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by

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Benevolent Failures:

The Economics of Philanthropy in Victorian Literature

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**Benevolent Failures:
The Economics of Philanthropy in Victorian Literature**

by

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By what means, then, is poverty to be contended against? How is the evil of low wages to be remedied? If the expedients usually recommended for the purpose are not adapted to it, can no others be thought of? Is the problem incapable of solution? Can political economy do nothing, but only object to everything and demonstrate that nothing can be done?

---J. S. Mill, *The Principles of Political Economy*

“Man,” said the Ghost, “if man you are in heart, not adamant, forbear that wicked cant until you have discovered What surplus is, and Where it is. Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die? It may be, that in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man’s child. Oh God! to hear the Insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust!”

---Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

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Benevolent Failures:
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This dissertation critically examines why mid-Victorian fiction often dismisses or complicates monetary transactions and monetary charity, even as it negatively portrays differences in social status and wealth. I argue that the novel uses representations of failed charity to reconstruct, however briefly, a non-monetary and non-economic source of value. Further, I examine how the novel uses techniques of both genre and style to predict, form, and critique alternate, non-economic, social models. While tension surrounding the practice of charity arises in the late eighteenth century, the increasing dominance of political economy in public discourse forced Victorian literature to take a strong stance, for reasons of both ethics and genre. This stance is complicated by the eighteenth-century legacy that portrays charity as a kind of luxury. If giving to the poor makes us feel good, this logic suggests, surely it isn't moral. Thus, while much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature remains dedicated to the ethics of charity, the practice becomes immensely complex. By discussing the works of Tobias Smollett, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot, this project exposes a wide variety of responses to this deep

cultural anxiety. These authors are, ultimately, strongly invested in redefining the meaning of benevolence as a valid form of social action by moving that benevolence away from monetary gifts and toward abstractly correct moral feelings, though their individual solutions vary widely.

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Introduction

The Luxury Debates, the Poor Laws, and the Crisis of Victorian Fiction

When Henry Mayhew describes the chaos of London markets in the 1840s, he deliberately blurs the line between acts of buying and selling and acts of begging and charity. Children selling vegetables “creep between people, wriggling their way through every interstice, and asking for custom in whining tones, as if seeking charity.”¹ Descending further into the market, he notes the “clean family, begging; the father with his head down as if in shame, and a box of lucifers held forth in his hand—the boys in newly-washed pinafores, and the tidily got-up mother with a child at her breast” (1.10). The father isn’t begging, though, despite Mayhew’s description—he is selling matches. Of course, selling matches was an occupation hardly sufficient to feed young girls, let alone the entire “clean family” of at least three children. Mayhew later goes on to explain that match-selling itself is an almost entirely liminal occupation. A match-seller he interviews much later in the volume complains, as he tries to calculate the number of match-sellers in London, that “I don't reckon them as begs, or whines, or sticks to a house for an hour, but them as sells; in my opinion, they're 200, and no more. All the others dodges, in one way or other, on pity and charity” (1.433). So, this family’s participation in an act of commerce is, in and of itself, a non-

¹ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, ed. John D. Rosenberg (1849; New York: Dover Publications, 1968) 1.9. Subsequent references in text, with volume number indicated.

commercial activity. Moreover, charity, in this case, is the same as any other of the “street dodges” that Mayhew will eventually illuminate. At the same time, Mayhew’s description undercuts common stereotypes of begging. The family is neither dirty nor loud, neither proud nor drunken. Unlike the earlier children, who participate in a more legitimate act of sale, there is no “whining tone” here.

For Mayhew, sellers beg and beggars sell, and the topsy-turvy nature of London markets is just another part of their interest. But the markets weren’t the only thing turning upside-down in the middle of the nineteenth century. The very nature of economic writing was shifting. Earlier writers were, like Mayhew himself, quick to discuss poverty and vice; indeed, poverty and scarcity were the driving economic force for Malthusian economists. By the end of the century, this theoretical position would be radically reversed. After the “marginalist revolution” in the 1870s, economics became almost exclusively focused on purchasing and consumer choice, rather than on labor, production, and scarcity.

According to Mary Poovey:

economics’ embrace of mathematical modeling, which was inextricably linked to the theory of marginal utility, helped widen the gap between a mode of explanation that was obviously (if not perfectly) related to the phenomena it sought to describe and another mode whose referential capacity was arguably less important than its formal coherence.²

In other words, after the work of economists such as William Stanley Jevons and Alfred Marshall, economics no longer had a need to account for social realities

² Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008) 277.

such as poverty.

Modern scholars criticize the resulting school, now often called “neoclassical economics,” for focusing exclusively on individual preference, as opposed to large-scale social action; in neoclassical economics “self-interested agents must use their reason—they must make choices between alternative uses—about the disposition of their resources in order to realize their ends.”³ Rather than studying large group phenomena—most relevantly here, poverty—“all social institutions can be reduced to the individual preferences of the agents who comprise such institutions and groups.”⁴ Focusing on this kind of individual economic choice inevitably pulls economics away from politics. While somewhat disingenuous about his own involvements, Jevons set the tone when he quipped that “about politics, I confess myself in a fog.”⁵ Rather than being genuinely apolitical, though, this type of economic thought expends “much energy . . . to efface and ignore the political constitution of such thought.”⁶

Mayhew’s mid-century ambivalence, poised just before this drastic economic turn, is echoed in the more exclusively economic writings of his decade. Economists like John Stuart Mill were forced to actively decide what role charity and poverty would have in their own economic writings, at a time when both were still vitally important to Britain but becoming less and less so in

³ Jack Amariglio, Stephen Resnick, and Richard D. Wolff, “Division and Difference in the ‘Discipline’ of Economics,” *Knowledges: Historical and Critical Studies in Disciplinarity*, ed. Ellen Messer-Davidow, David R. Shumway, and David J. Sylvan (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1993) 168.

⁴ Armaglio, Resnick, and Wolff 169.

⁵ Qtd in Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times, and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers*, 7th ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999) 182.

⁶ Armaglio, Resnick, and Wolff 154.

economics as a discipline. In this first section of my chapter, I will examine this ideological crisis of charity as it appears in Mill and Mayhew, two writers whose ostensibly quite different goals become surprisingly similar over the course of their texts. Discussing these two writers will reveal a deep and important Victorian social anxiety about philanthropy, which the remainder of my project hopes to illuminate and the remainder of this chapter will historicize.

In his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848, revised 1865), Mill subscribes to a Malthusian position regarding surplus population. Because of the nature of supply and demand, he argues, the only way to permanently increase the standard of living among the working class is for there to be fewer workers. The only way to decrease the numbers of the working class is for working-class families to have fewer children. But, like many Victorians, Mill believes that the poor tend to automatically convert higher wages into more children, rather than into a higher standard of living: “the use they commonly choose to make of any advantageous change in their circumstances, is to take it out in the form which, by augmenting the population, deprives the succeeding generation of the benefit.”⁷ The desire of the middle classes to move up the social ladder encourages them to have relatively few children, but if the poor can “bring up a family as they themselves were brought up, even the prudent among them are easily satisfied” (174). Even worse, the poor are tempted to “rely on fortune, or the resources to be found in legal or voluntary charity” to help them raise these

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *The Principles of Political Economy* (1848 & 1865, Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2004) 175. The version used is based on Mill’s revised edition of 1865. Passages cited here have been checked against the 1848 first edition; significant changes are noted. Subsequent citations in text.

children (174). Poverty is rendered here as not only choice—one could be more upwardly mobile with fewer children—but as a deliberate abuse of public resources.

For all his pessimism about the state of population, though, Mill is considerably less acerbic than many Malthusians. He notes, for instance, that as society progresses “population is restrained by fear of want, rather than want itself. Even where there is no question of starvation, many are similarly acted upon by the apprehension of losing what have come to be regarded as the decencies of their situation in life” (173). To the extent that even the working class can come to expect a higher standard of living, they will have fewer children. This causation, however, is enormously delayed because the poor lack adequate foresight: “Improvement in the habits and requirements of the mass of unskilled day laborers” can only be the result of “raising the entire body to a state of tolerable comfort and maintaining them in it until a new generation grows up” (367). Only children raised in this “tolerable comfort” will see that lifestyle as a requirement rather than a luxury and moderate their behavior accordingly. In this way Mill attempts to moderate what he sees as the self-sabotage of the poor. If they are content merely to stay in the same situation, generation after generation, the only way for them to move forward as a class is for that situation to be substantially altered by those in another economic position. By this logic, only a serious, forward-thinking, middle-class altruism can reduce class inequality.

While Mill could use this quandary as an excuse to abandon the poor to

their own devices, a gesture that many philanthropists criticized in economics at large, he instead proposes specific solutions. First, Mill believes that the poor need a guaranteed level of practical education. More importantly than any set curriculum, they should be taught to recognize “the tendencies of their actions” with the desired effect of creating “a public opinion by which intemperance and improvidence of every kind would be held discreditable, and the improvidence which overstocks the labor market would be severely condemned” (366). In their current state, the poor are “careless of the consequences of their actions” exactly because they have no expectations of social advancement (366). The second stage of Mill’s project, then, after teaching the poor the social realities of cause and effect is to provide hope of social advancement through colonization and land reform. Once able to understand the consequences of their actions, the poor will be able to make better use of new opportunities. More critically, we might say, once the poor are educated to have an appropriately middle-class ideology of social advancement, they can be “trusted” not to abuse such social opportunity.

As someone who proposes what he saw as non-charitable methods of reform, Mill has an understandably complex attitude toward philanthropy. In several instances, he mocks philanthropic efforts as an insufficient and often ridiculous way of bandaging social problems. He remarks scathingly that agricultural laborers “with large families, and eight or perhaps nine shillings for their weekly wages when in full employment, have for some time been one of the stock objects of popular compassion: it is time that they had the benefit also of some application of common sense” (346). Mill applauds “sensitiveness to the

hardships of the poor” at the same time that he is frustrated by “an unwillingness to face the real difficulty of their position” (346). Like many philanthropists, then, Mill feels the injustice of the middle class’s general ignorance of both the causes and the effects of poverty. Indeed, he claims that this ignorance often causes middle class charity to do more harm than good. In the 1848 edition of his text, he criticizes those who see “improvidence” as a key recommendation to charity:

While a man who is intemperate in drink, is discountenanced and despised by all who profess to be moral people, is it not to this hour the favorite recommendation for any parochial office bestowed by popular election, to have a large family and be unable to maintain them? Do not the candidates placard their intemperance on walls, and publish it through the town in circulars?⁸

Giving charity, or in this case remunerated public office, to people whose only recommendation is having too many children is, in Mill’s analogy, the equivalent of buying drinks for alcoholics.

⁸ Thomas Carlyle uses this opportunity to make a Dickensian joke. His marginalia to this passage exclaims “Bumble for Beadle! He has ten children!” (See *Carlyle: Books & Margins*, UCSC Bibliographical Series Number Three [University of California, 1980]). Bumble is the Beadle of *Oliver Twist*, and *Sketches By Boz* mocks the same voting phenomenon. In 1865 Mill modified the ending of the above quoted paragraph to read: “While a man who is intemperate in drink, is discountenanced and despised by all who profess to be moral people, it is one of the chief grounds made use of in appeals to the benevolent that the applicant has a large family and is unable to maintain them.” Mill further softens the message by adding, in a footnote, “Little improvement can be expected in morality until the producing of large families is regarded with the same feelings as drunkenness or any other physical excess. But while the aristocracy and clergy are foremost to set the example of this kind of incontinence what can be expected from the poor?” (361).

Despite what could thus be easily constructed as an anti-charitable attitude, Mill does strongly support the operations of public charity. He is especially sensitive to the plight of poor children, arguing that “since no one is responsible for having been born, no pecuniary sacrifice is too great to be made by those who have more than enough, for the purpose of securing enough to all persons already in existence” (350). The idea of personal responsibility resonates strongly through all of Mill’s writings about poverty, and here he uses it to dilute the most objectionable effects of Malthusianism. We must do what we can to limit future population growth, but we cannot in good conscience allow existing children to die merely to, in the words of Ebenezer Scrooge, “reduce the surplus population.” Mill does believe strongly, though, in doing all that can be done to prevent this generation’s surplus from perpetuating itself: “it is another thing altogether, when those who have produced and accumulated are called upon to abstain from consuming until they have given food and clothing, not only to all who now exist, but to all whom these or their descendants may think fit to call into existence” (351). If this excess charity comes to be expected, “there would be nothing to hinder population from starting forward at its rapidest rate” (351). Charity must be given with great care, in Mill’s view, lest it remove any hope of its own efficacy. When population does advance “at its rapidest rate,” no amount of charity will be sufficient to prevent starvation and disease.

So, what does successful charity look like? First, Mill warns that any charity that guarantees subsistence must be part of a larger social system. He claims in several places in his text that the state should consider restricting marriage to

those who can prove their ability to provide for potential offspring. Otherwise, we “lavish the means of benefiting mankind, without attaining the object” (352). Perhaps unexpectedly for those who envision Mill as a defender of personal liberty, the same sentiments lead him to strongly embrace the New Poor Law and the principle of less eligibility. One way to keep charity from only increasing the population is to provide “relief, though ample in respect to necessaries” that is “accompanied by conditions which [the recipients] disliked, consisting of some restraints upon their freedom, and the privation of some indulgences” (353). Nowhere in his lengthy work does Mill choose to address how seldom the “necessaries” dispensed by workhouses were at all sufficient, and his choice of the word “indulgences” suggests a deep suspicion of the working class.⁹ It is, furthermore, quite possible that the “indulgence” Mill has in mind is sex, given that workhouses often separated husbands and wives. In this case, the workhouse and the poor laws are celebrated precisely because they can forcibly enact the restriction on childbirth that Mill so desperately desires from other social strictures, like a mandated minimum age for marriage. Readers should remember, though, that Mill desires the same restraint from the middle and upper classes but leaves their own greed and desire for upward mobility to compel them to have fewer children.

Mill sees this efficient, practical, forward-looking model of state charity as a

⁹ Mill’s inclusion in the Association for Improving Workhouse Infirmaries, founded in 1866, just one year after the revised edition of the *Principles*, suggests that he was indeed aware of workhouse shortcomings. Workhouse scandals were also popular newspaper material throughout the 1840s. (See Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws 1700-1930* [Houndsmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002] 99, 87.)

direct contrast to older paternalistic models. His feelings toward the upper class, indeed, are quite bitter, dwelling on what he sees as the great gap between aristocratic theories of paternalism and their practice. He defines the paternalist model as a view in which “the relation between rich and poor . . . should be only partially authoritative: it should be amiable, moral, and sentimental: affectionate tutelage on the one side, respectful and grateful deference on the other” (694). Mill keenly points out that this “is the ideal of the Future, in the minds of those whose dissatisfaction with the Present assumes the form of affection and regret toward the Past” (694). Mill contends that this lovely vision, like much nostalgia, is only and forever a lovely vision. He does recognize, however, some value in this particular variety of sentimentality. “Self-devotion” and “strong personal attachments” are particularly attractive in a society that could easily base its actions entirely on “feelings arising out of pecuniary interest” (695). “A generous giving of protection, and a grateful receiving of it” are undeniably strong threads to connect disparate elements of society. We must recognize, however, that “these virtues and sentiments” are no longer a necessary part of the modern world (695). Pragmatically, in Mill’s view, paternalism can no longer function because the poor are too quick to realize the gap between the interests of the upper classes and themselves. More importantly, the gap between the classes is now too great—the “necessity of enforcing a stringent Poor Law” to meet with modern demands would soon crush any attempts to actualize paternalistic ideals. Both sentimentally and practically, paternalistic ideals have no place in Mill’s England.

Despite popular criticism resenting economics as anti-charitable, however, Mill's final stance is remarkably favorable toward charity. In the final section of his work, he devotes time to examining the implications of his economic system for philanthropy. Mill generally agrees that poorly considered charity does more harm than good, but he never chooses to use this as a strategy to explicitly disavow the power or place of charity. Instead, he insists that the state has an ethical obligation to keep its citizens alive and relatively comfortable. Mill insists that "though individuals should, in general, be left to do for themselves whatever it can be reasonably expected they should be capable of doing," charity still has an important role. We must be careful, however, to consider the effects of our charity by attending to both "the consequences of the assistance itself, and the consequences of relying on that assistance" (880). Like many economists, Mill believes that relying on public charity can render the poor unable or unwilling to return to more "productive" employment. This understanding leads Mill to an enthusiastic embrace of the principle of less eligibility, which makes public charity more uncomfortable than almost any employment, however meager. The crucial criteria for any large scale philanthropy must consider "that if assistance is given in such a manner that the condition of the person helped is as desirable as that of the person who succeeds in doing the same thing without help, the assistance . . . is mischievous" (881). Thus far Mill aligns himself completely with the standards of the 1834 New Poor Laws.

Nonetheless, Mill remains optimistic about the power of charity. He articulates, for example, reasons that public charity can be beneficial, noting that

assistance for the “hopeless” can be “a tonic, not a sedative” (881). Charity is as capable of helping people to begin again as it is of rendering them unwilling to work. More substantially, Mill also insists on the power of individual charity, when given on a case-by-case basis. While Mill sees that private charity is too fickle to provide the funds for large-scale aid, he acknowledges that in many cases it can be more effective. In Mill’s strict division of public and private charity, the one thing the state absolutely cannot do is to distinguish the “deserving” from the “undeserving” poor. State-funded aid to the destitute is a human right, and the state thus cannot leave its dispensation to be contingent upon a possibly faulty set of moral criteria. This exact niche is the province of private charity. Precisely because private benefactors are not obligated to give help to everyone, they can both give more than mere subsistence and choose to give only to certain people. While Mill is not explicit, his division of public and private leaves to private charity the task of helping those who are not starving. Anyone who needs something other than the workhouse is the proper object of the individual benefactor. In this model, Mill is left with a single purpose for private charity—it must seek out the deserving person who is most likely to benefit. This is, according to Mill, the “particular and appropriate province” of private charity, and “it is commendable or the contrary, as it exercises the function with more or less discernment” (882). The only successful private charity is thoughtful charity, where the emotions of the giver are not allowed to overrun judgment about charity’s effects.

Henry Mayhew precisely demonstrates the problem with Mill’s tidy model,

as will many of the other texts this project will examine. Most crucially, how, exactly, is one to know the line between deserving and undeserving? Mill shows that the state, with its large powers of surveillance, cannot possibly make the distinction, but he offers no way for individuals to know it, either. *London Labour and the London Poor* complicates this situation far more than it illuminates it. Mayhew, as mentioned above, first demonstrates a variety of ways in which there is no clear line between legitimate street occupations and begging. The boys and girls who sweep the streets provide a valuable service in the dirty metropolis, but they earn no wages except from begging. Even those wages are forfeited when police are present. At the other extreme, little girls sell flowers to ladies and gentlemen who buy them, out of charity, for more than their market price. Which of these is charity, and which bad business?

Mayhew believes, and demonstrates, that charity can be effective. For example, he narrates the story of an elderly couple, the husband very ill and the wife working diligently to earn only enough money to care for him. Mayhew describes the woman's distaste for parish relief: "What shocked him the most was that I was obliged in his old age to go and ask for relief at the parish . . . the only parish money that ever we had was this, and it *does* hurt him every day to think that he must be buried by the parish after all" (1.386). This situation, as Mayhew explicitly states, is a perfect case for individual charity, and, in a rare moment of reflection on his project, he reminds both the couple and his readers that newspaper readers of his accounts have in fact donated money for him to dispense charitably. The husband, Mayhew dryly notes, "was buried out of

funds sent to the 'Morning Chronicle'" (1.386). The charity of Mayhew's readers keeps an elderly man from the shame of a pauper funeral.

Mayhew also distributes money in other ways. In a fascinating enactment of Mill's discussion of interest, he takes a role as a moneylender to the poor. After explaining the usurious interest extracted from the poor, Mayhew goes on to describe his own intervention in the loan market. As one who has "exhibited an interest in the sufferings and privations" of costermongers, Mayhew has "striven to extricate the street-sellers from the grasp of the usurer" by various small loans (1.31). Mayhew is quite clear that this intercession is not charitable. Like many Victorian writers, Mayhew transparently claims that "gifts only degrade struggling honest men into the apathy of beggars" (1.31). Despite this strictly businesslike stance, it soon appears, as it does over and over in this text, that practical experience can support no such absolute division. As an outsider, Mayhew is forced to confess that he has no legal power to "seek or enforce a return of a loan" because he is completely "ignorant of where to find" his borrowers (1.32). The exchange Mayhew desperately envisions as a loan is only so if the costermonger himself chooses to see it as such. He is thus compelled to end his section with a description of how trustworthy the street-sellers are as borrowers—an image he reinforces by an example in which only one of two borrowers repays his part of a joint loan. The example further breaks down through its own language. The two men, as Mayhew recounts, "beg" him for the loan. While Mayhew wants to imagine himself as a benevolent moneylender, the inherent tension in such an idea renders the exact morality of Mayhew's passage

much more ambivalent than he might like.

Mayhew's fourth volume, "Those Who Will Not Work," does more to damage his potentially charitable message than to further it. As critics have pointed out, this volume is from the very beginning more exciting reading than the earlier ones, containing Mayhew's examination of prostitutes, thieves, and other "interesting" members of the London Poor. This volume, and other works like it, served to convince many Londoners that the local poor were "undisciplined, amoral, and parasitic."¹⁰ Moreover, Mayhew's collaborator, Andrew Halliday, ends the volume with a detailed account of the ways in which the poor cheat the charitable impulses of the British public by artfully feigning distress that they do not genuinely feel. For example, Halliday reminds those readers sympathetic to the plight of begging industrial workers that:

Improvements in mechanics, and consequent cheapness to the many, are usually the causes of loss to the few. The sufferings of this minority is immediately turned to account by veteran cadgers, who rush to their wardrobes of well-chosen rags, attire themselves in appropriate costume, and ply their calling with the last grievance out. (4.447)

Halliday here adopts first the rhetoric of economics, arguing that the general social benefit of machinery is infinitely larger than the inconvenience it might cause to a very small number of workers, and then plays upon his readers' fear of being taken in. The "veteran cadger" in his "well-chosen rags" is a stock anti-charitable type, soothing the consciences of the well-off by promising them that

¹⁰ Brundage, *English Poor Laws*, 106.

the distress they see is either entirely or largely sham.

An alternate reading of this ending suggests that Mayhew and Halliday are attempting to give readers the facts they need to make an appropriate charitable decision. Halliday tells his readers, factually, that the very structure of poverty, in the guise of “occasional relief afforded by the parish,” keeps industrial workers in their own places of origin, making any such who appear in the capital less likely to be legitimate (4.447). The general tone of the final section, however, suggests that something less straightforward is at work. The repeated insistence that his message is only to “step between the open hand of true charity and the itching palm of the professional beggar” (4.447) indicates his awareness that the very facts he is providing are damaging to charitable sentiment. But Mayhew stands in the center of a real dilemma, in much the same way as John Stuart Mill. If, as Mayhew’s experiences obviously suggest, a certain portion of begging is legitimate and a certain portion is “professional,” charity does need to discern in order to be effective. Emotionally, though, the knowledge that even a small portion of beggars is not truly distressed is enough to make potential donors hesitate before opening their pockets. Just as it did to their predecessors in the eighteenth century, this knowledge forces Mayhew and Halliday to redefine what true charity is:

Whoever thinks that charity consists in mere giving, and that he has only to put his hand in his pocket, or draw a check in favour of somebody who is very much in want of money, and looks very grateful for favours to be received, will find himself taught better, if not in the school of adversity, at

least by many a hard lesson of kindness thrown away, or perhaps very
brutishly repaid. (4.448)

The mere suggestion that kindness *can* be thrown away aligns *London Labour and the London Poor* with a less purely emotional model of charitable giving. Its final exhortation is, much like Mill's, that "it is the office of reason—reason improved by experience—to teach us not to waste our own interest and our resources on beings that will be content to live on our bounty, and will never return a moral profit to our charitable industry" (4.448). Charity becomes, even for Mayhew, a calculus of cause and effect, profit and loss. Pure, emotionally driven benevolence, divorced from motive and forethought, is no longer even a rhetorical possibility.

I give this extended picture of the crossing of charity and rationality in the mid-nineteenth century for two reasons. First, much of this project will hinge on more literary treatments of this same cultural phenomenon, and these two interconnected examples provide an important chronological snapshot of mid-Victorian anxieties about charity and its emotional implications. Second, the rest of this chapter will argue that this moral calculation is the inevitable result of over a century of debate about the relationships between charity, poverty, self-interest, and social upheaval. While many scholars are hesitant to link nineteenth-century social and economic anxieties to the, in many ways quite different, eighteenth-century debates surrounding luxury and sentimentality, I will show that the two sets of arguments go, certainly and inextricably, hand in hand. In the interest of precision, I try to use the historical terms as carefully as

possible. I carry through the eighteenth-century sense of benevolence as the exclusively *emotional* aspect of charity. Benevolence, as an emotion, can be either the cause or the result of charity, but it can also be separated from those acts, especially in sentimental literature. I have reserved the term “philanthropy” to denote large, often public, acts of charity, intended to benefit groups of people rather than individuals. “Charity” refers to all other acts intended for the benefit of the less fortunate, although I do not exclusively define charity as monetary. The link between benevolence and charity is, in fact, one of this project’s touchstones. One effect of the eighteenth-century luxury debates, to be discussed more fully below, is the coupling of benevolence with what the Victorians came to see as undesirable social traits. The characters of sentimental literature both eroticized charity, by, for example, lingering over giving money to attractive women, and made it ridiculous through sheer excess. As shifting social attitudes made eighteenth-century models of masculinity seem practically obscene, charity, inextricably caught up in the same discourses, had to be renegotiated. Thus, only by considering the link between charity and the socially deviant “luxury,” so closely associated with benevolence in the eighteenth century, can we fully understand the positions of Mill, Mayhew, and their contemporaries.

II. As British citizens in the eighteenth century became the consumers of an increasingly elaborate world of goods, the framework of public morality struggled to admit such “excess.” Coffee, tea, silks, and fashions became as much the subject of sermons as of gossip. Critics of luxury considered it to be “a

debilitating and corrosive social evil” at worst and wasteful of resources at best.¹¹ Such debates only intensified and expanded as the century progressed. John Sekora calls the luxury debates “climactically fierce,” due to a growing fear that luxury was “losing by degrees the religious and political sanction it had possessed since antiquity.”¹² For many eighteenth-century thinkers, luxury was “as potent an enemy as England faces.”¹³ But, while many historians of luxury contend that these debates ended with the eighteenth-century,¹⁴ the legacy of this controversy lingers in nineteenth-century discussions of both economics and charity. Before they “ended,” the luxury debates coupled charity with the same excessive feelings that translated into other forms of conspicuous consumption.¹⁵ The luxury debates of the eighteenth century “required new engagements with the links between material and intellectual culture,”¹⁶ links which both made many spectators deeply uncomfortable and set the stage for long-term ideological shifts.

¹¹ Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, “The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates,” *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires, and Delectable Goods*, ed. Berg and Eger (Houndsmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) 2.

¹² John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought from Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977) 2.

¹³ Sekora 5

¹⁴ Berg and Eger, “Rise and Fall,” 22.

¹⁵ This was, of course, not always the case. Gillian Skinner highlights the newness of such a position by discussing the origin of the term “economics” as the province of careful housekeeper, a usage that remained common until at least 1740. This kind of “economics” of household management was often explicitly linked to charity in advice books for women. A carefully managed house left a woman with money or domestic goods that could be shared. See *Sentimentality and Economics in the Novel, 1740-1800: The Price of a Tear* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) 6.

¹⁶ Berg and Eger, “Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates,” 4.

The luxury of spending money on personal goods was much easier to rationalize than the emotional connection between luxury and charity. The first position was given its most compelling description by Bernard Mandeville. Mandeville adopts a pro-consumption model of morality, arguing that luxury and “useless” spending by the rich in fact help the poor by giving them employment. For Mandeville, owning a superfluous number of silk dresses is the means to keeping silk workers and tailors in business and away from charity. Spending money keeps it in circulation, and thus in the hands of workers, while saving money deprives others of their natural rights. No one, in Mandeville’s model, is more unnatural than a miser.¹⁷ At the same time, Mandeville is strongly opposed to traditional types of charity, including charity schools for poor children. He feels that true charity is incommensurable with human nature, largely because he insists on a much narrower definition of charity than many of his contemporaries. Charity, according to Mandeville, is “that virtue by which part of that sincere love we have for our selves is transferr’d pure and unmix’d to others, not tied to us by the bonds of friendship or consanguinity” (285). This definition leads Mandeville to declare that true charity involves two distinct conditions. First, it requires a degree of mental benevolence. In order to be truly charitable, we must “put the best construction on all that others do or say” (287). The extremity of his examples, such as assuming that a neighbor with his eyes closed in church is being particularly attentive to the sermon, presents this state of mind as a near impossibility. Secondly, we absolutely cannot stand to gain,

¹⁷ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye (1732; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924) 103-106. Further citations in text.

even emotionally, from any true act of charity. Personal gain, including being satisfied that we have helped someone in need, clouds the possibility that our actions are morally pure.¹⁸

When Mandeville argues in favor of luxury, he thus enters as a compelling voice in a complex moral and ethical debate about not just luxury but also the value and place of human selfishness. Like Mill, Mandeville positions himself against the kind of paternalist charity that serves only to bolster the emotions of the wealthy. For Mandeville, luxury was associated not just with material objects, but also with a particular, and hotly contested, set of feelings. He constructs human self-interest as a negative emotion in the strictest moral sense, but one with great power to promote social happiness at large. Because Mandeville sees humans as powered entirely by this self-interest, charity is no longer a good Christian virtue, but rather an expression of our own joy at receiving thanks or at removing a condition that distresses us. Charitable organizations give not only these pleasures, but also the “satisfaction there is in Ordering and Directing” (318) to those who establish them. While Mandeville appears to allow a small possibility of beneficial charity, his ultimate belief is that a general economic well-being, spurred by the selfish spending habits of the upper and middle classes, is the best way to truly aid the poor. Mandeville’s

¹⁸ John Stuart Mill similarly notes: “The gentry of England are usually very charitable. But charitable people have human infirmities, and would, very often, be secretly not a little dissatisfied if no one needed their charity; it is from them one oftenest hears the base doctrine, that God has decreed there shall always be poor” (363). He later claims that, while charity is among our “warmest feelings” we would do much better to remember that “whatever advice, exhortation, or guidance is held out to the laboring classes, must thenceforth be tendered to them as equals, and accepted by them with their eyes open” (695, 697).

somewhat nasty system argues that commerce and virtue are mutually exclusive, and, of the two, commerce is more important. Instead of disguising our self-interest and giving money to “beggars who don’t deserve it,” we should instead indulge it by spending our money in such a way as to “employ vast numbers of laborers” (366).

Like Mandeville’s valuing of self-interest, the discourse of sentimentality further disrupted the sense of “good Christian charity” by rendering the interaction of benefactor and recipient in an intensely emotional language. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Adam Smith reminds us, as Mandeville does, that sympathy itself is not just a moral good, it is inherently pleasant. Human nature, he argues, enjoys both the giving and receiving of sympathy, as sympathy is the emotion that most directly proves our humanity. As Smith points out, no matter which emotions we experience, “nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast.”¹⁹ Indeed, Smith’s entire social structure is based on an idea of sympathy. We learn to be appropriately social beings inasmuch as the “man within the breast,” Smith’s term for our social conscience, internalizes social norms:

We either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station, we either can or cannot entirely enter into and sympathize with the sentiments and motives which influenced it. (163)

¹⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1792; Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000) 10. Further citations in text.

Sympathy thus moves beyond a merely external phenomenon and instead becomes the most fundamental component of human psychology. We neither *can* nor *want* to avoid feeling it. Accepting that sympathy is pleasure, however, makes charity itself suspect to critics. If we enjoy our feelings of sympathy, and thus enjoy giving charity, who really benefits? And is it truly ethical to give charity that benefits the giver?

Although explicitly anti-Mandevillian in that he denies the inherent corruption of self-interest, Smith arrives at a similar place: we give charity because we enjoy the feelings it occasions. When Smith's sympathetic transaction becomes financial, however, it becomes intensely difficult to translate into consistently ethical behavior. Smith, typical of his position in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, believes that part of our pleasure in such moments is in accurately gauging the correct needs of our recipient and in the recipient's expression of a gratitude both natural and appropriate to the situation. To such an extent, sympathy is exactly like a commercial transaction in which the value to the seller and to the buyer must be the same. We find it very difficult, says Smith, to sympathize with gratitude for charity, "if in the conduct of the benefactor there appears to have been no propriety of conduct, how beneficial soever its effects" (103). Instead, what we desire from a benefactor is something far more abstract than a valuable gift; we desire the perfect expression of sympathy. We feel the most natural affection toward a giver who demonstrates "the concord between his sentiments and our own, with regard to what interests us so nearly as the worth of our own character, and the esteem that is due to us" (138). Only when

the actions of a giver and a charitable recipient are thus perfectly in line can we feel the charity to be praiseworthy. And, as E. J. Hundert highlights, this move to value “praiseworthiness” rather than mere “praise” is one of Smith’s most important ethical breaks with Mandeville: “Smith sought to show that unlike the social actor of Mandevillian provenance who merely seeks applause, the man of genuine self-command could be governed not by the desire for praise but by the standard of praiseworthiness itself.”²⁰ By making this distinction Smith attempts to move away from Mandeville’s claim that all men are motivated exclusively by public acclamation. His model of praiseworthy charity, however, projects a world in which charity is only done by those who know their recipient personally. It is difficult to imagine this level of “proper gratitude” as the natural outcome of, for example, casual almsgiving. Smith posits a charitable position, much like that espoused by Mill and Mayhew, in which one of the most important factors is knowledge, the more the better, of the intended recipient. Charity feels good, but it feels best when we exercise it wisely. Smith’s position contains an inherent caution: there is no proper reward for charity given casually, blindly, or without attention to possible consequences.

While Smith thus manages to check the effects of the link between charity and emotion, for other writers it becomes a Pandora’s box—the power of emotion, once unleashed, is very difficult to keep within socially accepted boundaries. The link between emotional display and moral worth in charitable

²⁰ E. J. Hundert, “Sociability and Self-love in the Theatre of Moral Sentiments: Mandeville to Adam Smith,” *Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750-1950*, ed. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 44.

exchanges became, as the eighteenth century progressed, both increasingly common and increasingly vexed. As Steven Ahern points out, sentimentalism was originally seen as “a reaffirmation of the virtue innate in human nature as demonstrated through an individual’s aesthetically pleasing experience of sympathetic response to suffering.”²¹ “One’s degree of sensibility” came to be seen as “the sole index of moral virtue and aesthetic judgment.”²² This construction, however, became historically unstable, in part for the reasons I have outlined above. Sentimental fiction quickly came to be a great object of parody and humor, sometimes in the very same works that seemed to represent themselves seriously. As Ahern argues, “the unstable complex of assumptions” that allows sentimentalism to exist at all also make it a difficult subject to treat openly. Indeed, “when put into practice in novels sentimentalism falls prey to the internal contradictions that materialize in the very acts of benevolence needed to convert the theory into practice.”²³ Robert Markley sees this internal contradiction as a problem of class privilege, arguing that sentimental narratives are “devoted paradoxically to demonstrating the sensitivity of a culture that shies away from acknowledging its responsibilities for inflicting upon its victims the very injuries that it mourns.”²⁴ To acknowledge that infliction would be to move “from passive sympathy to the spectres of outright repression and

²¹ Stephen Ahern, *Affected Sensibilities: Romantic Excess and the Genealogy of the Novel, 1680-1810* (New York: AMS Press, 2007), 21.

²² Ahern 21.

²³ Ahern 21.

²⁴ Robert Markley, “Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue,” *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987), 223.

revolution,"²⁵ guaranteeing that the sentimental hero, unwilling to become a revolutionary, can only give charity that does "more to ennoble him than to assist those who receive his money."²⁶ To touch briefly on an example I will return to in my next chapter, Laurence Sterne flounders in this emotional nexus, representing in *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) a model of charity that is essentially, inescapably, sexualized. For Sterne the logical outcome of the contradictions Ahern and Markley highlight is that the feelings that drive us toward giving money are one and the same with the desire to give other kinds of pleasure. While Sterne is perfectly comfortable with that link, the morality attached to those other pleasures is often much more ambiguous.

This kind of ethical ambiguity echoes much more seriously through more apparently straightforward sentimental literature. In Henry Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling* (1771), for instance, the expected reader response is decidedly vague. Harley, the eponymous man of feeling, appears to feel all the appropriate and pleasurable emotions of sympathy, but by the end of the novel he can scarcely be taken seriously as a model of behavior. While, as Gillian Skinner reminds us, the novel is filled with many conventionally sentimental tableaux,²⁷ it becomes increasingly difficult to recognize Harley as an appropriate lens for these scenes. His over-emotionality leads him into situation after situation in which his generosity is exploited. Furthermore, Harley continues to revel in the sentimental excess of giving, even as his money goes to criminals, madwomen, and

²⁵ Markley 227.

²⁶ Markley 230.

²⁷ Skinner 1.

dubiously reformed prostitutes. While many critics debated whether the novel is meant to be serious or satirical, Ahern claims that the most important message to be drawn from the ambiguity is that “the scene of sympathy as spectacle threatens to deteriorate into a hall of mirrors as much as it promises to stabilize the excesses of passion through the operation of pity.”²⁸ Extreme emotion, when “disconnected from rational reflection, social integration, and ethical responsibility will produce,” in Mackenzie’s eyes, “nothing but decay and disease.”²⁹ Sentimentality is beneficial in that it insists on recognizing and foregrounding social inequality, but pernicious to the extent that it requires only feeling, not concrete actions. Enjoying the sentimental feelings of a tour of Bedlam, to give a popular eighteenth-century example, does nothing to genuinely help the inmates, and indeed encourages such performances of suffering. Thus, at their worst, these sympathetic exchanges only encourage the very divisions of class and gender that they would apparently desire to undo.

If charity, in the literature of sentimentality, is coupled with both sexuality and monetary and emotional excess, it is subject to the same scrutiny and criticism as the buying of china and the drinking of coffee. More to the point, if we perform charitable actions because we enjoy reveling in our own capacity for sympathy and generosity, an action that should be outwardly focused becomes only another way of being selfish. Another part of the resulting backlash against this complex of sentimental ideas came from economics. The rise of political economy, while occurring largely after the luxury debates and the cult of

²⁸ Ahern 121.

²⁹ Ahern 142.

eighteenth-century sentimentality itself began to wane, made this point painfully clear by emphasizing the ways that charity is harmful to its recipients, rendering them unable or unwilling to work and making them overly dependent on others. Charity was thus attacked from both sides. The gratuitous emotions that result from casual charity not only morally corrupt the giver, but such charity also exploits and financially damages the recipient.

While we might expect political economy to rationalize the self-interest and individual monetary freedom that eighteenth-century critics claimed as the core of charity, it instead distances itself from notions of personal philanthropy. Early economics focused on production and distribution, not consumption. By the time the marginalist economists shifted their focus to consumption, economics presented itself as too “scientific” to discuss the emotional components of spending. While luxuries like furniture and clothes are implicitly praised as the fruits of industry and gradually normalized as essential, the *reasons* for consumption remained outside the province of economics. The Victorian public, anxious to distance themselves from the messy emotional legacy of the “libertine” eighteenth century, is thus left on their own to redefine the ethical source of their emotional engagements with the poor. The recognition of the pleasurability of charity was gradually replaced by the ostensibly more objective question of the worthiness of the recipient. If, as the latitudinarian logic of the eighteenth century goes, we give charity for either the good of our own souls or for pure emotional indulgence, it matters very little which particular person receives it. If, however, charity is intended to remove itself from mere

emotional luxury and serve the larger interests of society, it can only be given to those who are genuinely deserving. But for Victorians, taught by the church to be charitable and surrounded by brutal poverty, charity and emotion, as Mayhew demonstrates, were in practice incredibly difficult to separate. This tension ripples beneath almost every nineteenth-century discussion of charity, but it surfaces most transparently in the early nineteenth-century debates about the new poor laws. For the first time, there is a large and public argument, with real implications for social policy, about who deserves aid and what kind of aid can most help them.

III. The economic upheaval caused by rapid industrialization, the completion of most agricultural enclosure, and the ending of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 shifted charity debates in several important ways. The concurrent leap to popularity of political economy, in the hands of writers such as David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and Thomas Chalmers radically increased anti-charitable rhetoric by “proving” that poverty was either an inevitable part of economic progress or a state that the poor themselves could rectify if they so chose. Of course, as the argument of Sandra Sherman so articulately proves, most choices these economists presented to the poor were “simulacra, conflating discretion with the penny-pinching aims of science,” given that in the rhetoric of poverty, any poor person “would choose scientific improvement over their own habits” if

only they knew the truth.³⁰ Such rhetoric allowed members of the middle and upper classes to “see the poor without unique desires and complex subjectivity, so that experts wielding new, quantifying protocols could manage the poor en masse, cheaply, without regard to traditional folkways.”³¹ Economics as a discipline thus combined with legitimate economic crisis to prepare the way for radical changes in the fundamental ideology of charity.

One early symptom of this change, Donna Andrew notes, is the shift in patterns of voluntary charity. By the 1820s, charity:

rested on the assumption that the material transfer of aid and goods from the rich to the poor was but the most insubstantial element of charity’s true purpose. Material aid was useful only to the degree that it helped and brought about moral and spiritual reform, reform that bound classes together in a more harmonious fashion true charity involved the improvement of the nation’s morals and manners, as this came to be seen as not only the nation’s prime need, but the only sphere in which charity had not been replaced by the operations of the market.³²

Such sentimental language, in practice, meant the shift from subsistence charities to reform charities. Organizations like the Foundling Hospital, which had thrived on voluntary, subscription-based, charity through the eighteenth century, began to struggle to meet necessary minimum donations. It was no

³⁰ Sandra Sherman, *Imagining Poverty: Quantification and the Decline of Paternalism* (Columbus: The Ohio State U P, 2001) 28.

³¹ Sherman 4.

³² Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) 196.

longer so clear to donors that merely saving the lives of “surplus population” was the best use of limited charitable dollars.³³ Instead, donors began to seek out ways to “educate” or “moralize” the poor.³⁴ No longer was individual benevolence enough to change England for the better; philanthropists “hoped to reform the minds and morals of the laboring poor” and to use charity as “an instrument of national regeneration.”³⁵ As Mary Peace observes, the shift from benevolent to regenerative charity often cast suspicion on recipients. In her work on the Magdalen Hospital, Peace argues that even as early as 1790 the hospital was “no longer confident either about the innate virtue of its inmates or the possibility of their recuperation for society.”³⁶ The intended recipients of charity, generally, disapproved of both this new suspicion and the new protocols it demanded.

Of more sweeping historical importance is the pressure these shifting ideologies placed on the Poor Laws. The new focus of philanthropy on moral correction and education couldn’t help but shift public policy toward the poor. While some modern historians, such as Martin Daunton, have begun to argue that developments of the Old Poor Laws, such as the Speenhamland system or roundsman work systems, were adequate ways to accommodate the changing

³³ Andrew 199-200.

³⁴ Sherman 32-39. Martin Daunton, *Progress and Poverty: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995) 471.

³⁵ Andrew 201.

³⁶ Mary Peace, “The Magdalen Hospital and the Fortunes of Whiggish Sentimentality in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain: ‘Well-Grounded’ Exemplarity vs. ‘Romantic’ Exceptionality,” *The Eighteenth Century* 48.2 (2007): 142-43.

rural labor market,³⁷ administrators in the early nineteenth century opposed these developments both financially and ethically. In their eyes, the Old Poor Laws allowed and even encouraged the poor to be both lazy (by giving too much relief to the “able bodied”) and licentious (by giving larger charitable allowances to larger families). In the hands of the most vehement critics, the only solution was total abolition of any compulsory public relief. These claims for abolition were often, although not always, based on Malthusian doctrines of surplus population. A certain portion of the religious community followed the lead of Thomas Chalmers in reconciling the existence of the poor with God’s divine plan for human progress. Poverty was intended, in the view of these thinkers, to “stimulate human adaptability and exertion,” and any attempt to lessen its effects “led to more, rather than less, human misery” and “frustrated God’s plans” for humanity.³⁸ The extremity of this view was moderated in the hands of later thinkers, like Samuel Smiles, who came to believe that human life was intended as a trial of character.³⁹ While such dark views were never held unquestioned by a majority, their presence helped to fuel the aims of those stringent reformers who argued that only by rendering relief as unpleasant as possible could the state do its duty to the poor.

The eventual policy resulting from this situation, the New Poor Law of 1834, solved, in the eyes of Poor Law administrators, the problem of over-

³⁷ Dauntton 458. See also: George R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 195.

³⁸ G. R. Searle, *Morality and the Market in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1998) 11, 14.

³⁹ Searle 21.

generous relief by instituting the principle of less eligibility. Charity would only be given to those who were willing to enter the workhouse, where their conditions would be, because of hard work, the separation of families, and scanty provisions, even less pleasant than what could be achieved through the most wretched non-charitable employment. More importantly, though, the New Poor Laws tried desperately to cast poor relief as both shameful and disciplinary. E.P. Thompson writes that “the doctrine of discipline and restraint was, from the start, more important than that of material ‘less eligibility’; the most inventive State would have been hard put to it to create institutions which simulated conditions worse than those of garret-masters, Dorset laborers, framework knitters and nailers.”⁴⁰ In order to lower rates and reduce the numbers receiving relief, the Poor Law Board needed to overcome the earlier attitude that “the ratepayers, churchwardens, and overseers of the poor were not providing a system of relief for a distinct and despised class; they were themselves likely to turn to the parish at some stage in their life-cycle, and generosity and self-interest were one and the same.”⁴¹ The recipients of public charity needed to be, in effect, alienated from their own community and cast as “other” to the ratepayers in order to lower the cost of public relief. The workhouse, so often likened to a Bastille, was the inevitable emblem of this process.

The only problem was that this “perfect” economic and moral solution didn’t work. Workhouse scandals, like that at Andover, appalled early Victorian

⁴⁰ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963, New York: Vintage Books, 1966) 267.

⁴¹ Daunton 452.

newspaper readers throughout the 1830s and 1840s.⁴² In other districts, workhouses either couldn't, or wouldn't, be built immediately. Northern manufacturers, strongly aware of the boom-and-bust cycle of urban trade, resented a system more attuned to the problems of rural unemployment.⁴³ Disregarding pleas from the Poor Law Board to grant only indoor relief (the workhouse) manufacturers used outdoor poor relief (gifts of money or food) as a palliative for cyclical unemployment well into the 1860s.⁴⁴ The poor also resisted, either actively through riots, or by simply preferring to beg or starve rather than be admitted to the workhouse. Moralists and philanthropists, including some local poor law guardians, argued vociferously against the brutality of the workhouse system, making many of the arguments that Dickens would eventually make in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39). Furthermore, many local boards were determined to cling to their autonomy, resisting the dictates of the central Poor Law Board in any way possible.⁴⁵ By mid-to-late century, the campaign to eliminate all outdoor relief, never entirely successful, was almost completely defeated when many local boards of guardians began to insist that giving money was much cheaper than giving room and board, even in exchange for work.⁴⁶ Indeed, this very continuity of outdoor relief, seen as the survival of older models of paternalistic charity, was one of factors that reconciled opponents to

⁴² Brundage, *English Poor Laws*, 87. Starving Andover workers were caught eating the marrow from the bones that they were to grind for fertilizer.

⁴³ Brundage, *English Poor Laws*, 73, 75, 105.

⁴⁴ Boyer 237.

⁴⁵ Brundage, *English Poor Laws*, 91.

⁴⁶ Brundage, *English Poor Laws*, 107.

the New Poor Law.⁴⁷ Only by failing to meet its original strict ideals in ways that the strictest interpreters saw as giving in to useless and harmful charitable emotions could the New Poor Law continue.

Resistance to the New Poor Law, coupled with social problems like trade depressions, created a powerful public rhetoric of charity. As we've already seen with Mill and Mayhew, it was very difficult for most citizens to either reconcile themselves to purely state-administered relief or to accept that private charity could navigate the large-scale poverty that plagued the nineteenth century. Many members of the middle class knew that the Poor Laws were inadequate, but struggled with the best way to intervene. Social worries about consumerism and "Mammonism" paired with a growing awareness of poverty to produce extreme social anxiety. Many middle-class Victorians, with their Christian if not evangelical background, grew increasingly uncomfortable with their own prosperity even as their standard of living continued to improve. G.R. Searle writes that "the central predicament for such people was how to reconcile their economic convictions with their ethical principles, the new world-view which had emerged to explain modern society with the social values they inherited from their ancestors."⁴⁸ Both Christianity and old-fashioned paternalism dictated compassion toward the poor, but economics and fear of the unknown recommended severity. Furthermore, with so many competing messages, real reform of the Poor Laws seemed both impossible and fraught with social

⁴⁷ Anthony Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law: The Politics of Inquiry, Enactment, and Implementation, 1832-1839* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1978) 183.

⁴⁸ Searle 7.

danger.⁴⁹ Instead, the Victorians turned, in ever-increasing numbers, to private charity.⁵⁰

Private charity, however, had serious problems of its own. From all sides came the insistence that philanthropy needed to discriminate, but such discrimination proved unachievable. Mayhew pointed out to his mid-Victorian readership hundreds of ways that the poor “cheated” charity, while the Poor Law Board and many philanthropists deplored the danger and ineffectiveness of charity handed out willy-nilly. The famous Goschen minute, issued by Poor Law Board President George J. Goschen in 1869, railed against the “double distribution” of compulsory and voluntary relief to some paupers, arguing that such charitable plenitude would never teach the poor the self-denial that they needed to learn.⁵¹ The Charity Organization Society, founded earlier the same year, attempted to bridge the gap between indiscriminate private charity and more “rational” public works by a social work system based on home visits to determine eligibility, but the very scientific basis of its charity drew criticism. “Scientific philanthropy” only managed, in the eyes of the tender-hearted, “to turn its agents into bureaucratic administrators, a transformation which made a mockery of the claim that ‘charity’ was somehow superior to the cold and impersonal state.”⁵² The very “science” of such charity set it in opposition to the

⁴⁹ Searle 177.

⁵⁰ Anthony Brundage reports the creation of 279 new charities in London between 1800 and 1850, and another 144 just during the 1850s. *English Poor Laws* 113.

⁵¹ See discussion in: Robert Humphreys, *Sin, Organized Charity, and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1995) 5.

⁵² Searle 192.

emotional connection that many donors saw as charity's most important benefit. The COS in particular drew criticism from both local charities and the clergy, and many of the poor they visited would have preferred formal poor law relief.⁵³ While the eighteenth-century model of purely emotional benevolence never resurfaced as a dominant belief, very few people were willing to go to the other extreme.

Mid-Victorians wanted to be charitable: Stephan Collini goes so far as to call them "The Culture of Altruism."⁵⁴ With so many conflicting voices about the "right" kind of charity, though, complete belief in the benefits of charity was difficult. Popular writers of fiction and journalism represented the poor laws as negative and emotion-driven personal charity as positive, at the same time that economists, politicians, and even some religious leaders depicted exactly the opposite. The increasing visibility of urban poverty, thanks to exploratory social works by writers like Henry Mayhew, Charles Booth, and Seebohm Rowntree and the fiction of Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley, and others legitimately troubled audiences and convinced them that poverty was a problem beyond any quick charitable fix. This complex social anxiety forms the nexus of my project. I will be examining the ways that fiction chooses to interact with a variety of responses to charity. More particularly, I hope to examine the ways and possible reasons that mid-Victorian fiction often engages with the public discourse of charity by representing the ways in which individual philanthropy fails, at the

⁵³ Humphreys 7.

⁵⁴ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991) chapter 2.

same time that it also undermines, large-scale public charity.

IV. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature generally responded to harsh social ideas regarding poverty with an outraged attempt to revive sentimental charity. *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), and other novels like it, looks back to the legacy of *Tom Jones* (1749), embracing the redeeming qualities of the individual act of charity by emphasizing the connections between people of all classes. The person one aids without reason may turn out to be the very person one would have most wished to save. Money, properly applied, can and will save some worthy person from a terrible fate and restore the flow of benevolent feelings. Mid nineteenth-century "Social Problem" novels, though, often complicate the clear opposition between charity and economics. In a grim industrial situation like that of *Mary Barton* (1848), for instance, private charity may temporarily alleviate the most distressing cases, but it is portrayed, even within the novel, as no long-term solution. The message instead shifts toward a plea for widespread political and social reform. Personal benevolence and philanthropy, literary works insisted, could not remove the structural poverty of the industrial revolution. Many authors, however, were unwilling to give up on the moral and social benefits of benevolence. The resulting works struggle to negotiate the increasingly commonplace idea that individual charity is useless and the residual feeling that it is literature's moral obligation to resist the anti-charitable dictates of political economy.

The central concern of this project, as noted, is why Victorian literature (in

both its “social problem” variant and in others) is so quick to dismiss or complicate monetary transactions and monetary charity, even as it negatively portrays differences in social status and wealth. Why does literature often appear to agree with the political economists that “handouts” are not the answer, even though it criticizes poverty and would thus seem to value at least minor economic redistribution? Novel after novel features scenes in which poor characters either refuse charitable gifts or in which monetary charity damages the giver and/or the recipient. Further, I am interested in examining how literature uses techniques of both genre and style to predict, form, and examine alternative, non-economic, social models. Once literature dismisses financial rules as an inadequate substitute for social experience, what other framework does it provide for social interaction? And, finally, I will theorize a reason why literature often depicts competing economic genres with different moral values, like Esther’s fortune and Felix’s charity in *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866), or the coexistence of “The Golden Dustman” and the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65). What do we stand to gain from so much economic plurality? And, more importantly, is that plurality of economic experience the very reason that the novel, whatever its intentions, struggles to break away from the discourse of political economy? My brief answer to these questions, to be explored in more depth in the upcoming chapters, is that the novel uses representations of failed charity as a way to provide the space to reconstruct, however briefly, a non-monetary and non-economic source of value. The authors I discuss in this project are deeply invested in redefining the meaning of benevolence as a valid form of

social action by moving that benevolence away from monetary gifts and toward abstractly correct moral feelings. In order to do so, however, novelists must reckon with both economics and the legacy of eighteenth century sentimentality.

My work in this project engages with three somewhat overlapping threads of criticism. After Marc Shell's pivotal *The Economy of Literature*,⁵⁵ closely followed by Kurt Heinzelman's *Economics of the Imagination*,⁵⁶ a long line of critics has chosen to examine the way that economics functions as a metaphor of exchange that can structure literary analysis and in fact language itself. For these critics, language and economics exist in a complex, homologous, relationship. Heinzelman argues that speaking is "a metaphor of economic transaction,"⁵⁷ to the extent that both speaking and spending are actions of supply, demand, and exchange. In effect, "the economic complexity of literature is integrally connected to the discursive complexity of economics."⁵⁸ Recent scholars in this vein have examined such issues as authorial anxiety over the connection between paper (their livelihood) and paper money (at best, volatile, and at worst, worthless). James Thompson sees this recognition as a source of a "crisis of value" at its most apparent in eighteenth-century literature: "where is value or worth to be located—in silver or in paper, thing or name, or in a different genre, the courtship novel, in name or face, body or self?"⁵⁹ Heinzelman and Thompson,

⁵⁵ Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978).

⁵⁶ Kurt Heinzelman, *The Economics of the Imagination* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1980).

⁵⁷ Heinzelman 7.

⁵⁸ Heinzelman 9.

⁵⁹ James Thompson, *Models of Value: Eighteenth Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 2.

along with critics such as Gordon Bigelow⁶⁰ and David Trotter,⁶¹ become intensely interested in the way novels metaphorically and literally present images of circulation, which they discuss either in terms of the crisis of literary value (Thompson and Heinzelman) or in terms of empire and citizenship (Bigelow and Trotter).

An often, but not necessarily, related discussion arises around the economics of literary production. In the hands of Norman Feltes, this field began as a Marxist theorization of the ways that the means of production influence works of literature.⁶² Feltes defines his project as determining “the importance of such details as format as being the concrete mediations of the historical in the production of novels, determining in complex ways the actual production of a particular novel and tracing themselves in its text and its own production of ideology.” Every text, in this model, “encodes within itself ‘how, by whom, and for whom it was produced.’”⁶³ Later critics tend to see the play between the commodity-producing author and the commodity-purchasing reader as happening more directly. Paul Delany argues that any discussion of money in the novel “brings together both sides of the literary transaction: what authors hope to get by writing books, and what they hope to show about the market

⁶⁰ Gordon Bigelow, *Fiction, Famine, and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003)

⁶¹ David Trotter, *Circulation: Defoe, Dickens, and the Economics of the Novel* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1988).

⁶² Norman Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1993) and *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986).

⁶³ Feltes, *Modes of Production*, x.

society in which they live.”⁶⁴ Daniel Hack would largely agree, hoping to explore in his book “the meaning and mutual relevance of the physicality of the written or printed word, the exchange of texts for money, the working and slippages of signification, and the corporealities of character, writer, and reader.”⁶⁵ To these critics, any discussion of money within a text is a reflection of the economic status of the author. The analysis of authorial anxiety over being a worker has thus become one of the foremost of these branches of study.

The final group of criticism on these topics, and that most applicable to this project, is of a generally social, historical nature. These works look not only at how depictions of social interactions between rich and poor attempt to influence or control readers (Audrey Jaffe) but also how economic doctrine itself was founded on a series of “imaginative” acts (Sandra Sherman). Audrey Jaffe’s work illustrates the way that “sympathy in Victorian fiction is inseparable from issues of visibility and representation because it is inextricable from the middle-class subject’s status as spectator and from the social figures to whose visible presence the Victorian middle classes felt it necessary to formulate a response.”⁶⁶ “Visual representation,” with all of its implicit problems, becomes “necessary for the production of individual sympathy” both between characters in the novel and between reader and character.⁶⁷ Jaffe’s argument is complicated by Sandra

⁶⁴ Paul Delany, *Literature, Money, and The Market From Trollope to Amis* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 13.

⁶⁵ Daniel Hack, *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2005) 7.

⁶⁶ Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000) 8.

⁶⁷ Jaffe 29.

Sherman's work on representations of poverty in non-fictional works. Sherman aptly notes that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century works of economics and sociology encouraged simplistic representations of poverty. By the time "social problem" fiction becomes a popular genre, readers are more accustomed to "texts which claim to study and prescribe for the poor" but really serve to erase identity and "justify modes of poor relief that cost less by discounting personal desires."⁶⁸ Sherman's argument renders the desire-based sympathetic relationships that Jaffe sees as fundamentally troubling to in fact be a much-needed piece of social restoration. Some authors, like Catharine Gallagher, do extend their studies to examine specific economic predecessors for literary claims, but it is more rare for those texts to consider charity.⁶⁹ Gallagher instead chooses to examine some of the underlying reasons for the inherent connections between literature and economics seen by my first group of critics. In Gallagher's argument:

Political economists and their Romantic and early Victorian critics jointly relocated the idea of ultimate value from a realm of transcendent spiritual meanings to organic 'Life' itself and made human sensations—especially pleasure and pain—the sources and signs of that value Each [economic and anti-economic discourse] tended to blame the other for its internal paradoxes.⁷⁰

This debate over the sources of value results, in Gallagher's argument, in the

⁶⁸ Sherman 4.

⁶⁹ Catharine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006).

⁷⁰ Gallagher 3.

inextricable co-dependence of literature on economics—no matter how much literature wants to get away, the basic terms of literary discourse have already been linked to economic ideologies. This group of critics, of which there will be additional examples throughout this work, provides the most important intellectual context for my work.

My examinations will, I hope, fill a gap in the discussion of literature and economics. The critical literature tends to either assume that both genres are playing the same game (an exchange of money is merely a metaphor for the kinds of exchange that happen in language, so uses of monetary plots are all self-referential), or that monetary plots are a reflection of the author's own status as "worker" rather than "artist." On the other hand, studies of the social agendas of novels generally fixate on the success or failure of realism in the solutions those novels pose, rather than recognizing the rhetorical space that failure helps to fill. By looking at scenes of explicit and deliberate failure, I hope to illuminate such concerns. Chapter One will examine closely Tobias Smollett's *Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), an important eighteenth-century precursor to the Victorian anxieties explored in this project. Chapter Two turns to the works of Charles Dickens, which trace an increasing ambivalence about, but simultaneous dedication to, the idea of personal charity. The chapter will be most centrally concerned with *Our Mutual Friend's* (1864-65) searching look at the effect of philanthropy on its objects. My third chapter examines Elizabeth Barrett Browning's novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and its powerful condemnation of paternalistic philanthropy. Finally, I will examine George Eliot's attempts to

move entirely beyond economics in *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871). Each of these texts centers around a notorious economic failure. The “unrealistic” economic ventures that focus these texts (Humphry Clinker’s hidden parentage, the “Golden Dustman” of *Our Mutual Friend*, Marian Erle’s refusal to marry Romney Leigh, Esther’s and Dorothea’s abdication of their fortunes) correspond exactly with the novels’ attempts to break both fiction, and ultimately their readers, away from the language and control of economics. By positing an often-abstract morality in place of any particular monetary transaction, literature participates in a more general social retaliation against the narrow strictures of what nineteenth-century economics deemed appropriate interpersonal behavior.

For all of the research that has been done on the class and gender problems of “social problem” and other realist fiction, few works take seriously the legitimate projects that these novels undertake. By understanding and articulating the way that these literary works, and others, are responding to their social context and making important alterations to the social discourse, we can recognize the way that literature allows authors to redefine and rearticulate public feelings about poverty, charity, and sympathy.

Chapter One

Smollett's Men of Feeling and Late Eighteenth-Century Charity

Tobias Smollett's intention to thumb his nose at charity and benevolence makes itself known from the first pages of *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753), where he soundly mocks the venerable tradition of literary patronage. The novel, Smollett's third, was little read and even less appreciated, perhaps in part for the initial affront offered by Smollett's cheeky treatment of that staple of the eighteenth-century novel, the dedicatory preface. In writing his preface, believed by many critics to be addressed to himself,¹ Smollett exposes the inherent problem of gratitude: if one expresses "the transports of gratitude or affection which is always apt to exaggerate, and produce[s] no more than the genuine effusions of his heart, the world will make no allowance for the warmth of his passion, but ascribe the praise he bestows, to interested views and sordid adulation."² A too liberal thanks makes the recipient of patronage a toady, insincerely lavishing praise only in the hope of additional gain. Alternatively, too much honesty, as expressed in Smollett's mocking enumeration of his patron's (really his own) vices and virtues, is easily constructed as ingratitude. While Smollett can jokingly contend that "you may, thus stimulated [by criticism]

¹ See Lewis Mansfield Knapp, *Tobias Smollett, Doctor of Men and Letters* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1949) and Jerry C. Beasley's introduction and notes to *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1988).

² Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*, ed. O.M. Brack, Jr. (1753; Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988) 3. Further citations in text.

watch over your own intemperance and infirmity, with redoubled vigilance and consideration, and for the future profit by the severity of my reproof”(4), literary patrons are unlikely to desire such harsh advice. Gratitude as constructed here always and inevitably undoes itself. Its tendency to exaggerate the goodness of a benefactor will be read as false, at the same time that “true,” and thus naturally extreme, gratitude leads to the expectation that all thanks will be profuse. Due to these expectations, moderate thanks can only be read as ingratitude, while our cynicism means that extreme praise can only be read as insincere. Like Cordelia in *King Lear*, the truly appreciative recipient of charity cannot possibly respond in the right way. Genuine emotion has no room in the equation, because there is no way to control the perceptions of others, who are likely to imagine our actions in the worst possible light.³

Smollett’s cutting satire of the inability to express genuine feelings derives from the paradox of sentimentality outlined in my previous chapter. If, as the sentimental model established, feeling is the mark of enlightenment, it becomes worthwhile to perform sensibility. Appearing to be affected by a scene, if performed believably, will convince bystanders that one has true moral worth. At the same time, then, that the sentimental model places tremendous value on emotion, it also gives a motive for exaggerating or falsifying that emotion.⁴ The

³ Smollett here is articulating keenly a flaw in Adam Smith’s model of sympathy. If we must always consider how others are likely to judge our actions, and moderate our behavior accordingly, how can we behave around those who would construct any action negatively?

⁴ This is in part why E.J. Hundert sees Smith’s move to value “praiseworthiness” over actually received praise as of such fundamental importance. See “Sociability and Self-love in the Theatre of Moral Sentiments: Mandeville to Adam Smith,”

sentimental novel and its surrounding discourse became mired in a rhetoric of truthfulness. How can we know, really, that anyone feels the way they appear to? For Stephen Ahern, this is the primary anxiety of sentimentality: "Affectation is thematized within the fictive world of the narratives themselves, which are haunted by the always present threat that someone can fake the signs of sensibility in order to deceive others for selfish ends."⁵ Furthermore, this focus on feelings exposes the fact that human emotions rarely have a single source. Even our best impulses, such as charity, can rarely be separated from other psychological factors, such as desire. Human emotions are suspect, then, for a whole host of reasons. One response to this idea, espoused by Bernard Mandeville and later by many economists, is cynicism. Such cynics suggest that humans are fallen creatures, motivated by their worst impulses. Luckily for humankind, those worst impulses work in socially beneficial ways. For writers less interested in this negative view, the problem is more complex.

Laurence Sterne and Tobias Smollett set out, in very different ways, to explore this problem of human psychology. Both of them eventually argue that the complexity and apparent contrariness of human nature doesn't exclude the possibility of human goodness. Conflicting and complicated motives for benevolent actions do not mean that we are always and inevitably corrupt.

Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750-1950, ed. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 44. "Praiseworthiness" has, however, no practical application for how we judge behavior other than our own, because it gives us no tools to determine the true motivation of any act not performed by ourselves. While it is an important distinction for Smith, it can't solve this basic problem of sentimentality.

⁵ Stephen Ahern, *Affected Sensibilities: Romantic Excess and the Genealogy of the Novel, 1680-1810* (New York: AMS Press, 2007) 14.

Instead, our messy feelings allow for a complex and amusing variety of reactions to the world. For both writers, this human multiplicity can be misleading and frustrating, but the proper outlook on the world can allow us to navigate it successfully and live a life of basic virtue and happiness. The two writers, however, take a very different stance on what this outlook entails. Sterne, as I will demonstrate briefly, is content to enjoy and even elevate life's ambiguities. Smollett, on the other hand, is driven to articulate an entirely revised ethical code. By the end of his final novel, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), Smollett has turned to an alternative discourse for a potential solution to the problems of charity and affect. The conclusion of his novel shifts charity away from luxury and closer to a more modern understanding of economics as a way to remove it from the less concrete and more vexed realm of feelings. That is, Smollett comes to accept the belief that charity needs to be calculated. Like Sterne, he never questions that we should help others in need, but he does question our level of emotional involvement in that intervention. In doing so, however, Smollett both raises and explores a host of new problems with charity, including the complex navigations necessary between charity and fiscal responsibility. While Smollett's ending functions fairly smoothly in the ethical context of his own novel, future writers will struggle to escape Smollett's very solution and reunite charity with emotion.

Sterne seeks no such complex ideological solution. Instead, *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) suggests that happiness arises from our ability to revel in the vagaries of emotions for their humorous effect. Sterne sees the emotional

untidiness of human nature as providing a comic core to our actions. This desire to enjoy the potential humor of social interaction surfaces in a number of scenes of comic misinterpretation in the novel, many of which center on the connection of benevolence and sexuality. While Stephen Ahern accuses sentimental writers, especially Henry Mackenzie, of being “uneasy about the effect that representations of extreme emotion might have on particularly susceptible readers,” especially because sensibility narratives “carry a sexual charge,”⁶ Sterne embraces such emotional tension. Gardner Stout long ago pointed out that Yorick’s “sentimental travels consistently exhibit the comic incongruities between his exalted impulses and the situations which occasion them, expose their instability and radical impurity, and reveal his susceptibility to all the venial imperfections of human nature, including pruriency, concupiscence, selfishness, and vanity”⁷ In many of Yorick’s scenes, seduction and charity go hand in hand. Unlike the later writers in this study, Yorick, and by extension Sterne, suggests that readers should embrace the emotional side of charity—that is to say, benevolence—as a positive feeling. While Smollett is anxious to move from benevolence to a more calculated and emotionally distant form of charity, Yorick sees those emotions as fundamentally worthwhile, despite, or even because, of their extra implications.

Yorick’s encounter with a young Parisian *fille de chambre* emphasizes both the sexualization of benevolence and its inherent emotional pleasure. In their

⁶ Ahern 28.

⁷ Gardner Stout, “Yorick’s *Sentimental Journey*: A Comic ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ for the Man of Feeling,” *ELH* 30 (1963): 398.

first meeting, Yorick gives her a crown, ostensibly as a “tribute . . . to virtue.”⁸ Their meeting, however, is described in elaborately romantic language. Yorick pauses midway through their encounter to note, “’Tis sweet to feel by what fine-spun threads our affections are drawn together,” and he imagines ending their meeting with “a kiss of charity” (65). Their second encounter continues the ambiguity by strongly resembling a seduction. The contrived vagueness of what does happen emphasizes the psychological turmoil that Yorick experiences. Yorick observes that he “felt something at first within me which was not in strict unison with the lesson of virtue I had given her the night before The devil was in me” (88). The devil also appears to be in the *fille de chambre*, who seamlessly mingles her gratitude to Yorick with an expression of her sexuality:

I’ll just shew you, said the fair *fille de chambre*, the little purse I have been making today to hold your crown. So she put her hand into her right pocket, which was next to me, and felt for it for some time—then into the left—“She had lost it.”—I never bore expectation more quietly—it was in her right pocket at last—she pulled it out; it was of green taffeta, lined with a little bit of white quilted sattin [sic], and was just big enough to hold the crown—she put it into my hand—it was pretty; and I held it ten minutes with the back of my hand resting upon her lap—looking sometimes at the purse, and sometimes on one side of it. (89)

The punctuation here, unusually breathless even for Sterne, combines with the obvious sexual word play on purse and crown to emphasize the erotic charge of

⁸ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick*, ed Paul Goring (1768; London: Penguin, 2001) 64. Subsequent citations in text.

the scene. At its core, however, this is a scene of gratitude. The *fille de chambre* is literally proving to Yorick that she values and appreciates his gift because she has taken the time to sew a special receptacle for it. Sterne also suggests, however, that she is showing Yorick that she values his attention and would consider furthering their relationship. The ruse of looking in her pocket, which Yorick can construct as an excuse to “innocently” put her hand against his leg, is, at least in his mind, intended to be seductive. Yorick’s appreciation for her gratitude takes on the same sexual overtone, as he examines her purse for far longer than necessary as a pretext for keeping his hand in her lap. The movement between gratitude and sexuality is seamless, but the scene still appears emotionally satisfying for both parties. Unlike other sentimental scenes, in which female recipients of charity are unwillingly eroticized, here the *fille de chambre* appears to enjoy her charitable flirtation with Yorick.

Rather than ending the scene with either a conventional seduction or a conventional denial, Sterne ends it with an “accidental” tumble onto the bed and an apostrophe to divine providence regarding human feelings:

If nature has so wove her web of kindness, that some threads of love and desire are entangled with the piece—must the whole web be rent in drawing them out?—Whip me such stoics, great governor of nature! Said I to myself—Wherever thy providence shall place me for the trials of my virtue—whatever is my danger—whatever is my situation—let me feel the movements which rise out of it, and which belong to me as a man—and if I govern them as a good one—I will trust the issues to thy justice. (90)

Our heaven-sent duty is both to experience our feelings fully and to govern them accordingly. Not only is it impossible to separate one human emotion from another, but we also shouldn't waste time trying to do so. To deny any particular category of feelings is to experience less of the world than we should, and thus to do less of our duty toward it. The emotional messiness of benevolence—always the angle emphasized by the financially strapped Yorick—is in fact its very most important part.

Moreover, Sterne's very act of embracing the sentimental journey signals his approval of emotional indulgence. Yorick deliberately seeks to experience not the world, but the feelings that the world can occasion. Again and again in the narrative, we see Yorick both deliberately encourage his feelings (as in the scene with the caged starling) and pause mid-way through a scene to analyze what and how he is feeling. His intense scrutiny of the motives, causes, and effects of his emotions serves not only to emphasize *that* he feels, but also to emphasize that human emotions are worthwhile. Yorick, for all his faults, is never worse than a little selfish and somewhat silly. If, Yorick suggests, indulging in emotional excess is self-interested, it's a kind of interest that does very little harm to the world. The comedy of the story, as Stout reminds us, only emphasizes its benevolent message: "In attuning his sensibility to Yorick's, a 'man of feeling' should have found himself participating in a comic proof of the incongruities between his faith in his benevolent impulses—and the realities of acting on imperfect motives in an imperfect, though beneficent, world."⁹ This comedy isn't

⁹ Stout 407.

intended to produce despair that we can ever act correctly. Instead, Sterne desires his readers to develop “a benignly comic sense of life, including a benevolent sense of humor about themselves.”¹⁰ Part of this “benevolent sense of humor” is accepting, and learning to enjoy, the limitations of human nature, including our obsession with our own emotional state. The humorously positive attitude of the text encourages the reader to experience by proxy Yorick’s heightened emotional sensitivity.¹¹

Indeed, by conventional novelistic standards the narrative offers little else besides this sympathetic identification to recommend itself. Sterne adopts a fragmentary form that routinely denies intellectual or emotional closure. Like Yorick, the reader goes on a sentimental journey that, because the novel has no “end,” spills over into everyday life. While critics can and have attempted to trace a moral/intellectual arc in the novel, their attempts are generally thwarted by both the inconclusiveness and the comedy of Sterne’s project.¹² The novel’s non-ending suggests that we should continue to imagine ourselves in the intensely emotional world that Yorick has created. By metaphorical extension,

¹⁰ Stout 407.

¹¹ Robert Markley expresses the most cynical construction of this fact when he claims that “our appreciation of the author’s goodness makes us his collaborators: if we respond as he does, then we can appreciate not only his goodness but our own.” See “Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue,” *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987) 221.

¹² For Markley the narrative structure is an ineffective way for Sterne to reiterate a message that lacks strength on its own, “litanies of the hero’s sentimental acts” that are designed to “mystify the contradictory impulses of sentimentality” (223). Stephen Ahern acknowledges that Sterne’s structure “underscores the fragmentary nature of human experience,” but his work by and large insists on a moral/ideological progression within the novel (113).

life itself is the sentimental journey. Sterne's parody of the more serious Smollett as "the learned Smelfungus" (28) emphasizes what he sees as the fundamental human choice. Smelfungus "set out with the spleen and jaundice, and every object he pass'd by was discolored or distorted" (28). His resulting travel narrative is only and always "the account of his miserable feelings" (28). Yorick's narrative and his travels may not always run smooth, but his encounters are represented by contrast as genuine and fulfilling. He very rarely has the money to give charity, thus suggesting that the emotional connection between the would-be giver and the would-be receiver is the only part of charity that truly matters. In maintaining this position I obviously disagree with those critics who construct Sterne's project more negatively. Ahern, for example, claims that Yorick is "driven more by a desire to prove his sentimental credentials than by genuine concern"¹³ and that Sterne is most interested in demonstrating "the problems with an ethical code that depends on public performance of virtue."¹⁴ However, most of Yorick's "performances" happen only privately, in the space between himself and the reader rather than between himself and the object of his sympathies.¹⁵ Sterne also makes no obvious claim that sentimentality is a perfect model. Rather, he argues that given our choice between the two extremes, Smelfungus and Yorick, Yorick is the more appropriate model for life. Smollett,

¹³ Ahern 97.

¹⁴ Ahern 115.

¹⁵ Gillian Skinner cogently observes, "Given the number of sentimental encounters Yorick experiences, he succeeds in committing himself financially remarkably infrequently. Only on three occasions does he give money charitably." See *Sentimentality and Economics in the Novel, 1740-1800: The Price of a Tear* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) 114.

obviously, will take a different angle, and one that has more lasting implications for the rhetoric of charity.

II. Smollett's oeuvre expresses a similar desire to follow the man of feeling to his extremes, although Smollett's ultimate opinion, tempered by caution, is less amusingly optimistic than Sterne's. Smollett is far more anxious about the implications of human emotions, seeing them as more than just passing states to relish. His earlier fiction, including *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) and *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*, warns its readers that one extreme of emotion leads to the next, perhaps less pleasant, one. These earlier novels are generally content to offer an exploration of the problems of sentimentality without a clearly demarcated solution. *Roderick Random*, in particular, points out to its readers the difficulty of being sentimental without also being easily angered or cheated. Roderick's fortunes fluctuate wildly, in part because *all* of his emotions are unregulated. The same traits that a reader can admire in one vignette lead Roderick to misery in the next. Smollett, in one of his famous encapsulated narratives, condenses these problems with sentimentality into the story of Miss Williams, the prostitute who nearly lures Roderick into marriage. As she tells the story of her fall, Miss Williams depicts herself as the heroine of a sentimental novel. She is educated, polite, beautiful, and sensitive. More importantly she is, both within her narrative and to Roderick, the object of sympathy. Her narrative begins with her rescue from a would-be rapist and her expression of appropriate gratitude toward her savior. Indeed, this gratitude is

the beginning of her sexual downfall, showing just how easily charity gives rise to sexual desire: "If the obligations he had conferred upon me justly inspired me with sentiments of gratitude, his appearance and conversation seemed to intitle him to somewhat more."¹⁶ At this point in her narrative, Miss Williams shifts from exploited victim within her tale to potential exploiter of Roderick, who is at this moment filled with sympathy for her. Describing the beauties of Lothario, her rescuer and eventual seducer, Miss Williams pauses to interject that, "I do not flatter, when I say he was the exact resemblance of you" (119). Given that Miss Williams has already attempted to seduce and cheat Roderick once, earlier in the novel, it is notable that she uses this moment of gratitude to shift to what is indeed flattery. Just as she, in the story of her past, is grateful to her rescuer and thus more likely to be seduced, Roderick is in the present moment sympathetic and thus more gullible.

Miss Williams's deft handling of Roderick's emotions proves that she has learned, as Roderick eventually must, how to navigate turbulent emotional waters. She reenacts her past, but with herself in the more powerful role. She blames her education for making her "heart the more susceptible" to Lothario's charms because of its part in "refining her sentiments," but her subsequent education in the crimes of London shows her how to exploit the sentimental economy for her own ends (120). While Miss Williams proves herself able to negotiate the line between sentimentality and sexuality with at least some success (the last benefactor in her story also becomes her last positively described

¹⁶ Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, ed. Paul-Gabriel Boucé (1748; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 119. Further citations in text.

lover), Roderick is not yet able to do so. He makes “no scruple of believing every syllable of what she said” and in fact takes her on as a charitable object (136). When Miss Williams leaves Roderick, she is again able to reinsert herself into the sentimental model, leaving Roderick with “a torrent of tears, and a thousand protestations of eternal gratitude” even while she lies to him as to her future plans and intentions (138). Her careful control over the way others see her allows Miss Williams to move more fluidly than Roderick, even though he himself is well aware that men have more social mobility than women.¹⁷ Smollett, though, chooses not to portray this adaptability positively; it is, indeed, a sign of Miss Williams’s corruption. Knowing how to move through the world’s emotional complexity is, as Roderick’s adventures prove, necessary for survival. Understanding that system well enough to exploit it is, on the other hand, extreme moral depravity.

By taking the villain of sentimental novels as its main character, *Ferdinand Count Fathom* ostensibly warns its readers of the dangers of emotional responses to the world even more directly than *Roderick Random* does. Ferdinand, like Miss Williams, lies, cheats, and manipulates his way through the novel. Smollett, perhaps anxious that his readers are enjoying Ferdinand’s exploits in the wrong way, interjects to explain the didactic purpose of his narrative: “Perfidious wretch! Thy crimes are so atrocious [sic], that I half repent me of having undertaken to record thy memoirs: yet such monsters ought to be exhibited to

¹⁷ For more examples of Roderick’s own emotional instability and excess, see Juliet Shields, “Smollett’s Scots and Sodomites: British Masculinity in *Roderick Random*,” *The Eighteenth Century* 46.2 (2005).

public view, that mankind may be upon their guard" (239). There appears to be little reason to read this statement ironically. As the narrative progresses, the virtuous characters' sentiments and optimism regarding human nature only make them more susceptible to rogues and cheats. The novel desires, by Smollett's own claim, to teach good people to avoid exploitation. Yet despite this intention, the clear hierarchy Smollett attempts to construct between rogues and saints doesn't yield a concrete lesson at the end of the novel. Renaldo and Serafina, the novel's virtuous characters, frequently declare that divine Providence cannot let "true" benevolence be punished, a message that the novel upholds with its happy ending and Ferdinand's conversion. This ending, given Smollett's stated message, makes no sense, as it suggests that being exploited is impossible for the truly virtuous. Renaldo is so good that his benevolence will ultimately convert those who attempt to take advantage of it. More importantly, the novel goes to great lengths, as I've already discussed in relation to the preface, to prove that appearance is not equivalent to reality. Ferdinand, thanks to "those ingratiating qualifications he inherited from nature" (62) is able to simulate every possible mark of truth. By the end of his novel, however, Smollett lapses back into the conventions of sentimental fiction, allowing the very physical markers that the earlier parts of the narrative discount to reappear as transparent signs of legitimate virtue. "The drops of true benevolence," "the shower of sympathetic pleasure," and "the pearly drops of pity" flow from eyes (328, 319, 321); "the goodness of her heart" is shown in Madame Clement's face (315); and Serafina's beauty is unequivocally connected to her virtue.

Appearance, in the novel's sentimental ending, is suddenly restored as truth.

Ferdinand demonstrates that while Smollett is content to recognize that sentimentality is an imperfect model, he cannot truly embrace the most cynical message that his novel claims at its beginning. While much of the novel cautions readers against fraud, the final quarter proposes the fundamental goodness of human nature. Ferdinand, overwhelmed with Renaldo's generosity and his own failure, decides to abandon his cheating ways. Benevolence not only is an unproblematic expression of human goodness, it also has the power to transform those who benefit from it. But, again, the narrative denies a stable reading of its characters' emotions. While Renaldo's benevolence ultimately saves Ferdinand, it first causes significant misery to both himself and others. Smollett uses this misery, though, to elicit the compassion of his readers, who are thus more completely drawn into being in sympathy with the characters. The ultimate weight of the novel perhaps only serves to reinforce the preexisting notions of the reader, who will remember either Ferdinand's treachery or his ultimate conversion thanks to Renaldo's goodness. Moreover, Renaldo himself undermines his own benevolent motives, suggesting that "he could not deny himself the luxurious enjoyment of communicating happiness to his fellow creatures in distress" (353). *Ferdinand* does more to expose a complex of problems surrounding sentimentality than to solve those problems. If the outward signs of goodness can be either fake or genuine, how can we possibly move through the world? If Renaldo's goodness is really "luxury," was it worth the price? The novel ultimately gives equal sanction to leaps of faith and to prudent caution, but

Smollett's final novel will return to these questions with a quite different stance.

III. Unlike *Roderick Random* and *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* contains an attempt to articulate a solution to the problems of charity and sentimentality. Most critics have come to think of *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* more explicitly as a text about luxury than about feeling, due to John Sekora's groundbreaking study of the concept across Smollett's works. Sekora argues that "*Humphry Clinker* is what Smollett thought about luxury in contemporary England" and that "the attack on luxury gave focus and coherence" to the novel.¹⁸ The novel in this construction becomes, like all attacks on luxury in the late eighteenth century, both pessimistic and conservative. By the end of the novel, in Sekora's view, "the people, their representatives, and their institutions have all been corrupted When national values have been twisted, personal choices alone remain, and these cannot represent the ideal but merely the inevitable."¹⁹ David Weed presents a more modern view of this argument, suggesting that for Smollett "England's social body incorporates the ill effects of commercialism into its public institutions and civil and social life, and that it produces effeminate men who participated in an epidemic spread of luxury, bodily waste, consumption, and 'cannibalism'."²⁰ In Weed's view, Smollett solves this problem by recreating "a model male landowner who is at

¹⁸ John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought from Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977) 241. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Sekora 238.

²⁰ David M. Weed, "Sentimental Misogyny and Medicine in *Humphry Clinker*" *SEL* 37 (1997): 615.

once more cultivated and more masculine than his allegedly 'modern' counterpart."²¹ The end of the novel "asserts a masculine, homosocial, rational society that restores male prerogative."²² Only recently, in the hands of Michael McKeon, has this view been undermined. McKeon, instead of insisting, as Sekora does, that the novel is a perfect expression of authorial intent, suggests that we should carefully reconsider the idea that "Smollett's central character, Matthew Bramble, speaks for its author and therefore articulates *Humphry Clinker's* social and ethical norms."²³ (57). Questioning this assumption lets us recognize that "Matt ends by showing his involvement in, and tacit approval of, precisely those socioeconomic developments on which the rise of luxury depended."²⁴ For McKeon, the text's statements against luxury only prove that the modern world enforces a complex reaction to consumption.

Instead of seeing these two critical positions as polar opposites, I would argue that both of them articulate a deep anxiety that occurs differently throughout the first and second halves of the novel. Sekora's insistence that the novel is a complete and perfect mirror of Smollett's clearly established agenda toward luxury is damaging insofar as it flattens the text, repressing all signs of Smollett's anxiety and questioning. While the text does, especially in its first half, condemn luxury in all the terms that Smollett had at his disposal, luxury's

²¹ Weed 616.

²² Weed 634.

²³ Michael McKeon, "Aestheticizing the Critique of Luxury: Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*," *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires, and Delectable Goods*, eds. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Houndsmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) 57.

²⁴ McKeon 66.

emotional companions are less comfortably handled. Smollett can excoriate social climbers and excessive spenders, but he has more trouble with those who enjoy the luxurious sensations of giving charity and receiving gratitude. In the early portions of the novel, Jerry presents Matt as a man whose sensibility, in the eighteenth-century sense, drives his life. His physical sufferings make him cranky and short-tempered, but combine with an incredible humanity to make him charitable toward those in need. Matt spends his letters complaining bitterly about the luxury and excess of society, but rarely fails to conclude his letters without a charitable direction toward his tenants or the poor of his parish.²⁵ Jerry's letters often reveal Matt's charity toward those they meet on the road, not excluding Humphry Clinker himself. However, once Matt's physical symptoms, real or imaginary, have ceased to occupy his entire attention, his attitude toward the world shifts remarkably. He becomes less likely to rant about the state of the world, but also less likely to perform spontaneous acts of charity. The novel thus suggests that charity is the same kind of emotional excess that produces Matt's

²⁵ For more about the connection between Matt's personality and his physical symptoms, see Thomas R. Preston, "Smollett and the Benevolent Misanthrope type," *PMLA* 79.1 (1964). Preston suggests that "Matt is, then, in part an eighteenth-century splenetic humorist whose misanthropy can be traced medically to the humorous melancholy cynics and misanthropes of the Renaissance character-books and Stuart drama From another angle, however, Matt's ill health is the result, not the cause of his misanthropy, for the misanthropy itself derives also from what Jerry calls Matt's 'natural excess of mental sensibility.' As Matt writes to Dr. Lewis, everything that 'discomposes my mind, produces a correspondent disorder in my body.' Matt's sensibility does not stem from the humor tradition, but from the eighteenth-century character usually described as the man of feeling. As a man of feeling, Matt is angered by the wickedness of the unfeeling world, and misanthropy is the result. Matt's indignation at the world thus represents a merger of physical and mental distress" (51).

physical illness. But, to further complicate matters, Smollett often praises charity. A central problem of the novel, then, is how one can be charitable without succumbing to the “luxurious pleasure” that Renaldo cited as charity’s most positive inducement. If charity and benevolence, as my introduction pointed out, are linked both to luxury and to Smollett’s non-luxurious paternalism, how can one be appropriately charitable? The remaining portion of this chapter will argue that Smollett’s choice to endorse a modified, limited model of charity, especially after exposing many of its potential downfalls, is an attempt to maintain some room for charity but also to distance it from its problematic emotional excesses. Matt comes, eventually, to represent a new masculine model, one that is less emotional than Sterne’s Yorick but still concerned with the welfare of others.

Many scenes early in the novel explore charity as emotional excess, including the novel’s first extended treatment of charity. It is played by Jerry for comic effect, but has serious implications for the novel. Matt Bramble, weary of the officious doctors of Hot Well, decides to assist a poor widow and her child. The scene is ideologically critical—Matt’s decision to aid the widow comes close on the heels of his criticisms of the town’s social disorder. His assistance to the widow serves not only to draw our sympathies to Matt, but also to provide an alternative social form. Matt’s charity directly contrasts with the disgusting selfishness displayed at Hot Well, later expanded in his discussion of Bath. He alone is able to be generous. His generosity, then, comes to stand as our only alternative to selfish display and social position jockeying. Or, in the more precise words of Stephen Ahern, his “sensibility entails an antistoic celebration of

feeling as an instinctive force for good, one that can function as a corrective to the calculating selfishness and deceit of aristocratic society."²⁶ We can be charitable, like Matt, or we can be terrible. Before the scene, Jery begins to prepare us to properly interpret Matt's actions. He carefully informs us of the link between Matt's emotional and physical state: "I think his peevishness arises partly from bodily pain, and partly from a natural excess of mental sensibility; for, I suppose, the mind as well as the body, is in some cases endued with a morbid excess of sensation."²⁷ While Jery's judgments, particularly in the early sections of the novel, are not entirely trustworthy, his idea of the "morbid excess of sensation" demonstrates one of the problems with Matt's charity. Matt's previous letter establishes his unwillingness to make poor tenants pay their past-due rent, which can be constructed as either an act of paternalist generosity or as the worst kind of foolishness. Jery's analysis only articulates the problem. Is Matt's charity, too, "morbid excess"?

Matt's attempt to assist the poor widow is his first test. Jery's letter is delightfully vague as to Matt's original intentions. He sees Matt observe the widow with "a very suspicious expression," followed by "evident marks of confusion" that might fit a lover. Jery is accordingly surprised to see her ushered into the library, "not into his bedchamber" (21). Matt's awkwardness and "croaking tone of voice" further indicate a lover afraid of rejection. Instead, Matt offers her twenty pounds to aid her sick daughter, but her hysterical reception of

²⁶ Ahern 17.

²⁷ Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, eds. Thomas R. Preston and O.M. Brack, Jr. (1771; Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990) 18. Further citations in text.

this gift only further implicates Matt in sexual scandal. Tabitha, Matt's stingy sister, provides the most cynical reading of the situation. She enters the room exclaiming, "Fy upon you Matt! . . . What doings are these, to disgrace your own character and disparage your family?" (22). The widow's reply sets the other side of the argument: "shall a worthy gentleman's character suffer for an action that does honour to humanity?" (22). As much as Smollett seems to expect us to share the widow and Matt's outrage, the answer to her question appears to be yes, which Jery acknowledges in the closing of his letter. While Jery admires Matt, he leaves the scene with the fear of "being detected in a weakness, that might entail the ridicule of the company" (24) if he performs a charitable deed himself. Indeed, without Jery's spying to provide a witness, Matt might never have cleared himself from the suspicion of sexual misconduct. After Tabitha no longer thinks Matt is providing the widow with hush money to conceal an affair, she is even more outraged. Jery's presentation of her uninterrupted speech makes her displeasure both more vague and more damning: "Oh, filthy! Hideous! Abominable! Child, child, talk not to me of charity—who gives twenty pounds in charity? . . . Besides, charity begins at home—twenty pounds would buy me a complete suit of flowered silk, trimmings and all" (24). Tabitha's initial exclamations are precariously placed. While we can assume in the context of the larger passage that they refer to the idea of sexual misconduct, their grouping with her anti-charitable remarks highlights her feelings about Matt's generosity. Her remaining dialogue reminds us of Jery's earlier diagnosis of Matt as excessive. Twenty pounds is over-generous, leading to suspicions, again, of both

Matt's motives and his prudence. Tabitha's desire for additional clothes highlights her vanity, but also draws attention to exactly how much money Matt gives. The entire scene is steeped in hysteria, excess, and confusion. The reader comes away with a positive sense of Matt's enormous generosity, but also with some of Jerry's trepidation about unrestrained giving.

The party's stay in Bath emphasizes this feeling that charity can sometimes be given a bit too liberally. Jerry further illuminates Matt's character by commenting that Matt's "blood rises at every instance of insolence and cruelty, even where he himself is no way concerned; and ingratitude makes his teeth chatter. On the other hand, the recital of a generous, humane, or grateful action, never fails to draw from him tears of approbation, which he is often greatly distressed to conceal" (65). This comment establishes Matt as a traditionally imagined man of feeling, except for the crucial last qualification. Jerry indicates Matt's anxiety to conceal his emotions, thus bypassing the criticism of sentimentality as performance. If Matt's tears were false, he would be at no pains to conceal them. However, Matt's apparent failure to conceal his emotions (Jerry, after all, has no trouble discerning them) gives him all the credit of genuine sensibility. The positive moral judgment Jerry intends, however, is cast into shadow by the novel's most pointed discussion of gratitude, the story of Paunceford and Serle. Serle ruined his own fortunes, thanks to a "romantic spirit of generosity, which he has often displayed, even at the expense of his discretion, in favor of worthless individuals" (66). Paunceford is the embodiment of this worthlessness, specifically in his ingratitude. Now that his own fortunes are

made, “he takes great pains to appear affable and gracious. But they say, he is remarkable for shrinking from his former friendships And that he seems uneasy at sight of some old benefactors, whom a man of honor would take pleasure to acknowledge” (65). Smollett takes this chance to completely revise the story of Ferdinand and Renaldo. Instead of virtue being rewarded and villainy reformed, the worst case has happened. Paunceford “lives in a palace, feeds upon dainties, is arrayed in sumptuous apparel, appears in all the pomp of equipage, and passes all his time among the nobles of the land” (67). His overly sentimental benefactor, on the other hand, “eats for twelve shillings a-week and drinks the water as a preservative against the gout and gravel” (67). Only in the indignation of Smollett’s readers is there any justice in the situation. The scene, indeed, is carefully calculated to raise our suspicions of charity and to encourage us to give it more carefully. Charity cannot only interrupt good fortune, it can also ruin your life and render you a social outcast. However beneficial sympathy is to the human character, overspending on charitable pursuits can damage one’s fortunes just as quickly as other extravagances, especially when one misjudges one’s charitable object.

Matt is also forced to learn early in the novel that charity can cause more trouble at home than it is worth. While Matt’s early letters are filled with suggestions of things Dr. Lewis should do for the tenants on Matt’s estate, this trend abruptly stops mid-way through the first volume. Smollett is perhaps simply suggesting that as the party gets further from Wales Matt’s interventions are less needed—many of the early suggestions require trips to/from the estate—

but a particular interchange with Tabby provides a more compelling explanation. Matt's charity on the estate goes unnoticed, until it crosses into a domestic area that Tabby considers to be rightly her own, in which case Matt is forced to sullenly retract his gift. Matt's letter from Bath on May 19 concludes with his typical paternalistic generosity: "If you think Davis has stock or credit enough to do justice to the farm, give him a discharge for the rent that is due: this will animate his industry, for I know that nothing is so discouraging to a farmer, as the thoughts of being in arrears with his landlord" (74). The letter continues, however, to Matt's retraction of "the lamb's skin, which Williams, the hind, begged of me, when he was last at Bath" (74). Tabby, it appears, has raised such an uproar over this piece of misplaced charity that Matt can have no rest. He claims (despite the concluding scenes with Baynard, to be discussed below) that "I shall never presume to despise or censure any poor man, for suffering himself to be henpecked; conscious how I myself am obliged to truckle to a domestic demon" (74). But while Matt presents Tabby's interference as negative, and concludes his letter by mentioning how he "appeases" (i.e., pays off) the servants "by stealth" in order to keep them from rebelling against her, he appears to take Tabby's advice to heart. This is the last letter that directly addresses charitable actions to be taken toward Matt's tenants. Matt has presumably learned that domestic economy and charity cannot coexist, and he will perhaps be a thriftier landlord thanks to Tabitha's interference. That interference, however, is presented negatively as "hen pecking" and noise.

In this case, Tabitha gets literally the last word, sending a follow-up letter

chastising Dr. Lewis for his interference in her domestic arrangements. All of Tabby's letters, except the one to Dr. Lewis in this passage, are to her housekeeper, dictating the tightest domestic economy. Tabby, for example, insists that her housekeeper, "clap a pad-luck on the wind-seller, and let none of the men have excess to the strong bear" (8) and "have an eye to the maids, and keep them to their spinning" (44). While Matt desires bounty without luxury on the estate, Tabby insists that her servants have neither and blames Matt's charity for her own cheapness. In an earlier letter to the housekeeper, Tabby notes that Matt's gift of her Alderney cow to one of the tenants takes "so much milk out of my dairy, and the press must stand still: but I won't lose a cheese paring; and the milk shall be made good, if the sarvents should go without butter" (43). She sees Matt and Dr. Lewis's charity as teaching "servants to pillage their masters" (74). Tabby goes so far as to lapse into perhaps unintentional obscenity in her anger: "Roger gets this, and Roger gets that; but I'd have you to know, I won't be rogered at this rate by any ragmatical fellow in the kingdom" (75). For Tabby, any money saved from the domestic half of the estate goes into her own pocket (literally, almost, since she mentions saving enough wool to make her own petticoats). Her cheapness, whatever Matt does to counteract it, is what provides her with the means to attract a mate despite her lack of the usual qualifications. Tabby is, in a way, right to be angry, given that Matt's charity is lessening her chance of finding a husband and setting up her own household. Dr. Lewis's complicity, in putting "such phims into my brother's head, to the prejudice of my pockat" (75) renders him equally to blame in Tabitha's eyes. While many anti-

charitable rants in the novel are undone by the subsequent letters, Tabitha's ire stands fairly uncontested, as the last letter on this topic and the final letter from Bath.

The question of the cheating Bath servants, to which Matt alludes in his letter, goes along with Tabitha's anger to give her an unusual amount of credit. Win's final letter from Bath proves that the servants were not just taking the "vails" that Matt alludes to, and to which custom gave them a right, but outright stealing. He, in turn, appears to pay off the corrupt servants in order to avoid a domestic scene. In addition to whatever they have already taken from the family, the servants thus get additional hush money. Matt comes away from this exchange seeming more than ever like something of a dupe, without the necessary determination to stand up to his own servants. Tabby's fierce independence, though rendered objectionable by her tone and humorous by her spelling, appears pragmatic by comparison. Her terrible thrift looks more and more like prudence. One must be careful, Matt learns, that domestic generosity does not do more harm to household peace than good. More than ever, though, this scene calls into question the line between rational charity and emotionally driven extravagance. The fact that Matt sends no more charitable missions home perhaps suggests that Tabby has taught him to harden his heart against the importunities of his servants and tenants, who appear from her perspective as mercenary advantage-takers.²⁸ And, indeed, Matt's task for the rest of the novel becomes creating a masculine model in which a moderated version of Tabby's

²⁸ For a slightly different, but still recuperative, reading of Tabitha, see Gillian Skinner 85-89.

thrift can become desirable. Gillian Skinner notes that, in its earliest form, economy was explicitly domestic, and by that standard Tabitha is a very good economist.²⁹ Matt must find a way to meld that domestic economy with the increasingly questioned model of sentimental masculinity.

Smollett's portrait of himself, as Mr. S---- in London, perfectly encapsulates the novel's deep ambiguity toward charity. The scene is, in a basic way, positive. Smollett presents his version of himself as someone who is deeply charitable, giving liberally to the literary community with little hope of reward. Whatever anxieties the novel has, Mr. S---- as a character still believes in the goodness of charity. The scene's presentation through Jerry's slightly skeptical eyes, however, serves to emphasize alternate interpretations of Mr. S----'s actions. Jerry's companion Dick explains Mr. S----'s charity as liberal, but also slightly silly. After a more traditional list of charitable actions, including helping hack writers out of debtor's prison, Dick ends his enumeration by pointing out the writers' ingratitude: "when they see occasion, they make use of his name with the most petulant familiarity; nay, they do not even scruple to arrogate to themselves the merit of some of his performances, and have been known to sell their own lucubrations as the produce of his brain" (129). Since his beneficiaries are not grateful, the text struggles to articulate a motive for Mr. S----'s charity. Jerry argues that "this appearance of liberality . . . was easily accounted for, on the supposition that they flattered him in private, and engaged his adversaries in public" (129). But Dick easily refutes this motive and instead points out, "those

²⁹ Skinner 6.

very guests whom you saw at his table to-day were the authors of a great part of that abuse; and he himself is well aware of their particular favours" (129). Jerry and Dick eventually come to the conclusion that there is "no reasonable motive" for S----'s actions. Dick goes even further, believing "that, if the truth must be told, the man was, in point of conduct, a most incorrigible fool" who "had not fortitude enough to resist the importunity even of the most worthless" (130). While Jerry acknowledges that Dick's complaints sound a good deal like sour grapes, he can come up with no better motive himself. He ends his passage with fairly weak praise: "By all accounts, S---- is not without weakness and caprice, but he is certainly good-humored and civilized" (130). While S----'s character is thus justified, his charity is not. The text proves unable to give a rational, or any, reason for S----'s actions. While his charity, until its final denunciation by Dick, is shown positively, it is also shown to be beyond explanation. It exists entirely as eccentric whim, not as a model for actions the reader should take. Indeed, allowing Dick to give the only attempted explanation draws even more attention to one of the novel's deep concerns about charity—what the giver perceives as goodness or benevolence can easily be constructed by anyone else as foolishness or even malice.

Smollett also presents scenes that demonstrate the pitfalls of charity misunderstood by its recipient. Humphry's initial "rescue" of the "drowning" Matt is a very literal attempt to rescue virtue in distress. While the scene is not charitable in a traditional, monetary sense, the novel uses it to explore the problems of misplaced philanthropy. Matt's initial shock upon entering the

water at Scarborough is perceived by Humphry as drowning, causing Humphry to rush into the sea and drag Matt out by the ear. Humphry's attempt is based on entirely positive emotions—love for his master, a desire to save a human life, and a concern for others greater than that for his own well-being. At the same time, though, his attempt exposes himself and Matt only to ridicule. Humphry nearly drowns, exposes Matt's state of undress to "all the people, men, women, and children" on the beach, and causes Matt to have "a burning-heat, and a strange buzzing noise" in his ear (179). Matt quickly acknowledges both his own anger and Humphry's good intentions after the event, highlighting the emotional ambiguity of charity gone awry. Matt does not see himself as an appropriate charitable object, since from his own perspective he needed no help. This misalignment of perceptions causes Matt to lash out, striking Humphry almost on instinct. The moral of the story, so far, appears to be that waiting to make sure your charity is desired is perhaps best. But, if Matt had truly been drowning, waiting would have been more fatal than misapplied help. Even Matt is compelled to admit that "Clinker's intention was laudable," despite his own anger and his feeling that he is "a sufferer by [Humphry's] simplicity" (179). The entire scene leads Matt to doubt the efficacy of basic human goodness. He concludes his letter by asking, acerbically, "whether a man had not better choose a sensible rogue, than an honest simpleton for his servant" (179).³⁰ This scene argues that good intentions are not equivalent to thoughtfulness, a message that combines with Matt's charity to the widow at Hot Well to suggest that the world

³⁰ The novel answers Matt's rhetorical question when Jerry's servant, a sensible rogue, abandons the family to seduce an heiress.

needs fewer spontaneous charitable feelings and more deliberation.

The subsequent scenes, however, shift the novel's perspective toward charity again, suggesting an unwillingness to let Matt's negative stance prevail even briefly. Jerry's letter immediately following Matt's is filled with conventional sentimental tableaux, reorienting our feelings to a more traditional compass. In the first, a widow, deranged with grief, mistakes Humphry for her dead husband. In Jerry's own words, "the incident was too pathetic to occasion mirth—it brought tears to the eyes of all present We did not leave the village without doing something for her benefit—Even Tabitha's charity was awakened on this occasion" (180). Here, the traditional charitable tropes, exploded by Matt's "drowning" and the novel's other treatments of charity, are seamlessly reinstated. There is no hint of mirth, no implication that the widow is a cheat, and no question of helping her. This sentiment is reinforced immediately by the reintroduction of Martin the Highwayman. While we might expect Smollett to cast charity toward a known criminal as worthy of deeper thought or criticism, such is not the case. Martin's scene is a very traditional one of patronage and gratitude. Matt gives Martin a letter of introduction to the East India Company, risking his own reputation to "procure [Martin] such credentials, that [he] will not be long without a commission" (182). Martin, in turn, demonstrates "strong symptoms of gratitude and attachment" (182). The charitable system is shown in both these scenes to be alive and well, and giving charity is again shown to be the mark of fundamental human virtue. Charity here is born from real concern and ends in appropriate gratitude, in scenes that could have been taken directly

from any more straightforward sentimental novel. This immediate reinforcement of ideal charity suggests that Smollett is simply unwilling to dismiss charity's power and virtue, just as the character of Mr. S---- continued to be charitable in the most inhospitable circumstances.

At the same time that this ongoing presentation and representation of charity occurs, Matt's narrative voice shifts in its attitude toward the sights he observes, abandoning his high moral tone for a more dispassionate style. As many critics have pointed out, Matt's early catalogs tend toward hysterical extremes of social commentary. In Bristol, Bath, and London, all is filth, disease, and disgust. Readers cannot help but have a visceral reaction to Matt's horrifyingly intense descriptions of, for example, the Bath waters:

Suppose the matter of those ulcers, floating on the water, comes in contact with my skin, when the pores are all open, I ask you what must be the consequence?—Good Heaven, the very thought makes my blood run cold! We know not what sores may be running into the water while we are bathing, and what sort of matter we may thus imbibe; the king's evil, the scurvy, the cancer, and the pox I can't help suspecting, that there is, or may be, some regurgitation from the bath into the cistern of the pump. In that case, what a delicate beverage is every day quaffed by the drinkers; medicated with the sweat, and dirt, and dandruff; and the abominable discharges of various kinds from twenty different diseased bodies. (44-45).

This description alone is certainly sufficient to give anyone with a modern understanding of germs a serious case of the heebie-jeebies. We sympathize

completely with Matt's physical disgust. As Matt's physical symptoms abate (he writes Dr. Lewis on July 18 to say that he is feeling stronger than ever and enjoys "a constant tide of spirits, equally distant from inanition and excess" [211]), and as the party approaches the less luxurious Scotland, Matt's attitude becomes that of a political economist.³¹ Matt's increasingly dispassionate reports of the diet, lifestyles, and spending habits of Scottish peasants demonstrate a remarkably shifted perspective. In contrast to the moral depravities of Bath, Matt finds purely economic reasons for the failings of Scottish peasants:

As the soil and climate of the Highlands are but ill adapted to the cultivation of corn, the people apply themselves chiefly to the breeding and feeding of black cattle Perhaps this branch of husbandry, which requires very little attendance and labour, is one of the principal causes of that idleness and want of industry, which distinguishes these mountaineers in their own country—When they come forth into the world, they become as diligent and alert as any people upon earth. (245)

Such coolly calculated remarks recur throughout Matt's letters from Scotland. While the Scottish Smollett had an obvious interest in redeeming his fellow citizens in any way possible, even the redemption has shifted tone.³² Unlike Matt's earlier hysterics, his discussion of Scotland arises from an intellectual, not

³¹ While the genre of economic writing was not as well formed in 1771 as it would become after Smith's 1776 publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, it certainly existed. Sir James Steuart published his *Principles of Political Economy* in 1767. Moreover, Smollett himself is likely to have been familiar with the burgeoning field, thanks to his role in editing the *Critical Review*. See Gottlieb for a more complete treatment of Smollett's role as editor.

³² For discussions of Smollett and Scottish nationalism, see Gottlieb and Shields.

an emotional, rationale. We are not meant to shudder along with Matt, but to agree with his calculating rationality. Just as Matt's constipation appears to have been cured by his journey, his emotional backlog has been swept away by his earlier outbursts. Without these "excess" emotions, Matt has moved away from sentiment toward economics. This shift should perhaps not surprise readers who have noticed, as Thomas Preston does, that "Matt's tenderness of heart generally expresses itself in gifts of money" and that "throughout the novel various characters discuss their own finances or the finances of others."³³ Matt and Lishmago even go so far as to debate the economic value of the Act of Union. Matt contends, in a starkly different tone from that of his discussions of England, that "the people lived better, had more trade, and a greater quantity of money circulating since the union, than before" (266). The very conditions that Matt earlier berated as causes for luxury are here revalued in the way that they came to be seen by economists, not moralists. The subsequent debate between Matt and Lishmago covers much the same territory as do many late eighteenth-century economic texts—the social value of circulation, colonization, and trade. Matt's final word on the subject is an only moderately qualified endorsement of the positive power of trade—"I am one of those who think that, by proper regulations, commerce may produce every national benefit, without the allay of such concomitant evils" (269). While Thomas Preston suggests that the "very world which admires the man of feeling forces him into the posture of a

³³ Thomas R. Preston, introduction, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, by Tobias Smollett (Athens, U of Georgia P, 1990) xxix.

misanthrope and a satirist to defend himself from it,"³⁴ in this case it forces him away from even misanthropy and into the arms of economics. Gillian Skinner contends, as do I, that this shift is a logical one. In her argument, "correspondence between the degree of financial generosity and the degree of proven sensibility immediately raises the possibility of excessive response—extravagance of both financial and emotional (and often . . . sexual) kinds."³⁵ Economy, as I will discuss below, is for Smollett a safeguard against the dangers of this kind of unrestrained sensibility.

Indeed, the novel's final charitable scene depends on this shift in Matt's perspective and makes little sense without considering it. We meet Matt's friend Baynard twice on the journey, once before the party goes to Scotland and again on their return. Baynard serves not only, as many critics have noted, as a focus for the text's misogyny,³⁶ but also as a dire warning of the dangers of sentimentality. As Baynard himself notes, and Matt criticizes, "the tenderness of his nature [is] the greatest defect of his constitution" (277). His wife, sensing this, "fastened upon the weak side of his soul" and exploits his delicacy by feigning illness when she is thwarted. Baynard is the embodiment of the man of feeling's greatest fault. Baynard's sensibility renders him unable to resist, even though Matt contends that his spirits would be able to counter the direct attacks of a "termagant" (278). Notable in these passages is the uncharacteristic harshness of Matt's criticism. A man whom we have so often seen in the throes of

³⁴ Thomas R. Preston, "Smollett and the Benevolent Misanthrope type," 57.

³⁵ Skinner 4.

³⁶ See, particularly, David Weed's "Sentimental Misogyny and Medicine in *Humphry Clinker*."

sentimentality himself seems scarcely the voice to propose such an anti-sentimental stance. Yet he criticizes everything about both Baynard himself, from his personality to his “meagre, yellow, and dejected” appearance, and his household (279).

Throughout this section, Smollett carefully blends the language of sentimentality and the language of prudent economics in order to modify the reader’s expectation of generosity. In fact, the coupling of sentiment and economics makes Matt’s economic message more acceptable than it would have been in any other form. While Matt has been remarkably cold and critical throughout the section, he finally lapses into outright anger: “I inveighed bitterly against the indiscretion of his wife, and reproached him with his unmanly acquiescence under the absurd tyranny which she exerted. I exhorted him to recollect his resolution, and make one effectual effort to disengage himself from a thralldom equally shameful and pernicious” (281). Despite this strong language, Baynard reacts to Matt’s offer to “regulate his affairs” with the stock picture of sentimentality. Matt gives his lecture while “mingling tears with [his] remonstrances,” and Baynard is “so penetrated with these marks of my affection, that he lost all power of utterance. He pressed me to his breast with great emotion and wept in silence” (282). Baynard’s enthusiastic, and even sexualized, acceptance of Matt’s aid disguises how different Matt’s offer here is from his earlier charities. Matt gives no money or concrete aid, but instead helps Baynard wrest control of the family finances away from his wife. Gillian Skinner articulates the mechanisms by which this shift aligns perfectly with the shifting

provenance of economics from an area of female and strictly domestic control to a subject for male expertise.³⁷ The loan also shows, though, the subtle revolution in Matt's thinking about charity. After the various setbacks his charity has suffered in the story, he is no longer willing to give money without due consideration. The state of Baynard's finances makes it less than prudent to simply give him a lump sum of money. But Matt's assistance in accounting still draws an effusion of sentimental language. True charity here, as is indicated by Baynard's profusely genuine gratitude, is economic. Smollett allows Matt's ordering of Baynard's affairs to stand in for more traditionally charitable acts; Baynard needs economic discipline even more than he needs an emotionally driven gift of money. Even if we give cautiously, Smollett suggests, our friends will be grateful.

Baynard's final appearance allows prudent financial transactions to replace Matt's earlier, more emotional, charity even more smoothly. Baynard's wife, the one sentimental weakness standing between him and financial accountability, dies, allowing Matt full control of his finances. Matt's coldness continues in his absolute lack of sadness for his friend's loss—"I was instantly seized with a violent emotion, but it was not grief" (325). Matt even goes so far as to console his friend by suggesting "that Heaven could not have interposed more effectually to rescue him from disgrace and ruin" (326). After two brief paragraphs detailing Baynard's presumably unwarranted grief, the text immediately moves into Matt's discussion of Baynard's monetary affairs. Matt

³⁷ Skinner 5 and 59.

promptly dismisses servants, sends away Baynard's relatives, and even has an account taken "of every single thing in the country house, including horses, carriages, and harness" (326). Emotion is replaced with accounting, feeling with exactitude. Baynard's grief is not a natural feeling, but instead something to be conquered by "a complete victory over the infirmities of his nature" (327). Following this is an explicit catalog of Baynard's exact debts and income, a literal conquering of emotion under a wave of financial facts. Matt's final "charity" to Baynard is to arrange loans, at four percent interest, to help him gradually recover his estate. Not only does Matt risk Liddy and Tabby's fortunes, which presumably cannot be replaced if they are lost, to help his nearly insolvent friend, the help is of a very limited kind. Baynard, though presented as the kind of man who deserves our sympathy, is instead given a mountain of debt. Matt is not charitable; he is a banker. This state of affairs is given as an unequivocally happy ending—Baynard's emotional ties to his wife are replaced with a fiscally responsible role in his neighborhood, and readers are expected to find this an emotionally satisfying turn. Our complete alignment with Matt's point of view makes it nearly impossible to do anything but cheer when Mrs. Baynard dies. At the same time, Matt's charity here cannot possibly be constructed as anything but a financial investment. After the emotional upheavals caused by his charity in the earlier parts of the novel, Matt appears to have learned prudence. But that prudence is something less than generous to the exact extent that it is less than charitable. Smollett has constructed a way for Matt to help his friend while remaining beyond reproach for extravagance or emotional weakness, but to do

so he is forced into the arms of economics and its insistence on logical consequences.

Thanks to this shift, Smollett is compelled to reevaluate Matt's rescue of Humphry. His reinvention as Matt's illegitimate son, rather than the servant Matt took on out of charity, has often been read harshly by critics. These writers tend to suggest that this act of belated paternity is part of the text's inexorable conservatism, leaving the novel with a closed, private, backward-looking ending. For Humphry, Matt's charity is able to translate seamlessly into Matt's role as his father. The novel is thus able to end with, as Evan Gottlieb points out, a perfectly closed family unit. No one remains outside the circle of the patriarchal family. Win marries Humphry, Liddy and George's marriage brings in the Denisons, and Tabby's unsuccessful attempt to replace Lishmago with Baynard unites him, symbolically, with the family as well. The community is closed, and it becomes impossible to give charity outside the family circle. As Gottlieb notes, "the novel's sympathetic relations are absorbed into familial ones."³⁸ Gillian Skinner states this even more strongly: "The ending of *Humphry Clinker* thus represents a form of triumph for Bramble, being in effect a sentimental fantasy, in which an expanding circle of personal contacts provides the bulwark against a world whose values seem fundamentally inimical."³⁹ Earlier we are invited to mock as selfishness Tabby's repeated assertion that charity begins at home, but the final message of the novel appears, in this view, to invite just such a reading. Charity,

³⁸ Evan Gottlieb, "'Fools of Prejudice': Sympathy and National Identity in the Scottish Enlightenment and *Humphry Clinker*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 18.1 (2005): 24.

³⁹ Skinner 82.

like the kind of emotional excess it takes to produce an illegitimate child, is hidden beneath the more proper sphere of familial duty and economic prudence.

Despite these potentially negative readings of Humphry's parentage, his inclusion in the Bramble family also works in a different, and somewhat more compelling, direction. First, we must remember that this revelation is a stock of pro-charity fiction. Fielding makes a similar gesture in *Tom Jones*, and Dickens would go on to borrow it for *Oliver Twist*. In such cases, charity helps those who secretly have a claim on the time and money of their benefactor. Being charitable, such texts argue, helps us to fulfill the very duty toward society that we would most want to fill, if only we could know every circumstance. Furthermore, as Michael McKeon notes, Matt's charity toward Humphry succeeds in generating "the social 'circulation' and upward mobility needed to fulfill Humphry's status as a dangerous germ of social disease."⁴⁰ Matt's charity allows Humphry to transcend his class status, a social phenomenon Matt rails against time and again throughout the early part of the text, but is ultimately forced to abandon. The text's positive treatment of Humphry, though, suggests strongly that this social rise is not as negative as Matt portrayed it in those early sections of the novel. It is not a failure, but rather a portrait of the modern world. Humphry and Win are treated much like any of the other couples at the novel's end, and are able to move upward from servants to family members living on Matt's estate. Because of Matt's charity, his life has been saved, his family augmented, and the "sins of [his] youth" (305) have been expunged. But, before we take this as a completely

⁴⁰ McKeon 63.

unequivocal embrace of charity, we must remember that Matt's charity to Humphry was never emotionally or monetarily excessive. Matt employed Humphry as a necessary servant and never handed him money willy-nilly. Even when his parentage is discovered, Matt is remarkably reticent as to Humphry's financial future. This undemonstrative charity, however, is suggested to be as emotionally satisfying as more excessive giving. Matt's treatment of Humphry, like his dealings with Baynard, thus becomes a model for good, prudent, charity.

The form of *Humphry Clinker* reinforces a reading of the novel as a modified and narrowed endorsement of charity, at the same time that it crucially softens the ideological implications of the novel's economic shift. John Sekora explains the novel's structure as it relates to traditional attacks on luxury, but not its structure as a novel. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that "the attack upon luxury gave focus and coherence to the novel, whose travel form was not innately disciplinary."⁴¹ Smollett's choice of epistolary travel narrative is, in Sekora's view, a method of more elaborate authorial control: "Smollett thus develops the incidents of *Humphry Clinker* in such a way that they constitute both the narrative itself and an attitude toward it, the structure he provides telling us not only what occurs but also how to interpret those occurrences."⁴² But this construction of form's inevitable reinforcement of a clearly defined message is a little too tidy. Instead, the form adds another way to interpret charitable sympathy.

The epistolary form, we must remember, had proven problematic from the

⁴¹ Sekora 241.

⁴² Sekora 267.

very beginning. The famous *Pamela/Shamela* debate highlights the way that epistolary novels emphasize all the problems of unreliable narration. In addition, epistolary novels have an innate duality of both audience and message. Not only must the novels be believable internally, each letter realistically appealing to its addressee, but they also assume an external audience with a compatible frame of reference, capable of understanding a story with minimal authorial interference. Richardson imagined this reader as a “country reader” who could logically be assumed to not only share the author’s social values but to see the author as a source of cultural power.⁴³ For Smollett, though, and for many late-century writers, this reliance on social stability is more vexed. Blythe Forcey, writing about Anglo-American novelists of the same period, emphasizes this social breakdown: “knowing that they [late eighteenth-century Anglo-American writers] were writing in a time of rapid transition and for many possible audiences (rural/urban, British/American, naive/worldly, male/female, moral/amoral), they could no longer trust readers to interpret on their own.”⁴⁴ Forcey argues that this ambiguity drove many authors to abandon epistolary novels entirely, as they simply became too unstable to convey an unambiguous message. Furthermore, epistolary novels, by giving every character an equal voice, risk making every character equally persuasive. Many readers of *Clarissa* have enjoyed the disturbing sensation that Lovelace’s letters are often more charming, humorous, and entertaining than Clarissa’s, rendering him far more

⁴³ Samuel Richardson, *Selected Letters*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1964) 232.

⁴⁴ Blythe Forcey, “Charlotte Temple and the End of Epistolarity,” *American Literature* 63.2 (1991): 229.

attractive than Richardson liked. Michael McKeon counters Sekora by reminding his readers of the power of this phenomenon. No matter what the majority of Matt's letters may say, the choice to use a multiplicity of narrative voices allows other opinions time and space in the text. This disparity, McKeon argues, encourages and even demands readers to recognize that "the truth of things lies in a composite and mixed view of reality."⁴⁵

This "mixed view" works in multiple ways in *Humphry Clinker*. The letters serve, first of all, as a device to alternately reinforce and undermine the novel's explicit didacticism. Jerry's letters, and sometimes even Liddy's, serve to drive home social points made by Matt. Jerry's reportage also shapes our opinion of Matt, as discussed elsewhere in this chapter. At the same time, even these "serious" letters undermine what could be read as the novel's unequivocal anti-luxury stance. Liddy and Jerry are, to different degrees, fascinated by London and Bath and present moderated views of their uncle's displeasure. While Matt, for example, complains of the stench caused by the crowd of Bath, Jerry jokingly gives thanks "for the coarseness of my organs, being in no danger of ever falling a sacrifice to the delicacy of my nose" (64). Lydia, the novel's most positive voice, likes "Bath so well, that I hope [Matt] won't think of leaving it till the season is quite over" (57). She finds it all "gayety, good-humour, and diversion," and sees everything in the most positive light (39), even though she, too, finds it overwhelming. London, even more than Bath, brings out differences of opinion in the party. Liddy's letters, in particular, serve as almost a point-by-point

⁴⁵ McKeon 59.

renunciation of Matt's. He sees only signs of social pretension and filth, but Liddy is quite charmed by the very crowds of people. The "infinity of gay equipages, coaches, chariots, chaises, and other carriages" pleases her, leading her to reflect that "all that you read of wealth and grandeur in the Arabian Night's Entertainment . . . is here realized" (91). Jerry is more likely to see humor in events that Matt finds merely disgusting, while Liddy is more likely to be charmed by what Matt sees as excess and luxury. The very fact that the narrative otherwise values Jerry and Liddy as basically moral people allows their letters to present readers with a softer version of Matt's criticism. While the narrative certainly gives Matt's voice more space and a powerful eloquence of disgust, Liddy and Jerry are able to remind us that the world is not, perhaps, as terrible as Matt's voluble descriptions of it. And while we might be tempted to dismiss Liddy's voice as somewhat giddy, Tim Prior argues that her "impressionability is carefully qualified by more mature sentiments—sentiments directed toward her appreciation of friendship, solitude, and the natural world."⁴⁶ Liddy's embrace of pastoral life as the novel progresses further softens Matt's earlier views. She reaches his conclusions in favor of rural life, but without ever descending to his disgust. London is rich and exciting, but a quiet life is better for her in the long term. This alternate view of Matt's subjects helps to voice, in a small way, a more optimistic view than Matt's misanthropy allows.

Win's and Tabby's letters serve to destabilize the narrative more directly, both through a presentation of radically different, although never seriously

⁴⁶ Tim Prior, "Lydia Melford and the Role of the Classical Body in Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*," *Studies in the Novel* 20.4 (1998) 496.

sanctioned, viewpoints and through their humor. We laugh at their many “unintentional” errors, but also at their comic scenes. These, much like Liddy and Jerry’s letters, can simultaneously support and undermine Matt’s more dominant message. Win, for example, inadvertently supports Matt’s claim as to the foolishness of upward mobility by dressing in Tabby’s cast-off clothing, only to be taken for a prostitute. Servants cannot emulate ladies of fashion without being mistaken for something even lower. The mere fact of our laughing at Win’s misfortunes causes us to align ourselves, however briefly, with the socially rigid model that Matt expresses in his letters. Win’s aspirations to be more like Tabby also allow Tabby’s faults, like cheapness and overdressing, to be rendered even more ridiculous.

Tabby’s role in the story is even more complex. As discussed earlier, Tabby expresses an anti-charitable outlook that is partly ridiculous, but partly rewarded by the text. Her extreme cheapness is laughable, but also contributes vitally to the domestic economy that is lauded by both Matt and Liddy. We are supposed to mock her for an excess of traits that the text otherwise supports—prudence and restraint. Tabby is at once the text’s most anti-luxurious character, refusing to update her wardrobe even when she is far out of fashion and insisting that her servants use their time productively, and the text’s most selfish, resenting Liddy’s suitors, pinching pennies for her own dowry, and damaging the happiness of everyone around her. She is a cautionary tale in motion, intended to demonstrate the dangers of accepting Matt’s harsh rhetoric as a lifestyle. The line between the charitable prudence Matt learns and Tabby’s cheapness is one

Smollett believes is vitally important, but has difficulty articulating. We mock Tabby because she is ridiculous, but taken individually, none of her traits, except perhaps her grating personality, appears beyond the pale. Smollett thus exaggerates all of her extremities by the bizarre spelling and phrasing of her letters. When she, for example, wants to complain of Matt's charity to one of the servants, she writes, "God forbid that I should lack Christian charity; but charity begins at huom, and sure forbid nothing can be a more charitable work than to rid the family of such vermine" (153). In the same letter, she refuses to forgive Dr. Lewis for aiding Matt's charity "though he beshits me on his bended knees" (153). Smollett's epistolary form allows him to use the technicalities of Tabby's language to discredit ideas, like dismissing servants who beg too many favors, which might be more persuasive in the hands of a more literate writer. This deliberate control of our response to Tabby is indeed the text's strongest indication that her ideas are unacceptable to Smollett. He may temper Matt's generosity with caution, but he can never abandon charity as completely as Tabby does.

More importantly than any specific shifts in view, however, these letters force us into the consciousness of a multitude of characters. We see events first from one perspective, then from another, in what Janet Altman calls Smollett's "fragmentation and deformation of reality."⁴⁷ We see Matt's charity presented by Tabby as waste, and Tabby's finery presented by Jerry and Liddy as disgusting display. This constant shift keeps the reader at all times aware of the infinite

⁴⁷ Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1982) 176.

number of ways that a scene can be constructed. More than just a device to forward the plot or enhance the novel's humor, this is a fundamental exercise in sympathy. Altman reminds her readers that "the more fragmented and disconnected the narrative appears, the more actively the outside reader seeks to discover the connections."⁴⁸ Smollett's multiple narrators compel us to work at unifying his story. Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1792), argues that we primarily learn to sympathize and to judge our own behavior by imagining how others might see it. Only by shifting our perspective can we learn to judge the propriety of our own actions. Smollett's narrative form demands exactly this. Constantly revising and re-imagining scenes forces the reader to always be aware of the different ways actions can be perceived. By doing what Altman calls "perceiving coherence and fragmentation simultaneously,"⁴⁹ readers enact the basic mechanism of sympathy. While Smollett's narration rarely uses the multitude of voices to produce true ambiguity of action, the very act of reading Tabby's letters, for example, forces readers to imagine, however briefly, the events of the novel from her perspective. In order to read the novel successfully, we must be able to sympathize with every character in their turn. The grammatical and spelling errors, in fact, mean we have to sympathize even *more* with Win and Tabby to extract any meaning from their letters at all. Despite Smollett's reservations about unrestrained emotions, his style demands the exact kind of creative reimagining that is required in order for us to feel sympathy for other humans. This fundamental core of human interaction cannot possibly be

⁴⁸ Altman 172.

⁴⁹ Altman 174.

completely broken down by any novel whose basic construction demands so much sympathetic imagination from its readers. Smollett never embraces these emotional bonds as enthusiastically as Sterne does, but the very structure of his novel reminds readers of their importance.

The more Matt resists the confines of luxury, the more he has in common with a political economist. But, his increasingly dispassionate, observatorial style has little emotional reward, for either the readers or the other characters in the novel. Matt loses his personality and the more interesting part of his actions. At the close of the novel, Smollett seeks to revise this case by allowing Matt to return to his charitable ways. This charity, though, lacks the emotional satisfaction of the earlier parts of the novel, despite Smollett's attempts to prove otherwise. Instead of a heartfelt act of love, we see Matt loan his friend money, at interest, after Matt has refused to understand his friend's love for his wife. We have escaped luxury, but appear to have escaped love—and even friendship—at the same time. Perhaps Smollett is attempting to acknowledge, as many Victorians would, that the problems of England, in his case luxury and degeneration, are larger than can be solved with charity alone. But his inclusion of his portrait of Dr. S---, an obvious play on Smollett himself, and many other positively portrayed acts of generosity, suggests that he does not in fact wish for his readers to abandon charity. Indeed, the very form of the novel demands that we experience a kind of charitable sympathy with its characters. Rather, the ending of the novel presents the deeply troubled fact that charity has become coupled, for its critics, with negative, luxurious emotions. While Smollett seldom

portrays charity perpetrated for selfish ends, he allows us to glimpse that world as others misconstrue Matt's actions. His loan is safer from misconstruction, and thus safer emotionally. The act of charity, though, to become immune from misperception, must become remarkably uncharitable. The novel thus ends with a problem. Smollett succeeds in separating charity from luxury only by a substantial reduction in charity's power. At the same time, he begins to establish a powerful link between charity and proper economy, in both the older domestic and newer public sense. The novel's final act of charity is an act of modern economics. For Smollett, this sacrifice is acceptable, because of his fears of modern degeneracy. For his Victorian followers, witnessing the social damage caused by the unrestrained exercise of economics, Smollett's coupling of charity with economics and prudence will be perhaps even more troubling than the problem Smollett seeks to avoid. The ending of *Humphry Clinker* serves to prove that charity can under no circumstances be applied to social problems without serious questioning. The economic revolution, only dimly on the horizon for Smollett, will only complicate and trouble that relationship further.

Chapter Two

“Genuine Orphan Stock”: Dickens and the Economics of Charity

Charles Dickens began his career just as the “dismal science” of political economy was at its most dismal.¹ The 1810’s and 1820’s saw the greatest debates over the inevitability of Malthusian principles of population, leaving the more casual charity of the eighteenth century far behind. The British public still wanted to be charitable, but in a more scientific and less emotionally fraught way. Thanks largely to Malthus’s fear of surplus population, merely saving the lives of the indigent was no longer an unmixed blessing. Instead, charitable acts began to shift away from preservative efforts such as founding hospitals toward efforts to educate or morally reform the poor.² Thomas Chalmers voiced this opinion by emphasizing that true charity need not involve money at all. Indeed, in his view, large-scale public relief only corrupted the poor, making it impossible for them to care for themselves later. Even the workhouse would only teach the poor how to bear its evils, giving them “a stouter stomach for the

¹ The phrase “dismal science” grew to enormous popularity by the late nineteenth century. It is generally attributed to Thomas Carlyle, at used in his essay “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question,” first printed in *Fraser’s Magazine For Town and Country* in 1849.

² Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) 196. See also: Sandra Sherman, *Imagining Poverty: Quantification and the Decline of Paternalism* (Columbus: The Ohio State U P, 2001). For an excellent treatment of this sentimental / scientific tension later in the century, see Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004).

digestion” of all new legal obstacles to poor relief.³ Instead, the burden of helping the poor should fall on private benefactors, strictly instructed to give everything *except* alms. Chalmers suggests that it is best to help the poor with:

The education of their families; the good order of their houses; the little schemes of economy and management in which he requests their cooperation; the parish bank, for which he has to solicit their agency and their contributions; the counsel, the service, the little presents of courtesy, by which he does not sink but signalize them; the cheap and simple attentions by which cottage children can be made happy, and their parents grateful; those thousand nameless graces and benignities by which the accomplished female can light up a moral gladness in the hamlet There is a way of prosecuting all these without alimending the rapacity or the sordidness of our laboring classes (265)

In the rhetoric of Chalmers, widely adopted by those opposed to mandatory public poor relief, the poor needed training, not money. These ideological changes combined with changes in the structure of rural poverty to make the Old Poor Laws seem grossly inadequate. The resulting New Poor Laws of 1834 were more institutional, less emotional, and, in the eyes of their critics, more blatantly cruel, than their predecessor.⁴ While the Old and New Poor Laws differed in a variety of ways, the most important and most deeply contested was the adoption of the workhouse. Paupers could receive relief only “indoors,” where they were

³ Thomas Chalmers, *The Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns* (1819-1826; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900) 246.

⁴ For a more extensive discussion of this phenomenon, see section three of my introduction.

separated from their homes, families, and community in order to be both deterred from seeking relief and managed as cheaply as possible. Thus by 1835 charity was largely seen as a matter of science, not emotion. For those like Dickens, steeped in the intensely sentimental charitable rhetoric of the eighteenth century, this shift was nothing short of an insult to the poor and to their benefactors.

Dickens not only wanted to right these social ills, as shown in, among other places, the anti-Poor Law polemics of *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), but he also recognized that the very subject of fiction was increasingly being taken over by political economy. If political economy had, as its practitioners implicitly claimed, the right to discuss the human institutions of marriage, family, life, and death, then literature's own particular territory was being invaded. Catherine Gallagher discusses this phenomenon as political economy's claim to both the "somaeconomic" and the "bioeconomic." Gallagher argues that once both human choice and natural law are constructed as strictly economic matters, literature *must* take an anti-economic stance.⁵ But this opposition could never be complete, given the increasing dominance of Victorian society by market forces. Mary Poovey demonstrates how fiction itself is complicit with the modern economy: fiction teaches its readers to "practice trust, tolerate deferral, evaluate character, and, in a general sense, believe in things that were immaterial," all traits necessary for life in the very credit economy fiction so often tries to

⁵ Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006) 3. For a more extensive discussion of Gallagher's work in this area, see the introduction to my fourth chapter.

oppose.⁶ While someone like Tobias Smollett had no genuine reason to be apprehensive about a shift toward economic ways of thinking, and indeed could see it as a way to regulate the emotional chaos of society, the increasing application of economics to social problems rendered it more objectionable to later writers. Victorian writers, especially Dickens, were keenly aware that mathematical models destroy the individuality of the poor and encourage solutions, like the New Poor Laws, that leave the fundamental problem of poverty unsolved. In this chapter, I will discuss how this tension surfaces in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65). Though this is by no means the only Dickens novel to address this same intellectual problem, it is by far the most complicated and varied in its treatment. I will argue that Dickens counters the totalizing mentality of economics both by attempting to articulate non-economic solutions to what were increasingly seen as economic problems and by representing near absolute financial chaos. Dickens deftly demonstrates mid-Victorian anxieties about charity and money, critically examining the role of private charity in a modern society while also upholding, within newly defined limits, its positive power.

The remaining authors in this study came to a fight between literature and economics that was already formed, but Dickens gave that fight much of its initial direction and remained invested in its outcome throughout his long career.⁷ Protecting the subjects and material of fiction combines for Dickens with defending the subjects of political economy, the poor, from political economy

⁶ Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008) 89.

⁷ For a fascinating portrait of how Dickens first adopted reformist rhetoric, see Amanda Claybaugh's "Dickensian Intemperance: Charity and Reform," *Novel* 37.1-2 (2003).

itself. Not only did Dickens feel compelled to distance his writing from the writing of economists, he also sought to provide through his fiction an alternative view of social problems. His dedication to the same social problems as economists, however, forces his fiction always and inevitably to keep that economy in mind. Trying to provide an alternative way of thinking, that is, keeps the original mode ever present. Thus, while Dickens wants desperately to distance his readers from economic approaches to social problems, he is compelled to remind them of political economy's power over and over. The simple fact that both literature and economics wish to describe the same lived reality and social experiences inextricably binds them. Examining this process as it appears in *Our Mutual Friend* illuminates one of the most consistent threads of Dickens's fiction, at the same time that it provides a compelling way to trace his shifting attitudes toward the social and political problems of the nineteenth century.

Norris Pope's full-length treatment, *Dickens and Charity*, remains one of the best sources for the specifics of Dickens's own personal involvement with the charitable causes of mid-century. Pope reveals that while Dickens was harshly critical of evangelical Christian attitudes toward poverty and social reform, he was positively involved in many quasi-evangelical philanthropic efforts. He was, for example, an avid supporter of the ragged schools movement, a cause that owed much of its early vigor to evangelical efforts to increase biblical literacy.⁸

⁸ Ragged schools attempted to educate slum children too "ragged" to attend regular schools and/or too poor for school tuition. Their training, often explicitly aimed at preventing juvenile delinquency, was heavily moral. The schools were

However, both Dickens and the founders of the ragged school movement were greatly disappointed by the general failure of the government to capitalize on the progress made by private philanthropy. Both the ragged schools and sanitation reform faced grave setbacks as the government declined to support them consistently.⁹ Additionally, Dickens's decision to separate from his wife in 1858 appears to have strained his relationship with Angela Burdett Coutts, the financial partner of many of Dickens's most directly charitable efforts.¹⁰ Thus, by the time of *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens was increasingly pinched on both sides of the charity question. The government's abstinence from charitable efforts left the poor still largely in the hands of volunteers for basic necessities like education and decent housing. Dickens had never had great faith in individual charity as a panacea, and he (along with his charitable peers) was increasingly forced to realize that even large-scale private philanthropy could accomplish very little for the majority of the poor without substantial government support. His own weekly journal, *All the Year Round*, confessed in April of 1866 that "mere benevolence" couldn't solve complex social problems. Thus, even though his later novels still mock failed *individual* charity, the bulk of his wrath is often addressed toward political power used for the wrong ends. While social criticism is a fundamental component of all of Dickens's novels, the later fiction grows increasingly bitter and despairing toward institutions that avoid accepting

generally staffed by volunteers, often with little training, and varied widely in quality. See Norris Pope, *Dickens and Charity* (New York: Columbia UP, 1978) 152-153.

⁹ For more information on the political fortunes of the Ragged School Union, see Norris Pope, chapter 4.

¹⁰ Pope 239.

responsibility for social ills, like Chancery (*Bleak House*, 1852-53), the Circumlocution Office (*Little Dorrit*, 1855-57), and even Parliament (*Our Mutual Friend*).

II. *Our Mutual Friend* is a novel obsessed with money. How do we get it? How do we keep it? How do we avoid being tainted by it? Like poor Sloppy's "considerable capital of knee and elbow and wrist and ankle" constantly peeking from his clothes, Dickens cannot avoid showing his financial preoccupations.¹¹ Every major strand of the novel's plot, and most of the minor ones, centers on money, while financial metaphors pepper the novel's pages. Even the romance plot doubles as a lesson in the perils of materialism. The novel simultaneously desires its readers, like Bella and the Boffins, to abandon money for love and demands that we remain intensely conscious of the power and effects of money. This double pressure—that money means nothing and that money means everything—encapsulates the text's extreme social anxiety. It is no coincidence that *Our Mutual Friend* involves more social mobility, and correspondingly more fear of social chaos, than any of Dickens's earlier novels. Bella Wilfer, the Boffins, John Harmon, Sloppy, and Lizzie and Charlie Hexam move up in the world, while the Veneerings, the Lammles, Bradley Headstone, and Betty Higden fall precipitously. Even those who ostensibly remain in stasis prove how difficult that is, with Twemlow as the text's main example of just how very much "work" it takes to maintain a social position, even as a poor relation. John Harmon

¹¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Adrian Poole (1864-65; London: Penguin Books, 1997) 201. Subsequent citations in text, as (volume.chapter.page).

constantly debates “returning to life,” pondering, as Catherine Gallagher phrases it, the possibility of “his possession of (instead of by) his money.”¹² By requiring his readers to constantly track these social and economic movements, Dickens forces us into a species of financial paranoia. Nothing in *Our Mutual Friend* is as it seems, especially when it involves money, and only by fully internalizing this problem can the reader survive the novel. This novel, that is, teaches its readers to suspect financial transactions.

This deep preoccupation forces *Our Mutual Friend* into an ethical quandary. As I discuss below, Dickens goes to great pains to prove money’s exact powers of corruption. At the same time, Dickens’s devotion to the ideals of the Victorian middle class—including financial comfort—prevents him from rejecting money outright. As a result, Dickens’s characters live in a world of complex financial uncertainty. This deep ambiguity about money carries over into the novel’s discourse of charity and sympathy. As Nancy Yousef suggests about *Bleak House*, “sympathetic attention is complex and unstable in the novel as a whole, and sympathy itself was a complex and variously defined concept in the ethics and moral psychology that formed part of Dickens’s cultural context.”¹³ While economic writers could use the distance of science to remove themselves from emotional questions, Dickens must reckon with the powerful and ambiguous force of sympathy, the emotion that attracts readers to both his characters and to acts of charity. *Our Mutual Friend* contains Dickens’s most stringent rejection of

¹² Gallagher 87.

¹³ Nancy Yousef, “The Poverty of Charity: Dickensian Sympathy,” *Contemporary Dickens*, edited by Eileen Gillooly and Deirdre David (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2009) 71.

the Poor Laws since *Oliver Twist*, but it also continues the deep skepticism of personal charity that is so familiar to readers of *Bleak House*. The novel powerfully rejects the classic economic dichotomy between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor with regard to public charity. But, while, pragmatically speaking, private donors with limited pockets must have some kind of criteria for selecting their charitable objects, Dickens is uncomfortable with the aesthetic component of such discriminations of sympathy. This novel, I argue, uses a variety of financial plots to work through this and other monetary dilemmas, but these plots raise more questions than answers. *Our Mutual Friend* articulates an angry rejection of political economy, but has no sustained suggestions for its replacement. Instead, its final proposal is at best a weak reaffirmation of the belief that people can spend money ethically, with minimal guidelines for how they should do so in the immensely complicated world the novel outlines. Here, perhaps, is Dickens strongest rejection of political economy: money in this novel refuses system and category.

I would like to begin my specific treatment of *Our Mutual Friend* at the end of the novel, with the financial collapse of the Veneerings. The narration of such collapse isn't new, either to Dickens or to Victorian novels. Indeed, it was quite a staple of Victorian fiction, figuring in, just to name a few examples, Thackeray's *The Newcomes* (1855), Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863), and Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (in two different plot lines; 1855-57) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44). The plot of financial collapse had, in fact, become so familiar to readers that Dickens

doesn't even need to narrate it—the novel stops just short.¹⁴ The Veneerings are left always just before the “resounding smash” they will make “next week” (4.17.792). This financial “smash” is prefigured so early in the text that the only surprise is how long it takes. The Veneerings are so conspicuously self-made that their downfall seems perfectly inevitable to any reader familiar with those other Victorian tales of financial collapse. They read like a checklist of the form: wealth from an unknown source, shiny new belongings, a suspicious way of integrating themselves into society, and corrupt political power.

Instead of contributing anything new to the idea of financial collapse, Dickens uses the Veneerings to institute the crash in a new, more ominous way. We get no closure with the punishment of the bad investor, comparable with Merdle's death in *Little Dorrit*. In fact, the Veneerings (in the future tense) won't suffer much at all: “the Veneerings will retire to Calais, there to live on Mrs. Veneering's diamonds” (4.17.792). Their only punishment appears to be their fall from social grace when society learns “that it always did despise the Veneerings” (4.17.792). The delayed collapse of the Veneering fortunes leaves their ruin constantly hanging over the reader's head as an ominous reminder that not all money is as it seems. But, since they are neither punished by the text nor presented in their decayed fortunes, they serve as a stronger reminder of the corruptions of materialism. Their collapse takes so little time, in comparison to the elaborate descriptions of their social excess, that it serves more as a way to tie

¹⁴ For more information on Victorian narrations of financial collapse, see Tamara S. Wagner's excellent account in *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre, 1815-1901* (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2010).

up loose ends than as the moral of their plot. In contrast, Dickens's constant and extended distaste at their "veneered" lifestyle appears again and again in the novel. His early descriptions of them are both uncharacteristically terse and, much like the Veneerings themselves, overly focused on material details:

Mr. and Mrs. Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new (1.2.17)

The Veneering household is filled with overly sumptuous objects, including the "gold and silver camels" that decorate the table (3.17.605) and elicit Dickens's near-constant disapproval. While their companions the Podsnaps serve largely as an indictment of upper-middle class moral narrowness, they, too, are criticized for their elaborate household goods: "Everything said boastfully, 'Here, you have as much of me in my ugliness as if I were only lead, but I am so many ounces of precious metal worth so much an ounce; wouldn't you like to melt me down?'" (1.11.135). The Veneerings and their circle are almost crushed under the luxury of their own possessions.

This sharp criticism of exposed and misused wealth places Dickens firmly in the midst of a much older debate about luxury that has complex ramifications for the rest of the novel. To say that the luxury debates continued unchanged into the nineteenth century would, of course, be false. As John Sekora notes, the

term “luxury” itself is remarkably adaptable, allowing people in any age to criticize “those things within their societies they most distrusted.”¹⁵ A key example of this shift, with serious implications for Dickens’s work in this novel, is the influence luxury was held to have on population growth, the great preoccupation of political economy. Sekora claims that a standard fear in the height of the mid-eighteenth century was that luxury would keep the poor from having an adequate number of children to drive economic growth, perhaps thanks to venereal disease or a belief that coffee and tea stunted fertility.¹⁶ Fewer children means fewer workers, which in turn means higher wages and lowered industrial profits. In the opinion of eighteenth-century economists, higher wages caused economic stagnation.

By the time John Stuart Mill wrote his *Principles of Political Economy* in 1848, this position had reversed on all fronts. Mill suggests that too many workers causes poverty, which can only be solved if workers would have fewer children and thus cause their wages to rise. Luxury in Mill’s argument comes to occupy a place on both sides of the population debate: negatively, the luxury of sexual indulgence, as opposed to the “prudence” of abstinence, drives population growth. Mill also contends, however, that luxury in the form of consumption is what keeps the middle class comfortably well-off. Their desire for social mobility and ever-increasing material goods requires that they have fewer children to absorb the family resources. Indeed, Mill claims that the only way to restrain

¹⁵ John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1977) 2.

¹⁶ Sekora 92.

population is to convince the poor to follow the example of the middle class and channel additional resources into additional goods rather than increased family size.¹⁷ The poor need to adopt the same kind of luxury as their middle-class counterparts. While developing an almost Mandevillian belief that a certain amount of luxury is both a necessary cause of and a benefit to social advancement, the Victorians remained deeply suspicious of the line between “luxury” and “comfort.” Mill’s ultimate position, in fact, is that the English are constitutionally incapable of enjoying the items purchased with their wealth. They “derive less pleasure than perhaps any other [society] in the world from what it spends.” English people have “an extreme incapacity . . . for personal enjoyment” that extends to their increasingly opulent households.¹⁸ Instead, Mill’s model allows that moderate purchases might be, and indeed should be, accompanied by moderate pleasure.

For someone like Dickens who championed working-class culture and who was deeply skeptical of political economy, luxury thus becomes sensitive topic. The line between enjoyable comforts and excessive luxury in his novels is often class-marked, rather than linked to any particular goods. The working and middle classes have appropriate domestic comforts, while the rich, or those who desire to appear rich, live in a world of false luxury. Dickens is careful to expose his largely middle-class readership to the shallowness of materialism. His message is a cautious reminder that “old-fashioned” comforts are more

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *The Principles of Political Economy* (1848 & 1865, Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2004). See Book I, Chapter 10 and Book II, Chapter 13.

¹⁸ Mill 187.

important than any amount of modern showiness. As a contrast to the Veneerings, he posits the comfort of Boffin's Bower, just beginning to be corrupted by Veneering-style luxury:

On the hob, a kettle steamed; on the hearth, a cat reposed. Facing the fire between the settles, a sofa, a footstool, and a little table formed a centrepiece devoted to Mrs. Boffin. They were garish in taste and color, but were expensive articles of drawing room furniture that had a very odd look beside the settles While the flowery land displayed such hollow ornamentation . . . there were, in the territory where vegetation ceased, compensatory shelves on which the best part of a large pie and likewise of a cold joint were plainly discernible. (1.5.63)

The luxuries here, represented by Mrs. Boffin's garish furniture and brightly flowered rug, are corruptions of the older comforts of the Boffin household. The old-fashioned open pantry and steaming kettle aren't meant to be approved only by Silas Wegg. This description, importantly poised between the presentation of the Veneerings and the Podsnaps, reminds readers that an older, more essentially British, comfort is always in danger of being replaced by a hollow and garish luxury.

Nowhere does Dickens make this point more clear than in his description of The Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters. His initial description is enough to chill anyone. It is "a narrow, lopsided, wooden jumble of corpulent windows" that exists in "a state of hale infirmity" (1.6.67). Inside, though:

The bar of the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters was a bar to soften the human breast No one could have wished the bar bigger, the space was so girt in by corpulent little casks, and by cordial-bottles radiant with fictitious grapes in bunches, and by lemons in nets, and by biscuits in baskets, and by the polite beer-pulls that made low bows when customers were served with beer, and by the cheese in a snug corner, and by the landlady's own small table in a snugger corner near the fire, with the cloth everlastingly laid.

(1.6.68)

While reformers were busily constructing the public houses frequented by the poor as dens of iniquity, Dickens demonstrates that they can be, in fact, havens of domestic comforts that even the middle class have forgotten.¹⁹ In this nostalgia for the world of *The Pickwick Papers*, nothing is luxurious or refined, but everything is warm, welcoming, and comfortable. The old-fashioned inn represents what Dickens sees as a set of quintessentially British values, positioned against both the hazards of life in the inn's poor neighborhood and the more luxurious environments witnessed by the bar's middle-class patrons. The ideal environment is comfortable, and, above all, hospitable. True domestic harmony, in these scenes, always warmly—perhaps even charitably—welcomes outsiders. Eugene, Mortimer, John Harmon, and even Bella are brought in to witness this particular lesson as part of their monetary reeducation.

¹⁹ Brian Harrison's *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England 1815-1872* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971) provides a comprehensive view of public-house debates from this period.

Dickens's rejection of luxury here carries a different ideological baggage than its eighteenth-century counterparts. In the eighteenth century, to oppose luxury also meant opposing "feminizing" and "extravagant" sentimental emotions, including but not limited to benevolence. The man of feeling was deeply sympathetic to the unfortunate, but he was also a fop. Smollett, as I have already established, is so uncomfortable with the emotional excess inherent in the eighteenth-century sentimental model that he is driven to adopt political economy as a corrective. Dickens and many other Victorians, however, felt deeply that new, more efficient, more "economical" models of dealing with poverty suppressed feeling so thoroughly that basic human decency was compromised. In part because of this growing awareness, Dickens's representations of luxury completely shift the emotional valence of the anti-luxury argument. Instead of showing, as earlier anti-luxury writers did, that luxury feminizes by removing opportunities for manly endurance of hardship, Dickens repositions it as an evil of laissez-faire capitalism and the adherence to the calculating principles of political economy. He mocks wealthy, shallow characters like the Podsnaps because they have no feelings. Mr. Podsnap's notable ability to dismiss social problems with "a peculiar flourish of his right arm" (1.11.131) represents what Dickens sees as the emotional state of much of the political elite in Britain. When faced with the idea of poverty, Mr. Podsnap can only proclaim that "it was their own fault" and "that Providence has declared that you shall have the poor always with you" (1.11.143-44). Money in this novel deadens feelings. While John Stuart Mill was able to partially

rehabilitate luxury into a way for the poor to progress in the world, Dickens is still imbued with the older sense that material luxury is a moral failing. His novel is thus required to mediate the tension between two distinctly different ethical frames: on one hand, he wants to fulfill readers' expectations by rewarding "good" characters with "good" fortune, but on the other hand he wants to present the serious ethical perils that an uncritical adoption of such good fortune presents.

III. The most fundamental way this tension manifests itself is in the extreme overcomplication of the main inheritance plot. John Harmon stands to inherit his father's entire fortune if he marries Bella Wilfer. His apparent tragic death early in the novel prevents the marriage. In the meantime, the Boffins, once faithful servants to the Harmon family, gain the fortune. Readers watch in horror as the money corrupts the Boffins—first forcing Mrs. Boffin into the shallowly luxurious arms of fashion, and then turning Mr. Boffin into a miser. Bella, chosen out of pity as a companion for the Boffins, appears to be on the same trajectory, confiding to her father that she is becoming hopelessly mercenary thanks to her new life of luxury. After being exposed to the "good life," she can no longer marry without money. Only when Mr. Boffin's greed causes him to dismiss his secretary, John Rokesmith, does Bella defend generosity and poverty. Bella and John marry, becoming a perfect Victorian couple with a modest income. A new will comes to light, in which the Boffins only get a much smaller inheritance, thus saving them, too, from the corruptions of wealth. Fifteen years before,

Dickens would have ended his novel here. Everyone has learned his or her lesson, and domestic harmony is established. Except, John Rokesmith really is John Harmon, a fact the Boffins have known all along and readers for quite a while. His marriage to Bella proves the conditions of the first will, and they can happily have their fortune. Except, there is a third will, leaving the entire fortune to Mr. and Mrs. Boffin with no conditions. Except, they decide to give John and Bella the money anyway, in effect reinstating the first will.

Not only does turn after turn undermine what would have been a clear moral, the final turn appears to be completely egregious. Why introduce the second and third wills at all? At the most basic plot level, the answer is apparently to facilitate the humiliation of Silas Wegg, who used the second will to blackmail Mr. Boffin. Thematically, though, the inheritance plot proves an ever-shifting moral morass, of which the ambiguous position of the later wills is only one symptom. Through the constant reevaluation of social position this plot demands, Dickens unequivocally argues that money corrupts and then, finally, softens this position to suggest that such corruption isn't inevitable. Silas Wegg becomes a criminal on the mere possibility of extracting a small portion of the Harmon estate, while Mr. and Mrs. Boffin demonstrate their fundamental virtue through their ability to relinquish the entire property. Bella is tainted first by poverty and then by money, only to be redeemed by the same pairing. The constant shifting of values keeps the ending from feeling entirely comfortable. While the novel expects its readers to be happy for John and Bella, who now live the dream-life of Victorian fiction, modern readers squirm at the fundamental

deception implied by their relationship. As John Kucich puts it, “John Harmon’s scheme to reeducate Bella, which seems generous on the surface, ultimately imprisons her as a kind of possession in Harmon’s own private dollhouse.”²⁰ Bella learns to love and trust her husband, who spends most of the novel as a liar and an obstructor of justice. Furthermore, the Boffins’ reward for moral behavior is a social descent back to their “rightful place” as family servants.

The massive complication of the novel’s plot demands critical attention. In addition to the wild inheritance narrative outlined above, the novel contains numerous subplots—those of Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam, of Jenny Wren, of Mr. Venus and Precious Riderhood, and of “Fascination” Fledgeby, just to name a few—that fail to connect as neatly as they do in Dickens’s previous multi-plot novels. The effect of this disunity is to dull the “meaning” of any particular plot. Nancy Metz points out that “because the perspectives of the novel are so diffuse, . . . no one solution can stand for the reintegration on a larger scale of humanistic values and beliefs,”²¹ while J. Hillis Miller argues that the novel rejects “the idea that there is an unity of the world transcending the differences between individual lives.”²² The novel, in other words, is intentionally chaotic, failing to comfort its readers with any grand sense of unity in a disordered world. Michal Ginsburg constructs this resistance to clarity as an expression of Dickens’s feeling toward free will. The elaborate plot “has precisely

²⁰ John Kucich, “Repression and Representation: Dickens’s General Economy,” *Charles Dickens*. ed. Stephen Connor (New York: Longman, 1996) 204.

²¹ Nancy Aycock Metz, “The Artistic Reclamation of Waste in *Our Mutual Friend*,” *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 34.1 (1979): 60.

²² J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958) 292.

the function of making us hear at the end of the novel two distinct and opposed voices: the terms of the will that gave rise to the plot have been fulfilled, but the characters have freely chosen to bring their story to this particular end."²³ For Ginsburg, the ending's over complication helps Dickens to address the inherent tensions in the novel genre between free will and determinism. I would also argue that the ending and the multiple plots comment on the monetary ethics of Dickens's Victorian readers. As noted above, Dickens wants his readers to viscerally feel the peril of corruption, which occurs in both the major and minor storylines. If the sweetly jolly Mr. Boffin can be soured by good fortune, so can any of us, no matter how value-neutral political economists render money. At the same time, Dickens, speaking as a man who participated in his very own rags-to-riches story, wants to demonstrate that money can have a redemptive power. Mr. Podsnap freely ignores the poor, but the Boffins, Bella, and John Harmon cannot. The Veneerings spend money on lavish dinner services, while the Harmons spend it in decorating Baby's nursery and providing a new, more humane job for Bella's father. Losing money, then regaining it with a new conscience, teaches Bella, and by extension Dickens's readers, how money and sympathy can coexist. The novel's elaborate plot serves, again and again, to remind characters and readers of the "correct" way to behave toward money, partly by showing every "incorrect" way as well. Money, that is, constantly fluctuates between "gold" and "dust."

²³ Michal Ginsburg, *Economies of Change: Form and Transformation in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Stanford, Stanford UP, 1996) 149.

IV. Because money itself presents such an ethical quagmire, charity isn't an easy task in this novel. No one in *Our Mutual Friend* simultaneously desires and deserves charity. Dickens, notoriously beset by begging letter writers who demanded his charity, unleashes his full ire on those who write to request money from Mr. and Mrs. Boffin. Both institutional charities and private beggars see Dickens's scorn in an elaborate passage on the perils of new money:

Oh, the varieties of dust for ocular use, offered in exchange for the gold dust of the Golden Dustman! Fifty-seven churches to be erected with half-crowns, forty-two parsonage houses to be repaired with shillings, seven-and-twenty organs to be built with halfpence, twelve hundred children to be brought up on postage stamps. Not that a half-crown, shilling, halfpenny, or postage stamp would be particularly acceptable from Mr. Boffin, but that it is so obvious he is the man to make up the deficiency. And then the charities, my Christian brother! And mostly in difficulties, yet mostly lavish, too, in the expensive articles of print and paper. (1.17.209)

Dickens's mockery here is particularly damning because its specificity both humiliates the writers of these letters and illuminates just how foolish their problems are.²⁴ Evangelical philanthropists in mid-century certainly did worry

²⁴ Daniel Hack articulates an additional source of anxiety for Dickens over begging-letter writers: career anxiety. "The actual movement of individuals across the boundary between the writing of books and articles and the writing of begging letters," a movement Dickens's involvement in literary charities would have constantly reminded him of, "underscores not only the notorious economic precariousness of authorship but also the conceptual precariousness of this boundary." See *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2005) 107. Dickens thus needs to defend himself not only against the illegitimate requests of these writers, but also from their illegitimate authorship.

about the lack of churches in poor urban districts, and the other problems Dickens mentions would have been equally real to his readers. But by conflating these goals and dismissing them as “dust,” Dickens serves to highlight their gross insufficiency. How can twelve hundred children really be helped with the price of postage? Even the letter writers, who obviously expect more than the nominal charity they mention, seem aware that a half-crown will help no one very much. Dickens goes on to lampoon the rich and powerful who join charitable organizations, as Bernard Mandeville criticized them over a hundred years before, just for the power and authority of belonging to one. Less influential individuals writing to request money confuse selfishness with charity in the grossest of ways, asking for money in ways that humiliate, such as the “daughters of general officers, long accustomed to every luxury of life (except spelling) who little thought, when their gallant fathers waged war in the Peninsula, that they would ever have to appeal to those whom Providence, in its inscrutable wisdom, had blessed with untold gold” (1.17.210). (The Peninsular wars, we should note, ended in 1814.) In *Household Words* Dickens had lambasted such letter writers for “dirtying the stream of true benevolence.” Their presentation here reminds readers that it is impossible to practice indiscriminate charity in the modern world. Acting on even a portion of these requests would destroy the Boffins’ ability to live at all, let alone help the truly needy. Processing the requests of the begging letter writers is, in fact, John Rokesmith’s only clearly defined and extensively discussed job. The unworldly Boffins simply lack the requisite cunning to distinguish true charity from false.

Dickens's frustration over the need to distinguish true and false charity even extends to the ragged schools movement, something to which he, as I demonstrated above, had given considerable support. Both Charley Hexam and Bradley Headstone, the novel's two products of the ragged schools, are shown to be morally hollow, deeply ingrained with an intensely selfish desire to rise above their class. We can see in Bradley's description the seeds of Charley's future: "regarding that origin of his, he was proud, moody, and sullen, desiring it to be forgotten" (2.1.218). Furthermore, the education that Bradley has received, and is likely to give, is only by rote. He can "do mental arithmetic mechanically, sing at sight mechanically, blow various wind instruments mechanically, even play the great church organ mechanically" (2.1.218). Bradley's moral influence so intensifies Charley's innate selfishness that he can only see Lizzie's possible marriage to Bradley as "respectability, an excellent connexion for me, common sense, everything!" (2.15.384), and there is nothing in the education he is provided to correct such faults. Charley, like Bradley, learns by rote and desperately seeks to hide his past.

Beyond simply noting this deficiency, however, Dickens also dwells at some length on the dangers and failings of the ragged schools as philanthropic bodies. The teachers, like good philanthropists, believe the best of the poor children in a strictly middle-class sense, which gives them no access to the kinds of education the children truly need. According to Peter Stokes, Dickens is keenly aware that many of the school's strategies exist only so "that the teachers

may sustain their own fiction that they are imparting an important education.”²⁵ The school in *Our Mutual Friend* is “pervaded by a grimly ludicrous pretence that every pupil was childish and innocent,” so that “young women old in the vices of the commonest and worst life were expected to profess themselves enthralled by the good child’s book” (2.1.215). Perhaps it is for this reason that the school’s most intensely examined “products,” Charley and Bradley, are so morally empty. They have never been taught a lesson that matched the fabric of their daily ethical existence. Even worse than perpetuating this pedagogical mismatch, the school, lodged in “a miserable loft in an unsavoury yard,” serves as a breeding ground for disease, a “hot-bed of flushed and exhausted infants exchanging measles, rashes, whooping-cough, fever, and stomach disorders, as if they were assembled in High Market for the purpose” (2.1.215-16). It is not knowledge that is exchanged in this school, nor are children taught lessons that would give them better future employment. Instead the school is the worst kind of market—a vehicle for spreading physical and moral contagion, whooping cough and vice. Ethically and biologically, the education given to these poor children is a failure, and only “an exceptionally sharp boy, exceptionally determined to learn” can gain anything from it (2.1.215-16). These criticisms echo a popular line of argument about the ragged schools, which were notoriously uneven in both the quality of the instruction, left entirely to volunteers, and in attendance. *Our Mutual Friend* contains no stated alternative to this “jumble,” but in reality many philanthropists at this time began to argue in favor of state-run,

²⁵ Peter M. Stokes, “Bentham, Dickens, and the Uses of the Workhouse” *SEL* 41.4 (2001): 719.

and thus presumably more uniform and better-regulated, education for all children. Voluntary charity has too many serious flaws to address a social issue so important.

The novel contains another, somewhat more poignant, model of pauper childhood in its portrait of the orphan Johnny. The Boffins, filled with good intentions, attempt to fill the role that Dickens gave unequivocally to benefactors in his earlier novels—they, like Mr. Brownlow in *Oliver Twist*, would like to adopt an attractive orphan to replace a lost friend. But adopting an orphan is not quite as straightforward as Dickens imagined it in 1837, and the Boffins find themselves and their charity considerably abused. Indeed, instead of philanthropy, the Boffins must participate in a complex market of exchange. Mrs. Boffin's view of charity is old-fashioned, well-intentioned, and straightforward: "Don't you begin to find it pleasant already, to think that a child will be made brighter, and better, and happier, because of that poor sad child that day? And isn't it pleasant to know that the good will be done with the poor sad child's [John Harmon's] own money?" (1.9.105). Like Mr. Brownlow, Mrs. Boffin imagines a world of charitable equity. The money they received from the death of John Harmon can go toward making a new child happy in his place, and the world will benefit. One fewer orphan, one more educated and prosperous boy in his place. What could possibly be the harm?

As it does for many of Dickens's late benefactors, however, the gap between charitable theory and practice proves almost overwhelming for the Boffins. Selecting a charitable object from the multitude is nearly impossible, and

involves a series of uncomfortable criteria. There is, for example, the question of gratitude to consider. Can the poor really appreciate the Boffins' charity? The curate's wife, enlisted in the search for an orphan, rejects the first candidate, Mrs. Goody's grandchild, because Mrs. Goody proves herself incapable of receiving charity properly: "I hope it's not uncharitable to remember that last Christmas Eve she drank eleven cups of tea, and grumbled all the time. And she is not a grateful woman . . . she brought back the petticoat of new flannel that had been given her, because it was too short" (1.9.109). Other orphans are rejected for aesthetics—"I don't think Mrs. Boffin would like an orphan who squints so much" (1.9.110)—or age. More seriously to the Boffins, though, than these semi-sarcastic criteria, is the very fine line between benefaction and purchasing. Mr. Milvey, the curate, considers the danger, at the same time that he falls into the very trap he describes:

"We have orphans, I know," pursued Mr. Milvey, quite with the air as if he might have added "in stock," and quite as anxiously as if there were great competition in the business and he were afraid of losing an order, "over at the clay-pits; but they are employed by relations or friends, and I am afraid it would come at last to a transaction in the way of barter. And even if you exchanged blankets for the child—or books and firing—it would be impossible to prevent their being turned into liquor. (1.9.110)

While Mr. Milvey is anxious to prevent the sales of orphans for liquor, he openly imagines the orphans themselves as commodities. In his shopkeeper's attitude, there is no harm in exchanging orphans for blankets, only in those blankets being

subsequently exchanged for alcohol. His ethical problem is not, as we might expect, the sale, but rather the currency.

In case readers missed the obvious moral fallacy here, Dickens drives it home later in the search. When the quest for an orphan resurfaces later in the book, we see that Mr. and Mrs. Milvey have faced difficulties. Often:

it was found impossible to complete the philanthropic transaction without buying the orphan. For the instant it became known that anybody wanted the orphan, up started some affectionate relative of the orphan who put a price on the orphan's head. The suddenness of the orphan's rise in the market was not to be paralleled by the maddest records of the Stock Exchange. He would be at five thousand percent discount out at nurse making a mud pie at nine in the morning, and (being inquired for) would go up to five thousand percent premium before noon. The market was "rigged" in various artful ways. Counterfeit stock got into circulation. Parents boldly represented themselves as dead, and brought their orphans with them. Genuine orphan stock was surreptitiously withdrawn from the market orphan scrip would be instantly concealed, and production refused, save on a condition usually stated as "a gallon of beer." Likewise, fluctuations of a wild South Sea nature were occasioned, by orphan-holders keeping back, and then rushing into the market a dozen together. But the uniform principle at the root of all these various organizations was bargain and sale, and that principle could not be recognized by Mr. and Mrs. Milvey. (1.16.195)

This bizarre passage serves two complexly connected functions. By pointing out that orphans are being treated as a market commodity, literally here as shares in a human stock market, Dickens makes an argument both about philanthropy and about the nature of economy's relation to society. First, as much as Mr. and Mrs. Milvey refuse to participate in the orphan market by "purchasing" any of the offered wares, the market is of their own creation. It is only when Mr. and Mrs. Milvey's inquiries reach the poor that the "price" of orphans begins to fluctuate. In a mild way, Dickens condemns their well-intentioned philanthropy for corrupting the poor. While their hands are technically clean, the Milveys are the rhetorical stock-jobbers of the orphan market, or, more damningly, the purveyors of slaves. Most strongly, though, Dickens criticizes the market itself for overreaching its bounds. As Tamara Wagner argues, the Boffins's "failure is also part and parcel of a much larger collapse of financial discourse into domestic space" that Dickens finds appalling.²⁶ The corrupting power of money is articulated in very similar terms here as it will be later on about Mr. Veneerings's business friends, who can only reckon value in terms of supply and demand. In order to even understand the satire, readers must have an intimate knowledge of the mercurial and often corrupt Victorian stock market. Lying, cheating, bargain, and sale become completely synonymous when everything is imagined as a monetary transaction. The criticism in this passage is directed as much at readers for understanding the situation as it is as the Milveys for creating it. The

²⁶ Tamara S. Wagner, "'We have orphans [. . .] in stock': Crime and the Consumption of Sensational Children," *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) 201.

untainted giving of money from benevolent motives becomes, in such an over-determined “market,” impossible.

Dickens is anxious, however, that his criticism might deter needed and genuine sympathy for poor children. To correct his harshness here, Dickens accompanies it with a traditional scene of childhood pathos—the death of the innocent Johnny. His sickness and disease, filled with the same melodrama that, years before, accompanied the deaths of Little Nell and Paul Dombey, serve as an emotional corrective for readers whose sentiments have possibly been over-hardened. Like *Oliver Twist*, Johnny represents pure, untainted childhood innocence, immune from the corruptions of poverty. His deathbed piety, asking if “God had brought them [the sick children] all together there?” (2.9.326) in the hospital, and his final bequest of his favorite toy to a fellow patient, remind readers that poor children are deserving of help. Johnny is morally and ethically pure, a thoroughly deserving object of sympathy. Even this message can’t be delivered without a chastisement, however. It is his guardian Betty Higden’s deep suspicion of public charity that keeps Johnny from the hospital until it is too late. Dickens directly addresses his readers: “The shameful accounts we read, every week in the Christian year, my lords and gentlemen and honorable boards, the infamous records of small official inhumanity, do not pass by the people as they pass by us.” Hearing the terrors of the poor laws has taught Betty Higden to “catch up in her arms the sick child who was dear to her, and hide it as if it were a criminal” (2.9.321). The current system directly encourages the death of sweet

and adorable Johnny, the very emblem of the “deserving poor,” because it teaches the poor to suspect the motives of public charity.

By exciting readerly sympathy for the attractive and interesting poor child, Dickens puts his readers in the same moral quandary as the Boffins. Poor children deserve sympathy and help, but we’ve just seen a handful of reasons that we can’t ethically give them that help. So what do we do? The answer, for Mrs. Boffin, is to learn that even charity can be selfish: “This little death has made me ask myself the question, seriously, whether I wasn’t too bent on pleasing myself. Else why did I seek out so much for a pretty child, and a child quite to my own liking? Wanting to do good, why not do it for its own sake, and put my tastes and likings by?” (2.10.330). The right kind of charity should help “a creature . . . for its own sake” (2.10.331). Mrs. Boffin points out the precarious position of her own charity. By looking for a particular kind of orphan to help, Mrs. Boffin trapped every poor child in the neighborhood in a brutal market system. Charitable objects can’t be selected like furniture, by personal preference, or the entire benevolent system collapses under the weight of the choice. Selection based on taste is a matter for the market, not for benevolence. The text’s solution is to take the first legitimate problem that presents itself, disregarding the irrationally aesthetic elements of our sympathy. Charity must be divorced from luxury. Readers, like the Boffins, need to care as much for the strange, awkward, damaged Sloppy as for the cherubic Johnny. The tall and ungainly Sloppy has, in the words of Tamara Wagner, “literally outgrown the

sentimentalized orphan's role,"²⁷ and his position in the text demands readers to think outside of those stock sentimental parameters for charity.

Institutionalized charity is, of course, not an ideal alternative to overly luxurious and sentimental charity either. Dickens allows Betty Higden to serve as a voice for the working class's anxiety about charity. Her frequent speeches detail why the poor might desire to exchange charity toward their children for outright sale, at the same time that they bitterly mock the Poor Law's claim to separate the deserving and undeserving poor. No one is more deserving than Betty Higden, and for exactly that reason Betty Higden refuses charity. But, again, Dickens is treading on ideologically thin ice. He is perhaps more aware here of the flaw Bruce Robbins discovers at the heart of *Bleak House*: "to clutch the ethical and experiential, while letting go of the global and the systematic, is to give up on teaching people how they can act in, on, and against System."²⁸ If he wants to act against the Poor Law system at large, his characterization of Betty cannot prove that all deserving candidates would refuse charity. This misplaced criticism would instead convince readers that charity is a waste of time—only drunkards and thieves would accept it. Instead, Dickens wants to prove that specific evils of the Poor Law system drive away the very candidates the public desires to serve. The Poor Law is so corrupt that only morally damaged people would have anything to do with it. Betty is thus portrayed as naturally and rationally, but also unfortunately, suspicious of a corrupt system.

²⁷ Wagner 211.

²⁸ Bruce Robbins, "Telescopic Philanthropy: Professionalism and Responsibility in *Bleak House*," *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990) 214.

Mrs. Higden's impassioned speeches might well be cobbled from Dickens's own journalism, giving powerful voice to the various anti-Poor Law sentiments more gently discussed elsewhere. Unlike the hint in *A Christmas Carol* that "some had rather die" than go to the Poor House, Betty stridently declares: "Come to us and find us all a-dying, and set a light to us where we lie, and let us blaze away with the house into a heap of cinders, sooner than move a corpse of us there!" (1.16.199). Why does she feel this so strongly? The depictions of the Poor Laws in newspapers and the popular press. "Do I never read how they [the poor] are put off, put off, put off — how they are grudged, grudged, grudged, the shelter, or the doctor, or the drop of physic, or the bit of bread?" (1.16.199). Dickens satirically notes that this has had its desired deterrent effect: "A brilliant success, my Lords and Gentlemen and Honorable Boards to have brought it to this in the minds of the best of the poor!" (1.16.200). Mrs. Higden has been so terrified of public charity that she can't even bring herself to accept the private aid of the Boffins, arguing, "I've never took to charity yet, nor yet has any one belonging to me. And it would be forsaking of myself indeed, and forsaking of my children dead and gone . . . to set up a contradiction now at last" (2.14.377). Mrs. Higden has so deeply internalized anti-charitable rhetoric that even in her old age she cannot accept the gift of a quiet retirement. For this refusal, Dickens calls her a "brave old heroine" (2.14.377).

As Mrs. Higden dies, without rest and without aid, Dickens delivers his message: the Poor Laws only deter those who most need help. Their degrading scrutiny is too much for anyone who is still moral:

For when we have got things to the pass that with an enormous treasure at disposal to relieve the poor, the best of the poor detest our mercies, hide their heads from us, and shame us by starving to death in the midst of us, it is a pass impossible of prosperity, impossible of continuance. . . . This boastful handiwork of ours, which fails in its terrors for the professional pauper, the sturdy breaker of windows, and the rampant tearer of clothes, strikes with a cruel and wicked stab at the stricken sufferer, and is a horror to the deserving and unfortunate. We must mend it, lords and gentlemen and honorable boards, or in its own evil hour it will mar every one of us.

(3.8.496)

Attempting to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving poor is not only impossible, but the mere attempt will drive away anyone decent enough to feel self-conscious at such examinations. Betty's ramblings expose additional possible misery at the hands of the Poor Laws. Women "linger on a doorstep, while the appointed evader of the public trust did his dirty office of trying to . . . get rid of them," while others make rigorous trips cross country to visit relatives in centralized workhouses far from home (3.8.498). The Poor Laws make no attempt to personalize their care, and no attempt to lessen the humiliations of taking such aid. Betty's burning desire to die an honorable death, outside of the workhouse, reminds readers over and over of the abhorrence of these institutions. Betty's tale makes its point quite clear; the "Honorable boards" Dickens so frequently

addresses must learn the lesson of the Boffins, to give charity, without subjecting it to individual desires.²⁹

Dismissing the cheerful comfort of his early novels, in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens is compelled to admit that even charity itself is subject to the ruthless dictates of the market. Good people are overwhelmed trying to determine the best ways to help, while powerful people are, through the messages of political economy, busy determining the most effective ways to help as little as possible. The corrective for this situation is never perfected in this novel. While the early fiction let well-meaning philanthropists do unequivocal good, Dickens has obviously become more skeptical about individual power to solve large social problems. We can see this anxiety clearly by noting how often his direct addresses on the topic of poverty are not to the reader, but to those with political power. This shift leaves individuals at loose ends. Much like *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend* never suggests that readers shouldn't help, but it never provides a way that they can. Johnny and Betty die, and Sloppy is left to a strangely unclear future. But this lack of direction is only a smaller part of the immense financial confusion of this novel. Bella learns the lesson that money is not necessary for happiness, only to be rewarded by the very money she has learned not to want. The Veneerings teeter forever on the precipice of financial ruin, but their fellow

²⁹ In this position, Dickens approaches J.S. Mill's belief that the state could never have adequate tools to make such distinctions. Mill notes that "what the state may and should abandon to private charity is the task of distinguishing between one case of real necessity and another. . . . The dispensers of public relief have no business to be inquisitors. Guardians and overseers are not fit to be trusted to give or withhold other people's money according to their verdict on the morality of the person soliciting it." See *Principles* 882.

cheaters and stock jobbers go unpunished. Dickens opens the abyss. Money is everywhere, and everyone is forced to interact with it, but it corrupts. Except for the “Lords and Gentlemen and Honorable Boards” with their political power, our only influence is in the care we take with our own money. While Dickens wants to deny and undercut the power of economic principles to control society, his world at its very core rests on financial decisions.

Chapter Three

“Sit Within my House and Do Me Good”: Art and Philanthropy in *Aurora*

Leigh

When Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote *Aurora Leigh* (1856), she was a middle-aged woman living in Florence, Italy. She knew very little about the life of England’s poor, her experiences limited by her own ill health, her natural reclusiveness, and her family circumstances. Her experience of London was remarkably limited given the number of years she resided there. Unlike Dickens, she was not a great urban explorer, and her health had limited her social engagements. Yet in *Aurora Leigh* she writes a poem filled with concern for England’s poor and for the political future of her nation. Readers acquainted only with her biography might well be surprised by the poem’s content. But Elizabeth Barrett Browning believed deeply that poetry could and should help shape current events. She had written political poetry before, against slavery in “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1848), against the exploitation of factory workers in “The Cry of the Children” (1843), and most notably against the political divisions of Italy in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and later in *Poems Before Congress* (1860). Her belief in the political efficacy of poetry is strongly expressed in *Aurora Leigh*, her story of the rise of a woman poet. The poem articulates Barrett Browning’s personal feelings about poetry and its status even though the details of Aurora’s life are not drawn directly from Barrett Browning’s own. In

this chapter I will argue, however, that *Aurora Leigh* has a clear agenda aside from merely establishing women's rights as artists. Through Aurora's interactions with the discourses of charity, art, and political reform, Barrett Browning carefully rearticulates the place of poetry in serious social debate, while simultaneously undercutting the rights of political economy to influence that same policy.

Criticism of *Aurora Leigh* usually attempts, often with an air of desperation, to turn Barrett Browning into a clear and consistent feminist. Anne D. Wallace, in her essay "'Nor in Fading Silks Compose': Sewing, Walking, and Poetic Labor in *Aurora Leigh*," comments that the primary concern of scholarship on the poem should be to "describe *Aurora Leigh*'s position in the contemporary discussion of women and in our current discussion of gender."¹ Most criticism of the poem has followed this prescribed course. Quite often such feminist critics are, understandably, most interested in *Aurora Leigh*'s woman-as-artist plot, which Helen Cooper calls an illustration of "the process whereby [Elizabeth Barrett Browning] achieved that integration of woman and poet."² As a result of such focus, Cynthia Scheinberg can say, with confidence, that the "three goals of this poem" are "authorizing female experience, asserting women's poetic authority, and imagining new Christian heterosexual relationships."³ Similarly, Laura

¹ Anne D. Wallace, "'Nor in Fading Silks Compose': Sewing, Walking, and Poetic Labor in *Aurora Leigh*," *ELH* 64.1 (1997): 223.

² Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman and Artist* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988) 145.

³ Cynthia Scheinberg, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Hebraic Conversions: Feminism and Christian Typology in *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 22 (1994): 65.

Rotunno suggests that the poem's most powerful message is for "women [to] reform their visions of what women can uniquely contribute to the literary marketplace" (66), bypassing any mention of the poem's direct challenges to other Victorian norms.⁴ In agreement, Joyce Zonana claims that *Aurora* empowers women by becoming her own poetic muse, thus letting her sound, at the end of the poem, "more like a twentieth-century feminist or ecologist than a Victorian divine."⁵

Despite their convictions, these feminist critics often crash on the rocks of the poem's ending, which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call a "veil of self-abnegating servitude,"⁶ and Wallace herself is compelled to admit that the poem ultimately "refuse[s] complete resolution" of gender questions, thus leaving us with "unresolvable textual ambivalence."⁷ Cora Kaplan's groundbreaking work on *Aurora Leigh* set the tone for many critics, regarding the poem as something of a grand failure for modern feminism: "What is really missing is any attempt at analysis of the intersecting oppressions of capitalism and patriarchy."⁸ Continuing, Kaplan suggests that Barrett Browning's "solutions to class controversy are even less adequate" than those posed by Christian Socialists

⁴ Laura Rotunno, "Writers of Reform and Reforming Writers in *Aurora Leigh* and *A Writer of Books*," *Gender and Reform in Victorian England*, ed Anita Rose (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) 66.

⁵ Joyce Zonana, "The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 8.2 (1989): 247.

⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd. ed. (1979; New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 580.

⁷ Wallace 251, 250.

⁸ Cora Kaplan, Introduction, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* (London: Women's Press, 1978) 12.

because they are “unconnected with reality and deeply elitist.”⁹ Deirdre David reads the poem even more bleakly, claiming “whatever feminist sympathies she may be said to possess” are “strongly compromised” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “firm identification with male modes of political thought and aesthetic practice.”¹⁰ Stephanie Johnson takes this argument a step further by arguing that “because Barrett Browning’s apocalyptic vision in *Aurora Leigh* relies so heavily . . . on Aurora’s transformation into a spokesperson for the male, the potential radicalism of the novel-poem’s call for such change is deflated.”¹¹ But such consent is not unanimous. The contrary opinion is voiced by those, such as Kathleen Renk, who are happy to suggest that the poem remains revolutionary even with Aurora’s marriage, “shattering female stereotypes and . . . loosening the tongue of the woman poet.”¹² The poem’s happy return to the marriage plot, in such critical constructions, either betrays the poem’s earlier feminist fervor, reveals that the poem never had feminist intentions at all, or redefines marriage as a less restrictive institution.

While the debate over the exact nature and depth of the poem’s feminism has yielded many valuable insights, I would suggest that it also limits our ultimate understanding of the poem’s other social claims. The difficulty posed by fitting the poem’s final book into a cohesive statement is merely a symptom of

⁹ Kaplan 12.

¹⁰ Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and the Victorian Patriarchy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987) 98.

¹¹ Stephanie Johnson, “*Aurora Leigh*’s Radical Youth: Derridean *Parergon* and the Narrative Frame in ‘A Vision of Poets,’” *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): 441.

¹² Kathleen Renk, “Resurrecting the Living Dead: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Poetic Vision in *Aurora Leigh*,” *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 23 (2000): 47.

the problem. The poem itself does, obviously, demand a consideration of gender: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's repeated and explicit calls to action over such issues as female financial independence make it clear that such concerns must be attended to. Focusing on such gender issues exclusively, however, reduces the complexity of this epic work. Attempting to answer the one question "How can we reconcile the poem's traditional end to its feminist beginning?" undervalues the poem's vast scope and extensive social concerns. While Barrett Browning was most certainly concerned with the feminist politics of her own day, the poem demands attention to other social issues almost as insistently. Marjorie Stone sees this broader political tension when she argues that *Aurora Leigh* is "one of the Victorian period's most notable works of sage discourse," although, like the critics above, she is quick to point out that "Barrett Browning's representation of the 'woman question' generated the most innovative and iconoclastic elements."¹³ Thus, while Stone touches on the poem's other social goals, she never considers the sum of these separate discourses. Kaplan similarly articulates that "gender difference, class warfare, the relation of art to politics . . . are all engaged as intersecting issues in the poem" but then claims that the poem ultimately "cannot answer the questions which the work as a whole puts to discourses outside it."¹⁴ For both Stone and Kaplan, *Aurora Leigh* spreads itself too thin, and as a result fails to make significant contributions to any one discourse.

¹³ Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Houndsmills: MacMillan, 1995) 137, 144.

¹⁴ Kaplan 5, 16.

The poem's diverse commitments mean that it is difficult to make a clear statement without narrowing one's focus to only one of its major plots or only one of its major messages. Choosing to focus on either the romantic story of Aurora and her cousin Romney or the dramatic fall of Marian Erle lets critics construct a much neater, more compact argument. Similarly, one can choose between the poem's message of independence for female artists or its difficult philanthropic idealism. Only by considering these strands simultaneously, however, can we possibly hope to grasp the poem's full message. I will argue that Elizabeth Barrett Browning addresses the same tensions between literature and economics that I have already discussed in relation to Dickens and Smollett. Her rejection of economics, though, is both more nuanced and more aesthetic than that of her male counterparts. This delicately balanced position is partly due to the poem's gender politics. For Barrett Browning, the same statistical models that treat the poor, unjustly, as objects of analysis, drive paternalist treatments of women. Thus, Barrett Browning needs to do the complicated work of both deconstructing Victorian ideals of gender and rejecting the vast bulwark of political economy. By creating a place for Aurora, the female poet, in the discourse of philanthropy, Barrett Browning ultimately creates a non-economic model of charity that allows the full participation of women. While that participation is not without problems, as we shall see, it enables her to return to a pre-economic model of charity that completely rejects economic and statistical models for "managing" both women and the poor.

In this reading of the text as a modified endorsement of Christian philanthropy, I disagree with Lana Dalley, the only other critic to discuss the economic aspects of the poem in any depth. Dalley valuably attempts to broaden our understanding of the poem's stance on women's work by redirecting our attention to its concern with women's roles in political economy. As she notes, Barrett Browning's "treatment of political economy in *Aurora Leigh* is largely unexplored critical terrain," a shortcoming that is odd in light of the way the poem "draws attention to the limitations of the liberal economic paradigm for conceptualizing women's waged labor."¹⁵ Dalley's focus on *Aurora Leigh* herself, however, at the expense of the poem's philanthropic sub-plot, leads her to overlook Barrett Browning's vital contributions to mid-Victorian ideas of charity and charitable reform. Dalley centers her argument so narrowly on *Aurora Leigh*'s impact on later female economists that she overlooks the poem's attempts to radically resituate the very genres of political economics and poetry. That is, despite Dalley's argument to the contrary, Barrett Browning doesn't write about exclusively female interactions with economics, but rather with the relationship between political economy as a whole and artistic value at large. It is only because Dalley refuses to consider Romney's role and the poem's broad reaction to philanthropy that she is able to declare confidently that there is a "union of economics and Christianity at the poem's conclusion" (526) or that "the text's

¹⁵ Lana L. Dalley, "'The least 'Angelical' poem in the language': Political Economy, Gender, and the Heritage of *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): 525, 526.

vision of female economic empowerment is a repudiation of . . . philanthropic self-sacrifice."¹⁶

Instead, I argue that Barrett Browning chooses to rewrite philanthropy by re-coupling poetry (art) and social reform. Aurora declares, defiantly, that poetry has the power to reform both individual souls and society at large, because only poets "Exert a double vision" that enables them to "catch / Upon the burning lava of a song / The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age (5.183, 213-15).¹⁷ This double vision lets poets "see near things as comprehensively / As if afar [. . .] / And distant things [. . .] intimately deep" (5.185-187), thus giving them a unique power to both understand and explain large social patterns. While others "ill discern" the events of their own lifetimes, poets can see them truly (5.167).¹⁸ This special power means that poetry has not just a right, but also an obligation to pass along its more accurate representation. Poetry, too, is the purest of the literary genres, because it is least subject to fickle public taste. Drama, in contrast, "wears a dog-chain round / Its regal neck, and learns to carry and fetch / The

¹⁶ Dalley 526, 530.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, ed. John Robert Glorney Bolton and Julia Bolton Holloway (1856; London: Penguin Books, 1995). All subsequent citations in text. For ease of reference, my line citations throughout this chapter will be formatted as (volume.line). Please note that the edition I have used throughout is based on the original publication of the text rather than on later revisions, and thus line numbers might vary. Also note that Elizabeth Barrett Browning frequently uses ellipses, including a double rather than triple period. For ease of distinguishing, my own omissions will be marked within brackets.

¹⁸ While Barrett Browning herself does not gender this construction, Gilbert and Gubar see a variety of double vision as the female artist's most necessary survival skill: "women have created submerged meanings, meanings hidden within or behind the more accessible, 'public' content of their works, so that their literature could be read and appreciated even when its vital concern with female dispossession and disease was ignored." See *Madwoman in the Attic* 72.

fashions of the day" (5.270-72), while a true poet "does not write for you / Or me" (5.251-52) but rather for the sake of art. That is to say, poets have both the requisite vision to see the world as it really is, and independence enough from public opinion to portray that world truthfully.

Poetry has another power, too. It not only reveals truth in its arguments, but it also renders the human soul more beautiful by its very poetic devices. This elevation of the soul is what Barrett Browning ultimately sees as the most powerful gift poetry can give to all classes, even the poor. In one of Romney and Aurora's early quarrels, she claims:

It takes a soul,
To move a body: it takes a high-souled man,
To move the masses . . . Even to a cleaner sty:
It takes the ideal, to blow a hair's breadth off
The dust of the actual.—Ah, your Fouriers fail,
Because not poets enough to understand
That life develops from within. (2.478-84)

Aurora here and elsewhere deliberately contrasts poetry and the social sciences. By rendering social change in terms of aesthetics, Barrett Browning is able to remove it from the realm of science. As Aurora herself ultimately argues, poetry is thus more important even than bread:

'Tis impossible
To get at men excepting through their souls,
However open their carnivorous jaws;

And poets get directlier at the soul

Than any of your economists. (8.537-41, sic)

In the poem's much-debated ending, Aurora's poetry ultimately influences society more than Romney's philanthropy. By giving poetry so much power, Barrett Browning sets out to rectify the great genre debate, outlined in my previous chapters, between literature and economics. Economics, has, in contrast to poetry, no right to discuss human life.

Aurora Leigh illuminates this alignment of true philanthropy with art through each of its main plots. While the two stories of Romney and Marian work simultaneously in the poem, I will separate them here for ease of discussion. Romney's decline, which I shall discuss first, proves directly that the power of political economy and statistics is largely illusory. Even in Romney's capable and well-intentioned hands statistics create only a soulless and ultimately destructive charity. The evil of institutional charity is shown not to be its control by the state, as both Utopians and economists often protested, but its very institutional status. Romney painfully proves that even private hands cannot successfully perform large-scale social reform, however noble or socialist. Marian's story is intimately connected with Romney's failure, but it also ultimately showcases the positive power of Aurora's more poetic methods of reform. Romney's attempt to save Marian from the conventional fallen-woman plot only drives her to it—her track from seamstress to prostitute is slightly less direct, but as inevitable as in any "social problem" literature. Aurora, on the other hand, is given so much more power that she can do the impossible: restore

the fallen Marian to a role in respectable society.¹⁹ It is through Aurora's means that Marian is able to declare herself, ultimately, so pure that she doesn't require a marriage to "save" her reputation or her soul. These two narrative threads, taken together, thus reveal all the faults of impersonal charity and all the benefits of true, mutual sympathy.

II. Romney Leigh represents the most positive aspects of large-scale Victorian philanthropy. He believes passionately in his work and, unlike many other literary philanthropists, wants to completely undermine the rigid class structures of nineteenth-century England. Romney sees, with an acute sensitivity, the misery that prevails among the poor, and thus desperately attempts to use his wealth to reform their lot:

Who,
Being man and human, can stand calmly by
And view these things, and never tease his soul
For some great cure? (2.279-82)

To Romney, the rich have an overwhelming ethical obligation to remove social evils, and failing to do so creates an immense, painful burden on the rest of society. The poem recognizes the ethical strength of Romney's ideals. The initial presentation of Romney's social goals is quite positive, and the even the critical Aurora paints his character in a noble light. He has read the best social theories that Victorian England has to offer and has seen in "statistical despairs" the

¹⁹ Early critics debated the poem's success in this regard, but it is unquestioned within the poem.

“long sum of ill” inherent in Victorian culture (2.313, 309). By taking such care in her descriptions, Barrett Browning avoids depicting Romney as an example of the charitable stereotypes most easily dismissed by the previous authors in this study. He is not rapacious like Mrs. Pardiggle, nor does he avoid England’s own problems like Mrs. Jellyby, the charitable stereotypes of Dickens’s *Bleak House*. Most importantly, he is not a blindly benevolent fool, giving money without considering the consequences. Romney is both educated and compassionate, both sympathetic to individuals and aware of large social trends. And yet still his charity will fail.

Barrett Browning needs, in part, to deconstruct Romney’s model of charity because it inevitably limits the charitable participation of women. Romney’s statistics and science force women to the margins of charitable work, doomed to be “directed” in their activities by more “objective” men. At the same time, only those with an incredible desire to dedicate their entire lives and incomes, not just their spare hours, to charitable causes will succeed at the kinds of charity Romney envisions. Aurora is well aware of what it would mean to be the wife of a dedicated philanthropist, noting with near hysteria:

He might cut
My body into coins to give away
Among his other paupers [. . .]
[. . .] might unquestioned set
My right hand teaching in the Ragged Schools,
My left hand washing in the Public Baths,

What time my angel of the Ideal stretched

Both his to me in vain. (2.789-97)

Aurora's insistence that she will not be Romney's "helpmate" (2. 401) is both a recognition of the time that such philanthropy would take from her own work and a refusal to be confined to the limited role of washer or teacher, rather than an equal to Romney as a developer of policy. Note, too, Aurora's keen perception of economic reality. Not only would marriage subsume her own small inheritance, but charity work on such a large scale will also destroy her ability to participate in the waged labor of writing. She will, like "his other paupers," be reduced to Romney's financial and ethical dependent.

While Aurora fears that Romney's charity would absorb the time and energy needed for her "real" work, Romney directly questions her ability to accomplish either. He condemns the value of women as both poets and philanthropists, noting that their compassion, and thus their understanding of the world, is too limited to immediately visible problems:

A red-haired child

Sick in a fever, if you touch him once,

Will set you weeping; but a million sick . .

You could as soon weep for the rule of three,

Or compound fractions. Therefore, this same world,

Uncomprehended by you, must remain

Uninfluenced by you. (2.213-20)

Romney, that is, denies that women could ever have the “double vision” that Aurora sees as necessary for true poetry. Controlled by their emotions, women can never look at the “big picture” of social problems. Since women are so limited to the present and immediate in their understanding of the world, they can be neither great philanthropists nor great artists. In Romney’s words, “We get no Christ from you, —and verily / We shall not get a poet” (2.224-25). Barrett Browning couples charity and art from the very beginning of her long poem. Being properly charitable requires, in Romney’s equation, the same skills as being a good poet. For this reason, it is absolutely crucial that his masculine, statistical conception of charity is proven to be a failure. Barrett Browning dramatically undermines his claim that such abstract sympathy is truly powerful in favor of reinstating women’s right to the “double vision” of immediate sympathy *and* large social vision.

The emotional component of charity thus becomes one of the poem’s great ideological battles. The remainder of the poem systematically deconstructs the emotional fallacy inherent in Romney’s type of large-scale social work. Diffuse sympathy for the world at large, quite simply, proves to be too much for one man to bear. Romney is tortured by the gap between his wealth and the poverty of the world, from his very first appearance in the poem as :

early master of Leigh Hall,
Whereof the nightmare sate upon his youth,
Repressing all its seasonable delights,
And agonising with a ghastly sense

Of universal hideous want and wrong

To incriminate possession. (1.516-21)

This guilty distaste for wealth drives Romney to his philanthropy, which the poem suggests is too immoderate to be rational. Romney hints at his unnatural burden from quite early in the poem, with his “statistical despairs” mentioned above. The guests at his failed wedding to Marian observe that he is, rather than a philanthropist, a fanatic, having “turned quite lunatic upon / This modern question of the poor” (4.662-63). Lady Waldemar, though not the best judge of character, notes that Romney’s social mission made him do poorly at Oxford, as “he lost count of Homer’s ships / in Melbourne’s poor-bills, Ashley’s factory bills” (3.547-48) while in society “If you do not starve, or sin, / You’re nothing to him” (3.564-65). Romney’s philanthropy, in short, causes him to lose perspective, to overlook the world’s beauty and obsess about its unfairness. His immoderate dedication to social questions means that it is Romney, not Aurora, who cannot understand the world. He becomes a monomaniac and can no longer successfully participate in society. Or, in Aurora’s most damning understatement of their difference, “he [is], overfull / of what is, and I, haply, overbold / For what might be” (1.1108-10). The poem, more closely aligned with Aurora’s view, argues that in order for Romney’s philanthropy to be truly successful, he will be compelled to reject his despairing statistics in favor of Aurora’s optimism.

Romney’s methods are ultimately as much criticized as his motives. Barrett Browning argues that Romney, and by extension political economy, misses the true goal of philanthropy by focusing on the body, not the soul. Helping the soul

is, of course, the realm of poetry. Mere physical improvement of the type demanded by Romney's impersonal charity is misunderstood, misconstrued, and resented by those it should help. Nowhere does *Aurora Leigh* demonstrate this bitterness more strongly than in the burning of Leigh Hall, an act representing the most powerful rejection of Romney's style of charity. He is compelled to understand that the poor need more than merely food and shelter, and, finally, must confess in agony:

I beheld the world

As one great famishing carnivorous mouth, —
A huge, deserted, callow, black, bird Thing,
With piteous open beak that hurt my heart,
Till down upon the filthy ground I dropped,
And tore the violets up to get the worms.
Worms, worms, was all my cry: an open mouth,
A gross want, bread to fill it to the lips,
No more! (8. 395-402, sic)

The reduction of social problems to bodily needs, Romney realizes, "makes libertines" of all men by compelling attention toward the body instead of the soul (8.412). Focusing on only basic physical requirements for survival, that is, degrades morality. Even worse, the moral reforms that Romney attempted to impose, top-down, at Leigh Hall were "waxen masks" and "tyrannous constraint[s]" that the poor came to deeply resent. The very people he attempted to help "helped the burners, it was said, / And certainly a few clapped hands

and yelled" (8.962-63). Not only is Romney's charity misunderstood by his community, who, both rich and poor, resent his changes to tradition, but it is also seen as tyranny by those reaping its benefits. By demonstrating this resentment, Barrett Browning attempts to remove charity from the range of such large projects. Helping the individual, whose circumstances can be truly understood and changed both materially and immaterially, is more fitting than attempting to force one solution on an entire community.

Romney thus comes to recognize the power of smaller, more personal, philanthropy. His blindness makes him physically unable to act on his previous scale, but he has also come to accept Aurora's definition of compassion. Rather than seeing the evils of society as a vast and overwhelming whole, Romney learns to "be content in work, / To do the thing we can, and not presume / To Fret because it's little" (8.732-34). But here the pendulum has swung too far, and Aurora must step in. After his grand failure, he is tempted to throw up his hands entirely, arguing:

God will have His work done [. . .]
And that we need not be disturbed too much
For Romney Leigh or others having failed
With this or that quack nostrum [. . .] (8.684-87)

Romney, having done too much, is now tempted into the language of "the poor are always with us," a standard argument against charity. (Dickens, for example, considers this a foundational attitude of "Podsnappery.") Aurora must intervene to remind him that:

no earnest work

[. . .] fails so much

It is not gathered as a grain of sand

To enlarge the sum of human action used

For carrying out God's end. (8.705-10)

All charity, by this measure, will do some good. Still, the emphasis is on smaller charitable acts, which, as I will discuss in more detail below, gain the poem's final endorsement.

By using Romney's plot to show that true charity is individual and focused on the human soul, Barrett Browning grants agency to women, who often had neither means nor opportunity for such large projects, either as benefactors or as artists. She also systematically undermines the paternalistic model of philanthropy that Romney and his political economists espouse. After the burning of Leigh Hall, Romney himself must confess:

We talk by aggregates,

And think by systems; and, being used to face

Our evils by statistics, are inclined

To cap them with unreal remedies

Drawn out in haste [. . .] (8.801-805)

Unlike poets, political economists cannot preserve a proper sense of scale. Their statistics only overwhelm and their solutions are never real answers to the problem. Their "unreal" attempts to face social problems, as Romney's failure so painfully demonstrates, will only divide classes further and cause the poor to

resent their apparent benefactors. The destruction of Leigh Hall proved that the poor do not want or need fatherly guidance. Romney's final words on the subject conclusively replace social theory with personal feeling:

Fewer programmes, we who have no prescience.
Fewer systems; we who are held and do not hold.
Less mapping out of masses, to be saved,
By nations or by sexes. Fourier's void,
And Comte is dwarfed, —and Cabet, puerile. (9.865-69)

Romney, and supposedly the poem's readers, has learned that true charity has nothing to do with numbers, or even with money, but with love. And love, the poem suggests, is very much the domain of women and of poets.

III. Marian Erle's story first appears as the most direct representation of Romney's charity, and until the last quarter of the poem that story relies heavily on melodramatic charitable stereotyping. Marian begins her life as the virtuous child of wayward parents, learning to read from the scraps of poetry that peddlers throw away from damaged books. When she becomes an attractive young woman, her mother attempts to sell her in sexual slavery to the local aristocrat. Marian flees to the city, where she falls insensible and awakens inside the ward of a charity hospital. She there meets Romney Leigh, who finds her a job as a seamstress. Romney eventually proposes marriage, not for love, but in order to demonstrate his beliefs about the insidious effects of the English class system. Marian accepts, until the wicked Lady Waldemar, who wants Romney

for herself, persuades Marian to emigrate from England to Australia. Marian's traveling companion instead sends her to a Parisian brothel. Marian, virtuously refusing prostitution, is raped and goes mad. After being cared for by French peasants, Marian recovers her senses and acquires a job as a servant, until she discovers her pregnancy. She is then cast out, destitute, on the streets. Only Aurora's charity, to be discussed below, saves her from the remainder of the typical story: being driven back into prostitution to save her child, then dying of disease or starvation. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's readers would have known that version of the story quite well.

When we first "see" Marian in the poem, it is through Aurora's description. As she goes to visit her cousin's future bride, we are prepared for the encounter through the standard language of nineteenth-century charity work. Aurora ventures through a courtyard, and sees:

A sick child, from an ague-fit,
Whose wasted right hand gambled 'gainst his left
With an old brass button; [. . .]
While a woman, rouged
Upon the angular cheek-bones, kerchief torn,
Thin dangling locks and a flat lascivious mouth,
Cursed at a window [. . .] (3.759-66)

Poverty and vice go hand in hand, just as popular charitable works suggested. Aurora's only available reaction is, accordingly, the stock language and gestures of philanthropy. Saying "The dear Christ comfort you / [. . .] you must have been

most miserable / To be so cruel," she pours the money from her purse onto the pavement and runs to Marian's apartment (3.779-81). By these gestures, we are prepared to view Marian exclusively as a charitable object, since they frame Marian as only one of the poor creatures living in this terrifying urban den. But, according to these same charitable tropes, she must be remarkable in order to be distinguished as a separate object of charity from the masses who come "boiling, bubbling up" to take Aurora's money (3.784). As could be expected, then, the first thing that Aurora notices is Marian's delicacy:

She touched me with her face and with her voice,
This daughter of the people. Such soft flowers
From such rough roots? the people, under there,
Can sin so, curse so, look so, smell so . . . faugh!
Yet have such daughters? (3.804-808)

Marian's appearance instantly sets her apart from the other dwellers in Margaret's Court, giving Aurora the right to appropriate her story in a way that she cannot attempt to do with the rougher women outside. Aurora is quite clear about her role: "I tell her story and grow passionate. / She, Marian, did not tell it so, but used / Meek words" (3.846-48). At this first encounter, then, the poem opens itself to all the standard criticisms of charity—Aurora is too interested in her own perceptions, too invested in seeing a difference between herself and Marian, and too anxious to take Marian's story as a part of her own experience. Marian, as the poor but beautiful woman, is silenced, even as Aurora ostensibly gives her a voice. Aurora's sympathy so far is complicit with the exact system of

charity that fails so miserably for Romney.

When Aurora and Marian have their second major encounter, however, the scenario no longer aligns with the usual models of charity. Marian, empowered by her suffering, refuses to fit Aurora's narrow vision of what options a poor woman has at her disposal. When Aurora has seen, but not conversed with, Marian, she can still easily stereotype her:

And oh, as truly as that was Marian's face,
The arms of that same Marian clasped a thing
. . Not hid so well beneath the scanty shawl,
I cannot name it now for what it was.

A child. (6.342-46)

Aurora quickly leaps to the conclusion of didactic literature, that Marian is "not dead, / But only . . . damned" (6.364-65), and that she must be saved "if she will, or will not—child / Or no child, —if a child, then one to save!" (6.387-88).

Aurora still imaginatively overrides all of Marian's agency. When the two finally speak, however, Marian is no longer the sweetly innocent bystander who allows her voice to be overridden. She counteracts Aurora's offer of a home by quickly replying "A home for you and me and no one else / Ill suits one of us" (6.459-60). She will not be made the victim of someone else's charitable scheme again. She also has the strength to criticize the past charitable efforts of Aurora and of Romney, whose attempts to help her almost ended in destruction. She scathingly describes herself as "that little stone, called Marian Erle, / Picked up and

dropped by you and another friend, / . . . / And bruised from what she was” (6.808-11). Marian has seen, and understands, the dark side of being constructed as an object of charity.

Aurora, too, finally recognizes both Marian’s fundamental virtue and the damage that her half-hearted intentions have caused. For the first time, Aurora seems to realize that Marian, too, deserves treatment as an equal. In this scene, the final plea comes from Aurora herself, who now begs Marian to:

Come with me, sweetest sister [. . .]
And sit within my house and do me good [. . . .]
I am lonely in the world,
And thou art lonely, and the child is half
An orphan. (7.117-22)

Their relationship can finally, with this shift, move beyond one of charity and into genuine companionship. Aurora lets go of her position as benefactor. Recognizing their new relationship, Marian “neither signed she was unworthy, nor gave thanks” (7.134), but merely assents, signaling the end of her role as charitable object. No thanks are needed because the situation will be mutually beneficial. The two women can live together in isolation without facing the criticism of the world, which has not yet made the leap that Aurora has in learning to recognize the individual merits of Marian’s case, rather than resorting to charitable stereotypes. The two women, finally, can exist outside the norms dictated by conventional charity.

For a brief moment, Aurora and Marian demonstrate a feminist utopia—

two women helping each other to live independently. Marian's representation at the end of the poem, however, undermines this position and raises serious questions about the overall coherence of the poem's intentions. First, we must look, from a slightly different angle, back to a passage I also analyzed in the previous section, in which Romney argues that the larger problems of the world are outside female understanding:

Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doating mothers, and chaste wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
We get no Christ from you, —and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind. (2.220-25, sic.)

Romney here, as I indicated earlier, sets the bar for socially accepted roles for women. In my previous analysis I argued that Aurora's adoption of charity undermines these clear roles. Marian, explicitly cast as a Madonna, examines this construction from another, more troubling, angle. Is she proving a larger social point, or does she merely allow a return to the socially mandated roles for women that Aurora seems to escape? While Marian and Aurora can briefly coexist outside of charity, that narrative does not have the final word in the poem. Barrett Browning attempts to render Marian more revolutionary by the major turns of the plot, but the very poetic language she both uses and praises restricts Marian's future. Unlike her literary predecessors, Marian does not die on the streets after she gives birth, but she does keep the rhetoric of death at her

disposal. In her rejection of Romney, she claims, "I told your cousin, sir, that I was dead; / And now she thinks I'll get up from my grave, / And wear my chin cloth for a wedding-veil" (9.391-93). Though she is technically alive, Marian is completely removed from the sexual sphere of the living. At the same time that Marian claims that she is as "clean as Marian Erle / As Marian Leigh" (9.399-400) she explicitly denies her own right to socially-sanctioned marriage, relying on isolated individual understanding to absolve what would be perceived as her guilt. These verbal gestures remove Marian from the role of the fallen woman, at the same time that they serve very much to keep her subject to the same limitations. While Marian herself may feel that she needs no social approval, the reader has to wonder how, for example, she might be able to provide for herself without remaining Romney's and Aurora's charitable object. If the text ends with Marian as a desexualized charity case, her situation has actually been downgraded significantly even from Romney's initial charitable outreach, which at the least gave her legitimate employment.

Marian's renunciation of marriage takes on a specifically religious and aesthetic cast. Beyond the connotations of her very name, she also rejects Romney's proposals in part because she refuses to have other children, who would be "called happier, / A fathered child, with father's love and race / [. . .] / To vex my darling when he's asked his name" (9.418-21). She will devote herself, as in some presentations of the Virgin Mary, to her one child exclusively:

Here's a hand shall keep

For ever clean without a marriage ring,

To tend my boy, until he cease to need
One steady finger of it, and desert
(Not miss) his mother's lap, to sit with men.
And when I miss him (not he me) I'll come
And say "Now give me some of Romney's work,
To help your outcast orphans of the world,
And comfort grief with grief." (9.431-39)

In this context, the language that Marian uses to refer to her own child has specific religious ramifications. Marian's child, as the young Christ, will leave her of his own volition to "sit with men" and do serious work. Marian, then, will be left to carry on an appropriately feminized charity. Motherhood makes Marian both sacred ("for ever clean") and ultimately expendable. She fully recognizes both that her son will inevitably leave her and that once he is gone, her purpose in life will have already been fulfilled. Her life becomes one of renunciation in more than one sense: she will give up marriage and other children for the sake of her illegitimate child, who will leave her behind. Her grief for him and for her past life can then be used to comfort motherless children. This language further casts us back to Romney's initial views of women and charity. Marian here fulfills exactly the roles that Romney prescribes. She, as Madonna, gives birth to Christ but cannot become a savior herself. Even in her transcendence, she never offers to become a model for other outcast women, and she turns down her chance to be a social model by marrying Romney. She is limited to doing "Romney's work," not her own, in the charity that she can most closely identify

with. Bereft of her own child, she will fill the void by helping other lost children. In the end it is Marian who becomes exactly what Aurora rejected—Romney's pauper helpmate.

While in the end Aurora's position as Romney's equal might perhaps counter this limitation of female agency, the reader is still left with the question of what to do with Marian. The plot reduces her at last to a kind of moral obstacle to overcome: Romney must rid himself of his feelings of responsibility to her before he can marry Aurora and make what, despite all of the poem's earlier protests, is the socially-acceptable union. Marian's claims to innocence and purity, which fill her final speech, are actually a less effective defense of her position than the more impassioned and defensive answer that she gives to Aurora earlier in the poem. There, she can exonerate herself by giving the specifics of her case. In this final scene, she merely reverts to a slightly different aesthetic position that still leaves her subject to the vicissitudes of charitable responses by others. While Romney and Aurora found their new union on the idea of Christian work and Christian ethics, Marian is the text's simultaneous proof that acts of charity can still have unintended and damaging consequences. Her successful relationship with Aurora can only begin where charity ends, and her ambiguous status at the poem's end reminds us of the precarious state of women who become dependent on personal charity.

IV. As the poem's final, deeply ambiguous portrait of Marian shows, the charity that Aurora and Romney plan to have in the future remains profoundly limited.

Aurora and Marian's friendship allows them to move, tentatively, beyond the giver/receiver dichotomy that forces charity out of the ethical comfort of many introspective would-be donors. Aurora can recognize what she will gain from Marian's company, and Marian has a voice in their relationship. Note, too, that this relationship is never portrayed as giving the easy emotional satisfaction often lauded as the "pay back" for charitable work. Aurora is allowed to participate in Marian's family life, not, like Ebenezer Scrooge at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, to use her power as a benefactor to force her way onto Marian's hearth. Marian's case initially lets Barrett Browning have the best of both charitable worlds. She can elevate Marian over her mere physical needs for food and shelter at the same time that Marian's aid to Aurora keeps their role from devolving into conventional paternalistic charity. The problem for Elizabeth Barrett Browning comes in trying to sustain that model of charity and extend it beyond the personal. Aurora and Marian avoid the structures of paternalism because they have a complex pre-existing relationship that feeds their ultimate position toward each other. Any future charitable relationships will be, in comparison, artificial and limited, and even Romney's addition as a third party disturbs the delicate balance.

We must also note that neither Romney nor Aurora is exactly a saint at the poem's end. Romney, even into the poem's final book, still blunders in his treatment of Marian because he cannot recognize her true desires. For Romney, the best charity is still helping others to conform to social standards, and he cannot understand why Marian might be wary of doing so. Aurora, in turn,

articulates the position that helping souls is more important than helping bodies, at the same time that those very bodies terrify her. On three notable occasions she witnesses the life of the poor: in Margaret's Court when she first meets Marian, at Romney's wedding, and when she encounters Marian in Paris. In all three situations, her reaction is panic. The first and last of those I have already outlined. At Romney's wedding, in the most extreme of the three, Aurora becomes overwhelmed by the physical presence of the poor:

Faces! . . . phew

We'll call them vices festering to despairs,

Or sorrows petrifying to vices: not

A finger-touch of God left whole on them;

All ruined, lost—the countenance worn out

As the garments, the will dissolute as the acts,

The passions loose and draggling in the dirt

To trip a foot up at the first free step!—

Those faces! 'twas as if you had stirred up hell

To heave its lowest dreg-fiends uppermost

In fiery swirls of slime [. . .] (4.579-89)

Aurora has a trace of sympathy here, acknowledging, briefly, that sorrow is the source of the vice that turns the poor into devils, but devils they remain. Her claims later that the souls of the poor can be helped by beauty and poetry jar falsely against her conclusion, here, that the poor are the fiends of hell, without "a finger-touch of God."

So, while *Aurora* seems to believe deeply in poetry's power for reform, the practicality of such a project remains entirely outside the poem's scope. Beyond the poem's treatment of Marian, which could hardly be constructed as a typical, or entirely successful, act of charity, and Romney's vast failures, no actual charity is portrayed. It is hard to envision *Aurora*, with her imaginative terrors at the mere sight of dirt, participating valiantly in the reform of a slum. We could, if feeling rancorous, blame this gap partly on a failure of Barrett Browning's own imagination—Deirdre David scathingly, perhaps even unfairly, notes that “the closest Barrett Browning ever got” to the real poor was “on a rare cab trip to Shoreditch in search of Flush.”²⁰ More importantly, though, the poem has an ideological concern that forces it to avoid specificity. Namely, Barrett Browning very, very carefully separates spiritual reform from physical reform and poetry from science. The poem as it stands ends, triumphantly, with the declaration that

Art's a service [. . .]

To open, so, that intermediate door

Betwixt the different planes of sensuous form

And form insensuous, that inferior men

May learn to feel on still through these to those,

And bless thy ministration. The world waits

For help. [. . .]

New hearts in individual growth

Must quicken, and increase to multitude

²⁰ David 124.

In new dynasties of the race of men, —
Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously
New churches, new economies, new laws
Admitting freedom, new societies
Excluding falsehood. (9.915-24, 943-49)

In this vision of the future, art will so redeem the souls of men that, in time, society itself will be completely restructured. It is a grand, vague, proposition, easily countered by pragmatics. Critics of Barrett Browning's new model can quickly agree with the acerbic judgment of the *Westminster Review* in 1857, that the poem makes "the mistake of exaggerating the effect of Art—in ameliorating or elevating the condition of the masses or the people in any age or country."²¹

And, as slightly different formulations are for every author in this project, the precise relationship between literature and the subjects it hopes to wrest from economics is deeply troublesome. The last two books of *Aurora Leigh* routinely deny the power of philanthropy because it is limited by statistics and mathematical reductions. It is about bread, not souls. Conventional philanthropy has been so linked to economic theories that it must be completely cast out in order to make room for this new empowering of art. The poem allows for and encourages a certain kind of small charity (even the disabled Romney vows to work "silently / and simply," with "fewer programmes," but not to quit abandon charity [9.859-60, 865]), but Barrett Browning can't begin to explain

²¹ *Westminster Review* 68.134 (1857). Qtd. in Lynee Lewis Gaillet, "Reception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*: An Insight Into the Age's Turmoil Over the Representation of Gender and Theories of Art," *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 20 (1993): 120.

exactly what that charity would look like. Specific systems, that is, have been so routinely denied that the room simply doesn't remain to name a new kind of system. Prescribing the exact future work of Aurora and Romney, especially if it were to touch on money, would return Aurora's philanthropic art to the service of economics.²² Focusing exclusively on souls and on emotions allows the most complete separation from the old, derided political economy, even if it leaves readers at slightly loose ends.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is thus left with an incomplete picture of her newly defined charity. Showing it in action would be limiting, reducing it to the exact kind of statistical particulars she has been so busy to deny in the rest of the poem. But in another sense she achieves her object entirely. In their first debates about philanthropy, Aurora and Romney cannot reconcile charity, art, and the position of women. Romney contends that both charity and poetry are beyond the scope of women, and Aurora keenly sees how his beliefs would limit her role as Romney's wife. Aurora's achievement in writing the book that transforms Romney and, by extension, Barrett Browning's achievement in writing the poem that we have read for over 10,000 lines, proves that poetry is within women's power. By then linking that poetry to the only part of charity that is shown to matter—sympathy and mutual elevation of the soul—Barrett Browning thus creates a philanthropic role for women. Aurora can participate not only in the

²² Leslee Thorne-Murphy similarly assesses the ending's charitable vagueness as deliberate, although we disagree about the purpose: "Indeed, Barrett Browning purposely leaves many of these details obscure, because she is convinced that true poetry inspires beneficent change rather than predetermines what that change will be." See "Prostitute Rescue, Rape, and Poetic Inspiration in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*," *Women's Writing* 12.2 (2005): 242.

conventionally feminine charity of sympathizing with individuals in distress but also in the grand ideological work of the new philanthropy of art. She does not need to become an economist to help the world on a more than individual scale. Art, not science, will redeem the world, and women, as Barrett Browning argues, are perfectly suited for art.

Chapter Four

An Economics of Renunciation: *Felix Holt: The Radical* and *Middlemarch*

“Young ladies don’t understand political economy, you know,” said Mr. Brooke, smiling towards Mr. Casaubon. “I remember when we were all reading Adam Smith. There’s a book, now. I took in all the new ideas at one time – human perfectibility, now.”¹

Mr. Brooke’s equation of political economy and human perfectibility is initially puzzling. Adam Smith’s construction of human nature in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) certainly implies less than perfection. He scathingly notes the failings of government, the exploitation of workmen by their masters, and the inevitable follies of modern society. By the time Eliot wrote, political economy, “the dismal science,” was largely invested in proving human failure, especially the failure of prudence and the ineffectiveness of market interventions. But Smith does remain less negative than his followers. Indeed, it is *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) that expresses the strongest notion of perfectibility. Smith there constructs humans as forever learning from their experiences, and then using those experiences to better themselves. We are always able to learn more and do more. To this extent, the possibility of human perfection does figure even in *The Wealth of Nations*—every worker is able to be more efficient, and every capitalist could be more effective. More broadly, economics as a discipline hinges on the idea

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (1871; London: Penguin Books, 2003) 2.17. Subsequent citations in text.

that people can be accurately predicted, counted, and legislated. Eliot writes on the cusp of the shift to more purely mathematical economics, which depends exclusively on this tenet. Over the course of her works, George Eliot is anxious to undermine these notions of both human perfectibility and human predictability, constructing each as pernicious. Failing to recognize inalterable human weakness remains the most common, and often most tragic, flaw in any of Eliot's characters, from Maggie Tulliver to Dorothea herself.

Eliot thus articulates much of her age's distrust of economics as a fruitless attempt to categorize objects beyond category. For Eliot, however, this suspicion is broader than anything expressed in the works of Charles Dickens or Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In addition to rejecting the premise of human perfectibility, Eliot further chooses to focus on a more general ethics of renunciation. Both *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871) feature endings in which heroines abdicate their fortunes for love, an ending often constructed as anti-feminist, especially by casual readers. Instead, I will argue that Eliot's model of renunciation is less about fear of female empowerment than it is about a deep distrust of the monetary system. This anxiety is most present in the very interaction that Mr. Brooke encapsulates so early in *Middlemarch*: the junction between human behavior and political economy. In short, Eliot chooses to reject money, including monetary charity, in favor of her famously abstract, and thus more powerful, sense of sympathy. Only by leaving money behind can we truly aid our fellow humans.

As Mr. Brooke reminds us, George Eliot occupied a world in which the dictates of political economy could easily be called upon to replace moral claims. Adam Smith's kinder economies had, by the time Eliot wrote, been replaced with the stricter dictates of the New Poor Laws of 1834 and the theories that helped to justify them. Increasing dedication to the free market in the hands of newer political economists made it a right, if not an obligation, to be as prosperous as possible. By these criteria, Eliot's "young ladies," with their philanthropic tendencies, certainly don't "understand political economy," as Mr. Brooke phrases it. At the same time, however, a strong counter-discourse of moral obligation to the poor arose. Igor Webb refers to the moral conflict over poverty as part of the nineteenth century's "debate about the sources of value."² In Webb's terms, the debate hinges on the value of labor: "if labor [rather than market force] is the source of value, then social life and its products and the meaning of social life all derive from human activity."³ Recognizing the fundamental value of human work, people were compelled to recognize the fundamental value of the human worker. G.R. Searle groups the moral responses to this shift into two major anxieties. People needed to address both "the exploitation of the poor and the soul destroying monotony of their existence" and the "deep-seated spiritual malady, resulting from a changed perspective on life [brought on by industrialization]."⁴ Every member of Victorian society, in

² Igor Webb, *From Custom to Capital: The English Novel and The Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 28.

³ Webb 30.

⁴ G.R. Searle, *Morality and the Market in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 3-4.

Searle's view, needed to come to terms with his or her exact response to these two historical facts. The middle classes, in particular, needed to balance their increasingly comfortable standard of living with a simultaneously increasing awareness, thanks to public debate and economics itself, of the crushing poverty of industrial workers. While economic discourse and institutions such as the Poor Laws attempted to naturalize poverty, writers like Eliot, particularly interested in Searle's "spiritual malady," found little comfort in such platitudes.

As my previous chapters have argued, Eliot's fellow writers articulated their anxieties about poverty and the social state of England largely through ambiguous scenes of monetary charity. Dickens and Barrett Browning wanted to reject charity's tainted associations with political economy by focusing on smaller, less-legislated actions. My previous chapters have demonstrated that these explicitly private charities represent an attempt to retain personal agency in a complex political and social environment. Unlike her contemporaries, Eliot presents few direct scenes of charitable encounters and rarely depicts poverty. Instead, her works focus more on what I have termed benevolence, or, in Eliot's own vocabulary, sympathy. As many critics have noted, Eliot expands sympathy to include a far more diffuse range of human emotions than mere fellow feeling in suffering, and her sympathy very rarely connects with monetary charity.⁵ This sympathy then becomes the almost exclusive source of moral value in Eliot's works. Ann Cvetkovich sums up Eliot's position neatly: "The foundation of

⁵ Though I feel Daniel Siegel is too quick to conflate the emotion of sympathy and sympathetic action, his article "Preacher's Vigil, Landlord's Watch: Charity by the Clock in Adam Bede" is a valuable treatment of Eliot's more explicit treatment of charity in her earlier works. See *Novel* 39.1 (2005): 48-74.

ethical behavior is emotional investment in objects or persons outside the self In Eliot's moral universe, the original sin is narcissism or egoism, that is, an inability to have feelings about or to cathect on, anything other than the self."⁶ Audrey Jaffe is sharply critical of Eliot's sympathetic project, arguing that, especially in *Daniel Deronda*, sympathy creates "an identity politics in which differences between individuals are flattened out in favor of a reassuring fantasy of similitude."⁷ I disagree, arguing instead that Eliot's sympathy is intended as a powerful antidote to the too-flattening discourse of political economics, which confines everyone to their prescribed role in the market.

This chapter will argue that Eliot deliberately replaces charity with benevolence/sympathy in order to distance herself and her characters from the moral ambiguities my previous chapters have illustrated. True sympathy is, by its very definition, incapable of being incorrect, although Eliot does show time and again that this correctness is capable of misconstruction by those outside of the sympathetic bond. Moreover, Eliot's construction of sympathy hinges upon what I will here call an ethics of renunciation—only by actively distancing ourselves from the influence of money and the market can we become truly sympathetic to our fellow creatures. In this stance I am modifying a view taken by Rachel Ablow, who contends that "Eliot attempts to imagine how sympathy might be supplemented with remorse or gratitude, emotions able to eradicate

⁶ Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992) 130.

⁷ Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000) 156.

selfishness while preserving self-consciousness.”⁸ For those steeped in the Victorian ideology of accumulation, the deliberate choice of an austere life is the ultimately anti-selfish gesture. While this theme figures most prominently and didactically in *Felix Holt: The Radical*, it also helps to illuminate crucial ambiguities in *Middlemarch*. While both Dickens and Barrett Browning make a compromise of sorts between economics and human behavior, Eliot desires no such bargain. But her attempts to completely remove money from human morality are stymied by her need to demonstrate to her pragmatic audience that her heroes and heroines have an adequate income for life’s necessities. Her idealism is trumped by the mimetic requirements of realist fiction. While Eliot effectively separates money and morality, she is simultaneously compelled to both admit and draw attention to the fiscal realities of Victorian life.

In both *Felix Holt: The Radical* and *Middlemarch*, George Eliot expresses her attempts to negotiate complicated economic dilemmas. The similarities between these two novels are remarkable, but, most importantly for our purposes, both Dorothea Brooke and Esther Lyon sacrifice fortunes for love and moral influence. Dorothea cannot keep her money because her first husband’s will prohibits her second marriage, while Esther’s lover fears that prosperity would alienate him from his working-class objects of charity. Both heroines, in addition to these reasons, come to find wealth itself to be objectionable. Dorothea famously claims to “hate her wealth” (83.811), and Esther sees only the unhappiness that money has brought to the Transome family, from whom she would inherit. *Middlemarch*

⁸ Rachel Ablow, *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007) 71.

and *Felix Holt* thus present an ethics of resistance to the market. Both of these resistances, however, trouble modern-day readerly desires to see a sense of feminist purpose in George Eliot's heroines. Deirdre David condemns Esther as "a domestic coquette,"⁹ and other have argued that it is very difficult to read *Middlemarch* without feeling that Eliot simply backed down from making a strong feminist statement.¹⁰ Dorice Williams Elliott sees this failure as explicitly linked to Eliot's suspicion of charity: the plot of *Middlemarch* "displaces" Dorothea's "ambitious desires" onto Will Ladislaw. This "emotionally disappointing ending . . . can thus be read as a lament for the failure of philanthropy to fulfill the desires its representations have aroused."¹¹ I will argue, however, that Eliot's novels instead seek to remodel the category of philanthropy. In order to explicate Eliot's negotiation of these issues, this chapter will first detail Eliot's treatment of economic ideas in the less studied *Felix Holt* and then move to a reading of *Middlemarch*. In doing so I hope to prove that the intersection of the domestic/charitable and economic spheres was genuinely, rather than transparently, troublesome for Eliot. She struggles to find a satisfactorily moral way to allow the two areas to correspond, which in turn

⁹ Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and the Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987) 200.

¹⁰ Jenni Calder explains this view: "I think that George Eliot can be accused of a failure of commitment There are times when Providence and an ironic approach . . . hold back an element of daring, of taking up the challenge which she herself creates" See *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976) 128.

¹¹ Dorice Williams Elliott, *The Angel Out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2002) 30.

leads to an attempted abandonment of the economic sphere. Her gesture of renunciation is thus more strongly linked to her ethics than to her sexual politics.

Catherine Gallagher establishes the moral terrain that Eliot attempts to negotiate. Examining the tension between economics and literature in the mid-nineteenth century, she claims that both economics and its critics, in essence, moved to a more secular, humanist notion of value. At the same time, she argues, economics itself split between two types of discourse: the “bioeconomic” and the “somaeconomic.” Bioeconomics describes “interconnections among populations, the food supply, modes of production and exchange, and their impact on life forms generally.”¹² Somaeconomics, on the other hand, examines “economic behavior in terms of the emotional and sensual feelings that are both causes and consequences of economic exertions.”¹³ All forms of value thus become, in effect, economic relationships, as all human interactions can be made to fit one of these categories. While all the authors in this study have been troubled by this construction, George Eliot anxiously desired to move back to a non-economic center of value, characterized most strongly by sympathy both toward and between her characters. She attempts, that is, to present a secular alternative to what Gallagher terms the “transcendent spiritual meanings” of pre-economic life.¹⁴ But, because Eliot does exist in an intensely economic world, this move can’t be made without difficulty.

¹² Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006) 3.

¹³ Gallagher 3.

¹⁴ Gallagher’s specific explication of Eliot’s reaction to economics is concerned with Jevons’s *Theory of Political Economy* (1871) and *Daniel Deronda*. It is an

Eliot's choice of, or the literary market's expectation of, the marriage plot novel also hampers her freedom to abandon the economic sphere. Marriage easily falls into Gallagher's category of "somaeconomics": middle-class standards being what they were, love and marriage came to require an elaborate series of financial arrangements, from having eligible employment to buying the correct furniture. In addition, there were also ideological ramifications, hinging on both the financial and emotional sides of the equation. G.R. Searle's examination of marriage debates in the mid-nineteenth century provides a groundwork from which to examine some of Eliot's moral frustration. Searle notes that while John Stuart Mill, among others, believed that marriage could be a contractual arrangement, with equal participation by both parties, opposing thinkers held that such arrangements denied women their unique moral sphere as "the angel in the house." In Mill's view, "true partnerships rested upon affection and, in particular, upon sympathy," which was an emotion only possible between equals.¹⁵ Thus, marriage could be entered into as a contract, another type of arrangement between equals. Many contemporaries felt that Mill's position hinged too much on the ruthless dictates of political economy, according to which a person's worth was solely what he or she could bring to the market. Furthermore, however much Mill relied on the idea of sympathy between spouses, he denied the popular claim that women were naturally more sympathetic and altruistic than men. On the other side of the debate, both men

interesting but, for the purposes of the present study, anachronistic, treatment. See *The Body Economic*, ch. 5.

¹⁵ Searle 139.

and women wondered what would happen to the home if marriage became a contract and women increasingly participated in the outside world. Herbert Spencer, a great friend of Eliot's, cautioned against the social dangers that would arise if women were "enfranchised prematurely," at the same time that popular domestic ideologies offered women a way, via the sphere of their home, to counteract the increasingly negative, commercial worlds inhabited by their husbands.¹⁶ While we would think of this economic denial as an anti-feminist stance, the moral power given to women in an argument like Spencer's is persuasive in its context. Eliot's gender politics are further complicated by the very coupling of marital and market equality in these debates. The fact that equality, rhetorically if not in actuality, forces women into the market makes Eliot, ever suspicious of the market, hesitant to embrace it. Instead, she appears to desire her male characters to adopt the "feminine" attributes of sympathy and separateness from the market.

II. With this framework in mind, we can begin examining the vexed morality of *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* to see why Eliot's moral and economic anxiety might center itself so strongly on marriage. *Felix Holt*, at first glance, presents a perfectly stable moral sphere in which economic interactions are to be avoided, beyond supplying the necessities of life. First, we must remember that Felix is never seriously undermined as the novel's moral center. He appears in the novel fully-formed, and aside from abandoning his views on marriage, we witness no

¹⁶ Searle 153 and 156.

substantial ideological changes in him. Indeed, critics have long seen Felix himself as one of the novel's most serious flaws, with Arnold Kettle soundly condemning Eliot for "the artistic failure to create a figure commensurate with the needs of her central theme."¹⁷ Colene Bentley pointedly notes that "as a character [Felix] often lacks narrative realization because at key moments in the novel Eliot does not provide an account of how her protagonist came to hold the opinions he in fact does."¹⁸ More tersely, Evan Horowitz remarks that "Felix is not the kind of radical who believes in praxis. He is the kind of radical who believes in rhetoric."¹⁹ For similar reasons, Barbara Hardy calls Mrs. Transome "the only really successful character in the book."²⁰ I would argue instead that Felix's position is intended to serve as an example for readers, not of a "good" (dynamic) character, but of a good role model. We are intended, as Esther is, to be converted by Felix's goodness. While this didactic purpose is perhaps less compelling to readers than other approaches, we must remember that Eliot often chooses it in her fiction. Dorothea herself, while she makes some mistakes, is presented as the embodiment of saintly perfection at the beginning of *Middlemarch*, as are characters like Adam Bede and Romola. For all these characters, the trial of life is coupling moral correctness with the actions of an unfair and censorious world. By providing readers with Esther's conversion,

¹⁷ Arnold Kettle, "Felix Holt: The Radical," *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 113.

¹⁸ Colene Bentley, "Democratic Citizenship in *Felix Holt*," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 24.3 (2002): 276.

¹⁹ Evan Horowitz, "George Eliot: The Conservative," *Victorian Studies* 49.1 (2006): 16.

²⁰ Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot* (London: Athlone P, 1959) 93.

presumably similar to Felix's, Eliot attempts to show us both a model for Felix's transition and his unblemished moral correctness.

Felix is allowed to voice his own position through a number of speeches in the novel, most convincingly to Esther, but also to a variety of other characters. He gives the fullest account of his own conversion to Mr. Lyon, presenting a very radical—to Eliot's original readers—series of life choices as pure common sense:

This world is not a very fine place for a good many of the people in it. But I've made up my mind it shan't be the worse for me, if I can help it. They may tell me I can't alter the world—that there must be a certain number of sneaks and robbers in it, and if I don't lie and filch somebody else will.

Well, then, somebody else shall, for I won't.²¹

This language is unusually strong for Eliot, who more often deals out her moral absolutes quietly. Felix reduces, indeed, a good number of Eliot's readers to "sneaks and robbers," since in its context this speech indicts fairly standard nineteenth-century business practices. This strong language so early in the novel is deliberately cast to shock readers, who can then be persuaded by Felix's more detailed explanations and his later, somewhat more moderate, speeches. While Eliot's modern readers might be surprised to find this kind of rhetoric in one of her novels, we must remember that Felix's language would not have been completely new to a Victorian audience. Here, and elsewhere, Felix draws on the language made popular by anti-luxury sermons and pamphlets for a century before Eliot begins to write her novel. Felix's views are compellingly phrased,

²¹ George Eliot, *Felix Holt: The Radical*, ed. Lynda Mugglestone (1866; London: Penguin Books, 1995) 5.62. Subsequent citations in text.

but their strength of delivery is more essential than their originality. He advocates stepping away from the market, but, as my discussion demonstrates, this proves as difficult for Felix as it did for the audiences of those sermons.

Felix's most direct challenge arises in his home, the one place supposedly untainted by the market. Just as the novel begins, Felix convinces his aging mother to stop selling patent medicines that may injure patients. He would rather support his mother himself, through the "honest" trade of watch making, than have her "poison" her customers. This moral intervention in the market serves as our first introduction to Felix, and it remains throughout the novel one of his most concretely described actions. As discussed below, his charities and direct interactions with the working class are less directly presented. While it is obvious, though, that readers are intended to approve of Felix's choices, his reasoning remains vague. His only explanation is tendered to Mr. Lyon, who confronts him about his mother's livelihood. Felix makes a strongly anti-market claim, arguing that selling damaging goods to the public is equivalent to theft:

I've no more doubt about them [the medicines] than I have about pocket-picking. I know there's a stage of speculation in which a man may doubt whether a pickpocket is blameworthy—but I'm not one of your subtle fellows If I allowed the sale of those medicines to go on, and my mother to live out of the proceeds when I can keep her by the honest labour of my hands, I've not the least doubt I would be a rascal. (5.61)

More subtly than the overt equation of stealing and selling dangerous merchandise, Felix makes two other claims here. First, he suggests, although by

way of deprecation, that it is possible to be sympathetic to outright theft, presumably (in Felix's logic) because thieves are often poor men slighted by the economic system. More importantly, Felix aligns manual labor with honesty, and capitalism with being a "rascal." He is welcome to make money repairing watches, but his mother is condemned for selling bad goods to an unsuspecting public. What Felix chooses not to see, or not to dwell on, is that his very livelihood itself is dependent upon the existence of inferior goods. He tells Esther, who visits on the pretense of having her watch repaired, that "these little Geneva toys are cleverly constructed to go always a little wrong" (22.224). But, Eliot's point remains, even with this oversight: the market is not removed from moral considerations, no matter what economists or capitalists might attempt to make people believe.

Felix's attempt to deal absolutely with the morality of the market faces some serious challenges within the novel, where other characters are allowed to voice more economically-minded objections. For example, Mrs. Holt, Felix's mother, responds to his demand that she give up her remunerative trade in patent medicines with a purely free-market claim: "the pills . . . had a sale, as you may be sure they suited people's insides. And what folks can never have boxes enough to swallow, I should think you have a right to sell" (43.415). Mrs. Holt makes a series of simple equations here. If a medicine sells, it must be good for people, and if people are willing to buy something, you have every right to sell it. The latter claim is especially strong in the counter-discourse of the novel, given that Felix is never clear about how dangerous the medicines really are. The

relentlessly negative portrayal of Mrs. Holt helps to discredit her claims, but her voluminous repetitions serve as a constant reminder of exactly what Felix plans to work against. In his world, you do not have a right to sell anything that people will buy, but rather must protect the ignorant public from their own folly. On the other hand, Felix's true endangerment of his mother's livelihood is called into question by her complaints and by the circumstances of the novel. While Felix is in prison, his mother, rendered economically dependent by his actions, is forced to live on charity. In the end, Esther provides for Mrs. Holt out of her own fortune, undermining the moral purity of Felix's claim. In a world where the working classes had no insurance and no financial security, Felix's action can be criticized, despite Eliot's attempts to direct the reader away from the fundamental justice of Mrs. Holt's claim. It is, even in this seemingly obvious example of economic "right" and "wrong," impossible to make an entirely ethical choice to either embrace or disdain the market. This tension dramatically complicates Eliot's otherwise straightforward message.

Eliot allows similar anxieties to surface in less didactic scenes as well. Thanks to its political nature, the novel showcases several debates that touch on economic topics. One of the more extensively treated discussions among the townspeople centers on trade unions and working conditions. A young farmer proposes the idea that trade unions will be the root of future troubles for England, concluding, "You may tell what it is for a country to trust to trade [for its prosperity] when it breeds such spindling fellows as those [union men]" (20.207). Since the trade union spokesmen are not physically flourishing

themselves, they cannot possibly bring prosperity to England. Mr. Nolan, a retired weaver, promptly counters him with a beneficent view of trade. He claims that “trade, properly conducted, is good for a man’s constitution” (20.207). With some refinement of “properly conducted,” he is in complete agreement with Felix Holt. His speech becomes more conservative as it continues, however. He concludes his argument with the idea that “trade makes property, my good sir, and property is Conservative. . . . The prosperity of the country is one web” (20.208). Mr. Nolan’s argument is a standard of political economic writers, who often suggest that the interests of large trade are identical with the interests of the country. Eliot’s use of her favorite image, the web, complicates an easy dismissal of Mr. Nolan’s position. The reader is expected to approve of Felix’s attempts to live a more ethical and less market-driven life. The very image of the web, however, demonstrates that we cannot escape the economic sphere. Gillian Beer notes that Eliot’s web is “a product as much of strain and conflict as of supple interconnection.” This serves as a dramatic image of Eliot’s economic dilemma: we may wish, with Felix, to escape from the market, but its web inevitably holds and touches us all.²²

²² The image of the web will predominate in *Middlemarch*. As Gillian Beer explains: “The imagery of interconnection and of necessary sequence apparently conflicts with that of divergence and incongruity. But George Eliot—in common with other writers of the time—used a metaphoric form which could accommodate these conflicting models: the web, itself a product as much of strain and conflict as of supple interconnection.” See *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. (1983; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 155. As the model of both strain and interconnection, it makes a perfect metaphor for commercial life here.

At the same time, though, the difference between Mr. Nolan's views and Felix's illuminates something crucial in Felix's notions of good prosperity. Felix would, almost certainly, agree that the fortunes of all people in the country are linked, and people do have a moral obligation to properly (meaning, minimally) participate in the market. For example, even Felix feels the moral obligation to support his mother and to work, and would never suggest begging, roving, or living entirely from the land. His opposition to property, and thereby to Mr. Nolan's views, stems from a similar notion that property is Conservative. He can, for instance, never truly believe that the wealthy Harold Transome is a Radical. Felix's resistance to Mr. Nolan's careful outline comes in the shape of a resistance to property and prosperity itself. In one of his impassioned speeches to Esther, Felix remarks that a man should never enter a career that requires him to be "detestable" for "the sake of two parlours [and] a rank eligible for the churchwardenship" (27.260). A man should be only as involved in the market as is absolutely necessary to let him help others, but to that extent he cannot escape it.

The ethical issue of market involvement inevitably centers itself on the novel's romantic plot. Esther Lyon holds a more typical understanding of economic virtue, believing herself correct to spend her small income purchasing the "essential" luxuries she feels requisite to her station. While Esther occupies a monetary position probably shared by many of Eliot's readers, she receives no support from either the other characters or the main narrative voice. Even though, unlike other luxury-loving nineteenth-century heroines, she works for

what she wants and spends only what money she makes, her economic choices are represented as deviant. Esther's spending habits are given to readers even before her own first appearance, when her father tells Felix, "You are doubtless amazed to see me with a wax-light, my young friend; but this undue luxury is paid for with the earnings of my daughter, who is so delicately framed that the smell of tallow is loathsome to her" (5.60). The "undue luxury," like Esther's reading habits (Byron and French novels) comes to be a moral bone of contention between Esther and Felix. In one of their early meetings, he admonishes:

You don't care to be better than a bird trimming its feathers, and pecking about after what pleases it. You are discontented with the world because you can't get just the small things that suit your pleasure, not because it's a world where myriads of men and women are ground by wrong and misery and tainted with pollution. (10.123)

Esther's small luxuries, like wax candles instead of tallow, strike Felix as the signs of her moral degradation. Spending only her own income in luxuries still supports a morally corrupt lifestyle, which she must promise to give up before their relationship can continue. In a world filled with poverty, worrying about the scent of candles is unethical. The first sign of Esther's redemption occurs when, upon learning of her mother's true identity, she is able to instantly exclaim, "But that must be the best life, father . . . that where one bears and does everything because of some great and strong feeling—so that this and that in one's circumstances don't signify" (26.253). The reader is supposed to recognize, as Mr.

Lyon does, that Esther has finally made moral progress: she is able to see why someone might go without luxuries.

Eliot gives Esther a second and larger reason, beyond Felix's disapproval, to change her lifestyle. While Esther has longed to be "a fine lady" her entire life, she finds life at Transome Court to be less perfect than expected:

Now that her ladyhood was not simply in Utopia, she found herself arrested and painfully grasped by the means through which the ladyhood was to be obtained . . . all these things made a picture, not for her own tastes and fancies to float in with Elysian indulgence, but in which she was compelled to gaze on the degrading hard experience of other human beings, and on a humiliating loss which was the obverse of her own proud gain. (38.361)

Even in this initial moment of her fortune, Esther is filled with a vision of consequences. Her gain means a loss to Harold and his family, which her sympathy makes difficult for her to accept. At the same time, she remembers Felix's lessons and imagines him instructing her to "take care where your fortune leads you" (38.362). Esther stands on the brink of the text's ultimate corruption—taking money from others for her own personal gain. Until Esther sees life at the court first-hand, though, these moral concerns remain in the background for her. She is first compelled to recognize her temptation fully, in order to understand the exact nature of her sacrifice. She sees that life at Transome Court would be "easy"—"she had always thought life among refined people must be particularly

easy" (38.367)—but the text insists that she learn to reject not just the luxuries of that life but also the morally empty "ease" that it offers.

Many critics consider the scenes at Transome Court, especially the tortured inner life of Mrs. Transome, to be the most realistically and carefully depicted scenes of the novel.²³ The primary purpose of these scenes, however, is to convert Esther, and by implication the reader, toward the joys of a simpler life. Felix provides the framework, but Mrs. Transome provides the ultimate motive for Esther's conversion. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth marks Mrs. Transome's role: "Mrs. Transome is a sort of historic alter ego for Esther, a possible version of herself, an embodiment of one alternative which Esther may choose if she decides to become mistress of Transome court."²⁴ She is the novel's cautionary tale. Mrs. Transome's pride and class anxieties have kept her almost literally imprisoned in Transome Court, paralyzed by the fear that her past indiscretions will be revealed. From her initial introduction, Mrs. Transome is a picture of thwarted womanhood, repressed by her life: "like all eager-minded women who advance in life without any activity of tenderness or any large sympathy, she had contracted small rigid habits of thinking and acting" (1.24). Mrs. Transome's experience forces Esther to learn that money, rank, and happiness are far from synonymous. Esther is "touched with pity at [Mrs. Transome's] signs of unhappiness" (45.432) and observes "some indefinable indications of a hidden anxiety" (40.381). It is, even to Esther's wealth-bedazzled eyes, "impossible to

²³ Barabara Hardy cites F. R. Leavis to support her belief that Mrs. Transome is the novel's strongest character. See *Novels* 93.

²⁴ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40.1 (1985): 38.

mistake her for a happy woman" (40.381). Indeed, Mrs. Transome provides Esther with her final motive to reject her fortune, as "the dimly-suggested tragedy of this woman's life, the dreary waste of years empty of sweet trust and affection, afflicted her even to horror" (50.470). Deirdre David considers Eliot's devotion to Mrs. Transome's story a deviation from the main points of the novel—"she invests so much narrative energy in Mrs. Transome's unfolding family drama and so little in the 'study of the people as they are,' that the ideal social novel gets contradicted in her practice"²⁵—but this very attention drives home Eliot's most powerful point. Esther has spent her formative years desiring wealth, but Mrs. Transome proves to her that wealth brings no happiness, especially when unaccompanied by familial love.

More importantly than this fairly obvious moral, however, Esther learns in dismay that Mrs. Transome is "useless." Esther, despite her depiction as the embodiment of corrupted luxury, is accustomed to working for her living. She pays for her own wax candles and perfumes through her work as a governess. And, as she tells Mrs. Transome herself, these are relatively modest expenses. She knows "what to buy with fifty pounds a year, but . . . the price of nothing beyond that" (38.365). When Esther sees Mrs. Transome, surrounded by luxuries, she comes to realize the true implications of Felix's desire for women to be useful. Mrs. Transome, even though she has her small charities as a landlady, "insisting on medicines for infirm cottagers" (1.24-25), is even excluded from managing the estate, first by Jermyn and then by Harold. This model of enforced

²⁵ David 198.

leisure is new and disturbing to Esther, especially given her talks to Felix. Once she has been made to see the larger problems in the world, she cannot simply be content to sit idle. She comes to see Transome court as a life of “middling delights, overhung with the languorous haziness of motiveless ease, where poetry was only literature, and the fine ideas had to be taken down from the shelves of the library when her husband’s back was turned” (44.426). This life of luxury is “a silken bondage that arrested all motive, and was nothing better than a well-cushioned despair” (49.465). Being the wife of Harold Transome, who has ominously lived in the East and owned female slaves, would only intensify Esther’s sense of entrapment. Harold’s belief that “a woman ought never to have any trouble” (40.384) is exactly opposed to the things Esther has learned from both Felix and her father. She is desperate for the higher calling that life with Felix would allow, at least in part because that life would allow her to be useful.

For these reasons, Esther chooses to sacrifice her fortune, although Eliot doesn’t allow Esther to do so easily. Instead, Eliot gives us the full, halting progress of Esther’s conversion. In part this is due to Esther’s real experience of poverty. Unlike Dorothea, Esther has seen “the dim life of the back street” and fears facing it alone (49.464). Furthermore, as Colene Bentley observes, Felix’s change of heart happens before the novel begins, so we don’t witness his own inner workings.²⁶ Our lack of access to Felix’s interiority prevents readerly identification with his conversion. If Eliot truly intends to use Esther’s and Felix’s life as a way to model an ethical response to the world, she needs to give readers

²⁶ Bentley 272, 279.

a more detailed sense of Esther's change of heart. Esther's decision not to marry Harold is rendered with a keen eye to presenting the vividness of Esther's psychological state and a serious attention to the pressure of marriage on Victorian women. Esther is torn between a marriage that would be socially approved and one that would be seen as a downfall in the eyes of the world. Yet for her, the moral situation is exactly the opposite: to marry Harold is moral compromise. Eliot artfully shifts the narrative voice as she discusses Esther's dilemma: "It comes in so many forms in this life of ours—the knowledge that there is something sweetest and noblest of which we despair, and the sense of something present that solicits us with an immediate and easy indulgence. And there is a pernicious falsity in the pretence that a woman's love lies above the range of such temptations" (43.406). By choosing this neutral first-person tone, which she does much less often in *Felix Holt* than in the later fiction, Eliot compels her readers to internalize Esther's moral quandary as an abstraction: do we accept the easier path, or the more virtuous one? By removing the particularities of Esther's choice Eliot draws us in to sympathy with Esther in a more exact way than she ever does with Felix.

Unfortunately for Eliot's purpose, we actually see very little direct action taken by either Felix or Esther. Esther's time in the plot is occupied by her ethical conversion, while Felix's is dominated by his time in the riot and in prison. The riot, indeed, mostly discourages readers from adopting Felix's "radical" lifestyle. Felix instead proves the real validity of the fears a middle-class reader might have of becoming involved with working-class politics. His participation in the

riot irrevocably illustrates that even intelligence and charisma are not enough to alter the course of brute strength and alcohol. Instead of diffusing the riot, Felix commits manslaughter, a worse deed than many of the rioters might have committed if left entirely to their own devices. Eliot allows Esther to question his shortcomings: "I can't help being discouraged for you by all these things that have happened. See how you may fail!" Felix's answer, however, lacks a specific response to his situation: "The only failure a man ought to fear is failure in cleaving to the purpose he sees to be best" (45.434).

Nonetheless, Felix does go on to issue a more positive portrayal of the situation Dorothea Brooke faces at the end of *Middlemarch* (to be discussed below). Instead of reaching for grand gestures, such as stemming a riot, perhaps, Felix prefers "the minimum of effect, if it's the sort I care for" (45.435), and he cares for "very small things, such as will never be known beyond a few garrets and workshops" (45.435). Evan Horowitz scathingly points to this shift in view as a crisis of agency for Eliot, who sees "no direct way to transform intention into action."²⁷ Felix's lesson from the riots, then, appears to be a modification of his goals. The smaller acts he praised as the novel began, setting up a night school, for instance, were swallowed up in the political turmoil of the novel's central sections. Chastised by his failure to influence the political outcome of the election, either through speeches or by diverting the riot, Felix lowers his sights to smaller, more pragmatic goals. Thus I disagree with Horowitz's claim that

²⁷ Horowitz 17.

Eliot is paralyzed by her fear that any action can lead to social “chaos.”²⁸ Instead, I would suggest that Eliot is interested in a more portable and less socially specific model of morality. Rather than focusing on precise details of charity or direct action taken by Esther and Felix, Eliot chooses to focus her novel on the moral and ethical value of deliberately living a life without greed, embodied for Esther and Felix as a large income.

However, this moral choice, too, is troubled by the text’s ending. Examining Esther’s and Felix’s final scene together complicates the novel’s direct discourse of renunciation. Felix has just learned that Esther has given up her fortune, but doubts her resolve. After a list of more serious questions, he considers her hair: “‘And these curls?’ he said, with a sort of relenting, seating himself again and putting his hand on them” (51.474). Esther replies, “They cost nothing – they are natural” (51.474). This simple exchange provides a fundamental dichotomy between things natural and things purchased. Esther can keep her “natural” curls, but artificial ones would have to be abandoned in her more serious economic life with Felix. Other scenes between Esther and Felix demand a more complicated understanding of exactly what it means for Esther to keep her hair intact. She is first described to the reader from Felix’s viewpoint:

He would not observe her, but he had a sense of an elastic walk, the tread of small feet, a long neck and a high crown of shining brown plaits with curls that floated backwards – things, in short, that suggested a fine lady to him, and determined him to notice her as little as possible. A fine lady

²⁸ Horowitz 23.

was always a sort of spun-glass affair – not natural, and with no beauty for him as art. (5.67)

Even Felix, determined not to notice her, marks the instant signal of nobility in Esther's hair. Curls, imagined here as a literal "crown," are a sign of being a "fine lady," not worthy of Felix's respect. Similar language of royalty appears in the most significant early encounter between the two lovers. Felix visits Esther in order to scold her for her lack of seriousness, and finds her "playing with a shower of brown curls, and a coronet of shining plaits at the summit of her head . . . a remarkable Cinderella" (10.120). It is not only Esther's hair that is natural, and therefore without price, but, by extension, it is also her aristocratic characteristics, which are now proven to stand without the backing power of money. Unlike the genuine working class, she has "natural" nobility that can exist beyond the market.

Esther's "natural" aristocracy conflicts, despite the novel's attempt to bridge the gap, with Felix's radical, working-class politics. It is indeed difficult to imagine the refined Esther participating in the kind of life that Felix desires. Furthermore, Felix Holt's stance on money is so consistent throughout the novel that it jars with the novel's ending. In the concluding scene, Esther glowingly recites the endless spending power of the small amount of money she will retain from her fortune:

There would be money to spare, and you [Felix] could do wonders, and be obliged to work too, only not if sickness came. And then I think of a little income for your mother, enough for her to live as she has been used to

live; and a little income for my father, to save him from being dependent when he is no longer able to preach. (51.474)

Regardless of her chosen renunciation, Esther still sees a morally acceptable way of being economically comfortable. She will retain enough money from her fortune to protect Felix from the more unpredictable side of the market, but not so much that he can live completely without working. Felix responds enthusiastically, "Why, I shall be able to set up a great library, and lend the books to be dog's-eared and marked with breadcrumbs" (51.474). Esther adopts the kind of practical solution that might still appeal to Eliot's audience. Her choice also, crucially, empowers her. Unlike many Victorian heroines, Esther's decision to retain part of her fortune allows her to provide for her family and play an active role in Felix's future charities.

As much as readers may want to accept Esther's solution, it does nothing to solve any of the novel's deeper economic problems. From the political perspective, Esther's choice leaves the morally corrupt local nobility firmly intact, and the majority of her wealth in the hands of those who will do little good with it. Mr. Lyon, when he first learns of her fortune, rejoices at it as "a mean of honouring and illustrating a purer form of Christianity" than that adopted by the local gentry (41.391). By rejecting her fortune, Esther shuts down the possibility of joining her money to her father's religious calling. Furthermore, Esther here undermines Felix's entire moral program. Even though he ostensibly accepts her money to fund charity work among the poor, it is hard to escape noticing that doing so counteracts Felix's position. The novel's ending suggests

that Felix is forced to recognize that no charity work can be successful without the help of outside income, an idea completely opposed to his earlier desire to help the working class from within. His earlier stance is so privileged in the novel that marriage and economic comfort, for Felix, will always be a compromise.

By proposing a series of legitimate monetary dilemmas in *Felix Holt*, Eliot attempts to grapple with how, exactly, any person can interact with the market in a purely moral fashion. The novel comes to no successful conclusion. Esther's compromise, in the end, seems to represent *only* a compromise. Esther and Felix are doomed to live a life with neither luxury (Esther notably promises to give up her attar of roses, the pervasive symbol of her deviant economic tendencies), nor moral purity. The attempt to salvage Esther's money by making it only sufficient to maintain the family, with any residue going to charity, is not enough to ameliorate the sense that the ending is, somehow, a failure. Esther's moderation of Felix's goals is, however, shown to be the only way that those goals can succeed, just as Esther's plea at the trial is the only reason Felix isn't transported. Felix's powerful claims then that "I reverence the law, but not where it is a pretext for wrong" and "I hold it blasphemy to say that a man ought not to fight against authority" are enough to condemn him (46.442). Only Esther's assertion that "his nature is very noble; he is tender-hearted; he could never have had any intention that was not brave or good" saves Felix (46.449). In much the same way, her moderation of his intense social views is what makes them more viable, but perhaps less ethically pure. Or, as Elizabeth Starr phrases it, "while

sympathetic with Felix's vocational ideals, the novel undermines and revises his rigid distinctions between his macho humanitarianism and the feminine triviality that he associates with Esther, aesthetics, and the marketplace."²⁹ The novel's reassertion of middle-class values, by giving Esther and Felix a proper income, is perhaps why so many recent critics insist on the essentially conservative nature of Felix's Holt's "radical" politics. Esther's and Felix's promise to help the poor in small, local ways has so little room in the text that their actions, while given a beautiful rhetorical frame and a complex psychological rationale, cannot stand on their own. We can see why Eliot might choose to re-write her plot of renunciation in *Middlemarch*.

III. Eliot's tactics fundamentally shift between the two novels, even though her message stays the same at its core. While *Felix Holt* struggles to demonstrate strategies for shunning the market and the psychological shifts behind that desire, *Middlemarch* emphasizes both the ways that money itself corrupts and our need for human sympathy. The narrator's intense emphasis on sympathy is rendered as an addition to the rhetoric of *Felix Holt*, which allows for sympathy but does not demand it so insistently from readers. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot famously dictates not only the plot but also desires to control the reader's response to that plot. More succinctly, Eliot uses her narrative voice to teach us

²⁹ Elizabeth Starr, "Influencing the Moral Taste: Literary Work, Aesthetics, and Social Change in *Felix Holt: The Radical*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 56.1 (2001): 61.

how to view other humans with sympathy. For example, just as readers have learned to dislike Mr. Casaubon, Eliot interjects:

But why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding, being given to those young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble For my part I am sorry for him. (29.278, 280)

Eliot spends most of this chapter re-presenting the details of Dorothea's marriage from Mr. Casaubon's point of view instead of Dorothea's. The intention is quite pointedly to make us realize that the marriage is a disappointment for both parties. Any sympathy we feel for the disillusioned Dorothea should extend to her husband, even though his age and dryness make him less of a natural object for that sympathy. Eliot returns to this perception-shifting tactic again and again through her novel, using free indirect discourse to align her narrative voice to the interiority of each of her characters and presenting their actions from their own perspective.³⁰ Readers are forced to participate in Eliot's sympathy. Ann Cvetkovich cogently notes that Eliot's practice here is "central to a Victorian tradition that claims for literature or high culture a special role in laying the groundwork for political change because it has the capacity to develop and educate feelings."³¹ More than in the more overtly political *Felix Holt*, Eliot's narrative tactics in *Middlemarch* attempt directly to develop the qualities that she

³⁰ Barbara Hardy concurs: "The presentation of feeling is continuous, running right through explicit commentary, behaviouristic description of action, movement, gesture, and the drama of human relations and inner life. Each chapter has its trajectory of strong feelings." See *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1982) 88.

³¹ Cvetkovich 171.

finds the modern world to lack. For Eliot, “sympathy is the imaginative impulse that, transcending the egotism and renouncing the desires of self, promises to bridge the epistemological and ethical gap between self and world.”³² This bridge comes, as my analysis will show, to take the place of monetary or market relations, as Eliot attempts to move even beyond the sympathy implied in monetary charity to a completely non-monetary world.

Middlemarch's expanded scope allows Eliot to treat a broader range of economic perspectives than she does in *Felix Holt*, and most importantly to show the ill effects of money more clearly. By treating characters who are already wealthy, unlike the largely working-class cast of *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* adds significantly to the treatment of money as social corruptor. One addition is the novel's discourse of gambling and debt, in which the moral sacrifice of participation in the market is shown most strongly. Gambling by its very definition depends upon involvement in the market for amusement, rather than economic necessity. It presents a way to profit from the wealth of others with no corresponding investment of labor. Because the same action can produce, or remove, fortune, gambling fundamentally undermines economic systems. While the narrative remains largely neutral toward Farebrother's gambling as a way to stretch the meager income from his curacy, a stronger value judgment is framed against both Fred Vincy and Lydgate. Fred's gambling, while hinted at more broadly, appears largely in his illegitimate horse dealing. Before the novel begins he has already made the questionable decision of borrowing money from Caleb

³² Forest Pyle, “A Novel Sympathy: The Imagination of Community in George Eliot,” *Novel* 27.1 (1993): 6.

Garth, when he has little likelihood of repaying it. The possible moral cost here is very high—Caleb Garth is the text's embodiment of male virtue, and Fred risks all of the Garth family's future happiness in his futile endeavor. Fred, like a stereotype of irresponsible wealth, places his own short-term happiness at a premium and takes money from the poor to finance it. Furthermore, Fred's economic ideas are incredibly imprecise: "Of what might be the capacity of his father's pocket, Fred had only a vague notion: was not trade elastic? And would not the deficiencies of one year be made up for by the superfluities of another?" (23.230). Fred's economic rhetoric here only serves to displace responsibility, causing him to degenerate into a blatant economic speculator. Like the Victorian public, half-versed in economics, Fred knows only enough about the nature of money to abuse his opportunities. Instead of returning part of his loan, he invests his entire gift from Featherstone in a horse, hoping to make a quick profit. The horse turns out to be, literally, a bad investment, and Fred is forced to face the grimly stated economic facts of the case: "he was simply aware that he had only fifty pounds, that there was no chance of getting any more at present, and that the bill for a hundred and sixty would be presented in five days" (24.241). Fred's acknowledgement of these economic truths shows his essential capacity for reform. Under adverse circumstances, he can recognize, or at least learn, that the only recourse is honesty with the Garths. He sees that his turn to irresponsible speculation has only made his situation more dire. Later in the novel, readers are intended to recognize Fred's abandonment of gambling at the Green Dragon as a sure sign of his reform.

Lydgate, in contrast, is permanently animalized by his descent into debt and his attempts to shore up the family's finances by playing billiards. Lydgate, like Fred, begins the novel with no sense of what the market genuinely entails. As Kurt Heinzelman suggests in his reading, Lydgate chooses "to regard economics as neither a moral nor an epistemological 'fact.'"³³ His cycle of poor decisions extends much more deeply than Fred's. He begins by investing money in a medical practice that he fails to maintain. He then goes into debt for material goods that are more lavish than his circumstances allow and fails to retrench his personal finances when the bills are due. As Lydgate descends, Eliot notes that his earlier, more enlightened self did not gamble. He "had looked on at a great deal of gambling in Paris, watching it as if it had been a disease. He was no more tempted by such winning than he was by drink" (66.668-69). Lydgate's morality initially protects him against such corruptions. But, as his fortunes fall, Lydgate takes up gambling explicitly as a way to avoid his fiscal duties: "his thought now began to turn upon gambling – not with an appetite for its excitement, but with a sort of wistful inward gaze after that easy way of getting money, which implied no asking and brought no responsibility" (66.669). For Eliot, though, there is no way to gain money without responsibility. The consequence of Lydgate's choice is the utter renunciation of his ability to take a moral stand. Eliot's tone, as Lydgate begins to gamble, becomes heavily didactic:

He was not only excited with his play, but visions were gleaming on him of going the next day to Brassing, where there was gambling on a grander

³³ Kurt Heinzelman, *The Economics of the Imagination* (Amherst: U Massachusetts P, 1980) 7.

scale to be had, and where, by one powerful snatch at the devil's bait, he might carry it off without the hook, and buy his rescue from daily solicitings. (66.670).

Fred, observing from the sidelines, notes Lydgate's unnatural behavior, which the narrative voice describes as an "excited narrow consciousness which reminds one of an animal with fierce eyes and retractile claws" (66.672). The shift is absolute, and Lydgate has moved utterly beyond his customary "air of self-possessed strength" (66.672). From this point forward, Lydgate never regains the full self-determination he had in the opening chapters because the market, with gambling as its most pernicious form, corrupts. Lydgate's reach for "the devil's bait" results in *only* the hook: his increasing need to be prosperous, through whatever means, overturns his desire and ability to carry on with his medical reforms.

Middlemarch also comments more directly than *Felix Holt* on the corruption inherent in modern industrial practice. Eliot uses Mr. Vincy's silk works to remind her readers of sweatshop labor and the dreadful factory conditions more fully explored in novels like *Mary Barton*. As Dorothea's family and Mrs. Cadwallader look down on Peter Featherstone's funeral, Mr. Brooke comments that the Vincys are "a credit to the manufacturing interest" (34.327). Mrs. Cadwallader rebuts with a presentation of the family as vampires. Mr. Vincy is "one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers in Tipton and Freshit. That is how his family look so fair and sleek" (34.327). The handloom weavers were, of course, a byword for industrial destruction. The

increasing dominance of factories forced their wages ever lower and lower, far below the level of poverty.³⁴ By one key detail, Eliot gives her readers a full reminder of just what Mr. Vincy's social aspirations rest upon. His shameful treatment of the handloom weavers, however, is not Vincy's only failing. Early in the novel, Vincy criticizes one of Bulstrode's investments: "It may be for the glory of God, but it is not for the glory of the Middlemarch trade, that Plymdale's house uses those blue and green dyes that it gets from the Brassing manufactory; they rot the silk, that's all I know about it" (13.130). The critical eye here is on the economic malpractice of using ill-gotten money to fund religious programs, but it also scathingly depicts the corruption inherent in the demand for industrial profits. Mr. Vincy is apparently unable to resist the market's demand for the cheaper dyes. By the end of the novel, Bulstrode's litany of offenses includes being "a sleeping partner in trade concerns, in which his ability was directed to economy in raw material, as in the case of the dyes which rotted Mr. Vincy's silk" (61.618). Bulstrode's failing here and Vincy's are inseparable, as they conspire together to give the public a poorly made good for the same price as its better-made predecessor. Even worse, the reader knows that Mr. Vincy's ill-gotten money is paying for Fred's lavish, unused education and Mrs. Vincy's dinner parties and ribbons. The family's wealth is "sucked" from those who need it, only to end in the most useless of luxuries. As a manufacturing family, earning

³⁴ Handloom weavers who could receive 25 shillings a week in 1800 received only 5 shillings 6 pence by 1830. See Edward P. Cheyney, *An Introduction to the Industrial and Social History of England* (London: MacMillan, 1913) 220. Also see E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

their money by repressing others and exploiting the market, the Vincys are the great social evil of Middlemarch.

More critically, Eliot argues that even good intentions can be corrupted or thwarted by money. Dorothea's inability to do anything with her fortune, despite her ideals, is a constant theme of the novel. She is rarely, if ever, able to spend her money in a way that is genuinely helpful. Eliot gently mocks her by noting her dismay that "everybody . . . was well off in Lowick: not a cottager in those double cottages at low rent but kept a pig" (9.77). Her hopes of being a Lady Bountiful are thwarted by the generally good conditions on Casaubon's estate, just as they were earlier thwarted by her uncle's lack of interest in improving his own. Dorothea desires to be charitable, but has no agency. After Casaubon is dead and she has a fortune at her disposal, Dorothea still finds herself unable to follow through with her charitable projects. She reluctantly learns that she does not have enough money to endow a school or to embark on any other large-scale reform. She confesses to Lydgate, "I am very uncomfortable with my money, because they tell me that I have too little for any great scheme of the sort I like best, and yet I have too much So you see that what I should most rejoice at would be to have something good to do with my money" (76.765). The tragedy of the novel is that she never does find that "something good to do." Dorothea is an unsuccessful philanthropist because her ardor lies outside the realms of feasible charity, but Eliot also uses her to make the point that true sympathy with our neighbors is more important than monetary aid. While Dorothea's loan to

Lydgate is important to him, for example, her sympathetic exchange with Rosamond about Lydgate's circumstances is ultimately more significant.

Eliot's treatment of Mr. Brooke drives this point home even more strongly. As he attempts to enter politics, Mr. Brooke's shame over the conditions of his estate lead him to attempt a more paternalistic attitude toward his tenants. To avoid being shamed, Mr. Brooke needs to improve their standards of living, but he has no genuine sympathy for them and operates only from selfish motives. When he finally does intervene in the problems on his own estate, his tenants deeply resent his overt paternalism because they can detect his lack of true feelings and tact. After being addressed as a "good fellow," Mr. Dagley, a poor cottager, replies "with a loud snarling irony" that he is "glad to hear I'm a good feller" (39.395). He goes on to resist Mr. Brooke's authority to suggest punishment for his son, caught poaching: "You've got no call to come an' talk about sticks o' these primises, as you woon't give a stick tow'rt mending. Go to Middlemarch to ax for your charrickter" (39.396). Desiring only the authority of paternalism, without performing the necessary actions to gain the loyalty of his tenants, Mr. Brooke makes a hasty retreat, even though he "had been inclined to regard himself as a general favorite" (39.397). Mr. Brooke's failure as a landlord results in the utter breakdown of any possible communication with his poor tenants. In order to become less of an embarrassment, Mr. Brooke is forced to run his estate as a business and rehire Caleb Garth to manage it. Paternalism, supposedly benevolent but in this case performed without true sympathy, is an empty sham.

Eliot also uses the more complex plot of *Middlemarch* to present the economic ramifications of three marriages, rather than just one. Lydgate demonstrates the worst of the novel's possible economic outcomes. He chooses to marry a frivolous woman—the unreformed Esther, if you will—and she forces him away from his principles. Rosamond's extravagance drives Lydgate to the most improvident of all possible actions—borrowing money from the corrupt Bulstrode. Only by exchanging Bulstrode's loan for one from Dorothea can Lydgate regain any moral center in the novel. Even Dorothea's money is unable to redeem him fully. He must, in the end, spend his life devoted to Rosamond's greedier pursuits. Lydgate is forced to abandon his charitable impulses for the sake of his wife's worldlier ones, which drive him, as discussed earlier, away from his original ethics. The narrator sardonically remarks that he ceased studying fevers in order to write "a treatise on Gout, a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side" (Finale.834). To borrow again from Heinzelman's analysis, Lydgate's initial inability to understand economics, as it relates to his marriage, "means that his imaginative understanding of other economies—such as the internal structure of the human body . . . will turn out to be . . . secret, imaginary."³⁵ The lesser failure of his imagination, choosing the wrong wife, is intimately tied to the greater, losing his medical idealism. Lydgate, almost inevitably, ends his days pursuing mercenary ends and curing the rich of gout, the disease caused by their own excess. Rosamond forces him to abandon his charitable intentions for a life of shallow luxury.

³⁵ Heinzelman 21.

Fred and Mary prove closer to achieving a financial ideal. Fred has been given a gentleman's training, but not one's income. Mary uses her influence to keep him out of the church, where he would have made himself reprehensible. In one of her more impassioned speeches, she asks, "What right have such men to represent Christianity—as if it were an institution for getting up idiots genteelly?" (52.516). Fred turns, instead, to a more humble position with Caleb Garth, who can teach him a better relationship to the monetary world. The narrator plainly points out that "Fred never became rich," even though he does gain enough money to "become owner of the stock and furniture at Stone Court" (Finale.834). Unlike Rosamond's corrupting influence over Lydgate, Mary's virtue saves him from Featherstone's tainted fortune, which introduces only vice and corruption into the text. By learning to work for his living, Fred is able to return, ultimately, to his birthright. He gains the benefit of Featherstone's estate, without the moral sacrifice. From the beginning of his shift in fortunes, his plans for Stone Court are presented in the most careful of moral terms. Mary asks, "Should you call it bad news to be told that you were to live at Stone Court, and manage the farm, and be remarkably prudent, and save money every year?" (86.830). Fred replies, "Oh, I could be a tremendously good fellow then, Mary." A proper, saving lifestyle is just what Fred needs to stabilize his character, along with some of Caleb Garth's notions of work. While Fred and Mary are presented as morally worthy, however, their attentions do not extend beyond their own home. Besides raising a family and publishing books, Fred and Mary contribute nothing to the outside world.

With so much contention surrounding issues of money in *Middlemarch*, Dorothea's renunciation at the end of the novel can be seen in a less equivocal light. While she does keep enough money to sustain her family, Eliot passes over that fact quickly. Even with £700 per annum, as opposed to Esther's £150, Dorothea must scale down her desires. She passionately exclaims that she will "live quite well on my own fortune – it is too much – seven hundred-a-year – I want so little – no new clothes – and I will learn what everything costs" (83.812). While Esther's money becomes the source of Felix's imagined charity, Dorothea's money is not mentioned again. The break between money and true charity, hinted at only through the absence of specific details in *Felix Holt*, is made absolute in this novel. Dorothea explicitly makes a moral, rather than economic, improvement in Will Ladislaw's life. The "Finale" chapter reports only that "many who knew her thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another" and that "the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive" (Finale.836, 838). Dorothea's economic influence on Will is deliberately silenced in favor of her "diffusive" moral effect on the world. While we can read Eliot's exclusive choice of morality as an essentially anti-feminist gesture, it also seems to be the only moral claim that she can possibly make. The novel has already proved that money is too complicated and corrupting for any unmediated relationship with wealth, and the only way to deal with the moral problems it brings is to place the emphasis of the ending elsewhere.

Will Ladislaw's rejection of Bulstrode's money allows a more clear and concrete example. The money offered to Will, after all, is genuinely immoral. His grandparents earned their fortune, now in the hands of Bulstrode, as dealers in stolen goods, and Will's mother fled the family (another positively portrayed monetary renunciation) when she realized the truth. Will's natural "impulse . . . to reject the disclosed connection" to Bulstrode begins even before the monetary offer occurs (61.622), and the revulsion only strengthens as the scene continues. On the surface, Bulstrode's proposal appears quite logical. He informs Will that he would like to "make amends for the deprivation which befell your mother" by giving him money "from a store which would have probably already been yours had your grandmother been certain of your mother's existence" (61.622). Even though Will has a right to the money, however, he recognizes the moral impossibility of acceptance. He asks Bulstrode, cuttingly, "Was that business [in which the fortune was made]—or was it not—a thoroughly dishonourable one—nay, one that, if its nature had been made public, might have ranked those concerned in it with thieves and convicts?" (61.623). Bulstrode objects to the questions, which provokes Will to give the clearest statement about money contained in the novel:

It is eminently mine to ask such questions, when I have to decide whether I will have transactions with you and accept your money. My unblemished honour is important to me. It is important to me to have no stain on my birth and connections. And now I find there is a stain which I can't help. My mother felt it, and tried to keep as clear of it as she could,

and so will I. You shall keep your ill-gotten money. If I had any fortune of my own, I would willingly pay it to any one who could disprove what you have told me. What I have to thank you for is that you kept the money till now, when I can refuse it. It ought to lie with a man's self that he is a gentleman. (61.624)

Will's speech comes directly to the crux of all Eliot's attempts to moralize about economic matters. Money is a potential, or even probable, "taint." We should be careful from whom, and for what reasons, we accept it, because it has an infinite power to blemish our characters and control our future actions. The highest moral act, in the terms presented here, is to refuse money, even when you are poor, because it comes from an impure source. Economists would, of course, disagree: in economic terms money is always and only a unit of value. Eliot patently rejects such assertions of neutrality, implying that the economic system covers over a fundamental corruption.

Once we recognize the contagion transmitted with ill-gotten, or indeed almost all, money in these two novels, the renunciations of Eliot's heroines make perfect sense. In the moral frame of her novels, giving up money is both a high moral action and a preventative one. Esther sees that the Transome fortune carries only misery, and Dorothea recognizes that Casaubon's money, like her marriage, cannot bring her happiness. For both women, starting over again, with just enough money for subsistence, is a way of rendering oneself morally pure. The contagion of money, however, leaves Eliot with a major, unresolved problem. How should one be charitable, if money is not desirable? With so much

weight placed on being able to choose one's own economic status, monetary charity comes to seem like more of a curse than a blessing to its recipient. For this reason, all of Dorothea's charitable fervor turns into a diffuse moral influence. Eliot, finally, turns to a larger, more general, philosophy of charity than the one she adopted in *Felix Holt*. She ends *Middlemarch* with the proclamation that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent upon unhistoric acts" (Finale.838), rather than on grand gestures or great deeds. Somehow, Dorothea's "incalculably diffusive" morality and Felix Holt's vague desire to do "very small things" have more effect than even the largest monetary charity would have.

Epilogue

I would like to end with a few notes on the timeline of this project. The chapters here are presented in chronological order, but I am not suggesting a historical progression. Rather, the authors in this study have responded to a pressing social problem in particular ways. Their responses can, as presented here, suggest an evolution—from Smollett to Eliot, we see a more and more complete separation between the genres of literature and economics—but that lovely logical advancement is only true for these authors and in the texts that I discuss here. It is, in short, at least partly a coincidence. Trollope's Palliser novels alone, written from 1865-1876, destroy any suggestion that the difficult connection between literature and economics has been "solved" by George Eliot for anyone except herself. Nonetheless, some historical shifts are important for the purposes of this project. Only Dickens, for example, writes directly about the experience of life in a workhouse, because of the authors in this study only Dickens was actively concerned with poverty during the New Poor Law crisis. Similarly, only George Eliot witnessed the rise of mathematical economics. Even in the relatively compressed timeline of the nineteenth century literature I discussed, important shifts in the field occurred.

The second problem with assuming a chronological progression of the texts I have discussed is the obvious and extreme gap left by my non-discussion of Romanticism, the great literary event that occurred between Smollett and

Dickens. I omit the Romantics for two serious reasons. First, and most importantly, the Romantics have a quite different kind of relationship to economic theory than both their predecessors and their followers. On the one hand, authors like Percy Shelley passionately debated economics directly with its proponents, most notably in his case William Godwin, while Samuel Taylor Coleridge lashed out bitterly against Thomas Malthus. This kind of direct argument, while also fascinating, lies outside the more explicitly literary interests of this project. On the other hand, poets like Wordsworth have a nostalgia for the “old ways” of rural poverty that strictly limits engagement with modern economic crisis. Secondly, there is a serious problem of scale. Choosing one “representative” poet for a chapter on Romanticism would grossly distort any kind of historical argument. Wordsworth’s representation of poverty in “Michael” (1800) or “The Old Cumberland Beggar” (1800) is so radically different from, for example, William Blake’s in *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789) that selecting one or the other would be historically false. At the same time, a broad comparison of Romantic attitudes toward economics is an entire work on its own, and, indeed, has been done before by scholars better suited than I.¹ This project, ultimately, focuses on a particular economic crisis of representation in which the Romantics largely do not participate.

That said, I would like to touch briefly on a historical phenomenon of some note to the afterlife of this project: namely, the professionalization of charity and the rise of the welfare state. This topic is, of course, far too broad to include an

¹ See, for just one example, Marlene McLane’s *Romanticism and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).

extensive discussion in this epilogue, but I would like to offer some brief glimpses. The incredible drive of economics toward statistical science in the last decades of the nineteenth century removed the pressure from literature to oppose it. That is, as economics became more and more specialized and mathematical, it removed itself from topical competition with literature. Supply, demand, and productivity in the abstract are not generally the concerns of fiction. This separation allowed literature to respond to formerly economic problems with less anxiety about genre. Secondly, the British public became increasingly complaisant about professional charity. This is not to say that criticism didn't exist. Workhouse scandals rocked England as late as the *Pall Mall Gazette's* "A Night in a Workhouse" series in 1866, and the fantastic 1877 trial of Dr. Barnardo, leader of a children's rescue mission in East London, put philanthropy back, negatively, in newspapers.² Charity itself, though, became less of an issue. While the 1830s had seen intense debates about the right of the poor to aid, the 1870s and beyond saw debates focused almost exclusively on the best ways to perform that charity.

For an example of this shift in economic and charitable understanding, we need look no further than George Moore's most successful novel, *Esther Waters*, published in 1894. Unlike the other authors in this project, Moore's social pessimism, heavily influenced by the naturalist novels of Émile Zola, seems to know the exact place of charity. Esther lives in an economically tenuous world,

² For an excellent treatment of late-Victorian charity work, see Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004).

shifting from one low-paying job to another until finally marrying a professional bookmaker. William's health ultimately prevents him from taking his bets legally at the racecourse, and the public house he operates with Esther is closed when he is convicted of taking bets over the bar. On William's death, Esther is left as impoverished as she began. The novel's discourse of gambling operates both as a direct account of the realities of horse racing and as a metaphor for the monetary instability of the poor. Gambling is condemned as a social corrupter. Readers see men and women lie and steal to obtain money for betting, while their families nearly starve. The Barfield family, for whom Esther first works as a servant, loses nearly their entire estate because of horse racing. But Moore also notes that the gambling has other, more approved, counterparts, and a desirable economic role. William bitterly notes that the rich can have their betting any way they like it, "Then the betting that's done at Tattersall's and the Albert Club, what is the difference? The Stock Exchange, too, where thousands is betted every day. . . . Why shouldn't the poor man 'ave his 'alf-crown's worth of excitement? The rich man can have his thousand pounds' worth whenever he pleases."³ To William, the stock exchange itself is just another form of gambling, limited exclusively to the wealthy. Capitalism at its very core is nothing more than an elaborate betting system. Meanwhile the poor have nothing to look forward to, besides the outcome of the races: "Their only pleasure is a bet. When they've one on they've something to look forward to; whether they win or lose they 'as their money's worth" (306). William thus wants to shift the moral terms of gambling. The

³ George Moore, *Esther Waters*, ed. David Skilton (1894; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995) 305-306. Subsequent citations in text.

excitement of the races is a purchasable form of hope, the one thing that can't be had in more traditional markets.

The novel, ultimately, can't back this attempted economic shift. In fact, it ambivalently emphasizes that there is little hope of changing anything about money and its distribution. Moore caustically portrays an anti-gambling judge as a drunkard and gambler himself, who nonetheless spouts morality from his bench. He solemnly declares that gambling "springs forth from the desire to obtain wealth without work, in other words, without payment; work, whether in the past or the present, is the natural payment for wealth, and any wealth that is obtained without work is in a measure a fraud committed upon the community" (330). The judge, in terms borrowed directly from the older political economists, imagines money as a closed system—one works for wages, which are then saved and turned to wealth. Gambling is not "work," and is thus not a viable source of wealth. The novel has prepared us to see this proposal as a bitter fraud. Esther works brutal jobs to keep her son alive, but never sees any profit or savings. William, meanwhile, works so hard to keep his gambling business afloat that he catches tuberculosis and dies. While we thus might expect the novel's working-class characters to dispute the judge's truism, readers instead find his words mirrored by the dying William. On his deathbed he tells Esther, "No good comes of money that you don't work for" (372). Esther responds that "I'm sure you worked enough for what you won" (372) but William can only repeat the judge's dictum once more.

Moore ends his novel exactly where it begins, with Esther returning, in

identical language, to the Barfield manor as a servant. Her return to the now impoverished house signals the bleakness of Moore's economic landscape. Esther, despite her goodness and her dedication to hard work, has resolutely failed to break free of her legacy of poverty. She has worked her entire life to save her son, whose poverty forces him to join the army and become "mere food for powder and shot" (394). In this atmosphere of grim realism, though, Moore can give a portrait of charity far different from the other authors in this study. Esther, unlike the other heroines I have discussed, is the *recipient* of charity, not the giver, and her bland acceptance of such help draws a radically different picture of the charitable world. Esther, turned out on the streets with an infant, sees the workhouse as a place of terror: "If once she entered the workhouse she would remain there. She and her child paupers for ever" (159). She enters the workhouse anyway, and suffers little harm from it. The novel sees her entrance there as so matter-of-fact that it merits no further commentary. Other charities are more positively portrayed. Esther finds the lying-in hospital, run by charitable subscription, to be unsympathetic to the differences between its cases, but the care she receives there is both kind and medically advanced. Her mother, who refuses to enter the hospital, dies in childbirth instead. William, too, is treated very well by the charity hospital for tuberculosis patients. Most importantly, though, these charitable institutions are treated as facts, and Moore shows almost no private charity. There is no moral debate about taking money from an individual, because large philanthropic bodies seamlessly provide what is necessary. Only once, before she enters the workhouse the first time, does

Esther ever consider asking for money from an individual, and even then she chooses not to. *Esther Waters* shows us that, by 1894, public charity is imagined as a fundamental part of the lives of the poor. Given the novel's despair of social mobility, society must structure itself in such a way that the poor have these safe-havens. Charity isn't optional or unethical, or even worthy of debate; it is simply necessary.

What I have hoped to illustrate in this project is, thus, a series of snapshots of uncertainty. Mid-Victorian literature, following in the emotionally turbulent legacy of the eighteenth century, wanted to both solve social problems and to protect its genre from others that discussed the same problems. The presence of a shifting morality on one hand and political economy on the other made this an incredible challenge. And these questions linger today. While the removal of economics to mathematical models helped literature to sidestep problems of genre, the ethical problems of charity have proven harder to solve. We live with this legacy in what is cheekily known as "liberal guilt"—how do we both believe deeply in social equality and live with financial privilege? How do we reconcile personal freedom with the need for large social institutions? What do we do when someone on the street asks for our spare change? Each of the authors I have discussed has answered these questions in his or her own way, but each one has floundered at the exact point of specificity. While literature wants to solve the problem of personal obligation, it can only suggest possibilities to its readers. And, indeed, a specific, didactic message would never resonate as strongly through time as Dorothea Brooke's wail of frustration that "there is no

sorrow I have thought more about than that — to love what is great, and try to reach it, and yet to fail.”⁴

⁴ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed Rosemary Ashton (1871; London: Penguin Books, 2003) 75.764.

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