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Narrative and its Non-Events: Counterfactual Plotting in the Victorian Novel

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

English

Harvard University

Cambridge Massachusetts

April 2016

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the role of several types of counterfactual plots in both defining and challenging the borders of nineteenth-century realist fiction. Using texts by Dickens, James, Gaskell and Hardy, I argue for the narrative significance of "active" plot possibilities that, while finally jettisoned by the ascendancy of a triumphant rival, exert an enduring influence on the novels that evoke and discard them.

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Chapter One: The Non-Existent, the Fictional, and the Counterfactual

This dissertation is about what does not happen in the Victorian novel. The description sounds absurd; the set of events that do not occur in the Victorian novel is infinite, comprising everything from the Second World War to the murder of Dorothea Brooke to the plots of every novel written before 1837 or after 1901. Yet consideration of alternatives to a given state of affairs is crucial to our understanding of a novel. At the beginning of a novel, anything is theoretically possible. By its end, every sequence of events, save one, will have been rendered counterfactual. Plot emerges out of the gradual elimination of possibilities, from the revelation, on the first page of a work, that we are in nineteenth-century London and not sixteenth-century Paris to the final disclosure that the hero's comic sidekick has settled down with Betty the barmaid and not Susan the seamstress.

The vast majority of the counterfactuals produced in this process are trivial. If a character goes to a dinner-party on a Tuesday, technically, a version of the novel in which the event were held on a Wednesday would constitute a counterfactual plot, even though no meaningful change would have taken place. On the other end of the probability spectrum, most alternatives to an actual plot are simply not worth contemplating. One might suspend disbelief enough to *accept* that an Englishman named Jonathan Harker lives in a world populated by blood-sucking fiends, once informed of this fact, but only sufficiently ominous telegraphing by the text allows a reader of *Dracula* rationally to *expect* it. Similarly, while a reader might plausibly wonder whether Jane Eyre will wind up shunning romantic marriage for a life of religious vocation, it is probable that no reader, at least until the present moment, has imagined an alternative in which Jane becomes an acrobat in a traveling circus. Even superficially more reasonable possibilities will often be beyond the scope of consideration for any reader possessing the slightest familiarity with the conventions of narrative; we do not believe that there is any serious risk of Elizabeth Bennet

either marrying Collins or remaining single, although both outcomes would be far more likely for a woman of her social position than marriage to one of the richest men in England.

Other counterfactual possibilities, by contrast, are vital to the dynamics of a narrative. Sometimes, a text introduces such possibilities directly. As Angel Clare prepares to cast his wife out, the narrator of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* expresses the space between reconciliation and tragedy in a brutal quirk of grammar: "If Tess had been artful, had she made a scene, fainted, wept hysterically.... he would probably not have withstood her. But...the many effective chords which she could have stirred by an appeal were left untouched" (253).[i] Only present-tense tears will do; the conditional can taunt us, but not influence Angel. Other potential outcomes may be embedded implicitly in the design of a narrative. The same readerly instincts that warn us away from considering the murder of Dorothea Brooke might mislead us into initially anticipating that our heroine will marry, not Ladislaw but Lydgate. Structurally equivalent, Dorothea and Lydgate, the principal female and male protagonists of *Middlemarch,* are also more obviously suited to one another than Dorothea is to Ladislaw, whose vaunted reformist zeal is as liable as not to collapse into mere petulance or peter out into dilettantism. It is easy enough to imagine a version of *Middlemarch* in which Dorothea and Lydgate, saved from early romantic folly by the timely deaths of their unsuitable partners, find happiness in pursuing a shared but now wisely tempered concern for the public good.

But none of this, of course, happens. Lydgate dies in middle-age after being forced to give up his ambitions toward medical reform at the joint urging of his wallet and his wife. Dorothea fares better in what appears to be a perfectly happy marriage to Will, whose wife's influence (and money) leads him finally to commit himself to a career as "an ardent public man" (792). Yet the inescapable force of what might have been shapes our response to the novel.

Lydgate's belated discovery of a woman who could in fact have been the partner and helpmeet he so needs underscores the magnitude of his mistake. In Dorothea's case, the effect of the counterfactual is subtler, but perhaps more striking. Dorothea's fate could be mistaken for the conventional happiness of the marriage plot as she settles down to marriage, motherhood, and a life of quiet usefulness. The novel's own awareness of alternatives to this life, however, complicates the final tableau. Most obvious in its portrayal of Dorothea as a thwarted Saint Theresa, the sense of compromise inherent in the narrowing of Dorothea's ambitions is underscored by her marriage to a man who, for all his merits, may not represent the best of all possible husbands. Deselected, but far from insubstantial, the counterfactual thus lives on to inform and challenge its triumphant opponent.

This project is itself informed by two primary questions: what features of a text create significant, or what I call *active,* counterfactual plots, and how do those plots shape our reading of the text as written? Later in this chapter, I will suggest some preliminary answers to these questions, and make a case for the particular relevance of the counterfactual plot to the study of the Victorian novel. First, however, I will consider prior attempts to answer the more fundamental question of whether and how to assign value to the unreal at all. Theoretically, that which does not exist should lie beyond the realm of practical consideration. Yet a tradition of interdisciplinary scholarship reflects a prevailing sense that not all fictions are created equal. Among all that never was, we find a broad category of imaginable things characterized by an obstinate refusal to be stopped by a small matter like their own lack of it.

Into the Jungle

A woman dreams of a golden mountain. When she wakes, the image stays with her so vividly that she searches her memory for its source – a place she had been once, long ago, or maybe only

a picture she had seen and never quite forgotten. If a photographer captured the Grand Canyon or Kilamanjaro in just the right light, she thinks, he might produce something like that, but when she looks through a set of pictures of the two places, there is nothing in the layered plateaus of the one or the snow-capped heights of the other to compare with the mountain of her dream. Continuing her search, she finds an image of what could, perhaps, be called a golden mountain, but it is not *her* mountain, she can tell at once, though she cannot immediately say, as morning passes into afternoon and the dream becomes more distant, what distinguishes the two. The shade of the gold, she supposes, or perhaps the steepness of the ascent. But no, she suddenly recalls, it is more than that: as she approached the mountain, the horse she rode, she can remember clearly now, had wings, and the path they took was paved with bricks cut, impossibly, into square circles, for the mountain is not in the Sahara, or New South Wales, or the American Southwest. It is in Meinong's jungle, the realm of non-existent things.

Meinong's jungle is a concept named, somewhat disparagingly, after the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong (1853-1920), best remembered for his work on the ontology of the unreal. His Theory of Objects takes on the problem of intentional objects – objects produced by human thought that may or may not refer to an actual entity in the real world.[ii] The mental contemplation of one's cat, just out of sight in the next room, forms an intentional object, but so too does the mental contemplation of a Cheshire Cat, an entirely imaginary creature. Yet while the Cheshire Cat may not be real in the manner of the Siamese or Persian lounging on your windowsill, it nonetheless possesses some being that must be accounted for, if only because thinking of a Cheshire cat – like thinking of a pink elephant, as we find in the old thought experiment – is different from *not* thinking of a Cheshire Cat. Meinong attempts to resolve the problem by suggesting that an entity may possess *sosein* (essence, or "being-so") even if it lacks

sein (being). Any object whose properties can be intelligibly described is endowed with *sosein,* and thus an ontological status independent of its actual existence. And in fact we can name quite a few attributes of the Cheshire Cat – he can be assumed, in the first place, to feature all of the characteristics common to cats as a species, and is additionally known for his wide smile and the ability to disappear, a gradual process that permits him to be represented as a disembodied head or a floating grin. Existence simply happens not to be one of these attributes.

The indeterminate status of non-existent entities may be an insurmountable problem for the citizens of Wonderland, whose debate over whether or not a bodiless cat can be beheaded is itself cut off when the head, too, vanishes. It has not, however, proven to be so for those of us on the other side of the rabbit hole. Many of Meinong's contemporaries dismissed his theory as fanciful, objecting to its apparent insistence on something very close to the literal reality of the unreal. Yet the notion that the unreal, the non-occurring, and the unrealized may possess a value in spite of their literal non-existence finds support in a number of disciplines. When historians consider what could have, but did not, take place; when judges and justices create hypothetical test cases to define the boundaries of precedent, when mathematicians create statistical models to account for what may be infinitesimally distant possibilities, they are all acknowledging the importance of the word – or world – not made flesh.[iii]

Indeed, Meinong's treatment of the non-actual is as pragmatic as it is eccentric. The distinction between *sein* and *sosein* acknowledges both the actual non-existence and the practical significance of intentional objects. Bertrand Russell, one of Meinong's principal opponents, preferred differentiating between sense and reference: one can sensibly *speak* of a golden mountain, but the description does not refer to any actual entity. An eminently plausible distinction, it is also one, as Russell concedes in his 1905 article “On Denoting,” fraught with

potential logical problems. According to The Law of the Excluded Middle, either a proposition or its negation must be true; if "The Earth is flat" is a false statement, it necessarily follows that "The Earth is not flat" is a true one. This seems not to apply, however, in the case of what Russell calls *non-referring descriptions*. "The present King of France is bald" is a false statement, since no such person exists. But its negation, "The present King of France is not bald," can hardly be true, as there is no present King of France to whom we can ascribe or deny any qualities whatsoever. Russell solves the problem by changing the form of the negation: since there is no present King of France at all, the logical negation to a claim about the state of his scalp is not "The [non-existent] present King of France is not bald," a Meinongian claim that endows an imaginative object with real properties, but "There is no present King of France who is bald," an unequivocally true assertion.[iv]

Yet while Russell's solution is elegant, it is not, outside the abstract realm of formal logic, particularly useful. Even within the philosophical community, criticisms of Russell have rested on his willful misinterpretation of what people actually mean when they use the expressions he discusses (Strawson). Rational people who do not happen to be characters in a thought experiment rarely walk around making earnest claims about non-existent entities. When we encounter a description like "The present King of France," we can instead presume that the speaker or writer is operating within a context in which the phrase has reference. If, during a conversation about follicularly-challenged world leaders, a participant were to offer the example of "the present King of Russia," the statement might be technically false but effectively true: a good-faith listener would grasp the probability that the ignorant or error-prone speaker meant to refer to the current *leader* of Russia, the balding Vladimir Putin. Closer to home, it would be pedantic to reject all positive assertions about "The State of Massachusetts" on the grounds that

Massachusetts is officially a Commonwealth. Aside from mistaken statements, there are discrete referential frameworks in which the proposition “the present King of France is bald” could be assessed without recourse to Russell's logical manipulations – a historical document in which Cardinal Richelieu revealed what lay under Louis XIII's wig, for instance, or a commentary on the cast of a long-running production of Henry V. This would be equally true of a description without the historical weight of a long line of Bourbon monarchs behind it: Dobby the House-Elf, within the referential scheme of the *Harry Potter* series, is as valid a subject as the Sun King in the court at Versailles.

The problem with Russell's theory is one of both utility and intuition. Refusing to evaluate statements on their own terms is not only counterproductive, it leads to conclusions that seem instinctively false. In his 1974 article “Truth in Fiction,” David Lewis notes that technically, the statements “Sherlock Holmes lived at 221b Baker Street” and “Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are identical twins” must possess the same truth-value, as Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character and thus never lived anywhere, let alone an actual street in London. Yet anyone who has ever read a Sherlock Holmes story (and does not happen also to be a professional philosopher) will immediately identify the first statement as true and the second as false. For Lewis, there need be no contradiction between our awareness of Holmes's fictionality and our sense of him as a substantive entity about whom true and false claims can be made. When we assert something about a fictional character, our statement is implicitly “prefixed” with a condition: *In a world in which the Sherlock Holmes stories are accepted as fact,* Sherlock Holmes lived at 221b Baker Street.

Like Russell, Lewis solves a problem of reference through a semantic adjustment, his qualification of an assertion acting as a mirror-image of Russell's rearrangement of a negation.

His conclusion, however, is inherently Meinongian: non-existent entities may possess qualities about which it is possible to make meaningful assertions. Indeed, he is if anything more extreme than his philosophical forefather.[v] For all the attempts to present Meinong as a crank as liable to believe in a Pegasus as a sparrow, the Theory of Objects draws a clear distinction between the actual and the imagined entity, which possesses "being" only to a subordinate degree. Even the term "Meinong's jungle," which seems to situate intentional objects in their own concrete realm, was the straw-man invention of Meinong's critics, rather than Meinong's own coinage.

Lewis's ontology, by contrast, consists of an infinite number of possible worlds, none of which enjoys absolute primacy over the others. Whatever priority we may wish to grant our own world, only in relative terms can it be said to be more significant than any number of equally valid others. Like Russell, Lewis grounds his belief in the principles of formal logic, specifically the possible-world semantics of Saul Kripke. Designed to apply the rules of traditional propositional logic to statements of uncertainty and qualification (modalities), "Kripke semantics" evaluates such statements based on whether and to what extent they *could* be possible. A qualified statement is *necessarily* true if it the thing being asserted – for instance "It is not possible that square circles exist" – is true in every possible world accessible to our own, the idea of a "square circle" being by definition impossible.[vi] It is *possibly* true if it is true in any possible world accessible to our own. Kripke himself regarded the possible-world framework as a useful model rather than an objective reality. (*Naming and Necessity)*. Lewis, however, maintained that these worlds had literal existence.[vii] Fanciful as such an idea seemed, this too, he claimed, was finally pragmatic: "Why believe in a plurality of worlds? - Because the hypothesis is serviceable, and that is a reason to think that it is true...It offers an improvement in ideology, paid for in the coin of ontology" (*On The Plurality of Worlds* 3-4).

Absent belief in a literal multiverse, what the coin of ontology buys us is a fiction. The fictions of possible-worlds semantics involve hypothetical models rather than literary inventions. Yet Lewis was not alone in recognizing the possible relationship between the worlds of the Kripkean multiverse and those of literary fiction. Viewing the world of a novel as an alternative reality rather than a distortion permits us to consider fictions on their own terms. Lewis's attempt to determine the truth value of statements about fictional worlds, however, limits the scope of his argument. Diane Proudfoot, in a critique of Lewis, observes that many narratives cannot be assessed by their ability to be narrated as fact in a particular world: a novel that acknowledges its own fictionality, for instance, cannot in any world be "told as fact." (31-33).

More useful is the taxonomy of Marie-Laure Ryan, who outlines a typology of narratives that considers fictional worlds, not in terms of truth value, but in terms of *accessibility.*[viii] A realist narrative, whether or not it could be rationally told as truth, is set in a fully accessible world separated from our own only by "expanded inventory" – everything true of our world can be presumed to be true of the world of the realist novel, such novels having simply populated an existing reality with fictional people. The world of a fantasy novel, even if it purports to be set in some hidden part of present-day Britain, is epistemically inaccessible, as it includes objects and situations that violate what we know to be true of our own reality. Experimental, and particularly absurdist narratives may be considered logically inaccessible in that they violate basic notions of sense or causality.

One advantage of Laure-Ryan's approach is that it considers the experience of the reader rather than the objective status of a fictional world: whether or not we can imagine inhabiting a character's reality is more important than the ability of the text to be imported wholesale into a world in which it reads as internally consistent truth. But possible-worlds literary analysis is, for

Laure-Ryan, more than a way of categorizing the relationship of a fictional world to our own. Extrapolating Kripke semantics to the literary realm allows us productively to consider narrative worlds as the equivalent of the possible realities of a multiverse. The model also, however, suggests the inherent multiplicity of each individual narrative world. In a multi-world cosmology, our own universe is one of many, perhaps equally plausible ones that can be classified as "alternate" only from our relative perspective. As residents of world "**E**" in which Barack Obama became the 44th President of the United States in 2008, we regard world "**E'** " (E prime), in which John McCain won that election, as counterfactual. When we immerse ourselves in a narrative, Ryan argues, we "cognitively recenter" our perspective around a textual actual world (TAW) that acts as our new point of reference. Its constituent worlds consist of possibilities raised by but not realized within the TAW. In Ryan's model, these counterfactual worlds are created primarily out of the subjective hopes, fears, and beliefs of characters: Eliot's *Adam Bede,* for instance, features an actual world in which Hetty Sorrel is sentenced to transportation for leaving her newborn baby to die, and a wish-world in which she marries Arthur Donithorne. The result is a fictional hierarchy in which texts gesture toward particular counterfactual possibilities that appear less real than the events of the textual actual world, but more real than the infinite number of possibilities the text might theoretically have generated.

The work I have described so far constitutes a rough epistemology of the alternative world. The philosophers Kripke and Lewis, along with literary critics like Ryan, Thomas Pavel, and Ruth Ronen, provide a systematic framework for justifying cognitive acts we already instinctively perform: with or without the vocabulary of possible worlds and recentering, we will treat the world of the novel as an autonomous referential framework in which a certain set of fictional events – those that actually take place in a narrative – assume primacy over any number

of merely hoped-for or hypothetical others. Their project is more representative than explanatory, using equations and maps to capture spatially the result of an otherwise diffuse set of mental processes. Other studies have expanded the notion of the literary counterfactual to include less overt evocations of alternative possibilities. A character can produce a wish-world by envisioning – and in turn compelling the reader to envision – a desired outcome that does not take place. As Andrew Miller has suggested, however, a text can also generate a counterfactual world by, for instance, juxtaposing the life path of a protagonist with that of a minor character who serves as his double or foil. Hilary Dannenberg's *Coincidence and Counterfactuality,* the most thorough treatment of the subject, introduces a wider range of categories of the counterfactual, from the "liminal plots" created by a *reader's*, as opposed to a character's, expectations of likely future events to the literally parallel time lines introduced in science-fiction narratives.

Stories, Plots, and Counterplots

My own use of the term "counterfactual plot" is more specific. Dannenberg emphasizes counterfactual plotting as characteristic quality of realism. While the "romance-oriented convergence" of the coincidence draws attention, in its unlikelihood, to the plottedness of a novel, the counterfactual suggests that the fates of the characters in a text are as free and unpredictable as our own (4). Even if the novel is in other respects entirely unrealistic, the profusion of narrative possibilities intensifies our capacity to immerse ourselves in the world of the narrative, both because it fosters interest in an uncertain outcome and because it makes our characters and their situations more psychologically convincing. Dannenberg is not primarily interested in the counterfactual plot, but in counterfactuality as a condition of plotting. The particulars of a counterfactual plot are less important to her than the fact of its existence, one reason, perhaps, that she gives comparatively little extended attention to individual texts. While

her examples tend naturally to be ones in which the role of the counterfactual is particularly dramatic, in theory a character's decision about whether to eat an orange or a kumquat is scarcely less important than her decision about which of two suitors to marry: in plot terms, one is trivial and one is significant, but both argue equally for the credibility of our heroine and her world.

Not all counterfactuals, however, are equivalent. Even the most minor counterfactual gestures of a novel may indeed contribute to the reader's cognitive engagement with its textual world. Yet some counterfactuals do more than this as well. They create suspense and complicate endings, compensate for the unrepresentable and model the unachievable. The alternative paths they evoke might, if taken, have changed the novel past recognition, or they might have altered only its conclusion, replacing a final success with a decisive failure or a terrible tragedy with miraculous restoration. What makes them so crucial, in either case, is that they would have changed the *plot.* The word "plot," as I am using it, is not a synonym for story. "Story" refers simply to the events of a novel: Rachel Verinder is given a precious stone, her cousin Franklin Blake steals the stone under the influence of opium, a detective comes to investigate, a maid is suspected, and so on, until Franklin discovers that he himself has been the unwitting culprit. "Plot," on the other hand, has the added sense of design and intention, comprising not just a sequence of events, but the causal connections between them and the meaning they combine to make.[ix] Stories may be innocent, but plots never, performing, whether they wish to or not, a particular function within the culture in which they are embedded. This difference is why we say a narrative is plotted rather than storied, and why, too, we refer in critical discourse to the marriage or detective plot.

It may be exciting when a text suggests a variety of story possibilities, but it is not necessarily important. The tendency of certain readers (or, increasingly, viewers) to sneer at

narratives that thrive on ever more outlandish twists reflects more than mere snobbery; such texts, in their desire to entertain and shock, often pay minimal attention to logic or causality, creating worlds in which events appear random and lack a sense of lasting consequence. Even works that feature fairly sophisticated plotting may contain any number of events that, enjoyable or affecting as they may be, lack real plot significance. The adventures of Tobias Smollett's aptly named Roderick Random are often great fun, but very few have a discernible effect on our hero's character or, ultimately, his fate. He makes fortunes, and loses them, and wins them back again. He fights under one flag, and then another. He falls earnestly in love in one chapter, and resumes hunting silly heiresses and moneyed old maids in the next. As far as the plot of the novel is concerned, what is important is not the specifics of our hero's ridiculous and largely episodic adventures, but whether or not he will finally be restored to his rightful place as a gentleman, a result that would affirm both the importance of a good pedigree and, as if by way of compensation, the virtues of decidedly ungenteel exercises in Scottish masculinity. Yet while this outcome is, theoretically, a matter of anxiety for the novel, Smollett does not ask readers to expend much emotional energy anticipating Random's fate. The breezy insouciance of the narration militates against the possibility of any serious disaster; the apparent death of a friendly companion is more surprising than his eventual reappearance, while the timely discovery of Random's wealthy, long-lost father, when it finally comes, is more matter-of-course than source of relief. Yet naturally, *Roderick Random* raises many alternative possibilities – one of the comic elements of the novel is its hero's rapid shifts from sanguine expectation of far-fetched successes to dismal prophecies of impending calamity. It is not that the novel fails to suggest counterfactual plots, but that it never asks us to believe in them.

If the counterfactual plots of *Roderick Random* are nominal, what makes a counterfactual

possibility "active?" Up to a point, the answer is not a literary one at all. Counterfactual thinking is embedded in our grammar: when we use the conditional tense (I would have gone), or modal verbs (I could, or should, or will go), or the qualifiers "perhaps" and "possibly" and "might," we are considering alternatives to an actual state of affairs. These structures can accommodate, at one extreme, mundane statements that only represent an alternative world in the most technical sense (i.e, "I should have gone to the store today"). At the other, they accommodate idle speculation and magical thinking, as in the statement "if I were ten feet tall, I would be the best basketball player of all time." Yet studies by cognitive and social scientists have shown remarkable consistency in the types of alternatives to reality people are most inclined to entertain.[x] Counterfactuals involving regret, for instance, tend to be formulated around those aspects of a situation that can be most easily imagined undone: we are more likely, in posing a counterfactual, to alter a proximate cause than a more distant one (the last missed basket in a one-point loss, rather than the first), to imagine changes in personal behavior rather than changes in external circumstances ("if only she hadn't taken that road," not "if only the road hadn't been so icy") and to envision the realization of a near-miss (Al Gore defeating George W. Bush in the contested election of 2000) over that of a remote chance (McGovern defeating Nixon in the landslide of 1972). The same is true of the anticipation of possibilities that have not yet been either actualized or eliminated: the star high school quarterback dreams of the NFL, his bench-riding friend does not spare the possibility of similar success more than a passing thought. Identifying what Ruth J. Byrne has called "joints" in reality, we ground counterfactuals in moments that seem most susceptible to plausible, if now impossible, revision.

Much of this logic is easily transferable to the world of the novel. The characters themselves, to the extent that their thoughts are designed to replicate the sophisticated cognitive

patterns of a real person, can be expected to engage in counterfactual thinking at about the same rate as we ourselves do. Thus abused, orphaned Jane Eyre thinks of what her childhood might have been had her kindly uncle not died, and William Dobbin, after years of vainly loving Amelia Sedley, finally leaves her when he considers that a worthier woman "would have returned [his love] long ago" (680). Similarly, as dutifully immersed readers, we can judge the possibilities available to our characters as we judge those available to us – but again, only up to a point. For all our willingness to suspend disbelief, even at our most engaged, we never really forget that we are dealing with a work of fiction; we may feel fear or grief as we read, but will not hide ourselves from a marauding dragon or close our Victorian novels to avoid exposure to a character's smallpox. A slightly more advanced manifestation of this recognition is our awareness of narrative conventions that render the probabilities of a constructed literary world very different from the ones governing our own. From the perspective of the young Jane Eyre, a character designed as a fair portrait of what such a girl in such a situation might think and do, the death of her uncle (not to mention her parents) is a tragic accident that she can imagine undone. From the perspective of the reader, aware of Jane as a character in a novel that depends on her unhappy orphanhood, it is rather an absolute necessity of the textual world in which she finds herself, what DA Miller might call a precondition of her story's "narratability" (*Narrative and its Discontents).* Nobody wants to read, or write, about a Jane Eyre who lives quietly with her parents before marrying her childhood best friend.

What guides us as readers, in such cases, is more specific than our awareness of the novel as a fiction. As I noted earlier, the reader of *Pride and Prejudice* will recognize, far before the characters themselves do, that Elizabeth and Darcy will marry; whether or not a given reader has ever heard the term "marriage plot" before, she knows it when she sees it. Yet despite the

impossibility of imagining any such conclusion to *Pride and Prejudice,* in the nineteenth-century novel alone, we find numerous instances of thwarted love-plots that leave their heroines alone, trapped in loveless marriages, or dead. Indeed, the plot I rejected as unnarratable in the case of *Jane Eyre* – that of a young woman who lives happily with her parents and then marries a close friend – *has* been narrated, and quite successfully; what I have described is, more or less, the plot of *Emma.* Rather, we understand Elizabeth's marriage as inevitable and Jane's orphanhood as necessary because of our understanding, whether conscious or intuitive, of generic conventions. To a reader with any awareness of storytelling types and patterns, it will be obvious that *Pride and Prejudice* is a marriage plot novel long before any marriage has actually taken place; Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage does not retroactively impose a generic identity on the novel, it follows from a generic identity that has been previously established. Despite its own marriage plot, *Jane Eyre* is by contrast first and foremost a *bildungsroman,* a genre with its own set of accompanying expectations.

Genre, however, is not always so prescriptive. The most generically stable texts allow for only nominal counterfactual plotting. In allegory, where characters are assigned fixed semantic identities, there is little room for uncertainty: of course a pilgrim named Christian will fight through the Slough of Despond to arrive at the Celestial City. Even as comparatively sophisticated a text as *Pride and Prejudice* is so perfect an exemplar of its kind that the counterfactuals it raises tend to be either incidental byproducts of ordinary discourse or formal mechanisms that highlight the inevitability of the very outcome they appear to challenge. The rival suitors Wickham and Collins represent elements of Darcy and Elizabeth's marriage plot rather than alternatives to it; their presence creates complications for the couple, but neither, to varying degrees, could plausibly serve as the hero of a marriage plot novel with Elizabeth Bennet

as its heroine. The active counterfactual plot, by contrast, is created out of real tension between a given plot and a textually-raised alternative that would, if enacted, significantly change the narrative stakes of the novel. The structure of the *bildungsroman* requires Jane Eyre to suffer through an unhappy childhood, to mature through a series of formal and informal educational experiences, and to emerge as a member of a stable social order. It does not, however, necessarily demand her marriage to Rochester. The interlude in which Jane contemplates going to India as the missionary wife of her cousin St. John Rivers raises the specter of a legitimate alternative to Rochester, one that privileges a model of development rooted more in the spiritual autobiography than in the conventional marriage plot.

Crucially, while Jane chooses Rochester, St. John remains an influential force in the novel. The Rivers episode is not, like one of Roderick Random's picaresque adventures, a relatively self-contained vignette, but a competitor plot that, beyond testing our predictive powers, changes our perception of the dominant narrative. Jane's eventual marriage to Rochester owes as much to notions of revelation and sacrifice – ideals cultivated by her relationship with St. John – as it does to the erotic and romantic. Their union, in which Jane acts as combined lover, savior, and nursemaid to her reformed and weakened husband, allows Jane to strike a middle course between the marriage-bed and a life of Christian vocation. But more than that, we are left to the last line of the novel with the lingering resistance presented by St. John's less compromising vision of what a narrative of development should properly be: we end, not with the image of Jane and Rochester's achieved bliss, but with St. John's triumphant prophecy of his own death in service to Christ. If, in spite of these last words, “Reader, I married him” wins out over “Come, Lord Jesus” as the novel's dominant assertion, it has been a narrow victory rather than an inevitable rout.

Yet it is a victory all the same. Counterfactual plots, like their non-literary counterparts, exist somewhere between a vain wish and an actionable desire, the paranoid nightmare and the cautionary tale. With all due respect to Sherlock Holmes, when we have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains still runs the gamut from the wildly improbable to the near certainty. Even the most apparently formulaic text can offer surprises: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* appears, like so many other Newgate Novels, to be heading toward heartbreak and the noose, until our hero escapes with his lady to a happy American exile. By the same token, a novel that seems to admit of endless possibilities may narrow into an ending that we acknowledge in retrospect to have been inevitable. Even in *Jane Eyre,* the choice of Rochester and marriage over St. John and the cross is hardly an arbitrary one; the possibility Rivers represents is potent enough to require serious consideration, but following his narrative of *bildung* would be a departure, if not an utterly inconceivable one, from the previous direction of the text.

Reader, Will I Marry Him: The Case of *Villette*

The counterfactual plot, then, is not limited to or dependent upon a moment of explicit counterfactual framing, arising rather out of a more persistent tension between a dominant genre and its alternative. In *Villette,* Charlotte Brontë surpasses the disquieting ending of *Jane Eyre* with a conclusion that refuses to choose between two seemingly active possibilities. After describing her fiancé's ship caught in a devastating storm at sea, Lucy Snowe abruptly cuts off her narration:

> Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror; the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life (555).

The uncertainty of the passage, however, is only feigned. In a text with a first-person narrator,

events are inseparable from the discursive act. A story narrated by a person who has gone on a series of adventures and a story narrated by a person who is pretending to have gone on an identical series of adventures will, for all intents and purposes, be one and the same. If Lucy does not tell us that M. Paul has died, theoretically we should, as she suggests, be free to imagine whatever we please of his future fate, just as we are free to imagine that Lucy's absent father was named Robert or William or, for that matter, Xerxes. In fact, since she does narrate, if only in the subjunctive tense, a rescue but *not* a drowning, the happy conclusion is invested with greater reality than the tragic one. Nonetheless, we cannot really believe that Paul has survived, any more than we actually think it remotely probable that Lucy was fathered by a man named Xerxes Snowe.[xi] The passage seethes with contempt for the reader who still has the luxury of such delusions, Lucy's words a final sneer at an audience with whom she has always maintained an oddly passive-aggressive relationship. The survival of M. Paul is thus properly a counterfactual, and not simply one option in a presciently post-modern denial of fixed meaning.

This closing paragraph merely makes overt what has been a long-standing rivalry between several competing paradigms. The explicit instruction to imagine M. Paul's rescue creates an alternative scene, but *Villette* would be as steeped in counterfactual plotting without it, making it a useful case-study in the variety of counterfactual structures available to the traditional novel. On the most basic level, when two characters in a nineteenth-century novel, after a long period of denial and misunderstanding, discover their love for one another and make plans to marry, our default assumption should be that they will do just that. The fact that this does not happen in *Villette* leaves the putative marriage to stand as a strong counterfactual alternative to the tragedy that actually plays out. Marriage to M. Paul, however, is far from the only possibility in play. When the novel begins, it is not immediately obvious that Lucy is to be

our heroine at all: while she narrates the novel from the beginning, the principal character in the first chapters is Paulina Home, a young girl left temporarily in Lucy's godmother's care by her grieving father. Lucy, in these chapters, is neither an active participant in events nor an immediately compelling central consciousness: it is Polly whose sad history she details, Polly who delights and disconcerts those around her with her uncanny precocity, and Polly who initiates her own marriage plot through her unusual friendship with the much older Graham Bretton.

The rest of Polly's story takes place largely off-page. Within a few chapters, we have left her behind to follow Lucy Snowe, the drab observer who has not seen fit to confide her own history to the reader. We do not see the peculiar child grow into a beautiful and polished heiress, and when she reappears years later in that capacity, it is quickly to marry Graham Bretton after a courtship that Lucy can narrate only from a distance. Yet her story serves as a counterpoint to Lucy's own. From childhood tragedy to a refuge with the Brettons to a life abroad, the journeys of the two women are in several respects parallel; between Paulina's two appearances, Graham Bretton even emerges as a potential love interest for Lucy. Polly's progress, however, is a charmed version of Lucy's: her inadequate father is loving, and returns to her; she appears in the Rue Fossette as a privileged pupil, rather than a humble teacher; her loves are fortuitously timed and undramatically consummated.

In another kind of narrative, this opposition might read as quasi-allegorical, or, in a less aesthetically-minded text, act as a conduct-book parable setting the success of a ladylike sylph against the failure of a prickly and opinionated rebel. *Villette* suggests a more complicated relationship between the two lives. In theory, Paulina's plot is, like the image of returning ship reaching the shore, a knife-twisting evocation of what could have been. Yet the novel leads us,

too, to question the value of what convention has persuaded us to desire. Though the stories of Lucy and Paulina share a dynamic similar to that of two strands in a multi-plot novel, the structure of this novel only allows us to take the analogy so far: Polly may be more successful in life but it is Lucy who wins out as the indisputably primary figure in the narrative. Not content simply to assert, in the manner of a home epic, the parity between Lucy's story and Paulina's more conventionally narratable one, Brontë suggests that Lucy's tale may in fact be the only one worth telling. Polly is good, Polly is kind, but we cannot escape the sense that Polly is a little bit trivial, for all that. Her naiveté has the power to wound ("Why do you go on with [teaching]?" she asks Lucy, and is shocked to learn that money has anything at all to do with it); her charm is a function of an extended childhood (321). Her love-problems are fleeting, and largely of her own invention. For his part, Graham seems unlikely to encourage any great development in his wife. Like Paulina, he is thoroughly decent, and thoroughly insubstantial; his fault is not simply that he does not love Lucy Snowe, but that he lacks all capacity to understand her, as Lucy herself ultimately realizes. His assessment of Lucy as "inoffensive as a shadow" is both insulting and excessively kind; she is more interesting than the docile nurturer he and the other members of the Bretton circle assume her to be, and less good. The description would be better applied to Graham himself, who Lucy calls, with her own, far more conscious mixture of praise and censure, "gracious to whatever pleased [him] – unkind and cruel to nothing" (356). Significantly, while Graham's lack of interest jettisons their potential marriage plot, it is Lucy who finally rejects the possibility of any place in his world. The last time she sees the Brettons, they are, with Paulina's father M. de Bassompierre, unaware of her presence. Mrs. Bretton and M. de Bassompiere, their kindness ever too simplistic to absorb Lucy's suppressed bitterness and resentment, regret that they have forgotten to invite her to a public entertainment, delighting in

the sight of their “steady little Lucy... so quietly pleased; so little moved” (513-514). Graham, however, seems to catch her eye. It is unclear whether he has finally seen her, or again misunderstood. In either case, as in the beginning of the novel, Lucy cannot long remain a minor character in the narrative of another. Refusing his glance, she leaves, acting out the farewell that she has already privately articulated: “Goodbye, [Graham]; you are good, you are beautiful; but you are not mine” (410).

Lucy's narrative primacy comes at a high price. In theory, any number of plot possibilities are available to Lucy Snowe. She could be, like Paulina, the heroine of a conventional marriage plot narrative, marrying the handsome, noble doctor she has known since childhood after a fortuitous encounter. She could be, like Jane Eyre, the focus of a less typical romance, the difficult woman finding her idiosyncratic happiness with a less than eligible bachelor. Recurring rumors of a ghostly nun haunting the Rue Fosette introduce a potential Gothic plot, which continues when Lucy's romance with M. Paul is threatened by a sinister Catholic cabal straight out of the pages of Ann Radcliffe. Not only do these plots fail to materialize, however, the text treats them dismissively, almost satirically. Graham may not prove himself a scoundrel in the manner of a Willoughby or Wickham, but he does, as I have suggested, reveal a subtler source of unworthiness. M. Paul, petty, harmless despot of his schoolgirl kingdom, is a quasi-comic descent from Byronic Rochester, more likely to inspire a smile than a swoon. The nun's ghost solidifies into a cross-dressing count, while the attempts of Madame Beck and Père Silas to guilt M. Paul out of marriage to a Protestant are a pale shadow of the bloody persecutions of their zealous ancestors.

Lucy might, for all that, have been perfectly happy with Graham Bretton, and even more so with M. Paul. Instead, her fate is sealed and her options restricted by the pressures of

narrative. The failure of any of the novel's alternative plots to become actualized suggests Brontë's own exhaustion with the paradigms that produce them. The precocious waif, the chance meeting, the mysterious apparition, the gradual softening of an irascible heart – each of these elements of the novel evokes the outline of a fully developed counterfactual plot. Yet none of them prove capable of bringing to satisfying conclusion the story of Lucy Snowe, whose life is finally defined by failure and alienation rather than a more familiar triumph and integration. The destiny of narrative, DA Miller tells us, is its own destruction, to reach a point of closure in "a quest after that which will end questing" (*Narrative and its Discontents* 272). This finality represents an achievement, but also a sacrifice. We tell stories about characters because their lives are not settled, because something in them is themselves untamed and seeking. They lose this quality, when they marry or solve the case or even die, finding a rest that both completes and betrays the journeying self. The rebellion of the social upstart ends with a kiss; the ungovernable temper is appeased, and in turn appeases.[xii] The first person narrator, however, complicates this model. In a first person narrative, the last act of the story is its own telling. On one level, this changes nothing; either way, the tale plays itself out, and is done. Yet if what drives narrative is a fundamental incompleteness, the choice to tell one's story would seem itself a sign of something yet unsatisfied.

There are perhaps few characters of whom this is truer than Lucy Snowe. Once we have finished the novel, we understand clearly enough why this would be so. Yet if the disappointments and tragedies of Lucy's story explain the bitterness of its telling, so too does the bitterness of its telling prefigure these calamities. As Lucy's final, mocking refusal to narrate M. Paul's death suggests, the unlimited possibility of the novelistic world is an illusion: we know that the ship is lost even as the text explicitly authorizes us to bring it imaginatively to shore, and

can read at each stage of Lucy's narration the promise of some unhappy end. A content Lucy Snow would not have told her own story as she has done, with her passive-aggressive narrative refusals and barely suppressed contempt, not only for the base, but for the happy.

The hostile undertone of Lucy's narration does not mandate any particular story event, but it does *preclude* some. Even when a relationship with Graham seems most possible, Lucy's discursive choices imply the failure of that marriage plot at the very moment of its activation. The coincidence of their chance meeting awakens our expectations; such an obvious contrivance suggests a narrative design to bring these two together, and a similar accident will, in fact, later lead to the marriage of Graham and Paulina. Yet we learn about the significance of the encounter only well after the event, as Lucy neglects to tell us that the handsome Doctor John is actually (John) Graham Bretton until a meeting with Mrs. Bretton makes it impossible to sustain the deception. Lucy's unwillingness to reveal her own identity to Graham is odd but not unaccountable: clearly attracted to him, she has no desire to awaken his memories of the plain girl he had largely ignored in childhood. Her unwillingness to confide in the reader is a more striking violation, an act that elicits stunned betrayal rather than pleased surprise. “I first recognized him” she tells us coolly, “on that occasion noted several chapters back...” (200), her reference to the novel *as* a novel highlighting the extent of her manipulation. Whether we immediately recognize it or not, it is our clearest sign that the alternative plot the encounter evokes will remain counterfactual. This is not the way one narrates a key event in a successful romance; it is the half-vengeful bitterness of the disappointed. The specter of a marriage, insubstantial as the ghostly nun who never haunted the Rue Fosette, is raised and banished in a breath.

Lucy's marriage to Graham Bretton, like Paul's miraculous rescue at sea, would violate

the integrity of the text; these events cannot ultimately happen, for all that they demand our consideration. What Lucy's narration requires, however, is not a particular set of events, but an overarching plot structure capable of accounting for her discursive rebellion. Any number of stories could have produced the Lucy Snowe we come to know as much by her telling as by her tale. But the only *plot* that could create her is a particular kind of Victorian plot, or anti-plot: the failure narrative. When the would-be hero of the *bildungsroman* ends an outcast, when the banns are canceled, when the mystery is not solved, and the good left unrewarded, the only meaning to hold on to is the meaning of defeat. In a sense, it is the ideal narrative for producing counterfactual plots, centered as it is around regret for what might have been. Yet if these alternative plots can be regretful, they can also be rebellious. The shadow-plots of *Villette* are not only the plots Lucy is denied, but the ones Brontë has rejected. Whatever we have been trained to desire, we would not want Lucy, finally, married to an anodyne Graham or become a species of untroubled Paulina. Neither, in the end, can the ideal reader of *Villette*, the one even Lucy Snowe could not scorn, want her married to M. Paul. *Jane Eyre* is Brontë's compromise with the marriage plot. Her plain heroine marries her always imperfect, now broken hero, and is happy. But choosing happiness, too, involves sacrifice: in a happy, rich, Jane Eyre, loved and loving, we lose the inspired saint of the Indian mission and the raging orphan of the red room.[xiii] Come Jesus, come what may, Jane will be content and settled.

Villette is what happens when Brontë rejects this compromise. The path of Paul and the path of Paulina are both threats to the grim autonomy of Lucy Snowe. The narrator we meet is not Lucy Snowe embittered, it is Lucy Snowe untamed. In another generation, the New Woman Novel may have suggested more congenial fates for her, but right now, there are none that satisfy Brontë. She tries one marriage plot, she tries two; she puts a ghost in the wings and a counter-

heroine in the margins, but Lucy will have her disappointments, and her say. Reader, she sneers, you should have known better.

Looking Forward, Looking Back

Before continuing, I would like to say a word about my choice of focus for this project. While the examples I have so far used are primarily taken from the Victorian novel, nothing I have said about the counterfactual plot is necessarily limited to the works of a particular period. So why choose to focus on this one? One answer to this question is inherent in the nature of the counterfactual; no text can tell every possible story. Nonetheless, if there is nothing necessary about my choice to focus primarily on English novels from this period, neither is that choice arbitrary. I wanted, in the first place, to study the role of the counterfactual plot in traditionally plotted narratives, which do not have access to many of the methods that most explicitly foreground alternative possibilities. Indeed, because modernist and post-modernist texts often highlight the uncertainty and instability of a presumed reality, they may fail to give priority to an "actual" plot at all. Even when they do, plot may be de-emphasized, or represent a narrower range of a character's life trajectory. Leopold Bloom's course has been pretty well established before the beginning of *Ulysses,* while Stephen Daedalus's is far from clear even after it has ended. The pressures of closure are less intense and, consequentially, call for less resistance from counterfactual plots ever struggling against their inevitable elimination.

The Victorian novel has additional features that distinguish it even from other traditionally plotted novels. The rise of serial publication and its attendant cliffhangers during the nineteenth century created a structure designed to prompt counterfactual speculation. The development of the multi-plot novel fostered natural comparisons between paired protagonists who often undergo alternative versions of fundamentally similar journeys. Formal and informal

systems of censorship, far more stringent and standardized than those of the eighteenth century,[xiv] caused authors to chafe against the unsayable and look to the counterfactual as a less direct vehicle of representation. Perhaps most importantly, the Victorian era marked the period in which the novel solidified as a distinct, aesthetically significant form with recognizable rules and conventions. It was a time in which novels acquired the cultural capital to be taken seriously as agents of social and intellectual progress, and in which authors themselves reflected self-consciously on the parameters of their chosen medium; in which the genres of the novel had grown up enough to be identifiable, stale enough to be challenged, and loved too much to be dismissed unmourned. At once sprawling and controlled, formulaic and innovative, new and familiar, the Victorian novel seemed to contain innumerable possibilities, but led its reader, masterfully and inexorably, to a foreordained, tightly plotted conclusion. In the midst of this tension, the counterfactual plot becomes most essential, and most fraught.

I have already mentioned several of the specific textual features that may create counterfactual plots. A character's consideration of a plausible alternative to the course she will choose is an obvious example, as is a cliffhanger that encourages the reader to regard multiple outcomes as potentially valid. Counterfactuals are built-in to the conventions of several of the most common Victorian plots: not only the marriage plot, but the detective and inheritance plots all require us to consider multiple candidates for, respectively, spouse, culprit, and legatee. Character doppelgangers and foils suggest alternative trajectories for our protagonists, while frame narratives may promise a hero and plot quite different from the one that will finally be enacted. In all of these cases, however, what most often activates the counterfactual plot in question is its affiliation with another recognizable generic paradigm or trope. We can ever be duped by Hardy into hoping that everything may come out alright after all because we have seen

it before; even Hardy occasionally gives us a successful marriage plot, albeit normally one dotted with a few more corpses than the average Jane Austen novel. Conversely, we can suspect Rachel Verinder of a dark motive for making away with her own moonstone because of the detective novel's close kinship with sensation fiction, in which the angel of the house might indeed be guilty of horrors. It is these established paradigms, too, that distinguish the counterfactual plot from a simple possibility. The counterfactual plot does not merely urge us to anticipate an individual event, it leads us to call upon an entire narrative sequence associated with it, the stock scenes and familiar gestures that are characteristic to that particular generic model.

This dissertation focuses on three forms of counterfactual plotting. The first, and the subject of my next chapter, is the *shadow-plot.* The broadest category of the counterfactual, it is also the one that includes most of the texts and models I have so far discussed, novels in which a main plot, associated with one narrative paradigm, is shadowed by an underplot associated with another. In particular, I will suggest, this is a dynamic that sets the emerging plots of the realist novel against the still-potent tropes of romance. Focusing my attention on *The Old Curiosity Shop, Great Expectations* and *Little Dorrit,* I will use the novels of Dickens to suggest the role of generically opposing counterfactual plots in either confirming or resisting the conventions of realist narrative. So often straddling formal borders, Dickens's works are rich with competing generic paradigms. In the fatal journey of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop,* I will argue, Dickens reluctantly abandons the romantic picaresque, in which Nell might have lived, in favor of a realist order that demands her sacrifice. In the later novels *Great Expectations* and *Little Dorrit,* however, a counterfactual plot instead complicates the status of the fictional world. Pushing back against the anti-realist tendencies displayed by even a realist novel, the counterfactual plots of Dickens's later novels increasingly attempt to undo narrative design itself.

Chapter Three, “Lifting the Veil: Horror by Proxy in the Sensation Novel,” introduces a form of counterfactual plotting I call the *proxy narrative*, in which an actual plot serves as a stand-in for an implied but otherwise unnarratable alternative. In a proxy narrative, the counterfactual plot is not simply another layer of meaning to be added to a surface understanding, but a mutually exclusive alternative that must be superimposed over a problematic actual plot if we are to make sense of the novel. Extending my argument about genre and the counterfactual, I suggest that climactic but inadequate scenes of revelation in Maria Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* should be understood as proxies for counterfactual scenes belonging to a deselected genre. The dynamic between the actual and counterfactual plots created by the proxy narrative reflect and finally resolve the sensation novel's competing alliances with the eighteenth-century Gothic and the Victorian marriage plot novel. Crucially, the proxy narrative reverses the usual order of priority between an actual and a counterfactual plot. In novels containing an active shadow-plot, as compelling as that alternative might be, it is finally subordinate to the dominant plot. In proxy narratives, the counterfactual plot is rather primary, albeit suppressed by a range of internal and external pressures.

Chapter Four, “A 'Thing Quite Other than Itself' : Henry James and the Proxy Narrative, turns to the proxy narrative in the works of Henry James, particularly *The Ambassadors.* While James lies slightly outside the temporal and geographic boundaries of the rest of my project, the category of the proxy narrative is so key to James's works as to demand his inclusion. The late Jamesian aesthetic, in which the representative failures of language so often obscure an actual state of affairs, fosters a gap between content and meaning in which the proxy narrative may thrive. This is never truer than in *The Ambassadors,* in which a series of substitutions reach their

apotheosis in a final scene that can be read most productively as, in James's words "[a thing] quite other than itself" (*The Art of the Novel* 324). Unable plausibly or ethically to depict a renunciation scene between Strether and Madame de Vionnet, James uses a proxy scene between Strether and Maria Gostrey to enact a discursively necessary outcome that the logic of story otherwise precludes. Addressing a long-standing critical debate about the otherwise narratively baffling scene, my reading suggests the potential of the category of the proxy narrative to confront narrative difficulties and radically alter our interpretations of familiar texts.

While both shadow-plots and proxy narratives may resist the domination of the actual plot, both finally involve an acknowledgment of narrative limits. In my final chapter, "Fancying the Delight: Hypothetical Realism in the Novel of Reform" I consider counterfactual plots that rather seek to expand the limits of both narrative and social possibility. Focusing on novels of reform by Thomas Hardy, and Elizabeth Gaskell, I argue that these works envision counterfactual utopias that are currently inaccessible but potentially attainable in an improved future; they are, in other words, *hypothetically realist*. In such a future, the possibilities of realist narrative will be themselves expanded as plots that would in the present be classified as utopian fancy become compatible with the project of mimetic realism. It is thus the responsive reader who can most successfully thwart the mandates of formal constraint, working outside the world of the novel to actualize the counterfactuals that, whether active or not, can never quite overcome the pathos of their own untenability.

My dissertation thus, in a sense, comes full circle. Here and in my next chapter, I suggest that some of the most active counterfactual possibilities in the nineteenth-century novel are the restive, still-powerful losers of a generic struggle that has resulted in their own displacement: they are potent because we recognize them from romantic narrative modes, but counterfactual

because they are incompatible with the emerging forms of realism. If the shadow-plot is a relic of the past, the utopian counterfactual is a portent of a possible future, representing alternative plots that belong to a hypothetical world waiting to be actualized. It is important to note, however, that the proper metaphor is the circle, and not the straight line. Genres do not evolve by natural selection: the counterfactual is so significant because it preserves as potentially possible even that which is not currently accessible. Different stories, and ways of telling, are dominant in different times, and few have been so thoroughly rejected that they could not and do not emerge again, modified but still recognizable. Change the tense, and prophecy becomes elegy; change it again, and it is prophecy once more – of another death, on a yet unbloodied battlefield.

Alexius Meinong was a pragmatist mistaken for an idealist. The concept of Meinong's jungle is a distortion of a philosophy grounded on the fundamental principle that anything that exerts its effect on human life, whether existent or not, possesses value in its own, intangible, right. Ironically, Meinong is himself the victim of his philosophy: a misreading, repeated often enough, gains the force of truth. But Meinong's actual beliefs suggest another source of the importance of the Victorian counterfactual, born, as it is, in the great age of realism. Past all rational objections, what bothers us most about Meinong's jungle or the philosopher's multiverse may be far more intuitive than logical: if there really were a land of impossible things, what good would it do us if we could never get there? A possible world might exist independently, but its value depends upon its relationship to our own: the image it reflects of what we are, the story it tells about what we could be. Any good fiction knows this; it is the reason that even the characters of the most elaborate fantasy world are ruled, like the rest of us, by death and desire. If a god cannot die himself, he falls in love with a human, and learns in that way the urgency born of mortality. The realist novel, however makes this relationship more explicit, creating

alternative worlds that, both as counterfactuals themselves and through the counterfactuals they pose, empathically confirm and boldly challenge the conditions of our own. We could, like *Hard Times's* fact-loving Thomas Gradgrind, dismiss them all as fanciful nonsense. But why on earth – or any other world – would we ever want to?

Chapter Two: Seeing Shadows: The Alternative Plots of Dickensian Realism

The story of the American release of the last installment of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is one of the best-known pieces of Dickensian lore. At the end of the previous segment, Dickens had left his readers at the threshold of Little Nell's cottage, where the child lay silently abed. Was she dead or sleeping? Time – and the next chapter - would tell, but for the moment, her fate, as far as readers knew, was undecided. Certainly, they behaved as if it were, inundating Dickens with "imploring letters recommending [her] to mercy" (House 153). When the ships carrying the novel's final installment arrived in New York Harbor, the story goes, readers crowded the docks, crying out "Does Little Nell live" (Ackroyd 319)? The answer, of course, was no, as it had been since long before the ships had set sail or the precise words of her doom been written. Yet until that moment, Nell had been, in the minds of the readers, if nowhere else, suspended between two narrative alternatives. One was destined to be realized, and the other to be discarded. For a time, however, both were possible, and so the letters were written and the vigils kept as readers prayed for a girl who, if only they had known it, had been dead all along.

Genre and the Counterfactual

The works of Charles Dickens are ideal test cases for a discussion of genre and the counterfactual in the nineteenth-century novel. Dickens has entered the canon as perhaps the representative author of the Victorian era, a period whose literary culture has become defined by the rise of realism. Yet Dickens himself is only sometimes treated as a realist author, and even then, it is often with an asterisk. F.R Leavis pointedly leaves him out of *The Great Tradition,* declaring that despite his obvious brilliance "his genius was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than this description suggests" (30). More appreciative later readings – including Leavis's own in *Dickens the*

Novelist, written twenty years after *The Great Tradition* – decisively refuted the notion that Dickens was insufficiently serious or aesthetically sophisticated to merit serious critical attention.[i] Even so, the extent of Dickens's realism remains a subject for debate; Peter Brooks, for instance, included Dickens in his 2005 *Realist Vision,* but prefaced his discussion of *Hard Times* with a caveat: "I am of course not sure that it is right to talk about Dickens in the context of realism at all, since so much of Dickens appears as the avoidance or suppression of realism" (40).

Some critics have dealt with Dickens's intermediate status by noting the easy divisibility of his career into early and mature stages that correspond roughly to the period's larger cultural transition between romance and realism.[ii] While Dickens's early works are steeped in the conventions of his eighteenth-century antecedents Fielding and Smollet, his later novels are characterized by an increasing social and psychological complexity. Triumphs become less complete, and social problems more pervasive; heroes gain flaws, and miss opportunities. More and more prominent characters are left out of the joyful final tableaux, which are themselves often harder won and more compromised than their counterparts in earlier novels. In *Nicholas Nickleby,* the world of the novel is remade in the image of its dashing hero's exuberant good-will; by *Our Mutual Friend,* it is only through giving up for lost the other members of a venal social chorus that a stolid band of refugees can make for themselves a separate peace.

Yet as Brooks's hesitation suggests, Dickens's conversion to realism was always ambivalent. Pip and Louisa Gradgrind and Arthur Clennam possess more developed interior lives than their predecessors, and must contend, as they did not, with novelistic worlds whose constraints are subtler and more inexorable than an evil uncle's antipathy or the deceptions of a pickpocket gang. These worlds simultaneously, however, accommodate hosts of characters and

situations that seem imported from the realms of the Gothic melodrama and the moral fable. Alex Woloch has written in *The One vs. the Many* on the way in which Dickens's protagonists frequently risk being "engulfed" by more prepossessing minor characters, the grotesques and eccentrics that readers often remember even after more prominent figures have been forgotten. Aimless barristers encounter sinister foreign schemers and doomed, angelic waifs; middle-class strivers collide with clairvoyant crones and resolutely noble fallen women. Dickens's plots, too, strain the limits of realist credibility. Fundamentally ordinary conflicts are created by overtly literary contrivances: Pip's story about the disappointment of bourgeois desires relies on a convict's largesse, an old woman's pathological vengeance, and a series of absurd coincidences that drive and unite the various parts of the narrative. Like the victories of their protagonists, the triumph of realism in the later novels of Dickens is often compromised and incomplete.

Particularly evident in Dickens, this generic tension is hardly unique to his works. Because its formal boundaries are so unstable, realism is a category inherently susceptible to collapse. According to the most expansive definitions, the realist novel would seem to be characterized primarily by what it is not: if a conventionally plotted novel is set among ordinary people in a reasonable facsimile of the world we inhabit and cannot be better classified as allegory, satire, historical romance, or Gothic melodrama, it is realist by default. Indeed, the inclusion of several, competing generic models can itself contribute to an impression of realism, as competition between several more restrictively defined forms prevents any one from becoming determinative. The term is in Leavis's *Great Tradition* associated less with content than with formal sophistication and "moral seriousness," but historicist accounts of narrative development like Watt's *Rise of the Novel* may include as well comparatively primitive works that nonetheless help to inaugurate a tradition characterized by detailed descriptive

representations of ordinary scenes and people. More recently, Amanda Claybaugh has limited the term to the works of authors "engaged in debates about realism," distinguishing between realist novels and those that simply display "verisimilitude" (42). Given this fundamental uncertainty over the definition of the genre itself, it is needless to say that there is often no clear consensus on the classification of a particular novel; the same works may be classified, alternatively, as picaresque and proto-realist, Gothic and (realist) anti-Gothic, sensation fiction and "sensational realism."

Even in less ambiguous cases, the nature of narrative design militates against the stability of the form. At minimum, realism is generally perceived to be characterized by mimetic fidelity to the conditions of actual life. Yet no matter how much comprehensive detail and acute psychological insight a realist novelist brings to bear upon his subject, one condition he can rarely replicate is the inherent plotlessness of human existence. We do not expect the lives of real people to meet standards of narratability or provide satisfying closure. Our futures are not foreshadowed, nor our chance encounters assumed to be invested with deep significance; the gun shown in the first act may lie dormant in a safe through the final curtain. Adoptees do not routinely find their birth parents among their existing set of acquaintances, and the likeliest culprit is, more often than not, indeed the guilty party, and not a red herring. Hilary Dannenberg has written on the methods that realist novels use to "domesticate" these improbabilities within an internally consistent, immersive narrative universe (5). Yet even when we accept the contrivances of plot as an organic part of the reality of a text, we remain aware on some level that a novel, no matter how exhaustively it details the minutia of daily life, is liable to explode into melodrama or collapse into implausibility. It is in this sense that Viktor Shklovsky called *Tristram Shandy,* the most anachronistically post-modern of all English texts, "the most typical

novel in world literature"; Sterne lays bare conventions that are implicit in even the least overtly defamiliarizing of fictions (170).

At best, then, genre is defined less by a binary than across a spectrum.[iii] It is often possible to say no more than that, on balance, a text's realistic elements overwhelm its romantic ones, and to accept that some level of conspicuous contrivance need not jeopardize the essential naturalism of a work. This contributes to the difficulty of making even post-facto classifications of many novels, and leads to an expansion of the number of counterfactual possibilities that a text will generate while in progress. As multiple genres struggle for dominance, it is never clear which will finally prove decisive, preventing us from excluding as unlikely a range of possibilities that we might dismiss in a more generically stable text.

The contemplation of counterfactual alternatives, however, is more than a predictive parlor game to be played by the most engrossed readers. Previous accounts have emphasized the role of the counterfactual in investing fictional worlds with an impression of realism. Marie Laure-Ryan has described the cognitive process by which a reader may experience even a fantastic novel as realistic by "recentering" his or her perception of the actual around the alternative world of the text (1991). Within a given textual world, the counterfactual solidifies an "ontological hierarchy" in which the chosen fiction of the actual world appears to possess greater truth-value than its rejected – or even entirely unexpressed – alternatives (Dannenberg 54).[iv] Counterfactual plots also permit narrative worlds to simulate the openness and unpredictability of our own. This is most obviously true in a work like *Romeo and Juliet,* where we are told at the outset that the lovers will take their own lives, but are compelled by the comic elements of the play to suspend this awareness and envision an alternative possibility. It factors as well into the well-known phenomenon of suspense in re-readings of texts, when the outcome is known but a

reader may nonetheless perceive as possible events that she knows will not actually take place (Carroll). But even when outcomes are not known, the discourse of a text may practically preclude events that are theoretically possible: Thomas Hardy could, of course, have finally left Jude Fawley as the successful head of a thriving family, just as he could have had him ascend spontaneously to heaven in the manner of a Garcia Marquez character, but neither one nor the other would be consistent with the novel's established formal and thematic concerns.

Counterfactual plots thus get at the heart of the critical question of how deterministic literary structure finally is. Are the fundamentals of any particular plot determined by formally and culturally generated deep structures, or the results of conscious and changeable authorial will? Is, in other words the counterfactual structure a tactic employed to create illusion of uncertainty, or the mark of legitimate doubt, on the part of authors as well as readers? To the extent that discursive logic impels texts-in-progress toward certain fixed outcomes, even the most potent counterfactual exists only to be eliminated, to give the appearance of freedom in the face of constraint. But to the extent that those outcomes may be obscured by real uncertainty over the possibilities available in a given textual world, counterfactual plots pose a more serious resistance to the constraints of form. If the author of a half-written serial can mull his options and undo his designs, then the events of the most artfully contrived narrative world exist, like those of our own lives, as the non-inevitable products of circumstance and choice.

Appropriately enough, the counterfactual structures in Dickens's novels, which tread so closely to the generic boundaries between romance and realism, themselves embody both possibilities. In this chapter, I will first discuss Little Nell's death in *The Old Curiosity Shop* as a reflection of Dickens's growing acceptance of the constrains of realist plotting. Still grounded in a tradition that permitted the improbable and the fantastic, Dickens himself was, for a significant

portion of the novel's composition, unsure that Nell had to die. Yet as his narrative grew from the short story Dickens had originally intended to the novel he wound up writing, it became obvious that Nell's death was the only logical end to her journey. In a discussion of the two endings of *Great Expectations,* I will ultimately suggest, however, that in its most mature form, Dickens's realism was on the contrary characterized by a resistance to the formal imperative toward closure.

The Unexpected Novel

Dickens's novels reflect a particular preoccupation with counterfactual forms. In his 2007 article "Lives Unled in Realist Fiction," Andrew Miller discusses Dickens's tendency to confront his characters with visions of alternative selves who serve as counterfactual possibilities for their own lives: Edith Dombey, had she not been sold in marriage by her scheming mother, might have been the innocent Florence; Sydney Carton, had he put his talents to better use, could have lived Charles Darnay's life rather than suffered his death.[v] Beyond haunting characters with images of alternative selves, Dickens's counterfactuals also raise the specter of alternative novels. David Copperfield, whether or not he is the hero of his own life, is certainly the hero of *David Copperfield.* But the novel's opening chapter, "I Am Born," is also the story of a misbirth: after being congratulated on her new nephew, David's eccentric Aunt Betsey storms from his home mortally offended that his mother has given birth to a boy and not the girl she has already adopted as goddaughter and namesake. Throughout the novel, Dickens will periodically raise the question of what kind of a story this might have been had Betsey Copperfield been born that night and David left "forever in the land of dreams and shadows" (12). For his part, fact-minded Thomas Gradgrind would never have considered the qualities and capacities of George, Augustus, and John Gradgrind, all "suppositious, non-existent persons" (3). But Dickens does,

and opens the second chapter of *Hard Times* by raising the specter of the rejected Gradgrinds who, he imagines, might have turned out more flexible than their stern counterpart.

In *David Copperfield* and *Hard Times,* Dickens's evocations of an unwritten narrative reflect on the circumstances that constrain our possibilities: whether one is born a boy or made a Benthamite, the conditions of our birth and upbringing foreclose, or at least threaten, the realization of certain potential outcomes. When it came to the process of writing his own novels, however, Dickens was notably open to the possibility of revision and alteration; each of his novels, to a greater or lesser extent, contains within itself the specter of its own discarded alternatives. The most famous instance of Dickens's malleability is his decision to replace the original ending of *Great Expectations* after Edward Bulwer-Lytton suggested that it was too depressing, but there were other changes as well. When the obvious original of *David Copperfield*'s Mrs. Mowcher wrote to complain about her portrayal as an unscrupulous flatterer, Dickens transformed the character into an unlikely heroine (*Letters* 674-675). After initially intending *Dombey and Son*'s Walter to serve as a cautionary tale of youth corrupted by greed, he found he couldn't bring himself to carry the plan through, displacing the original subplot onto a minor character and leaving Walter to serve instead as a cautionary model of a rather bland leading man (Forster 2.341). And, on the "valued suggestion" of his best friend and first biographer John Forster, Dickens decided well into the writing process of *The Old Curiosity* that his child-heroine Little Nell would have to die (Forster 1.211).

Even before Forster's intervention, the *Old Curiosity Shop* had undergone radical changes. The novel began, not as a novel at all but as one of the tales in *Master Humphrey's Clock,* a weekly periodical in which Dickens used the meetings of kindly Master Humphrey and his small circle of acquaintances as a nominal pretext for introducing a series of otherwise

unconnected stories. A combination of poorer than expected sales and enthusiasm for the story – at that point really no more than a sketch – of a little girl living with her grandfather in a curio shop induced Dickens to extend his tale into a full-length novel, and thus *The Old Curiosity Shop* was born, "with less direct consciousness of design" than perhaps any other of his novels save *The Pickwick Papers.* (Forster 1. 202). Conscious or not, Dickens's shift from one formal category to another necessitated changes to his original plans, such as they were, for Little Nell's story. This is most apparent in his clumsy abandonment of the first person narrator of the opening chapters, whom readers of the periodical would have recognized as Master Humphrey; even worse was his attempt, after the close of the novel proper, to claim retroactively that Humphrey had returned in the person of an entirely different character (*Master Humphrey's Clock* 105), an assertion that fails under even the most casual logical analysis. Dickens's original intentions for the story remain too obscure to say with certainty what other elements of his initial design might have been altered to accommodate the significant expansion of the tale. One point that seems clear from Forster's account, however, is that the short story version of *The Old Curiosity Shop* was not to have been a sentimental tragedy ending in the death of Little Nell.

Forster places great emphasis on his own contribution, proclaiming "I was responsible for its tragic ending," and claiming that Dickens "had not thought of killing her" until Forster himself suggested it at about the novel's half-way point (1.211). The tendency toward self-promotion is typical of the biographer; elsewhere, he pauses during an account of the publication of Pickwick to note the remarkable coincidence that both of the most important events in Dickens's pre-fame (and pre-Forster) life, his marriage and his encounter with the model for Pickwick, were, by some "shadowy association" linked to Forster himself: he married on Forster's birthday, and the inspiration for Pickwick shared his name (1.112-113). Yet even Forster

stopped short of claiming that the suggestion was a product of his own creative insight, presenting it rather as the natural consequence of what Dickens had already written: "I asked him to consider whether it did not *necessarily belong even to his own conception,* after taking so mere a child through such a tragedy of sorrow, to lift her also out of the commonplace of ordinary happy endings so that the gentle pure little figure and form should never change to the fancy (emphasis added)" (1.211). However late he may have come to the realization, by the time he was at the point of actually concluding the novel, Dickens, too, had begun to speak of Little Nell's death as a tragedy beyond even his power to remedy: "I am slowly murdering that poor child and grow wretched over it," he wrote to the actor William Macready. "It wrings my heart. Yet it must be" (*Letters* 180*)*. A second letter sent shortly after the publication of the novel's final number was more explicit: "That Nellicide was the act of Heaven, as you may see any of these fine mornings when you look about you" (228).

Such professions of inevitability, in the mouths of authors, come off as slightly disingenuous; who, if not the author, controls the progress of the narrative? In the case of *The Old Curiosity Shop* the claim that Dickens was somehow compelled to kill Nell is particularly difficult to accept. For a significant portion of the novel, he had evidently been capable of imagining an ending in which Nell lived and, even afterward, the novel seems to be preparing her for a reprieve. While the villainous dwarf Quilp seeks her, so too does the mysterious single gentleman, whose designs, it transpires, are far more benevolent. Indeed, there is no shortage of candidates for a timely rescue: from the family's loyal servant Kit to the long-vanished narrator to the poor schoolmaster who takes pity on the child and her grandfather, any number of possible heroes lies in wait to bring Nell her richly deserved reward. If ominous reminders of Nell's growing weakness make her death always a potent possibility, this host of potential saviors

makes her survival at least as foreseeable an outcome, up until the moment that the cottage threshold is crossed and the angel-girl's bower revealed as her deathbed.

All the same, Nell dies. Something in the shift from the short story, in which Nell would have lived, to the novel, in which she must die, has proven so fatal that even her own creator cannot mitigate her doom. That element, I will suggest, is genre. Certainly, realism is, at first glance, not much in evidence in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, an early Dickens novel and probably his most overtly fantastical. Nell herself is continually associated with the otherworldly: she lies on "a little bed that a fairy might have slept in" and appears "as if she had been an angel" (5, 318). The world she inhabits is, if usually more grotesque than ethereal, in many respects no less unreal: having grown up among a collection of "curiosities," Nell escapes from a dwarf, hides out with the performers of a circus freak show, and briefly finds refuge as a keeper of the grim human parodies of a waxwork. At the same time, there is a very real horror at the heart of her experiences. Nell must leave home because her grandfather, clearly in the early stages of senility, is a gambling addict who is deeply in debt to Quilp; when Quilp takes possession of the Trent home, he moves into Nell's old room – including that fairy bed - in a scene with strong undertones of sexual exploitation. For every nightmarish figure that Nell encounters in her travels, she also meets more commonplace victims of a social order as brutal as any fairytale villain: the promising young scholar, dying of overwork and want, the orphan sisters, separated by the poverty that has left them to lives of lonely drudgery. Nell's problem, however, transcends the commonplace struggles of the innocent waif in a cruel world. Rather, hers is a formal crisis of a character being forced into a generic paradigm for which she is fundamentally unsuited. Nell may be a child of romance, but the journey that, more than any other addition, turns her tale from a short story to a novel, removes her from her proper sphere into a realism she was never

intended to encounter. While Dickens may not initially have recognized it, embedded in the structure of his narrative was a conflict between two literary modes that could be neither reconciled nor easily dismissed.

The Perils of the Road

Superficially, *The Old Curiosity Shop* appears to be, like its immediate predecessor *Nicholas Nickleby,* a picaresque novel on the model of *Tom Jones* and *Roderick Random,* launching a hero out onto an open road filled with adventure and peril. The wanderings of Nell and her grandfather are episodic and often aimless. The tension of her escapades comes from external circumstances: we wonder how Nell will dodge her avaricious pursuers, not whether she herself will give in to temptation; the weakness she succumbs to can only be a physical one.

Yet the journey of *The Old Curiosity Shop* differs fundamentally from that of its antecedents. One characteristic that distinguishes the picaresque, a romantic form, from its realist equivalent the Bildungsroman is its attitude toward social possibility. The hero of the picaresque must confront the unpleasant aspects of his world: imprisonment, impoverishment, and mishaps comical and serious are all staples of the genre. Finally, however, reality will bend to accommodate the needs of the hero. Nicholas must undergo the injustices of Dotheboys Hall and the indignities of life on stage, but he will finally and improbably emerge triumphant: the wicked uncle will die; the benefactor will appear; the day will be saved and the girl won. Even the poor schoolboys belatedly get their due: their tyrannous master Squeers is imprisoned and Dotheboys Hall, as they exultantly cry, "broken up" for good. The Bildungsroman inverts this relationship between self and society: rather than triumphing over his world, the hero must be reconciled to it (Redfield 38). Nicholas Nickelby can give the schoolmaster Squeers a good thrashing in the first third of the novel secure that his actions will be validated by the wider world in the last. His

descendant David Copperfield must instead seethe quietly when he unexpectedly encounters his stepfather Mr. Murdstone, the man he holds responsible for his mother's death; when David last hears of him, Murdstone has just married a second and still younger wife. Accepting the world as it is is part of the process of maturation for the hero of the Bildungsroman; he may triumph within that world, but only by learning to negotiate the rules of a reality that will always be more limited than his desires would have it.

The realism of the Bildungsroman, rather than the romantic possibility of the picaresque, ultimately determines the course of Nell's tragic journey. Surrounded by the fantastic, Nell is nonetheless unable to wrest control of her fate from the unforgiving world around her; poverty, cruelty and illness will not in this case be overcome by virtue and faith. The reason for this failure is not any harshness inherent in the form; most Bildungsromanae end happily enough. Rather, Nell's failure is determined by an incompatibility between Nell herself and the paradigm into which she has been inserted. Forced into the trajectory of the realist novel, it does not follow that Nell herself is a realist hero. Partially, this is function of age and gender: the protagonist of the classical Bildungsroman, by the time his journey begins, is typically a male on the brink of adulthood. Throughout the novel, characters comment on the incongruity of Nell's task: "[These paths were] never made for little feet like yours" (333), says one sympathetic stranger. "One of you is a trifle too old for that sort of work [walking through the night], and the other a trifle too young" (321), remarks another. Nell is a little girl undertaking what should, both practically and narratively, be a young man's journey, and her failure is in this context just punishment for her transgression.[vi] Yet her unsuitability runs deeper than her physical unfitness for her task. In his *Theory of the Novel,* Gyorgy Lukacs defines the novel as a playing out of the essential incommensurability between an interior life and exterior reality. In the nineteenth century, the

primary iteration of this struggle occurs in the "novel of romantic disillusionment" in which "a purely interior reality which is full of content and more or less complete in itself enters into competition with the reality of the outside world…the failure of every attempt to realize this equality is the is the subject of the work" (Lukacs 112). But while Nell is unquestionably at odds with her environment, she lacks the complex interiority of Lukacs's hero. "She seemed to exist," says Master Humphrey, speaking for Dickens, "in a kind of allegory" (10). The hero of the Bildungsroman may die, as Julian Sorrel does in *The Red and the Black,* but he can also mature, assimilating the lessons of experience with the impulses of nature to achieve an integrated, socially tenable selfhood. Nell, however, was never meant to grow up; conceived as a romantic symbol of innocence and goodness, she cannot hope to profit from a journey that could only diminish her idealized nature. In the world of romance, she might have lived; in a world of realism, she must not.

All the same, romantic possibility is by no means at an end for Dickens. It remains, in the first place, in the persistence of the fantastic imagery that continues to challenge the dominant realist mode. Once we have recognized – as Dickens did- that Nell's road is the Bildungsroman's path to realism, her fate is sealed. But the fairy-tale features of Nell's world continue to the end to work against encroaching realism: if we are in a world of dwarves and giants, angels and monsters, we may also be in a world in which Nell can be saved. Realism will finally defeat her, but not without resistance from the genre that lives on to protest its displacement and testify to the road not taken. Romantic possibility lingers as well in a subplot that plays out a version of Nell's narrative of victimized innocence to radically different effect. One of the minor characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a young girl called The Marchioness, the serving drudge of a sadistic mistress who houses her in the cellar on a near-starvation diet. Alone and abused,

without even a proper name to call her own, the child initially seems, far more than Nell, to be firmly situated among the realist elements of the novel, a pathetic figure smuggled into the tale from one of Dickens's journalistic street sketches.

By the end of the novel, she has instead become a case study of the transformative power of fancy. The girl's wretched lot first changes when she is befriended by Dick Swiveller, a sympathetic tenant of the repulsive Miss Sally. Like Mr. Dick, *David Copperfield*'s mad would-be author, this literary Dick acts as a diffracted version of Dickens's own imagination, and specifically, as a figure of romantic fancy. "Left an infant by my parents at an early age…cast upon the world in my tenderest period…who can wonder at my weakness! Here's a miserable orphan for you (172)!" he proclaims, in a typically melodramatic revision of his really quite tolerable childhood. Sally Brass and her brother Sampson are, as their surname suggests, steeped in a culture of base materialism of which the Marchioness is only the most immediate victim. But Dick can infuse even their grim existence with romantic interest: "This is a most remarkable and supernatural sort of house… She-dragons in the business…plain cooks of three feet high appearing mysteriously from under ground…" (258). It is he who dubs the little servant the Marchioness, treating her with the exaggerated courtesy of a besotted knight addressing his lady, and he who, finally, ensures that her trajectory will be the reverse of Nell's. Having entered the novel as a potential suitor of Nell, he exits it by marrying the Marchioness, whom he formally renames Sophronia Sphinx as a nod to her obscure origins. These, however, are perhaps less mysterious than he supposes: she is, it is heavily implied, the illegitimate child of Miss Sally, always portrayed as a mannish, sexless figure, and Quilp. With this revelation of her grotesque descent, the Marchioness completes her transformation from figure of realism to figure of romance: for her, the rescuer has arrived just in time rather than moments too late.

The Marchioness and Nell never meet. Rather, they operate in parallel, one a figure of romanticism imported into a fatal realism, the other a figure of realism initiated into a saving romance. Yet the two women are not equals. The Marchioness is, essentially, the heroine of a short story played out within the body of the larger novel. Unusually for a character in a Dickens novel, her plot is comparatively self-contained; it influences other narrative strands, but does not itself depend upon them, and has only the most indirect relationship to Nell's story. Within this curtailed form, romance can still triumph, and the fancy of a fairy-godfather turned lover transform an urchin into princess and riddle and bride all in one. But when the romantic fancy Dickens can still sustain for the length of a tale is tested against the expanded world of the realist novel, it collapses, and that is the world in which Nell must travel. Had she remained at home – remained ensconced in the few chapters containing Master Humphrey's fond recollection of a chance meeting one night in London – she, too, would have been saved: her long-lost uncle, in the form of the single gentleman, would have found her at home when he came on his first fruitless call, bearing the fortune she so desperately needed. But unlike the Marchioness, whose glimpses of the world are taken furtively through the keyhole of her cellar door, Nell seeks out a wider plane of existence. Not knowing she was only ever supposed to be an allegory, not knowing that the rules of the journey have changed, she departs on what she believes to be the well-worn path of the picaresque: "'Dear grandfather,' cried the girl with an energy which shone in her flushed face, trembling voice, and impassioned gesture… 'Let us walk through country places, and sleep in fields and under trees, and never think of money again, or anything that can make you sad, but rest at nights, and have the sun and wind upon our faces in the day, and thank [G-d] together. Let us never set foot in dark rooms or melancholy houses any more, but wander up and down wherever we like to go…'" (71).

A world without money, or pain, or grief. It is Nell's proper sphere, but it is not one available to the earthly traveler. Unable to credibly achieve the necessarily compromised maturation of the realist hero, she must settle for the apotheosis of the romantic saint. The reader's path, unrelieved by any such ascension, is perhaps a sadder one. Lulled by the survival of the romantic underplot as a legitimate counterfactual possibility, we have hoped for an ending that was never really an option at all; we do enter the dark room of the melancholy house, and realize too late that we have been reading a tragedy all along.

The Failed Scheherazade

Yet although Nell's fate is tragic, that of the community surrounding her is not. In the first stage of Dickens's career, characters by and large get the endings they deserve. By *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities,* protagonists, no matter how sincerely penitent or belatedly heroic, will find themselves unable to compensate for initial failures of heart or will; as comparatively early as *David Copperfield,* a good portion of the novel's supporting cast has to be shipped off to Australia to find even qualified happiness. The early novels, by contrast, end in the creation of small-scale, utopian versions of English society in which the good are rewarded, the evil are punished, and members of all classes are left, with a very few exceptions, to live harmoniously within their respective stations. Normally, the protagonist is instrumental in securing this ideal. In *The Old Curiosity Shop,* however, it is only the death of formally problematic Nell that enables the achievement of a perfected social order. In dying, she frees up Dick for the Marchioness and Kit for the pretty housemaid Barbara, who can better tolerate her husband's continuing infatuation with a dead child than with a living woman. The single gentleman, thwarted in his original mission of mercy, uses the money intended for Nell to dispense charity to her various helpers: from the poor schoolmaster who provided her final resting place to a

furnace-keeper who offered a night's shelter from the cold, all get their just reward. Even angelic Nell, the novel's final chapter suggests, is perhaps not lost but rather restored to her proper sphere. Sacred in Kit's fireside tales, remembered and revered by all who knew and loved her, her tragedy is muted by the sense that she is more suitable as presiding deity than as living member of a human society.

Yet this is, as Dickens himself felt so keenly, a poor consolation, and the difficulty of achieving even this compromise reflects the formal struggles of an author beginning to chafe against the restrictions of his chosen genre. In *Nicholas Nickleby, The Old Curiosity Shop*'s immediate predecessor, it is Nicholas's energy and virtue, his "life and adventures" that bring about the novel's final settlement. In *The Old Curiosity Shop,* the absence of an adequate hero instead forces Dickens to abandon the attempt at narrative immersion and conclude his narrative with a self-conscious authorial intrusion: "The magic reel, which, rolling on before, has led the chronicler thus far, now slackens in its pace, and stops. It lies before the goal; the pursuit is at an end. It remains but to dismiss the leaders of the little crowd who have borne us company upon the road, and so to close the journey" (547). Replacing the literal journey with the narrative one, Dickens concludes the novel without fully confronting the generic problem posed by the protagonist who would not be a romantic and could not be a realist heroine. His awareness of what "must be" having led him grudgingly to his great "Nellicide," he finally returns to a model of storytelling in which the unrestrained play of fancy can turn a drudge into a marchioness or a dead child into an immortal angel. The declining potency of this romantic imagination is reflected in the transformation of charming fabulist Dick Swiveller, several novels later, into the madman Mr. Dick. For now, however, it will suffice to stave off, for a time, the pressures of realism.

Or, it will suffice up to a point. Before the end comes, Nell herself makes a last attempt to change her story. In the final, most desperate leg of her journey, she tries belatedly to reinsert herself into a series of more appropriate generic paradigms. Having fled from her last refuge after her increasingly senile grandfather has fallen under the sway of another group of gamblers, Nell tells the old man that they must fly from "the horrible dream" she cannot bear to dream again. It is a recasting of her story as fantasy, a desperate retreat back into the paradigm she has so fatally abandoned. But even as she weaves the fancy, she cannot forget the reality that overwhelms it: "This dream is too real" (318), Nell says to urge her grandfather to leave. Next, she takes shelter in a furnace room, where the forbidding industrial fire, its flame hidden through "iron chinks," its ashes falling into a "bright hot grave," surrounded by the "unearthly noises" of machinery, becomes a hideous parody of the domestic hearth that might, in another life, have one day been hers to tend. Finally, she finds herself on a ship, surrounded by a group of rough sailors who ask for her to pay for her passage with a song. While she claims not to know any, the man persists: "You know forty-seven songs… forty-seven's your number. Let me hear one of 'em – the best. Give me a song this minute" (324). The frightened girl searches her memory and finds one song, then another, and then another. All night long she sings, and by this expedient "[keeps] them in good humor" (*Ibid.).*

The scene of Little Nell singing, as if for her life, among the threatening men recalls the story of Scheherazade, who each night staved off death by plying her murderous husband with her tales. It was one of Dickens's childhood favorites,[vii] a romance that captivated him long before he discovered the picaresque of *Humphrey Clinker* and *Roderick Random.* Scheherazade's stories would have been worth listening to even without the threat of the sword hanging always above her neck as she spoke. But the most exquisite thrill came from the knowledge of that other,

awful possibility: one day, the blow might fall, as it had on so many less gifted wives. Of course, it was only the storyteller's art that made the threat seem real: Scheherazade could not die if the tales were to go on, and no reader would believe in a sultan that could listen for one thousand nights unmoved. By the time her tales finally ran out, if they ever did, he could not help but love her; we too had listened, for all those nights, and knew how such stories went. But Nell, try as she might, cannot hope to match the power of that ancient princess. While Scheherazade must call upon inventive powers, Nell's task involves an appeal to memory; the songs are not Nell's own, and her recitation is compulsory. For Scheherazade's one thousand and one tales, Nell has forty-seven songs, an arbitrary number that Nell approaches only by repeating the same old tunes again and again. Nell mimics Scheherazade, but she, like the songs she recalls imperfectly, is no more than an echo of a lost past, the shadow of a romantic heroine who once found salvation in stories.

Two paths lie before the sultan: death or the story. He chooses as he must, and so does Dickens. But in Dickens's case, both choices, death and the story, arrive at the same end. The counterfactual narrative – where the story stopped at chapter three; where the impossibly good child stayed home, and left another to serve as hero; where Little Nell was only sleeping – still lingers at the margins, because the triumph of realism could never be easy or complete. Yet choosing the story, in *The Old Curiosity Shop,* means choosing the novel as Dickens was coming to understand it, and this meant that Little Nell had to die. We mourn her bitterly and sincerely. But, for the sake of the novel, we cannot wish her death undone. The sacrifice of romantic allegory would, later in Dickens's career, later in the nineteenth century, lead to heroes with an interiority that Nell could not have developed while remaining Little Nell. We leave the child to her little bed, a lasting reminder of the narrative direction that Charles Dickens might, in another

life, have taken.

Seeing Shadows

Dickens's account of Little Nell's death emphasizes the necessity of the tragedy; among many theoretical possibilities, only one was ever really an option. The emerging realist Dickens *cannot* save Little Nell; the novel's end is the single natural and fitting consequence of the narrative that has preceded it. In this model, the counterfactual realm serves as a graveyard of jettisoned plots and inaccessible genres, a place where Dickens can raise the ghosts of romantic possibilities, but never quite recall them to life. Yet Dickens's own career provides an obvious contradiction to this account of narrative construction in the two endings of *Great Expectations.* Since Forster first published the original ending of *Great Expectations* in his biography of Dickens, readers have been left with the evidence that Dickens found himself capable of writing two crucially dissimilar endings to the novel, challenging any impression of compulsion. As DA Miller has observed, the very existence of a second ending requires a text open-ended enough to have produced both: "if either ending wholly regulated the narrative leading up to it, Dickens would simply have been *unable* to change the original without substantially revising the rest of his novel" (273-74).

Nonetheless, partisans of both endings have argued their claims precisely on the grounds of the fundamental narrative rightness of one or the other of the conclusions; Dickens might have been able to write another ending, but only one could be a *proper* ending.[viii] Advocates for the first conclusion even have a ready-made scapegoat for Dickens's defection from the paths of narrative virtue in Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the friend and fellow writer who suggested the change. Although Dickens does not enumerate the "good reasons" Bulwer-Lytton offered for revising the original ending, the inducements for providing a happier ending to Pip and Estella's

story have often been assumed to be more commercial than literary. [ix] Dickens's letter announcing the change to Forster, to whom he had already sent a draft of the novel with the original conclusion, provides further ammunition to those who would interpret Dickens's decision as a crass and grudging concession to public taste: he says that he has no doubt the change will be "more acceptable," and evaluates the result with the somewhat backhanded boast that he has "put in as pretty a little piece of writing as I could" (3.369).

Far more convincing are the aesthetic arguments in favor of the canceled conclusion. Forster sets the tone for later uncharitable readings of the alteration by calling it a "summary proceeding" and maintaining that the first ending "seems to be more consistent with the drift, as well as the natural working out of the tale" (3.368-69). For all its "prettiness," the happiness of the second ending feels unearned. This is not entirely a matter of genre: literary realism can coexist with the happy ending, as it does routinely in the case of the marriage plot. What a realist novel does require is a sense of causal sequence taken to its logical conclusion – or, at least, *a* logical conclusion. The marriage of, for instance, David Copperfield and Agnes, insufferable as it may be in other respects, undeniably arises out of the structure and constitutes an essential element of that particular novel: David's marks his development as an adult by his recognition of Agnes's virtues.

The logic of *Great Expectation* dictates precisely the opposite: Pip's central mistake has been bound up with his love of a woman who represents the falseness of the world to which he aspires. We need not be censorious enough to demand that Pip, at twenty-three, resign himself to a life of penitential celibacy to be convinced of the narrative impropriety of his marriage to Estella; it is one thing to accept Pip and a softened Estella shaking hands in a street in Piccadilly, another to tolerate them joining hands in the ruined garden of Satis House.[x] A brief meeting with

Estella can be assimilated into a general sense of lost expectations that include and are represented by, but do not end with her. A longer and more lasting encounter requires that she assume a function absolutely antithetical to the one she has occupied throughout the narrative in order to become an appropriate locus of desire. It is a transformation that we are, as Forster reminds us, expected to accept in two pages in which Pip and Estella's reflections on the states, past and present, of their respective hearts must serve as validation of what is in her case an entirely off-page metamorphosis.

There are also, however, strong stylistic reasons to prefer the Satis House ending. Jerome Meckier observes that the revised conclusion returns, as the original had not, to patterns of imagery – particularly those involving clasped hands and rising mists – that have been central throughout the novel. The logic of these images, Meckier suggests, properly dictates a reconciliation that is, far from a simplistic happy ending, an embrace of a drastically reduced set of possibilities. The image of Pip and Estella leaving the ruined garden of Satis House among the evening mists recalls both the mist-strewn atmosphere of Pip's own earlier departure from the forge and the final line of *Paradise Lost,* in which Adam and Eve leave Eden “hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow” (*Paradise Lost,* XII.648). Satis House itself, of course, was never more than a false Eden – in the world of this novel, Eden was the forge, where another Pip, in the form of Joe and Biddy's child, now occupies our hero's forfeited space. For Pip and Estella, the world behind them and the world before are both compromised. It is the evening mists, and not the morning ones that rise over their departure; they may yet be happy, but it will be the happiness of fallen people, in a fallen world.

The leading merit of the Satis House ending, however, is an ambiguity that contains within it the conclusion it purportedly displaces. Pip and Estella themselves remain, at least for

the moment, divided in their understanding of the reconciliation:

> We are friends," said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench.
>
> "And will continue friends apart," said Estella.
>
> I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her (460).

That *Pip* believes that this moment of empathy can be sustained as a more lasting relationship does not guarantee that his hopes will be realized; Pip does not, after all, have the best track record when it comes to expectations. Yet even many critics who praise the second ending for its ambiguity cannot resist arguing either for or against Pip and Estella's marriage. John O. Jordan acknowledges the indeterminacy, but also articulates a defense of the Satis House conclusion that reads it as, effectively, an expanded version of the original in which Pip and Estella merely part a moment after, rather than a moment before, the close of the narrative: "If Pip and Estella had remained together after they left the ruined garden, if they had subsequently married... Pip would in all likelihood say so" (29). Meckier takes the opposite position, emphasizing the ingenuity of Dickens's resistance to cheap novelistic closure before declaring confidently that the Pip who narrates the novel can only have been one who has been long married to Estella.[xi]

This critical tendency reflects an inherent difficulty in the second ending, whose ambiguity is at once obvious and implausible. As far as the primary interpretation of the scene is concerned, there is actually very little room for doubt. Readings that assume Dickens intended us to read past the obvious implication that Pip and Estella are to marry, like certain interpretations of his letters, turn Dickens into a motiveless cryptographer out to deceive an unsuspecting audience. At the same time, the effect of the conjunction of Estella's final rejection and the negatively stated, subjectively framed closing line cannot be discounted. If Dickens wanted to

marry off the two characters, he had plenty of less ambiguous ways of doing so; in many of his other works, Dickens is so thorough in his wrapping up that not even family pets or childhood acquaintances escape his telescopic gaze. Here, he will not definitively project even his main character into any future beyond a present moment understood in light of Pip's uncorroborated belief.

What we are left with, then, is something resembling an actual and counterfactual plot. Pip may see "no shadow of another parting," but in fact, the rejected first ending is precisely that, a different parting in which we are left in no doubt that the separation between the two is to be final. Only by chance did the original ending survive to become a literal counterfactual alternative to the chosen conclusion, preserved alongside its rival in afterwords and footnotes. Yet in leaving his readers with the ambiguity of the final line, Dickens transfers to the published page the counterfactual possibility inscribed in the two written endings: the first conclusion is not so much rejected in favor of the second as it is incorporated within it.

Dickens refuses, however, to establish these two alternatives as part of a stable ontological hierarchy. Counterfactuals typically promote novelistic realism by giving priority to the actual world of a text. If the only point of reference for a textual actual world were our own, it would be more difficult cognitively to suspend the dichotomy between fiction and reality. By contrast, surrounding the events of a novel with counterfactual alternatives creates an internal frame of reference in which, for instance, Nell's death acquires a reality that her survival does not. In the case of the death of Little Nell, the persistence of a seemingly viable counterfactual alternative also helps to maintain the illusion that his characters are free, their fates not constrained by the laws of narrative logic: Dickens ultimately recognizes as binding a formal imperative to kill Nell, but constructs competing mechanisms temporarily to mask his design and

keep active the possibility of her survival. *Great Expectations* lacks any such clear delineation. Dickens does not, in the manner of some post-modern authors, leave the novel in such uncertainty that there can be no distinction made between the various possibilities it raises: the prospect of Pip and Estella's marriage is clearly dominant, and that of their final separation subordinate.[xii] But here, unlike in *The Old Curiosity Shop,* neither does he fully exorcize the counterfactual possibility. It is the difference between ending coverage of the race at the medal stand, or cutting it off with one team enjoying a significant lead going into the final leg of the relay. While even in the latter case, the outcome may be all but determined, there is a reason that, unless that lead is genuinely insurmountable, no real fan will actually leave the stadium.

Fighting Closure

The function of the counterfactual in *Great Expectations* is thus not to solidify an absolute outcome, but to define a range of possibility. Some options, by necessity, lie outside this range as surely as Nell's survival ultimately did. The last chapter of *Great Expectations* closes with a counterfactual, but it also – in both versions – opens with one. Returning to the forge of his childhood after years away, Pip finds Joe, Biddy, and their son, who they have named Pip. The older Pip observes a remarkable similarity between himself and his namesake: when he enters the room, he sees "sitting on my own little stool looking at the fire... – I again!" and finds later that he and the child "[understand] one another to perfection" (457). Indeed, given that the two Pips are not, in fact, biologically related, the resemblance is not just remarkable but uncanny. Dickens's emphasis on their similarity reinforces the sense that the child is, for Pip and for the reader, simultaneously the actual son of Joe and Biddy, a reminder of the son Pip himself might have had with Biddy, had his life gone differently, and a version of Pip whose path in life will not be thwarted by the burden of spurious expectations. In this case, the counterfactual indeed

represents a lost possibility, an unfulfilled promise that can no longer be redeemed. The possibility that does remain, that Pip will find peace with Estella, can assuage, but never fully compensate for this loss. Whether or not it is the most likely or even appropriate outcome of all that has preceded it, the compromised happiness of the second ending represents the outermost limit of what is narratively possible for this novelistic world.

Yet if the negotiation between counterfactual outcomes underscores the closing of certain possibilities in *Great Expectations,* it also opens others. Pip cannot finally return to the forge and marry Biddy for the same reason that Nell cannot survive: in a realist novelistic world, characters must contend with the constraints and limitations faced by actual people. There is a different limitation, however, that is imposed, not by the conditions of our world on that of the novel, but by the form of the novel on the lives it contains. Part of the attraction of fiction is its promise of endless possibility, its ability to suspend the laws of nature and physics and, perhaps above all, of probability, that logic that tells us that most lives will be ordinary and unremarkable. But while this is true in theory, every novelistic world finally establishes its own boundaries. When we open a realist novel, it very quickly becomes apparent that the hero will not be able to resolve his problems by performing a spell or traveling back in time, even though there are fictions in which we might accept either of these solutions as plausible. The life of a realist hero is also limited in ways that those of actual people are not. As improbable as it is that anyone who does not happen to be a character in a spy novel will discover that his or her otherwise friendly and unassuming neighbor is secretly a foreign agent, it remains – if barely – in the realm of the possible for a real person. It would, on the other hand, be utterly impossible for Pip to make such a discovery about his flatmate Herbert, as such a turn would be incompatible with principles of narrative design that preclude any such random turn of events.

This limitation is equally true of more plausible possibilities. Stories, even when they are not neatly moralistic, cannot avoid saying *something* about the reality in which they operate. Whenever an author chooses, he is choosing, not only between outcomes but between paradigms. Is this a world constructed to emphasize the triumph of the good, or its frustration? Is our tale one that suggests human capacity to change, or argues against it? We name an allegorical hero Everyman, and a realist one Pip, but Pip, too, must carry the burden of representation: strip away the convict benefactor and the bitter old woman in the wedding dress, and we are reading a tale of utterly ordinary ambition and ingratitude. I have said that Pip could not have married Biddy, and on one level it is true, but on another, *of course* he could have. A man might conceivably return home, penitent, to a woman he has previously rejected and not find her already married, as indeed, a sickly, almost impossibly good fourteen-year-old might in fact survive to make a decidedly non-picturesque marriage in a disappointingly imperfect world. Pip cannot marry Biddy, rather, because the characteristic attribute of realism is that the plot that is being constructed is not finally the most extraordinary but the most fitting. *A* Pip might have returned to marry Biddy, but this one cannot, because to do so would undermine the novel's established belief in the inability of penitence ever fully to repair the past.

In this context, the second ending of *Great Expectations* is preferable, not because it is plainly the most fitting conclusion, but because it seems not to be. The original ending, in which Pip and Estella part forever, extends the logic of the earlier loss of Biddy: Pip has erred, and the consequences are unalterable; it is, as Forster rightly noted, the conclusion toward which the novel has always been tending. The second resists that logic: Pip *has* erred, and the consequences *are* unalterable, but only some consequences, and only sometimes. It is perhaps no coincidence that Bulwer-Lytton had in *Paul Clifford* engaged in a similar reversal, taking us almost to the

point of his hero's hanging before instead telling us of his escape to a useful, honest future. We will never know what reasons Bulwer-Lytton argued so forcefully to persuade Dickens to revise his ending, but among them was perhaps this one: “who does not allow that it is better to repair than to perish” (309)? Dickens was a far more sophisticated writer than his friend, and he would not reverse Pip's fortunes so completely. But after considering the competing options, he found that he could give him, at least, the peace of the fallen – the fallen, and the free.

The ambiguity that Dickens preserves in his final line, however, represents a far more radical resistance to, not just the inevitability of narrative design, but the impulsion toward narrative closure. While the indeterminacy of the revised conclusion may not quite constitute a proto-modernist gesture of openness, *Great Expectations* – in both versions – is, by Dickens's standards, comparatively inconclusive; there are no conspicuously loose ends, but the knots are not tied as tightly as they might be. Dickens does not, for instance take the opportunity of Pip's return to England to provide an update on significant minor characters like Jaggers or Wemmick or Pumblechook. By comparison, in *David Copperfield,* his only other novel in which a first person narrative structure precludes an omniscient glimpse into futurity, Dickens still manages to fill us in on the fates of such essential figures as David's primary school teacher, the servant of a former friend, and a second friend's wife's sister, whom David has never met.

Great Expectations, however, is in this respect less anomalous than it may first appear. In the latter half of Dickens's career, even his most comprehensive endings are often complicated by counterfactuals that unsettle our sense of a theoretically closed text. These counterfactuals do not operate by preventing the story from coming to a decisive conclusion – *Great Expectations* is the only Dickens novel that could invite comparisons, however imperfect, to the postmodern, choose-your-own ending twist at the end of John Fowle's *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* [xiii]

Rather, their function is more akin to that of the strategies that, as Rachel du Plessis and Susan Fraiman have demonstrated, female writers have use to subvert traditionally male conventions. Yet this is not so much a matter of, in duPlessis's phrase, "writing beyond the ending"-- or even writing "around" it in Hilary Dannenberg's emendation (4) – as it is of bifurcating what precedes it, forcing the actual world of the novel to expand to accommodate its own counterfactual alternative.[xiv] *Hard Times* can achieve this only by invoking the non-fictional world to set against the more constricted novelistic one upon which it intrudes. After definitively answering a series of questions about what is and is not to come to pass in his character's futures, the narrator tells the reader that is up to him or her whether or not such things are to be in their own lives, dividing the actual world of the text into a closed fictional realm and an open-ended real one. In the case of *A Tale of Two Cities,* the fictional sphere itself is more susceptible to confusion between an actual and counterfactual state of affairs. Everyone remembers Sydney Carton's noble last words as he goes to the guillotine: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." The problem is that he never said them – his speech is introduced with the qualification "If he had given any utterance to [his thoughts], and they were prophetic, they would have been these" (357). As any film or stage adaptation of the scene will indicate, what is clearly delineated as counterfactual is simultaneously perceived as actual, permitting Dickens to strike a middle course between self-indulgent bombast and wistful tribute. The closing counterfactual in *Hard Times* projects the narrative into an unconstrained future; its counterpart in *A Tale of Two Cities* divides it into two parallel moments of the present. In *Little Dorrit,* our heroine enacts a more active liberation from the impositions of narrative closure in a gesture that attempts retroactively to cancel a previously established textual reality. The final chapters of the

novel have introduced a particularly lugubrious bit of narrative contrivance: Mrs. Clennam is not her son Arthur's biological mother, having wrested custody of him from a singer with whom her husband had had an affair. More than that, in a fit of guilt over the subsequent death of the singer, her husband arranged for a sizable bequest to be left to the youngest daughter of a teacher who had supported the young woman – or, if he had no daughters to his youngest niece, who conveniently turns out to be Amy Dorrit herself. This history, the reader recognizes at once, has been the hidden machinery driving much of the narrative: Arthur and Amy, now on the point of marriage, met because his mother, in an attempt at partial recompense, had hired her as a seamstress. Almost as soon as it has been revealed, however, this plot is formally nullified. Immediately before Amy and Arthur leave to be married, she makes an unusual request:

> 'I have taken such an odd fancy. I want you to burn something for me.'
>
> What?'
>
> 'Only this folded paper. If you will put it in the fire with your own hand, just as it is, my fancy will be gratified.'
>
> 'Superstitious, darling Little Dorrit? Is it a charm?'
>
> 'It is anything you like best, my own,' she answered...
>
> 'Is it bright enough now?' said Arthur. 'Quite bright enough now,' said Little Dorrit. 'Does the charm want any words to be said?' asked Arthur, as he held the paper over the flame. 'You can say (if you don't mind) "I love you!"' answered Little Dorrit. So he said it, and the paper burned away (825).

The reader understands what Arthur does not: the paper is the proof that would allow Amy to claim her inheritance, Mrs. Clennam having confessed the deception to her, and only to her, just before dying. Little Dorrit can do nothing to change the effect the other woman has had on the course of her life and story: there are consequences to our actions, and they are unalterable. But not all consequences, and not always. In burning the document, Little Dorrit, so far as she is able, vacates the force of her discovery, forfeiting the legacy and ensuring that Arthur will never know

the truth. In effect, she has rejected the actual in favor of its alternative – and, as far as Arthur is concerned, in favor of an endlessly open set of possibilities, a cliffhanger that will never be resolved with the next installment. For Arthur, the world of the novel will always be the world as it was for the reader three chapters earlier, a world of suspicion without proof and expectations not yet gratified. He has learned that some scandal in his mother's past has left her prey to a blackmailer; he has even suspected that it might have some connection to Amy, to whom his mother has shown unwonted generosity. He has seen the clues and held the last one in his hand, yet he will never solve the case. It is a fate common enough in our world, but rare in that of the novel; meaning eludes him, and he eludes meaning.

For in asking Arthur to destroy the paper, Little Dorrit does, for herself and for him, what Little Nell could not. Some of the same conditions that doom Nell might have applied equally to Amy. Little Dorrit, too, has been the angelic mainstay of a broken-down old man, too pure for her surroundings, seeming at once younger in appearance and older in strength of character than her actual age would suggest. But while Nell becomes a tale in the end, Amy passes out of one. In part, this has again been a battle between romance and realism. Immediately after burning Mrs. Clennam's papers, Little Dorrit signs her marriage license, the transition between the two documents suggesting the replacement of the byzantine contrivance of high melodrama with the naturalized conventions of the marriage plot: Arthur asks for magic words, and Amy answers “I love you.” Beyond that, however is the struggle of realist narrative to surpass even its own artifice. Romance and realism are too closely linked; Amy and Arthur's union is itself made possible by an improbable series of events played out long before her birth. For Little Dorrit, the old uncle and his money was never the savior, but the threat, bringing her the proof that in a novel, two people never marry except by grace of another's will. So she does what she can,

burning the papers in an act that turns the apparatus of fiction against itself. She gathers the powers of fancy, does her charm and, Prospero-like, burns her book. In our last image of her and Arthur, they are walking away from their own story:

> They all gave place when the signing was done, and Little Dorrit and her husband walked out of the church alone. They paused for a moment on the steps of the portico, looking at the fresh perspective of the street in the autumn morning sun's bright rays, and then went down.
>
> Went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness... went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar (826).

There are doubtless stories to be told among that crowd, stories to be designed and plotted and wrapped up. But Amy's will no longer be one of them. She has the secret, after all, of frustrating such plotters, for what power would any story have if we refused to tell it?

The ending of *Great Expectations* creates a parallel effect. To the extent that Pip and Estella have overcome their pasts, it is through escaping the grand designs of master plotters. Estella has not, as Miss Havisham intended, gone on to wreak revenge on the hearts of men; Pip is no longer the rich gentleman Magwitch had contrived to make him. Even now, the two are where they are because of their benefactors, but they belong to them no longer: they have come to the old house to leave it behind, and indeed, Estella, after holding on to Miss Havisham's property for years, tells Pip that she has finally sold it. Pip does his part by, like Amy Dorrit, keeping silent. As he and Estella sit in the garden, his mind turns naturally to Magwitch's death, specifically to “the pressure on my hand when I had spoken the last words that he had heard on Earth” (459). Those last words had been about Estella: “You had a child once, who you loved and lost...She lived, and found powerful friends. She is living now. She is a lady, and very beautiful. And I love her” (436). It is the natural moment for Pip to make an equivalent revelation to Estella herself, but he lets it pass, leaving Estella to break the silence that has fallen

between them.

What is the reason for Pip's forbearance? Once before, he had chosen to keep the secret out of concern for Estella's social standing and her pride, but by now, the former would not be jeopardized nor the latter revolted by such a disclosure. Neither can Pip feel the need to purge Magwitch's ghost as they are purging Miss Havisham's: his intentions may not have been wholly selfless, but there is nothing in his actions to compare to the sustained, destructive malice of hers. It is not Magwitch, but a higher authority that he thwarts. When Pip tells the dying Magwitch that he loves Estella, he compassionately leaves him free to draw the inference that Estella loves him too. It is the natural conclusion for him to come to; even the illiterate Magwitch cannot fail to grasp the poetic rightness of the notion that the boy he has turned into a gentleman will wind up with his own lost daughter – this coincidence is, indeed, one of the reasons that the second ending has been read as so excessively neat. By sharing this information with Estella, Pip cannot avoid imposing a similar burden of narrativity on Estella's own response: it would reinforce the sense – already acutely felt in the coincidence of their finding each other again in the garden of Satis house ten years after last leaving it – that there is a fatality driving them toward one another.

But there is, of course precisely such an external force bringing them together. Within the textual world of the novel, Pip can indeed lessen the effect of history and circumstance, at least as far as Estella's choices are concerned, by declining to reveal this additional layer of connection between them. The piling on of these coincidences, however, reminds the reader of the presence of the author who engineers them; whether Pip speaks or does not speak, marries or stays single, is all due to an act of manipulation. It is one thing to suspend disbelief, and another to keep faith once the conventions have been laid bare before you; in both *Little Dorrit* and *Great*

Expectations, one half of the couple lives in the counterfactual sustained by a partner's silence, while the other can only will forgetfulness of prior initiation into an actual world of narrative convention. The only way for Dickens to allow Pip and Estella the freedom they are seeking is thus through *not* choosing, or at least not completely. Dickens brings Pip and Estella again together. He removes a second husband who, in the first ending, had precluded entirely the possibility of their finding a future together. He even signals, in the way in which he leaves them, his own conviction that, for these two, the ending of compromise is preferable to the rejected one of denial. Yet having been reminded so recently of Pip's last words to Magwitch, we know that the most narratively desirable inference is not always the correct one. And so we are left with a counterfactual that will not be eliminated. Among rejected endings and untold histories, we see it still, the shadow of another parting, ever secondary, but ever possible.

The Final Mystery

Dickens's works exist at the formal borders, between romance and realism, between openness and constraint. Part of this intermediate quality comes from the time in which he wrote and the intellectual background out of which he emerged. But part of it, as well, came from his own belief that the events of the actual world could be as strange, as unlikely, of those of any novel:

> On the coincidences, resemblances, and surprises of life, Dickens liked especially to dwell, and few things moved his fancy so pleasantly. The world, he would say, was so much smaller than we thought it; we were all so connected by fate without knowing it; people supposed to be far apart were so constantly elbowing each other; and to-morrow bore so close a resemblance to nothing half so much as to yesterday (Forster 1.112).

The circumstances of Dickens's death perhaps bear out his conviction. Dickens died of a stroke on June 9, 1870, having completed only half of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* A novel left unfinished by an author's death is always fertile territory for speculation, and never more so then

when that novel has declared itself a mystery. *Edwin Drood* is no exception; one theory on the mystery has an Indian death cult mixed up in Drood's murder,[xv] while another of the most popular, at least through the mid twentieth century, involves Edwin escaping the attempt on his life, disguising himself as an elderly detective, and returning to town to solve the mystery of his own supposed murder (Lang). A majority of critics, however, now accept a more restrained version of events suggested by both the evidence of the existing chapters and comments Dickens had made about his plans for the ending: Edwin was, as he appears to have been, killed by his jealous uncle John Jasper, who would finally be found out and executed for the crime.[xvi]

It is a plausible ending and, probably, the right one. Readers who believe that Edwin Drood would have returned triumphant to solve the crime and claim his bride are fundamentally misreading the shift that had occurred over the course of Dickens's career. A "shallow, surface kind of fellow," Edwin, with his brash enthusiasm and skin-deep flaws, is as inappropriate a hero for *Drood* as Nell is for *The Old Curiosity Shop.* Jasper, whose divided, tormented psychology was evidently to have furnished much of the interest of the novel, would indeed more properly have assumed that place: Edwin is a picaresque hero transplanted into, not just a realist novel, but a proto-modernist one, more important in death than in life to the narrative that bears his name, but is not his story. An ending that leaves him to rest, is as Foster said of *Great Expectations "*more consistent with the drift, as well as the natural working out of the tale," than any of the other alternatives.

Even so, perhaps the most "natural working out of the tale" comes after all from far humbler source. In the unapologetically campy Rupert Holmes musical *Drood,* audience members are given the chance to vote on their favorite ending. There are over four-hundred possible configurations, and audiences tend to favor the least obvious, pairing the lovely Rosa

Bud with the street urchin Deputy and pinning the crime on the thoroughly upright (and, as far as the existing chapters are concerned, thoroughly motiveless) Reverend Crisparkle (Weltmann). The ending, however, is always the same. Edwin Drood emerges alive, a better man ready to share his hard-won wisdom with the audience:

I have read the writing on the wall,
And it's clearly spelled out
For those who've held out
That holding on to life is all...
If you hear my voice then you're alive
What a bloody marvel we survive...
Try to live forever
And give up never
The fight – you'll need the wherewithal!

It is an ending that Dickens could perhaps no longer have written, had he lived: he knew by then that writing, whether it appeared on the wall or on the manuscript, could hardly be so easily erased. The latter half of his career is marked by gestures against closure – the abandoned character, the cut-off sentence, the burned plot, the double-ending – but the sad irony suggested by *Edwin Drood* is that the only way of truly preserving possibility, of setting free a character from his own creator, is through a more radical incompleteness. Authors must die and novels must end, except when the author dies, and the novel hasn't, cutting his characters free and adrift in a world of alternatives. Like the figures on the Grecian urn, they remain suspended in their eternal moments of uncertain action, and like the figures on the Grecian urn, win a prize that is not worth its price. Better to choose the compromise of the counterfactual, which can only exist in the face of an opposing ending, yet may still live on to remind us that no ending short of death need be quite final; who knows, really, but that Dickens, too, might not have been preparing Edwin for a reprieve? Still, there is a value in an *Edwin Drood* unfinished. Dickens believed that the worlds of life and the novel were not as separate as most people supposed, and in the sudden

death that left the only work he had advertised as a mystery incomplete, Dickens's life ended with the dramatic irony of a novel, while *Edwin Drood* assumed – forever, but never at last– the plotlesness of an ordinary life.

Chapter Three: Lifting the Veil: Horror by Proxy in the Sensation Novel

For most of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel of the same name, Lady Audley's secret isn't much of one. The former Lucy Graham's hidden crimes are appropriately dreadful: having bigamously married her wealthy second husband, she murders (or, it transpires, attempts to murder) the first when he reappears inconveniently. The novel, however, takes few pains to conceal this dark history. Our hero, Robert Audley, arrives to visit his uncle and his beautiful, obscurely-born new wife. En route, he discovers his old schoolmate George Talboys, who has returned to England after a long absence to learn that his own lovely young wife has died. It becomes quickly apparent, to the reader if not yet to Robert, that the two women are one and the same: when George arrives at Audley Court with his friend, the lady of the house makes strenuous efforts not to see him, while George falls ill with shock upon seeing a picture of her. When he disappears mysteriously the following day, there can be little doubt that innocent little Lucy is to blame.

But Lady Audley's secret is neither bigamy nor murder. Once Robert is satisfied that his amateur detective-work has not led him astray, he confronts his aunt with his evidence. Our femme fatale folds like a cheap corset, helpfully confessing – to hereditary madness. *That* is her secret, and it is at least an unexpected one; the novel can now be absolved of telegraphing the solution to its central mystery. It is also nonsensical. Lady Audley's actions are evil, but comprehensibly so. Left impoverished by an absent husband, she positions herself to find a richer one. When the return of the first threatens her improved social position, she murders him. When Robert seems poised to expose both crimes, she takes equally extreme measures to protect herself, trying to preempt any disclosure by claiming to her husband that *Robert* is mad and then burning down an inn in an attempt on his life. Her behavior, however horrific, has been at every turn consistent with the cold logic of rational self-interest. Madness, a malady that strikes

unpredictably and renders the sufferer's actions morally void, seems both too tawdry and too easy an explanation for behavior that has been represented in the language of conscious evil.

Braddon has, it might seem, traded one aesthetic mistake for another, replacing a too-obvious secret with a patently unconvincing one. Yet the novel's open acknowledgment of the implausibility of its climax suggests that the inadequacy of the revelation is a feature, rather than a flaw, of the narrative's design. When Robert tells a doctor about his aunt's disturbing confession, the doctor dismisses Lady Audley's self-diagnosis as unfounded; she is guilty of no motiveless crimes or random aberrancies. After an off-page examination, he hastily reverses his position. This cannot, however, diminish the force of the original objection, which has been articulated at greater length and far more convincingly than his vague confirmation of "latent insanity" (385). Lady Audley knows a hawk from a handsaw: she is passionate, she is violent, but when the wind blows southerly, she is sane all the same.

As we have seen, the counterfactual plot arises out of limitation as much as it does out of possibility. If our sense of narrative freedom permits us to consider multiple future outcomes, our awareness of convention, by sharply curtailing a given text's range of possibility, is what allows certain counterfactual plots to assume priority over others. What is more, it is limitation that ultimately forces a counterfactual plot into counterfactuality: the active counterfactual plot for a time *appears* plausible, but proves finally inconsistent with the formal logic of a text. The openness of a fictional text is only virtual; that anything can happen in a novel does not mean that it should. It is part of the pact the reader makes with an author: we will suspend disbelief through any number of fantastic coincidences as long as a text follows the rules it has created. We may be delighted to miss the clue and enjoy the surprise, but we want the evidence there to be missed.

The next two chapters will describe what happens when a text violates this pact. In some cases, of course, a work's failure to fulfill its own discursive promises may be no more than an aesthetic mistake: there are flawed novels, and bad ones. But in other novels, I will argue, a development that could be taken for such an error is rather a crucial element of the narrative's design. A proxy narrative, as I will call it, emerges out of a moment of dissonance or difficulty. Perhaps the happy ending seems not quite earned, or the climactic scene involves a matter too trivial to merit the seriousness with which the narrative treats it. Maybe a significant character has been too hastily cast aside, or minor one been elevated past her station. Yet the proxy narrative, unlike the merely faulty text, embeds a correction within the novel itself: as well as telling us what has happened, the text suggests what *ought to* have happened – indeed, what we must implicitly believe happened – to avoid dissonance or disappointment. The result is a reading that negotiates between two alternatives – the scene as written, and the scene that everything surrounding it suggests should have been. In a reversal of the usual order between an actual and counterfactual plot, the latter, rather than the former emerges as primary. Normally an unreconstructed warrior, conquered but still restive, the counterfactual plot becomes in the proxy narrative a dark horse champion, claiming victory even as the unsuspecting herald reads out the tale of his defeat.

In this chapter, I will discuss the category of the proxy narrative through readings of two sensation novels, *Lady Audley's Secret* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White.* Belonging to a genre defined by lurid shocks and horrifying secrets, the two novels might at first seem almost immune to questions of plausibility. Yet the revelations at their centers are ultimately not only implausible but unconvincing, even for the reader who has gamely attenuated her disbelief. In the case of both novels, however, these apparently discordant scenes can be productively read as

proxies for counterfactual alternatives that are, paradoxically, at once necessary and unnarratable. Allowing a scene to do the work its corresponding plot requires without violating the borders of taste, character, or genre, the proxy narrative trusts its readers to behold something that is not there in the nothing that is.

Reading Mistakes

The trust a text reposes in its readers is not a blind one. Novels take it for granted that we are capable of reading into a text events other than the ones represented there. Narrative time, we understand, is distinct from chronological time, and will not encompass every moment of a given character's experience over the duration of a novel. We are thus unperturbed when a character last seen preparing for bed suddenly appears at breakfast, or, under certain circumstances, if a couple we left stewing after a quarrel reappears the picture of marital amity. This is because we can infer what the omitted scene must have been from the material that surrounds it. In the first case, we do not even need context; sleep – unless it is disrupted, or plagued by nightmares, or otherwise noteworthy – belongs to what Gerald Prince has called the "unnarratable," a category that includes events too minor or routine to require representing.[i] In the second, the novel can omit the reconciliation because it has already given us all the information we need to read the absent scene into the narrative. If the two characters are comic figures, a melodramatic argument followed by ostentatious shows of affection might be part of the joke, suggesting how little has been required to smooth over the violent dispute. If they are social climbers, we may rather recognize the plain implication that their ambition has prompted a public affectation of harmony. Without representing the scene, the text gives us the materials to compensate for the omission.

The same awareness that allows us to cope with narrative gaps can guide our response to narrative errors. When publishers discover an error after a book has gone to press, they may

insert an erratum slip instructing readers to read “light” for “might” or “sail” for “snail.” Yet given sufficient context, readers may make the substitution automatically, even subconsciously. Psycholinguists have shown that humans process written language by the word rather than by the letter; as long as the first and last letter of a word are preserved, changing the order of intervening letters will slow, but not inhibit comprehension (Rayner et al).[ii] A minor mistake, like a single inversion of letters, or even the repetition of an entire word, may pass entirely unnoticed: we see what we expect to see, what we *need* to see if we are to make sense of the words.[iii] Neither will we be at any great loss if we do observe an error. When we encounter the sentence “Mary needed milk and eggs, so **he** went to the store,” unless the line appears in a very specific context, we can accurately read the line to signify that a female named Mary went to the store, rather than assuming the author has taken the opportunity to casually upend our notion of Mary's gender identity. The same context that would have permitted us to fill in the missing pronoun had the author omitted it entirely allows us to replace an incorrect one with the appropriate substitute.

A similar process plays out in the case of a different and more significant type of narrative error. To a modern reader, a character's bold resistance against the immorality of private theatricals is more likely to mark her a prude than a heroine. Yet *Mansfield Park* requires us to take Fanny's objections seriously; whatever we might think of her moral judgments, the text itself consistently validates them. In theory, the conflict between the reader's values and those of the text forces her to adopt one of two untenable positions. Either she herself validates a premise that she views as gravely mistaken, or she engages in a reading that willfully subverts the plain meaning of the text; if Jane Austen was no milquetoast Fanny Price, neither was she, at least on the evidence of this novel, of Sarah Siddons's party without knowing it.[iv] In practice, most readers find a middle ground that permits us to cope with our cognitive dissonance. We may call

it “allowing for the era,” but what we are doing in effect, is reading the problematic scene as the moral equivalent of a more palatable alternative. Because *Mansfield Park* is not one of Austen's most popular works, we have been spared – or cheated of – a modern adaptation in which Mary encourages Fanny to consider moonlighting as an exotic dancer. If we are not inclined to be that inventive, we must nonetheless make a more modest imaginative leap to read a scene that on its face displays what we can only regard as puritanical rigidity as evidence of laudable rectitude. Without forgetting that the scene is actually about the moral perils of staging a vaguely risqué play for one's family and close friends, if we are to continue to take Fanny seriously as a heroine, we must subconsciously replace the proposed entertainment with an alternative – if not necessarily a named or fully formulated alternative - we might legitimately view as questionable. Substituting a generic notion of immodest or immoral behavior for the specific action, we can evaluate Fanny and Mary without betraying either the text or our own ethical sense.

The cases of the typographical error and the moral “mistake” are so common and our responses to them so automatic that they may escape our attention. A reader flummoxed by misspellings and outraged by each ingénue could not be much of a reader at all; whether moving past such faults requires us to change a letter or tart up a marriage plot, we will not find ourselves at a loss. What we are doing in these scenarios, however, is reading counterfactually, replacing – in some cases quite literally – the actual word on the page with the one that might have been there. The version of the text we absorb, in which “might” is made “right” and so is Fanny Price, may be true enough to the spirit, but not to the letters of the text as written.

Such counterfactual readings arise from more than offended sensibilities. Formally, the problem we confront in reading *Mansfield Park* is that of a disjunction between story, defined as the events of the narrative, and plot, defined as the narrative work being performed by those

events. Because the meaning of "story" and "plot" differ, not only in colloquial and critical usage, but in different critical contexts, my use of these terms requires further explanation. In ordinary conversation – or even scholarly conversation, outside of certain structuralist and narratological analyses – we often use the words interchangeably. Even some of the commonest uses of the terms, however, reflect more specific meanings. Hilary Dannenberg notes that one would never ask someone to "tell a plot," as we do to "tell a story" (6). Similarly, the term "marriage plot" has come to signify something more than "a story about marriage," referring rather to a particular nineteenth-century narrative model in which the ultimate end is an appropriate marriage that mediates between rising concern for individualism and conservative social consciousness. A concluding marriage alone does not constitute a marriage plot, and can in fact work against its aims; in *Daniel Deronda,* our hero's choice of wife signifies his rejection of his English identity in favor of a spiritual patrimony.

The particular meanings taken on by "story" and "plot" in these cases mirror the two major schools of thought on the theoretical distinction between them. Following Russian formalists Shklovsky and Tomashevsky, story and plot are sometimes used – with their close cousins story and discourse and *fabula* and *sjuzhet* – to distinguish between that which happens in a text (the "what" of a narrative) and the way in which that text is narrated (the "how" of a narrative). This definition proves especially relevant to discussions of narrative time, in which "story" refers to a series of events in chronological sequence, and "plot" signifies the order of events as they are related to us. In E.M. Forster's classic definition, however, story and plot are less the what and how than the what and *why* of a text: "'The king died and then the queen died,' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief,' is a plot" (86). For Forster, story represents the bare bones of narrative, while plot includes the ligaments, providing the

explanations and interpretations that connect event to event.

Judging by Forster's example alone, this may seem to be a distinction without difference. The process of creating meaning is so fundamental to storytelling that the events of story can hardly be separated from the causal chain that links them; it is nearly impossible to imagine a literary narrative intended for any audience much older than early childhood confining itself to a simple relation of events without intervening explanations, surmises, or even unconscious interpretive shadings. In the work of later critics like Greimas, Propp, and Todorov, however, Forster's definition evolved into a more comprehensive theory of narrative meaning. Shklovsky had been concerned with the "what" and "how" of narrative, and Forster with the "what" and "why." These critics distinguished instead between what a text was *about* and what a text was *doing.* The anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss noted that while different myths might contain any number of distinct story events, many myths across cultures nonetheless share "deep structures" that underlie widely disparate sequences (*Myth and Meaning*). There are an infinite number of stories, but only a limited number of plots, created out of common cultural pressures that motivate the production of certain types of narrative discourses. A plot, in this sense, refers less to the particulars of an individual novel – in other words, the stuff of story – than to the work being performed by them. In a telling bit of diction, Vladimir Propp expressed similar ideas by categorizing each story event in a series of folktales according to one of thirty-one narrative "functions": Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother falling ill and Jack's family cow running dry of milk would be in Propp's framework two different story versions of the same archetypal plot event, in which the hero is sent on a journey or quest (*Morphology of the Folktale).*[v] Levi-Strauss and Propp focus their discussions on myth, but their paradigms apply to more recent narrative structures as well. The marriage plot, detective plot, and Bildungsroman, each with its own

associated set of stock events and characters, perform functions embedded in a specific culture with a need for its own dominant narrative forms.

Normally, story and plot operate in tandem. The narrative world of a novel, more complex than the pared-down one of myth, may accommodate story events that are not strictly necessary to the progress of the narrative. Similarly, more intricately constructed novels may contain many plots, not all of which will be directly served by any given event; if a plot can generate multiple stories, so too can a story accommodate multiple plots. Yet none of these events amounts to a disjunction between plot and story: a comic vignette or pathetic tableau might be extraneous to a marriage or detective plot without undermining it. More often, major story events will perform double duty as plot agents. It is not terribly important to the "deep structure" of *Pride and Prejudice* whether Elizabeth learns that Darcy has denied Wickham a living or gotten him expelled from Cambridge, as either one or the other would serve the marriage plot-function of creating a misunderstanding between the novel's designated lovers. The difference in the proxy narrative, and the source of the disappointment or uneasiness we often feel in encountering one, is that plot and story are instead working at cross-purposes. Unlike events that are merely additional to the requirements of plot, these disjunctions occur at moments the text has highlighted as critically important. In some cases, the moment will occur at the very end of the novel, a placement that imbues the scene with narrative and thematic importance to which it, in these instances, fails to live up. In others, it will, as in *Lady Audley's Secret,* take the form of a scene of revelation that, after pages of expectation, turns out to be either (or both) inconsistent with the rest of the narrative or simply unworthy of the significance ascribed to it.

The problem that creates the proxy scene in *Mansfield Park* is extrinsic to the text, created out of the gap between the novel's values and that of its reader. Judged on its own terms,

the novel itself is consistent: Fanny is a moral heroine, and as such, she resists the temptation of Mary Crawford and her wicked schemes. In the proxy narrative, however, the division between plot and story is, as we have seen in *Lady Audley's Secret,* embedded in and even highlighted by the text itself; Braddon is as aware of the inconsistency as any of her readers. This self-awareness raises an obvious question of motive: if Braddon sees the problem, why not fix it? Answering it, however, will require beginning with a different line of inquiry involving, not what is present in the text, but what is being left out. What revelation *would* satisfy the plot of *Lady Audley's Secret?* Why don't we ever receive it? And, given that we do not, why does the novel nonetheless succeed in its apparent aims?

Seeing it Through

The revelation in *Lady Audley's Secret* is discordant because it satisfies, if only barely, the demands of story while ignoring the demands of plot. The story works, not because it is a sensible turn of events, but because *everything* works on the level of story, which consists of sequence detached from meaning. It takes very little to turn “the King died, and then the Queen died” into a coherent plot, and some effort to do the same with “the King died, and then the Queen juggled seven quail eggs.” Both, however, are stories, chains of events that need not display any particular logic at all. By this generous standard, the relative plausibility of Lady Audley's madness scarcely rates a mention: a bereaved monarch's turn to ovi-dexterous displays demands an explanation; the discovery that an attempted serial murderer suffers from insanity *is* an explanation. In any case, complaining about the implausibility of a Victorian sensation novel is like complaining about the prurience of a work of pornography: the criticism is at once incontrovertibly valid, and utterly misguided. Of course sensation novels are implausible; that is precisely the point.

It is plot that carries with it the burden of meaning, and it is on this level that *Lady Audley's Secret* threatens to collapse. The plot of the novel is a version of what Peter Brooks has identified as perhaps the ultimate ur-plot. A "same but different" plot operates through the replacement of an inappropriate relationship or set of circumstances with a more palatable equivalent: the heroine of the fairytale *Some Kind of Fur,* for instance, shares an incestuous bond with her father that is eventually redirected toward a legitimate marriage with her chosen husband. (*Reading for the Plot).* Robert Audley's quest, more than the unraveling of a mystery, is similarly to redirect aberrant passion to an appropriate channel. Gender and sexual anxiety pervade *Lady Audley's Secret.* A nominally employed lawyer who never seems to have turned his energies to any worthwhile pursuit, Robert Audley is a figure of failed masculinity who has conspicuously avoided romantic relationships, either with his lovely, available and blatantly interested cousin Alicia, or with anyone else. The first woman he shows an unwonted attraction to is Lady Audley, who as his aunt by marriage, would be off-limits to him even before the mounting evidence of her crimes makes her a horrific sexual choice. The second is the sister of his close friend George Talboys, the missing first husband of Lady Audley, who appears to attract his interest partially because of her uncanny resemblance to her brother.

Considered in outline form, this plot, too, seems to function well enough, in the sense that it performs the work it needs to do. Clara Talboys is the perfect object toward which Robert's passions can be redirected: with a strong will to match Lady Audley's own and a face genetically predisposed to recall the halcyon days of homosocial Eton, she serves as a safe alternative to the dual threats of queerness and monstrous femininity. And, indeed, Robert does finally marry Clara; once Lady Audley has been dispatched to a private asylum and George resurrected to a reassuringly desexualized role in the family circle, Robert emerges as a successful husband and

provider. As part of his transition to married life, we are told, Robert bequeaths his meerschaum pipe and French novels to a bachelor friend. If the former winks at the accessory's phallic potential, the latter provides both a more general dismissal of the erotic and a specific rejection of Lady Audley: earlier in the novel, Robert tells George, only half in jest, “I feel like the hero of a French novel. I am falling in love with my Aunt” (94).

Yet while both the story and the plot of *Lady Audley's Secret* may be in themselves viable, taken together, they reveal a profound mismatch. We might accept a story about a madwoman's crimes, or a plot about the regulation of sexual desire. *Lady Audley's Secret,* however, fails convincingly to link the two, instead merely suggesting the possibility of counterfactual alternatives that might have done so. The novel draws on three nineteenth-century plot paradigms: the detective plot, the marriage plot, and the horror story. Our understanding of each of the three models involves an expectation that is then subverted. By the rules of the detective plot, Robert Audley should be following clues to a logical conclusion. If Lady Audley is to be revealed as mad, we should have some preparation for that eventuality; in the absence of any such hint, we would expect a solution that follows rationally from the evidence at hand. According to the marriage plot, we should be reading a story in which Robert and Clara are our unquestioned leads, condescending to share space with a wicked aunt or absent brother without ever ceding their essential dominance. A Gothic horror story, complete with forbidding mansion and dreadful secret, might turn supernatural or it might not, but in either case, would seem to call for more villainy, less mania, and a foe not so easily foiled by the expedient of quietly locking her away in a Belgian madhouse to die of natural causes.

None of these plots, however, quite materializes. Amateur detective Robert almost solves the case, but the climactic revelation catches him entirely by surprise, as well it might, given the

total lack of clues to that effect, and abundance of evidence indicating quite the opposite. Clara Talboys assumes the role of heroine, but too belatedly and half-heartedly for the ending marriage to seem anything but perfunctory. For all her passionate dedication to avenging her brother, she actually does very little to bring Lady Audley to justice, and George turns out in any case not to require quite as much avenging as she had supposed. More seriously, her attachment to Robert, and his to hers, must be accepted more or less as an article of faith, as the novel devotes minimal attention to establishing any real connection between the two. Robert claims, after one meeting with George's lookalike sister, to be thinking obsessively of her, but his thoughts of her reveal themselves always to be entwined with his obsession with another. This other is not George, but Lady Audley herself. While he gives due deference to the effect his investigation of his aunt might have on his elderly uncle, Robert's ultimately frames his conflict over how far he should pursue the mystery of his friend's fate as a choice between Clara, who has exacted from him a promise to expose the truth, and Lady Audley: in a typical moment of indecision, he recalls "the pale face of Clara Talboys – that grave and earnest face, so different from my lady's fragile beauty" (290).

The connection occurs subconsciously as well. At one point, Robert wonders why he cannot fall in love with his cousin:

> Why don't I love her? Why is it that although I know her to be pretty, and pure, and good, and truthful, I don't love her? Her image never haunts me, except reproachfully. I never see her in my dreams. I never wake up suddenly in the dead of the night with her eyes shining upon me and her warm breath upon my cheek, or with the fingers of her soft hand clinging to mine.

"The more he tried to think of Alicia," the narrative continues, "the more he thought of Clara Talboys" (344). Robert's language, however, suggests that his thoughts have turned in a different direction. Lady Audley's "soft hands" are mentioned frequently enough that the words have

acquired the quality of an epithet, and Robert's portrait of a beautiful woman who steals into his room by night and "haunts" his dreams applies better to the succubus-like Lady Audley than to the stern, at times almost mannish Clara. Robert contrasts the effect of his cousin, whose image haunts him only as a reproach, to the more pervasive visitations of this other woman. Yet almost without exception, whenever Robert thinks of Clara, it is precisely in the form of a reproach; each time he is inclined to stop his investigation, the thought of Clara's upturned face, imploring him to bring her brother's killer to justice, shames him into redoubling his efforts. Clara is as unlikely a contrast to Alicia on a logical level as she is on a semantic one. Robert wonders why he cannot love his cousin, who is "pretty, and pure, and good, and truthful," a description that, in the context of what follows, serves as the first of a series of implicit comparisons between Alicia and the other woman. But Robert has no reason to assume Clara is anything but pretty, pure, good and truthful, and little reason to torment himself for preferring another eligible woman to his cousin. The intensity of his guilt makes sense only if the alternative to Alicia is a far less acceptable choice than Clara Talboys.

If *Lady Audley's Secret*'s detective plot is incomplete and its marriage plot belated, we might assume that its dominant mode must then be horror, where sensation trumps evidence and happy endings arrive as afterthoughts to terror. Even here, however, the novel disappoints our expectations. The horror of *Lady Audley's Secret* is grounded primarily in a pervasive sexual anxiety. More than a vaguely sinister figure, Lady Audley, with her crimes against husband and hearth, draws on archetypal images of the monstrous woman, the Lilith or Lamia whose sexuality entices and then destroys. A climax that turns on a confession of madness cannot bear the burden of resolving pathological sexual anxiety.[vi] As far as Lady Audley's erotic threat is concerned, the scene is rather an anti-climax: instead of addressing her monstrous womanhood,

the novel nullifies it. Demoting its villain from succubus to hysteric, the text trades what has so far been its operative archetype of negative femininity for a neutered alternative; as a victim of inherited madness, Lady Audley inspires Robert's pity, rather than his horror, leaving the larger psychological stakes governing their conflict unaddressed. The monstrous woman is so frightening because she plays into more ordinary male neuroses about sexual emasculation and betrayal; the woman who literally castrates or kills her lover is different in degree, but not in kind from the woman who cuckolds or jilts him. Uninterested in engaging with any kind of sophisticated psychology of madness, the novel's diagnosis of Lady Audley reframes her as a danger like any other, an external threat to be feared simply because she is capable of acts of unpredictable violence. As soon as she is removed from the scene, her potency evaporates: we may fear a rampaging lioness, but she doesn't haunt us.

As in *Mansfield Park,* a facially inadequate story event proves nonetheless capable of performing its apparent plot function. Before the revelation scene, Robert remains a fundamentally emasculated figure, sexually immature, professionally rootless, indecisive and perhaps unstable. After it, he is transformed, taking control of the arrangements for Lady Audley's confinement, supporting his broken uncle, and quickly establishing his own home and a successful legal practice. And again as in *Mansfield Park,* a problematic scene – although one problematic for a very different reason – succeeds to the extent that we are capable of reading it as a proxy for the one that we miss. Lady Audley's madness is not enough to explain the complete overthrow of her psychological hold on both Robert and the narrative itself. The structure of the novel does suggest, however, the kind of scene that might have effectively combated her influence. Lady Audley, with her deceptive beauty and almost preternatural sexual power, evokes, not only the suggestive specters of the Gothic, but an older model of malignant

femininity: the Lovely Lady, who in legend and folklore assumes the form of a beautiful woman before unmasking herself to her unsuspecting prey, often at the point of intercourse (Doniger). The most well-known use of the Lovely Lady trope in English literature may be Spenser's portrait in *The Faerie Queene* of Duessa, the witch who nearly woos the Redcrosse knight from his mission. Blind to her true nature even after several warnings, Redcrosse cannot escape from Duessa's thrall until his friends conspire to have the witch stripped, revealing, among other horrors "her nether parts, the shame of all her kind/ [which] my chaster Muse for shame do blush to write" (I.viii.48). This confrontation with Duessa's "nether parts" allows Redcrosse to redirect his wayward passions toward a more appropriate object; having conquered, in Duessa, a figure of repugnant female sexuality, he is free to pursue the conspicuously non-sexual Una, who represents the true Church in the poem's extended allegory. Transmuting Eros into a romance that is itself justified as a devotional act, the stripping of Duessa successfully replaces errant sexuality with decorous affection.

The confession scene in *Lady Audley's Secret* lacks the content, but replicates the function, of the archetypal stripping of the Lovely Lady. Even Spencer is coy about the precise appearance of his Lovely Lady's sexual organs, about which his pen blushes to write. For Braddon, the water that shields our vision from direct sight of Duessa's foul body extends into a more complete refusal to address the erotic horror that suffuses her narrative. Everything that precedes Lady Audley's confession suggests that a sexual unmasking must occur. Everything that follows it suggests that such a scene has already happened. Instead, madness becomes a proxy for the monstrous "nether parts" the text is unwilling to describe. Moving up the female body, Braddon replaces the vagina dentata with the hysterical mind.

This relationship between the two may appear at first to be subtextual. The moral codes

regulating the content of the Victorian novel ensured that texts would often imply what they could not say; of course *Lady Audley's Secret* cannot dwell on its title character's naked body. But subtext, which implies a layering of meaning, is not quite an accurate description of what is happening here. When, early in the novel, we learn that Robert is a confirmed bachelor and English public school graduate with a taste for Meerschaum pipes, these details may indeed indicate an unspoken subtext of homosexual inclinations: to someone with the right cultural context for understanding them,[vii] they suggest an additional significance, one that complements, rather than undermines, their plain meaning. The difference in the proxy narrative is that it involves two meanings that are rather mutually exclusive. Whatever else the act may signify, when we glimpse Robert puffing on his Meerschaum, we can also gather that he is, quite simply, enjoying a good smoke. A cigar can sometimes be more than a cigar, but it cannot, ordinarily, be *less.* But as the text takes pains to highlight, Lady Audley's madness cannot be accepted on the level of plain meaning; common sense and discursive logic alike revolt against the attribution of her crimes to insanity. Her madness is present and impossible; her sexual unmasking absent but essential. it falls to the reader to recognize both a given that cannot be denied and a hypothetical that ought not be, reading the confession scene both as itself and as the confrontation with demonic femininity the scene's position in the Lovely Lady narrative suggests it should be. We must train ourselves, in other words, to see double, reading both the present absence and the absence present.

Why and Why Not

If the underplot is, in the proxy narrative, in fact the primary source of narrative energy, why is it suppressed in the first place? Victorian censorship provides one obvious motivation. A nineteenth-century author could skirt the unsayable through inference, but also through

replacement. In her description of Dorothea Brooke sobbing during her honeymoon in Rome, George Eliot chooses the former; the passage, with its talk of "quickening power" and ideas that "urged themselves on her with [an] ache," is both a generally applicable meditation on disillusionment and a veiled reference to a specifically sexual disappointment (183).[viii] In the *Mill on the Floss,* by contrast, the illicit boat ride that seals Maggie Tulliver's doom can be read most logically as a stand-in for a more serious transgression. If the worst Maggie has done is linger on a boat and *not* have sex with her cousin's fiancé, the intensity of her guilt, which prevents her from pursuing any option that might ameliorate her social disgrace, is another instance of a penchant for martyrdom the text has consistently treated as misguided. The novel's apparent validation of Maggie's choice, killing her off in a drowning that is as purgative as it is tragic, in that case represents a formal disjunction. Reading the boat ride as a proxy for consummation solves the problem, rendering Maggie's crime a serious enough betrayal to require a sacrifice than is not simply an extension of the Pyrrhic self-flagellation of her childhood.[ix] Nothing in Eliot's notes or letters provides insight into whether or not she had ever contemplated another version of the scene. But the fact that her publisher, John Blackwood, forced her to transform a" loosely-hung, child-producing" woman into a "prolific, loving-hearted" one suggests that a fornicating heroine might indeed have been a step too far (Tillotson 68).[x] The boat ride thus becomes the equivalent of the structurally warranted scene; indeed, several contemporary reviews of the novel portray Maggie's transgression as a sexual fall without commenting on the actual circumstances of her brief elopement, a move that may suggest less about the exacting mores of the reviewers than about the scene's role in the text.[xi]

Censorship, however, is only the most obvious motivation for the proxy narrative. One of the more recognizable uses of proxy relationships is in cases of what Rene Girard and Eve

Sedgwick have called triangular or triangulated desire, in which a character mediates unacceptable passion by deflecting it onto a third party. Sedgwick's use of the term, probably its most famous, focuses on cases in which the unacceptable desire is homoerotic, and thus unable to be represented. But triangulated desire is more than a censor's dodge. Fear of the erotic is certainly part of the reason that Miles Coverdale ends Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* by confessing to his love of the innocent Priscilla when it has been obvious throughout that his attraction has been to her half-sister Zenobia, a far darker figure whose presumed sexual past drives Coverdale to titillated speculation. The suppression, however, occurs purely on the level of character; the subterfuge is not the text's coy subversion of enforced standards of decency, but Coverdale's own unwillingness to own up to his desire and all it implies. The motivation for the proxy staging is in this case part of, rather than opposed to, the internal dynamics of the text; Coverdale's lie is not an obstacle to be overcome by readers, but a weakness to be taken into account.

Indeed, the same narrative logic that may demand a proxy plot can also prevent its realization within the actual world of the text. *Lady Audley's Secret* cannot stage a Spenserian stripping scene because it is a Victorian novel, but also because it is a realist novel. The realist novel does not deal in hags and witches, sexualized or not; it exists outside the mythological context in which the exposure of a literally grotesque sexual organ could plausibly occur. Yet the loss of the landscape in which foul Duessas and treacherous Belle Dames might have unmasked themselves does not erase the cultural need that produced them; Robert Audley must do a Redcrosse Knight's work without the benefit of sword or shield. The imagined stripping scene is psychologically necessary, but practically impossible. As such, it must and will be carried out – but only counterfactually. Like a text containing a counterfactual underplot, the proxy narrative

leaves the reader suspended between two scenes, one written, and one only suggested. Yet the latter is in the proxy narrative not quite an *unrealized* possibility. Less than an actual occurrence but more than pure potentiality, the counterfactual alternative in the proxy narrative *is* realized, albeit not on the level of story. Rather, it constitutes a shadow-narrative created wholesale from the demands of plot, a necessary projection that fills the void left by an inadequate reality. Once conceived of, its significance not only rivals, but actually surpasses that of the event it implicitly challenges: Lady Audley's madness is a silly piece of melodrama; the defusing of her sexual threat is the key event of the novel.

In the proxy narrative, as in the underplot, a key element in the production of a counterfactual plot is the pressure of genre. Something is gained in the rise of new forms, but something is lost as well. The sentimental novelist must contend with the lure of Gothicism; the realist must deal with his own roots in romance. When the older form proves dominant, as it does in *Paul Clifford's* abrupt turn from Newgate novel to comic opera, the reversal is a self-conscious act of dissent in which the desperation of the victory cry presages the transience of the triumph. Sometimes, the discarded plot may be regretfully jettisoned, its diminishing span of possibility granted and then exhausted. But in other cases, what the generic cast-off requires is not a funeral but an exorcism. The sensation novel, a genre formally committed to its own undoing, is thus among the proxy narrative's most fertile ground. In *Lady Audley's Secret,* we have seen the formal problem posed by the sensation novel's movement from the Gothic horror plot to the marriage plot. In Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White,* we find a richer instance of the potential of the counterfactual proxy to negotiate between the two, serving the dual masters of discursive need and generic limitation.

Anne Catherick's Key

The structure of *The Woman in White* will by now be familiar to us. Like *Lady Audley,* the novel revolves around a secret – *the* Secret – which will render all the novel's mysteries plain. The word is used first by the feeble-minded Anne Catherick, who offers the Secret, portentously capitalized, to Laura Fairlie as the key to destroying her abusive husband Sir Percival Glyde. When it is picked up by other characters, they retain Anne's peculiar emphasis; to Laura, to her sister, Marian, to her suitor, Walter Hartright, to Anne's calculating mother, to Sir Percival himself, it remains the Secret, singular and all-important. But as in *Lady Audley's Secret,* our answer, when it comes, is comparatively tame. The plot of *The Woman in White* revolves around the faking of a woman's death and her incarceration in an asylum under the name of a previously unknown half-sister. It includes mysterious doppelgangers, Italian secret societies, and a sinister Count frequently accompanied by white mice that shadow him like a witch's familiar. Yet the revelation that promises to outdo this melodramatic premise comes to us straight from the pages of no more lurid a document than a church's marriage registry: Sir Percival was born before his parents' marriage, and is thus not the legitimate heir to the family estate. The horror of the murdering husband and his Svengaliesque adviser Count Fosco peters out into a question of primogeniture, while the plot of the novel reveals itself as an elaborate prelude to the marriage of Walter and Laura, the two blandest characters in it.

Yet whether the Secret satisfies or betrays our most lurid desires, Anne Catherick never knew it. Having once overheard her mother threatening Sir Percival with an unspecified secret, she has repeated the warning, convincing the paranoid baronet that continued possession of his wealth and title depends upon the silence of a dangerously unstable woman. The hysterical claim that drives so much of the narrative – Laura's, and then Walter's, search for the truth, Sir Percival's elaborate attempts to suppress it – is thus, in Anne's mouth, so much sound and fury, a

mindless echo lacking sense or reference. There is a secret at the heart of this text – indeed, there are many – but the Secret as we first learn of it is an empty sign that readers and characters alike only mistake for meaningful content.

Anne's Secret is not the only one that proves lacking in substance. Sir Percival's illegitimacy is a verifiable fact with real enough social consequences. Its narrative significance is less certain. Superficially, Walter's discovery about Sir Percival's birth retroactively validates Anne's message: there is, in fact, a secret capable of giving Laura power over her abusive husband. Yet if the revealed truth ratifies Anne's previous claim, so, conversely, does the revealed fiction – her fabricated knowledge of the Secret – challenge the significance of that truth. For much of the novel, Collins has encouraged us to draw an equation between what turn out to be dissimilar quantities: Anne's presumed knowledge (the Secret) is the same as Sir Percival's actual Secret, which will be the key to both saving Laura and understanding previously obscure narrative events. The collapse of the link between the two secrets, however, calls into question everything that followed from it: if the claim that has propelled the narrative is without substance, where, finally, does meaning reside?

Not, it would seem, in Sir Percival's secret. Anne's Secret, the pure verbal form, is at least as important to the novel as the facts that, in the end, only incidentally validate her assertion. When Laura tells her sister Marian about her meeting with Anne, she considers whether the Secret "only exist[s] after all in Anne Catherick's fancy." Marian, normally a far more trustworthy judge than Laura, dismisses the possibility on the basis of Sir Percival's cruel and at times unaccountable behavior: "I judge Anne Catherick's words by his actions – and I believe there *is* a secret" (286). But Marian's logic for once proves faulty. Sir Percival's illegitimacy explains very little of his behavior up to that point; the initial motivation for his actions is the

fairly transparent one of relieving himself from debt by getting his hands on Laura's personal fortune. There *is* a secret, and Sir Percival *has* acted with great cruelty, but no causal relationship links these two facts. While Sir Percival's belief that Laura has learned about the circumstances of his birth influences the subsequent course of the narrative, even then, the particulars of his secret scarcely matter. Laura does not escape Sir Percival because she exposes the material fraud at the heart of their marriage, but because he dies in an attempt to conceal evidence of his crime. Any sufficiently damaging revelation will do: the novel's purposes would have been served just as well had Sir Percival, rather than Count Fosco, been secretly on the run from foreign assassins. Like Anne's illusory promise, the Secret itself matters more for the role it serves than the information it conveys, generating events that invest it with an importance its content, narratively speaking, never warranted.

Ultimately, for all the focus on the Secret, the energy of *The Woman in White* lies elsewhere: in the confrontation with the instability of human identity, in the challenge of finding an appropriate direction for one's desire, and, perhaps above all, in the exorcism of the Gothic potential that the Secret, for much of the novel, seems most forcefully to represent. The substance of the secret is far less significant than its function, driving a plot that finally has only a tangential relationship to what seemed to be its central element. And Anne Catherick's Secret, the mere outline of meaning, is not an unfulfilled promise, but a warning, cautioning us about what we miss when we mistake a red herring for a smoking gun.

Our red herring, in this case, is the Gothic form itself. Even in the late eighteenth century, the Gothic novel had become as liable to defuse as to indulge its most extreme impulses. A genre that had begun with a giant mystical helmet wreaking bloody vengeance on the false Duke of Otronto reached its pinnacle in the novels of Ann Radcliffe, which almost invariably concluded

by providing rational explanations for apparently supernatural events. Over a half-century of realism later, the sensation novel trades off of the Gothic tradition without fully participating in it. The two forms contain many of the same elements: the imperiled innocent and the lonely mansion, concealed identities and dastardly schemes. Yet in the sensation novel, the range of possibility becomes more constricted. In his preface to *The Castle of Otranto,* Horace Walpole gives himself carte blanche for all manner of "miracles, vision, necromancy, dreams and other preternatural events" by citing the work's medieval setting: "Belief in every kind of prodigy was so established in those dark ages, that an author would not be faithful to the manners of the times, who should omit all mention of them" (60). Typically located in foreign lands or long-ago eras, Gothic novels could escape the growing demands of realism: what happens in Udolpho stays in Udolpho, and can be believed in so long as it does so. Relocating to contemporary England burdens the sensation novel with a different set of expectations. Ghosts do not walk in nineteenth-century England, for all that Anne appears before Walter as if "sprung out of the Earth or dropped from the Heaven" (26). Instead, the Gothic-inflected expectation of the otherworldly gives way to the now-familiar trappings of domestic realism, with its drive toward conformity and social reconciliation. The novel's premise is thus rife with Gothic potential that it will not and cannot carry out as it performs the taming work of the marriage and inheritance plots. The structure of *The Woman in White,* which consists of multiple characters offering "testimony" on the events leading up to Laura's marriage and presumed death, reinforces this generic indeterminacy by challenging the notion of stable textual forms: the record begun as epitaph becomes epithalamium; the marriage record that denies legitimacy can be manipulated to confer it, or destroyed altogether.

In this context, the Secret must be read primarily, not as a carrier of content, but as a

mechanism of form, the moment that effects the final transition from Gothic melodrama to Victorian domesticity. The question of Sir Percival's legitimacy or illegitimacy is accompanied by a variety of practical implications for Sir Percival, but possesses no real narrative stakes. The novel does, however, raise a more pressing question of legitimacy that must be in some manner addressed before it can end as it does. Laura epitomizes the desexualized romantic ideal of Victorian domestic fiction, the object of a theoretical desire that is declared but never seems deeply felt. Walter professes his love for Laura, and we must take him at his word. Yet in the uncanny resemblance between Laura, the legless angel of Victorian romance,[xii] and Anne Catherick, consummate figure of the Gothic, we see a version of the "same but different trope" that negotiates between acceptable and unacceptable desire. On the level of story, this likeness is practically necessary, enabling Sir Percival to fake his wife's death and imprison her in an asylum under Anne's name. On the level of plot, it is even more important. If sentiment is to defeat sensation, it must first free Laura from the shadow of Anne, thereby legitimating Walter's desire. Underscoring the shift in narrative attention away from Anne and the Gothic toward Laura and the marriage plot, the paralleling of Anne and Laura permits the novel systematically to neutralize Anne's influence, not by destroying her, but by transforming her into the heroine of the sentimental novel.

Simply by virtue of her role as the first unrelated woman Walter encounters in the novel, Anne enters *The Woman in White* as a presumptive romantic possibility. This first meeting, in which Anne appears before Walter at night on a deserted road, dressed all in white and raving about a man who has betrayed her, evokes the melodramatic and the supernatural, but it also hints at the potential for sexual scandal and, perhaps, danger. Walter protests that, appearances aside, "the grossest of mankind could not have misconstrued her motive in speaking, even at that

suspiciously late hour and in that suspiciously lonely place" (27). Yet this attempt to preempt the reader's suppositions is itself an acknowledgment of the scene's erotically charged nature, which extends beyond the possibility of prostitution. The mysterious woman who accosts young men on the road calls to mind Keats's perilous Belle Dame, or – as in the case of Lady Audley – even older, destructive female archetypes. More prosaically, the most logical inference to draw from Anne's vague accusations against a baronet is that the man has, in all probability, taken advantage of his position to seduce and ruin this desperate young woman. It is worth noting here that while this proves not to be true of Anne, by the time Walter marries Laura, she will, of course, have been victimized sexually by Sir Percival. At the end of the novel, Laura can nonetheless still play the narrative role of virginal bride rather than experienced woman in part because her actual experience can be displaced onto the double who merely appears to have undergone it.

When Laura enters the narrative, it is immediately clear that she is being primed for the role of Walter's romantic interest and, consequently the novel's putative heroine. Neither in the reader's mind nor Walter's, however, can she escape her association with the double who has preceded her. In the most obvious sense, Walter cannot confess his immediate attraction to Laura without implicitly acknowledging the far more threatening sexuality of Anne. The more time he spends at Limmeridge, the more forcefully he is impressed by the wealth of connections between them: Anne Catherick, he learns, grew up at Limmeridge and developed her mania for white clothes from Laura's mother, while Laura's betrothal to a baronet brings to mind Anne's enemy of the same rank. "Was there no possibility," Walter wonders after yet another "chance reference" linking the two, "of speaking of Miss Fairlie and of me without raising the memory of Anne Catherick, and setting her between us like a fatality that it was hopeless to avoid" (77)? The

question is the central one of the novel: the issue of whether or not Walter can save Laura from Sir Percival is ultimately secondary to that of whether the erotic possibility activated by Anne can be successfully transferred to an almost sexually void fulfillment with beautiful, banal Laura.

The existence of a third principal woman highlights this process of erotic substitution. Marian Halcombe, Laura's legitimate half-sister, is in all ways but one a more promising candidate for the role of heroine; indeed, for all intents and purposes she *is* the heroine, except in her failure marry the hero. While Laura remains to the end a passive doll characterized by little more than a rather insipid sweetness, Marian proves resourceful, brave, and witty, serving a crucial role in foiling Sir Percival and Count Fosco's designs. Structurally, however, Marian is superfluous: though Walter gratefully gives her the literal last words of the narrative, she is finally relegated to life as the awkward third in his and Laura's relationship, a permanently designated godmother and maiden aunt to Walter Junior. Although Collins gains a slight logistical advantage in giving Laura and Walter a confidante, particularly once Laura's marriage has exiled Walter from the main events of the novel, most of her role could be either taken over by Walter or mooted by giving Laura a more active role in her own story.

The natural corrective to the imbalance between Laura's formal and Marian's actual prominence would be to combine the two into a single woman, a bold and intelligent heroine who could be both wife and partner to Walter. But Marian is perhaps more important to the novel for what she does not offer than for what she does. When Walter is introduced to her, his initial impression of her figure as she approaches leads him to expect a beautiful woman. Immediately afterward, he meets with a startling disappointment: "The lady is dark…The lady is young…. The lady is ugly!" (37) The sensuous appeal of her body is effaced at once by the disturbing force of the masculine features that utterly eliminate her as an erotic possibility; the effect of

Marian's appearance is so repellent to Walter that Count Fosco's later attraction to her reads less as a redeeming quality than as a further sign of his monstrosity.

The extremity of Walter's response to Marian's appearance suggests a sexual anxiety that parallels his more enduring discomfort over the resemblance between Laura and Anne who, we will later learn, is also a half-sister of Laura's. Walter's description of Laura focuses almost exclusively on her face, the same attribute he finds so hideous in Marian. It is rather his description of Marian that is erotically charged, focusing on the perfection of her body until his full view of her features allows him to dismiss her as a sexual being with something of the same defensiveness we find in his preemptive refutation of any improper inferences the reader might draw about Anne. Through his excessive reaction against Marian, he defuses the force of his initial attraction and quickly attaches himself to a woman whose appeal is aesthetic rather than sensual. Anne, in her similarity to Laura, presents a more vexing problem: as long as both women live, Walter can never be quite sure that his pure and innocent beloved is not the madwoman who approached him one night like a streetwalker or Lamia, raving about a man who had wronged her. As with Spencer's Fidessa and Duessa, the horror of the doubled woman lies in the possibility that the apparent virgin could take off her clothes and reveal the monstrous – or, perhaps more dangerously, arousing – "nether parts" of a less virtuous simulacrum.

Marian does more, however, than highlight the tension between Laura and Anne. Possessing the outline of a beautiful woman while remaining essentially unattractive, Marian embodies the possibility of disparity between form and substance. Her role in the novel is determined by a version of this disparity: the story that would be served best by the active but sexually proscribed Marian must give way before a plot that requires the victory of legitimate desire. While a composite heroine combining the qualities of both women might have satisfied

both story and plot, dividing Marian from Laura clarifies and purifies the function of the latter. As in a Freudian act of psychological splitting, Walter's – and perhaps the novel's – own inability to cope with ambivalence manifests itself in the separation of what should be one woman into two: Marian acts, while Laura remains the virtuous, pure, and, above all, safe object of decorous romantic fulfillment. More symbol than woman, she is reduced to her generic function as the domestic ideal capable of combating Anne's Gothic threat.

While the novel establishes a number of substantive links between Laura and Anne, the most significant connections between them lie likewise below the level of story, arising from a series of more diffuse verbal and psychological associations that precede any more tangible knowledge. The information that Laura is to be married to a baronet reminds Walter of Anne's accusations against a man of that rank who has betrayed her. Of course, this connection will prove to be more than a free-associative blending; Sir Percival is in fact both Laura's intended husband and the man responsible for Anne's plight. Yet the retroactive validation of Walter's musings does nothing to diminish the force of the initial, unsupportable suggestion: Walter himself admits that "judging by the ordinary rules of evidence, I had not a shadow of a reason, thus far, for connecting Sir Percival Glyde with the suspicious words of…the woman in white" (80). In this case and others, ultimate confirmation merely corroborates what Walter seems instinctively and at time unconsciously to have known. He makes the connection between Laura's intended and Anne's baronet before he has even verified that Sir Percival is a baronet, rather than (as would be far more likely) a knight. More strikingly, his first linkage of the two women occurs before he has seen Laura at all. Falling asleep the night of his encounter with Anne, he wonders whom he shall dream about: "the woman in white? Or the unknown inhabitants of this Cumberland mansion" (36). Before the story has brought them together –as

childhood playmates, as twin victims of Sir Percival, as sisters - Walter's subconscious has done so, establishing a connective thread that precedes and perhaps surpasses the events of narrative.

This alternative to traditional evidence points to the novel's larger referential problem. Again and again, words serve both as referential signs and as discursive forms whose function operates independently of their content. In his first meeting with Anne, Walter tries to coax the mysterious woman into an explanation of her plight by "lift[ing] the veil that hung between them" (31). But when a veil is finally lifted many pages later, it reveals, not Anne, but Laura, who appears before Walter at her own supposed grave, garbed in clothes that recall both Anne's eccentric attire and Walter's metaphor. The veil is a tangible object *and* a component of a metonymic chain that would do the work of linking Anne to Laura, the shroud to the wedding dress, whether or not the image were embodied in the form of two white-clad women.

Seen in this light, the Secret becomes far less of a disappointment. On one level – the level of story – it refers to the real fact of Sir Percival's illegitimate birth. On another – the level of plot – it is rather a point on which the novel's generic tension pivots, the nexus between melodramatic promise and sentimental fulfillment. The revelation is surrounded by the elements of the 18th century Gothic – the ghostly encounter, the forbidding mansion, secret cabals and gruesome deaths – but consists of the material of the inheritance plots of Dickens or Trollope. Above all, it suggests an answer to the central question that has never been fully articulated: can Laura escape from the threat of Anne? For a time, the answer seems to be no. Even when it is discovered that Laura has survived and Anne been buried under her name, the Laura who emerges is indistinguishable from Anne: dressed in white, weakened both physically and mentally by her ordeal, she reveals herself from beside her own grave, as if in fulfillment of the vain supernatural promise of Anne's initial appearance.

Yet if a woman in white can be a ghost, she can also be a bride. The horror of Anne, of Marian, has never really been the feeble mind or the ugly face; the fear we ascribe to terror of the supernatural or the monstrous is really fear of the unnatural and the perverse. In the fairytale or the allegory, the perverse must be transformed into legitimate desire, the acknowledged passion for the dangerous beauty converted into a wiser love of a better woman. In domestic fiction, the erotic is legitimized past the point of desire entirely. Walter's first meeting with Marian enacts a version of the archetypal stripping scene that annihilates, rather than redirects desire: he confronts, not monstrous nether parts, but an ugly face that relieves him from the need to acknowledge the sexual possibility created by their meeting. Sir Percival's illegitimacy ultimately serves a similar function in the diffracted same-but-different plot that is Anne's gradual replacement with Laura. To allow that plot to play out on the level of story, to take on directly the implicit fear that Laura might be just as compromised as Anne appears to be, would require an acknowledgment precluded by the very genre such a plot strives to enable. Both the fantastic trappings of the Gothic and its erotic energy must be purged and displaced. Instead, the question of legitimacy is transferred from the erotic to the legalistic realm: *Sir Percival's* identity, rather than Anne's or Laura's, comes into question, and the removal of his presence, rather than Anne's, is made the necessary precondition to the union of Laura and Walter. Not only Sir Percival's secret, but his entire role in the narrative has been on some level a mechanism for representing and finally resolving an otherwise unspeakable tension.

In the wake of Sir Percival's death, the relationship between the living woman in white and the dead is stripped of its last vestige of the uncanny: Anne, we learn, was Laura's illegitimate half-sister, the product of an affair between her father and a servant. The disclosure demystifies the likeness between them, but it also formalizes Anne's displacement and Laura's

ascendancy; Laura, the true-born and pure, need fear nothing from the pitiable, forlorn pretender who, in this version of their story, becomes clearly an ersatz, rather than possible self. In either case, the children of Laura and Walter will be free from such shadows. The novel ends, not at the point of Laura and Walter's marriage, but some months after the birth of their son. In the final scene, Marian brings the child – named, naturally, Walter Jr. – to his father and asks him if he knows who the child is. For a moment, it seems that the old confusion over identity has resurfaced in another form, but Marian does not leave us in suspense for long: Mr. Fairlie, Laura's uncle, has died, and little Walter is now the rightful heir of Limmeridge. The uncanny normalized and the Gothic banished, the novel can conclude as a domestic drama governed by the salutary strictures of the marriage and inheritance plots.

The banality of Sir Percival's secret is not a failure; it is a sacrifice. We may be thrilled by the melodrama of the sensation novel and compelled by the psychologically evocative landscapes of the Gothic, but the domestic fulfillment toward which the text strives requires that both finally be jettisoned in the name of order and sentiment. "The way to the Secret," Walter reasons well before the revelation scene, "lay through the mystery of the woman in white"(459). The reverse, however, is more accurate: the way to the woman in white – and, consequently, *The Woman in White* – leads through the Secret, for "woman in white" is itself a phrase that encodes the novel's pervading problem of reference, seeming, at first, clearly to refer to one woman but ultimately expressing the confusion between, not only two women, but the genres that contain them. We go to the church, where the fateful marriage record is kept, still uncertain. But the revelation that takes us in a moment from the Gothic to the domestic, from the graveyard to the probate court, settles it at last. Laura, and not Anne, or even Marian, is to be the heroine of the piece, the only woman who can successfully fulfill the promise of the revealed secret and

complete the marriage plot.

The plots of the proxy narrative exist at the border of the actual and the counterfactual. Written, they may exist only to be discounted as unworthy of the struggle that produced them; unwritten, they must be read back into the text that yearns for the very consummation from which it abstains. The sensation novel, which more than any other Victorian form resists the realism it finally affirms, is a natural home for the proxy plot because it effects a transformation that can neither be fully believed or fully denied: we are told one Secret, but learn the lesson of another, one that no madwoman ever betrayed or marriage plot quite resolved. The next chapter continues the discussion of the proxy narrative with a turn to the novels of Henry James, which exist at another kind of border. The last Victorian or the first modernist, living in England but resolutely American, James found in the proxy narrative a fitting structure for a novelist who meant most when he said nothing at all.

Chapter Four: “A Thing Quite Other than Itself”: Henry James and the Proxy Narrative

In 1904, *Life* magazine printed a brief parody of Henry James's *The Ambassadors.* Written in long, clause-strewn sentences ("The reader was, even then, although scarcely, as yet, consciously, arrived at that point..."), "'The Ambassadors: A Question'" sees a frustrated reader of James contemplating throwing his book into the fire and wondering, in his own James- inflected fashion, "After all...why not, without periphrasis, lucidly, in English" (22)? Its author, the literary critic J.B. Kerfoot, had voiced similar complaints in his review of the novel the previous year, criticizing *The Ambassadors* for its dense writing, thin plot, and lack of "actual denouement." Yet Kerfoot's review was no hatchet job. Far from panning the novel, Kerfoot was ultimately enthusiastic, even effusive in his praise, ensuring his audience that for all its faults, *The Ambassadors* nonetheless "leaves [the reader] ... aglow with the enthusiasm of a perfect art" (604).

Modern scholars, more likely to praise than to condemn both the prose and the plotlessness of James's works, have largely corroborated Kerfoot's final analysis of the novel while rejecting the preceding qualification. One element of the original criticism, however, still stands. In context, Kerfoot's claim that *The Ambassadors* has "no actual denouement" may be referring only to its failure to answer, except prospectively, the central question of whether Chad Newsome will return to his family business in Woollett, Massachusetts or remain with his mistress in Paris. Yet the scene that *does* serve as the "actual denouement" of the novel, such as it is, has presented a far more enduring textual difficulty. Strether's refusal, on rather strained ethical grounds, of Maria Gostrey's tacit marriage proposal seems to represent a backsliding into the narrow New England moralism he has spent the novel learning to reject. At the same time, it seems narratively fitting that Strether should end the novel by asserting, even at great cost, a private moral code distinct from the values systems of both New England and Europe. We arrive,

then, at a contradiction. The notion of a final renunciation is, to borrow Strether's own language, "right"; the precise form that renunciation takes is altogether wrong. It provides little enough resolution that Kerfoot can call it no ending at all, but satisfies so completely as to leave him radiant with joy at its perfection. It does what it needs to while doing the most incongruous thing possible. It is, in other words, the proxy narrative at its finest.

The Citizen of the World

Despite living in Victorian England for nearly as many years as some writers of the era lived at all, Henry James is the obvious outlier in this project. True, a solid majority of his works were written in England during the reign of Queen Victoria, and if we can grandmother in Jane Austen, who died a full two decades before the start of the era proper, whenever a syllabus demands it, surely we can import already-transplanted American Henry James. But James, no matter how long he lived in London, could never be anything but an American abroad. It is not only that he writes so often *about* Americans abroad, constantly calling attention to the difficulties of assimilation. Rather, it is that he simply does not write like a Victorian novelist. His closest literary ancestor is Hawthorne, American Romanticist *par excellence.* At his worst, he can be guilty of crude allegory (he names the hero of *The American* Christopher Newman); at his best, he still often trots out his characters as types and functions: Dickens had minor characters, James has *ficelles*.[i] He has scarcely any interest in contemporary political or social issues, *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* being exceptions that prove the rule, and almost as little in the material details of realist fiction: as Mary McCarthy observes in *Ideas and the Novel*, James manages to write an entire novel (*The Spoils of Poynton*) about a dispute over antique furniture without bothering to describe the furniture in any detail (3-4).

Above all, he is not a plotter – or, to be consistent in my terminology, what I should call a

storyist. If we were to judge by summaries alone, James's narratives, full of subtle schemes and shifting allegiances, might seem byzantine, far more intricate than those of the Victorian novels he famously referred to as "loose, baggy monsters" (*The Art of the Novel* 84). But for James, the story is rarely the point. Even in his more conventional early career, events are not themselves as important as the responses to them; his works are dramas of consciousness in which whatever scenario he engineers serves the purpose of forcing characters into a moral crisis or intellectual awakening. In *The Princess Casamassima,* the prompt is radical politics; in *What Maisie Knew,* it is a custody battle; in many others, it is some romantic complication or another, but in almost any case, the particulars are less important than the quest of an individual mind to achieve cognitive and ethical maturity. It is perhaps for this reason that James was a notoriously poor playwright,[ii] and why the play turned into the most successful film adaptation of a James novel, William Wyler's *The Heiress* (1949), had the good sense not to call itself *Washington Square.*

This quality, however, un-Victorian, is one reason – although far from the only one – that James demands inclusion in a project on Victorian counterfactual plotting. On the most basic, thematic level, James is preoccupied with missed opportunities and paths not taken. His characters are haunted (on occasion, literally) by the thought of the lives they have not, but might once have lived. Spencer Brydon and John Marcher, Ralph Touchett and Milly Theale – whether the chance is squandered in blindness or denied by death, their stories are suffused with the wistful melancholy of a sense of promise unfulfilled. More to the point, in the context of this project, the outcomes of James's works often involve a struggle between competing narratives, each evocative of a recognizably novelistic paradigm. Mrs. Penniman, of *Washington Square,* wants to turn plain, quiet Catherine Sloper's life into a melodrama; Catherine's father first denies that his daughter could have any narrative value at all, and then treats her relationship with

fortune-hunting Morris Townshend as a species of romantic farce. Catherine herself behaves for a time as if she is the heroine of a marriage plot novel, but finally becomes a heroine at all only by rejecting such plots and plotters, refusing both the returned Morris and any other suitor who comes calling.

James's own status as at once an American and an English writer, the last Victorian and the first great modernist, heightens the sense of narrative tension. One of the most resolutely American aspects of James is his virtual dismissal of the marriage plot; people don't get married very often in James, and when they do, it generally ends badly. Yet if James's heroes tend to wind up in a state of Leslie Fiedler-approved celibacy, the worlds they inhabit – even if only as visitors – are ripe with the possibility of happier fates. Full of country estates, unexpected bequests, and plucky, attractive interlopers disrupting an established social order, James's works can be read as novels of manners, until the moment they veer off, like Catherine Sloper, onto a thoroughly unanticipated course.

At times, it is not just a particular Victorian paradigm, but the traditional plot itself that becomes the shadowy counterplot ever threatening, ever failing to emerge. Perhaps the prevailing sin in a Henry James work is attempting to force a person – whether oneself or another – into a fixed narrative role: Marcher wastes his life waiting for a conventionally dramatic destiny; Ralph Touchett wants Isabel Archer to play out a fantasy of independent American womanhood. Living in nineteenth-century worlds, these figures are representatives of a type that would become far more common in the twentieth. In the Victorian novel, the master plotter is, more often than not, a heroic figure, the benevolent old man who ties up all loose ends in the finale of a Dickens novel, the amateur detective who transforms evidence into narrative. The evil schemer is baffled by the good designer, who serves as an author-avatar capable of

operating within the world of the story to bring a plot to fruition. By the rise of the modernist novel, however, asserting fixed meanings has become an increasingly futile, potentially perilous enterprise; narrators are less omniscient, and less confiding; the defining heroes of the age are wandering Jews whose journeys stall at Q with R just out of reach.[iii] In this world, the character who seeks to impose a sense of plottedness on his or her life must be either a tragic Quixote or a sinister puppeteer. The detective is reborn as a neurotic, if not an outright madman, and the grand designer becomes, at his worst, an egomaniac monster bent on imposing a private will he mistakes for an externally validated masterplot.

The uniqueness of James is to participate in this shift without appearing to do so. No reader could long mistake *Absalom, Absalom!* or *To the Lighthouse* or *Ulysses* for a traditionally plotted novel.[iv] But James leaves us with just enough of a consecutive story to provide the veneer of stable meaning. As far as conclusions go, "Verena and Basil elope" and "Strether returns to America" successfully complete their novels' respective plots in a way that "Molly Bloom has a spectacular orgasm" and "Ten years later, a supporting character paints a picture" do not. Modern readers of James, part of a highly self-selected group and with the benefit of over a century of received wisdom on his works, may see the essential strangeness of James's only superficially traditional plotting as self-evident. Yet it is telling that *The Turn of the Screw,* now considered a case study in modernist uncertainty, was read by a full generation of critics as a straightforward ghost story.[v] Like the works of sensation fiction discussed in the last chapter, it is nearly always possible to take a James novel at its word. As I began to suggest earlier, however, it is hard to escape a sense, in reading James, that the story is not enough, that the place toward which the text has directed our attention is perhaps the last in which we should be looking.

The proxy narrative is thus, to

varying degrees, a consistent key to the riddles of Jamesian plotting. What I have been describing is precisely a disjunction between story and plot: it is not simply that there is an *additional,* subtextual meaning, but that there is an implied, non-story realm of action for which the actual event or fact is, for one reason or another, a necessary proxy. In James, as in the sensation novel, the most obvious reason for the subterfuge is sometimes a socially imposed delicacy; *The Bostonians,* for instance, can scarcely be read rationally without attributing Olive's obsessive devotion to Verena to something rather more intense than political enthusiasm or platonic friendship. James's own sexuality makes it especially tempting – and plausible – to read his works for signs of veiled homoerotic content, as Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick does in *Epistemology of the Closet.* Yet if there is a "queerness" to James's writing, it is perhaps the more pervasive one suggested by Kevin Ohi in *Henry James and the Queerness of Style,* a quality that, arising from a sense of doubleness and self-suppression, expresses itself in every elliptical phrase and representative dodge. Queer or not, this concealment is in any case undeniably strange, leaving the reader stranded, as James's own characters so frequently are, in a conversation whose frame of reference is but half-understood.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss two late James novels, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Ambassadors.* Both novels have generated notably persistent critical problems. In *The Wings of the Dove,* it is the mystery of Milly's illness, and in *The Ambassadors,* the merits, of Strether's sacrifice. These problems, I will argue, can be addressed by proxy readings that identify in the very difficulty of these problems a potential key to their resolution. I will begin with *The Wings of the Dove,* a text that, perhaps more than any other by James, suggests why in the world he can never quite, without periphrasis, play it straight.

The Matter with Milly

Milly Theale's illness in *The Wings in the Dove* is nonsensical as a real physical malady.[vi] Its manifestations are plain enough to send Milly – whose subsequent behavior suggests she would have been content enough with denial, if denial had been possible – to a doctor, but not so severe as to require any prescription beyond "be[ing] happy" and making periodic doctor's visits that seem to double as social calls (428). Luke Strett, the eminent physician she consults, declines even to call her condition "a case" (427), but does not hesitate in nonetheless taking it. Her complaint is not, he tells Milly's companion Susan Stringham, the disease Milly had initially feared, but whatever it is, it is serious enough to leave Susan visibly shaken after he reveals it to her in an off-page visit. When the malady proves fatal, circumstances suggest a psychological, rather than medical cause; Milly "turns her face to the wall" after learning that Densher, who has passed himself off as her suitor, has been secretly engaged to Kate all along (581). Yet Milly begins visibly to decline before any obvious psychological trigger presents itself, and it is in any case impossible to imagine James at the height of his talent doing anything so crude as having his heroine die of a broken heart.

The simplest course here would be for James to suggest that Milly is suffering from an actual illness that also reflects a psychological condition or, in what has become the prevailing critical reading of the novel, a symbol of a more pervasive spiritual malaise.[vii] Thomas Mann had, a year earlier, done precisely that in *Buddenbrooks,* in which the child Hanno's death is, like Milly's, a metaphorically resonant tragedy presented in the language of conscious surrender – but one that also has quite a lot to do with a severe case of typhoid fever. Even had James been loath to put something as vulgar as a name to Milly's illness – or to constrain his own representation by using a known disease with an established progression and prognosis – he could have

suggested that Strett was simply humoring a dying woman with his cheerful assurance that there was nothing to prevent her from living a full and healthy life. Instead, James takes pains to exclude this possibility by having Susan repeat the doctor's bizarrely contradictory assurances to a third party while Milly is not present. James purposes, then, evidently require specifically that Milly be physically ill with an ailment in which it is nonetheless impossible to believe.

This paradox reflects a larger tension in the novel. If Milly is suffering from cancer or tuberculosis, her death is the result of a grossly material cause, her body's undeniable betrayal the ultimate mockery of any attempt to assert a self beyond the physical. If she is not, then it is rather a confirmation of a refined spiritual sensibility that cannot long survive in a world of the vulgar real. But whatever the nature of her illness, the problem of Milly Theale's life has always been the gap between the material and the spiritual. For no immediately apparent reason, everyone adores Milly Theale. Susan Stringham wants to be her mother; Kate Croy her best friend, all of London, it would seem, her confessed and worshipful admirer. Yet one cannot help the suspicion that the source of this general fascination with Milly may be no more after all than the fact of her great wealth. Certainly, this proves true of Kate, who, secretly engaged to Densher but too poor to marry him, convinces Densher to woo the dying Milly so that she will leave him her money when she dies. Even as disinterested a party as Susan, however, who claims to see in Milly a "strangeness" that escapes the notice of less penetrating consciousnesses, must confess "the truth of truth that the girl couldn't get away from her wealth" (145). In the face of that admission, protestations to the contrary become hollow: "she had as beneath her feet a mine of something precious. She seemed to herself to stand near the mouth, not yet quite cleared. The mine but needed working and would certainly yield a treasure. She was not thinking, either, of Milly's gold" (150). Language itself undoes Susan's noblest intentions; while she has no desire to exploit

Milly for personal gain, her conception of her is on some level inseparable from her awareness of her fortune. She need not think consciously of Milly's gold, for to think of Milly herself is at once to invoke that consciousness, to start dreaming in a vocabulary of mines and treasure. Milly is fascinating for her money and her beauty, for being an orphan and for being an American, for her picturesque illness and approaching death, for anything but what transcends the bare facts of her material existence.

In this sense, death is the only possible solution for Milly, because it is only by ceasing to exist at all that she can overcome the burden of her own materiality. Long before she learns of Densher's treachery, her fate is determined when she accepts the image of herself as a dove. Kate, who will prove herself to be the basest of the novel's major characters, gives her the name primarily to deflect an unintentionally revealing comment; in her mouth, the image is as empty as any of the vague words ("stupendous," "fascinating," "strange") that have already been used inadequately to describe Milly's appeal. Milly, however, embraces the title:

> It was moreover, for the girl, like an inspiration: she found herself accepting as the right one, while she caught her breath with relief, the name so given her. She met it on the instant as she would have met the revealed truth; it lighted up the strange dusk in which she lately had walked. *That* was what was the matter with her. She was a dove. Oh, *wasn't* she (301).

"Truth" is a loaded word here, hearkening back to the "truth of truths" that is the undeniability of her wealth. Potentially, this truth is an antidote to the other, a spiritual replacement for a rejected material identity. Yet if it is, it can only be a self-annihilating one. The crucial difference between "dove" and the other terms used to describe Milly is that it is a metaphor rather than an adjective. A "stupendous" Milly is, after all, still Milly; the word is so imprecise as to be almost tautological: Milly is stupendous, but the only meaningful reference point for what is meant by "stupendous" is Milly herself. Milly the dove, by contrast, is no longer Milly at all. It is

significant, too, that Milly instinctively identifies the image of the dove with her condition, her illness becoming synonymous with a self-conception that stands opposed to the physical.

The novel's title reinforces the untenability of Milly's identification with the dove by insisting on the bird's own physicality. Metaphors allow us to choose our point of comparison which in this case, seems more likely to refer to a symbolic dove than to a real one: Milly is a dove, it would seem from Kate's usage, in that she is gentle or innocent. “The wings of the dove,” takes us from metaphor to metonym, and in so doing shifts the image to a point of specificity at which the original comparison collapses: a dove is a symbol, a wing is a limb. Both Densher and Kate try, at different times, to expand the metaphor to accommodate the dove's wings, but their efforts are self-serving, and revert to the material realities that Milly wishes to use the image to transcend. This is explicit in Densher's reflection on Milly's dovelike qualities, in which he half-acknowledges the inappropriateness of his extrapolation before succumbing to its lure:

> Milly was indeed a dove; this was the figure, though it most applied to her spirit. Yet he knew in a moment that Kate was just now, for reasons hidden from him, exceptionally under the impression of that element of wealth in her which was a power, which was a great power, and which was dove-like only so far as one remembered that doves have wings and wondrous flights, have them as well as tender tints and soft sounds. It even came to him dimly that such wings could in a given case—*had*, truly, in the case with which he was concerned—spread themselves for protection (533).

Densher's sensibilities are poetic as he imagines Milly's wondrously-flying wings spreading themselves protectively over him. Yet he cannot resist the comparison of these wings to Milly's wealth nor – in a chapter that will end with Kate proposing her plan for obtaining Milly's money – the fact that the “protection” involves using a feigned attraction to Milly as a pretext for gaining access to Kate without arousing the suspicions of her disapproving aunt. Imagery thus becomes a form of self-justification; if Milly is Densher's benevolent, quasi-mystical protector,

she is not then his dupe and victim.

Much later, after Milly has died and left an inheritance to Densher in spite of having learned of his scheme, Kate makes similar use of the metaphor, describing Milly “stretch[ing] out her wings.... [to] cover us” (710). By now, however, the significance of the image has changed, for Densher if not for Kate. Even Kate seems slightly chastened, whether by the reality of Milly's death, the magnanimity of her final gift, or Densher's obvious discomfort with his part in the affair. But, like Densher in the previous scene, it is also in Kate’s best interest to see Milly in this romantic light, which enables her both to see herself as justified and, more practically, to justify accepting the money. In any case, her interpretation of Milly's gesture is mistaken. However it appears to Kate, or even Densher, Milly's bequest is in effect less a token of magnanimity than a tool of vengeance. Milly knows too well how little money has ever done for her. She is not bestowing a gift, but passing on a burden, as indeed the inheritance proves to be. In his false pursuit of Milly, Densher had confirmed for her, in the most brutal way possible, what had until then been only an inchoate suspicion: that actual life could offer nothing to live up to the possibilities before her, that she herself might be in the end no more substantial than any other precious, beautiful thing, to be coveted but never loved. In turn, she repays him in kind. Densher has from the beginning been uneasy about the plot, which he could excuse only through his devotion to Kate. Indeed, he elevates it almost to an obligation: the only way he will consent to the deception is for Kate to prove her sincerity by agreeing to consummate their relationship, which he perhaps does less out of a desire to bind her to him than of a need to bind himself to her. If he “owes” her, he cannot help but carry out her design. By leaving Densher the money, Milly thus confirms, in the most brutal way possible, the transparent crassness of their actions, and of their relationship itself. Like his own treatment of Milly, Densher's relationship with Kate

has been, in the end, all about the money.

The irony is that, at least as far as Densher's feelings toward Milly are concerned, this is not ultimately true. By the end of the novel, at which point there can be no hope of gain, he does love her. There is, finally, something stupendous in Milly, in her capacity for desire, in her refusal to compromise, in her metaphoric flights. On a wild promontory in Switzerland, she sees the world before her and resists the urge to jump: “It wouldn't be for her a question of a flying leap and thereby of a quick escape. It would be a question of taking full in the face the whole assault of life, to the general muster of which indeed her face might have been directly presented as she sat there on her rock” (150). Much later, she will turn that same face despairingly to the wall, but not until she has given all her heart to the struggle; she is a dove, and will not heed that old nightingale's call, “to cease upon the midnight with no pain.” The world must have its chance. She goes to the National Gallery to see Titians and Turners, but winds up among the lady-copyists, and knows even so that she will purchase no imitation. She is proposed to by a Lord, and does not settle: there is one more avenue yet to be tried. In Merton Densher, falling selflessly in love with a girl with no future, she sees the promise of a nobility that might have given her one after all. When he proves false, Milly has her final answer. She “fold[s] her wings” (664), we are told, and at last, the metaphor bears its weight.

Milly must die before Densher can love her. He protests to the end that he never loved Milly at all, but Kate is more perceptive than usual in her observation that while she believes that he did not love her while she lived, he has loved her since, as Milly herself perhaps knew that he would. At this moment, the gap between Milly and Kate appears most starkly before him: Milly has refused to accept a world too coarse for her, while Kate has been too coarse to accept a love that transcends calculated self-interest. It is this that leads him to propose an ultimatum very

different from the one that demanded Kate's body in return for his promise. Either Kate will marry him at once, and renounce all claims to Milly's legacy, or he will make the money over to her, ending their relationship. Kate refuses the proposal on these terms, presumably signaling her own acceptance of the money, although her words are ambiguous enough to suggest that her motives may not be entirely selfish: when Densher confirms that he will marry her "as they were," she responds "we shall never be again as we were" (711), and leaves the room. Whether she means only that Densher has been irrevocably changed, or is acknowledging some change in herself, her act recognizes that Milly's death has altered the light in which her own relationship must be seen.

The reader, however, has had the means of understanding Milly almost from the start. Milly Theale must be physically ill because the story demands it. Even if James were willing to risk the aesthetic perils of any less literal malady, the logic of this particular story world simply cannot accommodate an imagined illness with earnest power to kill. This of course, has been precisely Milly's problem: she does not live in either a romantic landscape or a potentially more vital past, but in a disappointing present reality, a world of money and sex and actual doves with unpoetic wings. In this reality, young women die because they are ill, not because they have been disappointed in love or become disillusioned with life itself. But if the story requires us to take Dr. Strett at his ambiguous word, the plot requires us to do precisely the opposite. It is this dichotomy that accounts for the novel's impossible representation of Milly's disease: according to the story, she must be actually sick; according to the plot, she must decide herself spiritually unwilling to accept a hollow survival.

Again the question arises of why James cannot allow both to be true, creating a credible, rather than patently absurd, physical illness that the reader can be trusted to see also as symbolic.

It is crucial, however, that we, like Milly, finally reject a tawdry physicality for a more authentic alternative, the difference being that the alternative we embrace does not require Milly's death to do her justice. In reading Milly's illness as a proxy for a painfully refined sensibility, we see something in the living Milly that, had Densher recognized it in time, might have given both of them the capacity to fulfill a desire that would not then have been cheap or empty. Of course, this does not happen; the world which Milly might have found worth inhabiting remains strictly counterfactual. In the plot that does play out, Milly herself can only in death find genuine expression, shedding the material trappings that have proven so burdensome. But in the proxy reading that recognizes the source of her suffering, she has always been more than any apotheosis could make her. Witness to the courage and pathos of a spiritual struggle that plays out only counterfactually, the reader is the first, and perhaps the only one to give the living Milly her due. She dies for Densher as she has lived for us: she is a dove and stupendous; she is heartbreaking and loved.

Henry James is not a Victorian author. If the modernists did not invent the collision between reality and desire, they gave it a particular form, and James's characters are more closely related to Jay Gatsby than to Dorothea Brooke. What becomes so prevalent in modernism is the sense that the modes available for expressing our desires are themselves inadequate; we want the world, and wind up in a room full of shirts. It is why James's characters so often become heroic not in success but in renunciation, coming to possess a moral consciousness that is always more valuable than that which must be sacrificed to it. Crucially, for James, language itself becomes implicated in the general insufficiency: it is not just James's plots that are often impossible, but his conversations. No one speaks like a Henry James character, because to represent language as it is would betray James's sense of its inevitable failure. There are two modes of discourse

available in James, one involving a specificity that reduces the most sacred into – in the metaphor of a different James – the crass vocabulary of "cash value,"[viii] the other involving a vagueness that represents nothing at all. The best James can do is, at crucial moments, to make the words he gives us so transparently improbable that they require us to read past them to a significance for which they and their associated objects are only a proxy, to see what should be there but cannot be in what is there but should not. It is thus, then, that James, who was never a Victorian, finds his way into a dissertation on Victorian counterfactuals. It is a Jamesian paradox: the only thing more impossible than including Henry James in this dissertation would have been to exclude him.

A Delightful Dissimulation

If *The Wings of the Dove* suggests the reason that Henry James can perhaps only plot by proxy, it is in *The Ambassadors* that the Jamesian proxy narrative finds its fullest expression. "Nothing," James writes in his preface to the New York Edition of the novel, "is more easy than to state the subject of 'The Ambassadors'" (*The Art of the Novel* 312). Nothing more easy, he might have added, and nothing more deceptive. In the beginning of the novel, the fiancée of aging New Englander Lambert Strether sends him from their staid Massachusetts hometown to Paris to recover her wayward son from the clutches of a designing mistress. He finds, however, that Chad has been greatly improved, rather than debased, by his relationship and ultimately advises Chad of his obligation to stay with the woman who has done so much for him – a stricture that Chad seems likely to abandon as soon as the lure of a lucrative family business becomes stronger than his waning attachment to Madame de Vionnet. As Strether, in the final scene of the novel, prepares to return home, Maria Gostrey, an American expatriate who has guided Strether through the unfamiliar social world of Europe, essentially proposes marriage to him. Strether's

engagement to Mrs. Newsome, never more than tacit, has by now been as tacitly ended by his betrayal of his original mission, theoretically freeing him to accept. Yet Strether declines Maria's offer, ostensibly on moral grounds: the only way he can be "right" is "not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself" (512).

Critical opinion of the scene is mainly divided into two camps: those who see Strether's renunciation as genuine nobility, and those who regard it as a disappointing backslide into rigid New England morality.[ix] Subjective preferences aside, the first option has considerable support within the text itself. Maria, who has the greatest reason to challenge Strether's logic, instead grudgingly accepts it: her half-hearted objection to his decision – "but why should you be so dreadfully right?" – is an implicit acknowledgment of the moral claim she suggests he overlook. More significantly, his acceptance of a more nuanced ethical code notwithstanding, Strether has been consistently unwilling to abandon his moral sensibilities. For much of the novel, his approval of Chad's relationship with Madame de Vionnet is predicated on his ability to maintain the illusion that theirs is a "virtuous attachment." Indeed, it takes Strether some two hundred pages to determine whether Chad is involved with Madame de Vionnet, who, aside from being an obviously experienced woman ten years Chad's senior, is also married, or her eligible, irreproachably innocent teenage daughter Jeanne. When a chance meeting with the couple leaves him unable to deny the nature of their relationship, he stops short of full endorsement of the affair. The relationship is complex, even beautiful, but all the force of Strether's considerable sensitivity cannot quite make it "right." He will counsel Chad of his continuing obligation to Madame de Vionnet; he will even assure Madame de Vionnet herself of his continued admiration and respect. Yet it is clear to both Strether and Madame de Vionnet that this is to be their final meeting: he has, as Maria Gostrey helpfully summarizes, "taken a final leave of her" (495). For

his part, Chad, in his apparent willingness to leave Madame de Vionnet as soon as he grows bored with her, becomes a testament to the limitations of her training: “She had made him better, she had made him best, she had made him anything one would; but it came to our friend with supreme queerness that he was none the less only Chad” (482). If Chad's initial transformation suggests to Strether the narrowness of a moralism that would utterly reject the woman who effected it, his ultimate failure demonstrates the enduring relevance of a more nuanced ethical sense.

It is difficult to read the end of the novel, however, without feeling that if morality demands this of Strether, it is asking for too much. Nothing awaits Strether in Woollett. His engagement is off, and he would not have it back on if he could. His nominal job editing the town paper, is tied to Mrs. Newsome, and has presumably ended with the engagement. He has had experiences that alienate him from his previous life, but lacks the youth or resources meaningfully to change his lot once he returns home. Even if his own happiness could be set aside – no small matter in a novel in which the phrase “live all you can” is invoked as a guiding principle – Maria's cannot. Strether is, after all, not the only man who ends the novel on the point of leaving a woman to return to Woollett, and if the disinterested nature of Strether's choice absolves him of the selfishness with which he charges Chad, it does not make his departure any less painful for the woman he leaves behind. In introducing Strether to the sophistication and subtlety of European society, Maria has performed a radically compressed version of Madame de Vionnet's “miracle” of transformation; if Chad owes a debt, so, too, does Strether. Weighing against these enticements to remain is a principle whose logic would be suspect even if its rigor were not so exacting. If Strether's sacrifice of his own and Maria's happiness is a moral victory, it is at best a Pyrrhic one. The most direct obligation Strether incurred in agreeing to act as Mrs.

Newsome's agent in Europe was to attempt to persuade Chad to return home. He has instead done precisely the reverse. There might have been some argument for Strether's returning home before he had betrayed his original purpose so absolutely; there is only a tortured and tenuous one for a departure that cannot help Mrs. Newsome – who has by now broken with Strether in any case – and can only irreparably harm his own future prospects.

Ethics aside, the scene remains a puzzling endpoint for the novel. In the preface to the New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James describes the *ficelle,* a secondary character with a strictly functional role in the narrative: "Not... true agent[s]... they may run beside the coach 'for all they are worth,' they may cling to it till they are out of breath… but neither, all the while, so much as gets her foot on the step, neither ceases for a moment to tread the dusty road" (*The Art of the Novel* 55). Not only does Maria fit the bill, she is, by James's own reckoning, the "most unmitigated and abandoned of ficelles" (322). Having filled, in the first several books of the novel, the *ficelle*-appropriate role of platonic guide and confidante, she, just as fittingly, becomes less prominent as the novel progresses and Strether is forced to put the modes of analysis in which she has trained him to the test. Yet after graciously ceding the stage to the legitimate actors, she boldly assumes pride of place in the final scene of the novel as no less a figure than that of the protagonist's acknowledged love interest. Several critics have suggested that Strether's moral justification for his return is nothing more than a tactful way of refusing an unwanted proposal, a solution that restores Maria to comparative insignificance while side-stepping altogether the validity of Strether's alleged scruples.[x] But if the assumption that Strether does not love Maria excuses Strether, it does not justify James, who has, in that case, chosen to end his novel with a scene of acknowledged unimportance.

The problem is by now a familiar one. It is right and fitting that Strether conclude the

novel with a supreme moral act, drawing a clear line between nuance and relativism. This particular act, however, is altogether wrong, combining needless self-denial with an object that is, on a narrative level, hardly worth the trouble of renouncing. James, however, is ready with an answer. James's preface to the novel, as Julie Rivkin has noted, is as much a conclusion as an addition to the novel, telling the untold story of the novel's own composition. But in so doing, she suggests, it calls attention as much to what is absent from the novel as to what is present; like Spencer Brydon in *The Jolly Corner,* the James of the prefaces is haunted by what could have been: "[It] also inevitably hints at the intended novel that never got written...As the process continues, the dropped blossoms become more important than those that remain; what the writer sees is not what is there but what was to have been there" (60). And so, too, must the reader. The last scene, James tells us in the preface, is not properly a scene at all, but the representation of a scene:

> Nowhere is it more of an artful expedient for mere consistency of form, to mention a case, than in the last "scene" of the book, where its function is to give or to add nothing whatever, but only to express as vividly as possible certain things quite other than itself and that are of the already fixed and appointed measure. Since, however, all art is EXPRESSION, and is thereby vividness, one was to find the door open here to any amount of delightful dissimulation (324).

If Maria and Strether's relationship seems too minor a connection to sustain the burden of an ending, it is because it was never intended to. Adding nothing, giving nothing, it represents, not Strether's refusal, but "certain things quite other than itself." These things, James suggests, are already present in the narrative, and present they may be – but only, at this last and crucial moment, by proxy. The chosen story meeting the abandoned one, the unsatisfying facade standing in for the unnarrated finale, the novel pauses on its jolly corner, and lays a wistful ghost to rest.

Wistful, because there is another woman Strether leaves in Paris, a woman it would be both obligation and sacrifice to renounce. Maria is a friend and counselor, a stalwart Virgil to Strether's wandering Dante. But Madame de Vionnet is more than that. She is "beautiful" and "wonderful," rare and distinguished; she is a worker of miracles; she is Cleopatra on the Nile, in all her infinite, ageless variety. She is, "from the first, for [Strether], the most charming woman in the world" (493), and to the last as well. The sacrifice that is so senseless when it concerns Maria Gostrey becomes legible as a proxy for a scene Strether cannot have with Madame de Vionnet. Accepting *her* offer would be indeed discreditable. Even setting aside the fact of her marriage – which Strether does not when he considers her relationship with Chad - for Strether not only deliberately to thwart his original mission, but to become involved with Chad's mistress might legitimately be seen as a betrayal too far.

The final scene cannot, logically, take place between Strether and Madame de Vionnet. Morality aside, while it seems clear that Chad intends to leave her, he has not done so yet, and Madame de Vionnet's desperation over the thought of his desertion testifies to her continuing love of him. If there is no possibility of a relationship of any kind between Strether and Madame de Vionnet, there is, it would seem, nothing to sacrifice in the first place. Yet the final conversation between the two suggests that there is more at stake than either of them will consciously acknowledge; Maria Gostrey is not the only woman in the novel to make a proposal, of a sort, to Strether:

> "Why, if you're going, NEED you, after all? Is it impossible you should stay on – so that one mayn't lose you?"
>
> "Impossible I should live with you here instead of going home?"
>
> "Not 'with' us, if you object to that, but near enough to us, somewhere, for us to see you – well," she beautifully brought out, "when we feel we MUST. How shall we not sometimes feel it? I've wanted to see you often when I couldn't," she pursued,

> "all these last weeks. How shan't I then miss you now, with the sense of your being gone forever" (480)?

To suggest that Madame de Vionnet intends or Strether interprets her offer as sexual would be to impute an uncharacteristic crassness to both. Yet the proposed arrangement would have the form, if not the substance, of a bizarre ménage à trois: Strether is to be the necessary third in Madame de Vionnet and Chad's relationship, almost a kept man, installed at a discreet distance from the couple and, given the comparative scantiness of his own resources, probably supported by them as well. There is a certain vagueness, too, to the nature of Madame de Vionnet's intense desire for Strether to remain. After Strether has confirmed his plans to leave, she reflects on what could have been: "We might, you and I, have been friends. That's it – that's it. You see how, as I say, I want everything. I've wanted you, too" (485). Having struggled to define her own longing, she has now, in the language of friendship, found a vocabulary for it - "that's it," she says, hitting upon an explanation that satisfies her. But if all she is attempting to articulate is a desire for friendship, she has taken an unusually long time to do it, and, indeed, her next words preserve the very ambiguity she is trying to resolve. What she wants, most of all, is Chad; in saying she wants Strether "too," she is implicitly drawing an equivalence between the two men. For his part, Strether treats the hypothetical friendship as a temptation he must resist: when Maria, recounting her own conversation with Madame de Vionnet, repeats the other woman's belief that they might have been friends, Strether replies "That's just...why I'm going" (495). Even granting that Strether sees sustained complicity in Madame de Vionnet's adulterous relationship with Chad as necessarily compromising, the resistance adds to our sense that what we are witnessing is a veiled seduction.

Of course, Madame de Vionnet is not, on any level, actually proposing an affair, nor is Strether renouncing it as a legitimate possibility. Rather, the potential for such a relationship

between them is counterfactual. At the beginning of the passage, James's characteristically ambiguous pronouns permit us for a moment to exclude Chad from the equation altogether. Madame de Vionnet asks if it is possible that "one" might not lose Strether; Strether asks if she is suggesting that he live with "you." Immediately afterward, Madame de Vionnet specifies that he need not live with "us," foreclosing the possibility that the previous lines had, however illogically, evoked. Yet as a counterfactual, it remains manifestly in play for the rest of the novel, and indeed becomes a more potent possibility as we approach the final scene. By his closing conversation with Maria, Strether knows, as he did not before, that Chad is very likely to return home in the not terribly distant future; if Strether should stay, it will be with the promise that Madame de Vionnet's awkward threesome is to be reduced to a more congenial pair. While he sacrifices no immediately accessible chance at happiness, his renunciation is thus no empty gesture.

This is all the truer because of precisely what Maria is offering. Ostensibly, her question of why Strether should go home at all – asked immediately after she has confirmed that all is at an end between him and Mrs. Newsome – is an unspoken marriage proposal, and Strether seems to take it as such. Yet the most explicit offer she makes is framed, not in terms of mutual happiness, but of sacrifice on her own part: "There's nothing, you know, I wouldn't do for you... nothing...in all the world" (512). To understand her tone here, we must go back to the earlier conversation in which she and Strether discuss his belated realization about Chad and Madame de Vionnet's relationship. It is Maria who, in the course of that discussion, describes Madame de Vionnet as, for Strether, "the most charming woman in the world." As Strether continues to praise Madame de Vionnet, Maria remarks that she wishes the other woman could hear him, as Madame de Vionnet assumes that Strether must have lost any good opinion he once had of her.

Indeed, not content with wishing, she asks Strether if he would like her to convey his message: “ 'If you'd like me to tell her that you do still so see her -!' Miss Gostrey, in short, offered herself for service to the end” (495). When Strether reiterates that, in spite of his continued admiration, he is “done with” Madame de Vionnet, Maria continues arguing her case, speaking “as if for conscience;” she recognizes this as an ethical act that is directly against her own self-interest. Only giving way when she has satisfied herself that she has “done her best for each,” she concludes the scene by telling Strether she is sorry for “us all;” Strether's decision represents a loss for him and for Madame de Vionnet, but his assertions of undiminished admiration destroy Maria's hopes as well.

With this in mind, her proposal to Strether takes on a new dimension. Part of the richness of the proxy narrative in *The Ambassadors* is the capacity of James's own characters to recognize it. Obsessive interpreters of ambiguities and makers of meaning, James's characters are also the first readers of his plots, often considering many of the same possibilities that we ourselves do. In James, there is no clear boundary between the counterfactual and the subtextual; the scene between Strether and Maria Gostrey is a proxy for a counterfactual one between Strether and Madame de Vionnet, but the actual scene hints that both parties to the proposal are tacitly aware of this. Fully aware of Strether's feelings for another woman, at best, Maria is offering to act as a consolation prize. Yet the air of sacrifice suggests that she goes even further than this. Doing “anything,” in this case, means providing a pretext for Strether to stay in Europe with – or, as Madame de Vionnet herself had proposed, at least near enough to – a woman who provides more of an incentive than she does for him to remain. As in Madame de Vionnet's own proposal scene, the scenario envisioned is not one that is likely to lead to literal consummation between the two; it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which Strether could marry Maria and still have Madame

de Vionnet in any physical sense. Yet what Maria's proposed arrangement does permit is precisely a relationship by proxy, a marriage between friends to enable a friendship between lovers, which is what Strether and Madame de Vionnet would be in all *but* the most literal sense.

If this is Maria's offer, then what, exactly, is Strether rejecting? On one level, his refusal is simply a more forceful reiteration of his earlier rejection of Madame de Vionnet's own proposal. Even now, knowing about Chad's likely departure and having been given a chance to do as he wishes without the appearance – or, perhaps, even conscious acknowledgment – of impropriety, he remains faithful to his principles. On another, he is acting out of consideration for Maria, who he will not simply use as a means to an end. In a larger sense, he is rejecting a particular kind of narrative, or indeed, two kinds of narratives, each associated with a distinct literary and cultural tradition. Both Richard Chase and Leslie Fiedler famously contrasted the American novel with its English and European counterparts. The English novel has its marriage plot, the European its doomed adulterers, but the American novel is comparatively sexless, trading domesticated David Copperfields and cuckolding Julian Sorrels for Huck Finn and his endless, unreconstructed boyhood. The American-born, European-educated, naturalized Englishman Henry James leaves Strether poised between the three options. To choose Maria as Maria is to embrace, belatedly, the marriage plot, in which virtue is rewarded with an equally virtuous romance. To choose Madame de Vionnet, or Maria as a proxy for her, is to abandon scruples to the dangerous passion of adultery. And to choose, as Strether does, to leave both women behind is to resign oneself to the essential loneliness of the American wanderer, who must pay so heavy a price for his forbidden seas and barbarous coasts. Strether's conscience returns him to a world of social entrapment, while Huck's leads him away from it, but both man and boy are damned by the very consciousness that, morally, has saved them.

Yet more than a nation, or a narrative, or a woman, what Strether rejects is the representational system that permits Maria to offer herself to him as a surrogate for another.[xi] This is a novel about representative relationships. Strether, of course, is an ambassador, sent to Paris as Mrs. Newsome's proxy, but so too are most of the rest of the characters, to a greater or lesser extent. People are agents of Chad or agents of his mother, representatives of free-wheeling Europe or decorous New England. Madame de Vionnet is to be judged through Chad, whose improvement speaks more to her virtues than to his own, and Chad, in turn, is to be judged through Madame de Vionnet, whose difference from the tawdry seductress Strether had been led to expect testifies to Chad's own taste.

As a *ficelle,* Maria Gostrey theoretically exists outside this system: she is not an agent, but a function with pretensions. Yet in her very malleability – she will become whatever the narrative requires her to be – she suggests the limits of representational relationships. Her final, repudiated offer to act as a proxy for Madame de Vionnet, would have given her a belated place among the novel's ambassadors; indeed, it would have rendered her the perfect ambassador, her selfhood utterly effaced by her principal. Her attempt to establish such a connection, however, is less of a departure than it may initially appear to be. The sentence that introduces Maria, although not yet by name, to the novel, also introduces a second character: “After the young woman in the glass cage had held up to him across her counter the pale-pink leaflet bearing his friend’s name, which she neatly pronounced, he turned away to find himself, in the hall, facing a lady who met his eyes as with an intention suddenly determined…” (56). The woman behind the desk at the hotel lobby is so insignificant a figure that she can hardly be called a character at all. Yet the juxtaposition of her introduction with the weightier one of Maria calls our attention to her, especially as her second and final mention, two pages later, will link her directly to Miss

Gostrey: “[Maria’s] acquaintance with the place presented her in a manner as a hostess, and Strether had a rueful glance for the lady in the glass cage. It was as if this personage had seen herself instantly superseded” (58).

These associations are more than casual. Both Maria and the woman enter the novel with an apparent place in the novel's representative economy. The woman has been commissioned to serve as designated agent of the hotel, for which she acts as a metonym. For her part, Maria, whatever she will later become, seems poised for a place as one of the novel's many representative national types; she is the Europeanized American, just as Strether's friend Waymarsh is the stubbornly provincial expatriate. Both of these women, however, are soon supplanted in these roles, the woman in the cage by Maria, and Maria by a host of other characters – Little Bilham, Miss Barrace, Chad himself – who will assume, in more significant ways, the same, quasi-allegorical function. Essentially, the woman behind the glass is the non-narrative equivalent of the *ficelle* Maria will prove to be. Her single action is to pass a paper with Waymarsh’s name over the counter: rather than representing Waymarsh, in any meaningful sense, her relationship to him, as to the countless others whose names and notes she passes through the glass, is merely incidental. An instrument of transmission rather than a legitimate agent, she, like Maria, serves as an intermediary in events in which she otherwise bears no part. In the brief space between the woman’s casual introduction and formal exclusion from the narrative, James strengthens her link with Maria by emphasizing the insubstantial nature of Maria’s own connections to the various people with whom she is associated. One of these is, as in the case of the woman behind the glass, a connection to Waymarsh, who becomes the pretext for her initial conversation with Strether. Maria has met Waymarsh through mutual friends, and recollects him clearly, but she acknowledges that their encounter was so insignificant that he may

not remember her at all, as indeed he will not, when the two later meet. Her other potential link to Strether proves similarly tentative: he recalls seeing her at a previous hotel, where she had been meeting some of his fellow passengers, but he does not know the family in question well enough "to give the case much of a lift, and her own dealings with them were, in any event, no more than a "brief engagement" (57). Forming such comparatively trivial bonds is, it appears, something of a habit for Maria. Lacking a discernible life of her own, she drifts from hotel to hotel and casual friend to casual friend; connected to a seemingly inexhaustible number of people, she never finds a fixed place with any of them.

The most important of these vague connections is to Madame de Vionnet, who will complete the hierarchical chain begun by the woman in the hotel. The relationship between the two women, like so many of Maria's ties, refuses quite to bear its narrative weight: Maria says that she and Madame de Vionnet – whose given name is, not incidentally, Marie – are old friends, but their acquaintance for the past twenty years has been intermittent, "and above all with a long recent drop" (222). Often, the link serves as a mere convenience, allowing Maria to brief Strether on Madame de Vionnet's history. Yet long before the novel's final scene, there are hints of a deeper significance. Almost the first words that Madame de Vionnet says to Strether are about her old friend: "Hasn't Miss Gostrey…said a good word for me?... I'm so glad you're in relation with her" (211). Even before the identity of Chad's mistress is known, Maria draws an unconscious semantic link between them: "I'm talking," says Strether, of the woman presumed to be keeping Chad in Paris, "of some person who in his present situation may have held her own, may really have counted." "That's exactly what *I* am," returns Maria (179). Superficially, she is merely corroborating Strether: "That exactly what *I* am [talking about]." But she is also unwittingly preparing us for a deeper parallel between herself and the woman who turns out to be

Madame de Vionnet. Even more suggestive is a much later instance of verbal confusion between the two. After Chad tells Strether he has needed no one's help to be improved by Europe, Strether objects that he has, like Chad, been made better by "women – too" (503). Chad, however, misunderstands him ("Two?"), prefiguring the final conflation of the women in Maria's offer to Strether.

As Maria supplants the woman in the cage, so she is supplanted by Madame de Vionnet. The latter's entry into the novel signals the end of Miss Gostrey's period of prominence. Indeed, she literally leaves the novel, ostensibly because she is unwilling to betray either Madame de Vionnet or Strether by becoming too closely allied with one camp or the other, but also, possibly, because she is pained by her recognition of Strether's attraction toward the other woman. Whether or not Maria yet sees it, however, as soon as Strether meets Madame de Vionnet, Maria's own narrative role is sharply diminished. Until this point, the prospect of a marriage plot in which Strether chooses to stay in Europe with Maria has been a legitimate possibility; based solely on the evidence of the first seventy-five pages of the novel, there would be nothing at all discordant about such an ending. But Madame de Vionnet emerges so clearly as the novel's dominant woman that, by the time we arrive at that concluding scene, what once seemed so natural now reads as disappointingly anti-climactic.

Maria's relationships with both the woman in the cage and Madame de Vionnet – again excluding the final scene, for the moment – are not quite representative, in the sense of the novel's other ambassadorships. Indeed, in refusing to collude with either Strether or Madame de Vionnet, she explicitly declines such a role. If the novel's minor cast, its Waymarshes and Miss Barraces and Pococks, stand in for another, Maria, until that final scene, is rather associated with these other women. Yet this association in itself involves, at its extremes, a kind of substitution,

an interchangeability in which a reference to one woman may be a reference to two, or perhaps to all three. It is the difference, not between representation and free agency, but between metaphor and metonymy.

On one level, the looseness of Maria's associative, rather than strictly representative, ties, her capacity to change allegiances, affiliated first with one woman, then with another, and never, definitively, with any of the novel's partisans, is a model for escaping the rigid scheme of alliances that constrains so many others. It is a model that Strether will, in part, follow. His progress in the novel requires that he emerge as a moral, rather than representative, agent, transcending the narrow sensibility that would confine him to Mrs. Newsome's strictures. Yet this freedom carries its own kind of moral peril. If Maria's narrative position allows her to escape one kind of representative trap, it ensnares her just as surely, in another. Even as it criticizes the rigidity of the one-to-one surrogate relationship of the ambassador and his principal, *The Ambassadors* repeatedly suggests the opposing problem of the lack of direct correspondence between language and the thing signified by it. Early in the novel, the difficulty is evoked comically: Strether refuses, absurdly, to tell Maria the name of the trivial item whose production is the source of the Newsome family fortune, as if concealing the name could change the fact of the object's existence.

But the unwillingness to attach meaningful signs to objects of actual significance has more serious implications as well. When Chad’s friend Little Bilham tells Strether that Chad and Marie’s affair is a “virtuous attachment,” he is deliberately separating the term from the conventional meaning he knows that Strether will attach to it. Of course, Strether himself will later distance himself from the puritanical social codes that would require a “virtuous attachment” between two unmarried people, one of them unable to divorce the husband from

whom she has been long separated, to be necessarily chaste. Yet Bilham's phrase is also a deliberate act of obfuscation that, beyond hoodwinking Strether, encourages a laissez-faire morality that Strether will never fully endorse and in which the real ethical stakes of the couple's behavior may be glibly obscured. Ultimately, there are actual consequences that cannot be eliminated through verbal subterfuge: from the possibility that Jeanne may be married off in part to facilitate her mother's affair to the position of vulnerability in which Madame de Vionnet is left by Chad's ability to casually break their informal tie, there are costs to violating arbitrary codes that have nonetheless acquired legitimate force.

The social language in which Strether becomes so adept compounds this moral danger, consistently liable to collapse into a set of allusive games in which words need have no meaningful relationship to the world they claim to describe. People and situations are described as "magnificent" or "wonderful" or "horrible," placeholder words that, like "stupendous" in *The Wings of the Dove,* become a substitute for an attempt at greater specificity. Ambiguous pronouns that could logically be attached to multiple referents rob discourse of fixed meaning. Deictic phrases, like Strether's frequent "there we are," appear out of context. This kind of vagueness facilitates the looseness that would use the same language to describe platonic friendship and adultery: if there is no precise relationship between words and their meaning, then why shouldn't an affair be a "virtuous attachment?" Maria, as Strether's guide to fashionable society, is particularly implicated in this type of language, with all the moral peril it implies. When Waymarsh becomes noticeably irritated with Strether's and Maria's jaunts to London shops and theaters, Strether reflects on his friend's attitude in a manner that reveals Miss Gostrey's influence: "'He thinks us sophisticated, he thinks us worldly, he thinks us wicked, he thinks us all sorts of queer things'… for such were the vague quantities our friend had within a couple of

short days acquired the habit of conveniently and conclusively lumping together" (82). When Strether suggests there might be something "base" about his willingness to join a new acquaintance in mocking an old friend, Maria declares their sudden intimacy at Waymarsh's expense "magnificent," and thus "[makes] an end of it" (83).

It is appropriate, then, that Maria, in her inability to attach herself meaningfully to any single place or person, is both ultimate figure and victim of the imperfectly representational aesthetic. The *ficelle,* the woman behind the glass cage, is precisely a figure of apparent representational value that in the end lacks correspondence between form (what she is) and function (what she does). The hotel clerk's passing of a note has no meaningful relationship to the woman herself, who acts as agent for an employer with whom she, unlike other principal-ambassador relationships in the novel, has only an incidental connection. The glass that divides her from the guests may be transparent, but it is still a screen that denies her the ability to establish a direct relationship with an external reality. It is in this sense a "cage," enclosing her as surely as the novel's other type of representative model contains Waymarsh or Sarah Pocock. Maria has more apparent freedom than this woman, but she, too, is bound by her position as *ficelle,* further dramatized in her role as volunteer tour guide for countless travelers who never, in any sense, repay her. She acts, but never manages to attach herself meaningfully, with that one, significant exception of the novel's ending, either to the people she helps or the plot within which she finds herself.

In declining Maria's proposal, Strether escapes, to the extent that it is possible, both of the novel's representational traps. Refusing the possibility of any kind of future with Madame de Vionnet, he affirms a private moral code that he acknowledges as binding. No verbal sleight of hand, including Maria's own substitution of herself for the forbidden other, can dissuade him

from a resolve that is all the more valid for being self-imposed. But Maria herself must also, at long last, be taken into account. In making her offer, she attempts to trade the lonely freedom of association for the self-effacing union of representation. Never more than a *ficelle,* she cannot, like Strether, emerge as a stable self; the best she can hope for is to graduate from metonym to proxy. Or, she could not have done so, had Strether not saved her. Strether, so much earlier in the novel, had no more than a "rueful glance" to spare for the woman in the cage, long since dismissed and forgotten. But he does better for Maria. In rejecting her, he rejects Madame de Vionnet. But he also rejects the logic that would permit such a substitution: Maria must be refused as Maria, too. It is his supreme moral act.

Crucially, understanding the full effect of Strether's choice requires that we preserve both readings of the scene. To ignore the proxy relationship between Maria and Madame de Vionnet forces us to regard what should be genuine nobility as false morality; Strether's declared notion of what being "right" requires bears no more reference to any recognized ethical standard than Little Bilham's definition of "virtuous attachment." Yet to treat Maria, for the purposes of the scene, merely as a surrogate for Madame de Vionnet is to replicate the ambassadorial system Strether has so thoroughly rejected. Dissimulation, no matter how delightful, must end somewhere, allowing even Maria to be, at last, a character in her own right. "There we are," concludes Strether, and for perhaps the first time, the phrase is not empty. There we are, he is saying, you, and I, and Madame de Vionnet as well, all present, all recognized, all significant.

Conclusion

For all its hinting, its winks and gestures, the proxy narrative ultimately suppresses a text's most radical possibilities. The "what if?" that is explicit in *Villette* or *The Old Curiosity Shop* can in these texts never be articulated, and need never be considered: the story that we read, imperfect,

illogical, disappointing, will nonetheless serve. Indeed, it can save. Sometimes, the rescue does no more than preserve a novel from the censor's pen, or for the young lady's leisure hours. In other cases, the gain is more profound. When the substitute is all that is left, we do well to make the best of her, and the marriage plot is no heavy ransom to one trapped in the horror of Gothic romance. Yet even the best trade involves a sacrifice. The logic that exorcizes Anne denies Marian; the text that cannot peek under Lady Audley's robes will not, in the end, look far into her mind either, before it moves on to a safer heroine.

Of the proxy narratives I have discussed in the past two chapters, none includes a sacrifice greater than that of Strether, who denies himself so much for so little return. Gaining nothing, he also has the pain of knowing, as Walter Hartright and Robert Audley do not, precisely what he loses. After trying, for so long, to "suppose nothing," Strether, after the meeting that leaves him in no doubt of Madame de Vionnet and Chad's relationship, finds himself "supposing innumerable and wonderful things" (468). This supposition is distinct from the knowledge Strether has just acquired. There is no need, any longer, to suppose anything about Madame de Vionnet and Chad, the nature of whose "virtuous attachment" has at last been placed beyond the need for conjecture. The price of that knowledge will come, as it always does, with pain, and exile, and a fig leaf to conceal his shame. It will come, but not yet. Before the rigor of law catches up to him, he has a brief space of freedom to entertain the full range of possibilities awakened by his new awareness. For a moment, the counterfactual will not be denied, or suppressed, or superseded. In the new, more generous moral universe in which even this relationship can be beautiful and justified, what gifts might not be lying in wait? Yet Strether is not, after all, in a new world, but an old one. One need not be Mrs. Newsome's ambassador to be bound by an ethical sense that limits possibilities even as they unfold. The wildest of

Strether's suppositions could, in all likelihood, never have materialized. But sacrificing those that do is sacrifice enough. The universe, in the form of two women, offers its gifts to Strether, and Strether, politely, nobly declines.

Strether, in knowing what he sacrifices, loses more than his counterparts in other novels. But he also loses less. When Strether tells Maria that the only way for him to be "right" is "not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself," she points out the great flaw in his logic: "With your wonderful impressions, you'll have gotten a great deal" (512). It is nothing that can be seen or touched, nothing Mrs. Newsome would think to reproach him for. It will often be, even to Strether, a burden, the reminder of all that might have been, all that he has lost. It is inescapable, and precious. There are possibilities that must be rejected, and those that cannot even be spoken; those that do not materialize, and those that never directly make it to the page at all. But to have contemplated them is to have been enriched, imperceptibly, by the wonder of our own supposing.

Chapter Five: Fancying the Delight: Hypothetical Realism in *The Woodlanders* and *Mary Barton*

Early in *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell describes a tea hosted by an elderly Manchester washerwoman for two young neighbors. For the most part, the description is the standard stuff of nineteenth-century realism, full of rich detail (Alice uses half a pound of tea and a quarter of a pound of butter) and psychological insight (Mary wears a new gown to impress the other young woman, even though there is no need for her to make any particular impression at all). Suddenly, however, the narrator interrupts the scene with a direct address to readers:

> Can you fancy the bustle of Alice to make the tea, to pour it out, and sweeten it to their liking, to help and help again to clap-bread and bread-and-butter? Can you fancy the delight with which she watched her piled-up clap-bread disappear before the hungry girls, and listened to the praises of her home-remembered dainty? (44)

The questions are clearly rhetorical: of course we can fancy it; Gaskell is creating the image for us even as she writes. They are also quite literal. Are we *really* picturing old Alice at her kettle, anxious to please her guests with offerings of sweet tea and buttered bread? Can we feel her pride when these gifts are praised, or imagine a life so stark that they would constitute a rare indulgence? If we cannot, then the dream of empathy on which the novel's vision will rely is compromised from the outset.

Thus far, I have asked how counterfactual plotting affects the world of the novel. While the reader must collaborate in the construction of alternative narrative possibilities, the options she considers will refer to that world, rather than her own; having given herself over to a text's immersive will, she can absorb herself in thoughts of what Pip might have been or whom Strether should have married. But the nineteenth century is also, of course, the age of the novel of reform, a genre that requires, at least aspirationally, that we be equally concerned with the affairs of our own world. A reader who can pity the Alice of the novel, but not the one in the streets has missed the point. As a result, the most potent counterfactuals in these texts may be not those that represent an active textual possibility, but those that suggest a hypothetical future for

the world outside the boundaries of the novel. We have already seen one example of this phenomenon in the ending of *Hard Times*, in which possibilities rejected as counterfactual within the realm of the novel ("such a thing was never to be") are reactivated as hypothetical potentialities for the reader: "It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not." This chapter discusses *Mary Barton* and Hardy's *The Woodlanders* as instances of what I will call *hypothetical realism,* the imagining of a *currently,* but not necessarily, counterfactual world that may be realized in a transformed future. The two novels are tonally disparate, one almost unrelentingly grim, the other nearly utopian in its final vision. They are united, however, by a shared ethical commitment to examining, not the might-have-been, but the might-yet-be. In honoring this commitment, they extend the role of the counterfactual in defining and testing the borders of *narrative* possibility into a practical challenge to the reader, whose capacity to envision social alternatives becomes fundamental to the project of the novel.

Counterfactual Heroes

Thomas Hardy's pessimism ended his career as a novelist. Readers had endured the execution of Tess and Eustacia Vye's suicide, but their patience ended somewhere around the moment that a eight-year old known only as Father Time took it into his allegorical head to kill his younger siblings and himself to relieve their parents of the burden of supporting them. Margaret Oliphant, writing in *Blackwood's,* said that "nothing so coarsely indecent... [had] ever been put in English print" (*The Critical Heritage* 270). The Bishop of Wakefield publicly declared that he had burned the book, and he was not alone: one reader sent Hardy a packet of ashes that had once been his copy of the novel (Ibid. xxx).[i] Many of these attacks focused on the novel's immorality, particularly its critique of the institution of marriage. For others, however, *Jude*'s grimness was

enough to condemn it. The *Morning Post* reviewer declared that “even Euripides.... might well have faltered” before the work's “gloomy atmosphere of hopeless pessimism” (“Books of the Day” 6) while the preacher Thomas Selby accused Hardy both of peddling smut and dealing in “the most lachrymose and intractable types of pessimism that a morbid ingenuity can devise” (Yevish 242). Hardy may or may not have been exaggerating when he claimed that these reviews “completely cure[d] me of further interest in novel writing.” But exaggeration or not, in the thirty-three remaining years of his life, he turned exclusively to poetry, hoping that he could “express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion – hard as a rock – which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting” (*The Later Years* 57).

It is easy enough to forgive Hardy for his bitterness; inspiring one's very own bonfire of the vanities might well be enough to turn a far sunnier author cynical. His comment reflects, however, not only pique but disappointment. Most cynics are disillusioned idealists; Hardy had hoped that his prose would *do* something, only to realize that he had delivered his prophecy to a stiff-necked and obdurate people. At least in this account of the decision, Hardy's move from prose to poetry signifies his resignation: he does not believe that his ideas will be more effective in verse, but that the formal shift will render them toothless enough to escape censure. “If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved,” he concludes, “the Inquisition might have let him alone.” His beliefs will still be available to those who care to recognize them, but the freedom of his expression depends on the assumption that most of his readers will decline the offer.

The relationship between the world of Hardy's novels and the world outside of them, however, had always been complicated. Hardy once described Wessex, the location of most of his novels, as “a merely realistic dream-country,” that combined the detail of realism with the

freedom of imagination (Gatrell 30). Mimetic realism, he believed, was inherently inartistic; the artist should not strive to reflect too nearly the conditions or probabilities of the actual world: “Art is a disproportioning... of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence 'realism' is not Art” (*The Early Years* 299). Hardy deals in extremes of human passion; people rarely love wisely in a Hardy novel, and when things end poorly, as they almost invariably do, they do so in the most extreme manner possible. Characters' experiences need not be representative, but evocative. But as Simon Gatrell has found, over time, Hardy's Wessex became progressively less dreamy, more an alternative reality than a liminal space of possibility. The editions of Hardy's early novels that we now read have been revised significantly from their original published form; among other changes, Hardy retroactively added local detail to make the settings of these novels conform with his more developed vision of Wessex. Hardy accompanied his increasing attention to the history and geography of his fictional world with a turn toward greater focus on social issues (Gatrell 25). Having first introduced genteel characters into his fiction under pressure from editors to give middle-class readers figures with whom they could identify (20), Hardy had by the mid-1880s become far more invested in class conflict and the particulars of labor.[ii] *Jude*'s specific criticisms of the education system and divorce law reflect this shift, highlighting issues whose reach could not be plausibly contained within the borders of Wessex.

Several factors, however, continued to limit the reformist potential of Hardy's novels. The events of a fully realized Wessex reflecting social conditions parallel to those of the actual English countryside cannot help but suggest comparisons and areas of improvement. We can gather that Hardy believes that the world would be a better place if divorce laws were liberalized,

educational opportunities expanded, and ruined dairymaids no longer subject to execution for murdering their rapists. On the individual level, if Angel Clare had forgiven Tess, Michael Henchard held his liquor better, and Grace Melbury been less of a social climber, all of them would have been the better for it. The very grimness of Hardy's novels provides a fertile source of counterfactual energy, making readers long for pleasanter alternatives that lie just out of reach. Hardy's plots, however, consistently subvert their own counterfactual potential. In part, this is because giving Wessex a defined geography and more probable economy did not diminish the melodramatic extremities of the stories Hardy chose to highlight. Beset by Job-like accumulations of catastrophe, many of Hardy's characters enact parables of suffering rather than believably human-sized stories of opportunities denied and missed. While their circumstances might suggest alternatives, these possibilities are more taunts than active potentialities, the confluence of fatal circumstances militating against serious hope of escape. Tess and her fellow sufferers are doomed by the designs of both the President of the Immortals and the manifest will of their human creator.

On closer examination, however, this impression of fixed design reveals itself as an illusion, imposing on the novelistic world a malignant randomness more destructive to the possibility of meaningful change than conscious ill-will. Time and again, Hardy undermines the significance of his own plots. Sometimes, he raises what seems to be a counterfactual possibility – if Jude and Sue had been able legally to marry, their miserable lot would have been relieved – only to sabotage it: when Jude and Sue do win their divorces, an improbable development that seemed already to have been excluded by the narrative, it changes nothing, as the couple obstinately refuses to formalize their union. What had seemed determinative proves merely incidental. Sometimes, the sheer number of catastrophes with which our heroes are beset make

isolating a single, reparative counterfactual a fool's errand: in *The Mayor of Casterbridge,* is Henchard's drunken sale of his wife and daughter more determinative than their inconvenient return, or would neither have mattered in the face of his mounting financial difficulties, or the betrayal of Lucetta?

Similarly, events that should by rights prove devastating wind up having comparatively little effect, while those that seem inconsequential can produce horrific ends. The twenty-one-year term limit on Henchard's vow of temperance – conveniently made approximately twenty years before the main events of the novel begin – is a prop gun destined to go off, but when Henchard promptly returns to the bottle when the pledge expires, it has virtually no effect on his story. In *The Return of the Native,* Mrs. Yeobright seems to have lost her best chance of repairing her relationship with her son Clym when her messenger gambles away the money she has sent as a peace offering; Diggory Venn wins it back with a second throw of the dice, and it all ends poorly thanks to an entirely different mistake. By contrast, Sue's routine complaint about the pressures of supporting a family leads to the murder-suicide of the Fawley children when one of them decides that the best way to help his foster mother is to relieve her of three mouths to feed. In this world of attenuated and unpredictable consequences, determining what might have been, let alone how that outcome could practically have been achieved, is as dicey a proposition as Diggory Venn's game of chance. In Hardy, the social crusader would seem to have met his match: between cruel fate and indifferent chance, action of any kind would seem almost beside the point. The realist novel may be reformist; its naturalist counterpart is only resigned, skeptical of free will and its transformative power.

There is one respect, however, in which Hardy's reformist bona fides are unassailable. Social change appears more achievable in the realists' London than Hardy's Wessex. Yet Hardy

retains and even extends the realist novel's commitment to fostering sympathy for those normally forgotten by society. If Hardy did not fully subscribe to the positivism of Herbert Spencer or Augustus Comte, who coined the term “altruism” in 1851, his works nonetheless reflect his close reading of late nineteenth-century theories of fostering social progress by inspiring affective response to the suffering of others (Keen 358-364). Favoring not just the ordinary, but the obscure, his shepherds and reddlemen are a humbler sort than the minor country gentlemen and rising urban professionals that populate so many Victorian domestic novels.[iii] Even among that class, the characters on whom he chooses to focus are sometimes those who would seem least worthy of his narrative attention. George Eliot, known for her generous dispersals of consciousness among her characters, famously has the narrator of *Middlemarch* wonder “why always Dorothea” (169)? But if it need not be *always* Dorothea, there is reason enough why it usually should be. Our recognition of Casaubon's “equivalent center of self” warrants only a detour into the sad old pedant's consciousness before returning to the struggles of his more prepossessing young wife (130).

Hardy's protagonists, by contrast, are at times not only flawed, but almost relentlessly unsympathetic, given to fits of perversely selfish and self-defeating behavior. Michael Henchard begins *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by drunkenly selling off his wife and daughter; this is not, arguably, the worst act he commits in the novel. Even so, Hardy encourages the reader to care more for him than for his ignorant, coarse wife or, more strikingly, his (presumed) daughter Elizabeth-Jane. Elizabeth Jane is sweet, and innocent, and undoubtedly the wronged party in her relationship with Henchard. In the course of the novel, she experiences dramatic changes in fortune, learns the secret of her paternity, and falls in love. Despite this promisingly novelistic trajectory, Elizabeth-Jane does not, finally, claim our attention as her bitter, petty, self-destructive

father does. Elizabeth Jane is wise, no doubt, to remain relatively unruffled by the vicissitudes of fate, to welcome back her false suitor without reproach and move seamlessly from one father figure to another. It is right and proper that she should bound her "deep and sharp" regret for her tardy forgiveness of Henchard within appropriate limits, and that she should respect his final request to leave him without mourning rites or Christian burial, rather than assuage her guilt with theatrical demonstrations of grief (322). Yet the very traits that confirm her worthiness and good sense give her an air of shallowness; Henchard's torment is self-inflicted, but it invests him with a moral weight that demands more struggle and depth of feeling than the novel ever allows Elizabeth-Jane to display. Hardy has chosen Casaubon, and not Dorothea.

Hardy's protagonists, then, are on some level always counterfactual heroes. They are the figures ordinarily too humble, too troubled and troubling to garner either social or narrative sympathy. Bruegel-like, he foregrounds the indifferent plowman, and lets Icarus drown in the periphery. He chooses the D'Urberville who is not the scion of nobility, a Jude who will remain obscure. Yet like Eliot, Hardy remains aware of the limits of even the most populist process of authorial election. Before killing himself and his siblings, Father Time pauses to write a suicide note: "Done," it explains, "because we are too menny" (286). In a world that resists easy attributions of causality, the note offers a clear statement of motives: Father Time has acted as he has because of a sense of himself and his siblings as superfluous, mouths to feed and nothing more. An indictment of the society that has caused his family's plight, the child's declaration also has narrative implications. Little Father Time was not born a symbol: named after his own father, he too is an obscure Jude who might have been elevated to prominence by grace of authorial will. The change in his name suggests a flattening of his potential narrative role. Father Time's siblings – who go entirely unnamed – belong unambiguously to that class of minor

characters that Alex Woloch calls “worker characters,” defined as “flat character[s]...reduced to a single functional use within the narrative” (25). They exist to be burdensome and then dead. The second Jude Fawley, with his ageless gloom and preternatural morbidity, has the capacity to be more than this; if he has not been selected as *the* Jude of the novel's title, he is at least granted a measure of individuating characterization. The allegorical name “Father Time,” however, underscores his narrative function at the expense of his independent identity. We sympathize with Jude and Sue, recognize Philotson and Arabella, but Father Time is not a real boy to be pitied or loved. Father Time's act takes his and his siblings depersonalized narrative roles to their logical conclusion: living, the children are no more than structural excess, loose ends to be tied up; dead, they serve their purpose. Father Time must wield his scythe at last. But if the act itself is an affirmation of his role, the note he leaves behind is a challenge to it.[iv] The manner of the children's death is so aggressively melodramatic as to risk bathos. What saves it is one word: “menny.” The childish misspelling for the first time humanizes the boy – Pinocchio gets a blue fairy; Little Father Time makes do with a phonetic suicide note. While we have focused Jude's suffering at the hands of an unfeeling world, there has been still a humbler victim languishing forgotten. In society, in the novel, someone is always left out.

Moments in the Woods

In *Jude the Obscure,* Father Time's death is a reproach. In Hardy's earlier novel *The Woodlanders,* Marty South's life locates a possible solution. Unlike Father Time, whose problem is reflected in the rigidity of his narrative role, Marty's presence in the plot of *The Woodlanders* is stubbornly diffuse. Indeed, the events of *The Woodlanders* can be easily summarized without reference to her at all. Ostensibly, the heroine of *The Woodlanders* is Grace Melbury, whose fickle affections drive most of the action of the novel. Engaged almost since childhood to the

simple, incorruptibly noble woodsman Giles Winterbourne, Grace, newly returned from a ladies' seminary, is persuaded to break the engagement by her father, who encourages her to marry the charming doctor Fitzpiers. He promptly cheats on her; when she discovers his adultery, she renews her relationship with Giles (now in severe financial straits), but, unable to secure a divorce, is forced to return to her father's home. When Grace shows up at Giles's cabin during a storm, his insistence on preserving her reputation induces him to spend the night outdoors, where he contracts a fatal illness. As her loyal admirer languishes and dies, Grace forgives a penitent Fitzpiers, whose lover is also now dead, and rather quickly dispenses with her vow to remain true to Giles's memory.

Marty South precedes and outlasts the romantic quadrangle that provides the novel's main plot. Before we have heard of Giles or Grace, we meet Marty, a young woman who immediately earns our sympathies by selling her hair to provide for her ailing father. After events have played themselves out, Marty, truer-hearted than Grace, keeps vigil over the grave of Giles, who she has long loved in vain. In between, however, she is ruthlessly sidelined. Unusually for a Hardy novel, with their byzantine and abruptly changing romantic entanglements, Marty plays no factor in the erotic calculus of the novel; neither Giles nor anyone else seems aware of, let alone concerned with, her obvious attachment to him. She remains near at hand, but not at center stage, relegated to the less dramatic roles of silent witness or sympathetic confessor. Yet both socially and narratively, Marty's role is not negligible, but only unrecognized. We first find Marty making spars in place of her invalid father, a task she conceals lest potential buyers suspect the quality of her work. This furtive labor amounts to a doubling of the inherent anonymity of the producer in an economic exchange, who tacitly consents to the effacement of his original role in production – and resignation of his de facto, original title to the created object – for monetary compensation.

The appropriation of Marty's hair as another object to be bartered further dramatizes the exploitative potential of any transaction. It also, however, suggests a parallel between Marty as a hidden economic producer and Marty as a covert narrative engineer. The woman Marty sells her hair to is Felice Charmond, Fitzpiers's lover. By enhancing her attractions, Marty unknowingly contributes to the chain of events that will shape the novel, allowing the other woman to maintain the sexual power that will draw Fitzpiers away from Grace and, consequently, drive Grace back toward Giles, to tragic effect. Similarly, not only does her labor prematurely age her, detracting from her own romantic appeal, it enriches her rival Grace: the buyer of Marty's spars is Grace's timber-merchant father, whose money has made Grace "as valuable as [it] could" by providing her with the education that so refines her (19).

At times, Marty resists her own displacement. Denied an active part in events, she parlays her position as unobserved observer into a quasi-authorial role. When Giles's declining fortune threatens his match with Grace, Marty writes a verse on the wall of his house in a bizarre act of prophecy: "Oh, Giles, you've lost your dwelling place,/ And therefore, Giles, you'll lose your Grace" (107). When she does make her most direct effort to influence events, it is again in the form of text: Marty writes a letter to Fitzpiers telling him of Felice's borrowed hair, hoping that this will lead him to return to Grace and again separate Grace from Giles. In doing so, she tries to reverse her initial exploitation as a doubly unacknowledged producer. Breaking the terms of her economic exchange, which had included an expectation of secrecy, she also attempts to arrest the chain of events that sale may have initiated. One of these events is, at least symbolically her own narrative usurpation: if Marty had retained her own sexual power – and, more practically, if Grace had remained irrevocably lost to Giles – she might have been indeed the protagonist she appeared to be until the moment of the other woman's return.

In this context, the novel's final turn back to Marty offers grim reparation. To the labor system, she is an exploitable tool; on the marriage market, she is a bad bargain, but in the novel, her worth can be recognized. Our ethical challenge is to identify Marty throughout as a counterfactual heroine robbed of her rightful place, a perspective that may perhaps soften even the "inert crystallized opinion" of the self-interested reader that Hardy most hopes to reach. Yet her moral claim on us is finally detached from her role in either a narrative or economic order; our task is not to value Marty's role in driving a plot or enabling the prosperity of others, but in valuing her in spite of her peripheral status. Indeed, Marty's most significant role in the narrative is finally to undermine the primacy of plot. Like so many Hardy novels, *The Woodlanders* can read as paradoxically both over and underplotted. On one hand, it adds melodramatic, sometimes downright bizarre complications to situations that would already seem sufficiently involved: Fitzpiers has already left Felice, so why must she also be murdered (off-page) by ex-lover? What moves Hardy to add yet more sides to a crowded romantic polygon with the introduction of Fitzpiers's one-night-stand Suke Damson and the vengeful husband who *fails* to exact revenge against him? What are we to make of the disastrous death of Marty's already ailing father – who has secured the claims to his own and Giles's cottage by virtue of an old life-right that will expire with his death – being due to, not the ordinary course of nature, but an unaccountable fixation on a tree to which he ascribes semi-mystical properties?

Yet as we have seen, Hardy simultaneously takes great pains to undermine the causal chain that would seem logically to connect the events of his novels. Despite ample suggestions that Marty is an unacknowledged cause driving the events of *The Woodlanders*, the consequences of her actions are at best unknowable and at worst entirely ineffective. The sale of her hair appears to be fraught with significance, but the later revelation that Fitzpiers and Felice

had been lovers years earlier casts its role in their affair into doubt: the attraction between them had existed long before Felice's unnatural enrichment. Marty's letter to Fitzpiers, if it has any influence at all, succeeds only in an unexpected manner that has precisely the opposite effect from the one she intended. While Marty believes that Fitzpiers's knowledge of the transaction will cause him to end his affair in disgust, when he finally reads the letter, his attitude is rather one of cynical amusement; the relationship ends because his words have wounded Felice's pride, not because Fitzpiers has any qualms about loving a woman in spite of her revealed artifice. Instead of freeing Giles from Grace's influence, as Marty had hoped, Fitzpiers's subsequent return to his wife sends her running desperately to Giles' protection, which may in turn lead to his death. Yet it is again unclear that Marty's intervention has had any such power. Fitzpiers's mockery of Felice's borrowed hair is so bitter and her reaction so extreme only, we are told, because their affair had already soured; the final break seems to have been forthcoming with or without this particular incident. The cause of Giles' death remains equally uncertain: to Grace's great relief, Fitzpiers the doctor maintains that typhoid fever might well have killed him eventually whether or not he exposed himself to the elements to protect Grace's honor. Marty's other attempted intervention is similarly fruitless. If Marty's prophecy is intended in part to reclaim Giles as a romantic possibility for her, it is completely futile, while as a predictive statement, it is at the very least misleading. Giles does lose Grace, but not simply because he has lost his home, and not, at that point of the novel, irrevocably: Grace herself subverts Marty's message by altering it to read that Giles will "keep" his Grace in a moment of affection towards her old sweetheart.

Despite the subordinate position she occupies for most of the novel, Marty is not a counterfactual heroine in the manner of a character like Paulina Home of *Villette,* who is given

similar levels of early narrative attention before being displaced by a rival. Paulina is a secondary character who follows a plot trajectory other than the one pursued by our heroine. Marty, however, finally *does* emerge as the heroine of the novel – but without ever becoming its main character. We open with loving, dutiful Marty at work, and end with loving, dutiful Marty in grief. The victory of Marty over Grace – as Giles's truest lover, as the worthiest subject of our regard – stands in opposition to the story that has intervened. The progress from Marty longing for Giles to Marty mourning for him requires some linking action; the events of the novel account for how Giles has died and how, precisely, his relationship with Marty has developed in the period between the sale of her hair and the vigil at the grave. Yet in not only decisively transferring our sympathies to Marty, but retroactively withholding them from Grace, Hardy renders moot many of the events that have transpired. If Grace is the novel's designated leading lady, it should by rights be she that we finally leave at Giles's grave, having learned his value too late. Instead, she compromises her own worth by returning – happily enough, it seems – to Fitzpiers over the obvious displeasure of even her indulgent father, whose regret over encouraging his daughter to aim higher than Giles Winterbourne is more enduring. If *Marty* is our heroine, however, the attention lavished on *Grace* becomes excessive. In a story that centers around Giles and Grace, Marty's role is oddly unaccountable, while significant attention to not only Grace, but Fitzpiers and Felice is manifestly warranted. Recentering the narrative around Giles and Marty removes all of these other characters a degree farther from its structural core, leaving them to occupy a disproportionate amount of space.

The alternative to Grace's story, however, is not Marty's story, but no story at all. Marty's attempts to assert a place in the plot are not misguided simply because they prove ineffective. For all its tragedy, the novel's plot teeters on the edge of both melodrama and farce. Nothing can

be more absurd, for instance, than the “man-trap” that Suke Damson's husband Tom sets for Fitzpiers. Were we permitted to believe that the silly revenge plot actually led to Grace and Fitzpiers's reunion, the conceit might seem merely contrived, but as usual, Hardy undermines his putative assertion of a causal chain: Grace had already been entertaining meetings with her husband before he rescues her from the trap, and indeed, had been on her way to meet him when she met with her accident. The intense emotions both profess are, in context, nearly parodic. Fitzpiers, makes a passionate declaration of grief when he believes Grace to be dead – only to be quickly interrupted when she appears before him not much the worse for wear, as Hardy reveals with an air of mock-mystery: “...[there] a female figure glided, whose appearance even in the gloom was, though graceful in outline, noticeably strange. She was in white up to the waist, and figured above. She was, in short, Grace, his wife, lacking the portion of her dress which the gin retained” (356). Fitzpiers's overwrought declarations effectively punctured, Grace answers his hyperbole with the claim that “there has been an Eye watching over us tonight” (357) a faith that, in light of Giles recent death, is both painfully naive and outrageously egocentric. Perhaps an oddly selective eye has chosen to turn its lazy gaze to the restoration of Grace and Fitzpiers's marriage – but Fate has an assist, as well, from the new business prospect that leads Grace to look at her estranged husband “much interested” (358).

To become involved in the plot of *The Woodlanders* is to be implicated in this absurdity. Giles himself, though undoubtedly, as Marty says “a good man [who] did good things” (367) cannot entirely escape the taint: when Grace reveals herself unworthy, Giles's own adoration is exposed as a species of folly. The novel's woodland setting, though technically a part of Hardy's greater Wessex, itself evokes the enchanted space of Shakespearean comedy, complete with lost and baffled lovers. If Marty cannot be one of the bewitched mortals, then she will enter the plot –

or try to – in the role of fairy schemer: she brings couples together and drives them apart, gifts Felice with a disguise and then reveals the deception. Her most eccentric act of the novel, the writing of the poem on Giles's barn, is indeed explicable only if we regard her as a kind of elfin figure, to be granted oddities and freaks that might seem cruel in the hands of lesser mortals. Her father's belief in his dryad-like attachment to an old tree reinforces the impression that Marty – at least as she appears between Grace Melbury's return to town and her final departure from it – may be something other than an ordinary human woman.

Theoretically a sign of power, this identification of Marty with a woodland sprite or trickster becomes another form of marginalization, an assignation of a fixed role in a narrative economy that replicates, rather than resists, its mercantile counterpart. Again, Marty's father underscores his daughter's position. Old South's life may not actually be bound to a tree, but it is associated with the quirk of property law that makes the ownership of several cottages dependent on his survival. Giles, who has known the old man for years and really does care for his well-being, recognizes nonetheless that the arrangement inevitably corrupts human concern into material self-interest: it is impossible for him to register his concern for the man without turning him into a metonym for the home he will lose with his death. Narratively, the same logic applies. South may be a very good sort of man, one that Marty loves and Giles respects. But in the brutal commerce of the novel, he is a mere adjunct to Giles and Marty, a cog fixed in place to permit the operation of a narrative that does not require him to be more than his function has made him. Though a far more significant figure than her father, Marty – short of indeed winning Giles's heart and becoming the protagonist of a sustained marriage plot, an option the text never seriously considers – can resist a similar process only to the extent that she transcends plot entirely.

If any Hardy novel presages the author's transition from prose to poetry, it is perhaps not *Jude,* but *The Woodlanders,* where the logic of Hardy's always chaotic plotting is strained to its limit and exposed as hollow. Simon Gatrell attributes Hardy's turn away from the novel primarily to his creation of a more realistic – and therefore less imaginatively liberating – setting:

> His losses [in creating "New Wessex"] included the desire to write more novels... He was no longer content with the requirements the realistic novel imposed on him... the sense he had of the closure of Wessex as a living culture was central to his slow decision to end his career as a creator of fiction (32).

But lyric offers a respite from plot as well as setting. Plot, in Hardy, is less an elegant design than a field of quicksand bordered by a mirage: there seems to be a way out, if only one could reach it, but when the illusion fades, one path is as treacherous as another. Part of the problem, no doubt, is a general pessimism toward the possibility of social or individual progress. Beyond that, however, Hardy seems suspicious of plot as a type of system that can, at its worst, be as reductive and dehumanizing as any market transaction. Marty South gets it wrong: the ultimate metric of worth, in Hardy, is not defined by any action – the good man who does good things – but by a quality of authenticity that makes suffering unromantic and transforms melodrama into tragedy. The novel, of course, create an alternative order in which characters abused and cast aside in life can receive at last their due: where Henchard will be remembered by us when Elizabeth Jane has dutifully forgotten him, and been herself forgotten. Yet this egalitarianism becomes its own form of exclusion; someone must always be sacrificed to the hierarchy. The protagonist wins narratability with an excess that obscures the human; the minor character becomes an allegory or a function, left to move us only in stolen moments of legitimate pathos.

Again, the antidote here is not precisely a counterfactual *plot.* Apart from any ethical considerations, grand narratives, as we have seen, end poorly in Hardy. The person who seeks fame or fortune is humiliated or humbled or forced home to a world that no longer satisfies him.

By contrast, the few (sympathetic) couples whose stories end happily escape the general devastation by essentially reverting to an arrangement that existed prior to plot. The traditional novel may always move toward the exhaustion of its own narrativity (Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents*). Yet Hardy's successful marriage plots do not simply resolve complications, ending the need for discourse, they cancel, so far as it is possible, everything that has intervened. Both Diggory Venn and Thomasin Yeobright and Gabriel Oak and Batsheba Everdene are couples that should have been together from the first, that in fact *did* have an early romantic history disrupted by the foolish ambitions of one or other of the potential partners.

The Woodlanders does these novels one better. The happiness of the Venns and the Oaks represents a pastoral promise that cannot always, or perhaps ever, be fulfilled; for good or, more often, for ill, Hardy's Wessex is not a real English county. The possibility that Marty will win a living Giles after all, as other unrequited lovers have done before her, is one active counterfactual lying at the margins of *The Woodlanders.* Yet to make the strongest claim on the reader's sympathies, Marty must at last avoid not only farce and melodrama, but pastoralism as well. Social reforms fail; high romance grants its readers the pleasures of sensation without demanding the self-reproach of recognition. The pastoral provides a cold comfort. It is in isolated scenes and fugitive moments that Hardy's characters move us most, and in these moments that their claims are least dependent on assessments of social or narrative utility. In Little Father Time's six-word-story (“Done,” he writes, “Because we are too menny,”), in Marty South's bookended love and grief, we see briefly the potential of a more generous narrative order.

For Hardy himself, this more generous order would not come in the form of narrative at all – or, at least, not a long-form prose narrative order. The move to poetry is a logical extension of the alternative Hardy the novelist toys with most explicitly in *The Woodlanders*: the character

who cannot find a home in the plots of the novel seeks her mayfly moment in the images of poetry. There, Hardy hoped, she might yet have an influence on the obdurate hearts of his book-burning countrymen. Yet Hardy's sense of the limits of narrative do not require its destruction. Hardy's revolt against plot anticipates a narrative revolution in which he himself, by turning away from the novel entirely, would not participate. *Jude the Obscure* was published in 1895. By the time Hardy died in 1928, the Marty Souths of the world were no longer confined to verse or bookends: Joyce and Woolf and Proust had brought the plotless wanderer, whose life was witnessed in moments and measured out in coffee spoons, to the forefront of narrative discourse. This change did not, perhaps, transform the conditions of the world, except in the incalculably diffusive ways that the Eliot of an earlier era had so honored. But for those who allow themselves to be changed by them, these unnamed channels are perhaps enough, formed in love, and maybe even grace.

Utopian Realists

The desire to influence his readers led Hardy away from the rigid plotting of the Victorian novel. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton,* by contrast, we find a confident endorsement of the power of traditional plot to bring about practical social change. *Mary Barton* appears, at first glance, nearly utopian in its vision. Unflinching in its descriptions of the desperate conditions of life among the Manchester poor, the novel nonetheless ends almost blissfully well for our heroes. Gaskell offers her requisite sacrifices to the gods of realism; we open on a death in childbirth, and will see the deaths of starving children and broken-down fathers before we are done. Yet for our main characters, the final disposition of fates plays out according to the dictates of a seemingly providential justice. Mary marries honest Jem, who has been freed from an unjust murder charge. Her friend Margaret is engaged to Alice's nephew Will; having gradually gone

blind over the course of the novel, her sight is restored by its end. Not everyone, of course, can be saved; Mary's aunt and father die before they can be incorporated in the happy final tableau. But this, too, we can gather, is justice – justice, and mercy. Aunt Esther, having completed a Hogarthian descent from vanity to vice, seals her journey with her death. John Barton, the union radical, has murdered his master's son, and almost let Jem die for his crime. Both deaths, too, offer a reassuring sense of redemption. Barton dies in the arms of John Carson, the father of the man he has killed, the two men finally, briefly united in a perfect moment of mutual understanding and forgiveness. Afterward, we are told, Carson becomes an exemplary employer – vigilante murder, it seems, has its uses after all – while Barton shares a grave with Esther, whose fall he had helped precipitate through his uncompromising severity. The inscription on their stone bears a message from psalms, promising divine forgiveness for all sinners.

G-d may indeed forgive all, in time, and in another world. Precisely what kind of a world *this* one is, however, is, as it is in *The Woodlanders,* question of real anxiety for the novel. Utopian fiction plays out in a liminal space somewhere between an alternative world and a possible one. On one hand, unlike the fantasies and romances they only superficially resemble, utopian novels, no matter how implausible, are acutely aware of the world as it is. Romance requires suspension of disbelief; if we are to enjoy, say, *Lorna Doone,* we must arrive at the point at which nothing seems more natural than finding out that the little girl one encountered by chance on the moors is actually a long-lost heiress kidnapped in infancy by a clan of brigands. Utopian writing, by contrast, demands that readers maintain awareness of the reality against which the fiction has defined itself: social criticism, rather than immersion, is the order of the day, and that requires, not forgetfulness, but recognition of the actual world.

Yet the relationship of the utopian counterfactual world to the actual one is often

uncertain – here, too, only some counterfactuals emerge as active ones. Frederic Jameson defends the continued political value of utopian thinking with the claim that even if the utopian world is almost by definition void of practical content, its virtual existence provides an aspirational context in which social change may be fostered: " Even if we succeed in reviving utopia itself, the outlines of a new and effective practical politics for the era of globalization will not at once become visible; but... we will never come to one without it" ("The Politics of Utopia" 36). But many literary utopias seem so detached from any kind of accessible reality that their relationship to our world can be better characterized as cynically critical than productively reformative. In many of those works most commonly identified as utopian – those that, like More's *Utopia,* create elaborate models of an alternative society – the worlds constructed exist at considerable geographic remove from our own; the word "utopia" does, after all, mean no place. In the language of modal logic, they have fewer points of accessibility with our own than the world of a realist novel does. Many of the socialist and feminist utopian novels of the late nineteenth century take place in the future; some take place in different worlds. Though these novels occasionally locate the origins of their enlightened societies in a specific, contemporary moment – in Florence Dixie's *Gloriana,* a woman disguised as a man gets elected to Parliament and ushers in a matriarchal golden age – the utopias serve more often as instructive comparisons than as attainable possibilities. Indeed, they do not necessarily even represent desirable futures. There is an obvious element of sly wish-fulfillment in the imagining of feminist utopias characterized by matriarchal or exclusively female, as opposed to gender-egalitarian, societies. The primary function of such models, however, is not to advocate for the subjugation or elimination of men, but to trace male domination to social practice rather than natural law. This understanding would, ideally, lend itself to immediate social reforms; it is no coincidence that

these novels proliferated during the period at which the campaign for women's suffrage had begun to gain traction in Britain. The potential worlds themselves, however, were even at best more rhetorical than real. It is telling that with remarkable consistency, the most reliable way of getting to utopia seems to be, not active labor for a better society, but a magical vision that transports the sleeper to a realm only a dreamer could think possible.

Mary Barton complicates this paradigm. Unlike the fabulous journeys of the classical utopian novel, the events of *Mary Barton* are at least nominally possible, occupying a recognizable, immediately accessible reality. The open question is that of precisely how possible they are. Even the starkest work of social realism takes place in a world that is counterfactual relative to our own; were *we* to be transported in a dream-vision to Manchester in the early 1840s, we would look in vain for Mary Barton and Jem Wilson and Carson's Mill. A novel's realism rests on the extent to which its world can be seen as representative: is the Manchester that includes Mary and Jem a Manchester that could *be* real, but simply happens not to be, or one that can merely *seem* real for as long as we consent to inhabit the fiction? The novel's structure frustrates attempts at a consistent answer. Its first half reads like a cross between a Manchester *Middlemarch* and *Mary Barton's Apprenticeship,* shifting between a panoramic social gaze and more focused concern for the progress of an individual. The plot, as far as the reader can make out, consists mainly of a love triangle between working-class Mary, her childhood sweetheart Jem, and Harry Carson, son of the richest man in town, with the scenes of poverty and rumblings of political unrest serving as a grim backdrop to the developing romance plot. In any event, these elements add up to seventeen chapters tilting heavily toward the mimetic realism end of the spectrum of possibility. If there was never really a family named Wilson who lost twin sons named Joe and Will to a slum-borne fever exacerbated by hunger and lack of medical care, we

can be pretty sure that there were families of some other name losing children in parallel circumstances. As for Mary, Harry and Jem, the most incredible part of that little triangle, as far as the first part of the novel is concerned, is that Harry hasn't marshaled the persuasive powers of his wealth and looks to secure more than a kiss from Mary before she has had time to reevaluate her choice.

Barton's murder of Harry is, in this context, more than a shocking turn of events. It vitiates our previous understanding of the nature of the novel. The events of the first half of the text may produce the crime whose consequences dominate its second, but the murder plot cannot simply be folded into of our long-sustained sense of the novel as a portrait of urban poverty given narrative interest through a sympathetic protagonist and her fairly run-of-the-mill love story. Any initial classification of the story in terms of its love triangle proves not just incomplete, but incorrect: the rivalry between the two men turns out to have a comparatively slight functional role in the plot, while the central conflict of the novel proves to be the one between Mary's love of Jem and her love of her father. More than that, the second half of the novel seems to take place on a different plane of reality than the first. If the latter prefigures Eliot and Hardy, the former rather recalls Scott's *Heart of Midlothian,* whose plot reveals significant parallels to that of *Mary Barton*.[v] Without offering any absolute impossibilities, the novel has slipped into unlikelihood, and severely strained its mimetic claims; Mary's experiences are no longer representative, but exceptional. To Marxist critics, in particular, the second half of the novel has been regarded as a disappointing retreat from the serious social criticism of its opening. Raymond Williams, in perhaps the best-known of these critiques argues that the novel's sentimental turn is not only frivolous, but reactionary: by turning union man John Barton into a killer, Gaskell plays into middle-class fears of mob violence. The shift in tone intensifies the

betrayal: “Mrs. Gaskell was under no obligation to write a representative novel; she might legitimately have taken a special case. But the tone elsewhere is deliberately representative, and she is even, as she says, modeling John Barton 'on a poor man I know'.” For Williams, the generic change is evidence of representative failure, the victory of Gaskell's instinctive fear over her “deep imaginative sympathy” (97).

Only in a world of such special cases, perhaps, does the novel's final vision of happiness become possible. The utopia that social realism could never have produced, romantic melodrama, with an assist from Christian parable, wistfully enacts. Even in the more accommodating realm of romance, Gaskell's idyllic ending requires a geographical as well as a generic dislocation. Carson's reformation offers some modest hope of change in Manchester, but Mary and Jem wind up in Canada – where they are, implausibly enough, expecting a visit from two of their working-class neighbors from home. Canada itself is depicted as less a physical space than the (nominally) realist analogue of the utopian novel's remote lands:

> “Thou knowest where Canada is, Mary?”
>
> Not rightly – not now, at any rate; —but with thee, Jem," her voice sunk to a soft, low whisper, "anywhere—" What was the use of a geographical description (519)?

Yet far less fully realized than the similarly inaccessible reformist utopias of Bellamy or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gaskell's Canada is not a world to be created, but a paradise to be inherited. Rather than a plausible alternative to a sociopolitical status quo, what Gaskell offers is an escape from it, a Celestial City to requite the worldly travails of our good pilgrims.

It is not so clear, however, that the attenuated realism of the novel's conclusion is for Gaskell incompatible with an earnest, achievable social vision. By her own account in the preface to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell always intended the novel to be both a searing portrait of urban life and a romance of the streets: “I bethought myself how deep might be the romance in the lives

of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets... I had always felt a deep sympathy with the care-worn men" (3). The ability to see the romance in ordinary life is for Gaskell a sign of, rather than a barrier to, the sympathy that she will spend *Mary Barton* trying to inculcate in her readers. Over the course of the novel, Gaskell occasionally ventures into political specifics, objecting, for instance, to child labor laws that deprive poor families of desperately needed income without offering them any other means of support. Yet overwhelmingly, her preferred corrective to the abuses she catalogs is nothing more or less than the development of a heightened sense of empathy. In Gaskell's social vision, urban misery is primarily a function, not of bad policy or unchecked capitalism, but of a tragic lack of understanding between the classes. During a period of particular privation, Gaskell tells us, the suffering of the poor was so great that not even a Dante could adequately describe it. Even so, "the most deplorable and enduring evil" of the crisis is "[the] feeling of alienation between the different classes of society" (121). Gaskell's explanation for this feeling – which she will articulate at greater length in *North and South*– is less reminiscent of Dante than of Sophocles; in Gaskell's account, social distrust is the result of a series of mistakes made by blind but fundamentally decent men. The owners arrogantly refuse to explain legitimate economic realities behind wage cuts and layoffs; the workers turn in desperation to violent labor movements that make their employers less inclined than they might have been to take measures to ameliorate their lot. The poor suffer most from this tragedy of errors, but both sides are to blame and both, in their way, are to be pitied: the rich may not starve, but they too can lose livelihoods and sometimes lives to the unrest.

At first glance, Gaskell's proposed solution of harmony through Christian love and forgiveness seems hopelessly naive. Barton repents fully of his crime after connecting Carson's pain at losing Harry to his own grief for a long-dead son; as the other man mourns, the two

become not employer and worker, but “brothers in the deep suffering of the heart” (525). Carson is at first less yielding, vowing vengeance even as his enemy begs for mercy on his deathbed. But his sympathies, too, are awakened in time to embrace Barton as he dies, pitying the desperation that impelled a good man to murder. Later, he will be responsible “for many of the improvements now in practice in the system of Manchester” (558); although we do not learn what any of these improvements are, we are assured that they proceed from his acknowledgment “of the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties” (557).

But if Gaskell leaves much to be desired as a political reformer, she is more astute as an affective theorist. Well before he resorts to murder, John Barton goes to London as part of a union delegation to Parliament. Before he leaves, his neighbors suggest particular measures for relief, some reasonable (a shorter work-day and a reduction of protective tariffs), and some less so (the destruction of all machines and a mandate that wealthy gentleman purchase calico shirts). Barton, however, is not concerned with their proposals, convinced that simply telling the government of their sufferings will be enough to bring about relief:

> When they hear o' children born on wet flags, without a rag t'cover them or a bit o' food for the mother; when they hear o' folk lying down to die in the streets, or hiding their want i' some hole o' a cellar till death comes to set them free.... they'll surely do somewhat wiser for us than we can guess at now” (127).

Barton's logic here is Gaskell's, and the manner of his failure affirms his and Gaskell's shared faith in the power of empathy. The rejection of the Charter deprives Barton of even the chance to bear witness to the plight of the laboring classes; had he been able to do so, he might have succeeded.

More specifically, the incident validates the necessarily *affective* nature of the politically *effective* understanding that Gaskell promotes as a general solution to social ills. Although Barton curses “them as so cruelly refused to hear us” (146) the petition, as Gaskell's readers would have

recalled, was not rejected entirely without a hearing. Nine years before the publication of *Mary Barton,* Thomas Attwood, the MP for Birmingham, introduced the People's Charter before the House of Commons, and on July 12 1839 – presumably the day of John Barton's crushing disappointment – he brought forth a formal request for its consideration. For Attwood, "consideration," meant more than debate on the five proposals included in the Charter. While Attwood, unlike Gaskell and Barton, is also concerned with particular reforms,[vi] he, too, believes that it is essential that the petitioners themselves be given the opportunity to speak; had his motion passed, deliberations were to include the testimony of working-class representatives:

> Many petitions had been presented to that House from Birmingham, complaining of the state of suffering in which the people were, but their petitions had been altogether disregarded, and that hon. House had refused, in several instances, not only to grant the prayers, but even to receive the petitions of the industrious classes, and relied on the representations of lawyers and gentlemen and the public press.... that House had chosen to legislate in the dark—not, he believed, intentionally, because it was composed of noblemen and gentlemen of the highest honour and virtue, but because they had not a clear view respecting the matters they were dealing with...[vii] (HC Deb 12 July 1839 vol 49 cc220-74) .

If Attwood's fellow MPs are blind, it is not because they lack knowledge. Certainly, they are well aware of the Charter's five principles, and Attwood himself has represented to them, if only in abstract terms, the suffering that has inspired the appeal. The problem is rather that their knowledge is of the wrong kind; they may be aware that prices are high and wages low, but without any more direct encounter with the victims of their policies, they remain effectively in the dark.

To the extent that Gaskell's final vision of empathy and forgiveness is a fantasy, then, it is one created, like all utopian visions, to address a specific feature of a disappointing social reality. In his final moments, Barton realizes his dream of effectively representing the sufferings of his class. He does so, however, not as a union delegate, but as an allegorical martyr-penitent; Gaskell

softens the historical fact of the Charter's rejection by rewriting Barton's mission in the context of Christian parable. Departing from the realm of immediate social reality allows her to rehabilitate as an active political possibility the affective logic that has failed: when circumstances conspire to bring John Carson to a dying worker's door, his response is exactly the one that Attwood had anticipated – had the people been allowed to plead their own desperate case. One might have imagined that John Barton, having lost a son of his own, would have had sufficient theory of mind to perceive that John Carson might be similarly affected by Harry's death, but in ironic fulfillment of his own belief in the power of direct encounter, it takes the sight of the grieving father for him to feel remorse for what he has done. Even more to the point, Christian forbearance and charity are not themselves sufficient to prompt Carson's forgiveness of Barton, or to induce him to become a more compassionate employer. Rather, he can only do these things once he has been moved by seeing the other man's home: "In the days of his childhood and youth, Mr. Carson had been accustomed to poverty; but it was honest, decent poverty; not the grinding squalid misery he had remarked in every part of John Barton's house" (531). It is a diffracted version of Barton's mistake: if Barton fails to perceive the similarity between Carson's loss and his own, Carson assumes his own recalled experience of poverty must be universally and indefinitely applicable. Once he is confronted with the stark reality of current conditions, he is able to understand and forgive even his son's murderer.

This emphasis on direct experience poses a potential problem for the novel, which necessarily mediates. Gaskell, to borrow Attwood's categories, is more equivalent to the inadequate outside advocate than to the rightful representative of the masses. Yet if she is conscious of the need to ameliorate the disadvantage of distance, the text reflects that consciousness only inconsistently. There are plenty of affecting scenes of poverty in *Mary*

Barton, and opportunity enough for a reader to become absorbed in the world Gaskell has created. But the text also displays a number of anti-immersive qualities. Robyn Warhol has written of Gaskell's narrator as an "engaging" force working to counteract the melodramatic tendencies of the plot. She frequently enters the text as a narrative "I" and pulls readers after her with a confiding "you,"[viii] reinforcing our impression that the characters in the novel share space in our own reality. Occasionally, these moments movingly connect the narrative and actual worlds, as when the narrator interrupts a passage of free indirect discourse with a first-person reference to the death of her own child. Yet Gaskell's narrator is a more intrusive presence than she need be, from merely superfluous self-insertions ("the friend... was more handsome and less sensible-looking than the man I have just described") to more substantive reminders of her presence ("what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks," where the reference to an outside narrator risks negating the illusion of intimacy she claims to cultivate) (10; 34).While she positions herself as one well-acquainted with the city and people of whom she writes, she also maintains an obvious and sometimes even exaggerated distance; she *knows* them, but is not *of* them.

This is never more apparent than in the ethnographic tendencies of her narration. When Margaret sings a regional folk ballad, Gaskell doesn't simply transcribe the lyrics, she tells us that it *is* a regional folk ballad, and that she is therefore going to copy it for us so that we as outsiders may learn the local tune. Descriptions often focus on collective experiences; we are given characteristics of the laboring men or the factory girls as a class – members of the manufacturing population, for instance, can be identified as a rule by "an acuteness and intelligence of countenance" (8). Above all, there are the footnotes, 49 in total, nearly all of which provide definitions of words of dialect like "nesh" and "farrantly."[ix] Some of these glosses

are useful enough; when Mary says that she will be too “gloppened” to know what to say before the court, it is not obvious from context that the word means “terrified” rather than “overwrought” or “tongue-tied” (370). Often, however, they are unnecessary – could there be any confusion over “may happen” for “perhaps” or “again'” for “against”? – and arbitrarily employed; we get the definition of “getten” but not “whatten” (for got and what), of “pobbies” (porridge) but not “brosten” (bursting), and of “sin'” for “since”, but not “mun” for “must.” We do not need the citations of uses of the dialect words in Chaucer and Shakespeare that Gaskell often provides with the definitions, a doubly distancing move that interrupts our experience of the text and reminds us of the separation between the narrator – and, presumably, us ourselves – and her uneducated subjects.

Useful or not, the footnotes in any case impair our ability fully to immerse ourselves in the life of Gaskell's Manchester. Whatever marginal advantage we derive from knowing that a “ritling” is a child with rickets cannot compensate for the damage done to our illusion of intimacy; were we really there with the Bartons and Wilsons, we would not, after all, have the benefit of a glossary. But these troublesome footnotes – which Gaskell does not include in any of her other novels – seems to be more than an instance of an author's reportorial zeal overcoming her stylistic instincts. Indeed, it is hard to escape the impression that Gaskell is, for some obscure purpose, *deliberately* interfering with her readers' capacity to engage with the world of the text, and worse, to be affected by it. Some of the most questionable glosses occur at precisely those moments that should by rights be the most moving. In one early scene, Barton and his friend Wilson go on a mission of charity to the Davenports, a family of five living in what even the two working-men, no strangers to poverty themselves, consider to be desperate conditions. The father, dying of untreated typhus fever, has long been unable to work. Having pawned nearly all

of their possessions, they live in a nearly bare cellar; an old sewer line running through their street leaves their home, such as it is, suffused with the stink of excrement. Wilson sees with surprise that the mother is nursing a three or four-year-old child, and asks if the boy has been weaned, prompting the following dialogue:

> "Going on two year," she faintly answered. "But, oh! it keeps him quiet when I've nought else to gi' him, and he'll get a bit of sleep lying there, if he's getten nought beside. We han done our best to gi' the childer food, howe'er we pinched ourselves."
>
> “Han ye had no money fra' th' town?”
>
> “No, my master is Buckinghamshire born; and he's feared the town would send him back to his parish, if he went to th' board; so we've just borne on in hope o' better times. But I think they'll never come in my day;" and the poor woman began her weak high-pitched cry again.
>
> “Here, sup this drop a' gruel, and then try and get a bit o' sleep...” (91-92).

The first ten chapters of *Mary Barton* have an average of just under four footnotes per chapter. This brief passage has three, on the words “childer,” “han” and “sup.” All are easily understandable in context, if indeed they require context at all. In fact, in all three cases, Gaskell does not even bother to provide a definition to justify the intrusion, simply referring us to lines from classic texts – by Wycliffe, Spencer, and Mandeville, respectively – in which the words appear. Her decision, at such a moment, to put a gloss on “han” is particularly puzzling, given that she had used it without comment during a far less sensitive scene six pages earlier. The pattern is repeated in other scenes; when one of Wilson's own young sons is dying, Gaskell feels the need to tell us that “poor lile fellow” means poor *little* child (109), and Barton's vow to “not speak of [the Petition's rejection] no more,” at the end of a bitter, despairing account of his trip to London, is punctuated with the observation that Chaucer, too, often uses double negatives (146).

So what, to use some more current slang, is Gaskell playing at? Interrupting those passages most likely to elicit sympathy, the footnotes undercut the very emotional

responsiveness she is ostensibly trying to inculcate. I would like to suggest that this contradiction is precisely the point. For all her belief in the persuasive and affective value of personal testimony, Gaskell is not, like John Barton, naively convinced that the opportunity to bear witness automatically solves middle and upper-class indifference. Barton is not crushed only by Parliament's refusal to hear his appeal, but by the callousness of those along the way that did. As they make their way toward Parliament, the delegates are stopped and abused by policemen who try to turn them back, claiming that they are disturbing the ladies and gentlemen taking the same route to a ball. Here, Barton does get the chance to speak:

> "'And why are we to be molested,' asked I, 'going decently about our business, which is life and death to us, and many a little one clemming at home in Lancashire? Which business is of most consequence I' the sight o' [G-d], think yo, our'n or them gran' ladies and gentlemen as yo think so much on?'"
>
> "But I might as well ha' held my peace, for he only laughed" (145).

Barton's speech has as little effect as his enforced silence. When he says a moment later that he will "always curse them as so cruelly refused to hear us" (146), he is referring to the rejection not only by Parliament, but by the ordinary Londoners who remained impassive even after a direct encounter with the desperate men. The officer has heard Barton, but it isn't the right *kind* of hearing; given the chance to respond compassionately to the suffering of another, he elects to remain unmoved by the appeal.

In simultaneously presenting and disrupting scenes of human misery, Gaskell dramatizes – in the body of the text and in the footnotes – the two possible modes of reading her own text. Her depictions of individuals who are either affected by or detached from scenes of suffering has direct implications for the experience of the reader, for whom a text can be immersive or merely informative, a light diversion or a serious call to reflection and action. The policeman's laughter does not simply dismiss Barton's appeal, but treats it as an object of amusement. It has

entertained, rather than moved him. The parallel is even sharper in an earlier scene in which Mary and Margaret go to see a fire at Carson's Mill because, as Mary says "they say a burning mill is such a grand sight" (70). Her desire is grounded in love of spectacle and a longing for distraction; Margaret has just told her of her incipient blindness, and Mary hopes that the fire will provide a new stimulation to occupy both of their troubled thoughts. When she arrives at the mill, however, Mary is horrified to realize that there are people trapped in the building, and more who are risking their lives to save them; she had wanted to see the fire only because she "had no idea that any lives were in danger" (74). Indeed, even before she learns there are men in the mill, the sight of the flames alone is enough to "almost [wish] herself away" (72). Other members of the "deeply interested" crowd are less affected. While they, too, are caught up in the emotion of Jem Wilson's perilous attempt to save the trapped men, their response suggests the pleasurable terror of the sublime rather than empathetic anguish for their endangered fellows. Their anxiety arises from "suspense"; their sobs are "excited."

While Mary tries to leave the scene and then, unable to push through the crowd, hopes to faint as her only remaining means of escape, the masses can't pull their eyes from the scene until Jem appears about to fall to his death, when "many," but not all, finally shut them. Their emotion is, in any case, short-lived: when all are safe "the multitude in the street absolutely danced with triumph...and then, with all the fickleness of interest characteristic of a large body of people, pressed and stumbled... in the hurry to get out of Dunham Street, and back to the immediate scene of the fire" (78). The fact that many in the crowd might have answered the call for help themselves only makes their comparatively distant "interest" all the more culpable; even after Jem and his father have gone in, the trapped workers continue "praying the great multitude below for help" to no avail (73). Sensation is not sympathy, and tears no pledge of action.

Mary's response to the plight of the endangered men – which, Gaskell takes care to clarify, manifests itself before she realizes that her old friend Jem Wilson is among them – is thus a model for the desired reaction to Gaskell's own text. I began this chapter by considering the first of many questions Gaskell asks of her readers: "Can you fancy the bustle of Alice... can you fancy [her] delight" (44)? Most are more directly exhortative, and thus easier to write off as evidence of a somewhat wearying moralism. But for Gaskell, all are legitimate questions with the power to transform not only the experience of reading, but the nature of the text itself. They, in other words, create two active possibilities. During the fire at Carson's Mill, the area in which the men are trapped is, by the time Mary arrives, no longer actively burning; rather, the men are in a smoke filled fourth-story room with no means of escape, the staircase having collapsed. As a result, the crowd has to turn *away* from the fire to watch their rescue because, as Gaskell says, "what were magnificent terrible flames, what were falling timbers or tottering walls, in comparison with human life" (73)? But as we have seen, the question is not at all rhetorical: really, what are they? Do those below turn because of their sense of the value of human life, or as Gaskell suggests, at least in part because they have found a more compelling drama to replace the last sensation? Like John Barton's own question to the policeman - "Which business is of most consequence I' the sight o' [G-d], think yo, our'n or them gran' ladies and gentlemen as yo think so much on'" (145)? – it is a question that *ought* to be rhetorical, but is proved in the response not to be so.

The answers are as uncertain in the case of the reader. For Gaskell, *any* exhortation is implicitly a question because command or not, it remains in the power of the listener to either accept or refuse the charge. True even in the case of ordinary requests, this doubt over outcome is magnified in the case of the questions asked by a text of its readers. If Gaskell's rhetorical

questions should be read as exhortative, so too can her exhortative questions be misread as rhetorical. One could hardly miss the moral in Gaskell's "'Sick, and in prison, and ye visited me.' Shall you, or I, receive such blessing" (227)? Yet as her use of the biblical source text reveals the capacity of countless readers to do precisely that – or, at least, to fail to act up to it. The reader who appreciates the wisdom and power of the Gospels without taking up their charge reduces instruction to mere rhetoric; the Bible becomes a good book, rather than a guide for virtuous living, the word admired, and not the word made flesh through the incarnating power of action. "Does [the parable of Dives and Lazarus] haunt the minds of the rich as it does the poor" (142)? asks Gaskell. "To whom shall the outcast prostitute tell her tale? Who will give her help in her day of need" (228)? Would we not, like John Barton, who turns to opium in his depression "be glad to forget life, and its burdens" (244)? These are questions that interrogate both the nature of the reader and the nature of his reading. Does our engagement with the parable, whether of Dives and Lazarus or John Barton and John Carson, outlast the brief space of its telling? Are we moved by the prostitute's tale, and if so, will we help as well as pity her? Is our immersion in the novel itself an escape from our own lives, or an encounter with the lives we neglect? For Gaskell, the ideal reader is the one who, having picked up the novel as entertainment, reaches with Mary the moment of horrified recognition that real human lives are at stake.

If lives are at stake, so too, finally, is the status of the novelistic world itself. The novel's structure, with its inconsistent generic affiliation, prepares readers for and then subjects them to a test of their capacity for right reading– which is to say, a reading that is both emotionally responsive and generative of action. Both Gaskell's footnotes and her questions to the reader are disproportionately located in the novel's first, realist half, underscoring the possibility for two

contrasting modes of reception. The reader who can continue dutifully consulting the footnotes as the Wilson boys lie dying has gotten it wrong. She is *interested* rather than touched, entertained rather than transformed. She may answer Gaskell's questions in a catechistic call and response – *I* will help the prostitute, *I* will receive the blessing of the righteous – but then be as easily distracted by a return to Mary's love life (is it to be handsome Harry, or loyal Jem?) as by the definition of "donnot." When the novel's naturalism is co-opted by the melodramatic murder plot, she can thus be carried away with a new sensation, feeling all the pleasurable anxiety of watching, from a distance, the fight for Jem Wilson's life. It is, as Mary's callous acquaintance Sally says, like something "at the theatre" (515).

The experience of the other reader is radically different. At first, perhaps she, too, appreciates her guide to unfamiliar Manchester life, the soothing mediation of the narrator who can both define "nesh" and "farrantly" and furnish a quotation from Chaucer. But as she is pulled deeper into the world of the characters, of their modest joys and desperate privations, of their hopes and struggles and suffering, she outgrows her pedantic conductress; what, after all, is an unfamiliar word, in comparison with human life? If she misses the meaning, she has absorbed the sense of the novel's expressions of grief and pathos. For her, Gaskell's questions merit serious and sustained contemplation, consideration of whether or not she has, in fact, done enough to lighten the burden of her neighbors. When the novel turns to more conventionally romantic subjects, then, her attention is only half diverted. Not only is she more intimately invested in Jem's trial and Mary's conflict than the other reader, she maintains her awareness of the everyday tragedies that have, in this case, given birth to the sensational one, and the obligations she herself has incurred through that awareness. The melodramatic murder plot is the final test of her awakened sensibilities: having surpassed the affective limits of informative text, she must now

resist the affective excess of an entertainment that would excite her emotions past the point of productive engagement with ordinary human experience.[x]

The possibility of such disparate reactions destabilizes the new world created at the end of the novel. As Jameson suggests, the utopian vision comes to use "from a future that may never come into being" - but also that could, hypothetically, be realized. In most of the other novels I have discussed, the generically counterfactual plot exists alongside an actual one; the two begin together, and then diverge into parallel paths. In *Mary Barton,* they are rather consecutive. The first fifteen and a half chapters create a realist narrative world that suggests a fairly muted set of possibilities. Historical fact alone tells us that Barton's appeal to Parliament will fail, and there is little in the prevailing grimness of Gaskell's Manchester to give us hope that smaller scale union activity will be rewarded with productive change. We do not know precisely what will happen to Barton – imprisoned for labor agitation? Death by suicide or fever? Spared for a bearable, if not entirely comfortable, old age cared for by a loving daughter? – but we can make some educated guesses. As for Mary, the possibilities seem equally stark. In the image of her aunt Esther, we see one clear alternative before her: if she, like her once-pretty and thoughtless aunt, is swayed by the blandishments of a rich suitor whose intentions are not likely to include marriage to a seamstress, her end will be shame and degradation. If she instead recognizes the worth of Jem Wilson, she can look forward, at best, to the comparatively cheerful poverty attainable with a loving family, steady factory work, and lucky avoidance of grave illness or complications in pregnancy. At the very end of chapter fifteen, however, we get a radical revision of these possibilities when Gaskell abruptly introduces a union plot to assassinate some as yet unnamed member of the employer class. At this point, all bets are off; if the novel is willing to deal in such extremes, almost anything might happen. And indeed, Barton killing Harry Carson with Jem

Wilson's gun, thereby implicating him in the crime, immediately after Mary has recognized her love for Jem is about as sensational a scenario as we might have imagined.

Based on the response of our first reader, the final outcome, with Barton and Carson reconciled, Carson becoming a benevolent employer, and Mary and Jem prospering in Canada, can be possible only because of the novel's sharp anti-realist turn. Only in a world of murder plots in which a father is *coincidentally* tasked with assassinating his daughter's ex-lover, thereby implicating the dead man's successful rival for her affections, can we plausibly believe that the killing will finally lead to reconciliation, reform, and a general outbreak of increased good-will and happiness among men, or at least among all of our surviving characters. This is escapist fantasy, and nothing more.

Yet if the first half of the novel successfully awakens our sympathies, the world of the novel's conclusion, if not the road by which we traveled there, is perhaps no longer so inaccessible. Our empathy cannot make the Barton-Carson-Wilson affair and its associated complications any less theatrical. Strictly speaking, however, the final disposition of fates is not dependent on these contrivances. There are, as Gaskell will demonstrate in *North and South,* easier paths to productive and mutually beneficial class understanding than murdering a recalcitrant employer's son, and the seeds of Mary and Jem's Canadian retreat are laid early in the novel, when Jem's master gives him increased responsibilities for a project based in Halifax. Even more importantly, Gaskell's belief in social change through empathy is established in the midst of the novel's darkest scenes. The world such empathy would create has not yet been achieved, as the failure of the People's Charter has too plainly shown, so a literary realm that enacts Gaskell's vision must be counterfactual relative to our own. But the assumption that it is therefore anti-realist does not follow; that an outcome is contingent does not imply that it is

impossible. If the middle-class reader, who has come to be entertained, who does not understand the speech of the laboring man, let alone his plight, who has heard sermons all his life, and listened and wept and yet walked away unchanged, who knows Chaucer and Spencer, but not the mind or heart of his neighbor, can be gradually converted to true empathy by Gaskell's text, then why not Carson, or anyone?

The realist novel is grounded in the conditions of our world. But those conditions are not static, and neither are the boundaries of narrative realism. Fittingly, one of the agents capable of changing the actual world is precisely the realist novel. The structure of *Mary Barton* asks that readers perform the change that will render possible its own outcome. In the ultimate collaboration between an author and her reader, we are asked both imaginatively to recover lost possibilities and actively to create new ones. Accepting Gaskell's charge, we extend the possibilities of our own world: while it is impossible to trace the widening of human sympathies, it is worth noting that the second reform bill, which was being debated in the late 1860s as Eliot was writing *Middlemarch*, granted the extension of franchise the organized Chartist movement seen in *Mary Barton* never managed to secure. In turn, we extend the possibilities of the novel, which will not always be about Dorothea after all, though we love her no less for having widened the scope of our concern.

The last rhetorical question in *Mary Barton* is asked, not by the narrator, but by Mary. Having just been told that her lost aunt Esther has been seen walking the streets as a prostitute, she declares that she and Jem must find her. Jem wonders what they could do if they did, to which Mary returns “Do! Why, what could we *not* do, if we could but find her?” Roused to action by Mary's faith, Jem agrees: they will take the fallen women to Canada, and their love will make her good. But Gaskell, like Dickens, decrees differently: “it was not to be” (561). Mary's

faith could never have been enough: like Nell, like Strether, like Marty, Mary must confront the limits of a narrative world that can only be so much better than the world and time that produced it. The road is rough, for all that we are wise and kind and faithful; even Mary and Jem can find their happiness only in a Canada invested with all the reality of Shakespeare's Bohemia and its stormy coasts. But it is no coincidence, perhaps, that the novel ends with the news of the miraculous restoration of Margaret's vision. Like a counterfactual, the event is both present in and absent from the text, we hear about it only third-hand, through a letter from across seas. Like the crucial scene in a proxy narrative, it is almost impossible to accept; the novel can only manage it at all by slipping, again, into vagueness – "they" have done "something to...give her back her sight" (576). Yet what is at stake here is finally not Margaret's vision, but our own. At the end, we return to the old question: Can you see them? Can you really? And, at least for a moment, we do see, and hear, and love, and hope that that will be enough to make new worlds in their image.

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[i] Earlier in the same chapter, another counterfactual suggests an ending that tallies almost precisely with the final scene of Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss,* in which the “fallen” Maggie reconciles with her brother as both die in a flood: “If they could both fall together into the current now, their arms would be so tightly clasped together that they could not be saved; they would go out of the world almost painlessly, and there would be no more reproach to her” (249).

[ii] See Alexius Meinong. “On the Theory of Objects.” *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*. Ed. Roderick Chisolm. (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960), 76-117. The term “Meinong's jungle” has been credited to William C. Kneale. For a modern study on Meinong and his critics, see Richard Sylvan, *Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond: An Investigation of Noneism and the Theory of Items*. (Canberra: Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1980).

[iii] Among these, counterfactual history is the most controversial. The most prominent proponent of counterfactual, or virtual history is probably Niall Ferguson, whose 1997 edited collection *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* increased awareness of that mode of inquiry.

[iv] For the sake of the present argument, I am focusing only on Russell's discussion of non-referring definite descriptions, in other words, references to a specific entity that does not exist. The argument of “On Denoting” is far wider-reaching, including a number of other categories of reference, including indefinite and ambiguous statements.

[v] This is less apparent in “Truth in Fiction” than in Lewis's other writings; his principal work on the subject is *On the Plurality of Worlds.*

[vi] For a general overview of modal logic, see Blackburn, de Rijke, and Venema.

[vii] In this, he was perhaps inspired by theoretical physicists who had begun to consider the concept of parallel worlds as a viable solution to their own explanatory difficulties. The Many-Worlds Interpretation of physics is most closely associated with Hugh Everett, although Everett did not himself use the term, and the extent to which he accepted Many Worlds as a valid extrapolation of his quantum theory is not entirely clear (Barret and Byrne 39-40). For a brief and accessible summary of the theory and its reception, see March Buchanan, “Many Worlds: See Me Here, See Me There,” *Nature* 448 (5 July 2007): 15-17.

[viii] The term is also used by Lewis, who in *On the Plurality of Worlds* discusses (in a non-fictional context) doxastically and epistemically accessible worlds – in other words, worlds accessible to us because of our beliefs and worlds accessible to us based on our knowledge about our own. His discussion of these categories, incidentally, suggests a partial answer to Proudfoot's objection, as Lewis points out that the world that the actual world is very likely not doxastically accessible to most of its inhabitants, namely anyone who firmly believes in the truth of something that turns out actually to be false of our world. In this sense, the single world that is accessible to us is not more stable than that of the unreliable narrator (33-37).

[ix] Plot, of course, has been defined in a number of ways. The pithiest is perhaps E.M. Forster's in *Aspects of the Novel:* The king died and then the queen died,’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief,’ is a plot” (86). The element of intention is implicit in the emphasis of such definitions on the act of narration, as distinct from the narrated events; the former constituting deliberate process undertaken by a teller with subjective interpretations and a particular purpose and agenda. This is more explicit in the use of the term “plot” - and its rough Russian equivalent *syuzhet* – in the early twentieth-century myth and genre criticism of Vladimir Propp, Northrop Frye, and Claude Levi-Strauss, in which different “plots” archetypes perform particular types of cultural work. More recently, Peter Brooks's concept of “textual erotics” arises in part from a view of plot as the expression of a “form of desire” that will be consummated in the reading of the text (*Reading for the Plot* 37).

[x] Many of these studies are detailed in Neal J. Roese and James M. Olson's *What Might Have Been: The Social Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking.*

[xi] According to Elizabeth Gaskell, Brontë herself said that "she could no more alter her fictitious ending than if they had been facts which she was relating." She included the passage at all only out of deference to her father, who "disliked novels who made a melancholy impression upon his mind... and requested her to make her hero and heroine... 'marry and live happily ever after.'" (392).

[xiixii] In *Unbecoming Woman,* Susan Fraiman reads even *Pride and Prejudice,* possibly the closest the nineteenth-century novel comes to an ideal marriage plot, as "the humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet" (59). D.A. Miller is similarly dissatisfied with the fate of Austen's heroines, observing that "the realism of her works allows no one like Jane Austen to appear in them" (28); the "style" of Austen the narrator must be sacrificed if her heroines are to become proper subjects of narration (*Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style*).

[xiii] For Fraiman, Jane's sacrifice of the rebellious, socially marginalized child-self to become the wife and nursemaid of Rochester is represented most starkly in her dismissal of Rochester's illegitimate daughter to a boarding school.

[xiv] The British Obscenity Publishing Act of 1857 was the era's first formal tool of censorship, but the rise in the 1840s of Mudie's Circulating Library, which refused to distribute books "unfit" for family consumption, provided a commercial incentive for authors to police their own works (Griest).

Notes to Chapter Two

[i] Leavis only tacitly acknowledges his own reversal, arguing against previous critics who have dismissed Dickens without including himself in their number. Well before Leavis had made his conversion, Humphrey House's *The Dickens World* (1944) was the text perhaps most responsible for turning the critical tide in favor of Dickens.

[ii] Often, this has resulted in diminished critical attention to the earlier works; Stephen Marcus's 1986 *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey,* is written in part to counteract that trend, although even he had intended to follow it up with a companion book on the later novels.

[iii] Indeed, Gerald Prince notes that there are in theory as many genres as there are texts, although he finally contents himself with calling for classifications that are deductive and descriptive rather than inductive and prescriptive (278)

[iv] Dannenberg uses the concept of "ontological hierarchy" mainly to distinguish between realist texts, in which only one actual world is possible, and various levels of non-realist fictions, which may permit the existence of multiple textual actual worlds. It is also, however, implicit in her brief discussion of the authenticating effect of realist fictions, which she rather says "reinforces the reality of the narrative world by *ontological default."*

[v] See also Robyn Warhol's essay "What Might Have Been is Not What Is: Dickens's Narrative Refusals," which focuses on the prevalence of moments of narrative refusal (in which characters decline to speak of an event as it actually occurred) in the author's later works.

[vi] For a reading of the novel that emphasizes Nell's gender, see Laurie Langbauer. "Dickens's Streetwalkers: Women and the Form of Romance." *English Literary History* 53 (1986): 411-431.

[vii] Citing Gissing, Langbauer calls the *The Arabian Nights* the "most important romantic influence on Dickens' writing." Ibid, 416.

[viii] The most comprehensive argument in favor of the original argument – in addition to the most thorough overview of critical approaches to the two endings – is Edgar Rosenberg's "Putting an End to *Great Expectations."* See Jerome Meckier's "Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations:* A Defense of the Second Ending" for a similarly vigorous argument for the altered conclusion

[ix] Edwin Eigner notes that even readers who have appreciated the revised ending have tended to be suspicious of the motives behind it in part because of Bulwer-Lytton's role; he quotes Sylvere Monod's suggestion that we try to forget "that Bulwer originated the change" (105). The decline in Bulwer-Lytton's own reputation has not helped the second ending's case; although he was a respected member of the literary establishment in his own day, he is now perhaps best known for inspiring the annual Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest for the worst sentence written in the English language.

[x] Some critics have gone further than this and suggested that Estella should not properly be a part of the novel's conclusion at all. Milton Millhauser's *Great Expectations: The Three Endings* argues that the novel should end with Pip's return to the forge, while Peter Brooks sets his ideal ending farther back with Pip's acceptance of Magwitch. It is at this point, Brooks argues, that the plot resolves itself with Pip's recognition that his life will not operate according to the triumphalist narrative he has imagined for himself – a crucial part of which is the notion that marriage with Estella is his destined end (*Reading for the Plot.*

[xi] Rosenberg's swipe at Meckier is a caricature of the latter's position, but is too witty not to bear repeating: "At the same time, precisely because the composition of Pip's story coincides with Dickens's, Meckier would have you believe that Estella must have been dead by 1861 or she would have collapsed of shock at reading her shaming story in the pages of *All the Year Round.* I can't be the only biped in creation who finds the very notion of Estella's reading any issue of *All the Year Round* deeply distressing" (503).

[xii] Dannenberg suggests that this is more broadly characteristic of nineteenth-century counterfactuals, which mediate between the rigid causality of realist texts and the radical instability of many post-modern ones (193).

[xiii] One such comparison can be found in David Lodge's "Ambiguously Ever After: Problematic Endings in English Fiction." Lodge prefers the second ending to *Great Expectations* on the grounds that it more closely approaches the openness of modernism than most traditional novels.

[xiv] DuPlessis, in *Writing Beyond the Ending,* focuses her argument on twentieth century female writers. Fraiman, in *Unbecoming Women,* without framing her discussion explicitly as one of resistance to closure, writes rather about the struggles of eighteenth and nineteenth-century female authors to reinvent the traditionally male narrative of the novel of development. Dannenberg's reference to writing "around the ending" is a more explicit attempt to apply DuPlesssis' framework to the nineteenth-century novel.

[xv] Edmund Wilson was not the first to propose this theory, which suggests that Jasper was influenced by the Kali-worshiping Thugee cult that had been active in Britain in the 1830s and 1840s, but his "Dickens: The Two Scrooges" provides the most thorough elaboration of it.

[xvi] See, most notably, Gerhard Joseph's 1996 "Who Cares who Killed Edwin Drood?" in *Nineteenth Century Literature.* Despite the title, Joseph spends some time laying out a convincing case for Jasper as murderer; for Joseph, the novel is not really intended as a mystery at all, and there is thus no compelling reason to search for an ingenious, but invariably unconvincing, solution to the case.

Notes to Chapter Three:

[i] Prince's unnarratable also includes events that can be presumed to occur in a text but which cannot be represented for other reasons, for instance, because of social taboo. By contrast, the disnarrated, which refers to considerations of counterfactual alternatives, comprises those events that are represented despite not actually taking place in the actual world of the text.

[ii] Rayner's research found that the level of the processing delay depends on the specific placement of the letters – an inversion of two consecutive letters causes far less delay than that of more distant letters. Even the minor inversion causes some delay, but this does not necessarily mean that the reader is consciously aware of the error for which his or her mind works to compensate.

[iii] A related effect in visual processing is "serial dependence," which explains, among other phenomena, why most people do not catch minor continuity errors in movies (i.e, the color of a character's shirt changing within a single scene). Essentially, because our minds are accustomed to a visually stable "continuity field," the automatic

expectation of such logical sequence leads us to overlook rare disruptions to this usual order (Fischer and Whitney).

[iv] Austen was by no means opposed to theater, and in fact wrote of her acute disappointment on missing the chance to see Sarah Siddons perform. Her family had even staged private theatricals during her childhood. Her objection to the *Mansfield Park* performance seems to come rather from the moral danger posed by staging that particular play among a group of young people liable to become overly invested in roles that reflect their own desires – as indeed happens in the case of Maria Bertram, who uses the license provided by the play to begin her disastrous flirtation with Henry Crawford. See Judith W. Fisher's "'Don't Put your Daughter on the Stage Lady B,': Talking about Theatre in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*" in *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* for more background on Austen and theater.

[v] While I have chosen to use more familiar European fairy tales, Propp's examples come from Russian folktales.

[vi] To the extent that insanity could have been accepted by contemporary readers as a logical extension of the novel's themes, it would have been by evoking what was essentially a cultural proxy narrative that associated female insanity with sexual immorality. For more on this relationship, see Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Woman, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980.*

[vii] See Jennifer Kushnier's "Educating Boys to be Queer: *Lady Audley's Secret,"* which reads the novel's homoeroticism in light of the culture of the nineteenth-century English public school.

[viii] See A.L. French's "A Note on Middlemarch" in volume 26.3 of *Nineteenth Century Fiction* for an extended (if sometimes excessively literal) close reading of the passage as a metaphor for the consummation of Dorothea and Casaubon's marriage.

[ix] For Eliot and for Maggie, the crime seems to be the betrayal of Lucy and Philip rather than sexual impropriety, but the effect is the same; in either case, the relevant distinction is between a completed and perhaps irrevocable lapse, and one that seems ambiguous and mild enough to admit of some degree of narrative forgiveness.

[x] It is worth noting here that *The Mill on the Floss* is the first of Eliot's novels published after her identity – and the scandal of her affair with George Lewes – had become known, so Eliot and Blackwood may have felt the need to tread particularly carefully; as Tillotson observes, Eliot's relationship with Lewes risked compromising her publisher's reputation as well as her own (67).

[xi] Dinah Mulock, for instance, writing in *MacMillan's Magazine*, summarizes the relevant portion of the "very simple story" as one of Maggie being "tempted to treachery and [sinking] into great error, her extrication out of which...is simply an impossibility" (155-156). Ruskin, in a passage of *Fiction Fair and Foul* written just after Eliot's death, uses *The Mill on the Floss* as an example of contemporary literature whose characters manifest a "want... of common self command" and acknowledge "little further law of morality than the instinct of an insect." It is actually unclear in this passage whether or not Ruskin has yet read the novel, although a later essay reveals that he has since done so. His imperfect knowledge of the plot, however, suggests the easy conflation of the boat ride with a more complete fall: "Rashly inquiring the other day a plot of a modern story from a female friend, I elicited, after some hesitation, that it hinged mainly on the young people's 'forgetting themselves on a boat'..." (166). The friend's tactful hesitation, combined with the scare quotes around the description itself, suggests euphemism, but the summary is in fact almost literally true.

[xii] The term "legless angel," is George Orwell's, and was originally applied to Dickens's Agnes Wickfield, who he called the "real legless angel of Victorian romance." See "Charles Dickens," *George Orwell: An Age Like This 1920-1940,* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 459.

Notes to Chapter Four

[i] A "*ficelle"* is, in James's definition, a character who exists for purely functional purposes; see complete explanation below.

[ii] At the low point in James's brief theatrical career, he was booed off the stage after appearing for a bow at the premiere of *Guy Domville,* an incident described at some length by Leon Edel in his biography.

[iii] "If thought...like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then [Mr. Ramsay's] splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q....But after Q? What comes next...Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something" (*To the Lighthouse* 39). The wandering Jew, of course, is Joyce's Leopold Bloom.

[iv] In *Reading for the Plot,* Peter Brooks sees the puzzle of reading *Absalom, Absalom!,* and by extension many other twentieth-century novels, as the problem of finding any plot at all; in Brooks's reading, *Absalom, Absalom!* contains an overabundance of story and narration, but suppresses the plot that would render them intelligible. In James, by contrast, there is if anything too much plot – his novels work at the level of narrative meaning, but the events of story often seem unable to bear the weight their role in this plot suggests they should carry.

[v] Edna Kenton, is credited with having been the first critic to deny the reality of the ghosts in "Henry James to the Ruminant Reader: The Turn of the Screw," published in 1924, but the reading only began to gain currency a decade later when Edmund Wilson published "The Ambiguity of Henry James." Sidney Lind's "The Turn of the Screw: The Torment of Critics" provides a useful survey of the novella's early reception.

[vi] Not that this has prevented people, including some medical professionals, from attempting to diagnose her. Caroline Mercer and Sarah Wangensteen, in "Consumption, Heart Disease, or Whatever" suggest that she has chlorosis, a popular diagnosis for "hysterical" women in the late nineteenth century, while AR Tintner argues instead for cancer in "Inoperable Cancer: An Alternative Diagnosis for Milly Theale's Illness.

[vii] See, for example, Virginia Fowler's "Milly Theale's Malady of Self."

[viii] The phrase is used by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to suggest that the validity of a belief is tied to its utility.

[ix] William Veeder, for instance, in "Strether and the Transcendence of Language," takes Strether's final act as the ideal synthesis between New England morality and European romanticism, while F.O Matthiessen issued the rather devastating verdict that Strether's failure to fulfill his "wholly new sense of life" leaves readers ruing "his relative emptiness" (39).

[x] See, for instance, Marco Portales's *Strether and Women,* which discusses both Strether's lack of romantic interest in Maria Gostrey and his unrequited love of Madame de Vionnet.

[xi] My argument has several similarities to Rivkin's argument on representation in *The Ambassadors,* which also accounts for the novel's final scene as a rejection of a representative system. Rather than suggesting that the novel ultimately rejects representative systems, Rivkin, however, argues that in a world without stable authority – either verbal or of any other kind, – there are finally *only* ambassadors, albeit ones characterized, not by Mrs. Newsome's rigidity, but by "a freely disseminated selfhood." See Rivkin, 57-81.

Notes to Chapter Five

[i] Reviews of *Jude* were actually mixed, rather than wholly negative; see, for instance, William Dean Howells's defense of the novel, first printed in *Harper's Weekly* (Cox 265-268).

[ii] True of novels of the period like *The Mayor of Casterbridge,* this tendency is also reflected in Hardy's 1883 essay "The Dorsetshire Laborer" (Gantrell 25).

[iii] Suzanne Keen, in her article "Empathetic Hardy: Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Strategies of Narrative Empathy," focuses in particular on Hardy's promotion of sympathy with animals in key scenes of identification. Keen notes the possible link between Hardy's compassion for animals and the contemporary anti-vivisectionist movement, although she attributes it primarily to a more personal sympathy rooted in childhood experiences (377-378). Keen's article draws on concepts from her book *Empathy and the Novel,* which cites both Hardy and Gaskell as among those Victorian novelists who promoted "the notion that novel reading can be a personally improving activity and one that may even...inspire allegiance to a political cause (38).

[iv] To again borrow Woloch's language, Father Time is essentially recovering himself as, no longer a worker but an "eccentric character," whose "disruptive, oppositional role" demands that he be excised from the narrative (25).

[v] In *Heart of Midlothian,* a simple Scottish farm girl named Jeanie Deans becomes a key witness when her sister is accused of murdering her illegitimate child. If Jeanie will falsely claim that her sister had previously confided in her about the pregnancy and her plans for the child, it will support her contention that she had no intention of harming the baby. The incorruptible Jeanie refuses to lie, but then makes heroic efforts to win a royal pardon for her sister.

[vi] It is worth noting, however, that despite his advocacy, Attwood was ambivalent about several of the particulars of the Chartist platform. For more background on Attwood and the People's Charter, see David Moss's biography *Thomas Attwood: Biography of a Radical,* especially chapters eight and nine.

[vii] The text is taken from *Hansard*, the official edited report of proceedings of the English parliament. At this period, transcripts were written in the third person, and were not necessarily verbatim. The citation indicates that this is a House of Commons debate of July 12th 1839 recorded in volume 49, although I have used the online version maintained by the UK Parliament at hansard.millbankssystem.com.

[viii] I follow Warhol in choosing to refer to the narrator as "she" and identify her as an avatar of Gaskell's, a move that seems justified by the inclusion of elements of Gaskell's own biography, particularly the death of her child.

[ix] Some critics believe that the footnotes were written entirely by Gaskell's husband, William, who was an expert on dialect; the fifth edition of the novel included two of his lectures on the Lancashire dialect as an appendix. Elizabeth Gaskell's letters to her publishers, however, suggest her own investment in and knowledge of her characters' language: she wrote after the first printing complaining of spelling errors in dialect words, and encloses several verses of "The Oldham Weaver" in another letter (Jackson 58). Many other critics refer to the footnotes as Elizabeth Gaskell's without further comment, and on balance it seems likely that she played a significant role in decisions over use of dialect and the accompanying annotations.

[x] Catherine Gallagher has written on a corresponding *political* motivation for rejecting elements of the novel's melodrama plot. While John Carson initially interprets his son's death as the result of a love triangle, the root cause of the tragedy has been the far more prosaic suffering of his own workers; his mistake is in reading the event as melodrama rather than urban realism.