

FEELING LIKE A CLERK:
THE EMOTIONAL ECONOMY OF THE LOWER MIDDLE CLASS IN
DICKENS, GISSING, AND WELLS

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Feeling Like a Clerk explores the emotional life of class status, what class identity feels like and how it is constituted through the emotions. It focuses specifically on the lower middle class, the clerk class, in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century and illustrates how a particular set of social emotions give the identity of the clerk its shape and definition within a larger set of prescriptions, prohibitions, and influences during the Victorian period. The study suggests that the “rise of the clerk” in nineteenth-century Britain can be used as a model for understanding the modern complexities of class as lived experience. This is particularly true in the case of the great fiction writers of bourgeois life, whose texts represent various forms of upward and downward mobility as they themselves climbed out of the cramped parsons’ cottages, dingy rented rooms, and stuffy offices of the lower middle class. The male clerk, in particular, was subject to a bewildering unpredictability when it came the uneven distribution of emotions in the popular imagination. Provisional forms of masculinity and puzzling subordinate responses to social imperatives are the result of these emotional inequities. When given the opportunity to develop refined sensibilities that mark him as bourgeois, the lower middle-class man confronts the fact that his new companions only make him feel class more acutely, and he often yearns for a home to which he cannot return. By paying attention to these contradictions, *Feeling Like a Clerk* uncovers a moment when class becomes

more deeply psychological and internalized, when new, more diminutive emotions take the place of the classic passions of class struggle.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE CLERK

*Emotions are located among rather than within
people.*

— Adela Pinch

In a piece written in 2008 for the The New Yorker, the British novelist Zadie Smith writes of her father:

his mother had been in service, his father worked on the buses; he passed the grammar-school exam, but the cost of the uniform for the secondary school was outside the family's budget. . . . At thirteen, he left school to fill the inkwells in a lawyer's office, to set the fire in the grate. At seventeen, he went to fight in the Second World War. In the fifties, he got married, started a family, and, finding that he had a good eye, tried commercial photography. His pictures were good, he set up a little studio, but then his business partner stiffed him in some dark plot of which he would never speak. His marriage ended. *And here's the kicker:* in the sixties, he

had to start all over again, as a salesman. In the seventies, he married for the second time. A new lot of children arrived. The high point was the late eighties, a senior salesman now at a direct-mail company — selling paper, just like David Brent.¹ Finally, the (lower) middle rung! A maisonette, half a garden, a sweet deal with a local piano teacher who taught Ben and me together, two bums squeezed onto the piano stool. But it didn't last, and the second marriage didn't last, and he ended up with little more than he had started with. (88)

"Finally," Smith writes, "the (lower) middle rung!" This is a typical story of lower middle-class life, of repeated possibility and failure, of striving to become part of a class whose financial stability and sense of entitlement ultimately remain just out of reach. The essential meaning of the lower middle class is captured with special care in Smith's use of parenthesis around "lower." Her father, Harvey, was primarily middle class. He cherished the same middle-class values, pursued the same aspirations, sought the same status for his children. But the diminutive character of the parenthesis signals the larger reality of his predicament.

Certainly, by middle age Harvey was living a daily life that looked middle class, but underneath this successful veneer were emotions and beliefs that could never be wholly transformed by his class mobility. The ostensible subject of Smith's piece is her father's philosophy, which he derived from being something she calls a "comedy snob." What set him apart from others, what gave

¹ The main character of a British TV show, the docu-comedy The Office (2001-03).

him a claim to be unique, special, and deserving of class mobility, was his discerning approach to comedy. He disdained broad humor or jokes played for cheap laughs. Instead, he favored black comedy, dark expressions of cosmic despair, aggressive comedy that walked a tightrope between humor and hostility — comedy “structured like an iceberg, with all the greater satisfactions fathoms under water, while the surface pleasure of the joke is somehow the least of it”:

Harvey’s idea of a good time was the BBC sitcom “Steptoe and Son,” the grim tale of two mutually antagonistic “rag-and-bone men” who pass their days in a Beckettian pile of rubbish, tearing psychological strips off each other. Each episode ends with the son (a philosopher manqué, who considers himself trapped in the filthy family business) submitting to a funk of existential despair.

The sadder and more desolate the comedy, the better Harvey liked it. (83)

Embedded in this snobbery are Harvey’s intellectual pretensions as well, a sensibility and taste for sophisticated emotional and cerebral experiences. They produce a distinction, both in his own self-image and in his relation with others, that keeps him from sinking into the masses. But there is more to this snobbery than its sense of distinction. Dark comedy expresses the existential tangle all arrivistes find themselves in. The refrain of Smith’s piece is the phrase “*Can’t go home, can’t leave home*,” which is the dilemma of in-between-ness underlying class mobility, blocking both a return to one’s origins and the seamless embodiment of a new status. People may develop refined sensibilities or

sophisticated understandings that mark them as irrevocably middle class, but there is “a natural flip side, a typically British resentment for those very people his sensibilities have moved him toward,” those “who have made him feel his class in the first place” (Smith 87).² Harvey’s passion for pessimistic comedy expressed his bitter laughter in the face of this paradoxical position — laughter that enduringly made him distinct but that persistently reaffirmed his uneasy sense of displacement.

Individuals like Harvey have something to tell us about the history of class, our own contemporary experience of class, and the role of class and gender in literary history. From a purely historical perspective, the urbanized lower middle class is distinctly modern, a nineteenth- and twentieth-century by-product of the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century and a class that swells in tandem with the increasing hegemony of capitalism. The lower middle class — and especially its male “clerks,” I’ll be suggesting — has historical value as a subject in its own right. Since lower middle-class identity is by its nature conflicted and paradoxical, it may also suggest a model for understanding the modern complexities of class as lived experience. Indeed, the lower middle class, Rita Felski has argued, is a group whose culture and *habitus* have become the standard for us all. “[A]s older forms of class polarization and class identification begin to dissolve,” she writes, “the lives of ever more individuals in the industrialized West are defined by occupations, lifestyles, and attitudes traditionally associated with the lower middle class” (34). But this history does

² See Jameson, “Authentic Resentment,” The Political Unconscious (176-97).

not only tell us something about the “contemporary meanings of class” (44). The experience of members of the lower middle class is much like that of the modern individual that Franco Moretti uncovers in the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman*. As Moretti writes: “The modern individual is marked from birth by [a] heterogeneity of occupations, by a perennial disequilibrium of his symbolic and emotive investments. To become an individual in the full sense of the word, he will have to learn how to master this multiplicity, and how to keep it from becoming a wearying disharmony” (39).³ And so developing histories of the class should have a certain urgency.

The lower middle class is also essential to any history of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction. Terry Eagleton suggests that the breadth and scope of canonical British literature may owe something to the complex experience of authors from the lower middle class: “many of the most eminent names of English literature have been socially ambiguous . . . caught painfully between rulers and ruled, and so able . . . to look both ways” (“Company Man” n. p.). “The Brontë sisters,” he observes,

were the daughters of a down-at-heels provincial parson; Charles Dickens was the son of a feckless clerk in the Admiralty; George Eliot’s father was a provincial farm steward; Thomas Hardy was the son of a small-time rural builder and alternated standard

³ The difference between the lower middle-class man and the full modern individual, however, is the likelihood that the lower middle-class man *will* become a “wearying disharmony.”

English with the local dialect. D. H. Lawrence's father was a coal miner, while his mother had genteel proclivities. (n. p.)

Locating the lower middle class in the history of literature and the novel therefore also has a value of its own.

The phenomenon of class mobility in the nineteenth century felt different than it did for Harvey, without as much quasi-modernist difficulty, but its ambiguities should look familiar in the twenty-first-century. As Harvey's example demonstrates, class constitutes a *habitus* that is both economic and cultural (see Bourdieu, 170-74). And what we take to be the economic and the cultural are often inverted, creating seemingly anomalous categories, such as bohemian, intelligentsia, avant-garde, cosmopolitan, and, I would argue, in the nineteenth-century, culturally sophisticated clerks, all of which simultaneously blur and buttress the middle class: they erase recognizable boundaries between economic classes, which obscures their real differences. Indeed, given the competing claims of a myriad of social identities and cultural affinities and the often-blurred boundaries between those who labor and those who own — especially in the U.S. — class in the traditional sense of “consciousness” or “ideology” increasingly fails to critically comprehend the class structure. The guiding principle of this study is that the lower middle class can help us understand class experience and its effects in a post-industrial era, because this ill-defined social group best embodies the paradoxes, confusions, aspirations, and dead-ends characteristic of social and economic upheaval in a Western, capitalist version of class society.

As with Harvey's unpredictable experience, financial uplift did not always refashion the emotions or reward taste or even revitalize pleasure; indeed, emotional and intellectual sophistication were sometimes at cross-purposes with class mobility. Therefore, when a lower middle-class man sought — or simply aspired to — mobility, professional ambition was only part of the solution. Changes in outlook, life-styles, tastes, and values were also necessary. Along with these changes were also emotional transformations that signaled successful mobility, such as more nuanced forms of empathy or the modulation of class resentment.

But the representation of emotions, Daniel Gross charges, has long been subject to its own shadow economy, a “political economy of emotion”: the dispersal and allotment of emotions based on social hierarchies and the principle of scarcity. Generally speaking, in such an economy, the more specific and cognitive a feeling is the more likely it is embodied in an upper class or socially deserving character or group; conversely, the lower one moves on the social scale the more emotions become primary and involuntary. There is, as it were, an invisible hand for our emotions, distributing them as adroitly as money itself is distributed.

Many Victorian writers disparaged classic political economy for being inhumane and overly rationalized, but they were less averse to reproducing the inequities of political economy in their representation of emotions. Indeed, lower middle-class writers, such as Charles Dickens, George Gissing, and H. G. Wells, use emotions as a means to distinguish their modest heroes from the

masses. Their characters frequently resist an imposed class identity, and as such exhibit emotions that mark them as more sophisticated and nuanced (even more human) than others in their economic class. In creating such distinctions, writers commit themselves to a political economy of emotion that reproduces and naturalizes social inequities, even while they inveigh against the cruelty of the class system. The paradox for them, as it is often for us, was that they simultaneously saw emotions as involuntary and reactive, overwhelmingly passionate, while, at the same time, reproduced the fact that emotions are enmeshed in deep systems of regulation and responsive to cultivation and self-fashioning.⁴ This is further complicated, as Sianne Ngai argues in Ugly Feelings, by modernity, which engenders a “new set of feelings — ones less powerful than the classical political passions” (5). It is not surprising, then, that these Victorian writers help us trace a period when class becomes more deeply psychological and tractable, when new, more diminutive emotions take the place of the primary passions.⁵

The Modernity of Emotion

The emotional economy that I have sketched can be located within a variety of historical forces that have influenced a shift in modernity from passion

⁴ Even pleasure, as Joseph Litvak notes in his study of cosmopolitanism, is subject to scarcity: we live “in a cultural order intensively involved in the regulation and distribution of *sufficient* pleasure, in making sure that no one, not even the rich and famous, takes more pleasure than he or she ‘deserves’” (7). See also the description of “emotional regimes” in Reddy.

⁵ See my discussion below of Ngai’s Ugly Feelings. For comparison, see Fisher’s case for the necessity of strong emotion in The Vehement Passions.

to emotion. For example, we can trace a path in the transformation of moral sentiments into emotional psychologies. In her study of the history of emotion in Dickens, Maura Spiegel argues

that between the publication of Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments and Darwin's The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animal, a significant epistemological shift occurred in the study of feeling. When psychology passed, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the hands of theologians and philosophers to those of biologists, physicians and social scientists, it followed a well-beaten path, a path towards a discourse intended to break free of moral purposes, and a terminology conceived of as primarily descriptive, as "scientifically neutral," a language of the emotions not the moral sentiments. (3-4)

"But," Spiegel observes, "the nineteenth century is also the century of the virtuous and dutiful sentiments, of *sincerity, earnestness, humility, modesty*, etc." (Spiegel 27), which are not at all morally neutral. The burden on the individual became much greater as a result. What had been ways of being one could model as a "mode of behavior" became something understood as inborn and immutable (Spiegel 5). To be *good*, then, it was necessary not only to do good but to *feel* goodness as well. In the best of circumstances, the good people will therefore have instinctually good emotions (Oliver Twist) and villains instinctually bad ones (Fagin). But in nineteenth-century characters increasingly don't. Spiegel

shows how Dickens, for instance, strains to keep these distinctions intact, sometimes psychologizing virtuous emotions and other times creating a natural teleology for them.

The split between instinct and psychology is often framed in the distinction between passion (generally involuntary) and emotion (marked by varying degrees of cognition). In American Cool, Peter Stearns argues that the Victorians relied on passion far more than their twentieth-century heirs to make sense of the world. Stearns has an investment in positing passionate Victorians as a foil to the cool of his twentieth-century Americans, but his thesis does identify an often unacknowledged aspect of Victorian life. We must recognize, he claims,

the ways in which Victorians promoted and accepted fervor. The special commitment to intensity is also explained by the causes underlying Victorian emotionology, including not only the need to cement family bonds in an uncertain environment but also the effort to find an equivalent for religious emotion and motivation. . . . [E]ven as Victorians accepted constraints in many aspects of life, they welcomed, even depended upon, emotional depth. From boyhood challenge to adult grief, they assumed strong passions.

(94)

We can readily identify various aspects of the passion for passion, from the example of Tennyson's poetry to sensation fiction to the popularity of melodrama, but in the course of the century, Stearns claims, "the combination of

economic and familial functionalism and the larger innovations that supported Victorian culture began to unravel. New economic forms redefined functional emotions. Cultural changes further pointed this redefinition in the direction of growing hostility to intense emotional experience” (193). The clerk class, I propose, because its very existence was defined by its occupation of new economic forms and the persistent expectation of upward mobility, was in the vanguard of developing “functional emotions.” An argument against the “functional emotions” was not always so obvious. The political economist Albert O. Hirschman argues that capitalism’s regulating effect on the emotions was eagerly anticipated by eighteenth-century political philosophers, who saw new economic forms as a welcome check on unruly, pleasure-seeking passions. David Hume, for example, writes in “Of Interest”: “It is an infallible consequence of all industrious professions, to . . . make the love of gain prevail over the love of pleasure” (qtd. Hirschman 66). “[C]apitalism,” Hirschman pronounces, “would activate some benign human proclivities at the expense of some malignant ones — because of the expectation that, in this way, it would repress and perhaps atrophy the more destructive and disastrous components of human nature” (66). Hirschman, therefore, connects the embrace of economic individualism to the general desire to improve human nature.

Now, like Stearns, we are prone to mourn the passing of the passions, a nostalgia that grows in inverse proportion to the functionalism of socioeconomic roles and the circumscribed emotions they encourage. Not only has our class experience become more deeply psychological and our place in social

hierarchies more unpredictable, we are called upon to manage our emotions in more nuanced and socially astute ways. Class struggle itself, according to Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, is played out on a new psychological and emotional terrain. In their 1970s study of the “hidden injuries of class” in the United States they argue that overt political class struggle is increasingly difficult to discern because class experience has been transformed into a phenomenon that involves individual psychological conflicts regarding economic opportunity and social mobility (25-26). These internal conflicts, what we might call the internalization of class difference, are manifest in emotions such as shame, guilt, ambivalence, inadequacy, and dissatisfaction. Class difference in such a situation is no longer simply a matter of social position and function but also how selves and personal emotions fit in the social order. Status is measured within the individual as much as without: in a “post-industrial society inner intellectual development becomes the direct basis for economic growth,” wherein “social differences can now appear as questions of character, of moral resolve, will, and competence” (258; see also Foote 66; Perkin). Self-improvement rather than social improvement is the instrument by which people gain distinction. Thus, more than anything, the subjects interviewed in Sennett’s and Cobb’s study fear mediocrity and the sense of just getting by, for these debilitating feelings signal a failure of the self. At the same time, because the individual is responsible for his or her own failures in such a social system, feelings of inadequacy and shame are the means by which the class order maintains itself. As an outgrowth of this modernity, the clerk class was expected to embody the regulating benefits of a

capitalist system, to manage its emotions in more nuanced and socially astute ways. “Members of the lower middle class in Britain,” the historian Peter Bailey observes, “were in the front line of engagement with modernity. Its men and women were both agents and casualties of modern mobility in its many forms and disjunctions” (288).

Embedded in the historical trajectory of this emotional dynamic, the emotional economies represented in the fiction of Dickens, Gissing, and Wells are significant both for their conflict and for the desire to ameliorate discord. The reality of emotional management often fell short of the ideal, and these authors were unmistakably aware of the difficulties such a social imperative might precipitate. Dickens’s novels present some of the most striking distinctions between passions and emotions, such as the contrast between the narcissistic furies of *Bradley Headstone* and the quiet subordination of *John Harmon*, or the seething resentment of *Heep* and the plodding decency of *Copperfield*. In most cases Dickens reproduces an economy of scarcity, in which material wealth is accompanied by the rewards of emotional regulation and *proper* feeling, which in turn produces a stance of disinterest that is common in those who are successfully mobile (Robbins 32-33).⁶

More acutely aware of their own class insecurity, perhaps, Gissing and Wells display less confidence in their characters’ ability to achieve the right

⁶ Spiegel claims that Dickens’s early novels are devoted to the “sympathetic school,” which would see villainous behavior as rational and self-interested and benevolent impulses as “irrational and involuntary” (95). As she shows, reproducing such a model at the same time as new psychologies of modernity influence his work produces a variety of narrative difficulties for Dickens.

emotional distinction. They were more aware, as Bruce Robbins observes, that “Someone has to die in order for someone else to rise” (55). But both writers are susceptible to an emotional economy. Heroes like Gissing’s Godwin Peak or Wells’s Lewisham are studies in emotional regulation, but unlike Dickens’s heroes they also exhibit its undoing. Their regulation fails, in most cases, to produce the seemingly classless, proper feelings of the upper middle classes. Consequently, Gissing and Wells also seem drawn to species of purposeless emotions, such as in the passionate sociability of Nancy Lord or the reckless behavior of Mr. Polly, that are anti-heroic and less goal-oriented. Gissing’s explicit ambivalence toward Lord suggests that he saw such emotions as crudely debased and low class. But these “nonstrategic affects,” as Ngai would call them, seem to offer an alternative to both purely functional emotion and terrifyingly involuntary passion. Ngai suggests that this new species of emotions were “characterized by weak intentionality and characteristics of the situation of scriveners,” but that they expressed “restricted” or “suspended” agency (12). All three authors in this study are caught between the belief that proper emotion should occur naturally and the awareness of a cultural imperative to manage conflicting emotion, but to varying degrees they are also interested in those figures who fail to inhabit the right, distinctive emotions and who, at the same time, remain highly aware of their own lack of proper emotions and social agency. In this project’s movement from Dickens at mid century to Wells at the turn of the century, we witness the struggles and compromises with the inequities and rewards of an emotional economy.

A Phenomenology of Classed Emotion

The historian Arno Mayer has described the lower middle class as “enigmatic” (410), little-studied and even less understood.⁷ My attention to the emotions attempts to capture the elusive character of the lower middle class and, in doing so, to elaborate a subjective approach to class.⁸ Above all, I have made an effort to tilt toward the experiencing subjectivities themselves. The example of Roland Barthes is particularly apt for demonstrating what I mean in this regard. In his early cultural studies approach, Barthes’ fine-grained analyses work to engage with and express the emotions and subjectivities in the individual’s experience of culture. But there is often a bias in his work for seeing cultural flows as asymmetrical, for making too many assumptions about their consumption. For instance:

The bourgeoisie is constantly absorbing into its ideology a whole section of humanity which does not have its basic status and cannot live up to it except in imagination, that is, at the cost of an immobilization and an impoverishment of consciousness. By spreading its representations over a whole catalogue of collective images for petit-bourgeois use, the bourgeoisie countenances the

⁷ The historian Peter Bailey provides a thorough overview of past work on the lower middle class in his 1999 essay, “White Collars, Gray Lives?” The key text for historiography continues to be the 1977 edited collection, The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914, edited by Geoffrey Crossick.

⁸ I go into more detail about issues regarding class analysis below. In a nutshell, though, the British historian E. P. Thompson is an important starting point for a subjective methodology that is focused on consciousnesses and experiences rather than more objective relations. See the summary in Crompton 40-43.

illusory lack of differentiation of the social classes: it is as from the moment when a typist earning twenty pounds a month *recognizes herself* in the big wedding of the bourgeoisie that bourgeois ex-nomination achieves its full effect. (141)

In such an account, it is the bourgeoisie that has agency; the typist is merely a victim, the recipient of ideology. To be sure, the bourgeoisie has an investment in “ex-nomination,” but, then, so does the typist. What thoughts, emotions, or self-knowledge, I want to ask, are at play in her identification with the bourgeoisie, and to what degree, really, does she lose sight of class difference?

Yet, simply instituting more symmetry in a consumption model does not tell enough about the typist.⁹ How do we come closer to understanding her affinities, desires, and political identity? Carolyn Steedman’s argument for subjective histories in her critical biography, Landscape for a Good Woman, is targeted toward understanding what this typist’s experience might be. Steedman’s central assertion in this memoir of her mother — a Lancashire weaver’s daughter who became a stylish, lower middle-class Tory — and her own coming of age is that it is a disservice to working-class and, indeed, lower middle-class individuals to give them the “psychological sameness” of a fixed class consciousness. Not only are subjectivities absent in most accounts of class identity, people often inhabit the interstices and borderlands of one class or another in a manner that exceeds the common interpretive frames for class

⁹ Critical postcolonial discourse is much more comfortable talking about asymmetrical flows between dominant and subordinate. The corrosive effect of “mimicry,” for instance, on cultural authority is one such way of reconceptualizing these asymmetries. See Bhabha, especially his chapter “Of Mimicry and Man.”

analysis.¹⁰ As Steedman contends, her memoir is “about people wanting . . . things, and the structures of political thought that have labeled this wanting as wrong” (23). She asserts that the psychology of the desire for things and the sense of exclusion that can accompany it are not only forms of *habitus* that express normative imperatives, but a political language from which scholars avert their gaze: “within the framework of conventional understanding, the desire for a New Look skirt cannot be seen as a political want, let alone a proper one” (121). In other words, the intricacies of consumption do more than outline distinctive life-style identities. According to Steedman, individuals’ consumption and desire for things should be seen as “attempts to alter a world that has produced them in states of unfilled desire” (123).¹¹

Even shame, which is usually seen as a normative emotion that enforces social distinctions, can create forms of agency. In On Shame and the Search for Identity, Helen Merrell Lynd suggests that shame can be something of a stealth channel to self-recognition and social critique. “Shame,” she observes, “while touched off by a specific, often outwardly trivial, occurrence initially felt as revealing one’s inadequacies, may also confront one with unrecognized desires of one’s own and the inadequacy of society in giving expression to these desires” (231). Pamela Fox argues that Lynd’s materialist and historicist methodology

¹⁰ Regina Gagnier’s Subjectivities is a notable exception, but as Ying Lee points out Gagnier is susceptible to measuring working-class subjectivity against a bourgeois model.

¹¹ Although Steedman does not cite the work of Walter Benjamin, his approach to commodities and the “culture industry” is echoed in her thesis. As Susan Buck-Morss writes of Benjamin’s “Arcades Project,” “it takes mass culture seriously not merely as the source of the phantasmagoria of false consciousness, but as the source of collective energy to overcome it” (253).

describes shame as an experience that makes “Self-awareness and confidence become possible because in the process of revealing the shame of being shamed, often one is exposing oppressive societal norms and values as well” (16). To study the irregular subjectivities of the lower middle class, in particular, means curtailing the inclination to push such elusive feelings aside.

Emotions are not purely neurological (as many cognitive scientists assert), nor do they produce autonomous subjectivities (as some philosophers have tried to demonstrate).¹² Instead, as recent work on the historicity and social nature of emotions has demonstrated, they are rooted in social environments that prod, sanction, and censure what we feel, making emotions historical and contingent. To be sure, there are affects and feelings that deserve to be understood as universal and hard-wired, but secondary emotions (beyond hunger or physical pain, for example) — indeed, what we often mean when we talk about feelings — are “located among rather than within people,” as Adela Pinch puts it.¹³ It is common to treat emotions, which are associated with the mind, as separate from drives or affects, which are associated with the body.¹⁴ More accurately, the differences between emotion and affect lie along a continuum and the distinctions between may be less helpful than they at first appear. As Eve Sedgwick notes, in Silvan Tomkins’s post-Freudian view

¹² See Gross on the inability of cognitive science to describe social emotions accurately, even though such scientists claim otherwise; also Reddy.

¹³ Pinch asks “whether it is possible to question the notion that, in Paul Ricoeur’s phrase, an emotion must always be my own” (14). I am inclined to push this question further: Is an emotion ever really our own? On the distinction between affects and emotions, see Ngai 24-24; Terada 4-11.

¹⁴ In her recent study *Feeling in Theory*, Rei Terada posits “feelings” as a middle ground between physiological “affects” and psychological “emotions” (4).

the difference between [them] is not that one is more rooted in the body than the other; [Tomkins] understands both to be thoroughly embodied, as well as more or less intensively interwoven with cognitive processes. The difference instead is between more specific and more general, more and less constrained: between biologically based systems that are less and more capable of generating complexity or degrees of freedom. (18)

Thus, emotions are merely those feelings that generate more complexity and the possibility for agency. From the standpoint of philosophy, the cognitivist Robert Solomon argues that emotions should be seen phenomenologically, as constituted through cultural interpretation¹⁵: “An emotion is a system of concepts, beliefs, attitudes, and desires, virtually all of which are context-bound, historically developed, and culture-specific” (“Emotions” 87). Matthew Ratcliffe writes that “Solomon stresses that an emotion is not an *internal*, psychological state that *reaches out* to hook up with an *external* and distinct Intentional object. . . . [H]e claims that emotions are structures through which the world is experienced. They do not *connect with* but, rather, *constitute* their objects. . . . Hence emotions cannot be analysed apart from their objects” (n. p.). In short, emotions help to *make* the worlds of our experiential lives.

¹⁵ The cognitivists — essentially philosophers of emotion — range from claiming emotions are beliefs (Nussbaum) to seeing them as judgments (Solomon). In a recent essay, “Emotions, Thoughts, and Feelings,” Solomon downplays the judgmental nature of his previous claims; in their place, he asserts, “emotions are subjective engagements in the world,” “a way of cognitively grappling with the world” (Not Passion’s Slave 77).

Emotions, therefore, have a kind of materiality of their own, a phenomenology that is constitutive of identity, experience, and belief. A number of other figures, such as Sedgwick, William Reddy, and Brian Massumi, also argue that emotions cannot be adequately analyzed in terms of subject/object, internal/external, or any other dualistic distinctions.¹⁶ In working toward an understanding of nonessentialized affects, these scholars consider embodiment as capable of contingency and indeterminacy and emotion as an unpredictable but very material product of the body. This means, too, that the distinction between individual and social emotion is a false one. As a result, social entities, such as communities and other collective identities, which are generally understood to be a matter of social consensus, shared values, and economic structures, are also constituted by styles of emotional expression and management, the “emotional regimes,” as Reddy has described them, in place at any given historical moment. Social phenomena, in other words, are also emotional phenomena.

Cognitive science (via evolutionary biology) and studies of universal emotions tend to see only the determining effects of feelings. But, as Gross

¹⁶ Their studies are Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity, The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions, Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation, respectively. Other key texts in this regard include Rei Terada, Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject”; Sianne Ngai, Ugly Feelings; Adela Pinch, Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen; Julie Ellison, Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion; Lauren Berlant, The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture; and Sara Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion.

suggests, those working in the humanities, scholars more adept with the nuances of social life, are apt to develop theories of contingency even if they accept many of the physiological findings of cognitive science and its study of affects. Reddy, for example, talks of the “contortions” of emotional expression and Sedgwick of “deformations” in the individual’s experience of emotion. I am inclined to lean even further toward the cultural side of the debate. Gross concludes that

Emotions, whether in the context of eighteenth-century psychology or even in our own popular psychology, must be read as markers of social distinction rather than just as expressions of a human nature essentially shared by all. Instead of wondering perennially why it has taken so long to extend the range of human compassion to women, to slaves, to non-Europeans, to the poor, to the disabled, and so on, we would do better to track . . . how . . . particular communities are composed by the notion that they have a monopoly on that compassion. (178-79)

Culturally constructed monopolies on emotion occur in a variety of hierarchical forms. For instance, a more traditional Marxism is prone to favor a specific kind of heroic class rage, which like a radicalized political identity produces distinction in those expressing it and presupposes their monopoly on justified anger. Such individuals, in their own way, reproduce an uneven distribution of emotion. Even studies of social phenomena, such as those inspired by New Historicism or the “linguistic turn,” that have attempted to elude the deterministic nature of Marxian materialism through cultural analysis have

relied upon normative descriptions of emotions that replicate an emotional economy. This is one reason why Reddy sees an attentive study of emotion as a correcting influence on those who have tended to sweep up other, less recognizable sources of social identity into misleading discursive entities.

Ngai's Ugly Feelings is an important recent attempt to characterize the emotions of *everyone else*. Unlike Gross, whose description of an emotional economy is concerned with the most valorized emotions, Ngai is interested in the emotions that have been under-valued and overlooked, new feelings — “knotted or condensed ‘interpretations of predicaments,’” she writes — that are responsive to a particular late capitalist mode (3). Like the emotions in Steedman's memoir, these “interpretations of predicaments,” are more prosaic than we have been accustomed to observe — more impotent frustration, for example, than class rage. What were once emotions of resistance are now implicated in this system as well: the “classic ‘sentiments of detachment’ that once marked positions of radical alienation from the system of wage labor — anxiety, distraction, and cynicism — are now perversely integrated, from the factory to the office, into contemporary capitalist production itself” (4). The functional nature of affect in the current transnational mode of capitalism, however, does not mean that all emotional states, especially the “ugly feelings” of Ngai's analysis, have been completely absorbed by the post-Fordist organization of labor. Rather, she asserts, classic emotions of social action, such as anger and fear, are no longer as descriptive and effective as they once had been: “the nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls

upon a new set of feelings — ones less powerful than the classical political passions, though perhaps more suited, in their ambient, Bartlebyan, but still diagnostic nature, for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theorists of the commonwealth” (5). Although they do not necessarily “solve the dilemma of social powerlessness,” Ngai continues, they “diagnose it powerfully . . . preparing us for more instrumental or politically efficacious emotions” (353-54; see Gross 50).

Ngai’s invocation of Bartleby’s passivity is not an accident; as a clerk and a creature of profoundly opaque emotions, Bartleby exemplifies new forms of feelings and class experience in modernity. The British novelists I examine in this project express similarly “knotted emotions”: the muted outbursts of anger, the veiled feelings of frustration and shame, as well as the small rebellions, the occasional bravado, and the flights of fantastic ambition and self-aggrandizing narcissism that help to characterize the emotional lives of the lower middle class. Their clerks’ feelings are often impotent, diminutive, and nullified by larger social forces, typified by a version of subordination, in Dickens, that includes Wemmick in Great Expectations, whose ascetic subordination at work is compensated by the domestic refuge of his toy castle home, or the bumbling Reginald Wilfer, who is reluctant to claim a full name. Their emotions are opaque, seemingly spurning our attention. But the example of Bartleby — as Ngai suggests — indicates the potential for agency in passivity, the political nature, even, of vagueness and aimlessness, just as Steedman’s mother could express a political consciousness in the thwarted desire for things. Descriptions

of the nonproductive (or crude) emotional lives of the working classes, from agricultural and industrial laborers to servants, governesses, and clerks, continue to be a fundamental component of class hierarchy, supporting the view that emotions are a scarce resource. But instead of seeing the work of emotional economies, we are apt to interpret such one-dimensional characters as undeserving, seeing surrender and insensibility in their apathy and passivity.

Shame is not included in Ngai's study, although it too highlights agency and its lack. Work on its role as a primary social emotion at the core of personal identity should be given more importance for the way in which it produces a nondualistic sense of the self and the social by generating two paradoxical positions at once. According to Sedgwick, shame isolates at the same time as it reinforces one's connection to others: it moves simultaneously "toward painful individuation" and "toward uncontrollable relationality" (37).¹⁷ Sedgwick asks us to imagine a "half-insane, unwashed man" walking into a lecture hall and urinating in front of the room. While members of the class would try to avert their gaze, wishing they were elsewhere, each would be "unable to stanch the hemorrhage of painful identification with the misbehaving man" (37). Lower middle-class identity for the authors in this study shares a similarly doubled status. At its most corrosive, what is unique about lower middle-class identity is (shame-induced) class betrayal built into its core, the desire — derived perhaps from the negative definition of the class as in between, neither working class nor bourgeois — to deny the identity. On the other hand, class shame, the constant

¹⁷ Put another way, "Shame . . . is a communicative act. . . . It serves to mark the *boundaries* of identity, functions indeed as proof *of* an identity" (Sell 207).

reminder, for example, of being only “little” bourgeois, can be seen as foundational for a positive, shared identity that aids, as Fox puts it, “in the production of self-knowledge, community, and social critique” (16). At the very least, as Eagleton suggests, such a paradoxical position led to the literature of modernity that we now canonize.

The Lower Middle Class

The lower middle class presents unique problems as both a self-conscious identity and a historically meaningful category. In Geoffrey Crossick’s efforts to identify the emergence of a self-aware lower middle class, he finds that members of the class came to identify themselves mostly by what they were not: neither working class, nor bourgeois. Members of the lower middle class “were emphatically not working class, and felt stridently conscious of the fact,” and “shared a similar position of marginality to the established bourgeoisie” (Lower Middle Class 13). In addition to the negations at the very basis of its existence, the class was also something of a hybrid at the fault lines between the working class and the bourgeoisie, constituted by both wage earners and small-time owners of property. According to Crossick, the class could be said to include “two main groups. On the one hand was the classic petty bourgeoisie of shopkeepers and small businessmen, on the other the new white collar salaried occupations, most notably clerks but also managers, commercial travelers, schoolteachers and certain shop assistants” (12). Mayer suggests that we should

see the lower middle class as a group in transition, characterized by a series of waves.

[A] 'new' lower middle class of dependent clerks, technicians, and professionals expanded quickly and, in terms of numbers, more than compensated for the gradual withering of the 'old' strata of independent small producers, tradesmen, and peasants. This *second 'making of the lower middle class'* . . . was a by-product of the rapid development of industrial, commercial, and financial capitalism, which also stimulated the forced-draft expansion of the working class. By the last third of the nineteenth century, this second birth of the petite bourgeoisie coincided with and was stimulated by the swift growth of government bureaucracies, schools, hospitals, and armies. (417)

This diversity has led some scholars of class to question whether a single lower middle class existed. But whether the class consisted of property-owning shopkeepers, who were being particularly squeezed by the 1890s by "the concentration of capital" and "the rise of cartels and monopolies," or wage-dependent clerks, the various social groups at this socioeconomic level shared not only a similar average income, but they lived in similar situations and locations and held similar attitudes (15).¹⁸

¹⁸ The conflation of shopkeepers and white-collar wage earners, and the use of "clerks" as a shorthand for the lower middle class, are mildly distorting, but have little impact on my overall argument. Using "clerks" as a descriptive term for the lower middle class is also relatively common (see Price 97-98). In a very broad sense, a "clerk consciousness"

For this reason, in the following chapters I avoid the debates over the identity of those in transition between the lower middle and middle class (and the nascent professional class) by using *bourgeoisie* to identify a class perceived and represented as the white-collar wage-earners' *other*. Whether the bourgeoisie was formed around the fiction of a national "middle," as Dror Warhman claims (1-3), or the property-owning, "monied" men identified by Catherine Hall and Lenore Davidoff (19-20), is not as important as the awareness and feelings of those from the lower middle class — generally, "clerks" or the "clerk class" — who sense that they are on the wrong side of history, left outside looking in. It is the perception of Gissing's character Godwin Peak, afflicted with shame and thwarted ambition, on an unprecedented country drive with the land-owning Warricombes, who perfectly expresses "ex-nomination": "here was scope for the kindest emotions. . . . here he was humanized, made receptive of all human sympathies" (169). It is the difference between those who puzzle over their potential and cling to aspiration and those who possess possibility and enjoy entitlement. For reasons that will become evident, I think that even those who have successfully transitioned upward (either culturally or economically) carry the emotional traces of their class experience.

Nevertheless, historians have quantified aspects of lower middle-class identity. Geoffrey Crossick identifies the long nineteenth century as an era that witnessed "the emergence of the lower middle class." At a strictly empirical level

may even be useful for describing the general experience of uncertainty and transience in modern capitalist cultures.

and limiting ourselves to the wage-earning side of the lower middle class, the number of men and women employed as clerks changed rapidly during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as did the conditions in which they worked. At mid century, according to Gregory Anderson, the number of men employed as clerks stood at 130,000; in 1911, the number had grown to 739,000. Over the same period women employed in commercial occupations grew from 2,000 to 157,000 (Victorian Clerks 2). Given this rapid expansion, “clerks represented one of the largest and fastest-growing occupational groups in society” (Anderson, “Social Economy” 113).

The difficulty of producing a definition of the lower middle class is compounded by many of the common assumptions about its members. As a cultural figure the lower middle class has often been the object of ridicule and derision, which many have said are well deserved. Marx and Engels, as is well known, write in the Communist Manifesto that the *petite bourgeoisie* “are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history” (482). Since then, Rita Felski writes, *petit bourgeois* “has become an all-purpose term of abuse that is routinely applied to any form of conservative or backward thinking” (40). The class has been blamed for England’s “jingo hooliganism” of the 1890s, the emergence of Fascism, the rise to power of Hitler, right wing political movements such as McCarthyism in the U. S. and Thatcherism in Britain, and it is now said to comprise the so-called values voters of recent U. S. national

elections.¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, who found highbrow and lowbrow individuals authentically suited to their social stations, would write in her essay “Middlebrow”²⁰ that “Their brows are betwixt and between. . . . The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” (180).²¹ We find the same derision buried in dispassionate, scholarly discourse. Pierre Bourdieu writes in Distinction that “The petit bourgeois is a proletarian who makes himself small to become bourgeois. . . . With his petty cares and petty needs, the petit bourgeois is indeed a bourgeois ‘writ small.’ Even his bodily hexis, which expresses his whole objective relation to the social world, is that of a man who has to make himself small to pass through the strait gate which leads to the bourgeoisie” (338). Like other writers from the lower middle class, Bourdieu, the son of a postman, reserves particular scorn for the class of his origins (Fowler).²² This disdain

¹⁹ For a thorough description of the association of the lower middle class with conservative political beliefs, see Price. His analysis of the late Victorian and Edwardian period innovatively attempts to see jingoism as a response to class and status pressures.

²⁰ “Middlebrow” first appeared as a censorious term in 1925, according to the OED, to describe the tastes of a broad swath of the middle class.

²¹ The case of Woolf is, admittedly, somewhat more complex than this quote suggests. Sean Latham argues that she ushered in a form of snobbery that was more intellectual than class-based, making it an ideal alternative for the sons and daughters of the lower middle class who sought to escape their parents’ materialistic snobbery (63-73).

²² For a fascinating discussion of the influence of Bourdieu’s own personal upward mobility on his work, see Robbins, 210-19.



Figure 1. "The Superannuated Man"

derives, in part, from the class betrayal — and self-loathing — built into the very definition of being lower middle class, instilling shame and duplicity in many of its current and former members. Over time, the derogatory characteristics of the lower middle class — small-minded, status conscious, imitative, and

inauthentic — have come to dominate most literary and historical accounts of the *petit bourgeois*, leading some to ask whether “the absence of dynamic activity, the lack of cohesion and the quest for individual status” means that the class did not exist at all (Crossick, “Emergence” 52). As the modernist-era Marxist Christopher Caudwell once wrote, the lower middle class “has no traditions of its own and it does not adopt those of the workers, which it hates, but those of the bourgeoisie, which are without virtue for it did not help to create them” (77).

Moreover, from the desultory workdays of Trollope’s civil servants in The Three Clerks and the misery of Dickens’s Cratchit to alienated hack writers in Gissing’s New Grub Street and the stunted desires of Forster’s Leonard Bast, the labor of lower middle-class workers has not fared well in literary texts. But as Anderson points out, many of these earlier representations found the worst in what was then a rather discrete occupational field. At mid century clerks were more often than not valued employees, “employed in small workforces, on average no more than four including office lads and apprentices.” Anderson observes that “Although the spectrum of male clerkdom was very wide and hard-pressed Cratchit-like figures in dead-end jobs certainly existed, most clerks were superior in social background and educational attainment to other workers. . . . The technical and organizational realities of early offices ensured that such men filled positions of trust and could anticipate long careers ending in management” (White-blouse 3). By the turn of the century, however, “offices were getting larger and more complex” and the nature of the labor more routine,

requiring large numbers of cheaper clerks, including female typists (Anderson, White-blouse 5). The small offices were giving way to buildings and streets filled with “armies of clerks,” employed in what William Morris would deplore in the “The Manifesto of The Socialist League” as a system “full of waste.” Anticipated in the haunting alienation of Melville’s *Bartleby*, the frustrations of clerks and other white-collar workers in late-century novels correspond with a downturn in their prestige, stagnant wages, and the loss of career-building opportunities, even as the number of men and, especially, women employed as clerks was rising quickly (see Fleissner 65-66).

This shift in labor conditions was accompanied by what might be called the rise of an information society. Indeed, rooms full of data-processing clerks at the turn of the century were for all intents and purposes information processing “machines.”²³ From the perspective of Friedrich Kittler, a theorist of information and technology, clerks’ labor as “writing machines” rendered them into media, part of a system of production and reproduction. The problem is that they were thus also rendered creatures of the system’s noise: by 1900, Kittler argues, any meaning to be derived from information had been rendered random, senseless, and untranslatable (see Liu). With the development and use of the technology of mediation, such as the typewriter, telegraph, gramophone, and film, the

²³ Clerks made possible large bureaucracies, large-scale infrastructures, and vast amounts of information processing. The earliest large data processing organizations were in London. In the 1770s, banks in London began using a clearing room to settle checks. In the 1830s, about 30 clerks worked in a large room at the Bankers' Clearing House. By 1870, the Railway Clearing House was using over 1,300 clerks and “by the turn of the century, the Central Telegraph Office employed no fewer than 4,500 clerks” (Aspray and Campbell-Kelly 16-20).

quantification of writing, especially its storage and retrieval, were, according to Kittler, its only significant attributes. Some Victorian writers certainly allude to something like this process taking place in British offices. Henry James's telegraph clerk in his novella In the Cage abundantly demonstrates that the clerk's role as a medium of information did not mean that she could make sense of that information.²⁴

Other observers have emphasized less alienated aspects of clerks' labor. While the labor could be routinized and debasing, clerking, they claim, also offered many opportunities, often for the literarily inclined. Literary writing throughout the period, for example, regularly bears the stamp of clerking as writers of modest means get their start in banks, insurance offices, and the civil service. John Carey argues that the development of much progressive thinking during the period can be traced to clerk culture: In the Manchester suburbs of the first decade of the twentieth century, for example, "a new culture of

²⁴ James, of course, had a point to make about class status and cultural capital: without the proper birth, education, and taste, information — and writing, for that matter — would always be obtuse to the clerk. Kittler goes further. For him, writing and authorship, the very things valued as literature, had become nothing more than the automatic gestures of typewriting — something akin to clerks' labor.

While a provocative decentering of literature proper, I am not completely persuaded by Kittler's theory. In view of Harold Perkin's thesis that class society gives way to professional society in the twentieth century, we might see information subject to increasing specialization rather than being rendered completely meaningless. The professions that proliferated in the latter part of the nineteenth centuries and into the twentieth were essentially decoding societies, organized groups who shared a specialized language and who could use specialization and exclusivity to make their particular skills and resources valuable to others. For my purposes, Perkin's theory suggests that far from existing in a sea of senseless data, each clerk, however routinized his or her labor, could potentially occupy a particular node of specialization and possess a set of codes, so to speak, for certain sets of information — even if this code was the middle-class decorum of a shop. Clerks were decoding machines as much as they were writing machines. Perkin's theory, as we shall see, is not unlike Bourdieu's, in that specialized knowledges function like habitus in creating distinction and social norms.

socialism, cycling, free thinking and the flouting of respectable norms was flourishing among clerks, teachers, shop assistants, telegraphists and other white collar youth" (59). Jonathan Rose makes a similar point that "clerks belonged to a rising and increasingly articulate class" (434). The clerk's life, Rose argues, was far from the "living death" of Eliot's The Waste Land, as Richard Church remarks in his autobiography, Over the Bridge: "The multitudes of cultured men whom I met in the Civil Service, friends, advisers, monitors, served me in those first years in lieu of a university, helping me to educate myself, to enlarge my range of mind and experience, and finally supporting me in the heady and dangerous adventure of commencing author" (221).²⁵

Given the similarities among the descriptions of the lower middle class over a period of a century and a half, it is clear that views of the class have been overdetermined. John Carey argues that it was the reaction of the modernist movement to the common reader and mass culture that reified notions of the banality and unimaginative nature of lower middle class life. There was probably more contributing to this reaction than simply highbrow artistic impulses. Certainly modernist writers and artists were scandalized by a burgeoning mass culture, especially as growing literacy fed the ranks of the lower middle class, but, as Patrick Brantlinger points out in The Reading Lesson, antipathy toward a mass reading public stretches back to the eighteenth century.

²⁵ Both Carey and Rose have overt agendas to expose the social biases in contemporary and retrospective descriptions of working- and lower middle-class life, and Rose is rarely suspicious of the self-serving nature of his autobiographical evidence, but their research does suggest that much has been missing from our stories of what would come to be known as the masses. Also see Peter Keating's The Haunted Study.

If George Pooter's son Lupin's unorthodox approach to work and respectability in The Diary of a Nobody is any indication, the educated sons and daughters of the clerks were visibly chafing at the boundaries of proper suburban life. Yet, unorthodoxy, for the all the vaunted conservatism of the lower middle class, may be precisely the point. The often belittling images and tropes of smallness, impurity, and imitation that I will trace as part of this study also suggest contingent and unstable identities and affective states that belie the notion of an army of clerks in lock-step misery. The shame of being what one is and the longing to be what one is not are also what produce the state of being "betwixt and between." Unseemly behaviors and feelings, such as distraction at work, dissatisfaction with employers, or cross-class envies and fantasies, indicating weakness from one perspective, can from another point to a resistance to accept one's proper destiny.

This project joins a handful of literary critics writing on class who have sought to broaden our understanding of living as classed people.²⁶ Like them, I have tried to look beyond the emphases on activism and collectivity in conventional class analysis, which tends to imply "that those without a larger,

²⁶ Their work includes Jennifer Ruth Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest and the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel; Pamela Fox, Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel, 1890-1945; Lise Shapiro Sanders Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl, 1880-1920; Jonathan Wild, The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939; Ying S. Lee, Masculinity and the English Working Class: Studies in Victorian Autobiography and Fiction; Bruce Robbins, Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State; Rita Felski, "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class"; Thomas Augst's The Clerk's Tale Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America; and Arlene Young's Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel.

self-conscious sense of class identity exist outside of class” (Lee 9). It has been my goal to look at those who, without such self-consciousness, are missed in more activist (and utopian) accounts. Significantly, scholars of the lower middle class tend to be defensive about their subject. As the historian Arno Mayer asserts,

The lower middle class has been and continues to be of sufficient historical and political moment to warrant study in its own right . . . Instead of ignoring, disparaging, or dismissing the world of the petite bourgeoisie as transient, insipid, and counterfeit, intellectuals should examine and understand that enigmatic universe for what it has been. . . . For, like the laboring class, the lower middle class generates and keeps generating a separate culture, ethos, life-style, and world view. (410-11)

As we shall see, Mayer’s characterization of those who see the “petite bourgeoisie as transient, insipid, and counterfeit” identifies a common stereotype, and such descriptions began almost before the class itself had become a social category (see Young 485). In many cases, authors that came from the lower middle class were even more prone to reproduce these negative stereotypes. Although it was literary culture and its discomfort with the middlebrow tastes and values of the clerks that constructed many of the derisive assumptions about the lower middle class, authors and writers themselves often had to wave off the taint of their own passage through it. For the authors included in this project, disavowing the lower middle class was one way to

establish a new sense of self more closely matched to their success and ambition.²⁷ But these authors also use their class-based experience as the means of understanding both the flaws in the British social system and the persistent imprint of class on individuals.

Gender and the Domestic

Gender, of course, played a large role in the shifting identity of the clerk, whose social position placed pressure on traditional gender roles. One of the most striking developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coinciding with the rise of the clerk and large-scale back office operations, was the increasing number of women employed in commercial occupations. “From very small beginnings in 1881 women had by 1911 increased their share of the commercial and civil service workforces by up to 25 per cent or more” (Anderson, White-blouse 4). In general, women employed as clerks at the turn of the century, much like Gissing’s “odd women,” were more educated and mostly came from the middle and upper middle class, even while they remained at the lower echelons of office hierarchies. In his essay “The Cultural Work of the Type-Writer Girl,” Christopher Keep notes that “middle-class women served as an ideal solution” for the need of an “ever larger body of clerks to transcribe, collate, and file . . . masses of paperwork”: “not only were they an inexpensive

²⁷ Ironically, these writers were mostly writing for and promulgating the values of the middle class, as arguments regarding the rise of the novel have asserted. Even more ironically, then, the Victorian novel’s values and ideologies may more accurately be described as a lower middle-class view of the middle class, an observation that troubles our interpretation of the novel’s reception by both middle-class and, with increasing literacy, lower middle-class readers.

source of educated labor, but they maintained, if not the masculinity of the office space, than at least its bourgeois respectability” (403). Keep argues that this extraordinary shift in labor patterns could only become a reality if the image of middle-class working women was not disruptive to the cultural imaginary. By being associated with the “glamorous and adventurous” image of the New Woman, female office workers were prevented from threatening traditional female and maternal roles (404). Additionally, the introduction of a mass-produced typewriter into offices at the same time as women were asked to handle additional clerical tasks permanently gendered the typewriter as female and helped to consign menial and mechanical tasks, such as typewriting, to women. Keep acknowledges, though, that the reimagining of the female office worker, while mainly serving financial interests, also had the effect of offering an alternative subjectivity to middle-class women, as office work also did for ambitious working-class men. It is this subjectivity that partially informs my discussion of female characters in Gissing’s A Life’s Morning and In the Year of Jubilee, daughters of the lower middle class who like its sons must negotiate middle-class expectations and values without being fully entitled to them.

For men, on the other hand, the male clerk’s subordination and perceived domestication were feminizing — creating, by late century, a reputation for being a “Pooter.” Beginning as early as the 1870s, complaints began to surface deploring the eroding stature of clerks. As Susanne Dohrn notes, “Not only was clerk work badly paid, but it had become a low status job.” She quotes the founder of the Liverpool Clerks’ Association in 1870 declaiming, “however

intelligent and estimable a man may be . . . if someone whispers 'he is only a clerk!' at once he is at a discount, and almost anybody takes precedence over him" (51). The reasons for this were said to be twofold: young and uneducated male clerks willing to work for lower wages and the entry of women into the office. As the contributors to the volume White-blouse Revolution argue, however, women workers were not the primary reason for the clerk's devaluation; women only filled the demand for mostly low-paid typist labor. But clerks' anxieties about women's entry into the office did express the true nature of their position. Clerks, particularly those in middle age, could and easily did fall back into the working class, and, without the requisite manual skills, could end up falling even further. And while a clerk's values and perceptions of self-respect mirrored his middle-class betters, his was the "experience of subordination: the denial of initiative, responsibility, perhaps even knowledge of the larger process of which their activities were a part — dependence on the whim of those in authority over them" (McLeod 63).

Given these conditions, the lower middle class man was said to find solace in the home, which looms large in the cultural life of the nineteenth-century clerk. Throughout the Victorian period, the domestic was both a zone of safety from the humiliations of the clerk's public role and a place that emphasized the clerk's diminution and feminization. (Dickens literalizes this set of associations in Great Expectations, in which Wemmick's castle is both his place of refuge and an emasculating miniature.) The mocking cultural conversation surrounding Pooterism crystallized these perceptions, which

expressed the widely shared concern with “men’s presence in the home, where their occupational weakness was supposedly replicated and their pompous attempts to imitate the upper-middle-class paterfamilias were acted out” (Hammerton 294-95). Perhaps reflecting increased social pressure, the space of the domestic is particularly fraught in Gissing and Wells, where its consolations threaten to transform into unease and discontent. For these authors, the domestic meant increased responsibility, distorted emotions, and the premature foreclosure of ambition. Wells’s ambivalence toward the domestic is well documented, both in his fiction and life.

Notably, Wells’s reckless and restless responses to the domestic do not, however, coincide completely with a similar belittlement of the clerk’s masculinity. He seems both to embrace and defy the image of the clerk as an emasculated automaton. Negative views of the clerk’s masculinity, however, were ideologically dominant and consonant with larger shifts in masculine identity. “During the 1840s, ‘50s, and ‘60s,” the historian Paul R. Deslandes writes, “the focus in definitions of British manliness . . . shifted away from conceptions dominated by an evangelical Christian ethos that privileged earnestness, self-sacrifice, sensitivity to those less fortunate, and contemplative piety to a model . . . that emphasized strength, muscular development, the stiff upper lip, adventure, fortitude, and action” (5). According to James Eli Adams, this transformation was accompanied by a shift in constructions of the gentleman, from the importance of external attributes to an “ideal of deep subjectivity” that stressed the organic nature of manhood (152). The emphasis

in this late-century ideal was on the synthesis of character and body, eliminating “any hint of disjunction between surface and substance” (Adams 207). The clerk was unable to compete in such a value system. To many observers of male bodies in late-Victorian society, lack of physical activity by clerks, in particular, was just one sign in a larger process of degeneration. “The conditions of life among clerks and business men generally are most unwholesome,” Hely Hutchinson Almond, a school headmaster, writes, “During many months of the year they are engaged in sedentary occupations, in air which is by no means pure, in rooms often overheated, during all hours of daylight; and a large mass of them, instead of even getting such exercise as would be gained by walking to and from their homes, take considerable daily journeys in trains, or avail themselves of tramcars” (Almond 668).²⁸ Many commentators imagine a sort of doomsday scenario, where “nothing less than the downfall of the Anglo-Saxon is assured unless the stamina and physical fitness of our city folk are taken in hand” (White 236-37). Wells, who experienced a variety of health problems, especially while a student in London, and spent long stretches of time in convalescence, doubtlessly describes Hoopdriver with this rhetoric in mind: “narrow shoulders”

²⁸ This was explicitly seen as a result of urbanization. For frequent journal contributor W. S. Lilly, “The exodus from the country districts has resulted in the physical deterioration of our breed of men. The healthy peasants on leaving the fields for the slums and rookeries of our great cities, rapidly degenerate and decay themselves, and give to the world a more vitiated progeny [and] . . . diseases which poison the very life-blood of the generations to come” (541).

and a “weedy,” “skimpy” frame, which Hoopdriver himself regards with “distaste” (Wheels 111).²⁹

However, the masculinity represented in Wells’s story “The Land Ironclads,” is significant for imagining the clerk and his like-minded superior, the professional, in harmony with a new era of urbanization and, more importantly, its work habits and technical competence. The story presents a skirmish in a war between two unnamed armies, one from a traditional “open-air” society and the other consisting of “devitalized townsmen” (86). Unlike the loutish but pure-of-heart soldiers of the traditional society, the devitalized townsmen are deployed in new war machines that they operate with the methodical nature of technocratic office workers. Where their more physical enemy is motivated by ideals of bravery and courage, the technocrats do not feel compelled to fight and only pursue the enemy after being forced into a confrontation. Told from the viewpoint of the louts, the story highlights the superior technical prowess of the townsmen, which overcomes and befuddles the traditional army. Yet this cautionary tale is about more than the dangers of technology. Wells carefully addresses the implication that intellectual and technical expertise weakens the physical strength of his technocratic soldiers. Although the clerk-warriors of “The Land Ironclads” may not be “suntanned,” Wells avers, they are “healthy enough” and, more importantly, “alert, intelligent, quiet.” For Wells these professionals, unlike the “big, healthy men” of the enemy army, represent a kind

²⁹ For a wide-ranging discussion of the anxieties regarding the physical characteristics of the clerk, see Jonathan Wild’s chapter “Degeneration in the Edwardian Office” (81-100).

of ideal masculinity: they “all went about their work, calm and reasonable men. They had none of that flappy strenuousness of the half-wit in a hurry, that excessive strain upon the blood-vessels, that hysteria of effort, which is so frequently regarded as the proper state of mind for heroic deeds” (101). These technocratic soldiers, who ride bicycles rather than horses, constitute an army infused with what Perkin names the “professional ideal,” emphasizing skill, efficiency, and bureaucratic expertise over charisma and personal power (see Perkin 1-26). In my close readings of lower middle-class authors, it becomes evident that clerkish identity made gender both a heavier burden and one somewhat easier to bear.

The Challenge of Class

Class, on the other hand, is the knottiest of social identities. As a first-order, determining force in identity-formation, class has become increasingly undermined by a poststructuralist critique of self and identity. Like gender and race, class is now generally seen as a cultural rather than a purely materialist phenomenon, thanks in part to the work of cultural historians like E. P. Thompson and Gareth Stedman Jones. Historical shifts, such as the rise of non-manual labor, the “movement from production to consumption,” and the changing meanings of work, have also undercut the ability to speak of unitary class formations (Joyce, Class 1-16). In the development of cultural studies as well as in the linguistic turn in historical studies, scholars have been attentive to these changes. Some years ago, for example, Stuart Hall, drawing on the cultural

strain of Marxism favored by Volosinov and Gramsci, sought to replace “the notion of fixed ideological meanings and class-ascribed ideologies with the concepts of ideological terrains of struggle” (41). More recently, the Victorianist Chris R. Vanden Bossche asserts that “class identities were not shaped by economic relationships alone, but rather were produced through a discursive field constituted by social mappings — models of class and class relationships” (“Class Discourse” 10). Such culturalist models purport to take into account the shifting allegiances and ideologies that are more descriptive and accurate than a traditional view of class consciousness.

Many historians now question whether class consciousness ever develops outside of sharply local circumstances in specific historical situations. Arguing against the experiential methodologies of Thompson, Patrick Joyce contends that British class consciousness and struggle as we know them in the Marxian sense did not even coalesce until after the first World War, that the ideology identified with eighteenth and nineteenth century working-class individuals was actually formed within the particular historical conditions of the post-War period (see Visions of the People). Instead, Joyce claims that working-class individuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw themselves as “the people,” part of a British polity that evaded fixed meanings of working-class solidarity. A language of class did emerge in the early nineteenth century, but in a political and middle-class context rather than an economic one.³⁰ The upshot of Joyce’s thesis is twofold: There *was* a point at which working-class consciousness created the

³⁰ In this regard, see Joyce’s gloss of the work of Dror Wahrman and Gareth Stedman Jones in Class (289).

conditions for traditional class struggle, but that one's membership in a socioeconomic group in different historical circumstances results in points of view and models of collectivity that do not follow a Marxist model. Joyce, in short, demonstrates why the self-conscious (economic) identification with a class position is an inadequate measure of the effects and consequences of class.

Even more troubling, since so many individuals do not fit within the commonly accepted interpretive devices for understanding class identity, most narratives about class are incomplete and distorted. Steedman notes, for example, that "when Kathleen Woodward, who had grown up in not-too-bad Peckham, South London, wrote Jipping Street, she set her childhood in Bermondsley, in a place of abject and abandoned poverty" (9). Because a narrative focused on the effects of class was (and often still is) only legitimate if it involved such deprivations, Woodward felt compelled to alter the causal circumstances of her background. More recently in Masculinity and the English Working Class, Ying S. Lee situates herself between the "common experience" of Thompson's approach and Joyce's discursive method to more easily recognize the remarkable variety and distinctiveness of working-class identities, an insight routinely forfeited in literary studies and social and labor histories. Too often in such work, the laboring classes — the masses — seem to "have, between them, only one story to tell" (2) and the texts they produce are lumped together as a bulk product. In contrast, she contends that class *happens* to people in very personal ways and its effects are mostly felt outside of the "active, highly self-conscious" political identities that scholars generally use to describe class (8).

Yet, she argues, because “individual identity is often rooted in the communal and the external” we can reliably trace the effects of class in the self-representation of subjectivities that have been formed “through family and community bonds, responsibilities to others, labor performed, and assigned roles” (12). Lee’s close readings reveal each of her subject’s acute awareness of contradictory social imperatives and conflicting loyalties and their struggles to achieve a workable balance among them. Taken together, these varieties of experience demonstrate the unevenness of class identity, which must always contend with other self-conceptions and desires.

The cultural analysis of Pierre Bourdieu’s “*microtheory* of social power” purports to offer an apparatus for understanding how these seemingly contradictory details and specifics of everyday life form identity in a way far more nuanced than that described by an overarching account of class-based ideology (Moi 1019). In Bourdieu’s consumption-based theory of tastes and practices, he shows how the relation of classes to the means of production are less important than *habitus*, a set of social norms derived from sensibility and practice. *Habitus* is a powerful tool for describing the everyday details and affirmations that constitute socioeconomic identity and it can, as well, show how habits and ways of living potentially confound traditional class boundaries. As Andy Blunden explains in an insightful summary,

[W]hether a person *actually* has money, or skills or education or family, in practice turns out to be secondary to the *habitus* they have acquired, which may, under exceptional circumstances, be at

odds with the life-style and attitudes, the way of using the body, command of language, friends and contacts, preferences in art and aspirations, etc., etc., which are *normally* associated with those conditions. (n. p.).

However, while Bourdieu helpfully departs from ideological theorists by asserting that the “schemes of *habitus* . . . owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language” (466), he can lapse into a flattening model of cultural reproduction in which “biological, cultural, and ideological practices become blurred, all endlessly replicating cultural norms” (Fox 4).

In spite of these reservations, *habitus* is still an important means for understanding the complex normative components of social identity, enabling one to comprehend the contradictory states of class identity, a kind of negative capability of class, in which conflicting allegiances between, say, laboring class roots and upwardly mobile agency exist in different measures. Most importantly, the concept is helpful for reading the Victorians, who were notoriously fond of classificatory schemes and value-based boundaries, and who wrote of social exclusions and restrictions with particular relish. Victorian writers were especially partial to the embodiment of class, almost as much as they were to testing the strength of its influence. Literary characters are continually beckoned across class lines, and novelists like Dickens and Gissing — who in their own lives were committed to exploring hybrid class roles — continually rehearse moments of class-crossing in their books, but in the end

they do so only to consign their characters to the fate of blood or nature when all is said and done. As in Gissing's The Odd Women, the issue that seems continually to recur is whether something in one's nature, usually something noble, can overcome the other natural imperative of birth. (Gissing seems tormented by this question, writers such as Dickens and Trollope less so.) But *habitus* allows one to see how Victorian natural and biological explanations — and, perhaps, more importantly, our own — simply were not adequate, even when they did seem irrefutable. Indeed, it is on those occasions when the inadequacy of a narrative's deterministic scheme slips to the surface — when one mark of class in (or on) an individual seems to confound assumptions about another — that provide some of the most fruitful moments for analysis.

Many American scholars have long thought that class is an inadequate measure of social identity. Writing in 1959, the conservative sociologist Robert A. Nisbet held that “National democracy, economic and social pluralism, ethical individualism, and an ever-widening educational front joined to create new patterns of social power and status and to make class obsolete in constantly widening sectors of Western Society” (131). Asserting the irrelevance of class, to be sure, is nothing new for the Right. But even in a progressive venue like the journal Transformations, a recent forum asks, “Is class eclipsed by other considerations of identity?” (Lott). Each of the forum participants struggles to deal with the fluid nature of class. Even though other identities or social positions may be equally fluid, the normative positions for race, gender, and ethnicity, for example, are more stable in a given historical situation. But is this

because class has become increasingly unquantifiable or because it has ceased to capture enough attention? Janet Zandy, a participant in the Transformations forum, thinks that it is the latter; she echoes Steedman by suggesting that “we have an inadequate understanding of the complexities of class as lived experience” (n. p.).

All of the participants in the Transformations forum agree that social class is neglected in academic scholarship. This is particularly true of the lower middle class. Associated with thrift, respectability, conventionality, and kitschy taste, the massified and mediocre men and women of the lower middle class have excited little interest in intellectuals, who see the class representing all of the petty concerns and lowered horizons that academic life allows them to shun. It is also the lack of solidarity, the alacrity with which a lower middle class individual is willing to forsake his or her class for status advantages, that is so suspect. In addition, the academy, particularly as manifested in the humanities, is by its nature a concern in which the precise hierarchies of distinction, and the values of specialization, are often severe. Felski observes that “It is the perceived combination of aesthetic naïveté, cultural pretension, and moral rectitude that has made the lower middle class an object of amusement and scorn for the intelligentsia” (40). And given their own aesthetic values, intellectuals are probably most bothered by the naïve confidence of the lower middle class, a lack of curiosity that can masquerade as virtue, especially when it comes to taste. Perhaps most interesting, then, is the inability of many academics and the intelligentsia to share the *pleasures* of the lower middle class

and the *things* they want.³¹ As Regina Gagnier has noted, the intelligentsia has long been able to identify with the deprivations and miseries of class, but the pleasures enjoyed by particular classes are much harder to sympathize with (Insatiability 238). One might say that these pleasures simply aren't virtuous enough to be worthy of study. But as Theodore Zeldin once observed of French clerks, shop assistants, and bureaucrats, "they need to be dealt with through a different approach, which involves studying not institutions or catastrophes, but largely silent ambitions, which take one out of the realm of economics or politics, beyond quantity and conflict in its simple forms, to the search for satisfactions which were seldom clearly formulated" (qtd. in Crossick, Lower Middle Class 53). The investigation of their emotions in the following chapters is intended to uncover some of those "silent ambitions" and "satisfactions which were seldom clearly formulated."

³¹ While cultural studies, to a certain extent, has opened scholarship up to entertainment and popular culture, it generally conceives of the cultural field in neutral terms, without differentiating tastes among classes and social groups. John Frow's Cultural Studies and Cultural Value is an exception.

PART I: DICKENS

CHAPTER TWO

THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF SUBORDINATION: THE GRIM CLERK, NEWMAN NOGGS, AND JOHN ROKEMSITH

I served you because I was proud.

— Newman Noggs

With few exceptions, Dickens's clerks are identified with their work. We usually see them in the office or traversing the city on some task. Their emotions are similarly identified with their economic functions. Emotions class them by literalizing an economic logic in feelings that we usually understand to be purely personal. When Guppy proposes to Esther Summerson in Bleak House, for instance, marriage is a component of his rising economic position. His love is offered as though it were being stipulated in a contract:

When I first had the happiness of looking upon you, [my income] was one fifteen, and had stood at that figure for a lengthened period. A rise of five has since taken place, and a further rise of five is guaranteed at the expiration of a term not exceeding twelve

months from the present date. My mother has a little property, which takes the form of a small life annuity, upon which she lives in an independent though unassuming manner in the Old Street Road. . . . My own abode is lodgings at Penton Place, Pentonville. It is lowly, but airy, open at the back, and considered one of the 'ealthiest outlets. Miss Summerson! In the mildest language, I adore you. Would you be so kind as to allow me (as I may say) to file a declaration — to make an offer! (94-95)

Guppy's love is a form of currency, to be bundled with his other valuable attributes. Esther, as we know, does not hesitate in refusing his offer. After her face is scarred by smallpox, however, she loses value in Guppy's eyes. As Esther observes, "I could hardly have believed that anybody could in a moment have turned so red or changed so much as Mr. Guppy did when I now put up my veil" (411). Guppy, following the protocols of full disclosure in his profession, makes sure to withdraw his suit for marriage.

[Y]ou wouldn't perhaps be offended if I was to mention — not that it's necessary, for your own good sense or any person's sense must show 'em that — if I was to mention that such declaration on my part was final, and there terminated? . . . I regret that my arrangements in life, combined with circumstances over which I have no control, will put it out of my power ever to fall back upon that offer or to renew it in any shape or form whatever, but it will ever be a retrospect entwined — er — with friendship's bowers.

The conflation of emotions with an economic logic, and their representation in the realist novel, is familiar to many readers of Dickens.³² What is key in Guppy's case, and indeed in the case of the lower middle class generally, is that he cannot afford to feel any different. He suffers, in other words, from a poverty of emotion. In a political economy of emotion, an emotional "invisible hand" rewards refined, "proper" emotions in the service of the common good and withholds them for those who are not as deserving.

There is a distinctive form of impoverishment reserved for the ambitious lower middle-class character. Uriah Heep, from David Copperfield, explicitly illustrates the dangers of collapsing the emotional into the economic. Heep, a lawyer's clerk, is business-like and methodical, but also calculating and cunning and absolutely untrustworthy. When he is still an apprentice, Heep appears in the novel as vampiric and alien, "cadaverous," the narrator, David Copperfield declares, with "hardly any eyebrows, and no eyelashes, and eyes of a red-brown, so unsheltered and unshaded, that I remember wondering how he went to sleep" (275). Even Heep's touch is alien: "oh, what a clammy hand his was! as ghostly to the touch as to the sight! I rubbed mine afterwards, to warm it, *and to rub his off*" (281). Although Heep and David engage in almost indistinguishable lower middle-class striving, Heep's emotions differentiate him from the hero at every turn. Where Heep is resentful, David is eager to prove his worth; where Heep is

³² See especially Catherine Gallagher's The Body Economic. Her concept of "somaeconomics," however, is primarily focused on affects and sensations rather than more cognitive emotions.

envious, David wants to serve others. Heep's class resentment oils his famously abased avowals: "I have risen from my umble station . . . but I am umble still. I hope I never shall be otherwise than umble" (440).

What is most interesting about Heep's vivid emotional register is our uncertainty about his control over it. His avowals of humility seem involuntary, his envy and his ambition manage him rather than being managed by him. No matter how cunningly he channels his resentment and ambition, Heep is a bundle of damning affect:

he frequently ground the palms [of his hands] against each other as if to squeeze them dry and warm, besides often wiping them, in a stealthy way, on his pocket-handkerchief. (291)

He had a way of writhing when he wanted to express enthusiasm, which was very ugly; and which diverted my attention from the compliment he had paid my relation, to the snaky twistings of his throat and body. (292)

with his long hands slowly twining over one another, [he] made a ghastly writhe from the waist upwards. (316)

he gasped rather than smiled at me, he writhed and undulated about, in his deferential servility. (439)

Heep moves in jerks and starts — he serpentines and corkscrews, as Miss

Trotwood puts it. This affect can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it can be seen as a threat of lost control. His deferential servility, the attempt to keep his actual affective response in check, covers class passions that, unleashed, would have the violent potency of a mob, as if his body were a mob unto itself. But his jerking undulations also suggest an automaton, something so overtaken by an economic logic that even when he sits or walks his movements appear involuntary. Like his constant acknowledgment of his class status — his humbleness and modesty — his affect (and the actions linked to it) prevents him from taking a comfortable place in the bourgeoisie. We can view the significance of this emotional economy in differing ways. In one interpretation, Heep is the narrator's victim, involuntarily made to suffer rage and resentment for being a rival of David's. In an alternative view, the example of Heep exposes the functional nature of emotion in the new economic formations produced by lower middle-class labor and upward mobility. Asked to bend emotions to modern economic imperatives, clerks like Guppy and Heep attempt to comply, but in the value hierarchy of an emotional economy their emotions either fall short or become too transparently (and involuntarily) driven by economics.³³ They help us to understand the effects of new economic forms and to see how closely related the winners and the losers are in modernity.

Not surprisingly, Heep has elicited sympathy in critics like D. A. Miller and Mary Poovey because he seems to pursue his goals so cynically, making him at

³³ Matthew Titolo notes that "Uriah's crime is not that he is a hypocrite, but rather that he is too honest about a status system which masks its hypocrisy in the discourse of natural rank, gradual rise, and small successes" (191).

least candid about the self-serving nature of ambition. David, in this view, attempts to avoid recognizing his own ambition and the social oppression he suffers and imparts. He works to split his “agency from knowledge in such a way as to detach responsibility from action, to deny intention, and to defer responsibility so that self-serving means never show themselves as they are” (Poovey 119). Miller sees this dishonesty as an open secret, as a way of comprehending oneself as somehow better (or more “resistant,” in Miller’s language) than others in a worse or similar class position: “In a world where the explicit exposure of the subject would manifest how thoroughly he has been inscribed within a socially given totality, secrecy would be the spiritual exercise by which the subject is allowed to conceive of himself as a resistance . . . the difference he does make” (Miller 207). Consequently, it is in David’s interest to establish vast differences between himself and Heep, not only because Heep is his competition but also because Heep fully embraces a disenchanted, cynical attitude toward mobility. David, in short, wants to tell himself that he is not only immune to a consuming economic logic, but that an emotional exceptionalism legitimates the principled nature of his success.

But these beliefs and feelings tell us something about lower middle-class identity. Poovey asserts that Dickens’s emotions — essentially what I am calling “proper” feeling — play the important role of masking his class distinction: “The operative difference among the characters — the difference of class — is repressed (but not erased) by the vocabulary of emotion and development that subordinates class difference to the individual’s upbringing and his personal,

moral growth” (121). But the complaint that class difference is obscured by other forms of distinction may deprive us from fully comprehending Dickens’s representation of class. We would miss the important apprehension that emotions are a *part* of class difference, that they signify class rather than repress it. Even worse, we risk trivializing the emotions as mere symptoms or inconsequential decoys. Dickens was not obscuring the dynamic of classed emotions so much as placing it at the center of his understanding of class difference. In other words, emotions are not masks — they express rather than obscure social phenomena.

David’s emotions are not any less formed by economic imperatives, but their development is inextricable from his upward mobility — no more illusory or self-deceiving than that mobility. Heep’s emotions mirror his economic situation, reproducing at an emotional level what the social structure tells him he must value, whereas David reshapes the subordinating effect of social forces on his emotions into different kinds of subordinate feelings. These feelings do seek the endorsement of social authority, of course. Dickens gives him the same “proper feelings” that he values elsewhere in his economies of emotion: emotions that are modest, self-reflective, sensitive, characterized by muted passion. But David’s frequent experience of humiliation and subordination leads to what Dickens imagines is an ethical and social good. In other words, the effacing nature of these emotions are both a way of “getting along” and highly

valued in Dickens's emotional economy.³⁴ Dickens's other "hero-clerk," Pip, also demonstrates that an individual must emotionally embody humility and patience in order to be stable and successful. Pip and David, of course, do not always exhibit selfless emotions, but the accretion of slowly altered emotional responses does move them toward Dickens's goal for them. Thus, their emotions suggest to what degree Dickens idealized submission to social authority with muted emotions. Uriah Heep, in such a view, is not deplorable for being "umblé" so much as he is demonized for faking his humility, a sign of his refusal to submit.³⁵

David's orientation toward forms of subordination that express a social good is itself classed — it yields what Dickens believed bourgeois emotions should look like, not what bourgeois emotions actually were. To be sure, forms of subordination in gentlemen did confer authority, especially practices of self-discipline, but subordination, and a kind of stoic perseverance, also helped to form Dickens's critical view of modernity and his own lower middle-class relation to it. As Arlene Young has noted, the modest and unremarkable life (and

³⁴ In his recent work on upward mobility, Bruce Robbins makes an eerily similar point: "reading upward mobility stories may be deviously teaching us not to be self-reliant and self-interested, as is usually taken for granted. It may be teaching us to think about the common good" (xiv).

³⁵ Spiegel claims that Dickens's early novels are devoted to the "sympathetic school," which would see villainous behavior as rational and self-interested and benevolent impulses as "irrational and involuntary" (95). We see the persistence of this view in the portrayal of Heep, especially in the odd dissonance of Heep's emotion, which seems both fraudulently rational and involuntarily embodied — although both are represented negatively. David may disavow his own rational interest in what he feels, but the everyday phenomenological experience of emotion — embedded in the practice of subordination, for example — is shaped and influenced by cultural values. One could argue that the uneven representation of emotion is partly why Dickens's novels seem so modern.

emotions) of a character like Little Dorrit — who she argues is an exemplar of lower middle classness — enabled Dickens to highlight and critique what he saw as the smugness and ignorance of bourgeois superiority.³⁶ Indeed, the ironies in the case of Little Dorrit demonstrate that a rich emotional life produces its own form of superiority. Her “modest” emotions are a form of wealth in Dickens’s world. The consequence, however, is that Dickens’s economies of emotion lead him to value subordination for its own sake. As a result, the clerk is most sympathetic and enduring when he or she submits to social authority. But rather than seek out only the ingredients of class resignation in such a model, which are undoubtedly there, we should also use such a perspective as an opportunity to appreciate how Dickens explored the various emotional possibilities of subordination.

The Grim Clerk

While we are accustomed to look for Dickens’s victims of the socioeconomic system in poverty-stricken figures like Oliver Twist and Hard Times’ Stephen Blackpool, it is in fact his clerks and other characters from the lower middle class that best represent his ability to portray the perplexing effects of social hierarchies. Whether they are villainous or sympathetic, clerks are offered little in the way of pleasure or success. There is, for example, Uriah

³⁶ “In Little Dorrit,” Young writes, “it is at the interstices of class, and most significantly of the middle and lower middle classes, that Dickens most effectively dramatizes the hypocrisy and smugness of the Victorian bourgeoisie, and the commonplace but not insignificant virtues of the unremarkable — and largely unremarked — people living on the margins of bourgeois society” (507). Little Dorrit’s “modest life of usefulness and happiness” personifies Dickens’s alternative.

Heep's humiliation, the weak misery of Newman Nogg's alcoholism, Mr. Chuffey's sadness, the anxious dinginess of Pancks, John Carker's guilt, and, of course, the dismal poverty of Bob Cratchit. Even if they are able to achieve something better for themselves, their aspirations for class mobility are often suspect and subject to humor. If the clerk class can be said to have an identity at this point in the nineteenth century, for Dickens it is based on an emblematic shabbiness and the reek of failure.³⁷ As Titolo observes, "the clerk is class society's undead, hovering midway between the gentleman-professional and the symbolically authentic, working-class hero" (191).

In their marginal state, however, many of Dickens's clerks appear to have a reserve of emotion — a kind of emotional potential — that can increase their value in an emotional economy.³⁸ Some lower middle-class types, like Heep and Headstone, spend their surplus too quickly and profligately. Some are exposed as having no surplus at all. Like economic potential, emotional surplus stands for possibility and even hope. Due to their subordination the surplus remains repressed or unseen, but because it signifies their successful subordination its

³⁷ In "Virtue Domesticated," Young offers an important overview of the representation of the lower middle class at mid century. "The denigration of lower-middle-class figures in Victorian literature starts," she writes, "as soon as they begin to appear, even before the class *per se* has an identity" (485). In part, the vilification arose from the association of the bumbling, inoffensive clerk with the effeminate and simulated figure of the Gent. And the already uneasy upward mobility of the bourgeoisie was loathed even more when it was imitated by the lower middle class (487, 491).

³⁸ Gallagher identifies what she calls "suspended feeling" in the rhetoric of political economy, which sought to emphasize the potential for enjoyment rather than the experience of enjoyment (51).

value increases in proportion to the commitment to humility and modesty.³⁹ It is important, moreover, that the reserve not be spent hastily or even at all. Once spent it diminishes the clerk's value. At its most extreme, this tangled imperative produces a lack of affect, a vision of flattened emotion that renders individuals as ghostly apparitions.

We can see this most starkly (and early) in a sketch by Boz, where in one of his "Thoughts about People" Dickens's narrator observes a man, whom I will call the "grim clerk," walking in St. James's Park. The grim clerk is one whose emotions are diffuse and indistinct, whose lack of affect throws into relief the logic of a political economy of emotion. Dickens imagines a bleak clerk's life for him. He conjectures that the man belongs to a "class of people in this great metropolis who seem not to possess a single friend . . . Urged by imperative necessity in the first instance, they have resorted to London in search of employment, and the means of subsistence" (215). Severed from traditional kinship networks, these men have "become lost . . . in the crowd," forced to "break the ties which bind us to our homes and friends" and prompted to "efface the thousand recollections of happy days and old times" (215). In his very brief portrait, Dickens condenses the difference between old and new worlds, juxtaposing "Merry England" with contemporary modern conditions. Only a trace remains of an early Victorian world of village intimacy and the closeness of neighbors and families.

³⁹ See my discussion of John Kucich's treatment of repression in the next chapter, which I address in an examination of David Copperfield. Generally, I am less interested in repression as a sign of internal libidinal pleasure than its role in creating external social signs of emotion.



Figure 2. "The Poor Clerk"

This is undoubtedly a picture of alienated, haunted modernity, in which the clerk is reduced to pure functionalism. Mr. Smith, as Dickens generically names him, is such a product of the office, subject to the “thralldom of the desk” (216), that he is unable to acknowledge even the “children . . . playing on the grass” or the “groups of people . . . loitering about, chatting and laughing” (216).⁴⁰ Absorbed by routine and the demands of clock time, both in the office and out, he is “incapable of bearing the expression of curiosity or interest” (216).⁴¹ This clerk personifies modernity’s instrumentality and inhumanity, with the flattened affect of an automaton. “Poor, harmless creatures such men are,” Dickens continues, “contented but not happy; broken spirited and humbled; they may feel no pain, but they never know pleasure” (217). Dickens even refuses to give him the safe harbor of a rich domestic life.

Dickens’s handling of class in this portrait expresses a particular kind of *knowingness* about class experience, as though his own insightful understanding of class experience gives him the ability to see the real meaning of modernity. Modernity may make the man invisible, but it also makes Dickens’s vision possible. By watching Smith Dickens is able to make a series of observations leading to knowingly presumptive assumptions about how such men might lead their lives. We are, of course, meant to be sympathetic toward or at least identify

⁴⁰ On contemporary debates regarding habit, see Athena Vrettos, “Defining Habits: Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition.” This passage from *Sketches* is clearly expressing the side of the debates concerned with habit (“thralldom”) as “social stagnation” and “rigidity” (421).

⁴¹ In *Novel Professions*, Jennifer Ruth sees clock time as essential to the successful development of David Copperfield’s professional identity (72). Here a strict schedule does not suggest success, nor even a particular professionalism. Instead, it denotes unimaginative routine.

with Dickens's interest in the man. But there is a cruelty infusing Dickens's view, a callousness that belittles the victims of the class system that it also indicts. This is particularly true in Dickens's portrait of the man's emotions. Forced to "efface" nostalgia and subject himself to the "thralldom of the desk," he not only seems "incapable of bearing the expression of curiosity or interest" but incapable of any emotion of all. As he continues his vignette, Dickens pursues the only emotions the man seems to have: timidity and anxiety. On an errand to take letters to his employer's Russell Square home,

Mr. Smith, putting his hat at the feet of one of the hall chairs, walks timidly in, and being condescendingly desired to sit down, carefully tucks his legs under his chair, and sits at a considerable distance from the table while he drinks the glass of sherry which is poured out for him by the eldest boy, and after drinking which, he backs and slides out of the room, in a state of nervous agitation from which he does not perfectly recover. (217)

To be sure, Dickens is hardly sympathetic toward Smith's employer, but his description of the clerk's broken-spirited humility is extraordinarily thorough. He "tucks his legs," "sits at a considerable distance," and "back and slides out of the room." In every way, Smith is subordinate. Such men are so beaten down that they feel only the most objectless emotions, such as "nervous agitation."⁴² Yet his agitation and difficult recovery suggest a sensitivity, an emotional awareness of his status, that signifies an obscured reservoir of emotion. But

⁴² An objectless emotion lacks both clear causality *and* intention, a feeling, Ngai suggests, that is closer to (but not the same as) an affect (26-27).

even if Dickens implies that this clerk may feel something more than a sort of routine numbness, he also indicates that perceiving or exploring this emotion is hardly worth our trouble. And yet, we can't discount Smith's presence. As Alex Woloch suggests in The One vs. the Many, the marginal status (both socially and in the novel) of a character like the clerk can illustrate "how the very subordinated nature of minor characters catalyzes new kinds of affective presence" (128).⁴³ In Dickens's sketch, this affective presence illustrates the feeling of modernity and the author's acute understanding of it.

This grim clerk becomes something of a Victorian stereotype. By the end of the nineteenth century, this view of the clerk's nonstrategic affect, his nonproductive emotions that do not seem to contribute to the social good nor even have an object, was typical. Equated with mundane and tedious office labor, the clerk's emotions are constrained and limited, with the office or the counter becoming the whole of his being. As Edwin Reardon wonders in George Gissing's 1891 novel New Grub Street, "If I had to earn my living as a clerk, would that make me a clerk in soul?" (229). H. G. Wells's description a decade and a half later of the fate of the retail clerk Kipps is even more disheartening: "[He felt] [a] *vague* self-disgust that shaped itself as an intense hatred. . . . Dimly he perceived the thing that had happened to him, how the great stupid machine of retail trade had caught his life into its wheels, a vast, irresistible force which he had neither strength of will nor knowledge to escape" (Kipps 43-44). By the time of Edwin Pugh's 1916 novella The Mind of the Clerk, this sense of

⁴³ In Ngai's and Woloch's work one can see the development of critical themes regarding minor affects and characters.

inevitability is honed into a philosophy: “To live,” Pugh writes, “has become with him a sort of *aimless habit*, and he goes on, as the back wheel of the guard’s brake goes on behind the engine, far ahead, drawn by an irresistible impulse, he knows not whither” (168). The reductionism of this state of being is captured most famously and with special power by Melville in Bartleby’s gnomic phrase, “I would prefer not to.” These figures are a species of clerk whose feelings are impotent, small, and nullified by larger social forces, representing an extreme version of a type that, in Dickens, includes Wemmick in Great Expectations, whose ascetic subordination at work is compensated by the domestic refuge of his toy castle home, or Bob Cratchit, whose faithful loyalty seems incomprehensible to us. Their emotions are opaque, spurning our attention.

But the example of Bartleby — as Sianne Ngai has suggested — indicates the potential for agency in passivity, vagueness, and aimlessness.⁴⁴ It is true that descriptions of the nonproductive (or crude) emotional lives of the working classes, from agricultural and industrial laborers to servants, governesses, and clerks, are a fundamental component of a class hierarchy, supporting the view that emotions are a scarce resource. We are apt to interpret such one-dimensional characters as undeserving, seeing surrender and insensibility in their apathy and passivity. These “ugly feelings,” though, as Ngai argues, call attention to the powerlessness of those who feel them. These “nonstrategic

⁴⁴ In his essay on Bartleby and contingency, Giorgio Agamben suggests that Bartleby represents a new term, “potentiality,” suspended between Being and non-Being: “the impotent possibility” that exceeds both Being and Nothingness (259). “I would prefer not to,” Agamben argues, “is the *restitutio in integrum* of possibility, which keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and nonoccurrence, between the capacity to be and the capacity to not be” (267).

affects," she writes, "characterized by weak intentionality and characteristics of the situation of scriveners" express "restricted" or "suspended" agency (12). Although they do not necessarily "solve the dilemma of social powerlessness," Ngai continues, they "diagnose it powerfully . . . preparing us for more instrumental or politically efficacious emotions" (353-54; see also Gross 50). Such a view enables us to see more than immobility and resignation in Gissing, Wells, and Pugh.

Even the grim clerk's anxiety and discomfort suggests that he is aware on an affective level of his miserable powerlessness. What is different in Dickens is the clerk's relationship to subordination. The portrait of the grim clerk offers a critique of modernity, of course. But it also points to a lower middle-class type that Dickens employed to explore what types of emotions are possible for the clerk. We might, therefore, see the clerk's surplus, his emotional reserve, as "restricted" or "suspended" agency, affect that remains nonstrategic but that signifies a kind of potential. Bradley Headstone's "rapid passions" (536) and "convulsive twitching" (688) and Uriah Heep's writhing nervousness also express ugly feelings. But in the emotional economy of Dickens's lower middle class, ugly feelings are better if they remain subordinate. This was as much a matter of survival as it was socially productive, of course, as the fates of Headstone and Heep demonstrate. Indeed, the linkage of labor, social status, and its flattening effect on affect, is not necessarily interpreted negatively in Dickens. While he may sympathetically represent the passions of Headstone's resentment

and rage, he sees other clerks' "restricted" or "suspended" emotions as necessary and pragmatic responses to modernity.

One clue to Dickens's view of the clerk's interiority can be seen in his warm representation of office life, which, Titolo argues, he saw as a comforting form of domesticity. His delight in office life is especially evident in The Pickwick Papers, written when he was separated from the offices of the lawyer Edward Blackmore by only a few years. In this novel, Dickens imagines an autonomous world in which an excess of rank keeps the harsher realities of class society at arm's length.

There are several grades of Lawyers' Clerks. There is the Articled Clerk, who has paid a premium, and is an attorney in perspective, who runs a tailor's bill, receives invitations to parties, knows a family in Gower Street and another in Tavistock Square, goes out of town every Long Vacation to see his father, who keeps live horses innumerable; and who is, in short, the very aristocrat of clerks. There is the salaried clerk — out of door, or in door, as the case may be — who devotes the major part of his thirty shillings a week to his personal pleasure and adornment, repairs half-price to the Adelphi at least three times a week, dissipates majestically at the cider cellars afterwards, and is a dirty caricature of the fashion, which expired six months ago. There is the middle-aged copying clerk, with a large family, who is always shabby, and often drunk. And there are the office lads in the first surtouts, who feel a

befitting contempt for boys at day-schools, club as they go home at night, for saveloys and porter, and think there's nothing like "life."

(375)

This taxonomy represents an autonomous social hierarchy, complete with winners and losers, those with status and those without. The articulated clerk is upwardly mobile, on his way to becoming a lawyer. The salaried clerk and the office lad are both youthful, individuals blessed by the socioeconomic potential of being young and literate, but at risk of becoming too enthralled with the comforts of a regular salary. The middle-aged clerk is a pitiable type, destined for little more than drudgery. The details of status are striking not only for their particularity, but also for their focus on the signs of social status — on fashion and cultural awareness. Every rank carries its elements of distinction, from party invitations to the contempt for school boys.

The breadth of their distinction, however, disguises their similarity. "There are varieties of the genus [the clerk]," Dickens continues, "too numerous to recapitulate, but however numerous they may be, they are all to be seen, at certain regulated business hours, hurrying to and from the places we have just mentioned" (375). If we, Dickens's readers and imagined public, were to see them without the novelist's help we would merely glimpse them "hurrying to and from," going from "various holes and corners of the Temple" to other "certain dark and dirty chambers" (375). Therefore, they do seem like the undead, as Titolo suggests, ghosts emerging sporadically, engaged on mysterious missions. In the public's perception they all belong to one category — the clerk.

The excess of ranking in Dickens's description is merely an insider's game. Such a disjunction is common to other clerk-authors, who, like Dickens, encourage us to see a rich life obscured by superficial appearances.

The clerk's working domain is rich with meaning and activity, but its insularity inhibits the lay-persons' apprehension. When Pickwick visits the law office of Dodson and Fogg in his attempt to defend himself from Mrs. Bardell's lawsuit, the clerks help to set the stage for Pickwick's disenchantment through their bemusement.

"What did he say his name was?" whispered Wicks.

"Pickwick," whispered Jackson; "it's the defendant in Bardell and Pickwick."

A sudden scraping of feet, mingled with the sound of suppressed laughter, was heard from behind the partition. . . . Pickwick, on looking up, became sensible of the pleasing fact, that all the four clerks, with countenances expressive of the utmost amusement, and their heads thrust over the wooden screen, were minutely inspecting the figure and general appearance of the supposed trifler with female hearts, and disturber of female happiness. On his looking up, the row of heads suddenly disappeared, and the sound of pens traveling at a furious rate over paper, immediately succeeded. (238-39)

Pickwick is not pleased at all, of course, to have become the object of laughter.

Yet he hardly seems to know that he has become the butt of their fun until Sam



Figure 3. Pickwick and Sam at Dodson & Fogg's office

Weller informs him that they are “twigging” him. Weller, to be sure, is Pickwick’s informant for the “real” world, but the scene emphasizes the insularity and

cloistered nature of the office. The four clerks seem to act in unison, becoming “four heads” whose “countenances” all express “utmost amusement.” Their enjoyment of Pickwick’s discomfort is alienating in some respects, as though it is unfairly derisive; and their quick fun suggests the tedium of office life, which falls quickly back over them at the sound of their pens. And yet our invitation into the office, to see the world as clerks do, seems to beckon us to laugh with them. Indeed, the moment at Dodson and Fogg’s is the point in the plot when the novel pivots toward Pickwick’s encounter with the world of consequences, marking a place when readers become more estranged from Pickwick. As readers, we are asked to identify with the clerks who are bemused by Pickwick, who see him as an object of curiosity, whose misfortune can be exploited for its humor.

The four clerks seem to share Dickens’s knowingness. But in a flash they are gone, hidden behind the partition, willingly submitting to the demands of their labor. This submission defuses the bite of their laughter. So, their subordination is reassuring, neutralizing their threatening knowingness behind the partition. Although Dickens often asks us to imagine what is behind the partition, as it were, what we usually see is nothing more than their role as barely significant beings. Nevertheless, some surplus of emotion seems untouched in such men and out of sight from our view. We can speculate about what this emotion might be. I would suggest that it combines the quality of knowingness (laughter at Pickwick; acknowledgment of the tragedy of the slum) with subordination (bent over desks; absorbed by routine), which is similar to

saying that it — awkwardly, perhaps impossibly — combines middle-class values with working-class labor. Neither modesty nor humility are sufficiently descriptive or self-aware. Shame overstates the case, but this latter emotion does capture the social awareness built into the clerks' persistent self-effacement, which disguises knowledge and understanding behind subordination. Like the blackmailer, the clerk's emotional and intellectual knowledge is only valuable as long as it is withheld. And yet, Dickens has a form of subordination in mind that is not hypocritical or merely a cover. Professionally, the clerk was supposed to be dedicated — at least in an ideal sense — to sincerity and honesty, and he would be aware that these qualities could just as easily be fraudulent. The clerk's ideal identity and normative emotion, therefore, becomes in Dickens's hands something that expresses a purity of subordination that the clerk must actively and repetitively renew.

"Humble Angels of Sympathy and Self-Denial"

In Our Mutual Friend, Dickens comically embodies the modesty and humiliation of the middle-aged copy clerk in the character of Reginald Wilfer, who is identified by his ludicrous sartorial aspirations:

[H]e had never yet attained the modest object of his ambition: which was to wear a complete new suit of clothes, hat and boots included, at one time. His black hat was brown before he could afford a coat, his pantaloons white at the seams and knees before he could buy a pair of boots, his boots had worn before he could

treat himself to new pantaloons, and, by the time he worked round to the hat again, that shining modern article roofed-in an ancient ruin of various periods. (40)

We are struck by the modesty of Reginald's ambition, which doesn't ask for anything but a full set of clothes, and even with this he has difficulty. He has a desire to be better, as most clerks do to one degree or another. But he is laughably modest. For example, Reginald rarely uses his first name because he is self-conscious about it being "too aspiring and self-assertive a name" (41). He appears to be something of a fool, out of touch with the usual desires that drive people. In truth, he is the consummate subordinate: both aware of and resigned to his state. Reginald functions as one of Dickens's gentle souls, whose love of his daughter, Bella, is unconditional and who expresses a weary concern for the world around him. He says of the "suburban Sahara" (a slum) on a walk home from work, "'Ah me!' . . . 'what might have been is not what is'" (42), as though wearily aware of the world's imperfect state. Although he too is clearly a victim of the social structure, he expresses no revengeful ambition or anger. On the contrary, his sympathy stretches toward those less fortunate. Still, this sentiment is fleeting; it momentarily seems to encompass the world, but then dwindles into insignificance.

Forster claims that the clerk was a type of character in whom Dickens took "the most delight," "humble angels of sympathy and self-denial" who exemplify admirable feelings of selfless perseverance.

Newman Noggs ushered in that class of the creatures of his fancy in which he took himself perhaps the most delight, and which the oftener he dealt with the more he seemed to know how to vary and render attractive; gentlemen by nature, however shocking bad their hats or ungenteel their dialects; philosophers of modest endurance, and needy but most respectable coats; a sort of humble angels of sympathy and self-denial, though without a particle of splendour or even good looks about them, except what an eye as fine as their own feelings might discern. (96-97)

Based on Forster's commentary, one may imagine that Dickens's interest in the clerk arises because they skewer the pretensions of gentility. They may be "gentleman by nature" and represent the values of gentility, but they dress poorly, talk badly, and look ugly. They are philosophers — a test of thoughtfulness that many traditional gentlemen would fail — but theirs is a philosophy of "modest endurance." More importantly, they are "humble angels of sympathy and self-denial" in spite of their ugliness and shabbiness. The passage tries to separate political economy and emotional economy — a move that Dickens also makes frequently — but the two economies are still bound together. Indeed, subordination is the key to their admirable feelings; without "endurance" and "self-denial" they would become merely shabby.

Narratologically speaking, Noggs is the hero of Nicholas Nickleby, not quite like the quasi-clerks David Copperfield and Pip, but near enough. Yet very little distinguishes him from the type of clerk who is dissolutely middle-aged,

shabby, and drunk. Like others shabby clerks, he is subordinate and hopelessly tied to the whims of a cruel employer. Before succumbing to drink, bad investments, and the shabby state of the lower middle class, however, Noggs had been a bourgeois gentleman. Thus, his clerk's life represents the most horrific of fates, a kind of living death that could happen to anyone in such a position. And Dickens conflates the state of alcoholism and clerking, so Noggs appears

with two goggle eyes whereof one was a fixture, a rubicund nose, a cadaverous face, and a suit of clothes (if the term be allowable when they suited him not at all) much the worse for wear, very much too small, and placed upon such a short allowance of buttons that it was marvellous how he contrived to keep them on. (8-9)

Noggs is much closer to being like the grim clerk than the gentle shabbiness of Wilfer. He even reminds us of Heep, with his involuntary movements and wraith-like presence.

Newman Noggs made no reply, but went on shrugging his shoulders and cracking his finger-joints; smiling horribly all the time, and looking steadfastly at nothing, out of the tops of his eyes, in a most ghastly manner. (41)

Newman fell a little behind his master, and his face was curiously twisted as by a spasm; but whether of paralysis, or grief, or inward laughter, nobody but himself could possibly explain. The expression of a man's face is commonly a help to his thoughts, or

glossary on his speech; but the countenance of Newman Noggs, in his ordinary moods, was a problem which no stretch of ingenuity could solve. (19)

Lashing himself up to an extravagant pitch of fury, Newman Noggs jerked himself about the room with the most eccentric motion ever beheld in a human being: now sparring at the little miniatures on the wall, and now giving himself violent thumps on the head, as if to heighten the delusion, until he sank down in his former seat quite breathless and exhausted. (405)

In such moments, Noggs and Heep (whose twitching frame we've already glimpsed), would appear to be little different from each other. Both seem to move involuntarily and in unnatural and eccentric ways. One of Heep's signature behaviors involves grinding his palms together; Noggs cracks his knuckles with similar regularity. They both seem to be trying to hold affects in check: resentment in the case of Heep and fury for Noggs.

As similar as they seem — as though Dickens had the same exemplar in mind — the effects and consequences of their affects are different. There are, of course, rather obvious explanations for their differences. Noggs's heroic compassion and aid to Nicholas and his family comes from his vestigial gentleman self. He is kind and sympathetic in spite of the terribleness of his clerk status because he was once a middle-class man. Heep, on the other hand, is a lower middle-class man with ambition, who must struggle through the clerk's

life to achieve success. Noggs is on his way down; Heep on his way up. Noggs's proper feeling is authentically connected to his prior middle-class status; Heep's feeling — primarily, modesty — is simulated and inauthentic. And yet, Noggs's fury toward his boss, Ralph Nickleby, and Heep's resentment would seem to be natural expressions of their trajectories.

In Dickens there is a value in faithful, laboring subordination that seems to trump all other judgments about behavior and circumstances. Yet like the grim clerk and his ilk there is an additional value in withholding some feelings from being fully subordinate, feelings, in Ngai's phrase, that are "nonstrategic." With somewhat uneven logic, Noggs indignantly confronts Ralph Nickleby near the end of the novel.

Who made me "a fellow like this"? If I would sell my soul for drink, why wasn't I a thief, swindler, housebreaker, area sneak, robber of pence out of the trays of blind men's dogs, rather than your drudge and packhorse? If my every word was a lie, why wasn't I a pet and favourite of yours? Lie! When did I ever cringe and fawn to you. Tell me that! I served you faithfully. I did more work, because I was poor, and took more hard words from you because I despised you and them, than any man you could have got from the parish workhouse. I did. I served you because I was proud; because I was a lonely man with you, and there were no other drudges to see my degradation; and because nobody knew, better than you, that I was a ruined man: that I hadn't always been what I am: and that I

might have been better off, if I hadn't been a fool and fallen into
the hands of you and others who were knaves. (773-74)

The passage, first of all, seems to assume that clerks are natural scoundrels. They steal, cheat, lie, and “fawn” in the regular course of affairs. What makes Noggs distinct from them is what he holds back in his subordination. Rather than insinuate himself into becoming his employer’s “pet” or “favorite,” rather than becoming more strategic for his own benefit, he was motivated by pride, a sort of self-respect: “I served you because I was proud.” The sentence warns us, though, from seeing his pride as purely self-interested, because pride is modified by “served.” He knowingly subordinated himself to claim a reserve of proper feeling for himself. This is not to say that there isn’t something of the masochist in what he says — “took more hard words from you because I despised you”; “served you . . . because nobody knew, better than you, that I was a ruined man” — or that his logic is not tortured or even that he is different from the other Dickensian victims who call for our sympathy. What is striking is the valorization of faithful service and faithful work, the pride of someone who does a job well. Even if he fully subjugates himself, he finds redemption in subordinating work if it is done as a loyal employee, a clerk who, unlike Heep, does not take advantage of his employer’s trust.

Forster claims that clerks like Newman Noggs are “gentlemen by nature, however shocking bad their hats or ungenteel their dialects”: “humble angels of sympathy and self-denial.” This assertion seems to accept the effects of the socioeconomic on the emotions, as though characters like Noggs replicate the

faithfulness of their professional service in their emotions, such as in humility and self-denial. But subordination seems to mean something a bit different in this instance. Noggs keeps some of his emotions from becoming strategic. Unlike Heep, who exploits false humility and obsequious affection to gain the trust of his employer and steal from him, Noggs detaches his own desires and needs from his work. This is not to say that Noggs does not have ugly feelings, even violent, passionate fantasies. For instance, he imagines pummeling his employer in an extreme moment of frustration.

But the intense eagerness and joy depicted in the face of Newman Noggs, which was suffused with perspiration; the surprising energy with which he directed a constant succession of blows towards a particular panel about five feet eight from the ground, and still worked away in the most untiring and persevering manner, would have sufficiently explained to the attentive observer, that his imagination was thrashing, to within an inch of his life, his body's most active employer, Mr Ralph Nickleby. (373)

But he is able to subordinate the murderous fury of these feelings. The passive means that he pursues to undermine his boss also have a touch of subordination about them. He kills, indirectly, with kindness.

And yet it may not matter how we define clerkish emotion. What Dickens values most in clerks is his own feeling about them: he *knows* them, comprehends them in a way that few novelists could, and sees, most of all, their fading dreams. At the same time, he pities them. While this pity does not help

the clerks, it does help Dickens to represent a form of feeling — equal parts sorrow, nostalgia, ambivalence, and revulsion — that is integral to his literary realism. Dickens's willingness to exploit weakness, to slash away at the foibles of his characters, is indicative of his own knowingness and class unease, an effect of being lower middle class. Like the clerks at Dodson and Fogg, his vision is piercingly uncomfortable, but also like them he disappears behind the screen to scribble away at his work. Dickens thus repeats the dynamic of knowingness and subordination. His position enables him to strip away misleading appearances, but in the act of disappearing behind the screen, retiring to his room to write, he also subordinates his knowingness to the text. His revenge is therefore indirect as well, but also like Noggs no one can ever accuse him of not being faithful to his work.

Trusting the Undead

Knowingness and subordination are states of being enmeshed in sociality. They are conditions that evoke social emotions, such as humility, modesty, empathy, and, more negatively, shame, embarrassment, and jealousy. To these I want to add trust. I have already suggested that trust and trustworthiness are a feature in the representation of the clerk, an ingredient in the clerk's self-image and in his employer's perception of him. Such emotions produce and delimit social relations. In The Rationality of Emotion, Ronald de Sousa explains (following Bernard Harrison) that "most of the self-related desires and emotions capable of giving my life interest and meaning require that I actually become

engaged in relations calling for mutual trust, and therefore generating other-directed emotions and desires” (312-13). De Sousa contends that “other-directed emotions” are “ethically relevant,” and include “trust and its cognates — the reluctance to cheat, the feeling of being betrayed, loyalty” and “diffidence” and “pride in the achievements of one’s friends” (313). In part, trustworthiness is a form of subordination, subjecting oneself to the needs and inclinations of others. But as dependent as it is on others, trustworthiness is something that requires at least partial agency: by feeling it (and acting it) one is able to offer it to others.

In this last section I want to analyze John Rokesmith (John Harmon) as an exemplary instance of subordinated agency in Our Mutual Friend, one that navigates between a sympathetic acknowledgment of the “soul-death” of the grim clerk and the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for the rational interests of *homo economicus*. Rokesmith, Boffin’s secretary and (as Harmon) the secret heir to the Dustman’s legacy, exhibits many of the qualities we’ve identified as clerkish: flattened affect, regular, routinized labor, and weak traditional social bonds. Like the grim clerk, Rokesmith emerges in the narrative as a complete stranger, signifying the abstraction and impersonality of modernity. The “living-dead man,” as the narrator calls him, sheds the identity of John Harmon after being mistakenly linked to a corpse fished out of the Thames. By giving up his social identity and his claim to his father’s fortune, Rokesmith evades the greed, bad faith, and opportunism of Our Mutual Friend’s bleak world, the “great swarm of swindlers” with an interest in the Dustman’s legacy (367).

Significantly, this undead being is vivified through the routines, habits, and modesty of the clerk. He embraces the formulaic nature of his secretarial duties by hoping that his labors will be transformed into “a machine in such working order as that they can keep it going” (367).⁴⁵

The notion of the *undead* is a compelling way of conceptualizing the new emotional paradigms of modernity. Like a zombie, the grim clerk, for instance, feels neither pain nor pleasure. He typifies the stoic subordination of the wage laborer, who is defined by the routine of his work and the bleak regimen it casts over his life; living a dismal, depressing existence, he survives through passionless perseverance. Rokesmith and his labor, as we shall see, are not much different. Yet the figure of Rokesmith appears both to acknowledge the undead state of the clerk and to assert his subordinate clerkly status as a means for surviving modernity.⁴⁶ A seeming stranger in London, Rokesmith navigates what the sociologist Anthony Giddens calls a “disembedded” world, a putative “world of strangers.” Nevertheless, Rokesmith finds that as a clerk he can nurture trust in his former friends in this transformed world, giving him access to an emotion that seems rare enough to function as a kind of currency.

This could be another way of suggesting that Dickens seems to view lower middle-class life in notably positive ways at the end of his career. For

⁴⁵ In Catherine Gallagher’s chapter, “Bioeconomics of *Our Mutual Friend*,” she traces the abstractions that allow the production of value from dust, money, and death in the novel’s “transmission of life into inorganic matter and thence into money” (93).

⁴⁶ To be sure, Rokesmith is like other middle-class characters in Dickens, whose privileged statuses are only temporarily threatened. But Rokesmith occupies such a stand-alone role, and Harmon’s own narrative is so negligible in comparison, that it seems credible to bracket him off as his own character.

instance, Great Expectations' narrator, Pip, finds redemption at the end of his narrative of inordinate expectations in the steady life of a clerk.

I sold all I had, and put aside as much as I could, for a composition with my creditors — who gave me ample time to pay them in full — and I went out and joined Herbert. Within a month, I had quitted England, and within two months I was clerk to Clarriker and Co., and within four months I assumed my first undivided responsibility.

[. . .]

Many a year went round, before I was a partner in the House; but, I lived happily with Herbert and his wife, and lived frugally, and paid my debts, and maintained a constant correspondence with Biddy and Joe. (480)

The passage highlights Pip's fresh humility, emphasizing the modesty and simplicity of his new life. The position allows him to labor without ambiguity and to become a more responsible financial citizen, both highly valued qualities in the world of the novel. His plain life also leads to self-knowledge and an enhanced perspective on the illusions of his youth. "I must not leave it to be supposed that we were ever a great house," Pip assures his readers, "or that we made mints of money."

We were not in a grand way of business, but we had a good name, and worked for our profits, and did very well. We owed so much to Herbert's ever cheerful industry and readiness, that I often

wondered how I had conceived that old idea of his inaptitude, until
I was one day enlightened by the reflection, that perhaps the
inaptitude had never been in him at all, but had been in me. (480)

A new and ongoing modesty leads him to comprehend the distorted perceptions of his early adult life, and his misplaced mockery of Herbert Pocket's humble ambition and optimism. Herbert, ironically, is ultimately Pip's guide for learning to thrive as a modern, with the curtailed passions, blunted desires, and limited ambitions of "restricted" agency. In the end, Pip is proud of his labor and his time serving as a clerk. To be sure, it leads to upward mobility, but his position with Clarriker cultivates few expectations or illusions. Instead, it emphasizes qualities such as trustworthiness, which is the clerk's most valued attribute. Pip overcomes the mistakes of his past by being responsible for the payment of his debts and for reevaluating his past judgments, becoming more trustworthy in the process. His livelihood, too, is dependent on the most essential of trust relationships in a modern economy, his company's "good name."

By valuing these qualities, though, Dickens is not seeking a retrograde nostalgia for a pre-modern world. Rather, he seems concerned with how to live in modernity. On its face it would seem that the modernity Dickens is most concerned with in Our Mutual Friend is money culture, defined by what his mentor Carlyle called the "cash-nexus," where anything, including trust or love, can be bought and sold. But I would propose that it is not so much a new value system that concerns Dickens, but the new culture of strangers in which this money system operates. And in that culture, it is the clerk's very impersonality

that may be the key to his trustworthiness. Tied to those disembedded institutions that emerge with modernity, the clerk is a new modern type whose work is defined by trust relationships. Historically, we know that various forms of compensation and contractual obligations have been developed to ensure trustworthiness, but as Giddens observes, the “nature of the personal itself” is changed by modernity (120). In the modern world, Giddens writes, “Trust in persons is not focused by personalized connections within the local community and kinship networks. Trust on a personal level becomes a project, to be ‘worked at’ by the parties involved, and demands the *opening out of the individual to the other*” (121).

In relations of intimacy of the modern type, trust is always ambivalent, and the possibility of severance is more or less ever present. Personal ties can be ruptured, and ties of intimacy returned to the sphere of impersonal contacts. . . . The demand of “opening oneself up” to the other which personal trust relations now presume, the injunction to hide nothing from the other, mix reassurance and deep anxiety. Personal trust demands a level of self-understanding and self-expression which must itself be a source of psychological tension. For mutual self-revelation is combined with the need for reciprocity and support; yet the two are frequently incompatible. Torment and frustration interweave themselves with the need for trust in the other as the provider of care and support. (Giddens 252)

In other words, what we take to be the impersonal qualities of modernity may actually call for increased emotional contact among people, and promote relational emotions such as trust that require faith and confidence.

Idealized social emotions are a frequent feature in Dickens's fiction. In a discussion of Dickens's cultivation of sympathy, Martha Nussbaum remarks that his fiction seeks to create "a world of social and other-regarding concern, a world in which the good heart cares for each part of its context and strives, with active sympathy, to do good" (351). Dickens, in this view, wants not only to elicit his readers' sympathy for many of his principal characters, he also frequently imagines an ideal ethical world for them, in which compassion and empathy lead people to help rectify society's ills. Dickens uses all of his novelistic tools to gesture toward this idealized ethics: direct narratorial address, as at the end of Hard Times; plot construction, as in Sidney Carton's sacrifice in A Tale of Two Cities; and characterological development, as in Arthur Clennam's quietly helpful nature in Little Dorrit. Dickens's sense of social sympathy expressed a popular Victorian ideal. Sympathy could solve the problem of alienation and create distinction for those who could cultivate it. David Copperfield and Pip are the most obvious examples of socially mobile, lower middle-class characters who manifest emotions that distinguish them (see chapter 3), and who develop feelings that circulate in a social ecology, to their benefit and others. But Rokesmith presents a case in which his emotions are almost entirely social and are not accompanied by the development of a deeper interiority. Indeed, trust may be more helpful for understanding social emotions in Dickens than

sympathy. In Nussbaum's description, for example, sympathy may be "other-regarding," but it depends on a stable subjectivity with a "good heart." Trust, on the other hand, is a relational emotion that is only fully developed *among people* rather than *by someone*. Trust is constantly subject to revision, restored or lost based on the actions of the parties involved, whereas sympathy can exist without reference to the activity and behavior of others. In Giddens's words, trust combines "mutual self-revelation" with "reciprocity and support," an adaptation suited better for a modern world.

In a standard view of modernity, Rokesmith would be seen as estranged from all communal life, an alien lost in the urban crowd. Although he is cut off from the entitlement and familiarity of Harmon's world, Rokesmith's access to intimacy, as Giddens suggests, is increased in the disembedded environments of the modern world. Without the guidance of cultural signposts in traditional communities, modern individuals are strangers who must rely on each other. And with this estranged intimacy comes the development of more elaborate and emotional systems of trust (251). In the bleak modern world of Our Mutual Friend, Dickens resolves the strains of fear and alienation in modernity in two distinct, surprisingly parallel ways: through professional subordination and through romantic love. And on these terms, Rokesmith is an ideal subordinate, eliciting trust simply by being efficient and willing to submit to Boffin's authority. The capacity to anticipate Boffin's needs and care for his interests is also what allows him to be the ideal lover, for he draws out Bella's unconditional love with his ability to navigate sensitively and tactfully the old-world scheming

of his father's will. The charmless, functionality of the clerk and the yielding ardor of the lover are, in Rokesmith, magically united.

The disguise plot is one element of the novel's modernity. The narrative begins just after the death of the elder Harmon, who runs a property known as Harmony Jail, a repository of dust — that is to say, he dealt in trash. His adult son has returned from abroad to find that his father's will stipulates that he marry Bella Wilfer, the young, money-obsessed daughter of a poor clerk. Before he can claim his fortune, however, and marry Bella, a body pulled from the Thames is mistakenly identified as his. Rather than disputing his own death, Harmon assumes a new identity in order to ascertain the motives of those who have an interest in his father's will — to learn, most importantly, whether Bella can marry him for love, rather than for money. For most of the novel, then, Harmon exists as Rokesmith, the "Secretary" of Noddy Boffin, his father's former assistant. Rokesmith's real identity comes to light only after Bella has proven to him that she loves him truly, for whom he is, rather than for his money. While Harmon's ability to disguise himself reveals the dangerous instability of social roles during the period, his adoption of the role of clerk in particular palliates this danger, as being a clerk allows him to display exactly that quality — trustworthiness — that social instability renders uncertain. Moreover, the development of such trustworthiness, along with his display of other appropriate emotions (such as respect and admiration) do more to mark him as

a gentleman (i.e., someone worthy of a middle-class marriage) than would his fortune alone.⁴⁷

Rokesmith's very status as a stranger in Our Mutual Friend underwrites others' trust in him. If he were Harmon, alive and ready to inherit his fortune, his motives and actions would be interpreted solely through the stipulations of his father's will. His status as a stranger is invoked on several occasions. When he first appears, pale and out-of-breath with a handbill advertising "BODY FOUND," he asserts that he is an "utter stranger" (33); when he shows up at the Wilfers to rent a room, he is unable to give a personal reference because he is a "stranger" (46); and when he approaches Boffin on the street, it is as a "nobody" (99). Indeed, the category of the stranger is carried to odd extremes in the novel. When Bella finally discovers that he is Harmon, it doesn't bother her that she married him as Rokesmith. She scolds him for his obtuseness — "You are nothing better than a sphinx! And a married sphinx isn't a — isn't a nice confidential husband" (726) — but this doesn't get in the way of her trust or love. She relies on the feeling that he will love her regardless of the fact that he lacks the conventional markers of middle-class respectability, such as family and income, and thus underscores the importance of intuitions and first impressions in this world. (Bella herself is written into old Harmon's will after he meets her only twice as a little girl on the street).

⁴⁷ See Twemlow's comments regarding Eugene Wrayburn at the novel's end: "When I use the word, gentleman, I use it in the sense in which the degree may be attained by any man. The feelings of the gentleman I hold sacred . . ." (796).

The implicit motto of the novel is “through their labor you shall know them.” Boffin, at first, misunderstands his need for an educated guide to his new wealth and hires the street vendor Silas Wegg to read Gibbon’s The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire to him. Not only is Wegg’s knowledge useless — hilariously so — but he is a conniving swindler. Boffin does find the perfect subordinate in Rokesmith. The nature of Rokesmith’s relationship to Boffin is spelled out in a sample letter he writes to display his skills: “Mr. Boffin takes Mr. John Rokesmith at his word . . . he relies on Mr. John Rokesmith’s assurance that he will be faithful and serviceable” (182). Of course, the very basis of Rokesmith’s assurance is a fraud because he hasn’t even identified himself correctly — he applied for the job with a fake CV, as it were — but his subordinate behavior proves him trustworthy. Here is how the narrator describes Rokesmith’s work ethic:

His earnestness in determining to understand the length and breadth and depth of every piece of work submitted to him by his employer, was as special as his dispatch in transacting it. . . . [T]he Secretary was discerning, discreet, and silent, though as zealous as if the affairs had been his own. He showed no love of patronage or the command of money, but distinctly preferred resigning both to Mr. Boffin. If, in his limited sphere, he sought power, it was the power of knowledge; the power derivable from a perfect comprehension of his business. (193)

Dickens is so admiring of Rokesmith's qualities that he imitates them himself, his prose becoming as efficient, orderly, and direct as the man it describes, every word, phrase and clause in its place, sorted with a clerkly syntactic care. There is a secretary's aesthetic at play in Rokesmith's rhythms of work, as he "arranged the open papers into an orderly heap . . . folded it, docketed it . . . and . . . took from his pocket a piece of string and tied it together with a remarkably dexterous hand" (181). Effortless, tireless, and, in its regularity, entirely, instinctively trustworthy, this is a social ideal that seems not to depend on origins or any deep identity.

In Rokesmith, Dickens transforms modern social instability into the grounds of an ethical system. Stripped of the social authority of wealth and familial identity, all Rokesmith has available to him is the ability to "work at" his relationships as he works at his job. This "work" carries inherent risks, and trust must be constantly renewed through loyalty and diligence. It is important to remember in this context that from the perspective of the ownership class the clerk was a marginal character, bound by the ethos of gentlemanly behavior but prevented by his subordinate status from assuming the prerogatives of the gentleman. By "working at" his social relationships, with recursive feelings that mirror his methodical labor, Rokesmith underwrites others' faith in him and his own faith in others.

Rokesmith's intended, Bella, also highlights the necessity of trust in such a world. For much of the novel, she claims to want to marry for money. "I can't beg it, borrow it, or steal it," she tells her father, "so I have resolved that I must

marry it" (317).⁴⁸ Critics have long taken her to be a symbol of the cynicism of modern money culture. That she ends up marrying for love, in turn, represents the reformation of her former mercenary ways. But she has good reasons for being cynical. She begins the novel as a thing to be given away in an old man's will; embodying her culture's cynicism is a natural reaction to such status. If her society wants her to be a thing — "left to him in a will," she complains, "like a dozen of spoons" (45) — then she resolves to desire nothing more than things. She trusts Rokesmith because she believes that he doesn't see her as a thing. This trust needs to be so strong that when Rokesmith is revealed as Harmon she accepts that he didn't marry her to gain access to the fortune, which only comes to him if he marries her. In other words, being a clerk serves the same purpose for him as being deceived about Harmon's identity serves Bella. Both need to show that they are not marrying for money. Bella does so by marrying Harmon when she thinks he has only the salary of a clerk to give her; Harmon does so by being a clerk, that is by enacting a life of sincere trustworthiness. Once Bella has crossed into this territory, trusting becomes essential to her identity as a loved non-thing. "I can trust you," she claims more than once, "with all my soul. If I could not trust you, I should fall dead at your feet" (740). For Bella, in a mercenary society, trust secures her humanity. They pass out of the brute economic world of Harmon's father — which was built on the power of wealth

⁴⁸ At the end of the century, it would be much more likely that she could also "work for it." See my discussion of the rise of the female clerk in the Introduction and Fleissner's discussion of the late-century female clerk in "Dictation Anxiety." Fleissner suggests that Mina, the desexualized, mechanized stenographer in Stoker's novel, is preferred over Lucy, the susceptible sexual woman (85).

and the force of his nasty reputation — to a world in which strangers can find common ground.⁴⁹

The catalyst for their bond, however, comes from the failure of trust between Boffin and Rokesmith. Before the novel's denouement, as Boffin becomes more and more accustomed to being the heir to the fortune, he begins to suspect Rokesmith's motives. He portrays Rokesmith's actions in language that Dickens earlier used to describe Heep in David Copperfield and accuses him of self-interested, disloyal ambitions disavowed by Noggs in Nicholas Nickleby.

"This Rokesmith is a needy young man that I take for my Secretary out of the open street. This Rokesmith gets acquainted with my affairs, and gets to know that I mean to settle a sum of money on this young lady. 'Oho!' says this Rokesmith"; here Mr Boffin clapped a finger against his nose, and tapped it several times with a sneaking air, as embodying Rokesmith confidentially confabulating with his own nose; "'This will be a good haul; I'll go in for this!' And so this Rokesmith, greedy and hungering, begins a-creeping on his hands and knees towards the money." (579).

Boffin imagines Rokesmith "a-creeping" into a position of fraudulent advantage.

Here again we are presented with a picture that emphasizes the similarities among clerks, rather than their differences. In both the clerk/employer

⁴⁹ Others have begun to investigate how Dickens used the marriage relationship for thinking about social relationships. In David Copperfield, for example, Rachel Ablow writes that he "seeks to reproduce a model of sympathy organized around the ethically valuable desire for another person's love and approval, a model of sympathy most consistently associated in the middle of the nineteenth century with relationships between husbands and wives" (24).

relationship and in modernity, wherein this relationship is rooted, trust is absolutely essential for maintaining social relations. Rokesmith could be Uriah Heep or Newman Noggs, whose work also risks the possibility of their being insufficiently subordinate.

All of them *act* a part to one degree or another. By subordinating his emotion Rokesmith's affect seems both routinized and willful. Bella notices that "the Secretary's face changed no more than wall. A slightly knitted brow, that expressed nothing but an almost mechanical attention, and a compression of the mouth, that might have been a guard against a scornful smile" (467). There are indications that this affect is purposefully adopted to enable him to become even more subordinate. When Bella complains elsewhere of his sternness, Rokesmith says, "Upon my honour I had no thought but for you. I forced myself to be constrained, lest you might misinterpret my being more natural" (510). Shortly later, he tells her, "I repress myself and force myself to act a part. It is not in tameness of spirit that I submit. I have a settled purpose" (513). What is important in the case of Rokesmith is that Bella continues to trust him, and that he can continue to receive it. He is like Heep, if Heep were able to prove himself to Agnes by practicing a better mode of subordination. The difference between them, though, is not only that Rokesmith avoids committing fraud, but that he elicits trust from others who believe in him.

Boffin's suspicion highlights the absolute importance of trustworthiness in Dickens's culture, both personal and fiduciary. Most importantly, though, the plot line explores the ways that trust can transcend economic motives. We learn

at the end of the novel that Boffin discovers Harmon's subterfuge long before Bella, and he performs his suspicions for Bella's benefit. Rokesmith and the Boffins collude together to conceal his true identity so that Rokesmith can marry Bella before his real identity and his claim to the fortune become known. Their goal is that Bella marry for love (and trust) rather than money. This situation naturally begs many questions, especially whether Harmon's subordinate turn as Rokesmith was a fraudulent act to satisfy his father's will. But in the dynamic between knowingness and subordination, which Rokesmith enacts by being a secretary, these kinds of ambiguities are endured through trust. Trust is the ultimate contingency. Rokesmith could, in fact, turn out to be like Heep, who works to defraud the Wickfields. We can never know what Harmon/Rokesmith's ultimate motives are. But we do know that Dickens values the clerkly qualities that he adopts: his stoic work ethic, his diligent trustworthiness, his subordination. And these qualities, especially after Boffin discharges him, seem to suit Bella as well.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CLASS MOBILITY OF THE SENSITIVE CHILD:

DAVID COPPERFIELD

*Only the good part, the flower and fruit of it, was
plucked by him . . . nothing of the evil part, not of the
earth in which the seed was planted, remained to soil
him.*

— John Forster

Dickens's embrace of subordination leads an even more interesting life in his quasi-autobiographical novel David Copperfield. In the novel's emotional economy, crushing childhood experiences threaten to produce negative social emotions, such as class rage or irrational cruelty, and it takes special forms of subordination to transcend these determinative forces. This assumption is buried in Forster's assertion that Dickens kept only the good aspects of his negative experiences as a child ("Only the good part . . . was plucked by him"), and eschewed the rest ("nothing of the evil part . . . remained to soil him") (35-

36). A number of important implications inhere in Forster's comment: that Dickens had agency over his emotions; that the good and the evil aspects of experience can be identified; and, most importantly perhaps, that childhood — rather than essential, in-born — emotions persist and have an affective influence on the adult.⁵⁰ What the child does in such a situation, how these experiences manifest themselves, will tell us much about the kind of person the child will become. In terms of class, the capability to have agency, to exert force on the effects of class, suggests that the child himself can engage in class mobility. Of course, the child cannot develop the vocations of an adult; instead, such an upwardly mobile child can become something greater than his circumstances through his emotional experience. The child, however, is naturally subordinate, and like the clerk is forced to make the best he can of a bad situation.

To be sure, David Copperfield offers a retrospective narrative that fashions the past from the perspective of the present. The emotions of the child are viewed through the lens of the adult. But such a narrative does tell us about the kinds of emotions valued by an upwardly mobile lower middle-class individual, regardless of whether the child himself was as conscious of them as the novel represents. In David Copperfield, roots of the adult's success can be found in the representation of the sensitive child, whose claim to a rich emotional life counters the scarcity of emotions commonly endured by the class-

⁵⁰ Jill Matus suggests that by 1844 Dickens was practicing a nascent form of psychotherapy through his experiments with mesmerism (427). She notes that the ghostly presence of the past in the present is a significant feature of ghost stories like A Christmas Carol (428).

challenged individual.⁵¹ David develops an emotional life that is quite different from the clerks discussed thus far. Unlike the emotional manifestations of Rokesmith's patterns of work and subordination, David's emotions are more nuanced and diverse. They also do not seem to literalize an economic logic, as Heep's involuntary affects do. David does emerge from his economic suffering, much as we're told Newman Noggs does. (Indeed, Noggs may, in part, be the model for David's emotional subordination.) David's emotions are influenced by the social structure, but they are often surprisingly rational and reflexive (on rationality and emotion, see de Sousa). In an economy of emotion, these kinds of feelings are "proper," anticipating in the refinement of the child's emotions the adult's socioeconomic mobility. But these emotions coincide with the child's experience of injustice and isolation, circumstances that could easily be embittering and negatively determining. The novel, then, imagines a different alternative to the literalization of the social structure in one's being.

Yet David *feels* the effects of socioeconomic events and structures acutely, and his narrative is frequently punctuated by interpretations of his emotional responses to these events. From the standpoint of an emotional economy, the more diverse one's emotions become the more one becomes entitled and deserving. However, this does not mean David feels the effects of social forces any less. Feelings of powerlessness and threats to masculinity are primary issues in the novel, just as they appear in the representations of other clerks. But

⁵¹ By embedding Dickens's narrative in a class analysis I hope to avoid the more psychodramatic arguments of critics like Nina Auerbach, who writes that the "loved, famous man fed on the fallen child he had been" (15).

David illustrates how an embrace of subordination and the emotions — undoubtedly idealized by Dickens — can help to produce outcomes that compensate for powerlessness. Subordination is the natural state of the clerk, of course. But through his representation of clerks Dickens maps the responses made by men to oppressive circumstances and people. David Copperfield imagines a means through which sensitivity can neutralize other emotional responses, such as hypocrisy, resentment, anger, and routine and habituation, and in its way offer a pragmatic path — between knowingness and subordination, for instance — for the lower middle class man.

The trope of sensitivity in Dickens's life and work is familiar to most close readers. It is a truism, for instance, in most biographical sketches, that Dickens, who borrowed from his own "Autobiographical Fragment" to write David's narrative, was a sensitive child. At the very least, it is reasonable to note that Dickens represents himself as "sensitive, imaginative, and highly intelligent" (3), as Grahame Smith acknowledges in the opening biographical chapter in The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens. In an introduction to David Copperfield, Radhika Jones observes that the novel appeared the same year as Wordsworth's The Prelude, which valorizes the author and man of ideas as "a Sensitive being, a creative Soul" (xiv). Dickens's child-aged characters, in general, usually embody sensitive qualities. Pip, in Great Expectations, articulates his own sensitivity as a response to injustice.

My sister's bringing up had made me sensitive. In the little world in which children have their existence whosoever brings them up,

there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice. It may be only small injustice that the child can be exposed to; but the child is small, and its world is small, and its rocking-horse stands as many hands high, according to scale, as a big-boned Irish hunter. Within myself, I had sustained, from my babyhood, a perpetual conflict with injustice. I had known, from the time when I could speak, that my sister, in her capricious and violent coercion, was unjust to me. I had cherished a profound conviction that her bringing me up by hand, gave her no right to bring me up by jerks. Through all my punishments, disgraces, fasts and vigils, and other penitential performances, I had nursed this assurance; and to my communing so much with it, in a solitary and unprotected way, I in great part refer the fact that I was morally timid and very sensitive. (63)

By “communing” on injustice Pip forms an emotional sensibility that is closely observant of, and touched by, external events as well as self-aware about his own affective responses to them.

In a discussion of George Eliot, Tom Sperlinger observes that Victorian notions of sensitivity combined acute sympathy with a strong sense of self, reinforcing a connection to the external world without relinquishing the self’s point of view. As Sperlinger writes, “Sensitiveness is a pond, sympathy is a river. One reduces and contains the self, the other allows it movement and force” (263). The best kind of feeling in such a model is one that is constantly in check,

careful, thoughtful, and placed into larger perspectives, but one whose existence as an emotion is never in doubt. This is not the territory of the affect-less grim clerk, who appears resigned to a life of economic and emotional deprivation. Being sensitive, instead, creates distinction and signals a surplus of emotion. But as an emotional quality it is even more important for Dickens when self-sympathy risks becoming no more than narcissistic pain. During his family's financial troubles, he narrates, "I could not bear to think of myself — beyond the reach of all such honourable emulation and success. The tears ran down my face. I felt as if my heart were rent. I prayed, when I went to bed that night, to be lifted out of the humiliation and neglect in which I was. I never suffered so much before" (Forster 31). These emotions are powerfully self-absorbed, even in a child. They can produce a strong sense of self, but self-pity threatens to short circuit sympathy for others.

On the other hand, the feelings in Dickens's autobiographical narrative express a strong sense of subordination and an acute awareness of injustice in the world, even if that injustice is inflicted in this example solely on the self. Crucial to this dynamic, then, is that the feelings have an external cause. Dickens himself complained about his own "shrinking sensitivity" (Forster 35), which the biographer Peter Ackroyd interprets as a "morbid susceptibility to any form of slight" (98). One risk of such an acute emotional response to the world is letting it have too great a rein, to allow it to become too involuntary and influential. Conversely, it would be just as bad if there were no emotions at all, for developing proper feelings is essential to upward mobility.

This chapter explores how David's emotions extend the range of feelings felt by clerks. Diligent labor and constrained feeling, as they are for Rokesmith and Pip, are part of his success, to be sure.⁵² But like Pip, David adds a child's sensitivity to this equation, which suggests ultimately that one of the most developed forms of "proper" emotions — and most successful responses to the class system — in Dickens's work is that of the upward mobility of the sensitive child. Under pressure from oppression, authoritarian masculinity, and class constraints, David develops a mode of being that enables him to negotiate life as it is. What is compelling about this mode of being, especially from a lower middle-class perspective, is that it is feminine, sentimental, and highly imaginative. It may not be quite the same as the "sentimental worldview" identified by Lauren Berlant in her Female Complaint, but her description of twentieth-century female sentimentality and its role in compensating for the "the attrition of life" is surprisingly apt for David's form of subordination:

[I]t seems important to understand . . . the defensive, inventive, and adaptive activity of getting by, along with the great refusals to go through power to attain legitimacy. In a sentimental worldview, people's "interests" are less in changing the world than in not being defeated by it, and meanwhile finding satisfaction in minor pleasures and major fantasies. (27)

It should not surprise us, then, that in Dickens's version of upward mobility in David Copperfield, his fantasy of successful sensitivity, does not emphasize

⁵² See Ruth and Salmon on the open acknowledgment of the importance of labor and professionalism to David Copperfield.

developing the life of the mind — as it does for Wordsworth — so much as becoming simply financially secure and free from unpredictable oppression.

Dickens as a Lower Middle-Class Novelist

In part, bourgeois security is the dominant goal (and fantasy) of the novel because Dickens, like Gissing and Wells, was a lower middle-class novelist.⁵³ The conventional wisdom regarding Dickens is that he was a novelist of “the people,” but he wrote and understood far more about the middle classes — the lower middle class, in particular — than he did the proletariat. By this I mean, in part, that his outlook, values, and even his style arose out of his lower middle-class origins. But I emphasize Dickens’s background also because our sense of his class shame and the early impact of his family’s financial troubles are often overdetermined by readers. Much like the flimsy respectability of the debtor William Dorrit, Dickens’s pursuit of upward mobility and his discomfort regarding the events of his childhood were caused by his parents’ unpredictably fragile connection to the bourgeoisie as much as they were due to the imprisonment of his father and his own labor in the blacking warehouse. Because lower middle-class status was built on the social perception of respectability and refinement as much as it was on a certain level of income, the trauma of financial crisis and the subsequent loss of social status was amplified.

⁵³ In his introduction to Hard Times, Terry Eagleton writes, “To view society from a lower-middle-class perspective is to have access to the workings of the ‘official,’ upper-middle-class, but also to experience sympathy for those beyond the social pale. . . . Dickens’s peculiar social position allowed him a more complex, comprehensive view of Victorian England than, say, an aristocratic novelist, and gave him access to society’s more notable conflicts and contradictions” (3).

Consequently, Dickens's status slippage as a youth and his rapid rise as a young adult contributed to his remarkable comprehension of the insecurities and preoccupations of life as a classed individual. As George Gissing writes of Dickens, "To the lower middle class, so rich in virtues yet so provocative of satire, he by origin belonged; in its atmosphere he always breathed most freely, and had the largest command of his humorous resources" (40).

Dickens's paternal grandparents were servants and his maternal grandfather a clerk. His father, too, worked as a clerk in a series of Naval Pay offices and did some incidental journalism, before becoming a legislative reporter. Dickens grew up in an environment that was shabbily genteel, both financially strained and self-regarding. His father is said to have often lived beyond their means in order maintain a middle-class facade, and his profligacy led to his imprisonment in Marshalsea Prison as a debtor (Ackroyd 54, 63-64). Yet after the horrors of his short time at Warren's blacking warehouse, Dickens's late childhood followed the course of those who fell — or, perhaps more aptly, were transitioning — between the working and middle classes. In contrast to the self-constructed official story of Dickens's early life, I would argue that a good part of his youth was relatively ordinary for a lower middle-class boy. As he came of age, he went to school for two years, began his working life as a "writing clerk" in the law offices of Ellis and Blackmore (Ackroyd 115), and then, as we know, became a parliamentary reporter like his father. This is not to say that the shock of his family's financial setbacks were any less impactful on a child. I do want to suggest, though, that he ended up, in early adulthood, about

where you would expect. He was born into the lower middle class and entered adulthood as part of the lower middle class. In different circumstances he could have received more education or a better entry-level position, but he was never destined, for instance, to attend university or receive high-level patronage (G. Smith 4).

It is widely acknowledged that his childhood experiences led to the remarkable class awareness in his work, but I would suggest that his lower middle-class background gave his comprehension of class special power. It was the collision of middle-class conventions and working-class aspirations in the experience at Warren's blacking warehouse that made it so eventful for the young Dickens. He was not alone. The incident perfectly expresses the psychosocial anxieties of the lower middle class, whose economic stability and cultural status could be so easily shaken. Even Uriah Heep knows that he can injure David Copperfield by mentioning the bottling warehouse (Copperfield 817). The strain of the experience may have had something to do with Dickens's particular sensitivity, but the extent to which he interprets it as downward mobility, even later in life, means that its traumatic effects may not be solely attributable to his Wordsworthian "sensitive being." His pain regarding the contaminating companionship in the blacking warehouse express the torments of his class: "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk in to this companionship; compared these everyday associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my earlier hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast" (Forster 22). Yet he is close enough to

this way of life that it is not so much his absolute difference that sets him apart but his distinction: "Though perfectly familiar with them, my conduct and manners were different enough from theirs to place a space between us. They, and the men, always spoke of me as 'the young gentleman'" (Forster 25-26). His conduct and manners are not different, they are simply "different enough" to establish some distance between them.

Dickens's class awareness can also be seen as an effect of his remarkably early professional success. In Dickens's Class Consciousness, Pam Morris suggests that

In moving so rapidly from that marginalization to a position of esteem at the centre, Dickens experiences the contradictions inherent in interpellation of margin to centre in extreme form: intense desire for narcissistic identification with social images of success and respectability, fused with a deep fear of personal lack, in turn stimulating an alienated, hostile perspective on the object of desire. (10)

Dickens's desire to "unmask, even violate" genteel respectability is matched only by his "unappeasable anxiety" that he will be unmasked himself (Morris 13).

Dickens, Morris argues, suffered under the always present potential denunciation: "You're not a *real* gentleman" (1). Missing in Morris's description, however, is another effect of his "class consciousness": his representation of injustice. As much as he sought to obscure the embarrassing aspects of his lower middle-class origins, and was determined never to feel the same level of

insecurity, he also wrote reform-minded books as though he owed some penance for his success.

Yet, the features of childhood suffering return again and again in his work. Children play an essential role in Dickens's social critiques, which given his biography is not surprising. He believed that the sins of a society are felt most by its children. However, his representation of these children raises questions about his objectives. Writers like Dickens, Laurie Langbauer suggests, commit themselves to a larger ethical project by portraying children in their narratives. They denounce the adult world's indifference to the suffering of children, while also exposing and promulgating the desire of readers for images of injured children. This entangles them in an ethical dilemma: "By displaying these images, recycling their sway for their own rhetorical ends, these writers are caught in an ethical impossibility, repeating what they critique in order to critique it" (Langbauer 89).⁵⁴ Langbauer sees a lesson here for the development of an indeterminative poststructural ethics. In my view, there is also a larger conclusion to be drawn from the class implications of such a narrative. If the sensitive child is necessary for shaping the proper feeling of the upwardly mobile man, and suffering is a key for developing sensitivity, then childhood suffering is required for the man's success. The child's suffering is thus necessary, although the narrative's implicit critique of the class system loathes

⁵⁴ "The central poststructural ethical insight of the last generation," Langbauer writes, "stresses that we inhabit relations between self and others that are intractable, no one's fault, but still nevertheless everyone's obligation" (90). By reproducing such representations authors force their readers to exercise their ethical muscles, so to speak, and they demonstrate the power of rhetorical figures (like the child) in cultural narratives.

such a necessity. It is similar to the double-bind of upward mobility itself, which requires an acute sense of class status that becomes promptly repressed (or masked) after the mobility is achieved.

The Difference Sensitivity Makes

It is not always clear that David will avoid the fate of other more powerless individuals. For instance, part of the lesson David learns from Murdstone, which compounds his sense of being a victim, is that he can harbor untoward passions himself. After he bites Murdstone's hand, his mother comes to see him in a new light: "I forgive you; but I am so grieved, Davy, that you should have such bad passions in your heart." He realizes that "They had persuaded her that I was a wicked fellow, and she was more sorry for that than for my going away" (112). The difference for David is that this draws him into a double consciousness, estranging him from his self-perception: "I recollect that I positively began to have a dread of myself, as a kind of wild boy who did bite" (131). The implication is that he could, indeed, become the wild boy, but instead he gains a measure of self-awareness of his emotional responses by dreading his own potential wildness.

Compare this to the schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone, in Our Mutual Friend, whose class rage is ignited in a competition with Eugene Wrayburn for Lizzie Hexam's attention. More than in Uriah Heep's case, the problem for Headstone is the unrestrained nature of his class resentment. His claim against Wrayburn seems reasonable — indeed, Dickens seems to sympathize — at first:

“I tell you sir, I have worked my way onward, out of both and in spite of both [origins and upbringing], and have a right to be considered a better man than you, with better reasons for being proud” (291). But the frank articulation of his position vis-à-vis Wrayburn, who embodies an insouciant bourgeoisie, smacks too much of effort and class warfare. Headstone’s struggles to discipline himself, and to refashion his emotion through the love of another, become increasingly frantic. His class rage overtakes him, capturing his very being in its power: “The dark look of hatred and revenge with which the words broke from his livid lips, and with which he stood holding out his smeared hand as if it held some weapon and had just struck a mortal blow” (390-01).⁵⁵ The risk of this kind of emotion is that it will become too determinative, eliminating any distance from, or self-conscious awareness of, the social structures and circumstances that led the individual to this place. Dickens seems to suggest that modulating such emotion makes one more able to manage internalized class dynamics; an overwhelming anger, by contrast, makes one less effective in confronting class determinations.

Uriah Heep is an even more threatening figure to those who might dream of class mobility, for he falters even though his emotions do seem modulated. As

⁵⁵ Rick Rylance suggests that Dickens’s portrait of Headstone implicitly critiques associationism (and its links to Utilitarianism): “Headstone’s is a mind without proportion, self-understanding, and anything more than habituated egotism. As a result, Dickens argues, his human desires remain childishly vindictive. He lives in a toytown world as grotesquely messy and selfishly infantile as his self-proclaimed (and entirely unreciprocated) ‘love’ for Lizzie Hexam” (Rylance 69). Pam Morris, on the other hand, thinks that Headstone attempts to exert too much discipline on his passions. “Headstone is a representation of the totally taught and regimental self” (Morris 133). He is caught in a dynamic that seeks to discipline his emotion solely through will power, and like a Mr. Hyde his passion breaks through at night: “Tied up all day with his disciplined show upon him, subdued to the performance of his routine of educational tricks, encircled by a gabbling crowd, he broke loose at night like an ill-tamed animal” (535).

hard as Heep tries to be like David, his affect seems only perverse and alien. Heep isn't at all antisocial or detached; he wants to be integrated into a middle-class life, to be married and prosperous. But rather than reflect humanizing feelings that soften the harsh realities of economic striving and competition, he embodies all that is wrong (or what Dickens thinks is wrong) with money culture. Heep is too interested in upward mobility for its own sake where figures like David and Rokesmith mitigate their economic interest with public-spirited motives; his attempts to maintain discipline over his affect are too motivated. Heep fails to reshape his classed affects, which continue to reveal the class of his origins regardless of how far he climbs.

It is valuable to remember that David has his own "Headstone" moments, not only as a boy "who bites" but as an adult as well. David Copperfield is notably explicit regarding David's reactions toward Heep, of course, but it is easy to lose sight that such scenes are not simply about class distinction. They illustrate the role of subordination in emotional development. In the following passage, Heep elicits atavistic feelings in David that are not unlike Headstone's:

I believe I had a delirious idea of seizing the red-hot poker out of the fire, and running him through with it. It went from me with a shock, like a ball fired from a rifle: but the image of Agnes, outraged by so much as a thought of this red-headed animal's, remained in my mind when I looked at him, sitting all awry as if his mean soul gripped his body, and made me giddy. He seemed to swell and grow before my eyes; the room seemed full of the echoes

of his voice; and the strange feeling (to which, perhaps, no one is quite a stranger) that all this had occurred before, at some indefinite time, and that I knew what he was going to say next, took possession of me. (441)

The murderous rage and what amounts to a panic attack are not proper emotions for the upwardly mobile man. David's feelings are ugly and reprehensible. They may act to underwrite David's masculinity vis-à-vis Agnes; certainly, they illustrate the extent of the threat that Uriah represents to David, both romantically and professionally. What these feelings are not, however, is disciplined. In the scene, Uriah is coolly passive-aggressive, asserting that his feelings for David ("I have always overflowed towards you") and Agnes ("with what a pure affection do I love the ground my Agnes walks on!") are the most refined. We know, because of the narrator's insight, that Uriah is dissimulating, but without this knowledge he seems to have mastered an economy of emotion by embodying the most proper feelings. Just as David is known in childhood as a boy "who bites," here he could become a man who murders. What keeps him from lapsing further into this passion is his recognition of his own subordination. He is pulled back by the "timely observation of the sense of power that there was in his face." What stops him, perhaps, is the memory of Murdstone, his awareness, like the equally sensitive Newman Noggs, of his powerlessness.

In Dickens's version of David as a sensitive child, his strikingly feminized innocence is contrasted to a dark, foreboding, masculine world. Outside his

warm, maternal home, we're told, "the elms bent to one another," "like giants who were whispering secrets, and after a few seconds of such repose, fell into a violent flurry, tossing their wild arms about, as if their late confidences were really too wicked for their peace of mind" (55). Other memories are infused with a similar dread:

There is one cock who gets upon a post to crow, and seems to take particular notice of me as I look at him through the kitchen window, who makes me shiver, he is so fierce.

[. . .]

One Sunday night my mother reads to Peggoty and me in there, how Lazarus was raised up from the dead. And I am so frightened that they are afterwards obliged to take me out of bed, and shew me the quiet churchyard out of the bedroom window, with the dead all lying in their graves at rest, below the solemn moon. (62)

These moments are ominous, anticipating a malevolent world that will soon encroach on his happiness. They also reveal a child whose feelings mark him as imaginative and highly aware of his own vulnerability.

Murdstone — the "murdering stone" or "shit stone" — literalizes the threat of the crowing rooster with the brutal, authoritarian bearing he brings into the home. He symbolizes the interdiction of the social and the "name" and "no" of the father.⁵⁶ When David first meets him, the narrator writes, "My right

⁵⁶ See Virginia Carmichael's essay, "'In Search of Beein': *Nom/Non du Père* in David Copperfield."

hand was in my mother's left, so I gave him the other. 'Why that's the wrong hand, Davy!' laughed the gentleman" (68). The episode begins the process of separating him from his mother and the maternal world in which they live and heralds the loss of innocence. Murdstone is the social and masculine identity that "hails" David, here represented by the stipulation that he let go of his mother's hand to participate correctly in the handshake.

Murdstone's presence not only disrupts the Oedipal bond. He is an archetypically masculine man, with black eyes, thick black hair and whiskers, square lower jaw, and a "rich white and black, and brown" complexion: "a very handsome man" (71). Murdstone wants to toughen him up and reminds him that "What is before you, is a fight with the world; and the sooner you begin it, the better" (207). He admonishes his mother to "be firm with the boy. Don't say, 'Oh, Davy, Davy!' That's childish. He knows his lesson, or he does not know it" (103). His firmness, "another name for tyranny" (99), and proclivity for discipline, are portrayed by the narrator as masculine brutishness. Murdstone's dog is similarly cruel, "deep mouthed and black-haired like Him — and he was very angry at the sight of me, and sprang out to get me." The narrator is unequivocal about the nature of his relationship to Murdstone: "He ordered me like a dog, and I obeyed like a dog" (173). His flaws include a lack of sympathy and emotional frigidity, which he uses to blackmail those around him.

"There is no extent of mere weakness, Clara," said Mr. Murdstone
in reply, "that can have the least weight with me. You lose breath."

“Pray let us be friends,” said my mother, “I couldn’t live under coldness or unkindness. I am so sorry. I have a great many defects, I know, and it’s very good of you, Edward, with your strength of mind, to endeavour to correct them for me. Jane, I don’t object to anything. I should be quite broken-hearted if you thought of leaving.” (101)

The Murdstones’ grinding oppression and unkindness eventually leads to his mother’s death. The lesson David draws from Murdstone’s behavior is that authority is brutally powerful and any direct confrontation is futile. In the face of such cruelty, he is mostly a passive victim who retreats into an isolated sensitivity. Consequently, David grows up to inhabit an identity that is *not* Murdstone, becoming a man who avoids reproducing this authoritarian behavior.

In the competitive capitalist world of the nineteenth century, these lessons could inspire David to pursue a ruthless success. Instead, Murdstone’s example teaches David about what kind of man he does not want to be and sets in motion David’s embrace of an attenuated, passive, and sentimental masculinity. Murdstone’s reprehensible ideology is captured best by his opinion that “if I have an obstinate horse or dog to deal with, what do you think I do? . . . I beat him” (95-96). And when David fights back by biting him on the hand, “He beat me then, as if he would have beaten me to death” (108). Murdstone’s doctrine, of course, asks that David bite back, that he become the obstinate boy who acts in merciless self-interest — a pattern that could in turn be repeated by

the adult David's own tyrannical imposition on the world. The narrator, though, by focusing on the sensitive child's victimization, lays the groundwork for his readers' sympathy for the emotionally refined man that David will become.

Although David does have unruly passions, emotions that threaten to lash out in rage — as we've seen in his response to Heep — in general he strives to develop emotional responses that are sympathetic and deliberative. His response is to become other than Murdstone, rather than like him. Unlike characters such as Headstone, David embraces rather than resists his own weakness, and cultivates sympathy through his sensitivity rather than becoming increasingly resentful about the harm he endures. At the same time, he eschews the stiffly ideological cruelty of the middle-class Murdstone, whose self-righteousness provides a cover for impulsive, raw emotions that seem so arbitrarily cruel. By working to overcome the harsh environment of childhood, David can cultivate emotions that mark him as a member of the entitled classes — however self-fulfilling the narrative — long before he attains it through an income. In a class ecology of increasing mobility, these emotions replace the “blood” of class privilege.⁵⁷ In this light, Murdstone represents what Dickens saw as wrong with certain middle-class values, as opposed to, say, those of the lower middle class. Murdstone's motives are self-serving and he subscribes to a

⁵⁷ As he does elsewhere, Dickens reserves particular satirical venom for the belief in inherited privilege: “‘Oh, you know, deuce take it,’ said this gentleman, . . . ‘we can't forego Blood, you know. We must have Blood, you know. Some young fellows, you know, may be a little behind their station, perhaps, in point of education and behaviour, and may go a little wrong, you know, and get themselves and other people into a variety of fixes-and all that-but deuce take it, it's delightful to reflect that they've got Blood in 'em!’” (434).

brand of authoritarianism in which the ends justify the means. From an economic standpoint, of course, Murdstone is a member of the ownership class. His small firm, Murdstone and Grinby, supplies wine to packet ships (207, 209). It is to Murdstone's waterfront warehouse that David is eventually sent to work, among the bottle washers and labelers. Murdstone presents a picture of an exploitative, commerce-based middle class that operates in particularly self-interested and calculating ways.

But David is a lower middle-class boy, who perpetrates his own kind of class violence through his cultivation of sensitivity. The horror of becoming a working-class boy, on the verge of juvenile delinquency, produces a traumatic memory that the adult narrator can hardly characterize:

I know I do not exaggerate, unconsciously and unintentionally, the scantiness of my resources or the difficulties of my life. . . . I know that I worked, from morning until night, with common men and boys, a shabby child. I know I lounged about the streets, insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed. I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond. (216)

The ostensible purpose of such a passage is to underscore the deprivations and daily cruelties experienced by the urban working classes, to elicit readers' sympathy for the plight of the laborer. But it also evokes sympathy for David at the expense of his companions, common men and boys. David is the primary victim of these desperate circumstances, and we lose sight of the daily, long-term

experience of those who are not just temporary visitors. The repetition of “I know” produces an air of conviction, as though headed toward a reformist message, but the phrase also suggests a traumatic experience from which he can extract only the barest of facts. What remains are a self-absorbed set of emotions that underscore his distinction.

But I never, happily for me no doubt, made a single acquaintance, or spoke to any of the many boys whom I saw daily in going to the warehouse, in coming from it, and in prowling about the streets at meal-times. I led the same secretly unhappy life; but I led it in the same lonely, self-reliant manner. (223)

His sense of difference is even maintained by the men he works with, who call him “little gent” (218). We can speculate whether these men meant this nickname in jest or not. Regardless of their intentions, Chris Vanden Bossche is right to assert that David is not insulted by the work he must perform “so much as the degrading company it forces him to keep.” His attitude, Vanden Bossche argues, “shows such emphatic disregard for his fellow workers that, taken from their point of view and not that of the boy suffering the angst of social displacement, it comes as a shocking display of class violence” (“Cookery” 91). This class violence is characteristic of the lower middle class, who must negotiate between an acknowledgment of their inadequacy and their struggle to overcome the taint of failure. Furthermore, the scene emphasizes David’s sensitivity: he is acutely aware of the other workers’ plight, but the real injury is

directed at himself. It thus seems to naturalize his class difference by becoming an affront to his very sensibility.

But the apparent naturalization of his distinction is always incomplete. The trauma of Murdstone's violence and his warehouse lives on in many trivial, proliferating ways. On his way to London as a young adult, traveling as a real gent — "well educated, well dressed, and with plenty of money in my pocket" (343) — he is humiliated when his seat is taken by a "shabby man with a squint, who had no other merit than smelling like a livery-stables, and being able to walk across me, more like a fly than a human being, while the horses were at a canter!" (342). In remembering this cut, David's disingenuous hyperbole expresses a version of his ongoing injury and the sensitivity it prompts: "I have always considered this as the first fall I had in life." It reminds him of "a distrust in myself, which has often beset me in life on small occasions" (342). This distrust, I think, arises from the tentative nature of his lower middle-class position. He may exaggerate, but by naming this his "first fall" David underscores the absolute importance of upward mobility. His comment does not trivialize his experience with Murdstone so much as give it a new life as a persistent insecurity about his own economic mobility and character. The characteristics of self-surveillance in such a comment are undeniable, but it also reinforces our understanding of him as a sensitive victim, easily hurt, hesitant, and self-doubting.

David's sensitivity in regard to Littimer, whose aura of respectability makes him uneasy, is similarly self-directed: it reminds him of his lack of

maturity and legitimizes his “secret” feelings of inadequacy. The narrator writes that his embarrassment around Littimer “was occasioned, I suppose, by the reverend nature of respectability in the abstract, but I felt particularly young in this man’s presence . . . for in the calmness of respectability he might have numbered fifty years as well as thirty” (357); “in the presence of this most respectable man I became, as our smaller poets sing ‘a boy again’” (358). Although played in part for its comedy, David’s discomfort springs from his awareness of how close Littimer is to his own class status and his role as Steerforth’s companion. These passages constitute a working-out of what makes the gentleman. His discomfort around Littimer, moreover, refers him back to his own interiority and the imperative to regulate it: “my conscience had embarrassed me with whispers that I had mistrusted his master, and I could not repress a vague uneasy dread that he might find it out. How was it, having so little in reality to conceal, that I always *did* feel as if this man were finding me out?” (477). Again, David takes the opportunity of class insecurity to plumb the depths of his interiority, to articulate feelings that add to his emotional surplus.

The insecurity — a kind of flinty uneasiness — to which David’s dread refers is even more pronounced in Dickens’s own biography. The central injury for Dickens was abandonment by his family. Langbauer vividly describes how the memory of his family’s indifference persisted long into adulthood.

What bewildered him most, overwhelming him when he walked down the street of the blacking factory years later . . . was the sense that his suffering had been invisible to those who should

have cared. The shock and anguish, the misery and torment their child was enduring never even occurred to his parents; caught up in their own lives, they didn't take the time to think about it. The reality of his childhood became for Dickens the complete ignorance and disregard of the world around him to the searing truth of his existence. (94)

More than David, Dickens's emotions regarding his childhood experiences amplify rather than diminish the grim difficulty of the blacking warehouse and his family's trials. Forster's description introduces a different vocabulary for characterizing the persistence of such experiences.

[T]here was in him . . . something even hard and aggressive; in his determinations a something that had almost the tone of fierceness; something in his nature that made his resolves insuperable, however hasty the opinions on which they had been formed. (34-35)

Forster's own tone is tentative, as though he were reluctant to admit this flaw in Dickens. "So rare were these manifestations, however, and so little did they prejudice a character as open and generous as it was at all times ardent and impetuous," Forster claims to have sparingly glimpsed these moments. "But there they were," he continues:

and when I have seen strangely present, at chance intervals, a stern and even cold isolation of self-reliance side by side with a susceptibility almost feminine and the most eager craving for

sympathy, it has seemed to me as though his habitual impulses for everything kind and gentle had sunk, for the time, under a sudden hard and inexorable sense of what Fate had dealt him in his early years. (35)

Forster identifies two effects of Dickens's injury: one that sounds suspiciously like Murdstone, with a "stern," withdrawn masculinity and "cold isolation"; and another that is feminine, "susceptible" and sensitive, but also needy and "craving." Both express emotional memories of subordination and powerlessness, which success, fame, and comfort cannot resolve. Both are also manifested in his clerkly characters, to one degree or another, but seemingly magically resolved in David Copperfield's sensitivity.

Forster, though, seeks to reassure readers that Dickens's emotional outbursts were rare. Dickens remained "open and generous" and "kind and gentle" most of the time, he asserts, without anger, resentment, or cold withdrawal. Although Dickens could be brittle and willful, both he and Forster interpreted his behavior as a reasonable response to the memory of his childhood. It was acceptable as a collateral effect of Dickens's biography, especially in light of the distance he traveled from a shabby, unkempt boy to undisputable success. But Forster identifies something distinctly different in Dickens's relationship to sensitivity:

The fixed and eager determination, the restless and resistless energy, which opened to him opportunities of escape from many mean environments, not by turning off from any path of duty, but

by resolutely rising to such excellence or distinction as might be attainable in it, brought with it some disadvantage among many noble advantages. Of this he was aware, but not to the full extent. What it was that in society made him often uneasy, shrinking, and over-sensitive, he knew; but all the danger he ran in bearing down and overmastering the feeling, he did not know. A too great confidence in himself, a sense that everything was possible to the will that would make it so, laid occasionally upon him self-imposed burdens greater than might be borne by anyone with safety. (34)

Forster's guiding assumption is that he felt what "society made him" feel. Dickens found "explanations of himself in those early trials," and they presumably account for the "feeling" he experiences in society. Forster's description of over-sensitivity is consonant with the concept of sensitivity I have developed here. Sensitivity creates an acute emotional bond to the social world that is offset by a strong sense of self. But unlike David's embrace of sensitivity, Forster describes Dickens's drive to "overmaster" this connection to the social. That he willed himself to negate his sensitivity seems straightforward enough, but Forster emphasizes its danger. Written shortly before Dickens's collapse, the passage seems to prefigure his tendency for intensity that contribute to his death. "Danger" also implies a potential threat to those around him or to those who inhibit his ability to overmaster his inadequacy. It suggests that Dickens's emotion, his will to overmaster, could in turn overmaster himself and others, even explode to the surface like Headstone's rage. It implies that Dickens was

unable (or unwilling) to subordinate his emotions in the same way as his characters.

Surplus and Repression

Dickens clearly did not *overcome* his past. The author's investment in David's emotional life as a sensitive child is even more significant when we consider that Dickens was never fully comfortable with the emotional effects of his childhood. The long arm of his childhood affected the emotions of the adult Dickens, betraying the humiliations and hurts of his class background. But Dickens imagines another outcome for the sensitive child. Where David Copperfield differs most significantly from Dickens's own biography is not in the divergent details of his youth, but instead in the idealizations of David's success. Rather than continue, like Dickens, to feel the small hurts of inadequacy, after his marriage to Agnes David has the external and internal signs to prove that his sensitivity has been transformed into well-being and satisfaction: "I had advanced in fame and fortune, my domestic joy was perfect, I had been married ten happy years" (939).⁵⁸ David's eventual bourgeois feelings, such as generosity, kindness, domestic happiness, modesty, and gratitude, replace ugly feelings caused by his class experience. These "proper" feelings do not mask his new bourgeois position, they instead express a classed fantasy outcome for surviving the trials of class oppression and upward mobility. These emotions

⁵⁸ Critics tend to focus on his self-satisfied tone and assertion of autonomy at the end of the novel, but the narrator joyfully acknowledges his integration into a social world. His phrase, "I hear the roar of many voices, not indifferent to me as I travel on," suggests both the social nature of David's trajectory and the clamor of Dickens's audience.

signify a successful middle-class life that would be incomplete without “proper” feeling.

What bothers critics, I think, about the narrative trajectory in David Copperfield is that David’s new socioeconomic status seems believable — Dickens’s own success is proof of that — but his generous feelings seem forced and almost other-worldly. The mistake that critics have made is to assume that these feelings only represent a middle-class fantasy of social integration and benevolent authority. In short, that these feelings are the bourgeoisie’s way of soothing their guilt. The distance, however, between the feelings described by Forster and the feelings claimed by David suggests that David Copperfield presents a lower middle-class fantasy that upward mobility can sweep away the hidden injuries of class. (Both Gissing and Wells, in the following chapters, are highly skeptical of this fantasy.) The irony in this fantasy is that while David’s middle-class success means that he is no longer subordinate, his emotional practice becomes even more marked by subordination. John Kucich has identified “repression” as the means by which David produces an interiority that signifies social authority. Kucich’s account of David Copperfield coincides with my discussion of social emotion and subordination: His rich psychological analysis stresses the interdependency of the social and the repression, renunciation, self-denial and “negated feeling” that function as part of a strategy to exalt interiority (Repression 2). Kucich writes: the “enlargement of one’s personal repressive force” — or the adoption or cooption of subordination, as I’ve described — “comes to signify a superiority of self-development and self-

knowledge" (13). Kucich's descriptions of a repressive dynamic are especially good because he tends to avoid the propensity of other critics influenced by a psychoanalytical model to posit *desire* as a singular causal force. Kucich's model describes some of the mechanisms that allow David to convert his class resentment and frustration — such as we see in Heep's involuntary contortions or in David's own passionate lashing out at Murdstone — into emotions that signify nuance, respectability, modesty, and, in the language of the novel, "love." Repression's role is not to reduce emotion, but to enable a more rich, refined experience of emotion.

Repression, to press Kucich's usage a bit, represents a kind of agency related to the emotions, the ability to regulate, bend, or cultivate emotions to enhance their cognitive capability.⁵⁹ This repression leads to what Kucich calls autonomy, which can produce a certain kind of emotional self-reliance in addition to self-governance or independence. This emotional self-determination is desirable because it breaks up the direct causal connections between social phenomena and individual emotion.⁶⁰ Kucich argues,

To acquire the kind of social authority that Dickens wanted to promote . . . emotional depth must be symmetrical and balanced as

⁵⁹ See my discussion of Gissing's concept of self-negation in the next chapter, which presents are far more "repressive" (or negative) form of repression to gain agency over emotion.

⁶⁰ Pinch describes a similar dynamic in somewhat more charitable terms: the "literary and philosophical obsession with extravagant emotion may be inseparable from an ambivalence about locating feelings' origins in experience. . . . To refuse or defer knowing how and where feeling fits may be as aesthetically, personally, and socially generative as is claiming them for one's own" (164-65). Severing the origins of classed emotions, which make what is rotten in society also rotten in the self, is one goal of lower middle-class authors.

well as self-contained. His genteel protagonists are not simply more repressed than repressed hypocrites; they are self-reflexively, symmetrically repressed. In this sense, Dickens has a special kind of emotional autonomy in mind, as a basis for class standing; or, rather, he defines autonomy itself through the infinities of self-reflexive passions and repressions. (268)

David engages in a process whereby he represses the trauma and then uses it as a spur for more reflexive emotions. By reexperiencing and reinvoking the trauma in a symmetrical cycle of repression and passion, as we see in his encounter with the shabby man on the coach or in his embarrassment around Littimer, he can (re)produce an autonomy based upon the sense of depth it produces, the contours it gives to the self. These emotions are still connected to social phenomena, but the social's causal force becomes indirect and less determinative.

Repression's primary role is not to prevent the exposure of the embarrassing details of David's humble class origins. On the contrary, when Uriah Heep is unmasked as a fraud he strikes back at David by revealing the shame of David's childhood — "I was never in the streets either, as you were" (817) — the truth of his shameful time in Murdstone's warehouse has little effect in the narrative. David lives in fear of this exposure throughout the novel, but when it does finally happen no one is interested (an "open secret," as Miller identifies it). Instead, knowledge of his embarrassing past and the fear of its disclosure exist to enhance David's cognitive experience of his own emotions,

and therefore to short circuit the threat of social forces driving involuntary affects. Indeed, David's embarrassment will be preserved regardless of whether others know about his past or not. In Kucich's opinion, the seemingly repressed "good" characters in Dickens are not completely self-contained by their repression. Instead, their "passion for repression" enables them to experience libidinal enhancement, rather than the "repression of that passion" ("Repression and Representation" 77). In short, they don't eliminate feeling, but they are able to enrich and refashion it. More generally, political economy can offer an imperfect analogy for this dynamic: When a resource is withheld from circulation it gains in value, just as "repression in Victorian culture" increases the value of "deeper resources of subjectivity [and] . . . superior inward libidinal depth" (Repression 269).

The symmetry between passion and repression can be also seen in a repeated theme focused on his "undisciplined heart." In her influential essay "The Undisciplined Heart of David Copperfield," Gwendolyn Needham argues that disciplining the "undisciplined heart" is a trope that David uses when he sees the necessity to rigorously apply himself. The metaphor appears after he loses Betsey Trotwood's support in young adulthood — which makes him dream of "wanting to sell Dora matches, . . . [of] picking up the crumbs that fall from old Tiffey's daily biscuit" (566) — and later when Dora dies. By invoking this trope, David draws upon the trauma of his youth for motivation and discipline. After losing Betsey's assistance, he writes, "What I had to do, was, to turn the painful discipline of my younger days to account, by going to work with a resolute and

steady heart.” But instead of the social rewards of status and money, his goal is simply Dora herself: “What I had to do, was, take my woodman’s axe in my hand, and clear my own way through the forest of difficulty, by cutting down the trees until I came to Dora . . . With the new life, came new purpose, new intention. Great was the labour; priceless the reward. Dora was the reward, and Dora must be won” (583). This quotation, drawing upon working-class imagery and invoking an allegorical metaphor (“forest of difficulty”), refashions his economic insecurity into a higher-level emotion: love. At the same time, his libidinal investment for Dora is tempered by economic necessity, illustrating Kucich’s notion that symmetrical repression avoids complete repression and complete desire. David’s discipline acknowledges his romantic desire at the same time that it is deferred until after he has accomplished his economic goals with a “resolute and steady heart”; at the same time, his class-based motives remain couched in the language of romance.⁶¹ Thus, his romantic desire is engaged at the same time it is repressed or deferred.

Critics have noted the idealism at the heart of David’s ending, as though all the strife narrated in the novel can be scrubbed away. Alexander Welsh writes that

Dickens’ elaboration of his memories and his situation of *the* traumatic even in childhood are too much like a fairy tale, on the

⁶¹ Needham’s 1954 essay discusses of David’s emotional development in admirably subtle ways. She argues that “discipline” and “goodness” are superseded in the narrative by emotional maturity — the disciplined heart — which produces the sort of tempered emotionality Kucich analyzes in greater depth many years later. Most significantly, for my thesis, Needham foregrounds the importance in the novel of emotional development as a companion to socioeconomic progress.

one hand, and the Oedipus complex, on the other, for us to discount the possibility of a broad cultural motive behind the direction the story took. This motive can be thought of as the need to justify a rise in the world, so desired by the sons of the nineteenth century. (225)

What is most significant about the adoption of this fantasy by Dickens (and others) is how the nuanced emotions he imagines exceed what the middle-class actually were capable of, as though he can “out-bourgeois the bourgeoisie.” This is a lower middle-class fantasy, not a middle-class one. David’s assertion of the ameliorating qualities of domestic bliss do not only replicate a middle-class ideology. David’s domestic happiness idealizes what is possible by asserting the superiority of the upwardly mobile lower middle class, whose “proper” emotions (whether fictional or otherwise) counter the involuntary or flattened affects (a victory especially true in Little Dorrit) that mostly defined them. This is not to say that the valued emotions are any less “middle class,” but the fantasy replaces even what the bourgeoisie was able to idealize. This is one reason why the great authors of bourgeois life in the nineteenth century were those climbing out of the cramped parsons’ cottages, dingy rented rooms, and stuffy offices of the lower middle class. They imagined far more than the middle class ever could.

PART II: GISSING

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SUFFERING OF THE UNCLASSSED: A LIFE'S MORNING

The brevity of life may be the best quality it possesses.

— Arthur Schopenhauer

At the time of his death in 1903, George Gissing was considered something of an expert on Charles Dickens. This reputation happened by chance. Gissing originally wrote Charles Dickens: A Critical Study for a series edited by an old friend who, the Gissing scholar Pierre Coustillas suggests, was throwing a little work Gissing's way. But following the successful publication of the critical study, Gissing was then asked by the publisher Methuen to write the introductions for their Rochester series of Dickens's novels (Coustillas, Gissing's Writings 1, 5). A number of other commissions for introductions and articles would follow, including one to revise and redact Forster's The Life of Dickens. Coustillas observes that Dickens and Gissing were viewed as an odd pairing. Dickens sought to extract what joy and pleasure one could find in the conditions of the

world; whereas, Gissing saw only what was gloomy and depressing about it. In the introduction Gissing wrote for the Autograph edition of David Copperfield, we can see how he thought, at least late in life, about the opposition between optimism and suffering.

When he confided the fragment to his friend Forster, it was with the assurance that he had never told this story to any living person, such a sense of pain and shame did it stir within him. Whilst planning the novel which was to succeed “Dombey and Son,” he saw an opportunity for using those reminiscences in a way which had not yet occurred to him. We know that it was Goethe’s habit to shape into poetry a trouble which had grown too burdensome; the poem written, his suffering were at an end. Even thus did it come to pass with Dickens. What had been only a source of distressful emotion was no sooner seen as the material of art than it lost all its bitterness; the book in which, under a thin disguise, he told the world how poor and wretched was his lot in childhood, proved to be that which, of all his novels, he wrote with most enjoyment, and which ever remained his favorite. (11)

It is “art,” in Gissing’s view, that transforms a “distressful emotion” into something that can be enjoyed and valued. There are number of key elements in this passage for understanding Gissing’s own work and his penchant for representing social conflict. First, is the assumption that the “pain and shame” of class experience produces negative effects in an individual. Second, is his high

opinion of art and the healing power of aesthetic and creative experience. Third, is the theme of transformation, which Gissing returns to again and again in his work, even if in many cases his characters are not able to fully transform themselves.

Gissing clearly admired the proper, refined feelings that Dickens was able to extract from embarrassing class circumstances. Gissing suffered from the same acute awareness of deprivation and the potential for overcoming it. A scholarship boy from a shopkeeper's household, his upwardly mobile path was abruptly curtailed when he was expelled from Owens College, Manchester, for theft. Like Dickens, he was particularly successful at representing the effects of a class society, especially, early in his career, his depiction of urban poverty. But his real talent, again like Dickens, arose out of his intimate understanding of the equivocal world of the lower middle class. According to Jonathan Wild, Gissing is the "foremost chronicler of the late Victorian clerk in British fiction. No other writers of this era shared Gissing's interest and energy in documenting the emergence of the modern white-collar workers and their particular social class" (33). Gissing fills a long "vacant place in English fiction," one contemporary reviewer declared, in his depiction of "the vaguely outlined lower middle section of society" ("Rev of Jubilee" 238).

The key difference between Dickens's and Gissing's response to emotions of class is their view of proper feelings. The joys of domesticity, pleasure, and love are missing from Gissing's work, mostly because these emotions were dependent on the security of a middle-class income. He believed, instead, like

the bohemian, that social distinction and class mobility could be achieved only through transforming oneself into something akin to a work of art, completely severed from social values that were contaminated by class, income, ambition, and other social imperatives. In a manner that is distinctly modern, Gissing sought to imagine an emotional life entirely separate from social influence. Instead of “art for art’s sake,” he imagined an existence based on “emotion for emotion’s sake,” which given the social nature of emotion is comparable to cultivating an affectless state like Dickens’s undead in chapter two. Except that in Gissing’s work exile is always preferable to integration. Consequently, throughout his career Gissing imagines asceticism and renunciation to be the proper responses to a class identity that induces shame. Renunciation in Gissing most often takes the form of exile, forsaking sociality in order to achieve distance from one’s class. So strong is Gissing’s embrace of negation, especially early in his career, that he turns to Arthur Schopenhauer, whose “philosophy of pessimism” and negation of all but the most idealized aestheticism offers a way of evading the ugly feelings generated by class status.

The influence of this exile-themed realism should not be underestimated, especially for those authors “writing up.” Patrick Parrinder argues that Gissing’s aesthetic directly influenced at least two generations of British novelists, from H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett to George Orwell and V. S. Pritchett. But Parrinder sees Gissing’s most profound influence in the figure of the alienated intellectual, which finds its way into examples as disparate as the modernism of James Joyce and the post-war novels of Graham Swift (“Voice”). Gissing literalized this

alienation in his notion of the *unclassed*, those who “dwell in a limbo external to society” (qtd. Harsh 920).⁶² From a historical perspective, the unclassed are poverty-stricken professionals, artists and authors who are struggling to convert their own human capital into material wealth (Perkin 6). More importantly, though, the notion of the unclassed allows Gissing to slip class status out the back door in favor of more universal and existential themes. As Constance D. Harsh notes, “being unclassed is an expression of free will and an affinity for the metaphysical rather than a sign of imprisonment in the world of phenomena” (920). The concept of the unclassed thus enables the “spirit of rebellion” suffusing Gissing’s novels of lower middle class life. Indeed, Gissing’s unclassed rebels are, Fredric Jameson has claimed with characteristic hyperbole, equivalent to Nietzsche’s “ascetic priests” (202).

And yet this is a novelist described by Virginia Woolf as grim, without wit and romance (Common 223).⁶³ Far from being metaphysical, Gissing’s narratives and characters are mostly hemmed in by cruel material realities. In New Grub Street, Gissing depicts authorship itself from the harsh standpoint of the market, where alienation from one’s own artistic output is not at all romantic or sentimentalized. As one recent essay remarks regarding all the models of authorship in New Grub Street, his characters’ “lack of income, leisure time, and

⁶² This was written as a clarification of the concept of the “unclassed” in the introduction to the 1895 second edition of The Unclassed, the first of his novels to be commercially produced (Ryle 126).

⁶³ Woolf, however, admired the way that the “reader . . . whose pleasure it is to identify himself with the hero or heroine, and to feel in some strange way that he shares their virtues, is completely baffled” by Gissing’s novels (“Novels” 532). See also Parrinder 154.

access to the positions of power . . . means that Reardon, Biffen, Yule, and even the more successful Whelpdale and Milvain, experience the pressure of the market as a direct restraint" (Lupton and Reitz 136). These restraints appear to exert themselves on Gissing's own writing, which often seems incomplete and thrown together. His prose is frequently strident, portentous, heavy-handed, and unconvincingly intellectualized. Where he is sentimental, he often lays it on too thick; and his comedy is derived mostly from bleak irony. Martin Ryle writes that Gissing's "fiction is quite unimaginative formally. Its conventions of narration, commentary and character-drawing are derivative, with little evidence of deliberate rethinking" (120). Not only is Gissing unable to write with the seductively comic realism of an author like Dickens, he is unable to achieve the kind of objective relation to his subjects common to the naturalism of his generation (Ryle; Harsh).

What seems most to convince critical readers of Gissing's metaphysical aura is his stance of alienation, an outgrowth of his arrogant and vexed engagement with the world of his readers and his society.⁶⁴ But I propose that beneath this common view of Gissing's metaphysical alienation are forms of renunciation and asceticism that are the effects of class shame. What links shame and Gissing's aesthetic arises out of what Felski calls the "negative

⁶⁴ This is, in part, due to his exposure of the tensions in realism between market-driven forces (Reardon, Milvain) and the potential to produce "art for art's sake" (Waymark, Biffen). This kind of bifurcation of genre and authorship can be seen in many of Gissing's narrative set pieces. See Ryle for an illuminating discussion of Nancy Lord, who can be read as both an opportunistic lower middle-class neophyte and as an authentic author.

identity” of the lower middle class.⁶⁵ The alienation that Gissing and others like him felt toward their own class, and the effects of class that are a prominent part of his fiction, creates a kind of “negative aesthetic,” in which the antagonisms toward received cultural values are replicated in aesthetic antagonisms. In other words, Gissing reproduces at the level of his prose the alienation and struggle with identity that arises from class shame.

We can see clues to this phenomenon in his characters’ exiles. Such exile is meant to keep them beyond the reach of class, but lacking any recourse to an operative sociality their renunciations only intensify their suffering without keeping them from the sting of social humiliation and shame. Their efforts to circumvent and transcend their class identity and its emotions ultimately deform their goals and intentions and leave them suffering, confused, and withdrawn. Their *unclassed* status, for example, is supposed to produce a fully developed character that can negotiate existence without recourse to traditional social signposts, without relying on the values and beliefs of the social world. Instead of the assurance of a stable character, however, they endure impulses and in-the-moment emotions that mostly lead them to incorrect decisions or unsatisfying experiences.⁶⁶ When Emily Hood becomes an idealized wisp of her

⁶⁵ The lower middle class is unique in the alienation and renunciation it has historically inspired, the desire, as I write in my introduction, to deny the identity. As Felski explains, “Petit bourgeois subjects have nothing to declare: their class origins cannot be assimilated into a discourse of progressive identity politics.” “Is it any wonder,” she asks, “that individuals of lower-middle-class origins remain silent about their background, preferring camouflage over confession?” (41).

⁶⁶ As Waymark observes in *The Unclassed*, in true Schopenhaurian fashion: “there remained the fatal conviction of the unreality of every self-persuasion save in relation to the influences of the moment” (227).

former self, or when Godwin Peak wanders ill and forgotten across the Continent, or when Nancy Lord is consigned to the lonely world of her father's bequest, they are not only still classed individuals, their renunciations have come at too high a cost. Gissing's prose is similarly renunciative, an always grim reminder that the world is unlikely to be made whole again.

Causality, Aesthetics, and the Will-to-Live

The fact of class forces Gissing to build determining causality into the worlds he constructs. We are, he believes, subject to (secular) forces beyond our control. But as his notion of the *unclassed* suggests, Gissing was not satisfied with socioeconomic explanations for human behavior and destiny. This is, in part, the reason for many of the much-discussed dissonances in his novels. He writes explicitly and often eloquently about the effects of class — poverty, humiliation, lack of opportunity — but there is always the sense that his novels are not finally *about* class. What Gissing put in place of more materialist explanations for causality in his novels is affect.⁶⁷ To be sure, class determines the material existence of his characters, but affective causality controls their fate. In adopting Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of *will* — which envisioned affective causality as a naturally occurring phenomenon — Gissing gives affect the power to control human destinies. Although affect is usually associated with the body

⁶⁷ On causality, see Kern's A Cultural History of Causality. Gissing's interest in affective causality and its ineffable ambiguities anticipates modernism, which, according to Kern, used theories of probability and uncertainty to subvert traditional causal factors (5-6).

(and emotions with the mind), Gissing's borrowings from Schopenhauer illustrate how futile it can be to distinguish them.

The problem for Gissing is that affect and emotion are not always subject to self-regulation. Gissing's fiction describes in-the-moment emotions and drives whose relationship to causes and effects are obscured, accounting for the *drift* so many of his characters seem to exhibit, as though pushed to and fro by forces out of their control. For individuals to assert influence over — or even escape from — the sea of sensations and emotions that constantly wash around and through them, they must learn to regulate their emotions. For this, Gissing turned again to Schopenhauer, who not only diagnosed the conditions of insatiable *will*, but also offered a way out through indifference, renunciation, and aesthetic contemplation. Although Gissing's lower middle-class characters are tossed about by the "hidden injuries of class," they are offered the chance of combating their feelings through the practice of a renunciative and aesthetic passivity that allows them to sidestep the imperatives of both their emotions and their class. But causality in his novels is usually mysterious, resulting in multi-layered, seemingly free-floating affects that undermine his characters' attempts at renunciation and indifference.⁶⁸

Schopenhauer, whose anti-Hegelian, neo-Idealist "pessimism" influenced

⁶⁸ Harsh argues that Gissing is ultimately a failed Schopenhauerian: "Even in borrowing the Schopenhauerian formulation of art, he alters his forebear's conception of the aesthetic state so that it leads back into the world of sensation and sensual pleasure" (919). Gissing, she asserts, could not let go of a palliative, Arnoldian idea of the novel. I would propose, though, that Gissing is as much a failed Arnoldian as a failed Schopenhauerian. Gissing may be drawn back to the world of sensation, but it is a world fraught with unpleasant sensations.

Nietzsche and anticipated Freud, formulated his philosophy around the concept of *will*: “a mindless, aimless, non-rational urge at the foundation of all of our instinctual drives, and at the foundational being of everything” (Wicks 4). “My body and my will are one,” Schopenhauer claims of the will-to-live:

The act of will and the movement of the body are not two different things objectively known, which the bond of causality unites; they do not stand in the relation of cause and effect; they are one and the same. . . . [T]his is true of every movement of the body, not merely those which follow upon motives, but also involuntary movements which follow upon mere stimuli, and, indeed, that the whole body is nothing but objectified will. (bk. 2, §18)

Schopenhauer’s concept is unique for describing an anti-dialectical epistemology derived from the body and physical phenomena. The problem with will is that it creates “egotism, conflict, cruelty and inevitable unhappiness” (Grylls 3). This conceptualization has led to Schopenhauer becoming known as the philosopher of pessimism. His view of human culture, to be sure, reveals a deep disappointment in the state of the world.

Every one who has awakened from the first dream of youth . . . will, if his judgment is not paralysed by some indelibly imprinted prejudice, certainly arrive at the conclusion that this human world is the kingdom of chance and error, which rule without mercy in great things and in small, and along with which folly and wickedness also wield the scourge. . . . If, finally, we should bring

clearly to a man's sight the terrible sufferings and miseries to which his life is constantly exposed, he would be seized with horror; and if we were to conduct the confirmed optimist through the hospitals, infirmaries, and surgical operating-rooms, through the prisons, torture-chambers, and slave-kennels, over battle-fields and places of execution ; if we were to open to him all the dark abodes of misery, where it hides itself from the glance of cold curiosity, and, finally, allow him to glance into the starving dungeon of Ugolino, he, too, would understand at last the nature of this "best of possible worlds." For whence did Dante take the materials for his hell but from this our actual world? (bk. 4, §59)

The irony of life, in Schopenhauer's view, is that the strength of the human will-to-live is matched only by the extent of human suffering and cruelty. "The brevity of life, Schopenhauer concludes, "may be the best quality it possesses."

We can see the degree to which Gissing was influenced by Schopenhauer in an early, unpublished essay, "The Hope of Pessimism," which expresses its own equally gloomy view of human existence.⁶⁹ Indeed, Gissing is even less sanguine about the state of world, and deplores, in particular, the materiality of our existence for making us merely creatures of will, driven solely by the instinct to live.

Our passions rack us with the unspeakable torment of desire, and fruition is but another name for disillusion. Every epoch of

⁶⁹ On Schopenhauer's influence on Gissing, see Argyle, Deledalle-Rhodes, Francis, Grylls, Harsh.

existence feeds on the vision of some unattainable joy; from the rising to the going down of the sun we lament for that which we have not, and our nightly dreams mock us with a visioned happiness. We make unto ourselves idols of our vain beliefs, and rend each other for the supremacy of a name. From the ancient battle-field of earth goes up the reek of the blood of peoples, spilt that one man might lie in purple, or for the glory of gods that are not. Our bodily frame is a house of torment, and the seat of lusts which obscure the soul. The aching of a limb frustrates the keenest intellectual delight; disorder in a fragment of the brain sinks the philosopher below the beast. (91-92)

Reacting to his own early attraction to Positivism and what he calls “Agnostic Optimism,” Gissing’s rhetorical act in the essay is to tear away the veil that blocks our perception of the real truth of human existence; in his skeptical, more realistic version of the world, politics are vain, intellectual inquiry is too fragile, and sexual desire overcomes us. As beings of habit and physical appetite, humans have no other higher purpose than the banal drive to perpetuate their own lives. One problem with Gissing’s conclusion, however, is that Schopenhauer did not deplore the fact of will so much as condemn the human failure to come to terms with it (on Schopenhauer’s “critique,” see Bishop). Gissing’s primary concern, instead, is materialization and the body. The true enemy for him is not political systems or social behaviors, but the body’s will-to-live and the brain’s capacity to feel. Gissing proposes that this will-to-live and to

feel — “torment of desire,” “unattainable joy,” “visioned happiness,” “lusts which obscure the soul” — makes the “essence” of the human’s “being” “evil.” Will and instinct are the true constants in human experience; as such, humans can only become ethical beings if they “deny” themselves by unwilling “the instinct of life” (92). This is slightly but significantly different from Schopenhauer’s ironic comment that it is fortunate human lives are so short. Schopenhauer advocates abandoning the ego, whereas Gissing envisions the death of the human race.

In David Grylls’s study, The Paradox of Gissing, Schopenhauer proves to be a major influence on Gissing’s own celebrated pessimism. But it makes sense in another way that Schopenhauer was so attractive to Gissing, especially as someone increasingly alienated from commodity culture and the diminutive desires of the petit bourgeois, as he famously was. Schopenhauer’s concepts of desire and an all-pervasive will, Terry Eagleton observes, arose in a specific cultural moment:

Schopenhauer is perhaps the first major modern thinker to place at the centre of his work the abstract category of *desire itself*, irrespective of this or that particular hankering. . . . This is not only because of the emergence of a social order in which, in the form of commonplace possessive individualism, appetite is now becoming the order of the day, the ruling ideology and dominant social practice; it is more specifically because of the perceived *infinity* of

desire in a social order where the only end of accumulation is to accumulate afresh. (159)⁷⁰

As one of the first English novelists to feature consumer culture prominently in his fiction, Gissing expresses similar qualms toward the desires of his age. In the Year of Jubilee, for example, features an urban landscape saturated by advertising (“Till advertising sprang up, the world was barbarous,” claims one character [63]); the half-conscious singing of the same popular jingle by an array of characters; a “fashion club” offering inexpensive, aspirational attire for lower middle-class women; and, of course, the spectacle of Jubilee itself, which fills the streets with pleasure-seeking revelers. Even Gissing’s unclassed heroes suffer from debilitating desire. Although they try to distinguish themselves from the forces of accumulation and consumption around them, they too are merely insignificant expressions of will. For someone as concerned with an authentic form of social mobility as Gissing was as a young man, this produces such intolerable dissonance that he sees humanity’s only hope in its demise (“Pessimism” 96).

The appropriate response to such a world is indifference and renunciation, themes that wind their way through all of Gissing’s work. In Schopenhauer, renunciation is achieved through two alternatives to appetitive will: detached aesthetic contemplation or the universal feelings inspired by

⁷⁰ Schopenhauer’s critiques of the social world and the abuse of power reveal to Eagleton that he had modern labor conditions in mind while composing The World as Will and Idea (Eagleton 158). In a similar way, Gissing rejected Positivism because it proposed to solve the world’s ills through materialism and socioeconomic remedies — “by encouraging hedonism” (Harsh 918) — that simply reproduce the inequities of the social order.

music. Gissing introduces both in “The Hope of Pessimism,” but it is to Schopenhauer’s aesthetics that Gissing seems most drawn. (In “The Hope of Pessimism,” at least, universal feeling [or “fellow-feeling”] is helpful only insofar as it lets us see “the deeper pathos which goes so much beyond our every-day grief,” leading to “the gradual dying-out of the human race as painlessly as possible” [94; Harsh 918]).⁷¹ Aesthetics offers a mode of being detached from the will-to-live: “In the mood of artistic contemplation the will is destroyed, self is eliminated, the world of phenomena resolves itself into pictures of absolute significance, and the heart rejoices itself before images of pure beauty” (95). Gissing’s lower middle-class characters recognize that aesthetics can distinguish and distance them from others’ run-of-the-mill appetites. In a novel like A Life’s Morning, the protagonist is particularly drawn to an ethical and self-regulatory form of aesthetics, which finds its most exquisite embodiment in ascetic forms of discipline and self-containment (Gagnier, Insatiability 115). In this novel, as we will see in more detail, Gissing reflects a common hope at the time that aesthetics were more than coercive and regulating, that they could also challenge and exceed the grasp of a purely economic instrumentality (see Gagnier, Insatiability 121-24, 145, 243; Eagleton 20; Steedman).

⁷¹ Schopenhauer’s concepts regarding universal feelings as an avenue for access to the will-in-itself has had an important impact on the philosophy of music, especially the work of Susanne Langer. Harsh sees Gissing coming down on the side of fellow-feeling in The Unclassed. One could make the argument that Nancy’s experience of public life in In the Year of Jubilee owes something to this notion of universal feeling, but it would be a stretch to link it to Schopenhauer’s actual concept (see Schopenhauer bk. 3, §52; Langer).

Aesthetics offers Gissing a way of being distinct from the facts of political economy and class struggle. Fredric Jameson has linked this detachment with class consciousness, establishing an ideological basis for passivity. Where Schopenhauer sees appetitive will, Jameson sees commodification. In Jameson's view, renunciation is an indispensable response to a world in which "the universal commodification of desire stamps any achieved desire or wish as inauthentic" (204). Jameson concludes that Gissing's "unclassed" embody *authentic ressentiment*, an indifference to bourgeois definitions of success or failure that gives an authentic character to Gissing's characters' class envy. The renunciation of the petty preoccupations of the bourgeoisie in Gissing becomes "generalized into a refusal of commodity desire itself" (205). Jameson helpfully looks beyond Gissing's constant themes of class shame and envy to emphasize the political importance of his characters' indifference and renunciation. But Jameson's reading places too much weight on successful renunciation, eliding how close it is to desire, to Schopenhauer's *will* and Gissing's concept of causality. Moreover, asceticism and renunciation, particularly in their long association with aesthetics, are bound up with desire, especially the desire to make the world in a different image. "Asceticism," Harpham asserts, "deploys the fundamental mechanism of desire, the conversion or translation of things into other things. This is . . . one way to conceive of the fundamental mechanism of the work of art. For art is, in its classic formulations, a compensation for an

insufficiently satisfying world" (96).⁷²

Rather than simply being an aloof response to commodification, renunciation in Gissing is instead a particular species of asceticism in a world where affect and emotions are governed by the logic of a class system. The rejection of commodity desire may be a utopian response (in Jameson's nomenclature), but such renunciation is a classed and even a physical phenomenon with specific emotional effects. This is especially true of shame, for which renunciation is only one of its effects. Renouncing class is not only an instance of alienated metaphysics, as critics have claimed, but an actual effect of shame. In other words, renunciation is not necessarily passive or even unemotional, but a form of affect with its own effects. This is the reason for Gissing's early grasp of aesthetics as a response to class. Aesthetics, as described in a novel like A Life's Morning, reorients emotion toward an objective but enduring material realm untainted by the vicissitudes of social life, status, or the body's reaction to shame.

The problem, however, is that Gissing's characters are always beset by emotions not fully in their control, both from within and from without: they twitch with anxiety, seethe at injustice, anxiously lie sleepless, and throb with sexual desire. These are all signs of a struggle with reservoirs of emotion and will, as though humans live in an emotional soup from which they only rarely emerge. It is true, as John Kucich has observed, "repression" — his word for a more open-ended renunciation — "heightens and vitalizes emotional autonomy,

⁷² "[A]esthetics," Harpham claims, "is not merely a modern name for an aspect of asceticism, but constitutes asceticism's specifically modern form, its modernity" (97).

rather than threatening or suppressing it" (Repression 3).⁷³ Gissing is not unaware of the eroticizing potential of renunciative withdrawal, but emotional autonomy is not imagined as fully until his later work. Indeed, the renunciations and exiles of the central characters in A Life's Morning and Born in Exile impair emotional autonomy. To borrow from the language of Kucich's comments regarding Dickens, Gissing finds it difficult to balance "conflicting forms of desire" in his characters. The effect of this is an ascetic approach to characterization that presents emotional conflict without any sort of "illusory synthesis" (Repression 208). In particular, Gissing is unable to come to an "illusory synthesis" regarding shame. Shame, Probyn writes, is "intimately social" (77), which is a hard pill to swallow if it looks like the "social" causes the "intimate" discomfort of shame. It is even harder if the social is an expression of will, the all-encompassing drive that exists merely to perpetuate itself. Alienated and detached from sociality, Gissing's protagonists in both A Life's Morning and Born in Exile are literally destroyed by their shame (and its related desires). But the trajectory of Gissing's oeuvre literalizes Kucich's point. Jubilee reveals an author who begins to understand that renunciation and *social emotions* such as shame are not mutually exclusive.

Aesthetic Idealism and Class Suffering

⁷³ See Adams, especially chapter three, "Imagining the Science of Renunciation": "the Apostle of the Flesh," he writes, "has far more in common with John the Baptist in Cockney-land, and Tennyson's ascetic Saint Simeon Stylites, than one might guess" (112).

Most critical discussions of the social issues in A Life's Morning have focused on James Hood, a middle-aged manufacturing clerk who is wrongly accused of theft and commits suicide in the face of his shame. Hood is as good a subject as any for analyzing the mechanics of class shame. But instead, I concentrate on Hood's daughter, Emily, who functions as a model for what it looks like to be unclassed. Like every so-called unclassed figure, Emily is both classed and unclassed. Her employment as a governess marks her as lower middle class, of course, but her desire to approach life as one would a work of art, expressive of a kind of Paterian aestheticism,⁷⁴ marks her as an individual endowed with the sympathies and tendencies Gissing felt belonged to the unclassed. Emily resembles other Gissing heroes, whose potential gifts outweigh their flaws and poverty. Still, like Godwin Peak in Born in Exile, Emily is a thoroughly lower middle-class individual whose distinction from the common herd is generated through an ambivalent snobbery; who seeks social mobility through a lucrative marriage; and who is eventually tethered by ethical concerns that rein in her mercenary impulses. Where Emily differs from Nancy Lord in Jubilee, is in how she experiences sociality and social emotions. She turns away from sociality by embodying an aesthetic aptitude that is meant to exemplify a Schopenhauerian renunciation of economic necessity. On the other hand, Godwin in Exile epitomizes the trials of will, which impel him to seek sociality even in the face of his revulsion toward it.

⁷⁴ Pierre Coustillas remarks in his 1984 introduction to the novel, "The book is fraught with the cult of beauty as [Gissing] had found it successively in Ruskin and Walter Pater" (xxiv).

Lurking in Emily's turn away from sociality is shame, which follows her into exile and infects her attempts at renunciation. Consequently, when she looks inward for guidance and strength she comes up empty. The lack of stable self-knowledge is particularly apparent in Gissing's early and mid-career fiction. Indeed, when we compare the almost irrational sufferings of Emily Hood and Godwin Peak to the emotional management eventually practiced by Nancy Lord, we notice a shift in Gissing's thinking about class shame. Gissing may identify with his lower middle-class characters less in his later fiction, but he also becomes less spiteful toward them, as though with age he tempers his own self-loathing relationship to the lower middle class.⁷⁵ The demands he places on such early characters as Emily and Godwin, the weight he puts on their mostly futile attempts to be unclassed, is particularly malign.

The question posed in A Life's Morning is whether a religion of beauty, a purely aesthetic response to the world, is consistent with economic suffering and the attempt to alleviate it. Indeed, where there is suffering, Schopenhauer asserts, there is feeling, which refutes the goals of renunciation and lead back to the world of the classed. Unlike similarly inclined figures such as Pater's Marius or George Eliot's Dorothea, Emily suffers not only from poverty but from her class identity as well. It is particularly important, then, that she renounce the taints of social worth and exchange value that accompany any attempt she may make toward economic mobility. The principle of the unclassed and its affiliated

⁷⁵ See Grylls and Wild for descriptions of the shift in Gissing's career (beginning in 1890 through about 1895), which is variously attributed to his changing economic situation, improving aesthetic technique, or increasing conservatism.

renunciations wraps her ambition in noneconomic (and hence ethical) motives. Romantic love is one such noneconomic motive, and Emily's self-improvement is enhanced and challenged by the age-old conceit of the governess plot, when her employer's son, Wilfrid Athel, falls in love with her. Like Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, social mobility in the novel is preceded by sacrifice, except that in Gissing's novel sacrifice and renunciation are carried to a peculiar extreme. Rather than simply being the vehicle for an authentic kind of ascendant romantic love, Emily embodies what Gissing calls a religion of beauty, mixed with equal parts aesthetic veneration, self-sacrifice, and asceticism. Even her romantic love is saintly: "a spirit of passionate benignity, of ecstatic calm, holy in renunciations, pure unutterably in supreme attainment" (128).

Emily's aesthetic ideals and ascetic practice are supposed to place her beyond social valuations. So what does it mean when the reality of her lower middle-class position contaminates her ideals? The novel wrestles with the imposition of external influences, what James Eli Adams identifies as the "capitulation to 'circumstances'" (110). It tests the proposition whether a "Palace of Art" can exist separate from the luck of birth, whether Emily's developing aesthetic morality — a "beauty in the inward soul" (68) — is dependent on the evolving economic and intellectual advantages as the governess in a house filled with books and adequate free time. When faced with the prospect of returning to her parents' home while her employers are away on holiday, Emily asks, "Could her soul retain its ideal of beauty if environed by

ugliness?" (69).⁷⁶ Will her newly formed aesthetic sensibility be undermined by a physical relocation to the bleakness of her lower middle-class life in the industrial north? As circumstances press on her, Gissing makes the disjunction between her class and her aestheticism explicit.

She had never been able entirely to divest herself of the feeling that her exaltation in beauty-worship was a mood born of sunny days, that it would fail amid shocks of misfortune and prove a mockery in the hour of the soul's dire need. It shared in the unreality of her life in wealthy houses, amid the luxury which appertained only to fortune's favourites, which surrounded her only by chance. She had presumptuously taken to herself the religion of her superiors, of those to whom fate allowed the assurance of peace, of guarded leisure wherein to cultivate the richer and sweeter flowers of their nature. (239)

When A Life's Morning begins, Emily's natural instincts are said to embody beauty-worship — her "soul's" ideal. If her ideals, however, are no more than a product of class, inspired in an environment of "fortune," how can they function as signs of being unclassed? The realization that her socioeconomic circumstances might compromise her beliefs contributes to her journey into renunciation, portending greater suffering. As her hold on aesthetic contemplation becomes increasingly challenged over the course of events in the novel, her regimen of asceticism becomes increasingly strict and disciplined.

⁷⁶ In New Grub Street Reardon asks a similar question: "If I had to earn my living as a clerk, would that make me a clerk in soul?" (229).

Emily is at first successful in creating “an abode apart from turbid conditions of life,” for she “was hard at work building for her soul ‘its lordly pleasure-house,’ its Palace of Art” (70). One indication of this success is her cold attitude toward the working class. Unlike the empathy developed in a character like Margaret Hale in Gaskell’s North and South, what Emily feels is that “Their life is probably not hard at all. I used to feel that pity, but I have reasoned myself out of it. They are really happy, for they know nothing of their own degradation” (75). Emily’s aestheticism is buttressed by this stance of detachment. When Wilfrid first talks with her at the beginning of the novel, he notices that she has a “cold, absent gaze; her lips hardened into severity” (15). This is precisely what Wilfrid (and Gissing) values about her, interpreting her cold affect as “impressive” and “noble” (15). Wilfrid sees his own interest and desire as ignoble and enfeebling, particularly in his experience of art: “I fear to enter museums and galleries; I am distracted by the numberless desires that seize upon me, depressed by the hopelessness of satisfying them. I cannot even enjoy music from the mere feeling that I do not enjoy it enough, that I have not had time to study it, that I shall never get at its secret” (15). Wilfrid’s bourgeois tastes are undeveloped. What he finds most attractive in the lower middle-class Emily is her calm in the face of aesthetic encounters. Not only is she unworried about questions of mastery, but her intellect seems responsive and supple without the turmoil of desire and doubt. Her sensibility and intellectual cultivation exceeds the boundaries of her class status.

Emily, however, is never far from a reminder of her own limitations. At the end of their initial flirting discourse, an acknowledgment of her circumstances is embedded in an offhand deflation of Wilfrid's aesthetic insecurities. Upon commenting on the prettiness of the clouds, he wonders aloud about the beauty she will gaze on while away with her family during the holiday: "there," she responds with an acerbic last word, "we have only mill-smoke" (19). Once she returns to this mill-smoke during the Athels' holiday, the challenges to her "Palace of Art" become acute. At home in Dunfield, she is enveloped in economic actualities, where Gissing is not satisfied with merely testing her motives for falling in love with Wilfrid; he also tests the strength of her commitment to the unclassed way of life. That is to say, Gissing is less interested in the purity of her romantic love than her detachment from the social web of lower middle-class meanings and expectations. The precariousness of her situation emanates from her parents' very faces, which were "coloured by years of incessant preoccupation with pecuniary difficulties" (76). And like everything in Dunfield, Emily is herself turned into an object of exchange value, subject to economic estimation.

Gissing's cruel irony suffuses the episodes that follow, forcing her to come face to face with shame. She is asked, first, to see herself as a thing whose value inheres in her marriageability. Dagworthy, a local mill owner and her father's employer, a creature of elemental desires and sudden impulses, devises a scheme to force her to marry him. He entraps James Hood, her father, into taking ten pounds from his office, and then demands she marry him in exchange

for her father's reinstatement. By refusing Dagworthy's offer in order to keep her ideals intact, however, she becomes indirectly responsible for her father's suicide. In one stroke she becomes an object of exchange value and guilty of killing her father, both threats to the integrity of her aesthetic idealism. Behind Gissing's portrait of Emily is his assumption that without her elevating ideals she would have eagerly married for social mobility, just as other young lower middle-class women in the novel behave. To then have those ideals undermined by her father's suicide contaminates her striving for aesthetic idealism with guilt and shame. So, when Wilfrid arrives with an offer to sweep her away from the misery of Dunfield and the dissolution of her family, she refuses to go with him.

Emily becomes something of a passive being at this point, in seclusion without any one good choice. Accepting Wilfrid's advances would acknowledge her dependency and vulnerability and suggest that she is nothing more than an economic mercenary holding out for the highest bidder. "One way there was, and one way only," she avers, "of proving to herself that she had not fallen below the worthiness which purest love demanded, that she had indeed offered to Wilfred a soul whose life was chastity — and that must be utterly to renounce love's earthly reward" (238). It is true that at this moment of renunciation Emily gains a measure of autonomy, in the sense that Kucich describes. By refusing Wilfrid she not only proves that she has refused to use his wealth as a way of transcending her class, but she has also refused to use her intellectual gifts, talents, and beauty in service to her ambition. She becomes something akin to being unclassed, using self-discipline as her ticket to being middle class even if

she cannot enjoy the external benefits of social mobility. But her autonomy comes at a high price: The very thing that gives her the gloss of an elite status — her renunciative ability — is the very thing that keeps her from simply seizing class mobility by accepting Wilfrid's offer.

Emily's seclusion and renunciation renders her aesthetic idealism into a rather empty objective. Her outward projection of detachment is inversely related to her inner turmoil. Gissing borrows from the language of the gothic to describe the affects of Emily's suffering, her "smothered cry of fear," "wild sorrow," "surging thought," and "an anguish which shall torture [the] soul" (171). These emotions, however, appear rootless, without any point to their intensity. Rather, it is the fact of suffering that seems to be the goal, for, as Gissing writes, the only pure emotion inheres in "something of the martyr's joy" (174). Yet, as a martyr for the cause of asceticism, Emily is obliged to suffer without being able actually to suffer. As in the impasse she faces following her father's death, Emily is bound in a contradiction. Compelled to suffer because of her sensibilities — "Circumstances willed that she should suffer by the nobleness of her instincts" (240) — the imperative of renunciation demands that she *not* feel the suffering. Suffering is a manifestation of Schopenhauer's *will*, after all, the cause of all human misery. Although suffering is the basis of her detachment and the sign of her nobility, it is also what binds her to the sordid world of her class. She suffers because of the distance between her class and her noble instincts, yet to cease suffering would mean that she had become inured to the injuries of her class, to the class experience that first generated her suffering.

Her detachment is an effect of her class status, and to remain detached she must continually relive that status however far she has moved from the foul smoke of a mill town. So the question the novel asks regarding whether one can end up in a “palace of art” without being born into a palace is left unanswered. A religion of beauty is possible, Gissing suggests, but it can never sever itself from a tense imbrication with the world of ugliness.

Renunciation leads to a rather ambivalent denouement. Although the novel concludes on the seemingly happy note of Emily and Wilfrid’s joyous reunion, their otherworldly ideals produce a marriage that is strikingly bloodless and abstract. For all their talk of passionate love, there is no physical pleasure, nor a sense of quotidian bliss in their marriage. The language at the novel’s end reads like a particularly tortured Christian allegory, as though Emily were a martyred knight about to be burned at the stake. At the end, Wilfrid himself is at worship: “She realised to the uttermost his ideal of womanhood, none the less so that it seemed no child would be born of her to trouble the exclusiveness of their love. He clad her in queenly garments and did homage at her feet” (344). Theirs is a sexless marriage based on principles and ideals. Like the female figures of Ruskin’s “Of Queens’ Gardens” or Tennyson’s “Maud,” Emily is chaste and loveable only as an abstraction and a transcendent principle.⁷⁷ “[Y]ou will be the angel,” Wilfrid tells her, “that raises me out of the ignoble world into which I

⁷⁷ Gissing was particularly susceptible to this Victorian type, although, he is also credited with expanding the range of female characters in the late Victorian period, particularly in the urban context. See especially, Chialant and Ledger.

have fallen" (318). In the course of the novel, Emily goes from embodying refined aesthetic emotions to being transmuted into an ascetic ideal.

The novel is disappointing as a result, almost as passionless and abstract as Emily and Wilfrid's marriage. Gissing's obvious goal in the novel is to show how a noble lower middle-class individual has more appreciation of art, more refinement, and more self-discipline than members of the leisure class. We can admire this goal, even if the social crime he ponders is classic lower middle-class thinking. Nor should we discount the scope of his skepticism, which he could have abandoned when he turned from the urban tales of Workers in the Dawn and The Unclassed to this provincial, domestic narrative; Emily is clearly a victim of a class society, even given her eventual marriage to an upper-class gentleman.⁷⁸ Where Gissing fails is in being too ashamed of Emily to give her emotions greater range. Her soul-suffering keeps her as distant from the reader as she is isolated from the novel's other characters. As a consequence she becomes something of a flat, predictable character, like a lonely tuberculosis victim sitting in her sanitarium chair all day unable to move. The novel thus bears the burdens of its author's own asceticism and shame, keeping him under the spell of principles and ideals that marked him as one of the suffering unclassified.

⁷⁸ This would have been even more apparent in Gissing's early draft of the novel, in which Emily dies of heart failure on the eve of her marriage to Wilfrid (Coustillas xvi.)

CHAPTER FIVE

RETHINKING SHAME: BORN IN EXILE AND IN THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

*Though terror speaks to life and death and distress
makes of the world a vale of tears, yet shame strikes
deepest into the heart of man.*

— Silvan Tomkins

“[Y]ou can’t ever *really* be unclassed,” Constance Harsh writes of Gissing’s concept of alienation, “and to the extent you are you’re unstable or insane” (Perils 933). You can’t, in other words, ever be entirely alienated or live in true Schopenhauerian fashion. Indeed, in this chapter I will pay particular attention to the persistence of shame in Gissing’s work, and how it inevitably imbricates his characters in a social apparatus. For instance, in Born in Exile disaffection may be valorized, but the novel spends most of its narrative energy on the injuries of alienation. Exile implies two sides of the issues we have discussed so

far. On the one hand, exile expresses forms of renunciation and repudiation (an impeccable autonomy), and, on the other, desire (for what is lost) and injury (from the loss). Shame, which has historically accompanied exile, expresses this duality even more productively. As a normative emotion, shame becomes, at least in the case of class, a hidden injury that enforces social distinctions. But shame is also an *ugly feeling*, in Ngai's use of the phrase, with the potential for effects that are not wholly negative. It is an emotion, according to Eve Sedgwick, that produces its own relationality. Sedgwick argues that shame moves in two directions at once: "toward painful individuation, [and] toward uncontrollable relationality" (37). In other words, like exile, shame represents the lack of sociality (relationality) at the same time that it asks for and responds to sociality. Moreover, shame, according to Elsbeth Probyn, induces *interest* by implying that one does care about one's place in a social system and about one's own feelings. It is not a "good" feeling in the sense of feeling optimistic or positive, but in the sense of being "opposed to a negative or substrative state: it adds rather than takes away" (Probyn 15). Shame is a social emotion that not only distinguishes and separates the individual from the social world but it "teaches us about our relations to others" (Probyn 35). Ironically, what we can take from Gissing's depiction of alienation — and asceticism — is a refusal finally to be *disinterested* in the world.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ This is less contradictory than it would seem on its face. As Harpham asserts, "asceticism is essentially a meditation on, even an enactment of, desire" (*Ascetic Imperative* 45).

Gissing goes through a Schopenhauerian phase, when he imagines total and complete disengagement with the world. But by the time we get to Nancy Lord, of the 1894 novel In The Year of Jubilee, we can draw different interpretations from his representation of shame. Nancy is fated to go through her own painful renunciation and exile — “Into Bondage” and “Compassed Round” Gissing characteristically names chapters in Jubilee — but because she also experiences multiple dimensions of sociality, what Georg Simmel describes as *sociability*, she is eventually able to modulate her emotions and her desires in a directed way. Her yielding to the flux and flow of social emotions marks her as an exemplary expression of the lower middle class’s unthinking conformity, but her willingness to risk shame helps her counter the debilitating withdrawal that accompanies Gissing’s signature asceticism. His aesthetic remains just as antagonistic and grim in this late novel, but he imagines new kinds of reveries and disjunctions that do not just involve suffering and renunciation. Jubilee suggests that to deny one’s shame is both impossible and potentially damaging, because it (at least in Gissing’s case) robs one of a social identity.

Ashamed of Being Ashamed

What makes Born in Exile so unique is the way in which it simultaneously repudiates its motivating shame while recognizing, in its uneven and antagonistic way, that such repudiation leads to loneliness and isolation. Thematized throughout the novel, this paradoxical movement away from and toward sociality is embedded in Gissing’s antagonistic style. Gissing clearly

desires an audience and its sympathy for his novel, but he challenges his readers with a sour protagonist, Godwin Peak, whose shame-filled life hardly seems worth living.⁸⁰ (The novel is a “gloomy” one, a contemporary reviewer wrote, in which nothing much happens [Critical Heritage 197]). Like the shame and exile of his protagonist and his ever-present humiliation, Gissing’s negative aesthetic moves both ways: toward its audience and away.

Exile can be both forced and chosen, resented and relished. For Godwin, exile is at first his burden, a matter of circumstance. The son of a shopkeeper, Godwin grows up with the “instinct” that he belongs to the upper classes. “[F]ortune,” Gissing writes, “had decreed his birth in a social sphere where he must ever be an alien” (59). This social sphere is a world of small shopkeepers and clerks that he “loathed” for its “penurious simplicity,” pettiness, coarseness, and vulgarity (58). His snobbery and penchant for abstraction become signs of distinction. Consequently, Godwin’s exile is not so much his exclusion from the leisure classes as his exile from his own class. From this perspective, exile looks like free will, suggesting freedom from circumstances. And Godwin values the autonomy exile appears to give him. Over time, though, as C. J. Francis observed many years ago, he slips from “an all-embracing disbelief . . . , into an inability at times to grasp the reality of the external world . . . , and finally into a loss of the sense of personality which, with the loss also of [a] moral system, brought about an inability to decide what was the right or even the sensible thing to do” (57).

⁸⁰ In an 1895 letter to Morley Roberts, Gissing complains that critics of his novels too often complain that his characters have lives that “are not worth living.” They must look beyond the surface of his narratives, he argues: the “side of my work, to me the most important, I have never yet seen recognized” (Collected Letters 5: 295-96).

Exile means that he has no community or social group to keep him aligned with the social world, and like Emily Hood his detachment leaves him without a fully flourishing identity.

To be sure, though, Godwin's exile is never fully complete, at least not until his death at the end of the novel. His shame, in particular, functions both as a source for his attempts to renounce the social world and the force that emotionally binds him to it. For example, like all scholarship boys, Godwin does physically escape the commonplace world of his youth, when "his former existence . . . passed into infinite remoteness" (58). Although he resents and is ashamed of receiving a scholarship, he survives for three years in college. But his upward mobility is disrupted by a perverse uncle, who proposes opening "Peak's Dining and Refreshment Rooms" across the street from his College. The shame of having his name associated with a shopkeeper's common eatery leads Godwin to leave a year short of receiving his B. A. Thus, Godwin is doubly exiled, cut off from the social life of his youth and crippled by shame from assuming the prerogatives of the leisure class that he would enjoy as a graduate of Whitelaw College.

Ashamed of being ashamed, Godwin continually struggles with will and desire. Although he never achieves the impeccable renunciation practiced by a character like Emily Hood, it is this struggle, like his condemnation of the vulgarity of his youth, that gives him distinction. His exile, however, leaves him in a bind. He desires, for example, to be one of the chosen people, one of the wealthy and cultured, but, according to his own logic, to even have the desire is

to admit that he is not worthy. His desires shame him, just as the commonplace shopkeepers of his hometown do. Moreover, it is difficult to reconcile his desire with the simple fact that he needs sociality, “the thing most needful to humanity,” Gissing’s narrator comments: “One may find associates of his intellect in libraries — the friend of one’s emotions must walk in flesh and blood” (168).

This is at least one remove from Schopenhauer’s perspective. For the philosopher, the individual’s will-to-live almost succeeds in eliminating sociality altogether, but since humans understand that in order to perpetuate themselves they need to congregate and form institutions, they are driven to participate in the social world. In this sense, to be in the thrall of will is the worst of all possible conditions, tearing individuals apart at the same time that it brings them together.⁸¹ (Perversely, Schopenhauer remarks that “ennui” — the lack of sufficient challenges to survival — drives humans to “social intercourse: “It makes beings who love each other so little as men do, seek each other eagerly” [404].) And yet, Godwin finds himself in a similar dichotomy. The necessity of sociality is countered by his aversion to it. Thus, unwilling to have those who would have him, Godwin associates with those he either envies or despises, or even those who despise him, embracing, in a Beckett-like twist, his own subjugation.

⁸¹ A more commonplace view of Victorian sociality (see Lane) is perhaps best encapsulated by Charles Darwin in his concept of *social instinct*, a drive that knits society together through emotional bonds and helps develop individual morality and conscience: “social instincts lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of its fellows,” Darwin writes, “to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them, and . . . to act for the good of the community. . . . [They] play a very important part in guiding the conduct of each member” (72-73). Gissing resists this view, of course. As a creature of *will*, Godwin does not benefit from the same sort of sympathy.

Hence the hollowness of Godwin's claim at the novel's end: "What respect can I have for the common morality, after this?" (423).⁸² He is all too aware of the claims common morality has on him, able to imagine, for instance, that *others* can see his shame. For example, when winning only a series of second place prizes in the by-examinations at Whitelaw College he is sure that others (women in particular) "looked upon his shame," that "they had interchanged glances of amusement at each repetition of his defeat" and "had ended by losing all interest in him" (61). And elsewhere, when he thinks of his uncle's eatery associating him with a common class of shopkeepers, Godwin again imagines what others are thinking of him: "What possibility of pursuing his studies when every class-companion, every Professor, — nay, the very porters, — had become aware that he was nephew to the man who supplied meals over the way? Moral philosophy had no prophylactic against an ordeal such as this. Could the most insignificant lad attending lectures afford to disregard such an occasion for ridicule and contempt?" (62). A form of self-exile develops from this self-consciousness, which not surprisingly spoils his hopes of upward mobility. As Gissing's narrator observes,

With the growth of his militant egoism, there had developed in Godwin Peak an excess of nervous sensibility which threatened to deprive his character of the initiative rightly belonging to it. Self-

⁸² Stephen Ogden argues that Gissing was inspired by the skepticism of Darwinian natural selection. I would propose that Gissing saw too much optimism in Darwin. Although "The Hope of Pessimism" is mostly directed at Comte's Positivism, it is hard not to detect Darwin in Gissing's charge that "the scientific doctrine of evolution is made to yield a principle of beatitude . . . to what has ever been confessed the noblest of man's instincts, that of self-forgetfulness in devotion to others' good" (77-78).

assertion is the practical complement of self-esteem. To be largely endowed with the latter quality, yet constrained by a coward delicacy to repress it, is to suffer martyrdom at the pleasure of every robust assailant, and in the end be driven to the refuge of a moody solitude. (60)

Through his refined sensibility he ironically emplaces himself more firmly in a subordinate position, even as he further isolates himself (see Poole 171).

This isolation extends to social pleasure as well. Again, self-conscious of his own class inferiority, Godwin experiences painful humiliation. And, as before, his pain is self-inflicted, arising from a conflict between his wish to be part of a social milieu and the imperative to renounce his class. A highly anticipated visit to the theatre to celebrate the school year's end becomes instead a humiliating experience of class. "To stand thus, expectant of the opening doors, troubled him with a sense of shame. To be sure he was in the spiritual company of Charles Lamb, and of many another man of brains who has waited under the lamp. But contact with the pittites [spectators in the pit] of Kingsmill offended his instincts" (63). His sense of shame only becomes worse when he thinks of his own inferiority in relation to those in reserved seats, the "people who came at their leisure" (63). For a time he lets himself be taken by the crowd, its "honest British stupidity, crushing ribs and rending garments in preference to seemly order of progress—enlivened him somewhat," but shortly thereafter he spies a fellow student seated in the stalls above and shame descends over him once more. Godwin's class prejudices, including those he

directs at himself, preclude pleasure. This is particularly true if he feels the same pleasure as the “shopboy” and “grocer’s wife” who stand beside him (64).

Godwin’s vigilant sense of distinction also extends to popular culture and consumption. His brother, Oliver, an apprentice in a seed shop, revels in the pleasures of mass culture; “a type of young man,” the narrator notes, “as objectionable as it is easily recognised” (69). The list of Oliver’s violations of Godwin’s sensibilities is extensive: his purchase of a bicycle, especially since Oliver “regarded [it] . . . as a source of distinction”; singing “verses of sentimental imbecility”; “penchant for cheap jewellery”; “deciphering cryptograms” in “several weekly papers”; dancing “grotesquely to an air which local talent had somehow caught from the London music-halls”; and wearing “a silk hat of the very newest fashion” (69, 70, 81). This disapproving description of the unavoidability of mass culture surpasses even Gissing’s censorious portrayal of a mass reading public in New Grub Street. But what, we might ask, is actually wrong with Oliver’s pleasures? Godwin’s outburst in regard to his brother’s silk hat indicates the essential problem he sees in his brother’s gratification.

“Everybody wears this shape,” Oliver tells him; to which Godwin replies,

And isn’t that quite sufficient reason why anyone who respects himself should choose something as different as possible?

Everybody! That is to say, all the fools in the kingdom. It’s bad enough to follow when you can’t help it, but to imitate asses gratuitously is the lowest depth of degradation. Don’t you know that that is the meaning of vulgarity? . . . Have you no *self*? Are you

made, like this hat, on a pattern with a hundred thousand others?
(81).

“You and I are different,” Oliver insightfully observes: “I am content to be like other people” (81).

In one sense, Godwin’s reaction fits with Gissing’s Schopenhauerian aesthetics, in which it is only the singularity of aesthetic appreciation that distinguishes one from indiscriminating, instinctual will. In this view, the threat from mass culture is twofold: it diminishes the individual nature of aesthetic experience, and it marks one’s taste as common. But the role of mass culture in the novel, and its effect on Godwin’s shame and envy, are more complex than this suggests. Mass culture represents a risk to Godwin by threatening to identify him with a mass subject — that is to say, a risk of reembodiment in the pleasures or painful dimensions of being part of the vulgar crowd. Yet Godwin’s prejudiced identification with the bourgeoisie constitutes the same sort of risk, making him an even more impeccable version of the mass subject. Michael Warner writes that the subjects of mass publicity “long to abstract themselves into a privileged public disembodiment” (392). Likewise, Godwin longs for self-alienation as a means of becoming the abstracted body of the upper classes. Godwin desires, as Warner writes of mass publicity, a “reconciliation between embodiment and self-abstraction” (396). That is to say, the failure to become completely alienated causes the most pain.

In a scene that takes place ten years later, when the narrative rejoins Godwin in London, where he is a minor functionary in a chemical works, we

witness his vulnerability to mass publicity. It occurs when Godwin chances upon a “gaping plebeian crowd” in Hyde Park who are watching “some public ceremony,” a setting that anticipates the much longer descriptions of public celebration in Jubilee. The scene mixes spectacle and consumption when the crowd is “drawn up to witness the passing of aristocratic vehicles.” Finding himself a part of this crowd, Godwin is acutely aware of both his own position in the multitude and of the remarkable indifference of the subjects of the crowd’s gaze:

Close in front of him an open carriage came to a stop; in it sat, or rather reclined, two ladies, old and young. Upon this picture Godwin fixed his eyes with the intensity of fascination; his memory never lost the impress of these ladies’ faces. Nothing very noteworthy about them; but to Godwin they conveyed a passionate perception of all that is implied in social superiority. Here he stood, one of the multitude, of the herd; shoulder to shoulder with boors and pickpockets; and within reach of his hand reposed those two ladies, in Olympian calm, seeming unaware even of the existence of the throng. (129-30)

The passage strikingly juxtaposes his own passion to the indifference of the aristocratic ladies. Although he identifies himself as one of them — “They were his equals, those ladies; merely his equals. With such as they he should by right of nature associate” (130) — he fails to match their indifference. Unlike him, even the coachmen on the carriage “were splendidly impassive, scornful of the

multitudinous gaze.” Instead, his emotions are raw: “He hated the malodorous rabble who stared indolently at them and who envied their immeasurable remoteness” (130). By implication he also hates himself, especially as he too stares at the aristocratic ladies with envy. Haunting Godwin is the fact that the crowd around him probably feels more like him than not, and that his “passionate perception” is a social emotion. Unlike the ladies’ aristocratic indifference, he is still all too aware of the masses and their “vulgarity in every form” (127). As much as he’d like to project himself into the aristocratic position, he fails to disembody himself successfully into it.

Indeed, he is anything but alienated from the crowded social life around him. He not only experiences shame as a result of his distance from the bourgeoisie, but he also experiences shame as a form of relationality that undermines his intentions to be as indifferent as the aristocratic ladies. On the one hand, Godwin claims, in one of his conversations with Earwaker (“the awake ear”?), the novel’s primary interlocutor, that the “division I instinctively support is by no means intellectual. The well-born fool is very often more sure of my respect than the working man who struggles to fair measure of education” (134). On the other hand, though, he feels an involuntary emotional response to a person poorer than himself: “If it happens that a whining wretch stops me in the street to beg, what do you suppose is my feeling? I am ashamed in the sense of my prosperity. I can’t look him in the face. If I yielded to my natural impulse, I should cry out, ‘Strike me! spit at me! show you hate me! — anything but that terrible humiliation of yourself before me!’ That’s how I feel. The abasement of

which *he* isn't sensible affects *me* on his behalf" (135). Here, Godwin's identification with the abject "wretch" points to both his acute emotional experience of social hierarchy and his inability to maintain indifference. The episode epitomizes Sedgwick's concept of the relationality of shame. Sedgwick sees shame as the locus of identity, "the place where the *question* of identity arises most originarily and most relationally" (37). By displaying his shame to Earwaker, when his hands trembled with "nervous agitation, and occasionally a dryness of the palate half choked his voice" (136), he displays his vulnerability to social affects.

His emotional response not only places his identity into question by illustrating his own abjection to social hierarchy — his affective awareness of the humiliation imposed by the class system — it also mirrors Godwin's own need for social recognition. The conversation with Earwaker takes place within the context of Godwin's own intellectual ambition to become a writer, a published member of the intelligentsia. "But have I any chance?" he asks Earwaker shortly thereafter, "Can a perfectly unknown man get in?" (136). The social character of his emotions during this episode suggests that his need for recognition threatens to make him as abject as a street beggar, that he risks provoking shame in those from whom he asks for help. The episode leaves him vulnerable, too *interested* in being seen as a legitimate intellectual. Something in him seems to change at this point. It makes him more desperate and opportunistic. He abruptly leaves London on an extended holiday, apparently to

escape the opinions of the London intelligentsia and to nurse the ruins of his frail ambition.

But no sooner does he leave London than relationality reasserts itself. In a sort of expectant and far from indifferent drift, he travels only as far as Exeter, where he halfheartedly puts himself in the way of an old, rich school friend, Buckland Warricombe. As he had subconsciously hoped, Buckland offers him a different kind of opportunity: time and leisure among the bourgeoisie. His new opportunity, though, requires that he be something more than a chemist or a struggling writer. Thus, at thirty years of age, having failed to establish himself as literary giant or a member of the ownership class, he unheroically proposes to renounce his atheistic beliefs to become an Anglican priest. He becomes another sort of beggar. The priesthood, he surmises, will give him enough status to “marry a perfectly refined woman” and fulfill his dream of becoming bourgeois (140). With this plan he hopes to “cast away the evil grudge, the fierce spirit of self-assertion, and be what nature had proposed in endowing him with large brain, generous blood, delicate tissues” (159-60). He hopes to become something more than his narcissistic self-image and to rid himself of envy. On his first country drive with the aristocratic Warricombes, for example, he is overcome with gratitude and a sense of joy at their benevolence: “A bee hummed past him, and this sound — of all the voices of nature that which most intenerates — filled his heart to overflowing. Moisture made his eyes dim, and at the impulse of a feeling of gratitude” he confesses his happiness to his companions (160). With the Warricombes Godwin is on board the carriage, so

to speak, rather than looking in from the crowd. He feels, finally, that he is no longer “alone in the world” (167). “Here was peace,” he thinks of the Warricombes’ “English home,” “here was scope for the kindest emotions. . . . In the world to which sincerity would condemn him, only the worst elements of his character found nourishment and range; here he was humanized, made receptive of all human sympathies” (169).

Becoming humanized, however, comes at a terrible cost: he must be inauthentic, dishonest, and ignoble. Thus, he affirms the conventional stereotypes of his class and the isolating character of his shame. Godwin wants to feel as though he has arrived at a goal both hard earned and fated, but the hypocrisy he employs eventually moves him in the opposite direction, toward self-exile rather than self-identity — it is a species of renunciation, perhaps, but a perversion of Schopenhauer’s skeptical idealism. Hypocrisy increases Godwin’s self-consciousness and shame. It means he must maintain vigilance over himself and his actions; it means living in a reality where “after each of his short remarks” he must make a “comparison of his tone and phraseology with those of the other speakers” (154); it means that he reinforces his desire for sociality, for “human fellowship,” while simultaneously rendering himself even more at odds with the social structure.

He was now playing the conscious hypocrite; not a pleasant thing to face and accept, but the fault was not his — fate had brought it about. At all events, he aimed at not vulgar profit; his one desire was for human fellowship; he sought nothing but that solace which

every code of morals has deemed legitimate. Let the society which compelled to such an expedient bear the burden of its shame.

(167)

This is not the reasoning of the alienated, but instead the logic of one in exile, with all of the shame and desire-to-return that exile implies. His ambition is increasingly turned into a vertiginous plunge over which he has no agency — “fate had brought it about.” Several times in the midst of seducing the Warricombe clan he experiences “a tormenting metaphysical doubt of his own identity” (244), confirming that his new hypocritical identity has left him unmoored.

In a final irony, Godwin inherits a fortune from Marcella, the woman who loves him in vain. By bestowing her fortune on him, Marcella avenges Godwin’s rejection of her by rendering him unfit and tainted for the likes of Sidwell Warricombe, who is landed gentry. Marcella’s bequest helps to reveal the value of sociality (and fear of its lack) at the novel’s core. Although the gift of money means Godwin can finally achieve the renunciation that he has desired — “I shall make no fixed abode, but live in the places where cosmopolitan people are to be met. . . . I am an individual merely; I belong to no class, town, family, club” (463) — it cuts him loose from his struggle against the world, against the imperatives of his class. Once he severs all ties with his homeland he quickly becomes ill and dies, as though the loss of his dialectical relationship to the world drains the life out of him. In this sense, Godwin achieves the fatal renunciation that Gissing praises in “The Hope of Pessimism.” But the distant

picture we have of Godwin in the final pages of the novel would suggest that his renunciation is incomplete. We know from his intermittent correspondence with Earwaker that he suffers from isolation. "I am miserable alone, want to see a friend," he writes shortly before his death, "I never in my life suffered so much from loneliness" (484). Godwin's envy, unease, and shame fail to ebb, making him ill-suited for the good life. Even though he has achieved the social mobility that he strains for throughout his life, the pain of his exile is still deeply felt. Class mobility and sociality remain impossible to reconcile. Far from the isolated idealization celebrated in the story of Emily Hood, Godwin dies a dissipated and virtually forgotten man, still seeking a satisfying sociality.

Godwin is a remarkably contradictory character. He claims to overcome his own class through the sheer power of his intellect, and yet he insists that the strikingly rigid class prejudices of the aristocracy are part of the natural order of things. That the established Church is the avenue Godwin uses to access the Warricombes very traditional class superiority is no coincidence. Godwin is an avowed atheist, even while he discourses on the meaning of his faith with the Warricombes, but he is drawn to conservative notions of belief and faith, which in turn mirror the traditional social hierarchies represented by the Warricombes. Godwin's responses to the class system are equally contradictory. Exile is not the species of renunciation that it first appears in its "unclassed" guise. Instead of being an unclassed hero, Godwin is an exile because he is himself all the things he abhors: a weak, hypocritical product of the lower middle class. Even worse, he is a class victim who can identify with the upper classes by

victimizing himself. Like his doubled emotions toward the beggar, he feels the shame of his class as much as he feels others' shame at being aware of his class. (Sidwell Warricombe is the perfect foil for these feelings, for she is both benevolently willing to take tentative steps across class lines and evasively reserved and cautious in her affection.) In short, Godwin is an early expression of Sennett's and Cobb's postindustrial class system, which destroys him not by leaving him in material want, but by turning his emotions and thoughts against himself. The class system takes away with one hand what it gives with the other.

These contradictions make Born in Exile an exemplary case of Gissing's antagonistic style in his novels. He is unable to find more than bitter irony in its characters' shame. This is exhibited most in the novel's crowning contradiction: Every time Godwin moves toward a more intimate sociality — at college, London, or Exeter; with Earwaker, Sidwell, or Marcella; in the public world or in personal relationships — the narrator finds a reason for him to draw away into exile. The reason Gissing's narrator gives for this pattern is that sociality brings out the worst in Godwin. But it is clearly meant to provide protection from becoming socially vulnerable. A small sub-plot involving Christian, Marcella's brother, perhaps best encapsulates Gissing's vision of distorted sociality. Christian spends twelve years waiting for a married woman — a woman he rarely sees — to become free to marry him. But when the woman's elderly husband finally dies, she is astonished and amused to find out that Christian has remained unmarried for her sake. "Disillusion was complete," the narrator writes of Christian, "his life's story was that of a fool" (403). In a larger way, all

desires for sociality and relationality in the novel are deformed by the same apprehension and tentativeness and their subsequent confirmation in humiliation. Godwin is shamed, finally, by simply *wanting* others to recognize him. The novel's style bears the marks of this desire as well; or, rather, it bears the marks of a resistance to this desire. Long stretches of inconsequential dialogue, the constant questioning and changes of heart of its characters, and its bitter irony all testify to the novel's atmosphere of doubt and apprehension.⁸³ More than any of Gissing's novels Born in Exile is about shame, but a comprehension of its true nature is continually deferred.

A Public Remedy

Godwin feels his exile too finely and painfully for it to achieve much more than the fetishized suffering we observe as well in A Life's Morning. In the Year of Jubilee is an altogether different beast. While it echoes the romance plot of A Life's Morning, the character of its female protagonist, Nancy Lord, couldn't be further from Emily Hood's asceticism. These differences reflect Gissing's changing preoccupations. Where Emily Hood strives to keep Schopenhauerian will at arm's length, Nancy Lord is an impeccable manifestation of will. Not only does she have "strong physical passions and an even stronger physical presence that allows her to speak and act with authority" (Young, "Character" 59), she is a creature of the "emotions of the swarm" (Delany xix), of the "carnavalesque

⁸³ In his fictional biography, The Private Life of Henry Maitland, Morley Roberts remarks that Gissing's style features a sense of restraint that was "more marked than that of almost any living writer" (241), even when his rhetorical enthusiasm was most evident.

atmosphere” and “the suspension in the ordinary rhythms of work” that Gissing uses to characterize late nineteenth-century London life (Glover 138). She represents the flourishing during this era of what Henry James called “the devouring *publicity* of life, the extinction of all sense between public and private” (qtd. Leckie 185). In short, she exemplifies the expanding public life of women that so worried a man like James.⁸⁴

Why then, when Nancy does eventually go through her own process of renunciation, is she far more successful than Emily and Godwin in balancing the demands of self-restraint and the integrity of her character? Emily and Godwin are similar to Nancy in a variety of ways. Where they differ is in how they experience sociality and social emotions, particularly, in Godwin’s case, the emotions of the crowd and mass culture. When Godwin finds himself a member of the crowd, he strives to identify himself with the subjects of its gaze, to abstract himself into the aristocratic women’s superiority and indifference. Self-alienation, loss of identity, and unbounded desire are the primary effects of his experience. He thus becomes an unwilling but nonetheless indistinguishable member of the crowd. The effects of the crowd on Nancy and her subsequent renunciations are different. Although Gissing’s rhetoric throughout the crucial street scenes that take place on the night of Jubilee echoes Godwin’s condescension, the crowd makes Nancy daring enough to shake off her father’s designated chaperone and seek her own pleasure. The difference between the novels is in part related to Gissing’s different treatment of social hierarchy.

⁸⁴ On the relation of this expanding public life and consumerism, see Bowlby.

During Nancy's night on the street, the royals are virtually forgotten and the crowd's gaze, like Nancy's, is more interested in itself.⁸⁵ In *Jubilee*, Gissing imagines a new sort of mass audience, one not just cheaply amused by new consumer products and entertainment, but a self-regarding audience that takes pleasure in the experience of its own massification. The crowd animates Nancy's social emotions in such a way that when she is turned toward self-restraint and renunciation her emotional experience does not generate the same devastating effects.

The different valences of pleasure that Gissing produces in the novel are key for understanding the new model of class he tentatively imagines. In this altered narrative trajectory, it is the social emotions of the crowd that blunt the effectiveness of shame in producing an internalization of class. The pleasurable public life of the streets helps Nancy counter the power of shame that is the requisite accompaniment to renunciation in Gissing. To this end, the novel contains a unique view of mass culture that is both cautionary and stirring.⁸⁶ To be sure, Gissing loathes consumer culture and the classes that most represent it. Even worse, the emotions Nancy experiences on Jubilee night are erotic, sensational, and impulsive, anticipating her later seduction by Tarrant. They lead to overwhelming affect and a loss of character: "Nancy forgot her identity, lost sight of herself as an individual. Her blood was heated by close air and physical contact" (59); she becomes "carelessly obedient" (58). Gissing

⁸⁵ The unique qualities of the crowd are lost on Samuel Barmby, her chaperone, and her friend Jessica, who can be seen staring "at one of the coldly insolent facades" of the nearby architecture when Nancy makes her break (58).

⁸⁶ On the pleasures of mass culture, see Dyer; Radway.

describes the sensations of mindless collectivity through an aural metaphor: “only a thud, thud of footfalls numberless and the low, unvarying sound that suggested some huge beast purring to itself in stupid contentment” (58). “She did not think,” Gissing claims, “and her emotions differed little from those of any shop-girl let loose,” blunting “her sensibilities” (59, 53).

But this experience of the crowd also offers opportunities for someone like Nancy who is “haunted by an uneasy sense of doubtfulness as to her social position” (16). Thus, at the same time she is losing her identity, Nancy paradoxically finds a sense of agency in the pleasurable sensations of the crowd. She gains independence by becoming a medium for this communal expression of will. Nancy, Gissing writes, “resolved to taste independence, to mingle with the limitless crowd as one of its units, borne in whatever direction” (54). This loss of identity is different from Emily’s and Godwin’s: instead of leading her to isolation and alienation, she feels her way toward a new identity in the seemingly limitless presence of the crowd. Hence, her loss of identity represents a moment of transition, inspiring her to “cast off the show of domestic authority. . . . to come and go unquestioned and unrestrained by duties” (82). It leads her to seek companionship and experiences outside the narrow confines of her suburban life (see Young, “Character” 56). Although Gissing contemptuously observes that she is in “complete accord with the spirit of her time” (82), after Jubilee night she seeks even more to resist the quietism of female domesticity. She resists other Victorian values as well. She ridicules self-improvement and its corresponding cultivation of culture: “What was it to *her* — the future of the

world? She wanted to live in the present, to enjoy her youth" (83). And she develops an independent friendship with the coarse Luckworth Crewe, a lower middle-class advertising agent whose most defining moment comes from the pleasure he takes in a drunken melee. For all of his disparaging remarks, though, Gissing's narrator admires her. She becomes the sort of person Godwin aspires to be: someone who attempts to make her own morality.⁸⁷

Like Godwin she recognizes the ideologies that would domesticate and mold her, that would blunt her ability to seek her own experience. But unlike Godwin, Nancy's experience on Jubilee night is pleasurable, steeped in what Georg Simmel describes as *sociability*. One might see the echo of Darwin's *social instincts* in Simmel's idealization of sociability, but Simmel notices something very different than an ethical imperative in association (although he acknowledges an ethical impulse in his own views). Simmel theorizes that sociability can be compared to play or art, artificial environments where people shed the objective content of their lives. Sociability is

a feeling for, . . . a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others . . . [T]ypically there is involved in all effective motives for association a feeling of the worth of association as such, a drive which presses toward this form of existence and often only later calls forth that objective content which carries the particular association along. (128)

⁸⁷ On Godwin's Nietzschean character, see Allen's 1970 introduction to *Born in Exile* (12).

"[T]he *play-form of association*," Simmel continues, is "related to the content-determined concreteness of association as art is related to reality" (130).



Figure 4. Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee

Simmel wants to see sociability as a leveling or democratic experience, when the objective aspects of life such as social status and class are cast aside. While we should take this for the idealization that it is, Simmel's insight is to see sociability as a phenomenon of its own, an artificial space or feeling arising from the pleasurable association with other beings. Gissing mocks Nancy's reduction to a "shop-girl," but he also foregrounds her pleasure in being part of the crowd. For Nancy it is a form of play, as well, one that even Simmel connects to eroticism. Coquetry, he asserts, is sociability's "lightest, most playful" manifestation.

Similarly, on the night of Jubilee Nancy escapes from her chaperone “to enjoy herself” (58) and she finds “pleasure in her boldness” (60). When confronted by “a young fellow of the clerkly order,” “Nancy conversed with him unrestrainedly . . . until, at a certain remark which he permitted himself, Nancy felt it time to shake him off” (59).

Gissing interprets the emerging sociability of the late Victorian era as the ascendancy of sensation, when impulse and emotion flow free of guilt or shame. Gissing equates sensation, or a sensational age, with commodification, when everyone is in “harmony” with the time, “advertisements and all” (95). Gissing writes of giving oneself up to the flow of the street, of the virus-like repetition of popular songs, of cheaply made magazines and other consumer products. This is not to say that Gissing endorses a form of sociability advocated by Simmel. He is notoriously critical of Nancy’s complicity in the unrefined emotions of mass culture and middlebrow consumerism, but the thrust of Gissing’s antagonistic style has moved away from an advocacy of isolation. In earlier Gissing novels, Nancy’s expression of will would have kept her peripheral to a more suffering and caring protagonist’s efforts to become indifferent. Instead, she is brought to the center of a narrative to explore the reverse: how social instincts and social emotions can lead to separate, individualized emotions. Rather than portraying the isolation and exile of the unclassed, Jubilee explicitly investigates the experience (if not the value) of the sociability to be found in late Victorian London and its suburbs. Nancy’s experience of sociability on the night of Jubilee is fundamentally important to her actions in the rest of the novel. Although the

street celebration is leveling, giving her the character of a shop-girl, it also offers the view that class boundaries are not sacrosanct. More significantly, even, it offers a leveling of gender. Her agency on the street is derived from the freedom she is allowed to walk in the midst of the crowd, to take pleasure where and with whom she wants. Gissing, in his usual “negative aesthetic,” buries this recognition in an alarmed rhetoric regarding her “vulgar abandonment,” but Nancy’s enlightenment changes the tenor of the inevitable renunciation to come (58).

The two-sided nature of social emotions casts new light on her love affair with the middle-class Tarrant and their obligatory marriage. There is, of course, as in all Gissing novels, the danger of feeling too much. During her brief courtship with Tarrant Nancy feels ensnared, as though unable to escape a hypnotic spell. “[A] languor crept upon her” when she is with Tarrant, “a soft and delicious subdual of the will to dreamy luxury” (96). Worse, she “was not the mistress of the situation, as when trifling with Crewe. A sense of peril caused her heart to beat quickly” (98). Emotions also make her vulnerable to the masculine interest in keeping her isolated and off the streets. Once married, she becomes the epitome of the “emotional woman,” much to the horror of the self-entitled and resolutely autonomous Tarrant. Barred by her father’s meager will from living with Tarrant or even publicly acknowledging her marriage, she must reside in her father’s musty suburban house and keep her child a secret. Tarrant continues to live as a bachelor, openly satisfied with their arrangement. The more Tarrant withdraws from the yoke of marriage, the more desperate she

becomes: “I can’t bear to be separated from you,” she pleads, “I love you so much more than you love me” (165). Much like the collective stupor of the crowd on Jubilee night, “her sensations and her reflections were concerned with the crude elements of life . . . wherein thought, properly speaking, had no share” (153).

But as with her experience of the crowd, her yielding to erotic emotion — or any emotion, really — does not necessarily mean that she must suffer the same emotional fate as Emily Hood and Godwin Peak. Over time, Nancy becomes increasingly independent and whole. Shortly before Tarrant’s departure to the West Indies, she appears in a different guise:

he saw something in her face that removed the necessity for playing a part. It was the look which had so charmed him in their love-days, the indescribable look, characteristic of Nancy, and of her alone; a gleam between smile and laughter, a glance mingling pride with submission, a silent note of personality which thrilled the senses and touched the heart. (172)

Leaving aside the way in which this passage eroticizes restraint and self-control — “glance,” “silent note” — we should observe, as Gissing explains, that at this moment she is “untroubled by morbid influence” (173). To be sure, this part of the narrative concerns itself with renunciation and the consequences of having indulged public emotion too far, but Nancy can also claim pointblank to Tarrant that “I am independent of you” (172; on public emotion see Harman). The incident is important for underscoring the fact that Nancy is not idealized like Emily, nor is Tarrant interested in worshipping her.

Nancy represents a new type of lower middle-class protagonist in Gissing's work who resists shame.⁸⁸ Married in secret, the clandestine mother of a son, subsequently abandoned by her husband, and harassed by the smitten executor of her father's will, Nancy refuses to let shame overwhelm her. Even in the midst of her subterfuge, while she is still hiding her marriage and child from prying eyes, the narrator observes:

Strangely, as it seemed to her, she grew conscious of a personal freedom not unlike what she had vainly desired in the days of petulant girlhood; the sense came only at moments, but was real and precious; under its influence she forgot everything abnormal in her situation, and — though without recognizing this significance — knew the exultation of a woman who has justified her being. (230)

Unlike Emily and Godwin, who are never able to feel "justified," Nancy's robust emotional life means that she can rebound from feelings of shame. Moreover, the feelings inspired by the sociability of the city continue to be key for her. When her troubles continue with Tarrant after his return from the West Indies, she once again finds solace in public, to "distract, if possible, the thoughts which hammered upon her brain by moving amid the life of the streets" (272). The realization that her "life of intolerable isolation should come to end" comes while

⁸⁸ The novel works against its own ideology. Nancy is constitutive, Constance Harsh argues, of "an epistemology of resistance": "her character provides the narrative with a counterpoise to the patriarchal system the conclusion apparently embraces" ("Epistemology of Resistance" 855). Likewise, as I'm arguing here, her "resistance" also works against class ideology.

she watches “the tumultuous traffic which whirls and roars” and allows “the movements of a group of people to direct her steps” (273). Public life inspires her, as it did once before; this time, however, she authors a three-decker novel and seeks work outside her home, notably for Beatrice French at her South London Fashionable Dress Supply Association.

In Nancy Lord, Gissing imagines a new being in which the internalization of class is incomplete. Godwin may be closer to the reality of class experience, at least in the way in which Sennett and Cobb describe it, but Nancy offers a different model. This was not an unfamiliar type by the end of the nineteenth century. Vanessa Schwartz, writing about the urban dynamic of mass culture, claims that the nineteenth-century city fashioned a shared form of spectacular experience that avoids what most historians have seen as the experience of modern urban alienation. Instead, she asserts that “[r]ather than subsist as alienated and detached individuals lost in the crowd, the urban mob happily assembled as a new collective in front of the spectacle of the real” (44).⁸⁹ Nancy is a consumer, as well, a member of the collective self-regarding audience that Schwartz imagines populating the nineteenth-century city. Her pleasure in both public and private points her in the direction of social mobility and class transcendence, making her only one of many who flock to the streets to feel, however fleetingly, unclassed.

⁸⁹ To be sure, Nancy Lord is not the first literary figure to take pleasure in the city, nor the first woman. In the introduction to *Shopping for Pleasure*, Rappaport invokes Bronte’s Lucy Snowe as “a new type of urban character, a female Rambler who consumed the city’s sights and sights and sounds” (3; see also Wilson). But Nancy is different for being taken seriously as a member of the crowd rather than simply a bourgeois consumer.

Yet when Nancy hides her novel's manuscript away at the end of In the Year of Jubilee, when she "subdued her natural impulse, and conformed to her husband's ideal of wifedom," as readers we share her "grave disappointment" (356). As many critics have noted, Gissing unravels the promise of his novel by enclosing Nancy in an ambivalent domesticity. They have asked, as Nancy asks Tarrant, "Why should a woman be shut out from the life of the world?" (355). Tarrant's answer, of course, is that she might take *too much* pleasure in the world (Harman 368). The novel, thus, leaves us suspended between the acknowledgment that sociability can work to undo the worst extremes of class humiliation and the recognition that lower middle-class propriety and its gender politics have the final word. Like Moses wandering through the desert, Nancy is able to show the way, but she cannot reach the promised land. Shame, unfortunately, stains both herself and Tarrant at the novel's end when she hauntingly asks him, "Are you — ever so little — ashamed of me?" (366). Tarrant denies it, but the question suggests otherwise. We are ultimately left with the impression that Gissing has turned her sensation into subordination, once again collapsing any distinction between the determining nature of class and emotion. But it is Gissing's antagonistic style that makes a character like Nancy possible; indeed, its promise as a style begins to bear fruit at this stage of his career. Although his narrator claims continuously that Nancy represents some of the worst attributes of her culture's mass sensation and conformity, he grimly (and reluctantly) acknowledges that such an individual may represent the best case for enduring shame. Gissing never overturns his social prejudices, but

he comes to see the class of his birth in different ways. Shame is an ugly feeling, of course, but Gissing comes to recognize its potential in Nancy. “The dual experiences of exposure and vulnerability,” Pamela Fox writes of class shame, “not only wound; they aid in the production of self-knowledge, community, and social critique” (16). It is a lesson that Nancy learns well.

PART III: WELLS

CHAPTER SIX

THE HUMILIATIONS OF HABIT: HOOPDRIVER AND KIPPS

*To live has become with him a sort of aimless habit,
and he goes on, as the back wheel of the guard's brake
goes on behind the engine, far ahead, drawn by an
irresistible impulse, he knows not whither.*

— Edwin Pugh, The Mind of the Clerk

H. G. Wells was an explosively moody man, subject to caprice, reckless passion, and perverse, self-defeating acts of imprudence (Mackenzie xxx). His powerful emotions led to resentment and irresponsibility as a clerk, to rebellion and failure at university, and to life-long philandering that threatened his relations with those closest to him. I want to begin this chapter, then, with an interpretation of these emotions, the impulses that he would later spend so much time describing in his autobiographies, Experiment in Autobiography and H. G. Wells in Love. I would contend that his impulses were largely the product

of his lower middle-class origins, both a reaction to his strained circumstances and a way to distinguish himself from others like him. These impulses led to reckless acts that deflected his frustration and habituation as a member of the lower middle class. From his own perspective, though, they helped to make him an “originative intellectual worker,” emerging from a sea of small-minded clerks and students (Experiment 17). Even as they resulted in acts of self-sabotage, they masqueraded as sui generis emotions that, like the inspirations of a self-made man, marked him as something more than a product of his class.

And yet, even late in life, Wells’s impulses were bound up with a deeply class-based sense of inadequacy. The strong dread of failure that was instilled in him as a product of the lower middle class was only incompletely transmuted into the romantic and sensual disillusionment of his middle age. The elusive and haunting love object he describes in his autobiography as the “*Lover-Shadow*” suggests the extent to which his success was accompanied by a sense of failure. The *Lover-Shadow* undermines the light-hearted pleasure with which Wells otherwise characterizes his infamous series of affairs in the posthumously published H. G. Wells in Love; his claims to “cool-hearted[ness]” are belied by the unsatisfied ache they inspire (Experiment 61). Interpreted variously as the natural consequence of his heterosexual desire or the cover story for his pathological needs, Wells saw the *Lover-Shadow* as a physical drive and a psychological ideal, both compelling and rationalizing his promiscuity.⁹⁰ But the

⁹⁰ For a discussion of the various interpretations of the *Lover-Shadow*, see Lynn’s Shadow Lovers, especially xxii, 23-24 and Huntington’s essay “Problems of an Amorous Utopian.” Lynn suggests that because of his lower-middle-class background, Wells

Lover-Shadow is not merely about sexual satisfaction. It represents Wells's persistent discontent, leading to uncontrollable obsession, distracting preoccupation, and unfulfilled need. He writes,

We play with the sexual side of the Lover-Shadow; we relieve and drug the dissatisfaction of our imaginations in a purely sexual adventure, and suddenly sex turns upon us and grips us. . . .

[B]efore we know where we are, the haunting deeper need to possess and be possessed, for good and all, that undying hunger of the soul for a commanding love-response, has laid hold upon us. . .

. It will not leave us alone, and it will not give us enduring peace of mind. . . . It is a mental and aesthetic quite as much as a physical

need. (H. G. Wells in Love 66-67)

This passage describes the state of being possessed by physical as well as mental and aesthetic hunger.⁹¹ Wells suggests such hungers are the consequences of his autonomy and progressiveness, side effects of his success. Yet his reckless pursuit of sexual satisfaction — of relief from “the dissatisfaction of our imaginations” — turns out to be as much the product of his class-inflected sense of inadequacy as any of his other emotions. Meditating on the insufficiencies of his Lover-Shadow, he writes in H. G. Wells in Love of “the conviction of my own unworthiness” (203). “Sometimes,” he continues, “I realize something in myself

sought validation from his mostly aristocratic and upper middle-class lovers. For analysis of the Lover-Shadow's psychosexual ramifications, see Steffen-Fluhr.

⁹¹ The phenomenon of self-difference (the mind against itself, or the self against the world), which this example illustrates, is essential to Rei Terada's analysis of the nonsubjective nature of emotion: “Such emotion can no longer verify unities, but then it no longer has to; indeed, it has *not* to” (86).

so silly, fitful and entirely inadequate to opportunity, that I feel even by my own standards I am not fit to live" (203). While his sexual emotions prove his distance from economic want — he could with success, he writes, "*get women*" (61) — the logic of exchange is never far from his desire. That is to say, both his body and being are classed — seemingly forever — by his early life experience. Nevertheless, Wells is describing affective states, as ugly as they might be, that he would never have or been able to describe had he not spent 40 years writing himself out of the lower middle class. Emotions are repetitive, impulsive, and sometimes frighteningly open-ended, and Wells helps us to understand how they embody and remake our interpersonal and social experiences.

In this chapter and the next, I focus on the ambivalent representation of feelings like these in a sequence of novels Wells wrote about male clerks and scholarship boys in the 1890s and 1900s — among them, Wheels of Chance, Love and Mr. Lewisham, Kipps, and The History of Mr. Polly. Many of the characters in these novels are modeled on Wells's own lower middle-class past. Through them, the novelist expresses the muted outbursts of anger, the veiled feelings of frustration and shame, as well as the small rebellions, the occasional bravado, and the flights of fantastic ambition and self-aggrandizing narcissism that he sees as characterizing the emotional lives of lower middle-class men.⁹² Wells not only chronicles the material conditions of everyday life, he also helps us understand the extent to which class difference is a matter of how personal

⁹² Women do, of course, feel these emotions as well in Wells's realist fiction, but I've limited myself to this set of novels, which focuses on male protagonists. Ann Veronica (1909), Wells's New Woman novel, portrays similarly classed emotions and the risk of strong passions.

emotions fit in the social order (Sennett 258; Foote 66). My goal, though, is not simply to describe the effects of class on the emotions; rather, I seek to demonstrate, as I think Wells does, that upward mobility requires emotions to have range and complexity. Like Gissing in Jubilee, Wells is willing to embrace ugly feelings, to seek alternatives to even proper emotion. In many places, then, he inverts the familiar hierarchies of economies of emotion.

In the trajectory from Dickens to Wells, we can trace changing definitions of masculinity, from self-discipline and gentlemanly respectability to “an organic ideal, rooted above all in an innate, physiological sensibility” (Adams 152). I am, however, not as concerned with changing views of masculinity so much as how lower middle-class writers conceived of their own access to cultural authority through their gender identity. For Dickens and Gissing strong somatic feeling is threatening in their search for an uncompromised, upwardly mobile identity. Better to be the grim clerk (Dickens) or the suffering, abnegating loner (Gissing) than be exposed as a jerking, enraged emotional embodiment of your marginal class status. Wells was highly aware that the confident, strong male body and its passions were his culture’s late-century touchstone for ideal masculinity and social authority. Since his clerks are subordinate in both mind and body, he seeks remedies for them in strong, often libidinal, passions. And when his clerks fall short they fail to overcome the self-disciplining and habituated emotional responses of their internalized class status. But where some clerks, such as Hoopdriver and Kipps (covered in this chapter), prove themselves unable to fully exploit strong passion, others, like Lewisham and Polly (examined in the

next), are undermined by their intensity. Taken as a whole, these novels represent Wells's ambivalent and sometimes hostile preoccupation with emotion, much as the Lover-Shadow expressed a long-standing uneasiness about his sexual desire. In the end, Wells's 1910 novel, The History of Mr. Polly, represents the failure of emotion, ushering in a different period in his work, when changing the world becomes much more urgent than reshaping the self.

Both passion and renunciation ultimately close off options for traditional upward mobility, reflecting Wells's disenchanted view of emotion and his certainty about the persistent influence of class origins. But in writing this set of realistic novels, Wells gives the clerk a much richer life than his peers. He departs, for example, from the common contemporary image of the clerk as a figure synonymous with his or her function. The long, tedious hours spent in drab, stuffy offices and shops and the constant subordination to authority, he argues, did not necessarily create dull, grey, and interchangeable people. Wells gives voice, in particular, to men and women at odds with the utilitarianism and functionalism of their normative roles, without recourse to typical modes of self-improvement and social authority. Comparing his own work to Dickens in Experiment in Autobiography, Wells claims that Dickens's novels "never deal with any inner confusion, any conflicts of opinion within the individual characters, any subjective essential change" (496). In contrast, Wells sees his

work mining the very personal terrain of his clerks' inner lives, emphasizing the strains between internal feelings and an unsympathetic external world.⁹³

Wells did attempt to avoid reproducing the narrative priorities of most fictional accounts during the late Victorian period, which focused primarily on the ordinary, physical lives of clerks, such as in George and Weedon Grossmith's Diary of a Nobody or in George Gissing's Mr. Bailey, Grocer, his satire of realism in New Grub Street. Hoopdriver and Kipps, instead, both become conscious of their class habits and hope to break their habits' grip by overturning them with more passionate affects. In most cases, Wells ambivalently concludes that the habits of classed emotion and routines are more powerful than the passions. One would think, as Athena Vrettos observes about Victorian fiction, that "If habit is, by definition, automatic, unconscious, and conserving of energy, then to make habitual behaviors conscious, volitional, and perhaps most importantly, emotional, is potentially to break the grip of routine" (418). Yet, as she makes clear, those writing in the nineteenth century "on the psychology of habit" speculated "that the force of repetition is so compelling, and so intricately linked to the formation of character, that it may preclude the capacity for change" (419). In his early work, Wells struggled against but did not overcome such assumptions. In the end, neither Hoopdriver nor Kipps possess the emotional resources to defeat deeply ingrained habits. Thus, Wells's representation of class-coded emotions such as shame, ambition, and frustration illustrate the

⁹³ As Linda R. Anderson argues in her seminal essay "Self and Society in H. G. Wells's Tono-Bungay," for Wells experience "involved the contradictory evidence of both the individual's apprehension and the concrete situation in which he is caught," leading to an often intractable disjunction "between self-conception and lived reality" (54, 57).

profound impact of social hierarchies on individual lives. He illustrates even better than Dickens and Gissing how we can become subjected to socially conditioned feelings, *emotions of class* that make what is rotten in society also rotten in the self.⁹⁴

“Look at yer silly hands!”

Wells’s first social comedy, Wheels of Chance, addresses the uncertain masculinity of the late-century clerk, who Wells (somewhat ambivalently) redefines as something more than a weak, indecisive creature of the shop. The novel tests how classed masculinity might be circumvented through class-transcending recklessness. The protagonist, Hoopdriver, is a Gent, a superficial, self-conscious suburban figure who had become iconic by the end of the nineteenth century. His embodiment of lower middle-class diffidence takes us far from the self-deprecating heroism of David Copperfield or even the alienated arrogance of Godwin Peak. Hoopdriver views his own body, his “narrow shoulders” and “weedy,” “skimpy” frame, with “distaste” (111).⁹⁵ And he is impressionable, easily swayed by the romantic illusions he finds in cheap books, such as those by “Besant,” “Mrs. Braddon,” “Rider Haggard,” and “Marie Corelli”

⁹⁴ Ngai’s phrase for something like emotions of class is “affective ideologemes,” a term that attempts to capture the cognitive, historical, and physiological dimensions of such emotions (7).

⁹⁵ For a wide-ranging discussion of the anxieties regarding the physical characteristics of the clerk, see Jonathan Wild’s chapter “Degeneration in the Edwardian Office” (81-100).

(170).⁹⁶ Even in the strained world of the lower middle class, his position as drapers clerk in Putney is low status. “Real workman laugh at us,” Hoopdriver points out, “and educated chaps like bank clerks and solicitors’ clerks look down on us” (168).

But Wells makes the case that Hoopdriver is more masculine than he may at first appear. In the confines of the drapers shop, Hoopdriver is the consummate and unremarkable service employee: “Now if you had noticed anything about him, it would have been chiefly to notice how little he was noticeable. . . . He was of a pallid complexion, hair of a kind of dirty fairness, greyish eyes, and a skimpy, immature moustache under his peaked indeterminate nose” (4). He is also a sycophant, who, had you entered the shop,

would have come forward, bowing and swaying; he would have extended two hands with largish knuckles and enormous cuffs over the counter; and he would have asked you, protruding a pointed chin and without the slightest anticipation of pleasure in his manner, what he might have the pleasure of showing you. . . .

His remarks, you would observe, were entirely what people used to call cliché, formulae not organic to the occasion, but stereotyped ages ago and learnt years since by heart. (3-4).

⁹⁶ Wells contributes to a cultural discourse about mass literacy that saw novel-reading and “novelists themselves, as both the causes and symptoms of the rotting of minds and the decay of culture and society” (Brantlinger 24). Patrick Brantlinger shows that Wells’s later *The Outline of History* “treats mass literacy, with its untrained appetite for mindlessly chauvinistic, war-mongering journalism as the main cause of the disastrous war-making of the twentieth century” (205). In *Wheels*, the portrayal of reading is less alarmist. Reading’s main effect, for good and bad, on Hoopdriver (as it was for Don Quixote) is a fantasy life that he misrecognizes for reality.



Figure 5. Behind the counter.

While the clerk is polite and decorous, his rote and formulaic affect, and his obvious lack of pleasure, destabilize the servility of his role. Like a turn-of-the-century Uriah Heep, his humility is accompanied by potentially threatening undertones. The retail clerk in a middle-class establishment already occupies an ambiguous identity, functional in the well-mannered modes of middle-class decorum, but proletarian and cockney in the clerk's dormitories upstairs.⁹⁷ Hoopdriver's "uniform" and position behind the counter, for example, only partially conceal an active sexuality: "He wore the black morning coat, the black tie, and the speckled grey nether parts (descending into shadow and mystery below the counter) of his craft" (4). Wells pursues the comedy of that mystery beneath the counter: "Thus even in a shop assistant does the warmth of manhood assert itself, and drive him against all the conditions of his calling, against the counsels of prudence and the restrictions of his means, to seek the wholesome delights of exertion and danger and pain. And our first examination of the draper reveals beneath his draperies — the man!" (7).

The novel traces the emergence of this putative "man" while on holiday, drawing from the conventions of the picaresque novel and the potboiler excesses of Victorian melodrama to create a road narrative in which anything is, at first, possible. By taking a cycle tour along England's south coast on a newly acquired bicycle, Hoopdriver hopes to live for a short time as a gentleman with leisure and reckless autonomy. Setting off with otherwise uncertain goals, he

⁹⁷ "You look respectable outside," Hoopdriver will report later in the narrative, "inside you are packed in dormitories like convicts, fed on bread and butter, and bullied like slaves" (168).

almost immediately encounters another bicyclist, a young, upper middle-class woman, Jesse Milton, who is on a sort of quest of her own. Under the strain of her stepmother's household and inspired by narratives of New Woman independence, she has left home in the hopes of fashioning a writing career; she is, the narrator says, "resolute to Live Her Own Life" (66). She is on her way to meet Bechamel, the novel's melodramatic scoundrel, a married, thirty-something, small man of letters whose motives are purely carnal. Like the melodramatic heroes he has encountered in his books, Hoopdriver will proceed to save Milton from Bechamel's grasp. Their futile escape lasts only a few days, however, until Milton's stepmother and her comically urbane male suitors catch up with them. Identity and origin have the last word when Hoopdriver goes back to his life as a clerk, and Milton, who ironically was inspired to run by her stepmother's own New Woman novel, The Soul Untrammelled, returns to something like bourgeois respectability.

In the suspension of ordinary life — his vacation — Hoopdriver wants to inhabit the role of the untethered gentleman. The social psychologist, C. Wright Mills, names this phenomenon "status cycles," "which provide, for brief periods of time, a holiday image of the self, which contrasts sharply with the self-image of everyday reality. They provide a temporary satisfaction of the person's prized image of self, thus permitting him to cling to a false consciousness of his status position. They . . . compensate for economic inferiority" (258). To Mills, this has the unfortunate effect of making an individual more willing to endure long periods of privation and sacrifice. Similarly, for Hoopdriver, the bicycling

holiday is of a piece in a larger continuum of attempts to sidestep the reality of his status. According to the narrator, "his real life was absolutely uninteresting, and if he had faced it as realistically as such people do in Mr. Gissing's novels, he would probably have come by way of drink to suicide in the course of a year" (42). But for Hoopdriver, the holiday is about more than a suspension of his normal life. The middle-class holiday offers the possibility of uncovering a reckless and class-transcendent masculinity lurking obscurely within him.

Reckless emotion suggests that an individual is vital and risk-taking and that he or she could (for a moment, at least) rise above the economic consequences of his or her actions. By following his "warmth of manhood," by becoming reckless, Hoopdriver can reverse the "Years of the intimate remoteness of a counter [that] leave their mark upon a man" (19), bringing himself closer to being a gentleman. Hoopdriver may imagine himself to be "Cromwell-like, of sturdy plainness . . . a strong, silent man going righteously through the world," but the gentleman of Hoopdriver's desire is not necessarily chivalrous, nor a model of restraint (43; see Adams 16). Instead, he is a reckless "man of pleasure," with money to spend and prerogatives to fulfill (17), riding a bicycle that "may have had something of the blade in its metal" 19): "The situation was primordial. The Man beneath prevailed for a moment over the civilised superstructure, the Draper. He pushed at the pedals with archaic violence" (23). Hoopdriver's model for manly "warmth" is Bechamel, Hoopdriver's upper middle-class rival, who "in spite of Oxford and the Junior Reviewer's Club, was a Paleolithic creature of simple tastes and violent methods"

(84). Bechamel is a sexual predator familiar in sensation fiction and Victorian melodrama, for whom a superior class offers the means for sexual aggression. But like his name, his “warmth” is both phallically empowered and milkily refined. Hoopdriver first encounters him by the side of the road in the humiliating position of fixing a flat tire. Wells uses the touchstone image of Bechamel pushing his bicycle in subsequent scenes to undermine the force his villainy, as though he is only superficially potent. Yet Bechamel is more than a threat to Milton. He is also a person who can afford to be reckless.

Hoopdriver’s desire on the road to be seen as a “bloomin’ dook” is tainted the moment he encounters Bechamel. The “warmth of manhood” that supposedly drives Hoopdriver’s adventure and which animates his bicycle, becomes synonymous with an emotion of class: his envious desire to be Bechamel and to have what he has. As Hoopdriver encounters and reencounters Bechamel and Milton on their surreptitious elopement as “brother and sister,” and then begins to follow them purposefully, Bechamel supplements Milton as the focus of his interest: “A great brown shadow, a monstrous hatred of the other man in brown, possessed him” (56). Hoopdriver’s fixation on Bechamel for a time succeeds in heightening his warmth and adventurousness even more: “behold Mr. Hoopdriver, his cheeks hot, his eye bright! His brain is in a tumult. The nervous, obsequious Hoopdriver, to whom I introduced you some days since, has undergone a wonderful change” (88). But Wells creates a volatile brew by conjoining sexual desire and class envy. The confusions between his romantic notions of the gentleman and his own “warmth” mean that his social

status becomes more important to him than sexual fulfillment. Although he will attempt to cover up the contradictions between his twin impulses with a stance of chivalry, his goal of uncovering the gentleman within is doomed from this point forward, increasingly exposed as envy lapsing into *ressentiment* — what Fredric Jameson calls the “diseased passion” (268).

While Milton affirms his gentlemanly status at the moment when he helps her escape Bechamel, Hoopdriver is slowly but inevitably exposed as a fraud. Hoopdriver is too much a creature of habit and deep-seated class traits, exemplifying Wells’s recurring suspicion that class is an “iron cage,” enclosing identities that are impervious to individual desire. Although she at first accepts his gentlemanly demeanor at face value, what Milton notices about Hoopdriver is that “His English was uncertain, but not such as books informed her distinguished the lower classes. His manners seemed to her good on the whole, but a trifle over-respectful and out of fashion. He called her ‘Madam’ once. He seemed a person of means and leisure, but he knew nothing of recent concerts, theatres, or books” (121). His confusions capture the confounding indeterminacies of lower middle-class *habitus*. Eventually, Milton uncovers the persistent presence of the shop in him. She tries to improve him, suggesting that he “cure himself” of that “habit of bowing as you do, and rubbing your hands, and looking expectant” (161). But in the logic of this early social comedy, improvement isn’t enough. The truth of his social identity leaves Hoopdriver in painful humiliation. He may be able to recognize the so-called natural gentleman in his lonely imagination, but he can never truly feel like a gentleman if others do

not see his deep subjectivity, his “warmth,” in the signs and habits of observable behavior. Being conscious about his habits is not enough either. Even with the proof of his brave adventures, he can only reach the anguished conclusion, in telltale colloquial speech, that “It isn’t *in* me. You ain’t man enough, Hoopdriver. Look at yer [sic] silly hands! Oh, my God!” (196). Emotions of class are proved in this first social comedy to be as impossible to elude as the shopkeeping habits of the draper.

“Little pink strips of quivering, living stuff”

The comedy of Wheels of Chance depends on the failure of the “warmth of manhood” to overcome emotions, habits, and visible signs of class. Even if Hoopdriver’s abasement seems real enough, he plays a quixotic character, someone deluded enough to believe that he can be something that he is not. Hoopdriver’s delusion is also the point of the novel. Wheels of Chance demonstrates the tensions and self-estrangements among differing social identities — what class theory calls “contradictory locations within class relations” — and the strength of their emotional half-lives in everyday experience (Wright 16). In Kipps, the experience of self-estrangement is doubly intensified. The novel features a plot whereby the eponymous hero is plucked from his clerkly life and given wealth beyond his wildest dreams. Kipps desires something better for himself, but when he becomes wealthy he literally becomes the very thing that he cannot be. The novel recalls Dickens’s David Copperfield, with one significant difference: both Copperfield and Kipps are orphans; both

escape their fates and move up abruptly in their socioeconomic status; and both ultimately find what appears to be a satisfying marriage only after mistakenly pursuing another sort of social ideal. But where Dickens emphasizes the way in which Copperfield makes himself, in an idealized fantasy of the self-making man, Wells is more interested in the ways in which Kipps cannot make (or unmake) himself.

Kipps is often considered the most naïve of Wells's clerkly protagonists (see Green 10). This impression of Kipps arises primarily because of his embattled response to the sudden wealth given him by a surprise inheritance, which he endures with mounting shame rather than relief. Like Wheels of Chance, Kipps is eventually about the persistence of class, the eponymous character's *being* rather than his *becoming*. Where the surprise inheritance in most Victorian novels might confirm the social taste and position of a character who is, or who is becoming, part of the upper middle-class, Kipps's inheritance elevates a character who embodies the lower middle class — a class identity that is as much about his tastes, habits, and emotions as it is income and economic status.⁹⁸ Although Kipps does become joyously rich, the deeply ingrained habits of class prevent him from becoming more than he is. He will wander bewildered and hurt through the wilderness of the middle class before slowly coming to realize domestic satisfaction lies with the lower middle class of his origins. The

⁹⁸ Contemporary reviewers were generally struck by the clumsy use of the surprise inheritance ("The Ideas of H. G. Wells" 57). On the other hand, Breton argues that the more a plot device such as this one is improbable and based on luck the more it resists bourgeois principles of self-help (560).

arc of the narrative, then, rather than a rag-to-riches story, merely traces Kipps's rise from being a clerk in a retail enterprise to the clerk-owner of a shop.

The goal of the novel is to replace Kipps's class shame with something more venerable. To this end, Wells rewrites the domestic — and the lower middle-class relation to it — with a reckless dimension that revitalizes it as a place of sexual desire, pleasure, and rebellion. To be sure, Wells's revision of the domestic is a male-oriented endeavor. But his novel appears during a time when domesticity (as we'll see in Love and Mr. Lewisham) not only threatened the class ambitions of the clerk, but when sex and desire between spouses was not generally celebrated as part of the domestic scene. Kipps's marriage to Ann Pornick ultimately represents a rejection of the social authority of the middle-class home and the pieties of Victorian domesticity.⁹⁹

Significantly, Wells's version of the domestic also rewrites the stereotypes of the lower middle-class home, in which Kipps's childhood class subjectivity is first shaped by prejudice and narrow-mindedness. Kipps begins the novel living with an aunt and uncle, whose petty snobbery and isolation place them firmly in the lower middle class: "They were always suspicious about their neighbours and other people generally; they feared the 'low' and they hated and despised the 'stuck up,' and so they 'kept themselves *to* themselves,' according to the English ideal" (14). His uncle, for example, holds that the next door neighbor, Pornick, the haberdasher, is "a 'blaring jackass,'" a "teetotaler, a 'nyar, nyar, 'im-singing Methodis,' and altogether distasteful and detrimental"

⁹⁹ On middle-class domesticity, see Nancy Armstrong, who argues that it consolidates bourgeois ideology.

(14). Likewise, when Kipps is ready for school, according to the request of his absent mother, "He was not to go to a 'Common' school . . . but to a certain seminary in Hastings, that was not only a 'middle-class academy' with mortarboards and every evidence of a higher social tone, but also remarkably cheap" (12). The irony is that while "Cavendish Academy" is "a little 'superior' to a board school education" the principal's diploma is fake and the school's prospectus fraudulent (16). By appealing to the ill-considered but deeply held snobbery of the lower middle class, the school is able to pass off its corrupt existence as superior. The sense of a claustrophobic and close-minded world of the "Academy" sets the tone for Wells's depiction of Kipps's class fate.

The memories Kipps carried from that school into after-life were set in an atmosphere of stuffiness and mental muddle and included countless pictures of sitting on creaking forms, bored and idle; of blot licking and the taste of ink; of torn books with covers that set one's teeth on edge; of the slimy surface of the laboured slates; of . . . Mr. Woodward's raving days, when a scarcely sane injustice prevailed. (17)

The meanness and vacuity of the lower middle-class school are captured in the taste and texture of things that do not rise above physical sensation.

Wells emphasizes Kipps's lack of agency, his subjection to a corrosive social system. At the novel's end, the narrator blames the "ruling power of this land," a "monster" and "anti-soul" of "Stupidity," for causing Kipps's suffering (306). When Wells turns to Kipps's socioeconomic destiny, he similarly

emphasizes the systematic and inevitable nature of Kipps's humble future: "Inexorable fate had appointed him to serve his country in commerce, and the same national bias towards private enterprise and leaving bad alone, which had left his general education to Mr. Woodrow, now indentured him firmly into the hands of Mr. Shalford of the Folkestone Drapery Bazaar" (33). Once Kipps is apprenticed, his emotions are enfolded even further into gloom and resentment: "A vague self-disgust that shaped itself as an intense hatred of Shalford and all his fellow-creatures filled the soul of Kipps Dimly he perceived the thing that had happened to him, how the great stupid machine of retail trade had caught his life into its wheels, a vast, irresistible force which he had neither strength of will nor knowledge to escape" (43-44). His emotional life as a clerk is suffused with an impotent immobility.

In the face of such an existence, Kipps's very emergence from the shop appears as something of a form of recklessness. Indeed, the reckless, all-night drunk with the unemployed actor Chitterlow coincides with the surprise inheritance, thereby softening the blow of his termination from the shop. But I would like to step back a bit in the plot and consider the one other, earlier way that he manages to leave the stasis of the shop. He does this by spending his one free evening a week enrolled in an adult education woodworking course. We would expect this from a normative narrative of self-improvement, but it is his romantic crush on his young, shabbily genteel teacher that impels him from his gloom. The course replicates the class dynamics and hierarchies of his service as a clerk, but in a different key. In the classroom, Kipps is acutely aware of the

inferiority of his clothes, language, and education: he is like “a creature of the outer darkness blinking in an unsuspected light” who must remain silent in the classroom to conceal the “bottomless baseness” of “his tongue” (57). Likewise, he feels “pure and awe-stricken humility” with Helen Walshingham, his teacher (57). Yet if the infatuation humiliates and shames him, its erotic possibilities induce a stronger sense of masculinity in Kipps and displace the more humiliating social force of his class status.

One example, in particular, illustrates how an erotic recklessness changes the way that he and others view his class identity. Kipps leaps at the chance to help Helen open a classroom window: “It did not take Kipps a moment to grasp his opportunity. . . . He felt his manhood was at stake” (59). In the process he slashes his hand on broken glass, with the wound being subsequently dressed by Helen and her “freckled friend.” The scene is charged. As the “young ladies became very intent on the knot” of the bandage, Kipps “was very red and very intent on the two young ladies” (61). The event influences Helen’s and her friend’s perception of Kipps, particularly after he licks blood off the wound, to their amazement and horror. Hereafter, his clerk’s identity is seen as something more than a socioeconomic destiny. Much as the Schlegel sisters view Leonard Bass in Forster’s later Howards End, Helen’s “freckled friend,” in particular, sees him as someone who is “misunderstood” and “too sensitive” for the demeaning life of a clerk (64).

This sense of himself as something more than his socioeconomic status inspires Kipps to imagine another outcome for himself. After a conversation

with some fellow clerks about the successful class mobility of Dickens (“a labeler of blacking”), Thackeray (“an artis’ who couldn’t sell a drawing”) and Samuel Johnson (who “walked to London without any boots”), he next attends the woodworking course as a future “Nawther” (64):

After this there were times when Kipps had the pleasant sense that comes of attracting interest. He was a mute, inglorious Dickens, or at any rate something of that sort, and they were all taking him at that. The discovery of this indefinable ‘something in’ him, the development of which was now painfully restricted and impossible, did much to bridge the gulf between himself and Miss Walshingham. He was unfortunate, he was futile, but he was not ‘common.’ (65)

The “discovery” of “something in him” is important to the logic of the novel. It makes available to him a widening array of affects and experiences, changing his self-image as well as the way others perceive him. The episode suggests that something can be *made* from class experience, much as it shaped the successes of Dickens, Thackeray, and Johnson.

Following the arrival of the inheritance, however, the “something in him” that makes him special evaporates, with the ironic effect of making Kipps appear even more lower middle class than he was before. His access to future domestic bliss with Helen becomes assured, but now its bourgeois character corrupts it with debilitating class emotions such as shame. Wealth makes Kipps even more defined by the way he speaks, dresses, and whom he associates with. Installed in

his mysterious grandfather's old-fashioned town home, for example, even "the rug, the fender, the mantel, and mirror, conspired with great success to make him look trivial and . . . mocked and made tremendous fun of him" (127). From here on out, people — most especially Helen — see him as an expression of the fortune rather than someone romantic with a "sensitive" and "misunderstood" character. Her attempts at reform make him just another awkward, common man who can pay the bill, surrounded by a set of expectations he can barely understand. Helen "told him things about his accent; she told him things about his bearing, about his costume and his way of looking at things"; but her efforts leave Kipps wounded: "She thrust the blade of her intelligence into the tenderest corners of Kipps' secret vanity; she slashed his most intimate pride to bleeding tatters" (183).

Kipps wants the erotic recklessness of his classroom encounter with Helen to be fulfilled in their domesticity, but social perceptions and pressures make this impossible. As his marriage to Helen approaches, he becomes progressively alienated from her: the more she presses for a high-society life in London, the more she confirms his inadequacy, the more he loses the sense of that special "something in him" that originally impelled him. Kipps becomes increasingly estranged from himself, split between two worlds: one "constituting his primary world, his world of origin"; the other "the world of culture and refinement . . . a world, it was fast becoming evident, absolutely incompatible with the first" (216). At the height of his self-estrangement, he reencounters Ann Pornick, the woman from "his world of origin." Ann first awakened his

sexuality as a young man, and she appears here in the plot to save him from Helen. With Ann “extraordinary impulses arose in neglected parts of Kipps’ being” (201); she “called out all the least gentlemanly instincts of his nature. . . . There was something warming about Ann” (202). Ann, of course, is not only more sensual than Helen, she also doesn’t challenge Kipps or remind him of his inadequacies, especially after the trauma of attempting to become a gentleman deserving of his money. Ann “was possible to his imagination just exactly where Helen was impossible. More than anything else, she carried the charm of respect for him, the slightest glance of her eyes was balm for his perpetually wounded self-conceit” (210).

A safe harbor is not all that Ann offers. In choosing her, Kipps pursues a sexual desire that class seems not to have touched. However, as it was with Helen, Kipps must once again come to terms with social imperatives regarding domesticity, but this time it is he who censures. This pattern begins in his youth, when in a set of scenes that take place over a few long summer days, Wells captures an uneasy time between childhood and adulthood, pairing the move to an apprenticeship with a simultaneous sexual initiation. Wells describes the process as a sudden awakening when Kipps notices his neighbor, Ann, as though for the first time. The attraction intensifies when on the same day Sid, her brother, shows him the text of a schoolboy romance, which promulgates an ideal version of masculine emotion: “He produced a thumbd novelette that had played a part in his sentimental awakening; he . . . confessed there was a character in it, a baronet, singularly like himself. This baronet was a person of

volcanic passions which he concealed beneath a demeanour of 'icy cynicism.' The utmost expression he permitted himself was to grit his teeth" (26). As immature and comedic as this model of emotion is, it fits with Wells's depictions of emotion elsewhere. "Volcanic passions" must be accepted as inevitable, and Kipps will use this sense of inevitability as encouragement for his crush on Ann. At the same time, the model of the baronet suggests that volcanic passions must be managed through icy cynicism. The baronet glosses over unavoidable emotional complexities with a mask of idealized masculinity; indeed, the baronet's exemplary manner betrays a certain ambiguity, an affect that is both honorable and dissimulating. This ambiguity arises from the split between personal passions and social emotion. For instance, Kipps's passion for Ann spills over in the safety of a solitary confession of love, but in public his "icy cynicism" leads him to denounce her when his Uncle scornfully inquires about his time with her. He disavows his passion by identifying with his Uncle's class prejudices. Kipps experiences this moment of self-difference as a "horrible catastrophe" (30), with social shame enveloping his personal emotion.

Once they are married, Kipps again bends to the will of the "Argus eyes of the social system" by building a new, ostentatious house to match the scale of his wealth (276). Ann, though, refuses to participate fully in Kipps's endeavor to make them middle class. At their lowest point Ann becomes "the source of all his shames." In a defining moment she is even mistaken for the maid by answering the door of their rented country house for visitors in her cleaning clothes (305). In their failure to be accepted by the bourgeois community around them, Kipps

finds himself also once again becoming estranged from his desire. Only after their wealth is lost, and they come to accept this modest destiny, do they find a comforting kind of domesticity. As Kipps remarks, "Ere we are, Ann, common people, with jest no position at all, as you might say, to keep up. No se'v'nts not if you don't like. No dressin' better than other people" (317). With this coda in the narrative, Wells's message is packaged tightly: the emotions that keep a home intact are simple ones and they should always be protected from the outside world. Class shame and the corruption of too much aspiration is insidious, Wells seems to say, for it to be otherwise.

Behind this resolution, however, is the narrator's cynicism. It turns out that the working-class hero — a hero, in part, because he does not leave his class — is something less than heroic. The narrator betrays his own ambivalence in a moment of putative sympathy regarding the "lumpish monster" of "Stupidity," the shadow of the "apprenticeship system, the Hastings Academy" that loom over Kipps and Ann. Wells writes: "I see through the darkness the souls of my Kippses as they are, as little pink strips of quivering, living stuff, as things like the bodies of little, ill-nourished, ailing, ignorant children — children who feel pain, who are naughty and muddle and suffer, and do not understand why" (306). Although a Zolaesque nod to naturalism and the literary search for the root causes of things, this statement also reveals a narrator's ambivalence toward the simplicity of his characters. Like one of Wells's inevitable scenes of biology-laboratory dissection that recall the former certainties of his student days, Wells the narrator imagines himself as Wells the vivisectionist, with a knife

poised over lower life forms. While Wells blames stupidity and a stunted social system for the Kippses' plight, in the same passage he appeals to a readership who are "favoured" to apprehend "beauty" where the Kippses are not. The Kippses are made of "quivering, living stuff" capable of feeling and suffering but they fail, Wells notes, to comprehend "the vision of the Grail that makes life fine for ever" (306). While Wells appreciates Kipps's emotion, he deplores the fact that he does not have the capacity for self-understanding. This disposition makes Wells's exploration of class all the more ambivalent. He clearly wants to assert that the values and emotions of the working classes are superior to the leisure classes, but the implied ideal of the passage is an intellectual class whose values transcend socioeconomic status and whose selves are autonomous.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FAILURE OF RECKLESS DOMESTICITY:

LEWISHAM AND MR. POLLY

*We're all respectable householders — that's to say
Tories, yes-men and bumsuckers.*

— George Orwell

Unlike the assiduously self-improving clerks that Thomas Augst uncovers in his study, The Clerk's Tale, Wells's clerks either do not comprehend their opportunities in "a competitive marketplace" or they come to feel that economic imperatives to improve themselves are fraudulent and misleading (5).¹⁰⁰ Living through the beginning of the consumerist revolution (see Gagnier, Insatiability 59), Wells's clerks are called upon to pursue their desire as a means of

¹⁰⁰ Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe note that the "Wellsian comic hero . . . is an 'economic misfit' who bears the brunt of the contradiction between the social values of thrift and efficiency, and those of individual self-realization — a contradiction that lies at the heart of modern societies" (64).

distinguishing themselves. They happily oblige by valuing leisure and pleasure over work, and by seeking status through desire. The catch is that, as Gagnier points out, “the desire to consume or to express one’s individuality through that desire is not the same thing as the power to consume” (Insatiability 60). Failure thus comes in contradictory and doubled forms. Not only are Wells’s clerks social misfits, unable or unwilling to be good citizens, but their thwarted desire, a desire that only occasionally forms itself into ambition, becomes a sign of their inability to fulfill or even help themselves. Instead, they compensate with selves defined and distinguished by strong, internalized feeling. Their strong emotion promises to help them develop what Gagnier calls “significant selfhood,” a subjectivity that offers the potential for “creativity, autonomy, and freedom” and the means to express an individuated voice “with subjective desires” (Subjectivities 28). The urgency with which Wells embraces risky personal passion suggests the increasing effects of economic imperatives on emotional lives.

Wells sees the distinction between personal emotion and emotions of class as the difference between the “natural” state of the human — the persistence of a primal evolutionary core — and the accretion of habits and social structures that bind individuals to their social roles and destinies. He agrees with Freud’s general observation in Civilizations and Its Discontents “that what we call civilization is largely responsible for our misery” (33). In Ann Veronica, for example, Wells humorously juxtaposes the external “wrapped life” of Victorian social convention and the internal echoes of a primal ancestral past

filled with “fire and slaughterings, exogamy, marriage by capture, corroborees, cannibalism” (32). To be sure, Wells did not advocate a return to this primal past, which he imagines in all of its potential excesses. But the primal emotions hold the promise of allowing his characters to elude the dictates of the “wrapped life,” to escape the fate of class.¹⁰¹ Wells is ambiguous about how these primal personal emotions arise. At times, he treats them as though they are absolute “drives,” giving needs such as sexual desire the character of emotional determinism. At other times, these desires offer the potential and possibility of agency that Brian Massumi describes as “intensities,” affects that are “unformed and unstructured” by language or culture (Massumi 260; see also Ngai 25-27; Sedgwick 18; Terada). Where Dickens perceived the passions to be threats to upward mobility, involuntary affects that threatened to betray a lack of refinement, and where Gissing saw all emotion as a risk, Wells sees in the personal passions a way of detaching the individual from an economic logic.

So, as much as Wells opens the door to the recognition that all emotion may be in some way social, as the previous chapter suggested, he attempted to show how certain emotions can remain untouched by class experience. In Love and Mr. Lewisham and The History of Mr. Polly, Wells uses intense emotions

¹⁰¹ There is a horrified fascination in Wells’s attitude toward these primal emotions. In The Island of Doctor Moreau, Moreau identifies the failure of his Beast People to thrive as “something that I cannot touch, somewhere — I cannot determine where — in the seat of the emotions. Cravings, instincts, desires that harm humanity, a strange hidden reservoir to burst forth suddenly and inundate the whole being of the creature with anger, hate, or fear” (78). But in the social comedies Wells speculates about how personal emotions offer a means of challenging class proscriptions, just as an inaccessible reserve allow the Beast People to challenge the horrors inflicted on them by Dr. Moreau.

related to domestic life and those associated with acts of recklessness to push against what he sees as the social contamination (or the classed nature) of emotion. Wells imagines Victorian domesticity as an alternative to the humiliation of the marketplace experienced by the lower-middle-class clerk, and he mobilizes an emergent cultural appreciation of recklessness and rashness to instill vitality in his clerks.¹⁰² The emotions that lead to recklessness cannot remain free from social imperatives, but Wells's narratives expand the range of their emotions and thereby enlarge our view of their lives, defying centuries of ideological indifference to the emotions of the laboring classes (Gross 168-78). As Ngai argues, however, emotions frequently obstruct agency and undermine understanding. Wells's domestic worlds elicit unnerving and even deplorable emotions, for example. But ugly as they may be, they help throw into the relief the middle-class values that shape lower middle-class life. Wells may mourn the inaccessibility of proper feelings, but it spurs him to explore alternatives. The problem, though, for Wells, is whether emotions can coexist with ambition and upward mobility, and in the end he seems to see all emotion as incompatible with middle-class success.

Anger and Ambivalence

In Love and Mr. Lewisham Wells's restless ambivalence toward domesticity is used to invest it with an even wider range of reckless emotion.

¹⁰² Rashness suggests that an individual is vital and risk-taking and that he or she could (for a moment, at least) forget about the economic consequences of his or her actions. For another perspective on rashness, see Fisher, who argues that it can be a legitimate form of justice even though it momentarily suspends deliberative, rational judgment.

For Lewisham, at first, the domestic is a threat to his class ambition, as are passions and the intensities they imply. Indeed, emotions of every kind constitute a direct threat to Lewisham's upward mobility. In part, his subtly dissimilar class status influences this difference. Kipps comes from the proletarianized lower middle class, with little hope of class mobility. Lewisham, on the other hand, belongs to the upwardly mobile lower middle class. Unlike Kipps, Lewisham's identification with the imperatives of the social world estrange him from his own emotion. An implacable Gradgrind, Lewisham actively converts intellectual training into instrumentalized stepping-stones on the way to becoming *homo economicus*; he willingly objectifies himself for the promise of class mobility. Meanwhile, Lewisham's powerful involuntary emotions, especially those related to his ambition, take on the character of hungers that disperse themselves into various uncontrollable forms of desire.

The central struggle of the novel, then, is poised between two goals, one overt and one implicit. In the first, Wells tries to impose a strict boundary between emotions of class and alternative emotions, such as those related to domesticity and recklessness. But this goal of creating a boundary is driven by the second, more implicit goal: simply to reconcile strong emotions with the social imperatives that have defined Lewisham's life. Throughout the novel, Lewisham cannot help but be emotionally reckless, for these are the emotions that coincide with his intense ambition. Even when he marries and sets up house, his domestic environment fails to *domesticate* him. This is the reason why Wells is so fond of recklessness, for the emotions that it elicits manifest as

intensities that defy middle-class values and compensate for the compromises of seeking refuge in the domestic. But there are consequences for allowing the reckless to coexist with the domestic, as we'll see, and Lewisham's strong emotions risk destroying his domestic satisfaction.

As in the other social comedies, emotion first appears as an enlivening influence in the form of erotic passion. Lewisham begins the novel as an assistant master at a grammar school who follows a strict study schedule — his “Schema” of self-improvement. But once he becomes distracted by a young woman and shocked out of his study by a surprising rush of sexual desire, Lewisham's future as a scholar is suddenly uncertain. The stakes are high in this scenario. Wells himself as a young instructor at Midhurst made a plan that he too named a *schema*. For Wells, like Lewisham, “every moment in the day had its task” with one goal in mind: “making a desperate get-away from the shop and the street” (Experiment 171). To Lewisham, the mechanism for getting away is a college degree. Over his small room are the words “Knowledge is Power” and on another wall a Time-Table for the completion of his studies and his goals for a degree. “To judge by the room,” Wells writes, “Mr. Lewisham thought little of Love but much on Greatness.” Lewisham's world is a narrow one, furnished with little more than his single-minded purpose. Even the natural world conspires against him. Prefiguring Lewisham's wayward act is the subject of the novel's opening — early spring — which stirs up “an unusual sense of the grayness of a teacher's life, of the grayness indeed of the life of all studious souls” (7). Into this

grayness steps Ethel, a young, lower middle-class woman from the London suburbs staying with nearby relatives.

Erotic desire in the novel may be irrational and overwhelming, but in its nascent, physiological state it is not necessarily unwelcome. Problems arise when the emotion becomes intersubjective and social, when it is complicated by social imperatives and meanings. Erotic desire comes to Lewisham as a sudden awakening, with a kind of joyful celebration: "Love! The greatest of these. The greatest of all things. Better than fame. Better than knowledge" (19). As a result, "His whole being was irradiated with emotion" (22), so much so that he momentarily loses sight of the schema and allows passion to guide his actions. In due course, Ethel and Lewisham find themselves with each other on a reckless, impromptu "ramble" — a day spent wandering in the nearby countryside. The Grundyistic reaction of his school and her relatives is swift and effective: his employment at the school is terminated and Ethel is sent back to London, where she is lost to him for two and a half years. Through these actions, Lewisham's sexual desire becomes subject to social interpretation and judgment, which in turn derails the progress of his self-improvement and ambition. This changes the complexion of his desire and stirs forth different, more bitter emotions: "Sometimes he had moods of intense regret for the folly of that walk. . . . His dream of success and fame had been very real and dear to him, and the realization of the inevitable postponement of his long anticipated matriculation,

the doorway to all the other great things, took him abruptly like an actual physical sensation in his chest" (48).¹⁰³

Lewisham learns that impulsive desire is not only proscribed, but that it can suddenly undermine rational intention. He is faced with a choice of enemies: whether it is his society's moral constraints that have brought him down or his own emotion. Although he is frequently critical of late Victorian society, for the bulk of the narrative he will be at war with his emotion. An incidental episode illustrates his struggle. Once Lewisham lands in London with a scholarship to a polytechnic, he is stirred with the passion for socialist politics, but shame and self-consciousness play a larger part in his experience. For example, when Lewisham buys a scarlet necktie as a public sign of his new beliefs, he blushes with embarrassment while buying it and blushes from acute self-consciousness while wearing it on the street. Lewisham's blushing, and the way that it marks his lack of confidence, emphasizes his susceptibility to debilitating social emotion.¹⁰⁴ His shame overtakes any assertion to distinguish himself as part of the politically engaged intelligentsia.

This emotional education is advanced even further when shortly after the sequence dealing with his scarlet tie Lewisham is exposed to the shame felt by

¹⁰³ This is as much an ideological effect as it is a physical experience. As Kathleen McDougall writes of fellow Fabian George Bernard Shaw's beliefs regarding sex and the intellectual: "The intellect must be alert . . . to counteract nature, whose ultimate goal is to diversify and improve, but whose operation in the lazy-minded and self-indulgent results in mediocrity and greater slavery to instinct" (330). Wells, in the discussion that follows, reproduces this ideology up to a point, but he is unwilling to discount the merits of so-called instinct for his lower middle-class character. Nor is he completely willing to accept the tragic determinism of a text like Hardy's Jude the Obscure.

¹⁰⁴ For more on the blush in Victorian literature, see Mary Ann O'Farrell's Telling Complexions.

Alice Heydinger, a fellow student and new potential love interest. Heydinger's vulnerability illustrates the critical effects of estranged emotion. As Lewisham and Heydinger engage in an intimate conversation filled with implied import, he appreciates "the quality of personal emotion in her voice" and the "unstinted admiration in her eyes" (66), but when they grip hands in an acknowledgment of what has passed between them "at that moment she would have given three-quarters of the years she had still to live, to have had eyes and features that could have expressed her. Instead, she felt her face hard, the little muscles of her mouth twitching insubordinate, and fancied that her self-consciousness made her eyes dishonest" (67). Exploring the seam joining mind and body, the scene expresses the conflict between personal emotion and the effects of social influences and interpretations on emotion. Neither socially sanctioned nor actually reciprocated by Lewisham, Heydinger's desire is infected with social emotions, such as shame and fear. Not only are her strong feelings betrayed through physical manifestations of her emotion, her desire is so bound up with other social expectations that it betrays the intent of the initial emotion. She briefly recovers when "her eyes were for a moment touched with the beauty of simple emotion," but just as quickly she is betrayed once again by an impulse of self-censure.

The emotional dynamic that Wells develops hereafter posits "simple emotion" as passion that arises free from social contamination. Indeed, shadowing Lewisham's struggle with his emotion is an idealized "beauty of simple emotion." Yet if emotions such as shame undermine Lewisham, his desire

for Ethel, a seemingly simple emotion, is even more significant for him. After he reenounters her in London, his passion for her once again betrays his intention to succeed socially and economically, much like the obsessive debilities of Wells's *Lover-Shadow*. Compelled to spend time with her, Lewisham neglects his studies and courts the loss of his scholarship, leading to an agonizing choice between worldly success and love: "Lewisham saw that it was a case of divergent ways. On the one hand that shining staircase to fame and power, that had been his dream from the very dawn of his adolescence, and on the other hand — Ethel" (112). Faced with this dilemma, Lewisham feels as though his "logical processes, his emotions and his imagination seemed playing some sort of snatching game with his will" (97). Far from simple emotion, Lewisham's emotional life breaks down the boundary between emotions of class and other alternatives. His thrilling and haunting sexual passion is fraught with regret and his ambitious social hungers undercut the joy of having his sexual desire reciprocated by Ethel. Most painful to him is the sense of class consciousness his love for Ethel initiates. By loving her "He fell foul of his upbringing. Men of the upper and middle classes were put up to these things by their parents; they were properly warned against involving themselves in this love nonsense before they were independent" (112).

The novel is something of a thought experiment for Wells, who seems to wonder whether emotions can ever be his own, especially when personal emotions and emotions of class begin to mutate one into the other. Wells's pessimistic answer to his own question emerges from the Lewishams' first

difficult year of marriage. At first Lewisham tries to see the quick marriage in reckless, rebellious terms: “We are Fighting the World,” he tells her, “All the world is against us — and we are fighting it all” (148). But in seeking to balance social imperatives and his new marriage, Lewisham identifies his passion for Ethel as an enemy and subsequently his anger turns from the social system cruelly toward Ethel.¹⁰⁵ We see some indication of a tendency to blame her early on after they have been castigated for their teenage ramble. Dwelling on his changing circumstances, “He flung the pen on the floor and made a rush at an ill-drawn attempt upon a girl’s face that adorned the end of his room, the visible witness of his *slavery*. He tore this down and sent the fragments of it scattering” (49). Later, his marriage to her means that he is pushed to leave the relatively classless space of a polytechnic to open himself up to the humiliations of a marketplace that doesn’t want a young, married instructor without a degree. When it becomes increasingly clear that his impetuous marriage will end his education, Lewisham’s rage intensifies and encompasses their domestic scene:

He found himself fenced in on every side. A surging, irrational
rage seized upon him. (204)

His rage exploded. (205)

¹⁰⁵ In “The Domestication of Anger: The Use and Abuse of Anger in Politics,” Peter Lyman suggests, like other cognitivists, that anger can be intentional: it is a necessary component of successful dissident politics that enable the voice of the powerless. “Yet the procedural approach to justice of liberal regimes devalues the substantive protest of angry speech by interpreting it as a loss of emotional control and as a potential prelude to violence” (Lyman 133). By interpreting his own emotion as a loss of control and depoliticizing his own anger, Lewisham allows his anger to overtake the entire tissue of his emotional life, where it determines and deforms his married life.

Disappointment and exasperation darkened Lewisham's soul. He began to feel angry with everything — even with her. (214)

He took refuge in anger. (223)

Lewisham gave way to a transport of anger. (223)

He had a silent ecstasy of rage. (226)

Finally, in a fit of misdirected jealousy, when he thinks she has made a fool of him, his rage reaches out to severely wound Ethel: "I have found out you are shallow, you don't think, you can't feel things that I think and feel" (223). He finds comfort in the power his rage gives him, for "he knew quite clearly that he was inflicting grievous punishment and that gratified him" (226).

The novel demonstrates Wells's uneasy relation to the domestic, which for him provides both necessary sexual sustenance and elicits reckless, threatening emotion. Lewisham proves that he can be cruel and can use the privacy of domestic space to reverse the power dynamics of his humiliation in the social world. Yet it is partly through the process of reflecting on his rage and watching its damaging effects on someone who loves him that Lewisham forms a reflective, introspective self that transcends the more obtuse clerks of Wells's other novels. In part, he takes advantage of the domestic environment's expansion of the emotional field, as though the domestic accommodates the

collapsing boundary between emotions of class and personal emotion. This set of circumstances provides the space for a reflective skepticism and a new appreciation of ambivalence. He comes to terms, for example, with the inadequacy of his Schema and the consequences of his physical desire. He sees the former as a “boy’s vanity,” a dream of uncommonness that is by necessity swept away with maturity; the latter, on the other hand, leads to a domesticity that confirms his commonness, his class, a life for which he was “made and born” (251).

The final events of Love and Mr. Lewisham may express Wells’s own dread of “Domestic claustrophobia, the fear of being caught in a household,” as he informs us in his autobiography (Experiment 468). But these tensions contribute to the novel’s embrace of ambivalence. Destroying the Schema is a sign of his self-awareness and maturity as much as it points to his failure. As he tidies up the pieces of the torn Schema, he is both a new self-governing man and the personification of a domestic man destined to fade into insignificance. These contradictory meanings are precisely the point, however. The scene’s ambivalence signifies his now more significant self. Even if Lewisham has circled back to the constraints of his class, his negative capability points to the richness and diversity of his emotional life, a capacious reservoir of emotional potential that exceeds the resignations of Hoopdriver and Kipps.

Home Is Where the Hatred Is

The equipoise established in Love and Mr. Lewisham is short-lived, however. The last clerks' novel, The History of Mr. Polly, presents an endgame in the emotional lives of Wells's clerks and concludes his novelistic exploration of their emotions. Polly is also Wells's most misanthropic social comedy, in which the protagonist Alfred Polly ends up burning down his small outfitter's shop and home and subsequently abandons his wife. In this novel the weight of the material world of the lower middle class creates unbearable feelings that can no longer be processed through an array of alternative emotions. In Polly's domestic world there is not enough sexual energy or domestic contentment to override his class frustrations. Polly repudiates the ordinary, social world, but instead of withdrawing into a satisfied domesticity, he moves from the domestic to an awe-struck natural aesthetic. In so doing, he signals the exhaustion of more familiar personal emotions as a remedy for the difficult experience of lower middle-class life.

Ironically for a narrative that ends with a kind of existential calm, the novel is primarily about recklessness. Polly's reckless disregard of the future leads him to marry haphazardly and to take on the debt of a small shop, and recklessness eventually leads him out of this destiny. The novel, then, is also about the fear of stasis, and when it opens Polly is a disillusioned thirty-seven year old, with a failed marriage and a bankrupt shop.¹⁰⁶ As a proprietor/clerk, Polly ought to be as content as Kipps, who by the end of the novel looks forward

¹⁰⁶ In Coming Up for Air (1939), George Orwell documents the slow failing of single-product shops in the pre-World War I period as increasingly corporate retail concerns, the "box stores" of their time, modernized and expanded (93, 103). Wells's own father's crockery shop suffered the same fate.

to a future filled with small satisfactions. Instead, Polly is consumed with frustration.¹⁰⁷ By way of introduction, we find him in a great fury storming out of the second-floor apartment he shares with his wife: he “hated the whole scheme of life — which was at once excessive and inadequate of him. He hated Foxbourne, he hated Foxbourne High Street, he hated his shop and his wife and his neighbours — every blessed neighbour — and with indescribable bitterness he hated himself” (2). To be sure, forms of hatred appear in the other social comedies. Kipps does not only learn to love, he also learns to despise the drapers shop, to hate Helen Walshingham, to scorn the Londoners “laughing at him behind his back,” and to feel “the smouldering fires of rebellion” against the attendees of a tea party, “collectively and in detail” (*Kipps* 210, 241, 250). Lewisham’s rage, as well, expresses antisocial tendencies. But in both these instances, neither Kipps nor Lewisham come to the point of rejecting the touch points of their social world outright. Kipps and Lewisham attempt to rebel against their fate, but both ultimately accept the social conditions and habitus that made and keep them lower middle class. This form of acceptance has failed for Polly, resulting in his repudiation of any sort of normal life. As Christopher Lane writes of Joseph Conrad, Wells “shows why a character would be drawn to forms of satisfaction, like violent self-annihilation, that are psychically appealing and liberating, even as they result in awful bodily and social harm” (Lane 173).

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Lane’s book-length treatment of misanthropy demonstrates the radical nature of Polly’s emotion. Victorians were uniquely suspicious of antisocial emotion for undermining the “fellowship” and “citizenship” that was so valued in nineteenth-century Britain, often interpreting misanthropy as insanity (Lane 5, 6). Polly’s eventual aesthetic existentialism would have confirmed most Victorians’ worst fears.

Polly suggests, more even than Lewisham, that class rage is as much about renunciation as reform.

In pointing out that hating the “whole scheme of life” is “at once excessive and inadequate,” the narrator suggests that Polly’s hatred is both too far-reaching and too impotent, simultaneously overwrought and passive. We learn later in the novel that Polly’s hatred and disgust are directed toward the “passive endurance of dullness throughout the best years of his life” (117) and that “he came to hate the very sight” of his fellow shopkeepers because they echo “his own stagnation” (111). Polly’s passivity is pure negativity. These are the emotions that Ngai describes as “ugly feelings,” which express “restricted” or “suspended” agency (Ngai 2, 12) — that is to say, powerlessness. For Ngai, these ugly feelings do “not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as diagnose it powerfully . . . preparing us for more instrumental or politically efficacious emotions” (353-54). To be sure, Wells’s social comedies diagnose many of the dilemmas of social powerlessness, but it is less clear if the emotions in them succeed in being politically efficacious. What is clear is that Polly is even less successful than either Kipps or Lewisham in its diagnosis, for the novel so overdetermines Polly’s escape from the ordinary world that he ultimately sees himself as a “Visitant from Another World” (178).

As many social moralizers might have predicted, the seeds of Polly’s discontent are sown early during his leisure time away from school and work. Before succumbing to the all-encompassing hatred of his middle age, Polly compensates for his dismal circumstances, much like Hoopdriver, through a

variety of diversions and small amusements. In the place of an inspiring education Polly develops a reading habit that will continue into middle age: he “read stories voraciously, and books of travel, provided they were also adventurous . . . and he also ‘took in’ irregularly, but thoroughly, one of those inspiring weeklies crammed with imagination that the cheap boys’ ‘comics’ of today have replaced” (7). His reading is simultaneously commendable and suspect. It cuts through the dullness of his daily existence, and provides a measure of knowledge lacking in his proper education, but the adventure stories toward which he gravitates create the kind of constrained vision shared by Hoopdriver. The reading habit also leads to a dynamic in which long stretches of dullness and boredom can be endured with the expectation of coming leisure. Indeed, by the time Polly is apprenticed at age fourteen (like Wells himself) he is willing to accept the mind-numbing labor of a draper’s shop if he can experience brief moments of entertaining relief. He finds enjoyable companionship in the fun-loving company of fellow clerks and the “interminable hours” of the shop are made bearable by the “rare Sundays and holidays” that “shone out like diamonds among pebbles” (13). And just as Polly is not particularly interested in school, he does not grasp the necessity to apply himself to work. In many small ways he disrupts the imperative of work with daydreams and practical jokes. He is a slacker who loves the coarse laughter and wit of a character like Shakespeare’s Falstaff. He is also a collector of mispronunciations and malapropisms — “intrudacious” (65); “retrospectatiousness” (66); “absquatulate” (67); “dillententytating” (70); “floriferous” (77); “vortrex” (80); “vociferatious” (93)

— which on the one hand are a mark of his failed education, but on the other a sign of his pleasure in language and in bending rules. Later, as a shopkeeper, Polly similarly follows his own idiosyncratic notion of pleasure, but with a darker impulse in his middle age. For amusement he mocks those around him, particularly his neighboring shopkeepers, and his antagonism and sarcasm lead the inhabitants of his neighborhood eventually to shun him.

Read from one perspective, there is something of the quintessential suburban consumer in Polly before his escape, living simply for moments of diversion and entertainment. He reads for distraction and lives for holiday, and once these activities become constrained the quality of his life diminishes. Like Hoopdriver, his bicycle in early adulthood is a transformative commodity, with which he indulges a “restless craving for joy and leisure” (56). Moreover, he becomes a purveyor of consumables, part of a lower middle-class milieu of small shopkeepers in the business of selling commodities. But Wells distinguishes between two kinds of consumption, one that takes Polly out of the workaday ordinary world and one that implants him roughly in it. To Wells, there are forms of consumption that nourish the mind, such as the bicycle that carries Polly into the countryside where he develops an aesthetic appreciation for the natural world; or the books he buys by such authors as Rabelais and Sterne, of



Figure 6. Bicycling

which his cousin cautions, “Better [to] get yourself a good book on book-keeping” (56). His bicycle rides and his books satisfy. On the other hand, it is the most basic consumable — food — that fails to satisfy. A primary motif in the novel concerns Polly’s chronic indigestion, for which the narrator blames his malaise. The very act of eating makes him miserable, transmuting his body into a site of social struggle and insurrection: his gut is “like a badly managed industrial city during a period of depression; agitators, acts of violence, strikes, the forces of law and order doing their best, rushings to and fro, upheavals, the *Marseillaise*, tumbrils” (3). The simile underscores the depth of Polly’s rejection of his world, the rebellion that is incorporated into his very body. It also signals Polly’s need for spiritual rather than physical nourishment. This prejudice is emphasized on the cusp of his decision to commit suicide when at his most melancholy and hungry for relief Polly purchases a treat for himself: a “ruddily decorated tin of a brightly pink fish-like substance known as ‘Deep Sea Salmon’” (118), which he consumes at first greedily and then gloomily. The salmon does not ease his unrest, nor does his after-dinner pipe, which he finds “foul and bitter.” What is wrong with Polly’s world, even its very food, assaults him in the most basic, physical way.

Indeed, physical feelings of hunger and a corresponding disgust are analogous to social imperatives and conventions. Like hunger, his social responsibilities are disgustingly necessary. His marriage comes to signify these imperatives. It is his wife’s food, after all, that causes him so much discomfort; and it is his marriage that leads him to become shackled to the failing shop.

Lurking throughout the social comedies is an ambivalence toward wives. To be sure, Wells was something of a progressive, whose novel Ann Veronica is a sympathetic portrait of women's self-determination, so it is probably more accurate to say that Wells deplored marriage and its conventionality. But it is Polly's wife, Miriam, who personifies his difficulties, who becomes the symbol and proximate cause of his failure. Comically, even on the cusp of his marriage, Polly is already imagining his escape: "'Run away to sea,' whispered Mr. Polly . . . 'Cut my blooming throat'" (82). Wells compares him at this point both to a prisoner looking "backward . . . at the trees and heather through the prison gates" and to an "ordinary domestic cat" "fitted to go in harness" (82). Polly's complaints and feelings about marriage are fictional commonplaces in the Victorian fiction, where the unhappy marriage is an obligatory ingredient of melodrama. But Wells's portrait of their marriage emphasizes its lack of drama and its stultifying character. Wells's description of Polly's response to Miriam during their wedding begins with a capacious embrace of myriad emotions — "the sight of her filled him with a curious stir of emotion. Alarm, desire, affection, respect . . . all played their part in the complex eddy" — but becomes focused on "a queer element of reluctant dislike" in the mix of feelings. Of special note are physical details that inspire disgust: "The grey dress made her a stranger to him, made her stiff and commonplace . . . There was something too that did not please him in the angle of her hat; it was indeed an ill-conceived hat with large aimless rosettes of pink and grey" (86). Once married, disgust is fueled by disappointment when he realizes that the "house was never clean nor

tidy” and that “food came from her hands done rather than improved.” For her part, Miriam comes to think of Polly as lazy,” and almost immediately ceases “to listen to her husband’s talk” (100). After fifteen years of marriage, Polly finally concludes “that his life . . . had not been worth living, that it had been in apathetic and feebly hostile and critical company, ugly in detail and mean in scope, and that it brought him at last to an outlook utterly hopeless and grey” (103).

Polly repudiates the world of bodies and their needs, of responsibility and work. His reckless (and botched) suicide attempt symbolically cuts him free from these pressures as well as from the emotions they inspire. Like Ann Veronica’s rash move to leave her father’s house and its restrictions on her freedom or Lewisham’s decision to marry in the face of social disapproval, Polly’s is partially an act of self-determination in the face of social forces that demand hypocrisy and submission. He becomes something of a domesticated wild man, a handyman for the female owner of a rural river inn, in a situation that provides a space for his newfound awe toward nature.

The aesthetic appreciation toward which Polly turns offers an abstract universalism that obliterates the painful quotidian world of necessity and bad choices, replacing both personal emotions and the emotions of class. For all his earthy tramping, Polly’s break from his shop and wife is a New Testament-like rebirth. He enters a pastoral, painterly, idealized world.

He saw a remarkable sunset in a new valley near Maidstone, a very red and clear sunset, a wide redness under a pale cloudless heaven, and with the hills all round the edge of the sky a deep

purple blue and clear and flat, looking exactly as he had seen mountains painted in pictures. He seemed transported to some strange country, and would have felt no surprise if the old labourer he came upon leaning silently over a gate had addressed him in an unfamiliar tongue. (140)

Viewed from the perspective of clerkly desire, the aesthetic world he now occupies means that he has transcended class, finally succeeding where Wells's other clerks have failed. Polly may have read cheap, entertaining books consonant with his lower middle-class taste, but once on the road he cultivates an aesthetic sensibility that is classically bourgeois — that is to say, classically “classless” — a philosophical stance that results in what Bourdieu has called a “pure aesthetic.” Polly succeeds both by removing himself from immediate economic demands *and*, more importantly, by successfully treating class as a state of mind. Unlike Wells's other clerks, Polly doesn't work at being other than himself, nor is he fooled by assurances of meritocratic possibility. On the road and later ensconced at the inn, he simulates a bourgeois lifestyle by operating as though he were now in a position “to keep economic necessity at arm's length” (Bourdieu 55). As Bourdieu writes, the pure aesthetic “is rooted in an ethic, or rather, an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world, which may take the form of moral agnosticism . . . or of an aesthetic which presents the aesthetic disposition as a universally valid principle and takes the bourgeois denial of the social world to its limit” (Bourdieu 5). In lifestyle if not entirely in manner, Polly becomes a bohemian, a clerk in Wells's social comedies

who actually escapes the lower middle class by developing aesthetic emotion rather than personal emotion. Given all this, however, it is still freedom from economic necessity that enables Polly's transformation, although it is not money so much as freedom from money that allows Polly to transcend his class rage and hatred.

Polly's aesthetic produces an emotional appreciation that encompasses the greatness and power of the natural world. This version of aesthetics is different from a neo-classical Arnoldian appreciation of "sweetness and light," which endows culture with an enlightening and self-improving potential. In part, Wells spurns an Arnoldian version of culture because of his skepticism toward its pedagogical and self-improving functions. But more than that, it is Arnold's impulse to make culture accessible to the average person, an off-the-shelf aesthetic, as it were, that runs aground Wells's innate, lower middle-class snobbery, his suspicion of collective experience, of being subsumed into the crowd. A natural aesthetic implies a self that experiences emotion autonomously and self-sufficiently, rather than a self who rises and works toward an ideal shared by all. On the other hand, Polly's turn to aesthetics differs from the sensitive artistic sensibility of Jamesian aesthetics, which Wells derides in his autobiography. Commenting on their famous feud over the purpose of fiction, Wells writes of James's work:

They are novels from which all the fiercer experiences are excluded; even their passions are so polite that one feels that they were gratified, even at their utmost intimacy, by a few seemly

gestures; and yet the stories are woven with a peculiar humorous, faintly fussy, delicacy, that gives them a flavour like nothing else in the language. When you want to read and find reality too real, and hard storytelling tiresome, you may find Henry James good company. (Experiment 537)

Wells describes James's prose as "polite," "fussy," and "delicate," as though it is too feminine and too refined. On the contrary, Wells implies that his own novels convey manly reality and tell "hard" stories.

The possibility of meaningful existence, however — such as that found by Kipps and Lewisham — is foreclosed in Polly's new world. The best example of this comes in a series of encounters with the innkeeper's nephew, Jim, a brutish drunk who sees Polly as an intruder. Jim's narcissism and potential for violence personifies the indifference of nature. He thus forces Polly to confront savage and irrational forces that require no more than cunning to survive. Polly's former wife, Miriam, is similarly indifferent. When he returns guiltily to Fishbourne, after five years, to see what has become of his previous life, Miriam is only concerned with losing the insurance settlement on his life. "I'd always feared you'd come back," she says (178).

When Polly describes his understanding of the meaning of life at the end of the novel, he is strikingly unsentimental:

One seems to start in life . . . expecting something. And it doesn't happen. And it doesn't matter. One starts with ideas that things are good and things are bad — and it hasn't much relation to what is

good and what is bad. I've always been the skeptaceous [sic] sort, and it's always seemed rot to me to pretend men know good from evil. It's just what I've never done. No Adam's apple stuck in my throat, Ma'am. (180)

With bravado in his voice, Polly claims to see life in its stark reality, not only beyond human values such as good and evil but beyond human emotions as well.

But Polly's conclusion places Wellsian emotion in an awkward bind. On the one hand, emotional responses must be "fierce" and "real" in order to be legitimate; on the other, they must avoid sentiment, the lump in one's throat. Throughout all of the social comedies, Wells is never quite sure if he wants recklessness or only the idea of recklessness. In Polly, he attempts to solve this dilemma with a response to the natural world that emphasizes nature's indifference and hence the legitimacy of human skepticism. That is to say, nature replaces powerlessness in the face of class-based shame with powerlessness in the face of nature. By helping him sustain a disinterested approach to his circumstances, nature's indifference teaches Polly not to be ashamed or disappointed.

Polly represents something of a failure in Wells's oeuvre of the social comedy. In it, socioeconomic pressures become too great and the domestic too weak an alternative. It is true that when Wells looks closely at class in his social comedies he sees not a political problem but an emotional one. Polly is perhaps the logical and distorted extension of this tendency, especially for an author so ambivalent about his own emotions. The novel ends up in an abstract utopian

space in which the messy details of clerkly emotion have been displaced. Rather than a matter of the daily conditions of existence, materiality is converted into a brute force of nature.

And yet, what we might call Wells's critique of emotion offers a model for understanding the nuances of class experience and even for rethinking our opinions of the lower middle class. Kipps and Lewisham come to terms with their conditions of existence in ways that bring satisfaction and delight as well as disappointment and pain. Moreover, Kipps and Love and Mr. Lewisham signify a moment when Wells reimagined Victorian domesticity — under fire from such figures as Gissing, Ibsen, and Hardy — as vital and pleasurable, with many of its faults acknowledged. With Polly, Wells renounces the shame that make his clerks seem to care so much, the desires that tie them to their class and the constrained worlds of their everyday lives. Wells was not to write another novel of lower-middle-class life quite like the social comedies. In his novels, at least, Wells moved beyond his own emotions of class.

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EDUCATION

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Certificate in Victorian Studies
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- MA, English, Indiana University, 1998
- BA, Literature, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1994

DISSERTATION

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- Committee: Andrew H. Miller (chair), Patrick Brantlinger, Ivan Kreilkamp, D. Rae Greiner

ARTICLES PUBLISHED

- "Feeling Like a Clerk in H. G. Wells," *Victorian Studies* 50.3 (Spring 2008). Special Issue: "Victorian Emotion." Guest editor: Rachel Ablow
- "Waste and Value: Thorstein Veblen and H. G. Wells," with Patrick Brantlinger, *Criticism* 48.4 (Winter 2007)
- "London on Stage: The Urban Melodrama of George Sims," *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 4.1 (March 2006)

REVIEWS PUBLISHED

- Review of *Masculinity and the English Working Class: Studies in Victorian Autobiography and Fiction*, by Ying S. Lee, and *New Men in Trollope's Novels: Rewriting the Victorian Male*, by Margaret Markwick. *Victorian Studies* 51.4 (Summer 2009)

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

- Department of English Teaching Fellowship, 2009-2010
- James A. Work Award for the best graduate student in English, 2008
- Fellowship to attend Dickens Universe Summer Seminar, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2007

- Departmental Semester (Niekamp) Dissertation Fellowship, Spring 2007
- Department of English Travel Grant, 2006
- Victorian Studies Dissertation Fellowship, 2005-2006
- College of Arts and Sciences Conference Scholarship, 2000
- Mary Gaither Best Essay in British Literature Prize, 1999: "'Golden glory and the long shadow': George Eliot and the Problem of History"
- Department of English Travel Grant, 1999
- Mary Gaither Best Essay in British Literature Prize, 1998: "Rules of the Game: Surveillance, Knowledge, and the Rationality of Empire in Kipling's *Kim*"
- College of Arts and Sciences Graduate Fellowship, 1996-1997

PRESENTATIONS

- "The Clerk and the Political Economy of Emotion in Charles Dickens" (IU Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference, "Transmission, Translation, and Relocation," 2009)
- "The Modernity of the Clerk: Trust, Pleasure, and the Ethics of Subordination in *Our Mutual Friend*" (The Dickens Project, Winter Conference, 2008)
- "Rethinking Shame: From Exile to Sociality in George Gissing" (Midwest Modern Language Association, 2007)
- "The Emotional Epistemology of the Clerk in H. G. Wells" (North American Victorian Studies Association, "*Scientia* and *Techne*," 2006)
- "'I had far better have called it *Waste*': Producing Knowledge in H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*" (The Dickens Project, "Victorian Waste," 2000)
- "Nation, Empire, and the Crisis of Masculinity: Reading the British Periodical Press, 1898-1900" (Victorians Institute, "Framing the Victorians," 1999)
- "Tricks of History: Hong Kong Cinema and the Culture of Disappearance" (IU Conference in the Humanities, "Relocating Borderlands," 1999)

TEACHING

Teaching Fellow, Indiana University, 2009-2010

- E303: "Histories of Feeling: Literatures in English, 1800-1900" (1 section)
- W350: "Issues in Social Media and Open-Source Culture" (Writing-Intensive Course, 1 section)

Graduate Assistant, Indiana University, 2008-2009

- L202: Literary Interpretation
- L332: Romantic Literature
- L369: Studies in Jane Austen
- L371: Critical Practices in Literary Study

Associate Instructor, Indiana University, 1997-1999, 2004-2006

- W170: "Country, City, Suburb: Locating Ourselves in the Popular Imagination" (Writing-Intensive Course, 3 sections)
- W231: Professional and Technical Writing (3 sections)
- W131: Basic Writing (2 sections)
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- L142: Introduction to Literature and Composition: "Comic Literature" (1 section). Teaching Assistant. (Lectured on Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*.)

WRITING AND EDITORIAL POSITIONS

- Asst. Sponsoring Editor, Indiana University Press, 2002-2004
Sponsored titles include: *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*; *Asian North American Identities*; *Cruel Delights: Enlightenment Culture and the Inhuman*; *Oxbridge Men: British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experience*; *The Dream of the Perfect Child*; *Is There an Ethicist in the House?: On the Cutting Edge of Bioethics*
- Managing Editor, *Victorian Studies*, 2001-2002
- Editorial Assistant, *Victorian Studies*, 2000-2001
- Publicity Assistant, Indiana University Press, 1999-2000

SERVICE

- Co-Organizer and Fundraiser, Victorian Studies Lecture Series, "New Directions? The 19th Century in the 21st," 2000-2001. Invited speakers: Catherine Gallagher, Garrett Stewart, Christopher Herbert, Audrey Jaffe, Dino Felluga, Emily Allen
- Graduate Studies Policies Committee, elected student representative, 1999-2000
- Co-Organizer, Works-in-Progress Series, Victorian Studies Group, 1999-2000: James Eli Adams and Allen Salerno, Mary Favret and Melissa Gregory
- Conference Committee, IU Conference in the Humanities, 1998

OTHER ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

- Developed curriculum for Independent Readings in Cultural Studies: "Massification and Culture." Advisor: Michael Curtin
- Co-Developed curriculum for Individual Readings in English: "Literary Spatiality." Advisor: Jonathan Elmer