be able to recognize and articulate those other motives; in many cases the arc of the novel builds toward such a recognition. (E.g., “Vanity, not love, has been my folly!”) But Newman’s use of free indirect discourse does not build toward such a discovery; rather, he accepts that some causes will always operate beneath the level of our conscious judgment. Not only is self-conscious judgment, or, as Newman calls it, “conscious reasoning,” not a necessary component of reasoning, but “conscious reasoning” is also not inherently superior to “unconscious reasoning”:

The exercise of analysis is not necessary to the integrity of the process analyzed. The process of reasoning is complete in itself, and independent. The analysis is but an account of it; it does not make the conclusion correct; it does not make the inference rational. It does not cause a given individual to reason better. It does but give him a sustained consciousness, for good or for evil, that he is reasoning.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between A.D. 1826 and 1843*. Pp. 177-178.

¹²⁹ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. P. 178.

Rational thought, here demoted to the “analysis” of one’s reasoning, is not essential to the reasoning process; it is “but an account of it” – and, we have seen, an account that must always and necessarily be incomplete. Self-consciousness does not confer any special rigor upon one’s thought. In this account, self-consciousness, the attempt to hold the process by which one reasons to certain standards, is irrelevant to the validity of one’s conclusions – perhaps because all value judgments must contain an element of the irrational in any case. In effect, conscious reasoning is a narrative playing out alongside, but independently of, the “real” process of reasoning that is going on unnoticed underneath.

This process of unconscious reasoning, of course, is by definition not explicitly narratable. Hence Newman increasingly avoids direct representations of Charles’s inner life, especially as Charles moves from asking innocent questions to harboring more serious inclinations toward distinctly Roman Catholic principles and practices. Instead, the progress of Charles’s unconscious reasoning is made apparent by moments of revelation that punctuate the text, in which the views at which he has been unconsciously arriving suddenly reach the point of articulation. Occasionally such moments arrive organically (if unexpectedly) through dialogue; at other times their abrupt articulation takes the form of interior monologue or, especially, soliloquy.

Newman’s frequent resort to soliloquy despite its limitations accords with the idea that the conscious development of Charles’s perspective is not the most relevant content of the story of his ultimate conversion. Several of Charles’s most significant soliloquies evoke the immediacy and completeness of a revelation, rather than the open-endedness (and, Newman suggests, significant potential for error) of a process of judgment. On one occasion, catching a glimpse of a solitary stranger practicing Catholic prayer and self-flagellation, Charles “was overcome with a sudden emotion, which he could not control. ‘O happy times,’ he cried, ‘when faith was one! O blessed

penitent, whoever you are, who know what to believe, and how to gain pardon, and can begin where others end!”¹³⁰ A few chapters later, a still-Anglican Charles bursts into spontaneous Catholic prayer:

‘O mighty Mother!’ burst from his lips[...]

By the time he had walked two miles in this excitement, bodily and mental... [h]e slackened his pace, and gradually came to himself, but still he went on, as if mechanically, ‘O mighty Mother!’ Suddenly he cried, ‘Hallo! Where did I get these words? Willis did not use them. [...] Alas, I know where my heart is! but I must go by reason... O mighty Mother!’¹³¹

This is the outward manifestation of the irresistible and spontaneous force of conviction. At these moments it seems that such feelings must be articulated in order to be known or recognized, and even then their expression is not quite a conscious choice, as Charles repeats his apostrophe to the Roman Catholic Church “half unconsciously.” Rather, some hitherto unknown part of Charles here seems almost to be speaking through him (in a way that looks forward in some sense to Herbert Spencer’s idea that “nature” speaks through individual sentiment). The first half of this passage reflects the working of “unconscious reason” while the second half shows Charles’s exercise of “conscious reason” in his explicit attempt to analyze the source, tendency, and permissibility of the inclinations he is shocked to have caught himself expressing (“Hallo!”). In saying that he must “go by reason” (note how the journey metaphor colors Charles’s language here too) Charles makes the error Newman had identified as “confounding” implicit and explicit reason into a single conception of reason as always operating clearly and consciously; that is, he does not recognize

¹³⁰ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 257.

¹³¹ Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 296.

his initial outburst as being, in its own way, the result of a reasoning process that has been going on for a long time.

Charles's conversion narrative, the experience of Catholicism "coming home" to him, harkens back to Newman's account of "real assent." Boy encounters idea; years pass, things happen; man re-encounters idea; man experiences immediate, visceral assent to idea. The accidents of the man's particular experience shape his assent. But we don't need to trace the particular accidents and the ways in which they influenced this man because they are revealed in the real assent itself.

What is framed as one of the most shocking such revelations in *Loss and Gain* emerges in Charles's dialogue with his friends Sheffield and Carlton: we learn that Charles "has a kindness for celibacy."

Charles slightly coloured and laughed: 'You are a man I say things to I don't to others,' he made answer; 'as to Sheffield, he fancies he has found it out of himself.'

Carlton looked round at him sharply and curiously.

'I am ashamed of myself,' said Charles, laughing and looking confused; 'I have made you think that I have something important to tell, but really I have nothing at all.'

'Well, out with it,' said Carlton. [...]

'Why, it was only this, that Sheffield fancies I have some sneaking kindness for... celibacy myself.' [...]

There was a pause, and Carlton's face somewhat changed.

'Oh, my dear good fellow,' he said kindly, 'so you are one of them; but it will go off.'¹³²

Although it lacks the irruptive formal force that soliloquy conveys in the context of a realist novel, this scene of self-disclosure shares the sense of abrupt revelation that colors the soliloquies cited above, in part due to the evident shock with which Carlton receives this information. Charles's

¹³² Newman, *Loss and Gain*. P. 172.

own ambiguous relationship to this revelation makes this one the strangest moments of disclosure in the novel. It is unclear whether he considers himself to be making a positive admission of his “kindness for celibacy,” or simply senses something about himself that he attempts to deflect as primarily a “fancy” of Sheffield’s. Either way, the discomfort that colors this passage stems from the irresistible sense that it is precisely something about Charles, not merely a theological position but a condition of his very character, that is revealed here.

The (largely mental) “action” in *Loss and Gain* can be divided into two narrative structures, namely, dialogue as a venue for engaging and developing ideas; and the periodic, irruptive, “vivid” revelations of significant shifts in Charles’s perspective which create an implicit narrative playing out below the level of dialogue and action in the novel. These two narrative threads map on to Newman’s implicit/explicit reason binary.

As the novel’s narrative alternates between reasoned dialogue and abrupt revelation, so Charles’s views on religion develop through a combination of explicit, rational, dialogic deliberation and the unself-conscious engagement of inarticulable forces and motives within Charles himself. But the implicit reason, in addition to producing more “vivid” responses, like real assent, strongly and somewhat ineffably shapes the trajectory of the process of explicit reason. Quoting Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Pfau writes,

What distinguishes judgment from mere opinion, and so underwrites its greater probity and significance, is its continuity over time; whereas opinions 'come and go,' judgments are gradually recognized to be 'firmly fixed in our minds, with or without good reason, and have a hold upon us, whether they relate to matters of fact, or to principles of conduct, or are views of life and the world, or are prejudices, imaginations, or convictions.'¹³³

¹³³ Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2015). Pp. 55-56.

While dialogue is an important part of Charles's engagement with theological ideas, an explicit "good reason" or lack thereof does not necessarily dictate which judgments come to be "firmly fixed in our minds" – that is, which command our real (as opposed to our notional) assent. The sources of our "prejudices, imaginations, or convictions" remain stubbornly particular and personal. Similarly, the novel's narrative renders it impossible to separate the emergence of Charles's "kindness for celibacy," or any of his other Romanist inclinations, from the equally imperceptible development of the latent potentialities of his character itself. For Newman, our characters determine our "views" and our views determine our characters.

Although it is a kind of *Bildungsroman*, in narrative trajectory *Loss and Gain* is markedly anti-social. Charles finds his vocation, but the vocation of Catholic priest entails almost total alienation from the family and friends he has known. In addition to sustaining this eponymous loss, Charles has chosen a life course that precludes the forms of broader social integration typically operative in the *Bildungsroman*. Charles's "kindness for celibacy," which at other points in the novel manifests as an outright, misogynistically-tinged hostility to the worldliness of matrimony¹³⁴, perhaps best exemplifies his rejection of sociability in favor of a higher truth. *Loss and Gain*'s plot is thus emphatically one of social alienation rather than integration. And, furthermore, it is not exactly a story of how the "accidents" of our experience shape our development, but rather of how they are distilled into our character via our unconscious reason. Yet *Loss and Gain* is a social novel, and even a social-theoretical novel, insofar as it posits as a

¹³⁴ In one particularly memorable scene, Charles watches unseen and in increasing disgust as a former Oxford classmate goes shopping with his new wife, who is guilty of wanting to decorate their home.

key structural premise the social construction of our judgments via the “accidents” of our experience.

In both *Loss and Gain* and the *Grammar of Assent*, the idea of “accident” as simultaneously a known and an unknown quantity serves as a stand-in for any legible causal narrative. Like statistics, character and assent emerge from an unknowable multitude of “accidents” as self-contained, socially determined facts. Both character and the latent assents that constitute it thus stand as the only available evidence or revelation of the influence of these uncountable accidents. Of course, for Newman, the cause that lies behind this multiplicity of accidental causes is God. Newman seems fundamentally interested in scientifically explicable causes, but ultimately presents a scenario in both statistical formulations of judgment and more traditional understandings of private judgment as a self-conscious process are descriptive accounts that cannot capture what is actually going on beneath the surface. Like free indirect discourse, statistics, while it purports to represent an explicit fact, offers Newman a means of formalizing the multiplicity and unknowability of the accidental causes that shape an individual’s character and become subtle influences on his judgment. In representing the potential for unknowable and uncountable causes to operate on our judgment, Newman raises the possibility that these untraceable but all-important causes are the form given by science to the divine will.

Chapter Four

“Men Are Not, When Brought Together, Converted into Another Kind of Substance.” John
Stuart Mill’s Sociology of Character

Like John Henry Newman, John Stuart Mill focalizes his study of social forces through the figure of the individual character. But unlike Newman (and, as we shall see, in contrast to Herbert Spencer’s sociology as well), Mill is also invested in the idea that individual judgments and actions derive from the individual character, rather than from some larger social entity working *through* the individual character. In a strange counterpoint to Newman’s reformulation of private judgment to mirror the form of statistical thinking, the sociologist Mill attempts to reformulate the emerging discourse of social science into the shape of individual judgment.

In Mill’s *Logic of the Moral Sciences*, the difference between personal and impersonal forms of social knowledge exists as an unarticulated shadow argument in Mill’s text, deeply informing the sociology that Mill unfolds without ever being explicitly articulated in terms of its two most significant axes, the relationship between small and large scales and the relationship between judgment and empirical knowledge. It is this shadow argument that underlies Mill’s attitude of ultimate optimism about the freedom of the individual will in the face of a scientific necessitarianism that seems to preclude the influence of any individual choice. In the *Logic of the Moral Sciences*, Mill outlines a science of society that creates a conception of the social whole through humanistic judgment rather than empirical observation or indexical representation.

Arguably the single most important social theorist of nineteenth-century Britain, Mill made seminal contributions to the fields of political science, psychology, and sociology. Yet the trajectory that he envisions for the sciences of the social runs counter, in crucial ways, to the major

intellectual currents of social science of his time, in terms of both methodology and, especially, of its sense of ends. The sociology that he envisions thus ultimately feels strangely anachronistic, the product of a mind that does not distinguish as his scientific contemporaries have begun to do between humanistic thought and a new discipline of social science. A reading of Mill's conflation of the two epistemological modes throws the distinct parameters of this new discipline into starker relief.

I "The Social Science is a Deductive Science"

As Dickens registered in *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*, the ideas of representation and synthesis of facts in mid-nineteenth century social science were associated with an ethos of self-effacing objectivity wherein the individual will is suppressed and subjective experience filtered out in order to maintain the factual integrity of empirical observations. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have observed that objectivity became an "epistemic virtue" in the natural sciences in the mid nineteenth century.¹³⁵ Qualitatively distinct from the exercise of disinterested judgment, scientific objectivity in the mid Victorian era was increasingly coming to be understood as the absence of a shaping individual consciousness in the acquisition or representation of scientific knowledge. The increasing prominence of statistical formulations of social data was an important part of this trend. As Dickens demonstrated in his fiction, statistical conceptions of behavior remove the possibility of subjective influence by creating a set of uniform objects whose relationships can be understood in exclusively mathematical terms.

¹³⁵ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York : Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by the MIT Press, 2007). P. 4.

Mary Poovey writes that a prominent group of statisticians of the 1840s championed the idea of statistics as explicitly divorced from the shaping influence of the individual mind.

To distinguish between the method of statistics and both mathematical deduction and politically motivated theorizing, Jones and Babbage encouraged the Statistical Society of London to disavow 'speculation' and 'opinion.' ... [T]he founders announced in their statement of purpose that statistics 'does not discuss causes, nor reason upon probable effects; it seeks only to collect, arrange, and compare, that class of facts which alone can form the basis of correct conclusions with respect to social and political government.'¹³⁶

The threat of all “theorizing” is that it allows room for ulterior motives, political or otherwise, to shape one’s account of the facts. “Discussing causes” and “reasoning upon effects” reflect attempts to relate data to a larger epistemological schema via speculative judgment. This new investment in the possibility of a science that foregoes synthesizing “speculation and opinion” and limits itself to “collecting, arranging, and comparing” facts introduces a social scientific ethos in which social facts become *sui generis* phenomena and the representation of social facts becomes an end in itself.

Poovey writes, “By stressing the incontrovertible nature of statistical 'facts,' that is, by way of contrast to the excesses and deceits associated with fiction and rhetoric, apologists for statistics were able to downplay the methodological problem of moving from whatever numbers were collected to general principles.” She argues that Jones, Babbage, and their colleagues overlooked the problem of induction from statistical data in their zeal to establish statistics as an objective social science antithetical to the subjective distortions of “fiction and rhetoric.”¹³⁷ Although the purpose of gathering such data is ostensibly to provide “the basis of correct conclusions with respect to social and political government,” that is, to facilitate the conception of theories that can

¹³⁶ Poovey. Pp. 314-315.

¹³⁷ Poovey. Pp. 313-314.

lead to practical social actions, the resulting epistemology is one in which the attainment and unfiltered representation of facts emerges as the practical endpoint. Synthesis and application are relegated to a separate phase of the epistemological process.

At first glance, Utilitarianism's project of quantifying social value judgments would seem to place it right at home within a Victorian culture increasingly invested in collecting and learning from empirical social data. But as Mill occasionally points out, the Utilitarianism of his father James Mill and of Jeremy Bentham in many ways feels more grounded in eighteenth- than nineteenth-century social thought. The Utilitarian happiness calculation (*pace* Dickens's critique in *Hard Times*) ultimately prioritizes reasoning about ends over assembling factual information.

Bentham and James Mill had set out to offer an all-encompassing secular religion. Their guiding idea, the greatest happiness principle, was so broadly applicable as to be parlayed into a universal standard of judgment. The Utilitarians wanted their philosophy to offer a universal standard for individual judgment, in contrast to, e.g., Auguste Comte's argument that the standard of individual ethics should be the benefit to the individual's particular society, or Harriet Martineau's equally relativist observation (in *How to Observe Morals and Manners*) that the sense of right and wrong depends entirely upon cultural context. If the Utilitarians' greatest happiness principle sounds less like an absolutist rebuttal to such ideas than like a lofty restatement of them, it is a testament to Utilitarianism's uneasy admixture of old and new ideas about human behavior.

Although Mill expresses interest in the prospects raised by the new science of statistics, he explicitly objects to the idea of treating social facts as epistemological ends in their own right. In the *Logic*, he articulates this idea as the “Chemical Method” in social science. The “Chemical Method” derives its name not only from its empiricist approach to science, but also from its disposition to treat combinations of chemical entities as new entities in their own right. Mill sees

this idea of combination as the analog to the social sciences' elision of individual nature in their account of social behavior. "The method of philosophizing which may be termed chemical [...] proceeds as if the nature of man as an individual were not concerned at all, or were concerned in a very inferior degree, in the operations of human beings in society."¹³⁸ For Mill, this method of understanding society overlooks the true unit and endpoint of social forces:

Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance, with different properties; as hydrogen and oxygen are different from water, or as hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and azote, are different from nerves, muscles, and tendons. Human beings in society have no properties but those which are derived from, and may be resolved into, the laws of the nature of individual man."¹³⁹

For Mill, the idea of treating large-scale social phenomena as empirical fact represents an epistemological "conversion" that emphasizes the properties of the society over those of the individual, failing to recognize that the former are identical to the latter. By describing the epistemological phenomenon of social facticity as relying on the premise of an impossible conversion, Mill dismisses the idea that shifting to a different scale of observation is an important component of social scientific practice. Rather, for Mill, social scientific observation must always play out at the level of "the nature of individual man."

From this belief follows Mill's commitment to deductive over inductive social reasoning. Rather than examining the new "kind of substance" that emerges from a chemical process on its own terms, Mill interests himself in social processes themselves, and the "laws of [human] nature" that guide them. He remains convinced that deductive reasoning is the only rigorous basis for a

¹³⁸ Mill, VIII. Pp. 879-880.

¹³⁹ Mill, VIII. Pp. 879-880.

science of society. He describes his own “Concrete Deductive Method” as additive, calculating the combined effect of the many distinct forces that are operating on society.

The Social Science [...] is a deductive science; not, indeed, after the model of geometry, but after that of the more complex physical sciences. It infers the law of each effect from the laws of causation on which that effect depends; not, however, from the law merely of one cause, as in the geometrical method; but by considering all the causes which conjunctly influence the effect, and compounding their laws with one another.¹⁴⁰

Yet, given the complexity of social causes present in any given situation, to do justice to each category of social cause requires the formation of distinct subfields within social science (such as political economy) in order to furnish complete and accurate accounts of the influence of a distinct cause (such as the profit motive). Because of the difficulty of accounting for all categories of motivating causes simultaneously, it makes the most sense to have a clear division within disciplines of social science.

A social science that recognizes this need to investigate distinct social forces in their own right is one made up of several different subfields that each trace out the workings of a different cause. “Different species of social facts” depend “on different kinds of causes; and therefore not only may with advantage, but must be studied apart.” Mill compares their relationship to that among the organs of the natural body, whose “physiology and pathology... we study separately,” although “every one is acted upon by the state of all the others.... On these considerations is grounded the existence of distinct and separate, though not independent, branches or departments of sociological speculation.¹⁴¹ But Mill’s medical analogy here makes clear that if social science is to have any prescriptive value rather than providing merely descriptive knowledge, a larger

¹⁴⁰ Mill, VIII. P. 895.

¹⁴¹ Mill, VIII. Pp. 900-901.

overarching concept is needed to unite these “distinct and separate, though not independent, branches.” Medicine’s scientific division of labor rests on the basic idea of a body in which “each of the principal organs and tissues,” though it is useful to study them separately, is nonetheless “acted upon by the state of all the others.”

If the social scientist, like a physician, is to offer guidance to society, he must understand the distinct operations of different causes within the social body, but he must also understand how they all work together as part of a larger whole. So beyond disciplinary divisions Mill proposes a structure that will bring the study of these social causes out of the realm of isolated abstraction and allow for a holistic ethical response to their influence in practical life. Mill’s solution is to link all social causes by conceptualizing them in terms of a whole that they all together help to shape: that of character. Thus Mill hones in on a particular "subordinate branch of the social science" which "is directly conversant with the causes of only one class of social facts, but a cause which exercises, immediately or remotely, a paramount influence over the rest."¹⁴² This branch is "Political Ethology, or the theory of the causes which determine the type of character belonging to a people or an age. The causes of national character are scarcely at all understood, and the effect of institutions or social arrangements upon the character of the people is generally that portion of their effects which is least attended to, and least comprehended."¹⁴³ But for Mill, it is precisely this “portion of effects” that has the most to tell us about the workings of social causes.

To whoever well considers the matter, it must appear that the laws of national (or collective) character are by far the most important class of sociological laws. In the first

¹⁴² Mill, VIII. P. 905.

¹⁴³ Mill, VIII. P. 905.

place, the character which is formed by any state of social circumstances is in itself the most interesting phenomenon which that state of society can possibly present.¹⁴⁴

Where other social scientists understand causality in relation to empirically measurable social results (such as statistical data), Mill proposes that we instead approach social causality primarily from the standpoint of its formative impact upon character. For Mill, character formation is not only the most ethically significant endpoint of social science from the standpoint of prescription or guidance; it is also the most epistemologically significant endpoint of the operation of social causes from the standpoint of scientific description. In other words, where other schools of social science focus on specific, empirical “phenomena” (for instance, a nation’s murder rate) as informative endpoints of social processes, Mill takes the character formed by society as “the most interesting phenomenon which that state of society can possibly present.” His proposed sociological methodology thus has the concept of character at its core, and he has constructed a picture of society that allows this idea to remain at the ethical center of his project while simultaneously providing a framework for social description at a society-wide scale. As his rebuke of the “Chemical Method” in sociology shows, Mill does not conceive this as an epistemological tension, but rather as a natural application of the same causal “laws” to two different scales of society.

Like Martineau’s fiction, Mill’s sociology offers a way of representing society through the individual. But whereas for Martineau this is made possible by treating the individual as determined by social forces, for Mill we can understand society through individual character

¹⁴⁴ Mill, VIII. P. 905.

because individual nature is the source of the forces that operate on a society. In Mill's social theory, the individual is the natural unit of social causality, not a small fragment of a larger whole:

above all, the character, that is, the opinions, feelings, and habits, of the people, though greatly the results of the state of society which precedes them, are also greatly the causes of the state of society which follows them; and are the power by which all those of the circumstances of society which are artificial, laws and customs for instance, are altogether moulded.¹⁴⁵

Just as individuals are shaped by their encounters with other characters, so they in turn shape both the character of others and, to some extent, their own character. Mill describes a kind of social cycle with national character at the beginning and the end: "the opinions, feelings, and habits, of the people, though greatly the results of the state of society which precedes them, are also greatly the causes of the state of society which follows them." On the scale of national history, this translates into a picture in which "national character" can be expected to shape the national character of subsequent generations, but can also be taken itself as a product of the social forces of its own time, which in turn are dictated by the "national characters" which preceded it. Whether shaping or being shaped, social causality for Mill is inevitably bracketed by the concept of character. Mill will always conceive of social causality, of social laws, and social facts, in reference to their impact on character, whether individual character or its aggregate, national character. Even in the pursuit of a sociological methodology Mill cannot define social causality or social process otherwise than by its impact on the individual character, which remains in all epistemological contexts his most significant social unit.

II Mill's Social Construction of Character

¹⁴⁵ Mill, VIII. P. 905.

Even as he develops his account of the “moulding” influence of past and present circumstances on individual or national character, Mill emphatically resists the conclusion that individual character is socially determined in any way that excludes the exercise of free will. Instead, he positions character as an end, not a byproduct, of social forces. In the *Logic*, Mill raises and then dismisses the phantom of necessitarianism, the fear that everything we do as individuals is predetermined on a larger socio-historical scale. His dismissal of such social determinism hinges on the same argument he made against the “Chemical Method” of social science – that the rules of society on the mass scale are not qualitatively distinct from those on the individual scale. Mill reconceives social causation at the individual and national level as a willed project of character formation.

Mill's treatment of the determinism question does not explicitly register the tension between positivist and liberal individualist views of personhood. He represents the individual will as the solution to the problem of determinism, rather than as an epistemological construct that is fundamentally threatened by such an idea:

A necessitarian [is apt to believe that] his character is formed *for* him, and not *by* him; therefore his wishing that it had been formed differently is of no use; he has no power to alter it. But this is a grand error. [...] His character is formed by his circumstances (including among these his particular organization): but his own desire to mould it in a particular way, is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential.¹⁴⁶

Here, Mill describes the individual's relationship to the possibility of his own social determinism in terms of a narrative of character development. (This is, of course, a narrative that he will later develop more fully by retelling his personal experience of this problem in his *Autobiography*.) In

¹⁴⁶ Mill, VIII. P. 840.

this context the concern of whether we (as individuals, as a species) are free (as opposed to our actions being dictated by an aggregate of circumstances that have come to constitute our situation and our character), is reformulated into the more specific question of whether we are able, if we wish, to improve our characters. Mill counts our own desires among the influences that "mould" our characters, alongside our "education" and "circumstances."

This is the narrative of a turn-of-the-century pedagogical text or *Bildungsroman*, in which society remains a social contract among individuals rather than a *sui generis* agent. E.g., protagonists like Evelina Anville and Emma Woodhouse develop through correction from individuals because they consciously participate in their society's values and desire to earn the respect of their peers. In the world of *Middlemarch*, by contrast, Dorothea Brooke's and Rosamond Vincy's desire to become good women lead them to very different ends because each is dictated by very different causes, both internal and external, beyond the individuals' control. Mill's reference to education suggests something more akin to deliberately formative pedagogy than to the cumulative pressure of a large number of impartially exerted social forces. Indeed, Mill explicitly conceptualizes the social construction of character in terms of the project of education:

We cannot, indeed, directly will to be different from what we are. But neither did those who are supposed to have formed our characters, directly will that we should be what we are. Their will had no direct power except over their own actions. They made us what they did make us, by willing, not the end, but the requisite means; and we, when our habits are not too inveterate, can, by similarly willing the requisite means, make ourselves different. If they could place us under the influence of certain circumstances, we, in like manner, can place ourselves under the influence of other circumstances. We are exactly as capable of making our own character, if we *will*, as others are of making it for us.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Mill, VIII. P. 840.

Although our characters have been shaped by external influences, Mill argues, that doesn't mean that we can't count the force of our own wills among such influences. Here he elaborates this equivalence by referring to external causes formative of the individual will as a set of causes *willed by other individuals*. In the first two lines of this passage, Mill shifts immediately from determinism – “we cannot will to be different from what we are” – to the agency of “those” individuals “who are supposed to have formed our characters.” This move immediately equates the idea of social construction of character to an educational model in which individual people are responsible for moulding our characters. “They made us what they did make us by willing, not the end, but the requisite means,” that is, through a deliberate process of judgment in which they determined that the best way to achieve the end of “our” character development was by means of “placing us under the influence of certain circumstances.” In this account, we are indeed shaped by our “circumstances,” but they are the “circumstances” willed by the individuals around us specifically as a means to the end of our character development.

This understanding of what constitutes external social influences on an individual character of course stands in stark contrast both to sociology as we know it today and to its nineteenth-century positivist antecedents, in which mass social phenomena are read as ultimately more significant or effectual than individual efforts, in shaping both the course of history and the character of the individual. Thus certainly from our contemporary standpoint, but also from the standpoint of the burgeoning nineteenth-century field of positivist social science, the weirdness of Mill's explanation of social determinism as the deliberate influence of one will upon another can hardly be overstated. It's hard to resist attributing some of this peculiar way of thinking about necessitarianism in character formation to a painful consciousness of his own intentionally

formative but deeply scarring upbringing by his father. But this perspective is also in deeper agreement with Mill's ethical project of facilitating character development.

Mill's subsequent account of his personal struggle with the specter of necessitarianism in his *Autobiography* suggests that not only Mill's vision of social causality, but also his vision of the function of sociology, is fundamentally character oriented. As he reflects on the baleful implications of the doctrine of necessity, he laments that this scientific truth is not likely to inspire good behavior on the individual level:

I often said to myself, what a relief it would be if I could disbelieve the doctrine of the formation of character by circumstances; and remembering the wish of Fox respecting the doctrine of resistance to governments, that it might never be forgotten by kings, nor remembered by subjects, I said that it would be a blessing if the doctrine of necessity could be believed by all quoad the characters of others, and disbelieved in regard to their own. [...] [Upon perceiving] that though our character is formed by circumstances, our own desires can do much to shape those circumstances[...] I no longer suffered under the burthen, so heavy to one who aims at being a reformer in opinions, of thinking one doctrine true, and the contrary doctrine morally beneficial.¹⁴⁸

This passage contains an undertone of Mill's disappointed expectation that the actual dispensation of things *ought* naturally to also be "morally beneficial" knowledge, that is, knowledge that will provide salutary guidance for the individual's moral judgment. Note that Mill's fantasy of nonbelief in fact represents a kind of cherry-picking from the realms both of social fact and of personal experience. Drawing on Fox's ideal government in which the doctrine of resistance is never forgotten by rulers nor remembered by subjects, Mill proposes an ideal conception of social causality that informs our understanding of others but not of ourselves. In other words, we would derive most moral benefit from a determinism that absolved other people, in our eyes, of

¹⁴⁸ John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Mill, John Stuart, 1806-1873. Works. 1963 ; v. 1 (Toronto ; Buffalo : London: University of Toronto Press ; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), I. Pp. 175-177.

responsibility for their actions and even their character, but did not absolve us. This is not Harriet Martineau's or Auguste Comte's image of universal natural law or of mass social phenomena as factual data in their own right. In this ideal scenario that Mill imagines, the primary function of the concept of "necessity" is to inform individual interactions and individual judgments; ultimately, that is, to develop a character marked by both rectitude and generosity. Mill's focus on the concept of character throughout this passage makes this especially clear: social knowledge is to inform our attitude toward "the character of others," rather than simply toward the category of other people as a group (or toward ourselves as part of that group). That is, a right understanding of social causality serves ultimately as a socially beneficial formation of individual consciousness.

This moment of wavering between belief and disbelief in the Doctrine of Necessity opens up a similar duality in the generic register of the *Autobiography*'s narrative. As Elaine Hadley and Nancy Yousef have observed, Mill's narration of this episode downplays the fact that his depression was a recurring phenomenon over many years,¹⁴⁹¹⁵⁰ to which his famous resort to poetry provided only a partial solution.

during the later returns of my dejection, the doctrine of what is called Philosophical Necessity weighed on my existence like an incubus. I felt as if I was scientifically proved to be the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if my character and that of all others had been formed for us by agencies beyond our control, and was wholly out of our own power.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ See Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010). P. 30.

¹⁵⁰ Nancy Yousef, *Isolated Cases: The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). P. 183.

¹⁵¹ Mill, I. Pp. 175-176.

In the pragmatically confessional way that only he can, Mill recalls what it feels like to be an individual living in a deterministic world. It "weighed on his existence like an incubus." This passage reads like a long scene of weary drudgery. Mill is a "helpless" slave whose entire "existence" is "weighed" down by this sense of overarching powerlessness. The impression of dull, persistent pain that strongly characterizes this scene is due in part to its departure from Mill's generally linear writing style in the *Autobiography*. The passage's opening phrase, "during the later returns of my dejection," introduces this dejection as a cyclical experience to which Mill fruitlessly returns again and again, compounding his sense of powerlessness. What in his first depressive episode was characterized as a "life" with defined "objects" becomes in this passage an "existence" with no forward trajectory.¹⁵²

The first moment of crisis recounts the breakdown of Mill's teleological vision of his own life: "All my happiness was to have been found in the pursuit of this end." "The whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down." Yet this moment does not point beyond such a narrative understanding of Mill's experience. Rather, the structure of the episode suggests some form of resolution and resumption of a basically linear trajectory. In a narrative sense, Mill's "Life" goes on.

In the second episode, by contrast, this trajectory is more dramatically disrupted. Not only does Mill's narrative of his own life stagnate into a set of "returns" of dejection and existential weariness; Mill's narrative of self is replaced by a narrative on a different scale, impersonal and indifferent to Mill's development. This overarching social narrative renders him "wholly" powerless, his character "formed by agencies beyond [his] control." From being one of the

¹⁵² Mill, I. P. 139.

deliberate ends of his own narrative, the formation of Mill's character becomes an incidental result of "antecedent circumstances." While the confusion of the first passage was contained within a structure focused on "looking forward to" certain "objects" and "ends," so that we can imagine it as a crisis of Mill's choice of personal ends rather than as a crisis in the structure by which he narrates his life, the second passage offers a glimpse of a narrative structure in which the determining power of "antecedent causes" supersedes both Mill's ends and Mill as an end.

This moment in the latter half of the text thus threatens to unbalance the status of the *Autobiography* itself. Rather than telling the *Bildungsgeschichte* of Mill's cultivation and improvement of his character (the text's implicit function), or offering a pedagogical model to be deliberately and selectively adopted (one of Mill's stated purposes), the *Autobiography* in this passage opens up the possibility that it can instead be read as a narrative of the inexorable working of social law "forming his character for him." Such a reading destabilizes the *Autobiography's* narrative privileging of ethical projects of social reform and deliberately undertaken character development. With this interpretation available, Mill's alternation of clinical objectivity with emotional confession begins to resemble the fragmentary novelistic plots discussed in previous chapters that portion off static individual character from impersonal narrative process. Mill rejects the possibility of such a subdivision of the functions of the reasoning mind, however. Instead, in the narrative structure of the *Autobiography* as in the sociological methodology of the *Logic*, he concludes this line of thought by closing off this potential alternate narrative and returning with renewed emphasis to his lived experience of the development of his own character.

III The Experience of Predictability

Mill's wish that we might believe the Doctrine of Necessity with respect to others and disbelieve it with respect to ourselves reflects not only the didactic bent of his sociology, but also

the epistemological significance that this sociology accords to subjective states of mind. In the same passage of the *Autobiography*, he proposes a more practicable solution to the malign influence of necessitarianism that yet remains grounded in individual attitude rather than empirical fact: "I perceived, that the word Necessity, as a name for the doctrine of Cause and Effect applied to human action, carried with it a misleading association; and that this association was the operative force in the depressing and paralysing influence which I had experienced."¹⁵³ The concept of causal necessity has not yet been successfully translated into the sphere of "human action." Necessitarianism must be brought into the human sphere with a new "association" distinct from our "misleading" connection of it with a scale of analysis that subsumes the individual. Mill believes that by correcting this "misleading association," he can yet convince his readers (and himself) that the free will of the individual is not called into question by the doctrine of "Philosophical Necessity." And he believes that so to convince them is a crucial part of the function of his sociology.

To this end, Mill's account of the scientific predictability of human behavior in the *Logic*, like his account of the social construction of character, represents sociological epistemology in terms of individual experience and interpersonal relationships. Throughout the text, Mill continues to argue that the apparent tension between the ideals of scientific description and individual character development is in fact only a problem of perception. He thus develops an account of our predictability that invokes our common sense and our felt experience to uphold our sense of free will in the face of scientific prediction of our behavior.

¹⁵³ Mill, I. Pp. 175-177.

Mill couches this account in the concrete terms of the predictability of all human actions and volitions. For Mill, the question whether human behavior (or, in his characteristically more agentive formation, "human conduct") can be predicted is a fundamental precursor to our formation of a theory of society: "At the threshold of this inquiry we are met by an objection, which, if not removed, would be fatal to the attempt to treat human conduct as a subject of science. Are the actions of human beings, like all other natural events, subject to invariable laws? Does that constancy of causation, which is the foundation of every scientific theory of successive phenomena, really obtain among them?"¹⁵⁴ In other words, given sufficient information, can human behavior be predicted?

Mill argues that it is theoretically possible to predict individual behavior. We cannot "doubt that if, in the case of any individual, our data could be complete, we even now know enough of the ultimate laws by which mental phenomena are determined, to enable us in many cases to predict, with tolerable certainty, what, in the greater number of supposable combinations of circumstances, his conduct or sentiments would be."¹⁵⁵ The language of Mill's hypothesis suggests empirical research ("data") as well as number crunching. ("Supposable combinations of circumstances" evokes the mathematical calculation of probability.) If we could obtain "complete data," we could calculate an individual's conduct. With such a statement Mill seems to align his approach to sociology with what Daston and Galison call "mechanical objectivity," meaning a methodology that relies on a mechanical or mathematical process to remove any risk of subjective judgment contaminating the results.¹⁵⁶ But far from successfully reconciling the empiricist knowledge that

¹⁵⁴ Mill, VIII. P. 835.

¹⁵⁵ Mill, VIII. Pp. 846-847.

¹⁵⁶ Daston and Galison. P. 157.

is favored by social science with the free will of the individual, Mill's argument that with enough knowledge we can predict an individual's conduct in fact turns to a fundamentally humanistic interpretation of the practices of both knowing other people and predicting their behavior.

As he has done with the term necessity, Mill now seeks to disentangle the concept of predictability itself from its connotation of determinism or, in his preferred term, "fatalism."¹⁵⁷ He does so by shifting gears from the idea of an inevitable causal narrative that can be traced by a detached scientific observer to a conception of the knowability and predictability of an individual character in which the knowing and predicting entity is another individual relying on subjective forms of knowledge. He argues that predictability goes hand in hand with good character (and, implicitly, strength of will) in the sphere of interpersonal ethics, where we not only accept that we are predictable but in many cases actually expect to be so.

This proposition I take to be a mere interpretation of universal experience, a statement in words of what everyone is internally convinced of. No one who believed that he knew thoroughly the circumstances of any case, and the characters of the different persons concerned would hesitate to foretell how all of them would act.¹⁵⁸

Although he couches this question in the epistemological terms of "knowledge," "certainty," "consequents," and "antecedents," Mill seems to have in mind a very different kind of knowability than the empirical knowledge or facticity that characterizes positivist social science. What Mill describes here is – obviously – not scientific prediction from data as it is commonly understood, but rather a more imaginative, sympathetic, particularized, and certainly more personal process. This kind of knowing is not about adding up all of the potentially influential factors in a case, but

¹⁵⁷ Mill, VIII. *A System of Logic*. P. 839.

¹⁵⁸ Mill, VIII. *A System of Logic*. Pp. 836-837.

rather about knowing a person as a person, holistically knowing their character. The entity that Mill describes as capable of predicting the conduct of an individual is clearly not a statistician or social scientist, is not institutional or objective, but, on the contrary, someone emotionally intimate with the known individual. This passage suggests that this kind of knowledge, this “assurance” of “how we shall will to act in a particular case,” is inherently subjective rather than objective.

Far from threatening our sense of freedom, Mill argues, this form of subjective predictability is one of our crucial expectations of our interpersonal relationships.

We do not feel ourselves the less free, because those to whom we are intimately known are well assured how we shall will to act in a particular case. We often, on the contrary, regard the doubt what our conduct will be, as a mark of ignorance of our character, and sometimes even resent it as an imputation.... We may be free, and yet another may have reason to be perfectly certain what use we shall make of our freedom. It is not, therefore, the doctrine that our volitions and actions are invariable consequents of our antecedent states of mind, that is either contradicted by our consciousness, or felt to be degrading.¹⁵⁹

The kind of “foretelling” that Mill describes is clearly in fact a kind of judgment, and one with obvious moral valences, since it is liable to be “resented as an imputation.” What Mill describes here as prediction is a judgment of character.

Far from being recognizably scientific, this judgment as Mill imagines it seems to contain a significant element of what we might call trust or even faith. Language that evokes our relation to religious rather than to factual “knowledge” creeps into Mill’s account of our salutary capacity to “predict” our friends’ behavior. The question is couched in terms not of knowing, but of “believing” oneself to “know thoroughly the circumstances” of a case, a word choice suggesting that such an assessment of one’s full knowledge of others’ character and circumstances is always largely subjective. To “doubt” what someone’s “conduct will be” is “resented as an imputation.”

¹⁵⁹ Mill, VIII. Pp. 836-837.

This formulates the inability to predict your friend's "conduct" as more than mere "uncertainty." Instead, Mill's use of "doubt" in this context as a negative example implicitly introduces its opposite, "faith," as a part of the paradigm of intimate personal knowledge that informs Millian prediction.

This account of what it means to know another person sounds more akin to twentieth-century Ordinary Language philosophy's ethics of subjective knowledge than to nineteenth- or twentieth-century social science's impersonal prediction through an objective cause-and-effect narrative. Mill's language of belief and doubt evokes Stanley Cavell's argument for a kind of common-sensical faith in the authenticity of other people's professions of their experience in the face of skepticism. Ordinary Language Philosophy's tenet that we have an ethical obligation to, in some sense, take on faith that the people we know are coherent selves possessed of wills and characters, rather than (in an apposite Cavellian example) will-less robots executing a script, resonates with Mill's argument that we can judge ourselves and those around us to be autonomous, willing selves because on a deep level we are committed to believing them to be so. More importantly, though, both Mill and the Ordinary Language Philosophers are able to make such an appeal by shifting into a distinct category of knowledge – although Cavell acknowledges this shift while Mill does not. In his essay "Knowing and Acknowledging," Cavell distinguishes among "certainty," "knowledge," and "acknowledging": both "certainty" and "acknowledging" may fall under the umbrella of "knowledge" broadly construed, but acknowledging is a response to a very different type of knowledge than that represented by "certainty."¹⁶⁰ To "acknowledge" that one "knows another's pain," for example, is a knowledge that is ultimately based on the particular kind

¹⁶⁰ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge [Eng.]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Pp. 256-258.

of day-to-day interpersonal faith that Cavell and Mill believe we need in order to function as ethical subjects. But, unlike Cavell, Mill does not appear to distinguish this affective, faith-based knowledge of the other from the emerging social sciences' emphasis on creating an empirical, objectively factual description of human behavior.

Instead, what Mill describes as our “predictability” to those who know us intimately sounds inextricably intertwined with the process of making value judgments about each other, since to claim *not* to know how someone may act is regarded, not as a testament to that person's autonomy, but as an insult to his character. (Implicitly, these are judgments about our friend's relation to a certain moral standard.) In a way, then, the judgments of character that Mill describes can be regarded as aspirational for ourselves and others. (In a contemporary culture more attuned to the distinction between abstractions and lived experience, we often approach this question with, “I've never been in that situation, but I'd like to think that I would respond by doing x.”) Thus, in a sense, the type of judgment that Mill describes as “prediction” represents both our evaluation of and our aspirations for our friend's character – a typically Millian combination of detached judgment and an ethical pull toward a certain outcome. Once again, then, Mill presents us with an understanding of social description as fundamentally based in the narrative of individual character development: will the individual live up to his friend's, or his own, “prediction” of how he will behave in a given situation? In this context, the failure to live up to the behavior that his friend has predicted of him can be read as a failure of narrative and character development (as well as a failure of knowledge on his friend's part), while living up to the “prediction” reflects at once a successful prediction and successful development of character. Character is thus once again the ultimate end in this scenario; the circumstances relating to the predicted action ultimately serve as confirmations of character.

Thus Mill describes, explicitly, not knowledge of people as objects acted upon by external social forces, but a qualitatively different state of knowing a person's character, a kind of knowing which, especially in Mill's example, involves emotional sympathy and investment as much as intellectual knowledge. Indeed, the practices of knowing and predicting that Mill describes sound more similar to our mode of relating to fictional characters in a novel than to other people as anonymous data points in a scientific calculation of society. We do not feel ourselves to be the less free, Mill observes, because we believe our characters can be known in this way. Rather, he implies, we feel comforted and validated by the belief that those closest to us deeply understand our characters; and, if anything, we feel hurt when we find that they do not know us as well as our intimacy with them gives us reason to expect. Andrew Miller has compellingly described Mill's "relational understanding of selfhood" that "understand[s] the self to be constituted in relation to others and across time."¹⁶¹ The kind of knowledge that Mill describes here comes closer to this sense of moral knowing than to any purely empirical conception of knowledge.

Mill's argument appeals to human experience, together with the sort of common-sensical attitude he evokes with his reference to "what everyone is internally convinced of."¹⁶² Yet it is unconvincing as a rebuttal of concerns about determinism because the kind of knowledge and prediction that he describes here are so distinct from the objective cause-and-effect prediction of human behavior that positivist social science sets out to achieve.

Mill attempts to assuage the anxiety incurred by scientific premises about society by translating these premises into the realm of ethical judgment of character. He continues to

¹⁶¹ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). Pp. 15-16.

¹⁶² Mill, VIII. *System of Logic*. Pp. 836-837.

investigate this question in the context of individual and interpersonal experience, in fact to the exclusion of emerging scientific methodological values such as empiricism and objectivity -- values that nineteenth century thinkers were able to apply to human behavior precisely by approaching society from the standpoint of mass behavior rather than individual judgment. When he refers to the potential predictability of all human action, he still has in mind our ability to predict action based on a knowledge of individual character. Mill's approach to the idea of knowing and predicting another person sounds more akin to imaginative fiction than to social science.

On the one hand, we have Mill's initial assertion that predicting human behavior is a question of collecting empirical data to trace the influences of an uncountable number of random experiences and circumstances. On the other, he claims that knowledge of character is an interpersonal, subjective enterprise, and that character is shaped by the influence of other individual wills. Basically, two different kinds of narratives are at work here. The two do not have to be mutually exclusive. But because Mill is ultimately invested in arguing for a paradigm of individual experience that privileges individual agency and thus the power of the individual will, he insists on an individual-scaled narrative of determinism so that the individual will can be the primary cause of which the individual character is the effect. In this characterization he substitutes other wills in specific interpersonal interaction with the character in question for social forces that by definition exist and operate only beyond the individual scale. Through his account of individual conduct and the place of the will (relative to the big picture diachronic narrative) Mill argues that character is an end, not a means, of human behavior. Through both an explicit and a shadow argument about how we know, and predict, things about other people, he implicitly advances the epistemological argument that character is an end and not a means of sociological inquiry. In particular, rather than being a means for social knowledge it is an end of judgment.

IV Mill's Sociological Subject

As his vision of the social can always be reduced to interaction among individual wills and the development of individual characters, so Mill's reasoning, in the *System of Logic* and elsewhere, always rests on the ultimate formal assumption of a rational, experiencing individual consciousness who is working through these problems from a sort of abstracted individual perspective. Hence the characteristic reasonable, common-sensical tone with which he approaches even the thorniest abstract issues, replete with implicit as well as explicit appeals to those things which anyone can understand, which everyone feels to be true. What makes his style of writing so accessible for his area of inquiry is his investment in proceeding from the categories of experience that everyone shares. John Plotz has observed that Mill finds fictional texts to be “at their most intimate when they express the most universalizable notions,” and his own writings, even at their most logically abstract, engage in this “form of vicarious intimacy” as well.¹⁶³ As Plotz points out, the most important sites of interpersonal connection for Mill are textual, as literature taps into universal emotions and experiences that can profoundly connect writer and reader. Of his encounter with Wordsworth's poetry in the midst of his depression, Mill famously writes, “In them I seemed to draw from a source of... sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings.”¹⁶⁴

Here as in his approach to this problem in the *Autobiography*, Mill ultimately brings the question back to one of individual experience. In both contexts he argues that the real problem with the doctrine of necessity is the psychological one of our associations with the word necessity

¹⁶³ John Plotz, ‘Antisocial Fictions: Mill and the Novel’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 43.1 (2010), 38–46 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-2009-060>>. P. 45.

¹⁶⁴ Mill, I. *Autobiography*. P. 151.

itself. "I am inclined to think that this error is almost wholly an effect of the associations with a word; and that it would be prevented, by forbearing to employ, for the expression of the simple fact of causation, so extremely inappropriate a term as Necessity."¹⁶⁵

For Mill, it is our mistake to believe that the idea of causal necessity means the same thing with respect to human social behavior as it does in the natural sciences. (Positivists such as Comte and Martineau would argue that they are indeed applying the concepts that have held sway in natural science to the science of humans, and that we are meant to understand such concepts in the same way.) Since this association however seems indelible, it is necessary to translate the concept into the realm of social science by referring instead of "necessity" to some other term with different connotations. For Mill, "to call [the predictability of a sequence of events] by the name necessity [...] amount[s] almost to a play upon words."¹⁶⁶ The solution is to henceforth describe the idea in a word better suited to our feelings and to our own experience of cause and effect. Mill approaches this in terms of our own experience of our thought process as well as our relationships with others. So the problem comes back to our perceptions of a word, but ultimately, beyond that, to our perceptions of ourselves. We have free will because we perceive ourselves to have free will, because we have the moral feeling of having free will.

Like the Utilitarianism of his father and Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill's sociology relies on an intellectual attitude that Elaine Hadley has described as liberal "disinterestedness" rather than on the practice of scientific objectivity that increasingly sought to erase the human perspective from the process of observation over the course of the development of nineteenth-century scientific

¹⁶⁵ Mill, VIII. P. 839.

¹⁶⁶ Mill, VIII. P. 839.

methodology.¹⁶⁷¹⁶⁸ Despite the severity and asceticism of Mill *père's* social project, difficult as it is to disentangle from his coldness and inhumanity as a father, the utilitarianism of James Mill and Bentham unmistakably resembles the more humanistic social theory of Mill *fil's* in this: that it is less interested in informing us of social facts than in offering something like a narrative of how a rational mind might arrive at social judgments. (In this Utilitarianism resembles another great paradigm of the early 19th century, the *Bildungsroman*, although one shudders to imagine what sort of *Bildungsroman* James Mill might write.) Once again, Mill's reformulation of social science stands as the inverse of Newman's reformulation of judgment: while the reasoning process was ultimately unknowable for Newman, its knowability is crucial for Mill. Like his father's, John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism relies on the framing presupposition of a rational consciousness. And like his father's, the younger Mill's social thought retains Enlightenment social theory's investment in uniting observation of social phenomena with ethical guidance for an increasingly secularized world.

In his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), Jeremy Bentham tells his readers why they should adopt his Utilitarian ethics. His case is that they should think like Utilitarians because, if they thought about it, they would realize that they already do.

Not that there has ever been anyone, however stupid or perverse, who hasn't often and perhaps usually deferred to [the principle of utility]. By the natural constitution of the human frame, on most occasions of their lives men in general embrace this principle, without thinking of it; if not for the ordering of their own actions, yet for the trying of their own actions, as well as of those of other men.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Hadley. P. 75.

¹⁶⁸ Daston and Galison.

¹⁶⁹ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford : Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1996). P. 13.

The teachings of utilitarian philosophy should be accepted because they are already descriptive of actual human behaviors and preferences. People are acting and judging according to the principle of utility without realizing it. Bentham has, not inductively discovered a "natural law" that (analogously to the laws of political economy for Harriet Martineau) deterministically dictates the processes by which people arrive at certain decisions, but rather articulated as a unified category the hitherto undefined standard of judgment that people tend to freely choose to use when making decisions.

This argument for utilitarianism is in essence a philosophical argument for making ethical judgments as you already would. Ultimately, Bentham and the Mills sought to develop a secular framework for individual value judgments. John Stuart Mill's sociology is the logical extension of this project. His humanistic epistemology fundamentally relies upon the idea of the sociological observer as a detached judging individual, rather than an objective, institutional, scientific viewpoint. Mill's sociology is designed to inform individual judgments about individual and national character – to inform our interpersonal relationships and our ideas about education – rather than “converting” individual character into a new, unfamiliar mass entity. Mill resists this “conversion” by maintaining a social epistemology in which individual character is both subject and telos, rather than a mere index of the workings of social forces.

Chapter Five

“The Looking Before and After, Which is our Grand Human Privilege”: The Statics and Dynamics of Social Perspective in George Eliot and Herbert Spencer

Disturbed by the ethical implications of sociology’s claims that people are both scientifically predictable and socially conditioned, Mill recasts these ideas in terms that invite the individual will back into the picture, such as respect for character, trust in one’s friends, and educational projects. Like realist novelists, Mill makes the move of returning social phenomena to the level of the individual. His move is to ask, not how science might predict or society might shape the collective behavior of a nation, but how we can understand individuals – ourselves, our neighbors – as predictable and shapeable in a way that poses no threat to our sense of ourselves as morally responsible beings. This move thus reflects an obvious shift in the scale of observation; but just as crucially, it also replaces the objective standpoint of either positivist or statistical social science with the perspective of the rational individual subject. Mill’s argument that our knowability need not preclude individual agency rests on the idea that we are knowable as moral characters by our friends and neighbors, rather than as facts or statistics by institutional entities. Mill’s sociology privileges the “common sense,” common experiences, and rational processes of a universalized individual consciousness as the ultimate type of social knowledge.

Mill’s emphasis on a universal idea of rational individual perspective as the basis for social thought, not only in his *Autobiography* but also in his theoretical prose, ironically places his sociological writing in stark contrast to the fiction of Newman and even of Dickens. For Dickens a coherent individual perspective was unattainable; for Newman it was all-important but unknowable. The novels of both seem to separate the character with a predetermined set of “views” and the fragmentary narrative rather than emphasizing the narrative development of character

through the formation and evolution of a character's social perspective. These novels, like Mill's sociological prose, participate in a progression by which individual character and perspective come unmoored from the structure of fictional narrative. This trend continues in George Eliot's last completed work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), which, through a series of essays, unfolds the perspective of a central persona who exists outside the bounds of realist narrative. Combining a capacity for detached judgment with strong local affective ties, this persona – “Theophrastus” – is Eliot's ideal social observer. Herbert Spencer, whose social thought deeply influenced Eliot's own views, argues in favor of such localization but against reflection: individual perspectives and sentiments should be reported but not reflectively adjusted, since the individual mind is a mere conduit for the social will and the individual perspective cannot grasp the large-scale trajectory of his society. Eliot's theory of social knowledge in *Impressions* bears the marks of Spencer's views on the importance of the small and the local, as opposed to an idealized past or future. But Eliot complicates Spencer's advocacy for the local, particular viewpoint by seeking to formally incorporate detached reflection into a local perspective. We might read her theory of productive social perspective as an unlikely compromise between Mill's universal rational subject and Spencer's “static” vessel of socially determined sentiment. The loose, atemporal form of *Impressions* allows Eliot to merge particular sentiment with deliberate reflection to create such an ideal viewpoint. But for Eliot, such a perspective can only exist outside of the perpetual shaping influence of narrative events.

I. Spencer: The Balance of Character and Society

Herbert Spencer's evolutionary theory of society casts the qualities and values of the individual as adaptations to the existential needs of his society at that period. For example, Spencer explains the propensity of aggressive, violent societies to hero-worship by its function as a

necessary curb on what would otherwise be unchecked violence.¹⁷⁰ Society in Spencer's view is an organic being constantly striving toward balance in the short term and progress (which Spencer conceives as maximum individuation) in the long term. This adaptation to create balance is the eponymous "statics" that characterizes almost all of Spencer's thought, from what William James somewhat derisively calls the "definition of mind as correspondence,"¹⁷¹ laid out in Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* to the social adjustments that Spencer believes keep a society in balance in the short term while gradually building toward long-term progress.

Thus the social construction of individual character in Spencer consists of individual traits adapting to external social necessity, as in the hero-worship example. "Incongruity between character and institutions is the disturbing force," and it is rectified in extreme cases by revolution, and in general by the adaptation of social and individual character.¹⁷² In *Social Statics*, Spencer argues that character and value must be a function of the stage of society's development, or they would have remained constant throughout history. He finds that "conceptions of right and wrong" "completely... depend upon the balance of impulses existing in men" rather than upon any "tracing out of actions to their final good or bad consequences." In the latter case "it would follow, that in all ages and nations, men of equal intelligence should have like ethical theories, whilst contemporaries should have unlike ones, if their reflective powers are unlike." But in fact,

both history and daily experience prove to us that men's ideas of rectitude correspond to the sentiments and instincts predominating in them. ... [O]n the theory that opinion is a resultant of moral forces, whose equilibrium varies with every race and epoch—that is, with every phase of adaptation—the rationale is self-evident. Nor, indeed,... does it appear

¹⁷⁰ Spencer. P. 381.

¹⁷¹ William James, 'Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 12.1 (1878), 1–18.

¹⁷² Spencer. Pp. 388-389.

that society could ever hold together were not opinion thus dependent upon the balance of feelings.¹⁷³

Morals – or, rather, “men’s ideas of rectitude,” at any given historical moment – are not dictated by any abstract law that can be understood through rational deliberation independently of one’s social context. Rather, “opinion” is the product of the adaptation of moral forces to the social conditions of a given “race and epoch.” Spencer traces individual “feelings” to the workings of “moral forces” coming to equilibrium. As an important part of the process of adaptation in each epoch, “feelings” are determined by society’s need for balance, and in turn help to contribute to the attainment of that balance.

Because of this, Spencer argues that the most local, immediate, and unreflecting sentiment is the most socially valuable form of individual perspective. Because sentiment is a function of a society’s balance of “moral forces,” it becomes one of the most accurate indices of a society’s stage of development. “The strengths of these sentiments are proportionate to the necessity for the institutions they respond to. And the social organization proper for a given people at a given time, will be one bearing the impress of these sentiments in the ratio of their prevalence amongst that people at that time.”¹⁷⁴ This makes the open expression of such organically arising sentiments, prior to any calculation or judgment about ends, crucial to the process of social adaptation.

Of all these [various progressive and resistant sentiments] nature has need, so long as they represent sincere beliefs. ... Mark now, however, that for this resistance to be beneficial, it must come from those who think the institutions they defend really the best, and the innovations proposed absolutely wrong.... So long as the natural conservatism ever present in society is left to restrain the progressive tendency, things will go right; but add to this natural conservatism an artificial conservatism -- a conservatism not founded on love of the old, but on a theory that conservatism is needful -- and the proper ratio between the two

¹⁷³ Spencer. P. 387.

¹⁷⁴ J. D. Y. Peel, *Herbert Spencer on Social Evolution: Selected Writings*, 1972. P. 27.

forces is destroyed; the resultant is no longer in the right direction; and the effect produced by it is more or less vitiated.¹⁷⁵

Authentic self-expression is key to Spencer's distinction between espousing an opinion for instrumental means – a calculation one might be tempted to make based on the Spencerian mathematics of popular opinion that determines social progress – and expressing a sincerely held personal opinion. He takes a tone almost of exhortation – “mark, now,” such expression “must” be sincere, “must not” be calculating.

Spencer establishes a stark binary between “sincere beliefs” and statements based on what is “expedient.” Thus the “natural conservatism” of society plays a salutary role, while “a conservatism not founded on love of the old, but on a theory that conservatism is needful” throws off the balance of social opinion. One is an intellectual judgment and one what Spencer calls a “sentiment,” referring to a belief that goes deeper than “theory” or detached intellectual conviction. Spencer seems to be getting at something like a shaping, individual perspective which picks up on fundamental conditions of experience for the average person in a way that detached analysis apparently cannot. A close rather than detached perspective has something unique to offer to the project of social progress. Yet, while Spencer presents this process as a unique space for individual agency, his insistence that quasi-instinctive opinion is a more effective vehicle for social progress than deliberate ends-based calculation also rests on the idea that individual attitudes are biologically and socially determined. An individual's “honest opinion is “not an intellectual accident,” but rather a necessity of his social state.¹⁷⁶ As individuals we cannot effectively predict what will result when our positions are factored into the average societal perspective that will

¹⁷⁵ Peel. Pp. 27-28.

¹⁷⁶ Peel. P. 28.

motivate our adaptation and advancement as a society. Only Nature can create the appropriate distribution of opinions to produce the appropriate adaptation. Like Newman, Spencer attributes individual sentiments to the guiding influence of a higher power. But unlike either Mill or Newman, Spencer regards detached reflection on those sentiments as an obstacle to social progress. The socially beneficial individual perspective is the unexamined one.

Spencer's anxiety lest individuals should misrepresent their true sentiments of conservatism or radicalism doesn't just reflect his investment in the value of socially determined sentiments as the index of a social moment. Conversely, he also mistrusts teleological social calculation on the part of individuals who are in the midst of such a social moment. He worries that individuals will "destroy the proper ratio" between conservative and progressive sentiments by espousing opinions based on what they believe to be "expedient" or "needful" for the development of their society.¹⁷⁷ By thinking diachronically (about the potential development trajectory of their society), they threaten the natural synchronic process (of achieving a balance among current "moral forces") that should be unfolding organically through the authentic expression of their sentiments. Spencer expresses this binary as "statics" versus "dynamics:" "the first treating of the equilibrium of a perfect society, the second of the forces by which society is advanced toward perfection."¹⁷⁸

This advancement by its nature is a gradual process, as human beings and the world they live in each alter to suit changes in the other. Not only can a society not achieve perfection all at once, it cannot even advance too quickly, or people will be unable to adapt. Hence Spencer's

¹⁷⁷ Peel. Pp. 27-28.

¹⁷⁸ Spencer. P. 367.

central idea of social progress as the resultant of progressive and resistant popular sentiment: “From time to time the struggle eventuates in change; and by composition of forces there is produced a resultant, embodying the right amount of movement in the right direction. Thus understood, then, the theory of 'progress, and at the same time resistance,' is correct.”¹⁷⁹ This adaptive sociology of “progress, and at the same time resistance” encapsulates the aspects of Spencer’s social thought that make it fair to retroactively deem him the grandfather of the structural functionalist movement in 20th century sociology. Structural functionalism “holds that society is best understood as a complex system with various interdependent parts that work together to increase stability,” based on the premise that “social systems tend to remain in equilibrium.”¹⁸⁰ Even though Spencer’s is overall a vision of social progress and change, it also rests on the paradigmatic structural-functionalist conception of a society as a set of parts and institutions constantly readjusting themselves to achieve social equilibrium, or, in Spencer’s terms, harmony or adaptation. Society here is readjusting to achieve a short-term stasis; thus, over the very long term, it is on a trajectory of gradual but constant change and “progress.”

What Spencer provides in the above passage is an explicit formula for the conversion of public opinion into an increment of social change. The average amount of progressive sentiment in a society minus the average amount of conservative sentiment in a society equals “the right amount of movement in the right direction” (i.e., progressive or regressive) for that society at that historical moment. It’s not clear what “power” is making this calculation; it seems to simply be a part of the inevitable process of social evolution. What is new and striking about this account is

¹⁷⁹ Peel. P. 27.

¹⁸⁰ *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. by George Ritzer (Oxford, UK, Malden, USA and Carlton, Australia: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007)
<<https://doi.org/10.1111/b.9781405124331.2007.x>>.

that, rather than simply using statistics as a convenient way of conceptualizing social phenomena, Spencer seems to suggest that society fundamentally operates in this mathematical way. He gives us a statistical sociology that is fully embedded into the very workings of existence itself. In Spencer's formula, individual opinions about society are inevitably translated into a quantum of social change.

In his account of the centrality of individual opinion to social progress, Spencer describes this gradual process as the individual "adapting external arrangements to himself." He calls "opinion" "a unit of force, constituting, with other such units, the general power which works out social changes."¹⁸¹ But, although this ascription of such power to individual self-expression may superficially sound as optimistic about individual agency as Mill's argument that social conditioning is wrought by the individual will, the individual will plays no role in Spencer's account. On the contrary, individuals' opinions emerge as evidence of a larger will working through them:

It is not for nothing that [an individual] has in him these sympathies with some principles, and repugnance to others. He, with all his capacities, and desires, and beliefs, is not an accident, but a product of the time. ... And the result thus wrought out in him has a purpose. He must remember that whilst he is a child of the past, he is a parent of the future. The moral sentiment developed in him, was intended to be instrumental in producing future progress; and to gag it, or to conceal the thoughts it generates, is to balk creative design. He, like every other man, may properly consider himself as an agent through whom nature works; and when nature gives birth in him to a certain belief, she thereby authorizes him to profess and act out that belief.¹⁸²

Spencer appears to distinguish between individual character as a holistic concept and a more self-contained "internal fact" that exists within that character. "He, with all his capacities, and desires,

¹⁸¹ Peel. P. 29.

¹⁸² Peel. P. 29.

and beliefs,” refers to a holistic conception of individual character as a loose collection of an individual’s “capacities, and desires, and beliefs.” Spencer’s syntactical choice to create a cumulative list of “and”s, rather than a regular series, reflects the looseness of this assemblage of traits. As Spencer develops this account, it becomes clear that it is no longer “character” itself which “adapts external arrangements to itself.” Rather, an opinion that is one of the constituent elements of character works through the character as a whole to effect this adaptation of outward facts. This opinion is a “result” that has been “wrought in him” by nature for a particular purpose which lies beyond his comprehension. He can safely leave the expression of such an opinion to “produce what effect it may” because, it seems, the exact effect has already been calculated by nature to contribute, in a manner unknowable to the individual, to “future progress.” In this account, individual character becomes essentially a vessel through which an agentive Nature, cumulatively and over time, works out her own ultimate ends.

II. George Eliot and the Composite Perspective

Like many of her contemporaries, George Eliot was profoundly influenced by Spencer’s evolutionary theories of mind and society. Spencer’s psychological and sociological application of the ideas of adaptation and organic development had such currency with Victorian readers and thinkers that they would almost certainly have had a significant impact on Eliot’s thought even independently of their infamously vexed and complicated, but ultimately long-standing personal relationship. As Peter Garratt, Sally Shuttleworth, Vanessa Lyndal Ryan, and others have shown, Spencer’s thinking about the adaptive relationship between mind and external environment provides a particularly important conceptual framework for Eliot’s treatment of consciousness and

character throughout her fiction.¹⁸³ Ryan writes, "Particularly important for nineteenth-century literature is Spencer's theory of mind, specifically mind as an adaptive function. ... Mental processes and physiological processes follow the same principles; both develop through a 'progressive evolution of the correspondence between organism and environment.'" Spencer "thereby establishes a similarity of mental processes to life processes in general."¹⁸⁴

Thus, in addition to understanding the desires and propensities of the individual as adaptations to the facts of environment, Eliot, like Spencer, represents the individual "organism" as a microcosm of the social "organism," wrought by the same forces on a smaller scale. Spencer locates in the individual the seeds of the phenomena that are manifested in the character of the society as a whole. In a move that might be called the organicist analog to statistics' construction of an "average man" out of the aggregated traits of his society, Spencer writes that, " just as the attractions and affinities which are latent in separate atoms become visible when those atoms are approximated, so the forces that are dormant in the isolated man are rendered active by juxtaposition with his fellows."¹⁸⁵ We can characterize the "latent attractions and affinities" present within the individual based on the character of the social whole. Ryan writes that "Spencer did not believe in a unified individuality of the biological organism any more than he did in that

¹⁸³ Peter Garratt, *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge, and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer, and George Eliot* (Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press, 2010); Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (CUP Archive, 1984); Vanessa L. Ryan, *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (JHU Press, 2012).

¹⁸⁴ Ryan. P. 192.

¹⁸⁵ Spencer. Pp. 17-18.

of the social organism.” Rather, he considered both the individual and society as “composite state[s] of consciousness” whose component parts were constantly adjusting themselves.¹⁸⁶

George Eliot’s depiction of the silent operation of latent motives within the heart and mind represents the individual consciousness as a smaller-scale space of encounter and accommodation among various sentiments. On occasion, Eliot explicitly compares this process to the operation of social institutions. As Ryan observes, Eliot frequently depicts individual actions as the results of the internal machinations of a wide array of psychological factors of which the individual is completely unaware. Ryan cites Eliot’s account of the internal process behind Arthur Donnithorne’s fateful withholding in conversation with Reverend Irwine in *Adam Bede*. Eliot “complicates the etiology of choice by invoking the state as a figure for consciousness,” presenting the mind as a site of multifarious labors and influences, in which “a great deal of hard work is done by agents who are not acknowledged.”¹⁸⁷ Eliot’s observation in *Middlemarch* that “Our passions do not live apart in locked chambers, but, dressed in their small wardrobe of notions, bring their provisions to a common table and mess together, feeding out of the common store according to their appetite”¹⁸⁸ exemplifies the same phenomenon: the self is not simply one irreducible entity, but a complex of innumerable “passions,” motives, and ideas that all interact with each other to shape the desires of the unwitting individual.

In *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Eliot explores the vexed relationship between individual “notions” and national character through the construction of a loose persona who

¹⁸⁶ Ryan. Pp. 94-95.

¹⁸⁷ Ryan. Pp. 62-63.

¹⁸⁸ George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, Broadview Editions (Peterborough, Ont. ; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004). P. 156.

becomes known to the reader as a set of memories and perspectives. *Impressions* is both her most formally experimental and arguably her most philosophically radical literary work. It consists of a diffuse collection of social observations and commentaries in the voice of a respectable but undistinguished scholar, seemingly an anonymous everyman of the London literati. As Nancy Henry observes, the title's invocation of the *Characters* of Theophrastus of the Peripatetic School suggests the recognizable generic category of the collection of character sketches, but Eliot's essays can only be loosely described as such. "George Eliot's version of the 'Characters' is not just a series of sketches of nineteenth-century types. It is a book about what defines moral character, about how fictional characters are created, and about how the author survives as his or her written text is inherited by successive generations."¹⁸⁹ At the center of Eliot's exploration of character as a social and aesthetic form stands the text's organizing consciousness, which is constituted neither as a fully developed character, nor as an everyman, nor as a type, but unmistakably as a distinct perspective.

In terms of level of individuation, the voice (not quite "narrator") of the text bears a stronger resemblance to the genial local narrator at the beginning of *Adam Bede* than to the farther-sighted narrators of *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda*, whose capacity for detached observation along with their predictive abilities would seem to align them in some respects more closely with social-scientific than with personal forms of knowledge. Yet neither could this speaker be considered a complete character in any conventional understanding of the term. If we accept Nancy Henry's argument that "Theophrastus Such" is not necessarily his name, he doesn't pass the Ian

¹⁸⁹ Nancy Henry, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such by George Eliot* (Iowa City, IA: U of Iowa P, 1994). Pp. xii-xiii.

Watt test.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, even if it is meant to be his name, it is a name that marks him as a “type” rather than a character of the kind traditionally associated with realist fiction. (While I find Henry’s argument convincing, I will refer to him as Theophrastus for the sake of convenience.) The concrete facts we know about him are that he is a writer, that he lives in London; that he is a bachelor and the son of a country preacher. These are the kinds of facts that usually serve to position a realist hero firmly within (a facsimile of) the real world; home, vocation, and marital status in particular are the pieces that fall into place at the conclusion of a *Bildungsroman* to show that the protagonist has successfully integrated himself into society. Yet in *Impressions*, Theophrastus’s residence in London and career as a writer function more as the coordinates of a specific type or milieu, that of London intellectuals, than of a specific individual life. Theophrastus’s bachelorhood likewise sets him apart from the realm of realist character development, in accordance with the time-honored literary association of marriage with both social integration and subjection to the practical (financial) realities of life. (Eliot draws on this trope in one of the essays in *Impressions*, “The Half-Breed,” which reads as an abstracted retelling of the Lydgate-Rosamond storyline in *Middlemarch*.) Theophrastus is not subject to any narrative forms of social or economic necessity.

Theophrastus’s background as the son of a country parson stands out as the most distinctly English marker of his everyman status, suggesting that he represents the “type” of the Englishman. He imagines the English landscape and the English man in a sympathetic flux: “our woodlands and pastures, our corn-fields and meadows, .. our villages along the old coach-roads, are all easily alterable lineaments that seem to make the face of our Motherland sympathetic with the laborious

¹⁹⁰ Henry. P. xvi.

lives of her children.”¹⁹¹ The “Motherland” reflects the changes undergone by “her children” as they reflect the changes that happen in them. Theophrastus makes his sense of identification with his nation still more explicit by remarking that his upbringing allowed him to identify with people across all classes. His generic Englishness (in contrast with his status as a London intellectual) is bolstered by the ability to socially and imaginatively traverse class boundaries which he attributes to his father’s parish work. “I am rather fond of the mental furniture I got by having a father who was well acquainted with all ranks of his neighbours. . . . 'A clergyman, lad,' he used to say to me, 'should feel in himself a bit of every class.'”¹⁹² Theophrastus has for his “mental furniture” “the large sympathetic knowledge of human experience which comes from contact with various classes on their own level;” his mind is furnished with “bits” of the experience of all classes, allowing him to attain a perspective beyond that of his own “type,” a perspective more broadly “national.”¹⁹³ “I have always thought that the most fortunate Britons are those whose experience has given them a practical share in many aspects of the national lot.”¹⁹⁴

In a text built on an ethos of second-guessing all claims, especially claims about character, and most especially the claims advanced by an individual about his own character, we might be inclined to doubt Theophrastus’s self-characterization as a person of “large sympathetic knowledge of human experience.” After all, after the first two essays, “Looking Backward” and “Looking Inward,” which introduce us to him and his background, we hear of his experiences only in London dining-rooms and drawing-rooms as a member of an insular intellectual milieu plagued

¹⁹¹ George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed, 1994. P. 25.

¹⁹² Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. Pp. 18-19.

¹⁹³ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. Pp. 18-19.

¹⁹⁴ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 19.

with myopia and conceit. Yet in defense of its probability, Theophrastus's assertion is embedded in a whole essay of loving reminiscences of the English countryside of Theophrastus's childhood, and its people. Then there are the familiar strains that make it impossible not to hear Eliot's voice speaking directly through Theophrastus. A turn of phrase such as "the large sympathetic knowledge of human experience" strikes such an instantly recognizable Eliotic chord that it is difficult to imagine it being uttered disingenuously by any of her characters. In conjunction with this distinctive voice, the content of these nostalgic reflections inevitably suggests that this passage is in some degree autobiographical for Eliot as well as for the character through whose voice she speaks. The expressions of love for country life recall various moments throughout her novels in general, perhaps especially Fred Vincy and Mary Garth's countryside. Theophrastus's recollection of "the time when the fitful gleams of a spring day used to show me my own shadow as that of a small boy on a small pony, riding by the side of a larger cob-mounted shadow over the breezy uplands which we used to dignify with the name of hills, or along by-roads with broad grassy borders and hedgerows reckless of utility" echoes the narrator's invocation in *Middlemarch* of "the things that make the gamut of joy in landscape to midland-bred souls – the things they toddled among, or perhaps learned by heart standing between their father's knees while he drove leisurely."¹⁹⁵ Theophrastus's related sentiments of strong local attachment serve to balance out the cosmopolitan detachment and broad historical view of the London intellectual with values and investments arising out of particular empirical experience. "I often smile at my consciousness that certain conservative prepossessions have mingled themselves for me with the influences of our

¹⁹⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*. P. 109.

midland scenery, from the tops of the elms down to the buttercups and the little wayside vetches.”¹⁹⁶ Regional experience shapes social perspective.

II. The Social Value of the Mostly Embedded Perspective

Theophrastus is, early in *Impressions*, established as a persona arising out of a balance of several available “types” – a middle-of-the-road perspective embracing common English experiences and values but tempering them with the cosmopolitan perspective of the urban literati. John Plotz has described the interpersonal interactions in both Eliot’s novels and *Impressions* as marked by an ethos of “semi-detachment” that juxtaposes in-the-moment experience with reflection that points beyond it.¹⁹⁷ Eliot develops a similar epistemological framework on the scale of collective, social identity. On the societal scale, however, this framework ultimately privileges the embedded perspective over that which seeks to see beyond the individual’s social context.

The end of *Impressions* favors the perspective of local embedment rather than detachment. In “Shadows of the Coming Race,” Theophrastus recounts a conversation with his friend Trost about the effects of widespread mechanization for human pursuits. When Theophrastus suggests that machines might “supersede” human society instead of advancing it to new heights, Trost (echoing much of Martineau’s language about the spread of social scientific knowledge) indignantly faults his friend for his narrowness of vision. “If you had once understood the action of any delicate machine – you would perceive that the sequences it carries throughout the realm of phenomena would require many generations, perhaps aeons, of understandings considerably

¹⁹⁶ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. Pp. 22-23.

¹⁹⁷ John Plotz, *Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Partial Absorption* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). P. 6.

stronger than yours, to exhaust the store of work it lays open.”¹⁹⁸ Accepting this harsh characterization of his own ability, Theophrastus answers that it is exactly this narrowness of vision which allows him to see things that his far-seeing friend cannot, to see people as people rather than humanity as a “machine”:

'Precisely,' said I, with a meekness which I felt was praiseworthy; 'it is the feebleness of my capacity, bringing me nearer than you to the human average, that perhaps enables me to imagine certain results better than you can. Doubtless the very fishes of our rivers, gullible as they look, and slow as they are to be rightly convinced in another order of facts, form fewer false expectations about each other than we should form about them if we were in a position of somewhat fuller intercourse with their species; for even as it is we have continually to be surprised that they do not rise to our carefully selected bait. Take me then as a sort of reflective and experienced carp; but do not estimate the justice of my ideas by my facial expression.'¹⁹⁹

We get two levels of Theophrastus’s self-characterization here: how he characterizes himself to his interlocutor Trost, and how he characterizes that statement to the reader. His paradoxical sense of ‘praiseworthy meekness’ harmonizes with the paradox of greater insight from less knowledge, and suggests a sort of perverse pride in aligning himself with the carp, or with the mass of men, whose intellectual pursuits may not immediately be elevated by the removal of their manual labors. This prideful meekness of course is in keeping with Theophrastus’s main point here, which is that the closer one is, in status and abilities, to “the human average,” the more insight one has into human society and its potentialities as they currently stand. Theophrastus’s chosen metaphor compares a fish’s level of insight into the parameters of fish behavior to that of a detached human observer (with what designs on the fish is unclear). Not only are the carp and the human operating in different orders of facts, but Theophrastus rather jarringly suggests here that an observer who is

¹⁹⁸ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 140.

¹⁹⁹ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 140.

closer to an outlier than to the average may as well belong to a different species than the average man. This idea could quickly run to the absurd, creating a scenario wherein only the perfectly average man is qualified to make predictions about his species or his society. Eliot's argument about sociological judgment, like the "reflective and experienced carp," seeks to develop a middle ground between an ideal of knowledge as detached scientific observation, and an ideal of knowledge as simple embodiment, of a social phenomenon.

This quasi-instinctual awareness of limitation is an artifact of the form of the carp's perspective.²⁰⁰ The carp shares a way of seeing with his fellow average fish that escapes the eye of the theorist who concerns himself with "a higher order of facts." It is an intuition or communal perspective that might qualify as a form of "common sense" ("common" in the sense of both shared among all members of the group, and of appearing with a high frequency among its members – i.e., approaching the average). Because the human observer's perspective is less narrowly delimited than the carp's, he is much less able to predict the range of possible carp behaviors than the carp is. What Eliot describes here goes beyond one carp's ability to imagine another carp's motives and behaviors based on its own, the sort of interpersonal predictability of individual behavior that Mill described based on his deep investment in the epistemological structure provided by individual character. Rather, Eliot describes a share in a sort of collective social knowledge that comes precisely from being a participant in certain aspects of social behavior rather than a detached scientific observer thereof.

²⁰⁰ See Hazel Mackenzie, 'A Dialogue of Forms: The Display of Thinking in George Eliot's "Poetry and Prose, From the Notebook of an Eccentric" and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*', *Prose Studies*, 36.2 (2014), 117–129 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01440357.2014.944298>>.

The Comtean and Spencerian overtones of the vision of progress offered in *Impressions* and perhaps especially in “Shadows of the Coming Race,” along with running water’s well known association with determinism throughout Eliot’s oeuvre, might raise doubt about the value of the perspective of a “reflective and experienced carp” in the context of the larger movement of the indifferent river. It is unclear what the reflective carp will ultimately be able to achieve through his familiarity with the shared carp perspective. It seems mostly valuable as predictive knowledge; when it comes time to act, there is a sense that the carp will just do, will act on this knowledge of limitation without necessarily recognizing it as a kind of knowledge; it is simply the shape of their vision of the world, a frame that can be known without action but also lived without knowledge. Still, this conception of a sociology of relative proximity opens the door to some epistemological, sociological value to self-reflection, even in the biologically determined world of Spencerian evolutionary sociology.

Eliot echoes Spencer’s mistrust of detached and diachronic thinking throughout *Impressions*. In the above-quoted conversation with Trost, Theophrastus contrasts the carp’s narrow but just vision of their own world with the “false expectations” of the fisherman whose calculations are based on broader knowledge. The greater scope of the latter’s thought, and his ability to make more objective calculations about how to achieve certain ends, do not translate into a better understanding of carp behavior. Such fishers “have continually to be surprised that [the fish] do not rise to our carefully selected bait.”²⁰¹

George Levine and Catherine Gallagher have read *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot’s final completed novel and her last work before *Impressions*, as marking a shift in emphasis in Eliot’s thought about

²⁰¹ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 140.

the relationship between detached judgment and affect. Levine writes, "George Eliot's conviction that mere rational and systematic thought was dehumanizing determines her rethinking of epistemology.... But it is only in *Daniel Deronda* that she risks challenging the ideal of objectivity with her deep-seated belief that knowledge is always implicated in and sustained by feeling."²⁰² While, as Levine notes, Eliot's entire oeuvre has famously been shaped by an ethics and aesthetics of sympathy for our neighbors in all their ignoble reality, *Daniel Deronda* marks the first moment in which this ethics of local sentiment translates into transformative political action on a large scale (since Felix Holt cannot be read as the product of his background or environment in the way that Daniel overdeterminedly is). In particular, Daniel must overcome a paralyzing detachment arising from a too-broad sympathy in order to understand how to function as a socio-political agent in and for a particular community. Gallagher observes that *Deronda*'s emphasis on "sympathy as a dysfunctional excess" represents a thematic reversal for Eliot, portraying "the novelistic disposition Eliot normally sought" as "a luxurious excess, which should only be experienced in a world where one's will is properly disengaged -- that is, a fictional world -- but cannot fuel action in the real world."²⁰³ In order to become a social agent, Daniel must narrow his sympathetic vision.

III. The "Danger" of "a Sort of Other-Worldliness"

Impressions of Theophrastus Such continues this critique of a detached judgment of one's society, which once again is on a continuum with sympathy directed too far from home. Individuals who consider their views elevated beyond those of their society, culture, or tradition are frequent

²⁰² George Lewis Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). P. 192.

²⁰³ Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2008). P. 151.

objects of ridicule in *Impressions*. The eponymous “Man Surprised at His Own Originality,” for instance, is enabled thus to surprise himself by his staggering ignorance of the areas of thought in which he believes himself to be breaking new ground. Eliot’s insistence throughout this text on understanding a self as fundamentally continuous with both the past and present of its nation and its race is one strong mark of the influence of Spencer’s thought. Yet, carrying this critique a degree further, Eliot suggests that excessive orientation toward past or future generations at the expense of the era in which one lives obscures rather than clarifying one’s social vision.

In his second essay, “Looking Backwards,” Theophrastus laments the common fallacy of denigrating the present age in comparison to a distant idealized past. “Most of us... would shrink from wishing that our father and mother had been somebody else whom we never knew; yet it is held no impiety... for a man to wail that he was not the son of another age and another nation, of which also he knows nothing except through the easy process of an imperfect imagination and a flattering fancy.”²⁰⁴ Familiarity breeds contempt; were he to know something of “another age and nation,” the faithless son of his own time and place would find it falling short of his imagination. But Theophrastus’s analogy to rejecting one’s own parents adds another, Burkean dimension to his epistemological critique, suggesting that we should love our own “age and nation” not only because we have no rational basis for supposing them inferior to others, but also because they are ours. We are bound to them in duty and gratitude as we are to our father and mother. And whatever we think of another age, it is both foolish and unkind to reject the age in which the work of social development is currently going forward in favor of an imaginary past or future: “All reverence and gratitude for the worthy Dead on whose labours we have entered, all care for the future generations

²⁰⁴ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 14.

whose lot we are preparing; but some affection and fairness for those who are doing the actual work of the world,”

If we fail to look thus “affectionately and fairly” on our own age, he writes,

the looking before and after, which is our grand human privilege, is in danger of turning to a sort of other-worldliness, breeding a more illogical indifference or bitterness than was ever bred by the ascetic's contemplation of heaven. Except on the ground of a primitive golden age and continuous degeneracy, I see no rational footing for scorning the whole present population of the globe, unless I scorn every previous generation from whom they have inherited their diseases of mind and body, and by consequence scorn my own scorn, which is equally an inheritance of mixed ideas and feelings concocted for me in the boiling caldron of this universally contemptible life, and so on -- scorning to infinity.²⁰⁵

As Theophrastus continues to develop this account, “the looking before and after” which allows men to avoid identifying with their own time begins to evoke the ethos of detached observation that characterizes social science. He compares this attitude of being in one’s time but not of it to “the ascetic’s contemplation of heaven” – unfavorably.²⁰⁶ The “other-worldliness” of such contemplation is paradoxically secular, elevating, not god and heaven above man and the world, but hypothetical men and societies above the present ones among which we live. This attitude of strangely worldly “other-worldliness” characterizes many of the most significant branches of nineteenth century social thought, from the materialism of Feuerbach and Marx, to Comte’s canonization of the great minds of the past, to Spencer’s own evolutionary conception of human progress. Spencer would have called this an excessive investment in “dynamics” at the expense of the statics: aspiring to a future utopia without working for improvement within the parameters of the society in which one lives. Eliot has little patience for the kind of detachment which thus consists, not in reflecting on the nature of one’s society from within, but rather in incessantly

²⁰⁵ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 17.

²⁰⁶ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 17.

comparing it to what has come before or to what may come after. For Eliot as for Spencer, such looking forward and backward interferes with our real work of affective response to our present time.

In addition to distracting individuals from what should be the strongest claims on them, Theophrastus argues, fixing their perspective at the large historical scale can muddy rather than clarify individuals' social judgment.

Wide-reaching motives, blessed and glorious as they are, ... have their dangers, like all else that touches the mixed life of the earth. ... I cannot feel sure how my voting will affect the condition of Central Asia in the coming ages, but I have good reason to believe that the future populations there will be none the worse off because I abstain from conjectural vilification of my opponents during the present parliamentary session, and I am very sure that I shall be less injurious to my contemporaries. On the whole, ... the action by which we can do the best for future ages is of the sort which has a certain beneficence and grace for contemporaries.²⁰⁷

As individuals, for all our "wide-reaching motives" and idealistic interest in "the action by which we can do the best for future ages," we cannot know much about what such action would look like. Eliot argues that we will have more success if we apply those elevated motives to our day to day interactions with those around us, since the results of action on that scale are more easily imaginable.

Despite Eliot's deep skepticism of the human impulse to look too far into the past or future at the expense of the present, she does not, like Spencer, advocate an individual ethics of exclusively unreflecting response to one's immediate circumstances. In the persona of Theophrastus she models a practice of detached judgment that relies on holding incongruous ideas, experiences, or affective attachments together simultaneously. Theophrastus often acknowledges

²⁰⁷ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 70.

the coexistence of conflicting sentiments and ideological motives within his character and his past. Instead of issuing in a unique, mathematical resultant opinion, as they would for Spencer, Theophrastus's complex and conflicted feelings and affiliations coexist as a rich, imaginative, and unusually receptive perspective.

At the end of "Looking Backward," having described in loving detail his country childhood, Theophrastus reflects on its continued presence within him in that paradigmatic social space of his current sphere of experience, the "London drawing-room":

Sometimes when I am in a crowded London drawing-room... quick flights of memory take me back among my father's parishioners while I am still conscious of elbowing men who wear the same evening uniform as myself; and I presently begin to wonder what varieties of history lie hidden under this monotony of aspect. ... [O]f my elbowing neighbours with their crush hats, I usually imagine that the most distinguished among them have probably had a far more instructive journey into manhood than mine. Here, perhaps, is a thought-worn physiognomy, seeming at the present moment to be classed as a mere species of white cravat and swallow-tail, which may once, like Faraday's, have shown itself in curiously dubious embryonic form leaning against a cottage lintel in small corduroys, and hungrily eating a bit of brown bread and bacon; there is a pair of eyes, now too much wearied by the gas-light of public assemblies, that once perhaps learned to read their native England through the same alphabet as mine -- not within the boundaries of an ancestral park, never even being driven through the county town five miles off, but -- among the midland villages and markets, along by the tree-studded hedgerows, and where the heavy barges seem in the distance to float mysteriously among the rushes and the feathered grass. Our vision, both real and ideal, has since then been filled with far other scenes.... But my eyes at least have kept their early affectionate joy in our native landscape, which is one deep root of our national life and language."²⁰⁸

Theophrastus's choice to end the chapter with this gently imaginative and haunting passage suggests, not quite a fruition of his past, but rather its lingering presence within his current life experience. This passage shows us Theophrastus holding two distinct and seemingly incongruous social visions in his head simultaneously: in the moment that he rubs shoulders with the London

²⁰⁸ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 22.

literati, “quick flights of memory take him back” to a very different milieu, in a very different setting, “among his father’s parishioners.” The coexistence of this reverie with his “elbowing neighbours” in the drawing-room opens for Theophrastus an imaginative window into the past lives of these men “who wear the same evening-uniform as himself,” and he envisions for them personal histories similarly incongruous with their current place and “uniform.”

Eliot evokes the ghostly presence of these past spheres of life in the London drawing-room with these scholarly men through establishing a strong and sustained sense of visual contrast. Theophrastus’s mind juxtaposes his present experience of these men with his imagination of the other kinds of experience through which they may have lived. While gladhanding them in their “crush hat,” “white cravat,” and “swallowtail,” he imagines one of them “leaning against a cottage lintel in small corduroys, and hungrily eating a bit of brown bread and bacon.” He goes on to juxtapose the familiar scene before them with different scenes that may have been equally familiar to them from their country past. The man now “wearied by the gas-light of public assemblies” may well remember the very different scenery of “midland villages and markets” and “tree-studded hedgerows” – scenery which, Theophrastus hastens to point out, belongs to a different category of socioeconomic identity than the “ancestral park” that one might more readily identify as the country analog to their current London surroundings.

This scene evokes memories incongruous to the current setting in a way that does not relegate them to the past, but recognizes them as in some sense as much a part of these men’s present as “the gas-light of public assemblies” or the niceties of the London drawing-room. Theophrastus winds up his engagement with these other men’s hypothetical pasts by evoking national identity through their “native landscape.” The community he is studying are scholars, and, as such, have acquired a cosmopolitan perspective through travel and study. Yet, for Theophrastus

as, he suggests, for others, this cosmopolitanism does not negate his “affectionate joy” in the experiences specific to British life and character, any more than the settings and trappings of his current socioeconomic status negate the memories of his boyhood.

Ever conscious about the possibility that he could be reduced to a one-dimensional type, Theophrastus uses this contrast between different categories of experience to point out that his colleagues, and by extension he himself, are not reducible to flat characters or simply recognized perspectives. They cannot accurately be “classed as a mere species of white cravat and swallow-tail”; they have a larger range of vision to offer than one might assume by looking at them. And Theophrastus, for his part, is able to use that larger range of vision to recognize the potential that many seemingly incompatible strains of experience and attachment can coexist within a man wearing the “uniform” of a specific type. For Theophrastus’s vision, as well as for the characters of these men, what makes these incongruities of perspective valuable and productive is precisely that the contrast is not resolved, but rather that these sentiments are allowed to coexist alongside each other, creating a richer and more complex perspective, and thereby a richer and more complex character. (Eliot’s invocation of Faraday may even suggest a correlation between such complexity of character and a degree of genius.) Theophrastus’s double vision, showing him his fellow writers and his father’s parishioners simultaneously, gives him a unique potential to understand the people around him as characters who transcend their place and time (just as he himself does). There is no merging of contraries to produce a discrete “resultant” – rather, their existence side by side opens up a distinct perspective.

IV. “A Wholesome Air” of “Good and Sound Commonplaces”

As she does with individual character, Eliot regards collective opinion more as a live body of ideas which interact to produce a fundamental sense of commonality, in this case national

cultural continuity, than as a flat, discrete fact. In *Impressions*, spaces of collective opinion serve as potential sites for the very dialogue that will advance said public opinion in a new direction. As we've seen from Theophrastus's repeated invocation of the value of certain kinds of distinctly "British" sensory memories, Eliot regards shared culture and traditions as a sort of "national language"²⁰⁹ that allows contemporaries to engage each other, whether for the "dynamical" purpose of introducing changes to the cultural perspective or values, or simply for the humbler "statical" purpose of seeing beyond the immediate appearance of the men you meet to understand the multifarious strands of experience that may have contributed to shape their character.

Her sketch of "A Too Deferential Man" emphasizes this point by exploring the violence that is done to discourse where this shared cultural foundation is not recognized. The dominant trait of the titular man is the expression of excessive astonishment at the commonplace opinions and tastes of his interlocutors. The counterpart of the "Man Surprised at his Own Originality," this man appears surprised at the originality of everyone he meets. But Eliot argues that the problem with his outlook goes beyond the gross ignorance of which the Man Surprised at his Own Originality is guilty. By reacting to widely held opinions as though they are radical original insights, the Too Deferential Man not only flusters his conversational partners but, more importantly, undermines the foundation of shared tastes and values that Eliot believes must exist among countrymen. To treat an idea or aesthetic judgment as of value only because it is new is not only to devalue the few really new ideas by comparison, but also to eliminate the matrix of commonly held beliefs into which the new can emerge in a process of mutual engagement, rather than as a stark and self-contained irruption.

²⁰⁹ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 27.

Considered purely as a matter of information, it cannot any longer be important for us to learn that a British subject included in the last census holds Shakspeare to be supreme in the presentation of character; still, it is as admissible for any one to make this statement about himself as to rub his hands and tell you that the air is brisk, if only he will let it fall as a matter of course.... It is right and meet that there should be an abundant utterance of good and sound commonplaces.... Giving a pleasant voice to what we are all well assured of, makes a sort of wholesome air for more special and dubious remark to move in.²¹⁰

“An abundant utterance of good and sound commonplaces” goes as far to establish a shared matrix of experience as the “brisk air” which Britons breathe and through which they move together. As Theophrastus reflected in his drawing-room reverie above, “our native landscape... is one deep root of our national life and language.”²¹¹ Here he suggests that the inverse is also true: “our national life and language” are part of “our native landscape” and provide the necessary soil for radical ideas to spring up in. “Good and sound commonplaces” here act as the conversational equivalent to the conservative sentiments that serve in Spencer’s statics to ground progressive ideas in order to keep society in balance. A “wholesome air” in conversation is one in which commonplaces and “more special and dubious remark” harmoniously coexist.

“Debasing the Moral Currency” makes the same argument at the level of national culture writ large. Eliot laments the contemporary tendency among her countrymen to take a mocking attitude toward their cultural institutions: if a generation comes to know Shakespeare only “through burlesque,” “the burlesquing spirit” will corrupt “every sacred, heroic, and pathetic theme which serves to make up the treasure of human admiration, hope, and love.”²¹² The language of a sacred

²¹⁰ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 50.

²¹¹ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 27.

²¹² Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. Pp. 82-83.

moral “treasure,” or “our mental wealth”²¹³ might at first seem more apposite to Eliot’s argument than the formulation of “moral currency” that she adopts for the essay’s title. But Eliot points out that our cultural treasure is fundamentally about the shared perception of value that allows for meaningful cultural exchange. To belittle this shared culture is to “lower[] the value of every inspiring fact and tradition so that it will command less and less of the spiritual products... which sustain the charm and elevation of our social existence.”²¹⁴ Eliot concludes the chapter with a glimpse of what this would look like, in an anecdote of the Tiryinthians, who collectively lost their ability to see anything but the ludicrous even in the most sacred of subjects. For good or ill, a shared culture constitutes a shared perspective, and the perversion of uniquely devaluing among the Tiryinthians eventually threw their culture irrevocably out of balance, destroying the traditional values that should have provided a stabilizing base for a less radical and all-encompassing form of critique.

Eliot insistently formulates collective “sentiment” and cultural disposition as a perspective within which it remains possible to introduce and engage new ideas, in which balance is experienced as a practice of engagement or even simple coexistence, rather than as a unique “resultant.” In the carp passage too, Eliot conceives of proximity to the “human average” in terms of sharing a certain limited perspective, so that Theophrastus’s “reflective and experienced carp” is able to offer a better social analysis than his friend Trost’s detached observer because the “reflective carp” perspective consists in holding the carp view and a slightly broader view side by

²¹³ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 83.

²¹⁴ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 84.

side, without seeking to immediately translate this picture of carp society into the farthest-reaching sociological terms.

In this sense, it seems Eliot is more royalist than the king in her literary implementation of Spencer's organicist model of both the individual and society. Where Spencer deals with the problems of scale inherent in sociological inquiry by shifting from an organic to a linear, mathematical conceptual framework, Eliot successfully formulates experience and identity in organicist terms on both individual and societal scales. Although he provides a richer and more complex account of individual experience elsewhere in the *Statics*, Spencer cannot capture the flexibility or open-endedness of thought on the individual level that his "adaptive" sociology attributes to society as a whole when he is trying to establish the specific nature of the connection between the individual perspective and the larger social trajectory.

Eliot succeeds in shifting among different social standpoints, holding them loosely together in one formal space in much the way in which she depicts Theophrastus holding two conflicting settings in his vision simultaneously. For Eliot, in the character of Theophrastus as well as throughout her novels, the idea of character as a composite of many affiliations and sentiments looks very different. Character in Eliot is a loose association of habits, values, memories, sentiments, and biases in varying degrees of harmony and coherence – but which more or less coexist with each other within an individual. As we have seen in her novels, the balance of power among them may shift, as for example Bulstrode's prideful hypocrisy becomes more potent than his conscience on the reintroduction of Raffles to his life. But Theophrastus's character demonstrates that this is not always necessarily the case through his ability to hold rural past and urban present together and be conscious that both are him; neither wins out, and neither is a more significant aspect of him than the other. He is not subject to the constant re-calibration that Spencer

describes as necessary to the continuity of a society; indeed, Eliotic communities are likewise capable of containing a wide array of beliefs and ideas. Theophrastus in his capacity as everyman, or perhaps as representative Briton, can contain many contradictory sentiments and incongruous experiences within himself without reducing them to a resultant; instead, taken all together, they constitute a self.

V. "A Terrible Coercion in Our Deeds"

While this suggests that Eliot's vision of social progress may be more open-ended than Spencer's, it also points to the importance of genre in describing the social. Eliot has perfected through fictional technology what is much more difficult to do through scientific sociological techniques that seek to synthesize everything. For Theophrastus, character represents the interaction among an array of impressions, associations, and sentiments that creates a particular perspective at any given moment. But the balance that is attained is a balance among beliefs, not among beliefs and actions; the only disturbance to the equilibrium is the introduction of a new idea. Thus Theophrastus himself feels throughout the *Impressions* less like a concrete character, grounded in a particular community and value system, than like a voice or a point of view, a set of lenses, through which we obtain a particular kind of perspective on the subjects of his observation. As for those subjects themselves, Eliot similarly represents some of them in terms of the perspective and associations (or, in some cases, ignorance) which shapes their worldview, creating not so much a type in the canonical sense as a more abstract persona. Such depictions taken together offer a snapshot of individual character at a given moment in time as attitudes and behaviors resulting from a particular social outlook. The title of one of the chapters, "Diseases of Small Authorship," expresses this idea succinctly, drawing on the metaphor of illness to express the preoccupation of its main character. "Poor Vorticella might not have been more wearisome on

a visit than the majority of her neighbours, but for this disease of magnified self-importance belonging to small authorship. I understand that the chronic complaint of ‘The Channel Islands’ never left her.”²¹⁵ While Vorticella’s complaint appears to be “chronic,” the fact that Eliot so describes it suggests that in other cases, the “diseases of small authorship” may be mere phases that subside over time; Vorticella, with little to do, is apparently more tenacious than many.

Eliot’s novels, too, frequently depict character as a series of such states, each informing the choices that will shape the individual’s subsequent circumstances and thus his subsequent adaptations of character or outlook. In this way, character does not remain constant over time, but helps to pave the way for future iterations of a person’s character, much as adjustments to create balance at the level of “statics” ultimately result in gradual progress at the level of “dynamics” for Spencer. Eliot’s application of this form of adaptive determinism to the individual mind creates a model of selfhood that is at once less simply continuous and, perhaps paradoxically, more deterministic than that associated with the very fixed idea of character to which many of the types in *Impressions* subscribe. Rather than operating within the steady framework created by a consistent core set of values and habits, these characters find (or sometimes fail to recognize) that their proverbial ethical goalposts keep moving, preventing them as ethical agents from adhering to an initial ideal or following through on intentions and value commitments. In this sense, character development in Eliot’s novels provides a contrast to Spencer’s synthesizing account of social adaptation not via the multivalent perspectives that characterize Theophrastus Such, but rather by questioning Spencer’s belief that such adaptation always results in positive change.

²¹⁵ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Ed. P. 126.

In *Adam Bede*, after depicting in free indirect discourse Arthur Donnithorne's self-justification for abruptly breaking off his affair with Hetty, Eliot's narrator intrudes to emphasize the evolution his illicit relationship with Hetty has caused in Arthur's moral nature:

There is a terrible coercion in our deeds which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver, and then reconcile him to the change; for this reason – that the second wrong presents itself to him in the guise of the only practicable right. The action which before commission has been seen with that blended common sense and fresh untarnished feeling which is the healthy eye of the soul, is looked at afterwards with the lens of apologetic ingenuity, through which all things that men call beautiful and ugly are seen to be made up of textures very much alike. Europe adjusts itself to a *fait accompli*, and so does an individual character, -- until the placid adjustment is disturbed by a convulsive retribution.

[...Arthur] must persuade himself that he had not been very much to blame; he began even to pity himself for the necessity of deceiving Adam: it was a course so opposed to the honesty of his own nature. But then, it was the only right thing to do."²¹⁶

Arthur necessarily changes with his circumstances, and with the consequences of his actions, because his "character" is shaped by "the peculiar combination of outward with inward facts, which constitutes a man's critical actions." In this narrative context, character is no longer understood primarily in terms of perspective, as it was with Theophrastus, but rather in terms of the "critical actions" which arise out of a given individual perspective. The interaction of "outward and inward facts" emerges in the new "outward facts" of our deeds, which in their turn will wreak our "inward facts" into ignoble agreement with the new outward conditions they have created. The seeming concreteness of "outward and inward facts" thus does not translate into a knowable, consistent character, but rather into the constant adaptation of our thoughts and values to the world we have created by our actions. This shifting mental landscape seems to elide the possibility of an individual's carrying out a distinct intention based on consistent judgment, but without positing

²¹⁶ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press), New ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Pp. 282-283.

a larger beneficent Nature as the ultimate agent of our judgments and perspectives, as Spencer does when he argues that our opinions are given us by nature to create moral balance.

Eliot's description of this evolution in outlook brought about by the "terrible coercion in our deeds" mirrors the evolution itself. At first she seems to be describing an experience of cognitive dissonance wherein our moral perspective is incompatible with the narrower scope of action that has been created by our deeds. "There is a terrible coercion in our deeds which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver, and then reconcile him to the change; for this reason – that the second wrong presents itself to him in the guise of the only practicable right." This sentence initially seems to describe a total transformation in perspective, but concludes with a clarification that what is being described is in some sense a logical (though not an ethical) response to the chain of events that has been set in motion. The part of the sentence after the semicolon then seems intended to mitigate the tragedy of a man's "reconciliation" to his change into "a deceiver;" syntactically, it interrupts the smoothly "coercive" structure of the first part of the sentence, just as on the level of content it implies some remaining reflection and self-consciousness on the part of the deceiving man, rather than the unconscious descent into evil presented in the first half of the sentence. That "the second wrong" should appear "in the guise of the only practicable right" is primarily an observation about "outward facts." Although we are undoubtedly meant to understand the line of thought presented here as a misjudgment, it is still presented as potentially an instance of judgment, as someone reflecting on what his set of options are in the situation in which he has trapped himself.

Yet the next sentence removes the tempting option to see the "second wrong" in the way that Arthur sees it, as making the best of a bad situation. What may have appeared to be a reasonable judgment under the circumstances in fact reflects a fundamental shift in the agent's

ethical perspective as he adapts his “inward facts” to suit those circumstances. “The action which before commission has been seen with that blended common sense and fresh untarnished feeling which is the healthy eye of the soul, is looked at afterwards with the lens of apologetic ingenuity, through which all things that men call beautiful and ugly are seen to be made up of textures very much alike.” Here Eliot makes it clear that this is as much a question of adaptive perspective as of necessities created by action. One of the most tragic consequences of an evil action is to transform “the healthy eye of the soul” into “the lens of apologetic ingenuity” through which subsequent wrongdoing can be justified. Through this lens, “all things that men call beautiful and ugly are seen to be made up of textures very much alike.” An individual’s perspective adapts itself to awareness of his immoral actions by removing moral standards from the scope of his vision of the world.

At the end of the passage, Eliot slips back into free indirect discourse depicting Arthur’s own judgment on the matter. With a bitter irony she shows his unconsciousness that his actions have shifted his worldview and thus his character. Arthur invokes “the honesty of his own nature” as a reliable, consistent attribute that will continue to provide a reference point for his actions over time. Like the equally unself-aware characters Eliot critiques in *Impressions*, Arthur comes to deceive himself as well as others through dependence on a faulty conception of his own character as a constant that persists independently of either his own actions or the circumstances those actions create. Yet for Eliot, that character is constituted by an evolving “combination of outward and inward facts,” rather than serving as a kind of moral fact itself.

Eliot’s account of the adaptive nature of individual perspective suggests that Theophrastus is able to simultaneously engage past and present perspectives because he is only a static character, not an agent who must act repeatedly within a narrative context, or be subject to the consequences

of his actions. Thus his ability to engage distinct but coexisting perspectives within himself, rather than unselfconsciously allowing a new worldview to supplant the old, is not shared by the vast majority of the characters who populate Eliot's novels. Possible exceptions include the eponymous Daniel Deronda, who in the beginning of the novel does not take a much more active role than Theophrastus himself, and, in a way, Lydgate, who is forced to give up on his vocation without losing his love for it, and thus to live out his life in a tragic state of cognitive dissonance. Perhaps a post-Middlemarch Lydgate, taking on a similar role to that played by his friend and fellow biology enthusiast the Rev. Farebrother within the novel, would afford one of the closer approximations to a Theophrastian perspective among Eliot's fictional characters, although his detachment would be tinged with bitterness and cynicism. In exchange for this perspective, Lydgate drops out of the novel's *Bildungs*-plot. We are to understand that Farebrother has already done so, having at some point in the past made the much execrated decision to become a clergyman without a true calling to the Church. For him too, the effect of this dual perspective in a real, socially and economically situated life (as opposed to the abstract existence of Theophrastus) is a painful cognitive dissonance, which, while it makes him one of the most open-minded, sympathetic, and disinterested actors in the novel, also seems to disqualify him from any more than an advisory role in that other central institution of the *Bildungsroman*, the marriage plot.

This kind of multivalent perspective, then, which manifests as "reflective" abstraction in Theophrastus and as cognitive dissonance in the novel characters, appears largely disconnected from any reflective model of agency within the scope either of novelistic narrative or of socio-historical progress. Instead, characters called upon to act suffer the "terrible coercion in their deeds" that forces them to adapt their outlook to the "inward and outward facts" of their situation. This account invests "inward facts" with significant influence, since they shape individuals' deeds,

which in turn shape “outward facts,” so that by a subtle and gradual process, certain “inward facts” may reshape both a man’s character and his external situation in their image. Yet Eliot’s narrative of Arthur’s transformation distinguishes his “inward facts” from his “character,” clearly developing a concept of character as encompassing something more than only one’s “inward facts.”

In *Impressions*, Eliot tries to model a sociological perspective as an aesthetic attitude of reflective embeddedness that bridges Spencer’s statics versus dynamics divide. But this open-ended perspective is only sustainable outside the context of narrative action and the changes it introduces to one’s external and internal conditions. What works as multivalence of character in *Impressions* becomes either cognitive dissonance or unself-conscious adaptation when it is tied to actions with consequences in the context of novelistic narrative. But learning to hold our own past and present together in our minds, recognizing the influence and living presence of that past, may bring us closer to a successful “dynamical” vision of society. Our best chance of living as an agent in the world is to engage in such broad-ranging reflection before we act, like Eliot’s farthest-reaching social agent, Daniel Deronda, who suggests how such a static stage of imaginative acceptance may give the right orientation to all our future actions.

In this sense, Eliot turns the idea of a pre-formed character into a possible moral good. Unlike in Spencer’s account of our socially conditioned sentiments, in Eliot’s vision of individual perspective there is still a small space for agency through this kind of detached reflection. This agency hinges on the individual’s ability to take an open, loving, and clear-sighted view of his own community, the place and time in which he is embedded. The perspective of the “reflective carp” that Theophrastus valorizes as the most promising standpoint from which to understand a society’s potential for progress is a form of sociological perspective, though it belongs to an embedded

individual rather than an objective scientific observer. Like Mill, Eliot holds that we can best understand our society by understanding ourselves. But for Mill this meant assuming a universal rational individual subject as well as, crucially, a society understood only as the sum of such subjects. Eliot proposes, on the contrary, that we can best reflect on our society by reflecting on ourselves, not because the individual is the operative unit of a compound society but because the particular experiences, memories, attachments, and values of a particular society are the operative units of the individual mind. The stance of the “reflective carp,” a half-embedded examination of the interplay of such sentiments, raises the possibility of a limited form of individual social agency while acknowledging that we are fundamentally socially determined creatures.

Coda

Character and the Founding of Sociology

The practice of representing larger social conditions through forms or fragments of character and narrative had a vexed afterlife in turn-of-the-century efforts to develop sociology as a scientific discipline. While its close relative psychology had already been established as an academic field for decades by the turn of the century, sociology was only beginning to define itself as a distinct area of study. This was due in part to its reliance on such diverse “auxiliary subjects as history, ethnography, and statistics,” in many of which fields the work of proto-sociology was carried on during the nineteenth century.²¹⁷ Part of the difficulty, Emile Durkheim argued, was that “the problems [sociology] proposes are not clear-cut.”²¹⁸ The intellectual heir of Comtean positivism and a founding father of sociology as an academic discipline, Durkheim set out to clarify the purview of sociology first and foremost by elucidating its relationship to the study of individual character.

Durkheim was eager to establish sociology’s radical rejection of the individual as the base unit of social knowledge. To this end, in his 1895 *Rules of Sociological Method* and his 1897 *Suicide*, both of which he recognized would be seminal texts in the emerging discipline, he laid out the concerns and methods of sociology by defining them explicitly against those of psychology. While psychology concerned itself with the individual mind, sociology studied the

²¹⁷ Émile Durkheim, Simpson George, and translator. Spaulding John A, *Suicide : A Study in Sociology* (New York Free Press, 1997). P. 36.

²¹⁸ Durkheim, Simpson, and Spaulding. P. 35.

“social fact,”²¹⁹ a “*sui generis*”²²⁰ entity epistemologically distinct from the sum of its individual parts. In response to a colleague’s interpretation of the *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim explains that he does conceive of sociology as a kind of psychology, but entirely distinct from “individual psychology.” “I have said that the social being was a psychological individuality, but one of a new kind... Yet once this is postulated I conclude that one has no right to treat collective psychology as an extension, an enlargement or a new illustration of individual psychology.”²²¹ The distinction between the two fields rests entirely on the idea of individual mind, but sociology’s shift away from the individual transforms it into something qualitatively different.

Durkheim’s concept of a “collective psychology” that allows us to conceive of “the social being” as “a psychological individuality” evokes George Eliot’s formulation in *Theophrastus Such* of a national “type” that holds multiple experiences and affects together within a sort of supra-individual perspective. Like *Theophrastus*, Durkheim’s “social being” exists outside of an individual-focalized causal narrative. But for Eliot, this sense of national character is nonetheless constituted by a cherished trove of personal memories and particular experiences. Durkheim’s new “psychological individuality” has no such narrative background and no such particular associations.

Indeed, Durkheim develops his sociology explicitly in contrast to narrative form, disavowing for the field an interest in an ultimate *telos* and choosing for his own research case

²¹⁹ Emile Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method* (Simon and Schuster, 1982). P. 35.

²²⁰ Durkheim. P. 34.

²²¹ Durkheim. P. 250.

studies that could be construed in terms of a one-to-one correspondence between observed phenomenon and identified cause, rather tracing any narrative trajectory. Like Dickens's overzealous empiricists in *Hard Times*, Durkheim rejects any hint of a subjective synthesis in favor of self-contained facts. His *Suicide* study takes a pointedly non-narrative approach to a phenomenon selected for its power over our narrative imaginations. He sets out to transform the act in question from the culmination of someone's "private history" to a free-floating fact "with its own unity and individuality," purposely disconnecting the fact of suicide rates from the kind of factors that we might instinctively try to link it to narratively.²²² As a result, this perspective not only relies on statistics and empiricism; it also requires working from a static snapshot rather than tracing the way in which a chain of events unfolds over time. In order to represent a social phenomenon in a new and productive way, Durkheim believes he must wrench it from its context within individual narratives.

In this new epistemological dispensation, the particular individual character is no longer representative of the unfolding of a causal social narrative. Durkheim writes of social forces that they "are at first external to the individual," but "tend afterwards to shape [him] from the outside in their own image."²²³ But for Durkheim, it is particular "social facts," not for his purposes interchangeably socially determined individuals, that stand as products of social forces. A social fact such as a nation's recent suicide rate offers a case study in which a scientist can identify a finite number of causes of the effect in question, in contrast to what Newman recognized as the unknowably long and complex narrative of the many different social forces that come together in

²²² Durkheim, Simpson, and Spaulding. P. 46.

²²³ Durkheim. Pp. 127-128.

many different particular ways to create a single individual character. The realist, positivist novel, not sociology, provided the ideal form for such representation.

Yet – again, as Newman recognized – no matter how loose and baggy the novel, no narrative of the social formation of a particular, individual character can ever possibly be complete. The more the novel strives to capture all the relevant experiences and contexts that befall a character, the more it reflects the impossibility of tracing it all. The more it positions a character as representative of social causes, the more it represents the idea that individual character must represent something external to itself. Durkheim holds that by representing a society through “collective psychologies” and “social facts,” sociology can produce knowledge about the society. By setting out to represent a society through individual character, the positivist novel produced nothing so potent as the knowledge it offered about the individual character, which is that the individual character is socially determined. Rather than representing the society that formed them, characters in the positivist novel ultimately represent the idea of social determinism itself.

In setting out to adapt a positivist understanding of social representation to the novel’s portrayal of particular experience, the positivist novel served to introduce the idea of social determinism into the context of individual life. While the novel may have failed in its task of comprehensively representing the unfolding of social cause and effect, its legacy lives on in cultural productions at the intersection of social science and personal judgment. The twenty-first century has seen the rise of popular social science that promises to explain why we act, think, and feel in the ways that we do, from chart-topping books like *Freakonomics* to clickbait news reports on studies that purport to tell us what our nail biting habit says about our personalities. Although strains of the realist novel lingered in the twenty-first century, the project of the positivist novel had failed: the novel itself as a form ceased to be explicitly associated with the project of large-

scale representation. Instead, the modernist turn at the beginning of the twentieth century registered the split that we have traced between character and causal narrative by producing a new version of the novel of individual consciousness consisting of a jumble of the fragmentary experiences that Newman and Eliot saw as determining individual character. With their resolutely individual focus, such modernist novels of consciousness as *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway* offer up the unintended message of the positivist novel, representing individual consciousness as fundamentally fragmentary and determined, without attempting to represent the larger-scale social whole that gives it shape. The positivist novel had failed to represent a social whole through a personal perspective; instead, it constituted the modern individual as determined, fragmentary, and strangely static. Bringing positivist empiricism into the novel ultimately served to dismantle the clear narrative of social cause and effect that Harriet Martineau had optimistically believed fictional narrative could offer to readers.

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