VACANCY: MENTAL EMPTINESS IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation traces metaphors of mental emptiness in the British novel in the first half of the nineteenth century, and argues that novels during this period construct unique representations of vacancy as a state of psychological interiority. Challenging a contemporary didactic discourse that insists upon the vacant mind's one-dimensional blankness, an important group of novels provides access to the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of vacant-minded characters, whose vacancy is defined as the absence or partial effectiveness of specific mental mechanisms like perception or volition. These novels psychologize vacancy by providing narrative access to characters' minds and by carefully depicting the relationship between mental character and outward conduct. In the process, these works make larger points about the way social order is created and maintained, about how the individual experiences subjectivity in an emotionally fraught social existence, and about how culture contributes to mental variations across particular social groups. This project examines four crucial permutations of mental vacancy represented in nineteenth-century novels: partial perception in Jane Austen's *Emma*, sympathetic disconnection in Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*, emotional catharsis in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, and volitional weakness in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*. These novels offer thoughtful arguments about mental vacancy and the social order, carefully considering mental functions that are fundamental to the interaction between individual and environment.

In addition to the conceptual work these texts perform in reimagining contemporary models of mind, they also aim to construct readers' psychological interiors through their

rhetorical strategies. Each narrative places specific mental demands on its audience that correspond to the very mental mechanisms upon which vacancy relies. These novels thereby work to redress socially disruptive forms of vacancy and to encourage psychologically beneficial forms of vacancy in readers.

This project forges new ground in the literary study of theories of mind, bringing critical attention to a concept and cultural discourse largely overlooked in the relationships between literature and psychology, and in histories of psychology. It engages critical conversations about cultural histories of particular mental states and functions, bringing a new term to this conversation that, unlike *memory* or *boredom*, is not part of the ready vocabulary we apply to the mind. It also intervenes in research on theories of mind that are grounded in traditionally defined historical periods, introducing a mental trope that actually stretches across multiple models of mind and across traditional chronological divisions between the Romantic and Victorian eras. Finally, this project adds to the emergent literary history of mental emptiness, which has so far taken shape in Alan Richardson's work on the sublimity of mental voids in Romantic poetry. This project extends the chronological scope of this literary history into the Victorian period, arguing that mental vacancy undergoes changes in form, function, and representation toward the end of the Romantic period. *Vacancy* thus identifies and analyzes a new paradigm in the literary history of mental emptiness.

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INTRODUCTION

In his best-selling book, *Self-Help* (1859), Samuel Smiles argues that mental activity is the catalyst of both personal and national progress. The modern world, by his account, owes its development to unceasing mental occupation, and men like Galileo, Isaac Newton, and John Locke were "artisans of civilization" whose minds fairly overflowed with the intellectual material that built Western society (Smiles 3). He quotes the anatomist John Hunter as a model of mental activity and production: "My mind is like a beehive; but full as it is of buzz and apparent confusion, it is yet full of order and regularity, and food collected with incessant industry from the choicest stores of nature" (Smiles 39). Through citations like this, Smiles emphasizes the critical importance of mental occupation (of "buzz" and "incessant industry") as well as of the accumulation of knowledge (of the mind's "collections" and "stores"). Minds that lack these qualities, he warns, reverse the nation's progressive course, and the vacuous inactivity of the mentally vacant is an "effectual substitute for the plagues of Egypt" (Smiles 131). The individual mind's fullness or emptiness is thus linked to epic consequences, and this line of reasoning clearly resonated with the more than 250,000 British readers that purchased *Self-Help* (Cannon).

Smiles' book helps illustrate the significant place the vacant mind occupies in the nineteenth-century popular imagination, where it is implicated in questions of education, moral character, personal success, and the ability to contribute to social order and progress. In many overtly didactic texts like *Self-Help*, this quality of mind is closely associated with a lack of psychological interiority: an inability to "turn inward," or evaluate and take charge of one's own mental habits. Smiles writes that it is "of little consequence how a man is governed from without, whilst everything depends upon how he governs himself from within" (3). The incapacity for

introspection, application, or self-governance is what marks the mentally vacant, and their lack of mental activity and content is taken as a sign that they have no interiority to speak of. In John Stuart Mill's formulation, the "emptiest" minds are those that "live wholly immersed in outward things, and have never […] turned themselves to the contemplation of the world within" (1213). In other words, the vacant mind is defined by two mutually reinforcing conditions: it is never inclined to look within itself, and there is nothing within it to be observed.

In this account of mental vacancy, a lack of psychological interiority produces a visible external deficiency. The vacant subject's interior and exterior dimensions are collapsed into a depthless blank that, according to Sarah Stickney Ellis, literally defaces the countenance:

> Who has not waited for the first opening of the lips of a celebrated belle, to see whether her claims would be supported by
>
> > "The mind, the music breathing from her face;"
>
> and who has not occasionally turned away repelled by the utter blank, or worse than blank, which the simple movement of the mouth, in speaking or smiling, has revealed? (180)

This picture of the mind "breathing" from the face creates a vivid impression of vacancy as both a moral and a physical disfigurement: the unintelligent, mentally indolent woman contributes nothing to the enrichment of English virtue (which is her feminine obligation), and is easily recognizable because of the hideous void that extends from her parted lips outward across her face (Ellis 223).

These anecdotal descriptions of emptiness invoke John Locke's *tabula rasa*, an Enlightenment image that suggests a total absence of mental activity, content, and interpretive faculties. References to the "utter blank" of the "emptiest" minds draw on Locke's theory that the mind at birth is like a blank page, and point to a kind of enduring mental infancy (Ellis 180, Mill 1213, Locke 109). Lockean associationism informed theories of education through much of

the nineteenth century, which accounts for why didactic writing like Smiles' and Ellis' would deploy Lockean tropes in explaining intellectual deficiencies (Rauch 47). For roughly the first sixty years of the nineteenth century, this lingering Enlightenment imperative to "furnish" the mind remained prevalent in writing that aimed to instruct and improve readers through prescriptive lessons (Locke 109). Within this discourse of mental fullness, the vacant mind is unfurnished, marked by a failure to properly "take in" ideas. The lack of interiority associated with this condition is implicitly linked to the mind's lingering resemblance to a one-dimensional blank page.

Didactic writers assure readers that this mental condition is characterized by inaccessibility. For them, the vacant mind is a "shallow" blank that precludes an interior dimension, and there can be no narrative admission into a flat surface. These writers quickly pass by the problem of inaccessibility (they are, perhaps, more interested in prescribing rules for the minds that *are* capable of introspection, application, and self-governance), but this issue presents an imperative challenge to one of the fundamental operations of a different genre: narrative fiction, one of the basic functions of which is to provide an audience access to the minds of other people. As Dorrit Cohn points out, this is "the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which the unspoken thoughts, feelings, [and] perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed" (7). The assertion in many pedagogical texts that some people have no interiority to be accessed therefore contravenes an essential premise in narrative fiction's representation of human consciousness.

This project argues that a group of nineteenth-century novels push back against didactic claims about the vacant mind and redefine mental vacancy as a state of psychological interiority. These novels provide access to the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of vacant-minded

characters, and illustrate that there are indeed observations to be made within such minds. These novels identify different forms of vacancy through their attention to the specific mental mechanisms (e.g. perception, volition) on which vacancy may rely. In each novel, vacancy plays a crucial mental role but is sharply defined and coexists with typical mental activities and functions: the absence or weakness of one mental faculty does not preclude the presence of others; one may evacuate oneself of excess emotion and yet remain emotionally sensitive for future moments; and the lack of a mental force like will power may be coincident with positive powers like thinking and feeling. These forms of vacancy affect the minds of well-developed characters, existing alongside a remarkable mixture of quick-witted, ambitious, sensitive, observant, acquisitive, thoughtful, reflective, attentive, and morally astute qualities. The resulting mental portraits are engaging and multifaceted, and they refute the notion that the vacant mind is either inaccessible or one-dimensional.

Rhetorically, the approach to understanding vacancy in terms of particular psychological faculties and functions allows novels to engage directly with the very mental mechanisms upon which vacancy relies, and thereby to address mental vacancy through the activity of reading. In other words, because they assume that vacant individuals possess interiority, these novels attempt to both understand and describe that interiority *and* to engage directly with it by placing specific demands on it in the hopes of developing certain mental habits. For instance, when a novel contends that the inability to communicate emotionally is a form of vacancy, that novel requires emotional engagement in its reader that bolsters his or her own ability to connect sympathetically to others. When a novel identifies partial perception as a form of vacancy, its narrative presents a stimulating challenge to its readers' own perceptive abilities. Instructive texts like *Self-Help* see vacancy as a simple question of direction: the empty-minded individual

cannot turn inward and is therefore impervious to pedagogical directions about intellectual industriousness, attentional habits, volitional power, or moral development. Consequently, although Smiles, Ellis, and Mill write about vacancy, they do not address vacant readers. Narrative fiction, however, is able to engage with such minds, and the novels I discuss actually work to redress socially disruptive forms of vacancy and encourage psychologically beneficial forms of vacancy.

This novelistic intervention in the discourse of mental emptiness was an irony most likely lost on expository writers like Ellis and Mill, who accused novels of creating and reinforcing mental emptiness in their readers. Ellis writes of the novel's shallow representations of humanity, suggesting that the novel's style fortifies the mental character of its vacant readership (161). Hannah More warns her audience in 1799 to "snatch" their precious offspring away from the evils of "vacant days, when the thoughts have no precise object," for such idleness "*cannot* be led to good" (116-17, emphasis original). What exactly they *do* lead to is novel reading, and thus to the fixation of attention upon unsuitable objects. She describes the novel as a "tissue of hackney'd adventures" that actively corrodes the mind like a "poison" (More 170, 30-32).[1] While vacancy instigates novel reading, a line of influence also moves in the opposite direction, and the toxic novel reinforces the indolence that already hampers the reader's mind.

Mill attacks the novel on aesthetic grounds, declaring that enthusiasm for narrative is a childish predilection and that in "this most grown-up and unchildlike age,"

> the minds and hearts of greatest depth and elevation are commonly those which take greatest delight in poetry; the shallowest and emptiest, on the contrary, are, by universal remark, the most addicted to novel reading. (1213)

[1] More's own novel, *Cœlebs in Search of a Wife* (1809), aims for the opposite effect, and uses an evangelical narrative to promote the contemplation and adoption of Christian principles. While More resorts to the novel as a moral vehicle, her didactic writing suggests that she does so for the sake of reaching a broad audience, and not because her opinion of the genre improves.

Only an empty, child-like mind, he insists, can take pleasure in the vapid pastime of novel reading. This pronouncement is both an aesthetic judgment of the novel's cultural value and a moral judgment of British readers' character. Mental vacancy is more than just the source of poor literary taste: it is an epistemological deficiency that wrongly leads the individual away from meaningful, worthwhile pursuits. Vacant-minded citizens, Mill writes, are unfortunate relics from a primitive state of society, and therefore cannot really be considered part of the modern British nation (1213). The novel, by extension, has no discernible cultural or intellectual value.

Implicated as they are in the production and maintenance of mental vacancy, novels have a profound stake in investigating this condition of mind, and at the same time are uniquely suited for the task. Novels bring together methodical consideration with a capacity for detailed, multi-dimensional representation, and challenge vacancy's limited, anecdotal function as a pedagogical shaming tactic in texts like Mill's. These novels psychologize vacancy by providing narrative access to characters' minds and by carefully depicting the relationship between mental character and outward conduct. They dramatize vacancy's effects on other people and groups through the context of specific socio-historical conditions, and provide meaningful chronological scope that avoids both the temporal evanescence of Hannah More's evil vacant day and the epic span of John Stuart Mill's timeline of societal progress. In the process, these novelists make larger points about the way social order is created and maintained, about how the individual experiences subjectivity in an emotionally fraught social existence, and about how culture contributes to mental variations across particular social groups. The novels studied here—*Emma, Barnaby Rudge*, *Villette*, and *The Woman in White*—offer thoughtful arguments about mental vacancy and the social order, carefully considering mental functions that are fundamental to the interaction

between individual and environment: perception, sympathy, emotional management, and will power, respectively.

Because nineteenth-century scholarship has hitherto favored the themes of mental division and self-control over the imagery of mental emptiness, part of my work here is selecting the language best suited to framing a discussion about it. I adopt the word *vacancy* as the key term for this study not only because of its presence in many of the nineteenth-century texts discussed here, but also because it is a multivalent descriptor that can accommodate the variability of the psychological state that I discuss in each of my chapters. Vacancy takes a different form in each of the four novels that ground my discussion, and I take advantage of the term's flexibility in order to bring together what could otherwise be mistaken for unrelated conditions of mind. Because *vacancy* carries a spatial meaning, it can usefully describe emptiness within the mind, such as a deficiency, a weakness, or an act of clearing out. Its connotations of power—in particular, the absence of it—mean that *vacancy* may also refer to the absence of certain forces, and can indicate a kind of power vacuum in the mind. It also has a striking temporal connotation: *vacancy* tends to suggest an impermanent emptiness, a void in space or time expected to be filled eventually. In the characters studied here, vacancy varies widely in its endurance and can last for mere moments, for days, or for a lifetime. Moreover, these temporal variances are often juxtaposed within the same novel, so that vacancy is shown in its short-lived manifestations alongside more persistent cases.

Furthermore, *vacancy* implies a certain fractional quality that lends a sharper definition to the idea of mental emptiness. *Vacancy* signals a gap or opening within a larger, otherwise complete configuration: a vacancy in an apartment or office building; a vacant seat in Parliament; a vacant hour in an afternoon. Its fractional connotation signals that emptiness is not

the absolute state of the mind in question, even as it highlights vacuity as a crucial element. This is perhaps the term's most critical function because in every novel discussed in this project, vacancy is the quality that comes to define the mind it characterizes; it consistently upstages otherwise typical mental activity and content to become the most significant factor in determining the character of a given mind.

Scholarship addressing literature and psychology in the nineteenth century has generally overlooked both the specific trope of mental vacancy and the larger discourse of mental fullness to which the trope belongs. Matthew S. Kearns's *Metaphors of Mind in Fiction and Psychology* (1987) and David Leary's *Metaphors in the History of Psychology* (1990) attend to the language of the mind and its operations during this period, but they establish a correspondence between each metaphorical pattern and a different contemporaneous psychological theory. Their accounts are therefore limited to already-familiar images of the mind, like associationism's *tabula rasa* and physiological psychology's "steam engine"—figures that each map inflexibly onto a single theory of mind (Kearns 48; Leary 332). The figure of vacancy, as I will show, is depicted in conjunction with multiple theories of mind, and just as it becomes the defining characteristic of the mind it affects, it also becomes the dominant metaphor for that mind. For instance, Jane Austen's *Emma* draws on Enlightenment philosophy to describe mental workings; in this text, vacancy takes the form of partial perception, and because the result of this deficiency is misinterpretation rather than a complete failure to take in ideas, vacancy's fractional emptiness is a more accurate metaphor than the *tabula rasa*. Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* turns to physiological psychology's language of forces to explain mental operations; there, vacancy takes the form of absent will power, and physiological psychology's conventional steam engine imagery gives way to the metaphor of a mental power vacuum. By analyzing permutations of

mental vacancy in a wide variety of novels, I reveal the significant plasticity attending this concept and show how it exceeds the limits of any single psychological discourse.

Traditional approaches have also anchored literature to psychology in such a way as to reserve the creative power of psychological concepts for science. Rick Rylance's *Victorian Psychology and British Culture* (2000) situates literature in relation to psychology on the grounds of their "shared concerns," and although his survey was originally inspired by the literature of George Eliot, it is primarily a history of psychology with occasional illustrative examples taken from literature (3). He writes that the "porous boundaries" of Victorian psychology as a discipline allowed literature to participate in a "movement of ideas," but his rhetorical choices ultimately subordinate literature to psychology in his history of the mind (3). In the end, Rylance, Kearns, and Leary—although they suggest at times that literature may play a productive role in adding complexity to psychological language—reserve the right of conceptual development for psychology proper.

In bringing attention to vacancy as a condition of psychological interiority, my study shows how literature creates and develops psychological representations in ways that psychology itself was unable or unwilling to do. Psychological discourse of the period is in fact largely dismissive of mental vacancy as a real condition of mind worthy of study. The closest psychologists come to considering it is in descriptions of suspended thought—a circumstance confined to the mundane, unremarkable state of sleep.[2] Dugald Stewart in 1802, William Carpenter in 1842, and Alexander Bain in 1873, all circumscribe the possibility of suspended

[2] The psychologist Thomas Reid thought that the use of figurative language to explain psychological concepts was "medieval," and it was a widely held belief that "the science of the mind should proceed to frame its laws and principles in terms of its own specialized vocabulary without trying to force translations into the vocabulary of any already existing natural science" (Kearns 3). Although psychologists often had to resort to figurative language, many maintained an ambivalent attitude toward it nonetheless.

thought within the boundaries of sleep, where it becomes a matter-of-fact form of mental blankness too dull for empirical investigation (Stewart 344; Carpenter 573; Bain 10). In contrast, the novels I examine develop vacancy as a richly textured and culturally resonant concept—and this presents an important opportunity to consider that literary theories of mind need not correspond to scientific models in order to do significant cultural work. By blending systematic analysis of the mind with imaginative representation, these novels provide unique ways to think about mental vacancy that are conceptually sophisticated, shrewdly flexible, and judiciously attuned to the powers of artistic representation.

Since the goal of this study is to show how nineteenth-century novels develop sophisticated representations of mental vacancy that are psychological in form yet distinct in significant ways from extant psychological theories, each chapter devotes the bulk of its discussion to a novel, and uses historical and psychological context as explanatory material for the novel's conceptual work. In other words, novels are not paired off with psychological theories, although the final two chapters do argue that *Villette* and *The Woman in White* engage with specific theories of mind in their representations of vacancy. Because psychologists denied the legitimacy of vacancy as a mental state or condition, they do not offer definitions of vacancy *per se* that could productively inform or illuminate the novel's representations. Consequently, the novels draw from a variety of domains to develop their portraits of vacancy, and these domains are determined in part by the novels' dates of publication and the ideological tendencies of their authors.

Aesthetic traditions inform the accounts of vacancy in my first two chapters. Jane Austen's *Emma* is published early in the century when theories about interiority still rely heavily on philosophical discourse. Therefore, my analysis of *Emma* is positioned in relation to an

Enlightenment essay convention in which the "empty head" was merely a comic trope. The resulting contrast reveals the important work Austen does to psychologize mental vacancy and to mold a cultural narrative about vacancy that lends it humanity and interiority. Later in the century, Charles Dickens turns to a melodramatic aesthetic that is profoundly anxious about the link between psychological interiority and secrecy. In *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens contemplates the devastating social consequences attending the failure to disclose the contents of interiority. Simultaneously, the social threat posed by the vacant individual becomes the justification for the very rules of expression that he violates. By reading this novel according to melodrama's ethics of character transparency and emotional disclosure, I reveal that vacancy is a mode of closed or secretive interiority that is at once disruptive of and vital to the sympathetic community that Dickens idealizes.

The novels addressed in the final two chapters engage with contemporary psychological ideas about embodied consciousness and social education, and link their formulations of vacancy to an emerging science of mind. In both cases, the novelists rely on particular *models* of the mind provided by psychology (the physiological mind, and the mind constituted by currents of energy), yet the representations of vacancy within those models are unique to the novels themselves. My discussion of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* interweaves critical questions about class identity with a contemporary theory about the physical discharge of emotion in order to explain why mental vacancy would be appealing to Brontë's socially liminal schoolteacher. I show how Brontë modifies Herbert Spencer's physiological theory of laughter into a socially astute physio-psychological theory of catharsis that recognizes the working woman's experience of life as no laughing matter. Finally, I bring William Carpenter's work on volition into conversation with Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* in order to show that the novel both

draws on Carpenter's theory that will power is a self-directing mental force and critiques that theory's lack of cultural-historical consideration. I argue that the historical vacuum in which Carpenter explains his psychological ideas is corrected in Collins' sensational narrative, the key moments of which turn upon historically specific technologies and power differentials. Punctuated by rail travel and telegraphic communication, and suffused with anxiety about family legacies and Victorian gender roles, Collins' novel reveals the leading role culture plays in the education and exercise of the will—as well as in its constriction and atrophy.

My analysis of mental vacancy in these novels enacts a turn away from established nineteenth-century psychological tropes like self-control (as related to moral management and to the nervous body) and the divided mind (as related to faculty psychology and to studies of the hemispherical brain).[3] Consequently, my discussion of mental vacancy charts relatively new territory in the study of nineteenth-century psychological ideas. There is scant scholarly company in studying literary representations of mental emptiness, which is primarily to be found in Alan Richardson's most recent book, *The Neural Sublime* (2010). This book considers the neural phenomenon of the mental void in Romantic poetry, which (Richardson argues) often attempts to show how mental function is supported by neural mechanisms that lie beyond the grasp of our conscious apprehension. Poets like Keats and Shelley, he says, describe instances of the brain's failure to "grasp at the infinite," failures that are inevitably succeeded by mental collapse in the form of "profound vacancy" (Richardson 29-31, 33). This momentary collapse leaves the speaker "dizzy" and "blinking" in "the sublime darkness of an overtaxed brain," and

[3] On the subject of self-control, see Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*, Alison Winter, *Mesmerized*, Graham Richards, *Mental Machinery*, Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves & Narratives*, and Janet Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*. On the subject of the divided mind, see Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture*, Anne Harrington, *Medicine, Mind, and the Double Brain*, and Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*.

Richardson argues that Romantic writers viewed this breakdown as awesome evidence of the brain's capacity and complexity (33, 29). For when Reason fails, he explains, and we are "[jolted]…out of the cognitive categorizations by which we parse the perceived world"; we are able to "intuit the neural mechanisms working beneath them" (35). From a cognitive studies perspective, this experience is a form of "neural sublime" that renders the mind "naked" and thereby reveals the sophisticated cortical infrastructure underlying conscious experience (Richardson 30). For many poets working in the years just before and after the turn of the nineteenth century, mental vacancy was an anti-transcendental pleasure, a taste of the material sublimity governing human sentience.

This project joins in the conversation that Richardson begins about mental vacancy in nineteenth-century literature, and proposes that vacancy undergoes several significant changes toward the end of the Romantic period. First, I posit a shift in its form and definition, from a fleeting mental collapse to either a lasting mental deficiency or a deliberate act of emptying out the mind. This formal shift dissociates vacancy from poetic sublimity and reframes it in terms of the mind's everyday states. Second, because of this change in form, vacancy takes on a different set of causes and effects. Instead of exposing the brain's sublime cognitive power, vacancy becomes profoundly implicated in the relationship between the individual and the social sphere, and illustrates the extent to which the social order both constricts individual minds and depends upon particular forms of mental integrity for social stability. Finally, toward the end of the Romantic period, the novel becomes the genre best able to theorize and represent mental vacancy. As an everyday social concern rather than a poetic experience, vacancy can no longer be accounted for through the poet's subjective reflections on his own brain-scape and instead

requires the novelist's ability to account for an individual's progress through space and time.[4] In Romantic poetry, mental vacancy signals the impenetrable barrier separating our perception from the unconscious processes that undergird our everyday conscious life. In nineteenth-century novels like *Emma* and *The Woman in White*, mental vacancy is subject to detailed description and is defined in terms of a specific mental faculty or function; it signals the interdependence of the individual mind and the forces exerted by and manifested in the social order. The following chapters thus identify and analyze a new paradigm in the literary history of mental vacancy.

In addition to this emerging study of mental vacancy in nineteenth-century literature, my work engages two critical conversations. The first is centered on cultural histories of particular mental states and functions, including Nicholas Dames' *Amnesiac Selves* (2001), Patricia Meyer Spacks' *Boredom* (1995), and Barbara Benedict's *Curiosity* (2001). This group of scholars turns a critical gaze on everyday mental functions and states, like memory and boredom, in order to trace their literary and cultural resonances, explore the ideologies in which they are implicated, and contemplate the anxieties attached to them. I bring a new term to this conversation that, unlike *memory* or *boredom*, is not part of the ready vocabulary we apply to the mind. The eccentric and variable forms vacancy takes set it apart from more familiar mental qualities and confirm that important new insights into history and culture may be gained by looking for patterns beyond traditional categories of mind.

This project also contributes to research on theories of mind that are grounded in traditionally defined historical periods, such as William Cohen's *Embodied* (2009), Alan Richardson's *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (2001), and Alison Winter's

[4] David Lodge writes that "literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have. Lyric poetry is arguably man's most successful effort to describe qualia. The novel is arguably man's most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time" (10).

Mesmerized (1998). These works highlight large-scale patterns in the types of mental models to which authors and readers were drawn during different parts of the nineteenth century, and argue for special affinities between certain models of mind and specific eras. Although I do not disagree that historical and cultural developments bear heavily on the appeal of certain theories of mind, I propose another way to organize the relationship between a culture and its psychological discourses. My study introduces a mental trope that actually stretches across multiple models of mind and across traditional chronological divisions between the Romantic and Victorian eras. I show that Jane Austen is as interested in vacancy as Wilkie Collins, for instance—and for some of the same reasons. She writes about this condition of mind in an early-century novel that falls back on associationism and the philosophy of mental faculties, and Collins addresses it in the second half of the century, describing it in terms of physiological psychology's model of mental energies. From 1816 to 1860, mental emptiness is a compelling trope for exploring psychological sites of exchange between the individual and social structure(s). Vacancy's range suggests the need for greater fluidity in our temporal and conceptual classifications, and challenges the calcified division between the Romantic and Victorian eras that often prevents Austen's work from being considered together with Collins'.

The forms of mental vacancy that I examine in this project are associated with models of mind that are relatively transparent and accessible, and therefore allow for the subject to intervene in his or her own mental activity and development. Because these novels assume the mind's accessibility, each one enacts a rhetorical strategy to address in its readers the very mental conditions that lie at the center of its plot. In *Emma*, readers encounter misperception and partial perception in a narrative constituted by the tedium of everyday life, and thus demands our careful attention to detail and the exercise of our own perceptive capabilities. *Barnaby Rudge*'s

audience is witness to the horrors that result from sympathetic failures, and is simultaneously educated in sympathetic economy by way of its prolonged engagement with fictional characters. Readers of *Villette* are shown that emotional evacuation is a productive strategy for maintaining psychological equilibrium; in reading the melancholy narrative, they become freighted with emotion and thus put in a position to practice vacancy themselves. *The Woman in White* illustrates the detrimental effects of weak will power, all the while deploying the reward of sensational shocks to incentivize the development of readerly focus, critical thinking, and reflection. Each novel not only offers a sophisticated theory about vacancy in a specific form and social context, but also invites its readers to engage with carefully tailored rhetorical mechanisms that can help to either correct or enact the particular form of vacancy it theorizes.

This project examines four crucial permutations of mental vacancy. Chapter One identifies Jane Austen as a pivotal figure in the novel's depiction of vacancy, and argues that she psychologizes and refines the cultural trope of the "empty head," which had been an object of comic derision in the eighteenth century. Austen's fiction resists the literal interpretation of "empty headedness" that had become conventional by the turn of the nineteenth century, and instead represents it as a state of perceptive partiality. Austen's vacant characters, like Mrs. Allen of *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and Emma Woodhouse of *Emma* (1816), possess a mental apparatus of perception that takes only a partial account of what it apprehends. Austen thus transforms vacancy into a serious epistemological obstacle, and not only accounts for the vacant mind's relationship to the external world, but also dramatizes that relationship. Through her vacant characters, she illustrates how a person's partial perception can blind him or her to other people's characters and intentions, cripple the ability to fulfill important social obligations, and render everyday life overwhelming. By imbuing the "empty-headed" with psychological

interiority traditionally denied them, Austen lends gravity to mental vacancy and compels her readers to recognize it as a socially impactful condition rather than merely a comic punch line. In making this case, I modify the conventional view of Austen's "silly" characters, revealing that they are far more psychologically and ideologically significant than critics have typically granted.

Chapter Two turns to Charles Dickens' definition of vacancy as sympathetic detachment in the critically neglected *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty* (1841). The titular character's "vacant" gaze marks his inability to read emotional expressions, and thus signals his exclusion from an economy of social feeling that bonds other characters as a social family. In this novel, Dickens builds a case that social order relies on the sympathetic cooperation of individual minds; he depicts a high-stakes cause/effect relationship in which sympathetic vacancy in one mind can lead to widespread violence and destruction in the form of metropolitan riots. This chapter builds on recent critical work on melodrama and its dictate of character transparency, and the sympathetic exchange to which such transparency should lead. I argue that Dickens' literary aesthetic is drawn from these melodramatic rules, and that he designates the ready externalization of internal thoughts and feelings as the ideal means of establishing social and national kinship bonds. In this context, Barnaby's obstruction of sympathetic communication represents a national crisis. Because melodrama privileges the communal act of public, outward expression over secretive, private thought, *Barnaby Rudge* resists character psychology as a divisive rhetorical mode. This tactic implicitly acknowledges, however, a powerful link between individual mind and outward environment. Barnaby's vacancy is explicitly a mental condition, and the breakdown in the social order that the riots vividly represent is clearly due to the "disorder" of Barnaby's mental interior. This reading corrects a sweeping critical dismissal of

Barnaby Rudge, and positions him at the thematic and structural center of the novel named for him.

Chapter Three turns to a form of vacancy that facilitates emotional release, vividly illustrated in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). In contrast to vacancy in other novels, *Villette* formulates it as an active form of mental work rather than as a functional deficiency. Through the narrator Lucy Snowe, Brontë repeatedly depicts vacancy as a strategy of emptying out psychological vessels, including the mind and the heart. I argue that *Villette* represents vacancy as a necessary tactic for the physiologically defined subject, and more particularly for one that is vulnerable to a continual accumulation of emotional burdens. In the figure of Lucy Snowe, Brontë suggests that such an individual is most likely to be a professional-class woman, stuck in the socially liminal position of schoolteacher or governess. Lucy's narrative indicates that her position in the socioeconomic landscape both intensifies her identification as an embodied subject and necessitates ongoing psychological maintenance because her social hardship is continual. My reading brings attention to the crucial role that class plays in Lucy Snowe's psychological life and expands the scope of that life to her whole body, thereby contesting the priorities of critical traditions that limit their concentration to gender and/or to the nerves.

Chapter Four argues that Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860-61) defines mental vacancy as a lack of will power, and that the novel reveals how culturally modulated gender differences play out in the development and exercise of the will. Collins depicts variations in mental vacancy across gender, and shows how only Victorian men are given opportunities to develop their volitional power and thereby overcome their vacancy. While earlier novels had concentrated on vacancy's effects in the social sphere, *The Woman in White* provides valuable perspective on how it is produced and perpetuated, and emphasizes the role of culture in forming

psychological identity. This is the most invested in contemporary psychology of all the novels studied here, and draws on William Carpenter's *Principles of Human Physiology* (1842) for its representation of will power and the subject's relationship to external influences. Through its intricate plot and cast of characters, *The Woman in White* addresses Carpenter's failure to take cultural and social influences into consideration in his theory of volition. In arguing that will power is the organizing theme of the novel's argument, I reposition the critical conversation about gender, moving it away from arguments about the role of socioeconomic status and relocating it to a psychological context. This move challenges the view that the novel's characters are problematically one-dimensional by revealing its sophisticated claims about the psychological inculcation of gender difference.

A remarkable effect of vacancy's conceptual eccentricity is the unexpected combination of authors and texts it brings together. Each of the novels studied here is in some way an outlier from the other three, and yet every one contributes an important element to the discussion of vacancy. *Emma* is a chronological oddity; it belongs to a pre-industrial era before machinery and industry became part of daily life and enhanced anxieties about individual agency and social fragmentation. But Austen makes an important case about vacancy's mobility and perverse allure. By revealing that the popular dictates of taste are nothing more than the voluntary adoption of a form of mental vacancy, Austen exposes the hypocrisy hiding in judgments like Hannah More's and John Stuart Mill's. She shows that to instruct readers in predetermined aesthetic conclusions—whether applied to landscapes or novels—is actually to encourage their vacancy.

Barnaby Rudge's singularity lies in its active resistance to psychologizing its characters. Dickens paradoxically depicts vacancy through external signs and offers nowhere near the same

access to characters' minds as the other three authors here. But *Barnaby Rudge*, more than the other novels, imagines vacancy's role on a national scale, and offers a coherent theory about the relationship between the individual mind and the social order as a homogenous whole. As a result, *Barnaby Rudge* amends the kinds of histrionics trumpeted in *Self-Help* about the decline of civilization, preserving claims for vacancy's large-scale effects but grounding those claims in a social ideology that holds out hope for recovery and recuperation.

Villette is alone in defining vacancy as an active mental performance rather than a static condition, yet this incongruity is precisely its contribution. Brontë's novel makes a powerful argument for vacancy's positive function as a psychological tactic, and presents a potent rebuttal to Sarah Stickney Ellis's representation of vacancy as moral and physical disfigurement. Not only does Brontë counter the negative moral judgment that Ellis attaches to vacancy, but she also depicts an alternative relationship between vacancy and the body, in which vacancy is a functional part of the body's rhythms rather than a brand of alienation stamped on the face. In *Villette*, vacancy comes to be associated with emotional dynamism and remedial power, and is transformed from a dangerous quality into an act of self-care. In the process, Brontë claims the right to personal psychological equilibrium ahead of moral obligations to the social sphere.

The Woman in White stands apart because it theorizes the mind in terms of its forces and energy rather than its structure, and because it is clearly so invested in contemporary theories of mind. Yet the novel's sustained engagement with William Carpenter's theory of volition as a "self-directing power" does important work in bringing together vacancy with the psychological theory that dismisses it. Collins' compelling thesis about vacancy, will power, and gender suggests that psychological discourse *could* accommodate the concept of vacancy, although it elects not to. The novel vividly demonstrates that Carpenter's interpretation of "suspended

thought" in sleep is a far too limited consideration of mental vacancy, both in terms of psychological theories and—perhaps more importantly—in regard to the social life of the mind.

CHAPTER ONE

Jane Austen's Psychology of Vacancy

From the beginning to the end of her career as a novelist, Jane Austen was interested in empty heads. She wrote about them frequently, exploring different forms of mental emptiness and varying her depth of detail depending on whether the empty-headedness was merely for comic effect or aimed at something more serious. A portion of Austen's work with this trope comprises an intervention in mental vacancy's complexity and cultural implications, and the sophistication of this intervention increased as she matured as a writer. Her early representations of mentally vacant characters retain much of the traditional imagery upon which eighteenth-century writers had relied. In later novels, she would confidently depict more nuanced manifestations of vacancy and suggest increasingly detailed social implications for each. This chapter takes the empty-headedness on display in *Northanger Abbey* (1818) as an early example of Austen's earnest work with vacancy, in which she hazards a partial revision of an inherited trope, and then moves into an extended reading of *Emma* (1816) in order to show how she both expands and refines her approach. In the process of arguing for mental vacancy's centrality in these novels, I contend that Austen plays a crucial role in making empty-headedness the object of serious literary contemplation and in the fictional dramatization of the politics of psychology.

The epithet "empty-headed," used in English writing as early as 1650 to deride the (supposedly) stupid or ignorant[1], is the organizing term of this chapter because of the vivid imagery it provides of absence. Suggesting that a person may be so devoid of knowledge or

[1] *Oxford English Dictionary*. "Empty-headed" appears as a sub-entry under "empty" in the *OED*. Two illustrative quotations are provided. The earliest, from 1650, refers to "Empty-headed, Fiddle-brain'd Men"; the second, from 1873, comes from a volume on Greek poets and reads, "Trample on the empty-headed rabble."

sense that his head is literally empty, this phrase offers a mental portrait as one-dimensional as the individual it claims to describe. While many writers choose to label their objects of scorn outright as "empty-headed" (as I will shortly show), readers of Jane Austen will likely be unsurprised that her use of the image is subtler and more nuanced than the impatient name-calling engaged in by the likes of her literary antecedents as well as twenty-first-century journalists.[2] In her novels, the "empty head" is granted a complexity that the heat of derision otherwise denies it: the head, Austen shows, can of course not really be empty, but it may nevertheless harbor certain forms of emptiness. Alan Richardson has demonstrated Austen's interest in the brain as a material organ of mind in *Persuasion*, a novel that insists upon the brain's material reality within a head even so "giddy" as Louisa Musgrove's (*British Romanticism* 97). In her earlier novels that take the *mind* (as the abstract space occupied by functional structures of perception and thought) rather than the *brain* as the object of psychological inquiry, Austen similarly resists the dismissive literality of "empty-headed," even when depicting comically vacuous characters. Instead, she allows that there may be what she terms "vacancies" within the mind that inhibit proper perception and judgment, and which are worth trying to understand.[3] To focus on the language and imagery of emptiness in Austen's novels, then, is to draw attention to the ways in which Austen's work psychologizes and refines a popular image, turning it into an opportunity to theorize about the character of the mind in its social context and about the reverberations the mind sends outward into the social network that has shaped it.

[2] An internet search for "empty-headed" yields results that range from reviews of the American television landscape to an opinion piece on religious debates in the United Kingdom.
[3] Austen uses the term "vacant" or "vacancies" in this sense in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Emma*.

To say, as my opening sentence does, that Austen was intrigued by "empty" heads is both to make a fairly common readerly observation and to forward a new critical claim. While her regard for lively-minded people is clear in heroines like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, Austen's novels are also littered with the vapid (like *Sense and Sensibility*'s Mrs. Palmer), the dull-witted (like *Mansfield Park's* Mr. Rushworth), and the foolish (like *Pride and Prejudice*'s insufferable Mr. Collins). Popularly, these fools are often grouped together as a cast of "silly" characters at whom we variously laugh or grimace, depending upon their relationships to the heroine and the particular manifestations of their foolishness. Austen's sister Cassandra, for example, "delighted in Mr. Rushworth's stupidity" (qtd in Chapman)[4] while Henry Crabb Robinson expressed extreme impatience with the "silly chattering Miss Bates" (Morley 282).[5,6] Twenty-first-century readers have memorialized "Austen's Fools" in annotated lists on fan websites, which detail the combined pleasures and annoyances Austen's audiences continue to receive from her depictions of the stupid and self-involved.[7] A significant element of Austen's appeal, as her readers have known from the start, is her masterful satire of inanity.

Strikingly, scholarly readings of Austen's "empty heads" have tended to take this general label of "the fool" for granted, and have avoided consideration of mental vacancy as a psychological quality worthy of analysis. For many literary critics, Austen's vapid characters are

[4] Austen's sister Cassandra reported feeling this delight during her reading of *Mansfield Park*, and Austen herself made note of it in her collection of her audience's opinions.
[5] Henry Crabb Robinson cared little for Miss Bates and Emma's "fool" of a father when he read *Emma* in 1822.
[6] Resisting this (common) dismissal, Mary Hong attempts to claim a central role for Miss Bates in *Emma*'s realist project, as representing—through her endless articulation of meaningless details—a non-psychologized way of knowing that Emma must transcend in order to view the world from the proper perspective.
[7] See "Celebrating Jane Austen's Fools" at the "Austen Authors" website (http://austenauthors.net/celebrating-jane-austens-fools) and "Jane's Fools" at the "Laughing With Jane Austen: A How To" website (http://laughwithjane.weebly.com/janes-fools.html).

referential: they signify not in and of themselves, but rather according to a quality or problem they embody. According to this kind of interpretation, vacuous characters are shunted into one of two possible categories of significance. In the first category, the function of this type of figure is understood to be formal: s/he serves as a foil, often comic, to Austenian heroes and heroines. John Lauber's "Jane Austen's Fools" points out how Austen's silly characters usually propel her plots by providing the heroine with obstacles (as, for instance, when the John Dashwoods impose financial hardship on Elinor and Marianne). Fools also often contribute to the education of Austen's heroines, serving as the very people that young ladies must learn to properly judge as they move (like Catherine Morland) toward intellectual independence or (like Emma Woodhouse) toward self-knowledge. Lauber thus articulates the ways in which these insipid characters—though they may be "Nothingness incarnate"—contribute significantly to the furtherance of action and character development (513).

More recently, the formal significance of the silly character has been outlined in Alex Woloch's *The One vs. the Many* (2003), which conflates various types of foolishness and argues that they directly correlate to a character's minor-ness in the structure of the novel, against which the psychological development and complexity of major characters is set. Woloch reads the empty-headedness of characters like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* as psychological simplicity—a kind of representational flatness or one-dimensionality that renders her mental life ineligible for analysis. Any question of exploring the "empty head" and investigating its constitution is forestalled, because Woloch's conclusion is precisely that there is nothing to be understood; the very condition of silliness rules out the possibility of deeper signification and instead invites the reader to divert her attention toward those characters with greater dimension of interiority. The dichotomous character structure that Woloch (and, in a less pointed way,

Lauber) maintains for the novel problematically oversimplifies mental "emptiness" in Austen, I would argue, by setting it in opposition it to rich and complex interiority, and—especially in Woloch's case—by suggesting that it is commensurate with no interiority at all.

When scholars are not reading Austen's "empty heads" as mere types or foils, they are analyzing them in terms of gender conventions, focusing on the ways in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century femininity is burdened with expectations of weakness, ignorance, and submission. For instance, in this context, empty-headed Austenian characters signify according to whether their vacuity is in regrettable conformity to these expectations or whether it marks a savvy performance meant to manipulate others. Patricia Michaelson notes Austen's use of the "empty verbiage" of feminine speech in making so many of her characters ridiculous, and observes that the needless intensifiers and superfluous exclamation marks belonging to this mode of discourse also work to belittle—because they emasculate—the men who make use of them (57, 59). Alongside silly speakers like Isabella Thorpe and Charlotte Palmer, Michaelson also asks us to recognize the significance of Fanny Dashwood, who deliberately employs "woman's speech" to maneuver her husband in money matters; Michaelson thus highlights the possibility that expectations of submission may be manipulated into the means of attaining power. Her article—titled "Woman's Speech; or, How to Speak Like Mrs. Palmer (and Other Silly People)"—while it takes seriously the political work Austen does with secondary characters like Fanny Dashwood, sidesteps the psychological connotations attached to "silliness" and reads it as a form of behavior rather than as a quality of mind. Mary Waldron's "Men of Sense and Silly Wives" similarly takes a behavioral tack on the issue of silliness in *Emma*, and makes much of Emma's "delusion," through most of the novel, that "female vacuity is the essential requirement for a 'sensible' husband" (233). Waldron's reading is less interested in the broad political stakes

of such a conviction, but remains, like Michaelson's, focused on the externalization of vacuity in such a way as to suggest that conduct is the principal (and, perhaps, sole) mode of signification granted to vacant characters.

My claim about Austen's interest in empty heads comes out of a reading of Austen's fiction that recognizes a psychological dimension in her depiction of mentally vacant characters. While acknowledging that some of them are, as Lauber, Woloch, and Michaelson argue, embodiments of a single quality that Austen chooses to satirize for comic and/or political ends, I maintain that certain of these "empty-headed" characters have very specific mental "vacancies" that Austen was interested in tracing out in their psychological and social dimensions. What does it look like, she asks, for instance, in *Northanger Abbey*, when a mind is wholly occupied with one frivolous idea and as a result is unable to accommodate serious concepts like responsibility and discernment?[8] How does the full-yet-empty condition of such a mind manifest in behavior, and how does that behavior impact people who would benefit from the very responsibility and discernment that are lacking? While Austen was distinctly concerned, of course, with the subtleties of social conduct, I maintain that she often accounts for that conduct through a vacant character's psychological interiority. Rather than one-dimensional fools, these figures are frequently more psychologically sophisticated than many readers may have realized.

Moreover, Austen's work with mental vacancy is not, as we might expect, limited to secondary or "minor" characters, and includes even her heroines at times. This kind of expansion of vacancy's scope works to destabilize the equation of *vacancy* with mere *silliness* forwarded by readers like Woloch and Michaelson, who see vacuity as the exclusive purview of the peripheral

[8] Later in the century, psychologists would carefully study this state of mind, which they attempted to explain using the term "fixed idea." See Théodule Armand Ribot, *The Psychology of Attention*, and Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*.

character. As a result, Austen makes vacancy a central focal point in questions of characters' flaws and conflicts, and thereby takes a more contemplative approach to its representation. In her hands, vacancy becomes less a question of an easily dismissed "empty" head than a psychologically and socially problematic perceptive partiality. Furthermore, such partial perception has varied effects, so that the vacancy of a Mrs. Allen may resemble the vacancy of a Mr. Woodhouse, yet manifest quite differently because of carefully drawn social differences in gender and disposition. The vacancies in a mind like Harriet Smith's may take part of their shape from those that afflict Emma Woodhouse, but divergent effects follow from the women's disparities of birth and rank. Through these illustrations, Austen contextualizes vacancy in ways that help account for its frequent appearance in English literature and culture; at the same time, she carefully delineates the social variables that make its manifestations and effects so miscellaneous. Before we can fully appreciate the ways in which Austen refined and complicated this trope, however, we must turn to the eighteenth century and its avowed superfluity of empty heads to get a better view of her point of departure.

Coxcombs, Parrots, & Prattlers: Empty Heads in Eighteenth-Century Culture

During the Enlightenment the "empty-headed" character was a frequent presence in English writing. Authors often introduced the "empty-headed" man or woman as a figure of ridicule and target of criticism in novels, essays, conduct books, and treatises of social philosophy. In the eighteenth century the epithet "empty-headed" designated and censured a very particular form of behavior: pretending to know much while in fact knowing very little.[9] The "empty-headed" man or woman was voluble, but produced only meaningless noise. Daniel

[9] This is, in fact, the very definition of *coxcomb* in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*.

Defoe's novel *Roxana* (1724) sees the heroine regrettably married to "a weak, empty-headed, untaught Creature, as any Woman could desire to be coupled with," a mistake that renders Lady Roxana miserable for life and that she holds up as a warning to her female readers (5). *An Address to the Ladies* (1796) and *Practical Philosophy of Social Life* (1794) both warn their readership against engaging in social intercourse with "empty-headed coxcombs" (10; xviii). Mr. Cresswick, author of *The Female Reader* (1789), compares these "empty-headed prattlers" to parrots, who, "Being themselves strangers to thought and reflection, and accustomed…to repeat by rote what they hear from others, […] measure the extent of a man's understanding by the number of words he utters" (106).[10] The parrot imagery associates these "prattlers" with minds that conduct information rather than comprehend it. There is a suggestion in Cresswick's description that everything goes "in one ear and out the other"—or, perhaps, in at the ear and out at the mouth—and that there is little in the way of real understanding in between. During an era that placed the scientific method at the center of its intellectual pursuits, such an empty pretension to knowledge was considered a contemptible personal quality and dismissed by many as a sign of no knowledge at all.

As eighteenth-century disdain for empty-headedness centers around the coxcomb's misguided preference for appearance rather than substance, thus the literary representation of this quality also concentrates on surfaces. In *The Idler* No. 67, Samuel Johnson refers to empty-headed individuals as spectacles of fleeting amusement, the distractions of an hour's stroll in London's public gardens. These "illiterate empty women as well as men, in high life, admired for their Knowledge, from their being resolutely positive," are interesting not because of anything they have to say, but only insofar as their intellectual posturing is ridiculous (Johnson 81).

[10] "Mr. Cresswick" was, in fact, Mary Wollstonecraft, who took a pseudonym for writing the educational treatises by which she periodically earned her bread.

Johnson's description characterizes their emptiness as quite literal: the parade of humanity in the public gardens is meant to be looked at, perhaps laughed at, but it is certainly not worthy of any serious consideration because, he implies, there is nothing to consider. In this context, Johnson's definition of *empty* in his *Dictionary* is very telling: "vacant of head; … unfurnish'd with materials for thought." Johnson understood empty-headedness, and encouraged English speakers at large also to understand it, as a condition of thorough mental vacancy, in which the mind was "unfurnish'd" and therefore incapable of thought. Considered in this way, the "empty-headed" individual is little more than a doll or puppet, whose physical surfaces are accessible to the senses, but which lacks any substantive moral or intellectual content.

In addition to "empty heads," eighteenth-century writers mocked those whose minds seemed to have only the smallest capacity, and were easily filled up by a single idea. Richard Steele's *Tatler*, for instance, flippantly asserted that all of womankind fell into this category. "Were the Minds of the Sex laid open," his Isaac Bickerstaff wryly remarks, "we should find the chief Idea in one to be a Tippet, in another a Muff, in a Third a Fan, and in a Fourth a Fardingal" (Steele 277). While his dig at women's mental capacity includes a tacit admission that they may entertain multiple ideas simultaneously, Bickerstaff stresses that one idea always becomes "chief" over all others, and that this idea is a single material item: "*a* Tippet," or "*a* Muff."[11] The insignificant item, be it tippet or muff, takes on such an overwhelming presence in a lady's mind that all other ideas are shrunk to nothing. Writers like Steele critique this combination of crippling single-mindedness and deplorably low mental capacity for the way it restricts activity. In this type of mind, thought is always fixed on a single object, and that object is always unworthy of its privileged position.

[11] This observation of Steele's imagery is noted in Natalie Phillips, *Distraction* (forthcoming).

The two Enlightenment representations of mental vacancy just outlined (the empty-headed coxcomb and the single-minded materialist) share a sense that the mind may be effectively "empty" in spite of being filled with thoughts. The "unfurnish'd" minds that Johnson critiques are inadequately fitted out for real thought. They lack the sturdy accoutrements that would facilitate quiet reflection and the properly supported development of ideas. As a result, they are incapable of originating substantial thought, and instead habitually serve as mere conduits through which knowledge passes. Though they can be filled with ideas, these minds have no means of understanding those ideas or taking possession of them: when it comes to inherent structures for thinking, they are as good as empty. Similarly, the low-capacity minds that Steele's Bickerstaff ridicules are so absolutely overtaken by a single article of dress that thought is rendered impossible. According to his description, the mind is like a tableau, marked by a single, static image. Steele's figure forestalls the possibility for any type of dynamic thought: because the tippet is the "chief Idea" occupying the whole of the mind, the triviality characterizing that idea applies to the mind as well; nothing of importance can go on there. In both cases, the mind is, in a sense, full, but it is nevertheless characterized by a sense of vacancy. Moreover, in both of its manifestations this state of being full-but-empty is linked to vanity: intellectual pretension is the object of "empty-headed coxcombs," and the paraphernalia of personal appearance is Woman's all-consuming thought.

If "empty-headed" individuals are supposed to be solely concerned with appearances, their eighteenth-century audience generally seems content to take them at face value. Johnson and Steele's effortless rhetorical dismissal of them indicates that they are both inconsequential and insubstantial—easily swept aside by those with better-furnished minds. With little to no moral or intellectual substance to call their own, these empty-headed objects of ridicule do not

seem capable of bringing any more influence to bear on the social sphere than the dolls they resemble. Like the image of the all-consuming tippet in Steele's essay, empty-headed people are more often objects than subjects in the eighteenth-century social sphere. They display ridiculous qualities and serve as silly spectacles, but beyond amusement or irritation their vacancy has very little effect upon others.

Austen's fiction uniquely intervenes in this trope of mental vacancy at the beginning of the nineteenth century by psychologizing it, and thereby transplanting it into the realm of subjectivity. No longer simply the marker of a one-dimensional fool, vacancy is imbued with significant humanity through Austen's efforts: her narrative brings readers into intimate contact with her characters' minds and provides a wider view of the mind's role in social relationships. She represents not only the outward show of vacancy, but also the mental partialities underlying it. In doing so, she locates a particular origin for vacancy that makes it a question of faulty epistemology and renders it a condition of mind that may be theorized and meaningfully explored.

The shift from character weakness to epistemological failing that Austen achieves with vacancy pivots on the question of bodily surfaces. As critics have noted before, Austen persistently deals in a sensory-based epistemology as the best (though certainly not the ideal) way of knowing.[12] Consequently, the body's surfaces—specifically those that mediate between the external world and the perceiving mind—are of the utmost importance in the individual's construction of knowledge. This is not to make a claim that Austen's fiction demonstrates a preoccupation with the sensory body *per se*—though this is an ongoing debate in Austen studies.

[12] On Austen and epistemology, see Peter Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, and Susan Morgan, *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction*. For a broader discussion of empiricism and literature, see Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility*.

John Wiltshire has argued for an "epistemology of health" in *Emma*, for instance, and maintains that the body and its parts are in fact generally obscured behind the discourse of health as a way of masking social difference and disguising social and gender politics (150).[13] Mary Ann O'Farrell has just as persuasively demonstrated the body's intense visibility in Austen, arguing that the blanch and the blush are physical signs crucial to the construction of a legible body that renders character accessible to sensory observation. My claim has less to do with what the observer (be it reader or character) apprehends about the body in Austen, and more to do with establishing a relationship between the perceiving mind and the external world in which the body's sensory faculties are vital. Austen figures the body as a mediator in this way so effectively that it may be said to frequently disappear altogether from the reader's awareness—if not from the character's as well. When the eyes of Harriet Smith fall upon a former lover, for example, she becomes so bewildered by the sight that she completely loses awareness of her own body and its movements; the way Austen presents this moment in *Emma*, as I will later show in detail, invites questions about Harriet's perceiving mind rather than the eyes in front of it. In other words, Austen psychologizes vacancy in a manner that draws the reader's focus to the dynamic between the world being perceived and the quality of the mind that perceives it. In the event of partial perception (which often takes the form of mental blindness), Austen locates the source of partiality in the vacant mind rather than in the physical sensory organs.

Because loyal Austen readers will have no difficulty calling to mind the many instances when Austen demonstrates that blindness has nothing to do with the eyes (Elizabeth Bennet's attitude toward Mr. Darcy seems one of the most apt examples of this), I want to reiterate my interest in Austen's psychological studies rather than her moral lessons. It is not a misguided

[13] Wiltshire's book seems in conversation with an article by Carol Shields that catalogs the striking absence of the body and all its parts and yearnings from Austen's writing.

emotion or frame of mind (e.g. prejudice or sensibility) that Austen calls attention to with her depictions of vacancy, but rather a mental apparatus of perception that takes only a partial account of what it apprehends. Felicia Bonaparte has gestured in this direction with an article on misreading: she shows how Austen embeds a philosophical argument for empiricism in several of her novels, notably *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*. According to Bonaparte, the novels represent empirical observation as the best mode of knowledge construction, though Austen's skepticism does not allow for this knowledge to be perfect or even necessarily accurate (152). *Pride and Prejudice*, in Bonaparte's reading, is a distilled illustration of an epistemological paradox: the impossibility of reliable observation coupled with the necessity of drawing conclusions about the world around us. My reading of Austen repositions the question of epistemology, moving it from the philosophical into the psychological register and proposing that, particularly in *Emma*, Austen addresses an even more fundamental problem than the unreliability of sensory information. Through the figure of mental vacancy, Austen explores what it looks like and what the consequences are when there is a deficiency in the faculty of perception itself. In other words, how does the partially-perceiving subject encounter the world; and, furthermore, how does she act upon it?

The vacant mind is always, in Austen, implicated in a tightly-woven social web, in which individual activity sends vibrations radiating outward to affect the rest of the community's members. In addition to exploring "empty-headedness" psychologically and epistemologically, Austen's work is careful to delineate its social dimensions: specifically, its disruptive potential within the neighborhood "web." Her localized focus provides a new perspective on the empty head trope, which previously had been considered within an expansive and largely homogenous social sphere. Vacant individuals had been imagined to be everywhere in the eighteenth century,

pervading social settings of all kinds. The "entertaining scene" that Johnson's Idler witnesses in London's public gardens, for instance, is suggestive of a grand urban pageantry of emptiness going forth on a daily basis. Compared with images of the eighteenth century's bothersome multitude of coxcombs, Austen's nineteenth-century representations of vacancy have a much finer compass. Her concern is the village rather than the nation, the drawing room rather than the mall. Earlier writers addressed the "empty-headed" figure's capacity to amuse or irritate the public at large. Austen's project is to contemplate the vacant mind in its local context, within small, bounded communities whose days are ruled by habit and custom. Where her literary forebears had stressed the epic proportions of vacancy's influence, Austen asks us to recognize the not less considerable import of its role in the everyday.

Early Efforts: Mrs. Allen's Preoccupation

Northanger Abbey, Austen's last published but first completed novel, begins by sending its heroine, Catherine Morland, to Bath with her family's prosperous neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Allen. Mr. Allen's purpose in Bath is to improve his health, leaving Mrs. Allen to act as chaperone to the unworldly Catherine. With "more experience of novel reading than life," Catherine's first evaluations of people in Bath are rather naïve, and she forms a misguided friendship with Isabella Thorpe that leads to a series of social predicaments (Grogan 20). Mrs. Allen's staggering vacancy, which renders her incapable of perceiving or attending to social cues, often contributes to Catherine's dilemmas. In Mrs. Allen, Austen presents a satirical portrait of the vacant social guardian. Her single-mindedness is reminiscent of eighteenth-century formulations, but—unlike those dismissive critiques—it is recognized as carrying political ramifications for the young lady in her care. These ramifications extend to the ways in

which Mrs. Allen's single-minded vacuity restricts Catherine's ability to make choices about her social connections, and often leaves her vulnerable to the bullying of those who only pretend to be her friends.

If *Northanger Abbey*, as a gothic satire, ultimately stresses the very slight duration of Catherine Morland's discomfitures before "hastening [us all] together to perfect felicity" in the form of Catherine's marriage to Henry Tilney (*NA* 238)[14], Claudia Johnson has shown how the novel's tempering of gothic drama is nevertheless freighted with its own political significance. She reads *Northanger Abbey* as exposing the ways in which gothic conventions map onto late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century reality when it comes to the ways in which women are subjected to the powers of patriarchal institutions and authority. With this text, Johnson writes, Austen shows "that the gothic is in fact the inside out of the ordinary," and that the outrageous tribulations experienced by gothic heroines are, in a subtler way, what English women encounter in their everyday lives (34). In this context, Mrs. Allen becomes both an exasperating and a familiar example of the failures of vacant feminine guardianship. The widespread presence of women like her in society is made evident through her membership in "that *numerous class* of females, whose society can raise no other emotion than surprise at there being any men in the world who could like them well enough to marry them" (*NA* 44, emphasis added). Austen here points out that Mrs. Allen represents a national conglomeration of vapid women, and—by juxtaposing it with a description of her role as chaperone to Catherine—she implies the likelihood that many such women stand in places of supervision to young ladies. The difficulties she facilitates for Catherine may appear mundane when compared with the trials faced by gothic heroines, but when considered as the "ordinary" or everyday contributions of a vacant chaperone

[14] All references to *Northanger Abbey* are cited parenthetically in the text as *NA*, and refer to the Broadview edition.

to the life of an unschooled young woman, the weight of their frequency becomes too great to be dismissed as trivial. Mrs. Allen's vacancy serves as an important example of both the social and sexual dangers enabled by vacant chaperones, dangers that implicitly populate the everyday lives of young women who need protection and guidance.

The nature of Mrs. Allen's vacancy, and the source of her ineptitude, is that she allows an inappropriate idea—namely, Clothing—to become the ruling point of her perspective, with the result that it becomes impossible to perceive the world properly. Her mind is in the paradoxical state of being full of nothings: she is guilty of occupying herself completely with sartorial ideas that, by virtue of their insignificance, should remain in the background or at the periphery of mental space. At any given time, her ability to accurately perceive social and physical cues is severely hampered by her preoccupation, and she frequently "misreads" situations or fails to observe important signs altogether. She is unable to accommodate (or, sometimes, even recognize) life's weightier matters, and this regularly contributes to Catherine's social difficulties. Full of nothings, her head is as good as empty, and that emptiness turns out to have its own substantial energies.

The state of Mrs. Allen's mind recalls Steele's pronouncement of a hundred years earlier, that if ladies' minds were "laid open, we should find the chief Idea in one to be a Tippet, in another a Muff, in a Third a Fan, and in a Fourth a Fardingal" (179). The purchase, construction, maintenance, repair, display, and general appreciation of clothing are demonstrably the sole concerns of her life. In a moment of remarkable resemblance to the *Tatler*'s language, Mrs. Allen tellingly invites James Morland to "guess the price and weigh the merits of a new muff and tippet" (*NA* 73-4). Her single-minded devotion to all things sartorial restricts the themes of her conversation and, simultaneously, convinces her that such topics are universally engaging. James

thus finds himself obliged to pronounce upon the muff and tippet, just as Henry Tilney is called on to assess the quality of Catherine's new gown. Likewise, though she "can never get Mr. Allen to know one of [her own] gowns from another," Mrs. Allen continually appeals to him to do so (*NA* 51). Neither her mind nor her speech often ventures beyond the subject of clothing, and her ability to look past a person's costumed exterior seems nonexistent. Her perception is obstructed from the very first, confined to the shape of a dress or the quality of a length of muslin.

In addition to resembling Steele's pronouncement on women's minds, Mrs. Allen's mental space is linked to the tradition of empty-headedness through more explicit language. Austen informs us that the chaperone's "vacancy of mind and incapacity for thinking were such, that as she never talked a great deal, so she could never be entirely silent" (*NA* 81). Her mind lacks both content and activity, and seems capable only of funneling immediate sensory perceptions straight to her mouth: for, "if she lost her needle or broke her thread, if she heard a carriage in the street, or saw a speck upon her gown, she must observe it aloud, whether there were any one at leisure to answer her or not" (*NA* 81). Her vacancy combines with her single-mindedness in a head that is paradoxically full, yet empty. While muff and tippet loom so large that they block her from considering any other ideas, she is also so incapable of real thought that most ideas pass right through her head, meeting no resistance. The sights and sounds of her daily life give rise to a flurry of speech, which, however, imparts nothing and requires no response. As with Mr. Cresswick's parrots, ideas go in at Mrs. Allen's eyes and ears and exit through her lips without having been really reflected upon or understood; unlike the parrots, though, Mrs. Allen has absolutely no pretensions to knowledge. Content merely to emit inconsequential chatter to anyone and no one alike, Mrs. Allen's head is as functionally empty as the utterances to which it gives rise.

The character blindness formed by Mrs. Allen's vacancy and single-mindedness makes her a poor choice for a mentor. She proves staggeringly unfit for her particular role as Catherine's chaperone and negligent of the girl's social and personal well-being. For instance, the Thorpes unrelentingly press Catherine to ride out with them on a morning she had set aside for visiting with the Tilneys, and decorum takes the power of refusal out of her hands.[15] Mrs. Allen can use her authority as a chaperone to extricate Catherine from this situation, and the young woman looks hopefully to her to exercise it. Due to Mrs. Allen's blindness, though, the result is only Catherine's disappointment: "Catherine's silent appeal to her friend…was entirely thrown away, for Mrs. Allen, not being at all in the habit of conveying any expression herself by a look, was not aware of its being ever intended by anybody else…. 'Do just as you please, my dear,'" is her advice (*NA* 82). Ill equipped for nonverbal communication, Mrs. Allen sails through her days largely ignorant of anyone else's wishes or feelings. It is a significant social handicap not to recognize the subtle unspoken cues, like Catherine's meaningful look, that pass between the strictures of verbal niceties. Not only does Mrs. Allen communicate nothing to others, but she is also unable to decipher communication directed at her. She cannot, therefore, act as either an advisor or a rescuer, in this setting or any other. "Little as Catherine was in the habit of judging for herself, and unfixed as were her general notions of what men [and women] ought to be" (*NA* 86), she must be taught the art of judgment in order to properly navigate Bath society. It is Mrs. Allen's place to provide such guidance, and, moreover, to teach Catherine the difference between fiction and fact. Wrapped up in muslins and tippets, however, the chaperone cannot see past them even to recognize Catherine's danger—much less to help her avoid it.

[15] Claudia L. Johnson observes that Catherine's power of refusal is "continuously under siege" in the novel, and argues that Catherine's acute cognizance of that fact is an awareness produced by her gothic literacy (39).

The most significant danger to which Mrs. Allen is oblivious is Catherine's friendship with Isabella Thorpe, whose virtue and devotion are transparent veneers to the reader but appear thoroughly genuine to Catherine. Isabella's designs on Catherine's brother James are quickly joined by John Thorpe's pursuit of Catherine, with both Morlands unaware that the Thorpes believe them to be quite rich. By blandly encouraging Catherine's association with the Thorpes, Mrs. Allen increases the chances that the Morlands will fall prey to fortune hunters and permanently attach themselves to a family of low reputation and negligible moral worth. Moreover, her willingness to go along with the strongest current of opinion ends in Catherine's ill-advised participation in the Blaize Castle trip, alluded to above, which includes a dramatic "abduction" episode.

When Catherine's plans for a country walk seem frustrated by John Thorpe's claim to have seen the Tilneys driving out of town, she is roughly persuaded to go for a ride to Blaize Castle with the Thorpes and her brother, James. As I have noted, Catherine is uncomfortable at the idea of going out when there is still a chance that the Tilneys may call for her, but the others press her so much that her only possible recourse is to Mrs. Allen's authority of veto. Her chaperone, however, as we have seen, absently advises Catherine to do just as she pleases—blind not only to Catherine's signals of reluctance, but also to the selfishness and inconsideration shown by the Thorpes and James. While her hindsight informs her that the Blaize Castle trip is "a strange, wild scheme," she utterly fails to prevent its taking place, and in fact encourages Catherine to go since her friends seem so eager (*NA* 106, 103).

By encouraging Catherine's intercourse with the Thorpes and, more specifically, by approving of their trip to Blaize Castle, Mrs. Allen facilitates a situation with the potential to place Catherine in an improper light. For a young unmarried woman to ride out with an

unmarried man, as Mr. Allen afterwards suggests, is to invite gossip and possibly to tarnish her reputation. A more perceptive chaperone would have recognized this and prevented the outing: "I wonder Mrs. Thorpe should allow it," Mr. Allen pronounces, and he is "sure Mrs. Morland would not be pleased" (*NA* 118). Not only might the carriage ride leave Catherine at the mercy of public speculation, but it also certainly places her at the mercy of the unscrupulous John Thorpe. When Catherine catches sight of Eleanor Tilney in the street and realizes that she has been misled, she cries to John Thorpe to stop the carriage so that she may get down and join the friends to whom she first promised her day. Thorpe's response dramatizes feminine powerlessness, as he "only laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made odd noises, and drove on" (*NA* 104). Catherine, "having no power of getting away, was obliged to give up the point and submit" (*NA* 104). This moment makes clear that even ordinary social outings place women like Catherine in relatively helpless physical positions. The mundane villainy of an unmannered, ungentlemanly lout like Thorpe is representative of the advantage that may be taken of young ladies with mentally vacant guardians in the ordinary course of social interaction. The older, more experienced Mrs. Allen does not recognize either the sexual menace that John Thorpe and his carriage present, or the imprudence of unmarried couples riding out together. Evidently, the most dangerous thing she is capable of perceiving is a threat to her seams. If Catherine successfully counters the effects of her chaperone's vacuous failings with breathless explanations and apologies according to her own sense of right, the novel does not sanction Mrs. Allen's incompetent authority as stimulating the development of youthful independence or morality; Catherine makes it up with the Tilneys *in spite of*, not as a result of, Mrs. Allen's oblivious neglect.

Following Catherine's gothic adventures at Northanger Abbey, Austen chooses to revisit Mrs. Allen's vacuity once more before the "perfect felicity" of the novel's closing. When informed of General Tilney's rude dismissal of Catherine and her lonely journey home, Mrs. Allen conducts herself more thoroughly as an empty-headed parrot-figure than ever. Her husband's expressions on the matter "became in succession her's, with the addition of this single remark—'I really have not patience with the General'—to fill up every accidental pause" (*NA* 229). Without the resources of genuine emotional response or intelligent articulation, Mrs. Allen merely parrots the indignation to which she is witness. She only repeats her own remark, "I really have not patience with the General," as a way to fill the empty air with noise during "accidental pauses" in the conversation with Catherine and her mother. Like Mr. Cresswick's vacant parrot, she reproduces without real comprehension what she hears from others and squawks rather meaninglessly the rest of the time. And it is not long, either, before she works to draw attention away from questions of social decorum and toward her favorite topic, plumage. Immediately after her fourth reference to her lack of patience with General Tilney, she calls upon Catherine to remember "that frightful great rent in my best Mechlin," now "so charmingly mended" (*NA* 229). Expressions of dismay flow much more easily from her when they touch on her lace than when they concern Catherine's ill-treatment—and the insignificance of the state of her dress in light of Catherine's situation makes this dismay all the more immaterial. Just as the all-consuming muff and tippet obstructed her ability to apprehend the risks in Catherine's relationship with the Thorpes, so her lace and gloves crowd out any realization of what is due to Catherine's distress.

Austen thus closes the book on the vacant chaperone's superficiality, which cannot resist returning to the sheen of ostentation. Mrs. Allen's final words in the novel unwittingly make an

exhibition of the preoccupation with exteriors that make her blind to character and therefore a poor guardian. "Such an agreeable, worthy man as [the General] seemed to be!" she declares; "I do not suppose, Mrs. Morland, you ever saw a better-bred man in your life. His lodgings were taken the very day after he left them, Catherine. But no wonder; Milsom-street you know" (*NA* 229). She cannot comprehend that the General's character has proven so different from his appearance, by which she continues to be impressed. His *seeming*, she takes for *being*, and what she sees of his person and his fashionable lodgings should be reliable evidence, she implies. The last words Austen allows Mrs. Allen hint at her incapability of accepting this revelation about the General's unworthy character because it does not reconcile with her impression of him as a stylish gentleman with a respectable address. She is not merely blind to the dangers of such a character discrepancy but also highly resistant to admitting such a discrepancy into her mind. The fixity of her perspective is shown to be absolute here, as the Tippet shows no signs of being dislodged from its position as "chief Idea." Unwavering even in the face of great error, Austen indicates that the guardian figure's vacancy is irremediable.

Mrs. Allen's sartorial single-mindedness represents Austen's earliest novelistic work with vacancy, which borrows heavily from an earlier tradition for its form but contributes subtly articulated political dimensions. This muff-and-tippet brand of empty-headedness is reminiscent of Steele's censure, but Austen does important work by dramatizing its effects in a novel, which provides the mind with a social context and allows for the extended consideration of the individual's relation to others over a period of time, in a way that anecdotal essays like Steele's or Johnson's simply could not. Austen thus goes beyond an intellectual indictment of the silly chaperone or the fashion-obsessed woman. Through her depiction of a mind brimming with pictures of clothing and empty of any significant ideas, she psychologizes very pointedly a

gendered form of vacancy that does a very great disservice to the well-being of England's young women—young women who are not only put at risk by the obliviousness of such guardians, but also, presumably, are in danger of following their example.

In a later novel, Austen would address the question of vacancy's influence more straightforwardly, through a trio of "empty" heads residing in—and shaping—an insulated rural community. In *Emma*, she draws vacancy into the center of a realist focus and imagines a much more variable scope for its influence.

Vacancy in *Emma*: Mis/Perception and the Social Body

More than any other Austen novel, Janet Todd has written, *Emma* "allows the brainless to babble on without restraint" (103). Her remark recalls Patricia Michaelson's argument about the links between silliness and volubility, but it also—unwittingly perhaps—hits on the centrality of the "empty head" in *Emma*. Vacancy is at the center of Highbury society and of the novel's story line; it drives the plot on a narrative level, and grounds *Emma*'s social commentary. While it may be that this text is particularly replete with empty speech—indeed, with "little nothings" in general (Pinch xxvi)[16]—it also offers Austen's most earnest exploration of mental vacancy and its real-life consequences. In *Emma*, vacancy is not merely the single-mindedness of physical vanity; Austen imagines it rather as a state of psychological lack with varying manifestations and effects: as a condition whose causes and signs vary according to the context of an individual's social position.

[16] Adela Pinch notes that *Emma*'s initial reception was marked by references to the novel's lack of events and interest, and that for some readers, "there was nothing to remember in *Emma* except little nothings."

Emma traces three illustrations of vacancy: in the hypochondriac Mr. Woodhouse, in Emma the heroine, and in Harriet Smith, her protégée. Each of these characters has a different type of vacancy, which Austen traces outward to distinct social consequences. She dramatizes the impact of these three different modes of vacancy upon questions of hospitality, sociability and interpersonal exchange, community relations, marriage, and social status. In doing so, she traces the ways in which psychological circumstances act upon interpersonal relationships, and shows how community stability relies upon individual perception. Because the aesthetic category of Taste contributes significantly to both Emma and Harriet's misperceptions, the novel also implicitly critiques culturally-imposed ways of seeing and knowing that are predicated on predetermined conclusions. For an advocate of skeptical empiricism like Austen, neither the blinkered habits of Mr. Woodhouse nor the uncritical appraisals of Emma and Harriet are acceptable modes of interpreting the world.

Empty Fears and Dangerous Nothings; or, Henry Woodhouse Ventures on an Egg

"[H]aving been a valetudinarian all his life," Emma's father is a man filled with empty anxieties (*E* 56).[17] He is convinced that he and the citizens of Highbury are in constant danger of illness and consequently sees danger in everything: "bad air," custards, the sea, any kind of travel, under-baked fruit, snow, and so on. Only two actual ailments strike in *Emma*, however, and neither is due to a failure to guard against the environmental assaults that preoccupy Mr. Woodhouse. First is Harriet Smith's sore throat, which is the result of a constitutional

[17] All references to *Emma* are cited parenthetically in the text as *E*, and refer to the Broadview edition.

predisposition.[18] Second is the ebb and flow of Jane Fairfax's nervous illness, which comes and goes according to Frank Churchill's manner toward her; and in the end Mr. Woodhouse's worries are groundless. Their constant looming presence in his mind, however, causes him to lose sight of the social responsibilities that attach to being the patriarch of the village's foremost family.[19] Rather than offering friends and guests the pleasant, cheerful conversation of the gentleman host, he verbalizes a constant stream of prohibitions. Instead of inquiring politely after his company's health, he makes sweeping assumptions about how uncomfortable and dyspeptic everyone must be. He believes any little imprudence with one's health will lead to grave illness and fusses endlessly at his friends and family, advising them minutely on their clothing, their exercise, and their diets. His insubstantial ideas about illness completely obstruct his recognition of people's real desires for the pleasures of company, exercise, and good food.

His typical cautionary addresses aim to redirect his friends and neighbors away from the principal attractions of gatherings and meals, which are desirable to others for the very richness and vivacity that Mr. Woodhouse sees as hazardous. The Westons' wedding cake, for instance, sorely tries his nerves because no one will agree to abstain from eating it, and he all but ruins what he calls the "wild" plan of a dance at the Westons' home because it would require too many open doors and let in a draught (*E* 65, 233). The night of an evening-party at his estate, he delivers himself of a particularly revealing piece of advice:

> "Mrs. Bates, let me propose your venturing on one of these eggs. An egg boiled very soft is not unwholesome. Serle understands boiling an egg better than any body. I would not recommend an egg boiled by any body else—but you need not be afraid—they are very small, you see—one of our small eggs will not hurt you."

[18] Mrs. Goddard tells Emma that Harriet is "liable" to sore throats and "has often alarmed [Mrs. Goddard] with them" (*E* 134).

[19] I read Mr. Woodhouse's major failing to be in the category of hospitality to family and friends, but Juliet McMaster also notes that Mr. Woodhouse clearly has nothing to do with the management of his estate—a failure in his capacity as a landowner (119).

(*E* 70)

The cloth is laid with more substantial dishes like minced chicken and scalloped oysters, wine and apple tarts, but Mr. Woodhouse draws a veil of danger over them and proffers a small egg instead. The appropriate attitude suggested by this double-edged encouragement is one of suspicious vigilance over the supper table. "You need not be afraid," he reassures Mrs. Bates, implying that she is free to be afraid of everything except the egg—and even then, eating it qualifies as a "venture." Its negligible size and its physical resemblance to a cipher (0), however, bring its consumption to naught and he might as well encourage Mrs. Bates to eat nothing at all. The egg signals Mr. Woodhouse's mistaken partiality to nothings, a partiality that leaves both substantial food and ideas outside the scope of his understanding. The tiny cipher of the egg can offer no real sustenance to Mrs. Bates, and Mr. Woodhouse's mind is so full of the threats posed by the other supper delectables that he cannot see the inadequacy of his offer. It is not only that his condition of mental vacancy—of being filled by insubstantial anxieties—would result in people going home hungry, but also that these people are guests whose comfort and well-being are Mr. Woodhouse's responsibility. That Emma's intervention is required to supply the visitors in a "satisfactory style" and "[send] them away happy" signals her father's inability to perform the role of host according to prevailing rules of hospitality (*E* 70).

Mr. Woodhouse's advocacy of small eggs and watered-down wine is psychologically suggestive in light of the strong philosophical connection between mind and belly that prevailed at this time in British culture. Conceptually, the mind was often likened to a stomach that was fed by ideas; a big "appetite" was therefore a positive sign of intellectual curiosity (Gigante 71, 73). More specifically, the Romantic trope of the "feeding mind" referred to a form of slow and deliberate rumination (the "chewing" and "digesting" of ideas) resulting in desirable types of

insight and creativity (Gigante 71, 73).[20] Romantic poets considered a voracious appetite vital to intellectual health and to a transcendent kind of self-consciousness. Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1805), for example, pictures

> The perfect image of a mighty mind,
> Of one that feeds upon infinity,
> That is exalted by an under-presence,
> The sense of God, or whatso'er is dim
> Or vast in its own being – (I 3.69-73)

Compared with the near-divine perfection of the "exalted" mind that "feeds upon infinity," Mr. Woodhouse is reduced to absurdity. His mind displays a poor appetite and dismal capacity, and thus excludes an infinity of knowledge and sensations from his experience. In urging Mrs. Bates to choose the small egg that he himself prefers, Mrs. Goddard to water down her wine, and Mr. Knightley to join him in a basin of his nightly gruel, he fails to *mind* (in the sense of "attend to") the individual preferences of his guests and his obligations as a host: despite his complete absorption in the body's interaction with its environment, he is disconnected from the realities of both. Samuel Johnson's frank observation about the stomach almost seems to anticipate Mr. Woodhouse's relationships to food and to the world at large: "I look upon it, that he who does not mind his belly will hardly mind anything else" (Boswell 159).

As this contemporary link between stomach and mind suggests, the problem of Mr. Woodhouse's relationship to appetite (and thus of his failure to provide hospitality) is rooted in his understanding of the body—his own and others'—and its relationship to the external world. The condition framing Mr. Woodhouse's everyday behavior is hypochondria, and its late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century interpretations are predicated on the issue of epistemological dysfunction. According to the belief of the time, hypochondria was "a malady of

[20] Gigante writes that this metaphor comes from German *Naturphilosophie* and enters British culture by way of the Romantic poets, especially Coleridge and Wordsworth.

interpretation"; it was a disorder originating in an inability to comprehend the realities of cause and effect or to tell the difference between illness and health (Grinnell 7). Residing in nerves that "could not properly perceive the body or the sensory world around it," hypochondria came to be seen as symptomatic of a constantly malfunctioning faculty of perception (Grinnell 19). As a lifelong valetudinarian who assigns unsuitable meaning and scope to external stimuli, Mr. Woodhouse cannot make proper use of his senses, much less his limbs (he is introduced as a man "without activity of mind or body"), and is in a carceral relationship to his own physical frame (*E* 56). A dusting of snow appears a very serious impediment to a carriage ride home, for instance, and nothing—not even seeing its scarcity with his own eyes—can persuade him to recognize the snow's harmlessness. Once his alarm has been roused, he must retreat home to safety immediately, his fears "[confining all the carriages] to a foot pace" (*E* 148-151).

Because of his faulty interpretive powers, Mr. Woodhouse is unable to consider ideas in their proper proportions. Like Mrs. Allen in *Northanger Abbey*, Mr. Woodhouse's mind is always occupied by one "chief Idea" that crowds out every other thought. Most of the time, that idea is illness. And even in rare moments when illness does not command his entire attention, the fact of his single-mindedness endures. In a moment of significant irony, Mr. Woodhouse's resolution to make a visit to the Westons obstructs perception of severe weather that would normally worry him excessively. The language describing this atypical moment reinforces his tendency to privilege one thought to the disregard of all others: he is "too full of the wonder of his own going, and the pleasure it was to afford at Randalls to see that it was cold" (*E* 137). Here as well as in more characteristic moments of overcautious behavior, Mr. Woodhouse's mind is "too full" of a single idea to accommodate any others. Moreover, because he is hypersensitive to

nothings, that idea is usually a "needless alarm" or unsubstantiated fear, which itself—like the soft-boiled egg to which he is so partial—comes to nothing in the end (*E* 121).

Thus brimming with empty fears, Mr. Woodhouse is a force of negation in *Emma*. His perpetual desires are to minimize, constrict, and suppress; and although his wishes are usually prevented from inhibiting the pleasure of others, they nevertheless require constant attention in order that they may be managed. His vacancy, here and elsewhere, gets in the way of his role as a gentleman who has a certain responsibility to the well-being of his family and neighbors. His hospitality should enable the intimacies of shared meals and easy conversations, but these comforts would be withheld through his officious care for what is properly "wholesome." If left to his own devices, he would restrict everyone to their homes for their own safety and undernourish them all for their own health. The harm of Mr. Woodhouse's vacancy is in its challenge to generative social exchange—more specifically, in the *sterility* that his anxiety would inflict upon Highbury. His vacancy works, through prohibition and preemptive alarm, to smother the fruits of social interaction, which, in Austen, ultimately means marriage—that regrettable institution that Mr. Woodhouse believes "breaks up one's family circle grievously" (*E* 61). The footpace to which he would prefer to restrict visiting, the stuffy restriction of tightly closed doors, and the *nil* embodied by his favorite boiled eggs would, without Emma and Knightley's assiduous circumvention, soon extinguish the pleasure in social contact and, in leaving empty the bellies and drawing-rooms of his friends, leave Mr. Woodhouse (quite happily) with no need to forbid the consumption of wedding cake.

Emma's Tutelage: Partiality and Willful Misperception

Emma is not without her own special relationship to nothings. The partialities in her father that she works continuously to either appease or calm, she in fact replicates with a difference. The precise nature of Emma's mental vacancy is articulated in her famous and oft-quoted survey of the street outside of Ford's shop. This passage contrasts Emma's expectations with her actual view, and reveals an important mental tendency:

> *Much could not be hoped* from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury;—Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr. Cole's carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects *she could presume to expect*; and when her eyes fell *only* on the butcher…a tidy old woman…two curs…and a string of dawdling children…she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, *can do with seeing nothing*, and *can see nothing that does not answer*. (*E* 222, emphasis added)

What Emma knows it is possible to see and what she actually sees are in stark contrast here, but she makes the most of it. It would be far more "lively" to see Mr. Perry than the butcher, or to watch Mr. Cole's horses than two curs fighting over a bone; but her mind is capable of finding amusement enough in these commonplace sights. Of the utmost import is the final sentence, which states that her mind "can see nothing that does not answer." Whatever she sees, in other words, even if it is "nothing," Emma will find something to make it "answer" to her hopes.[21] The nothings she apprehends fill her mind up, and "amuse her enough" that she feels content to stand longer where she is, the observer of nothing much.

As Adela Pinch has pointed out in passing, Emma's mind is in a paradoxical state here, being both "lively and at ease"—though, strikingly, Pinch would rather describe it as "alert yet

[21] Kelly Hagen reads a similar tendency to misperception in Fanny Price, attributing it to Fanny's desire for a more loving and accepting community. The difference is that Fanny's misperception is borne not of a mental vacancy, but rather of the absence of love in her emotional life.

vacant" (xxvi). Alert and prepared to meet a lively world, her mind is determined that that world will answer to predetermined conclusions; but the liveliness is all in Emma's head, because the world she has access to is disappointingly dull. Janet Todd reads this dullness as the subject of the novel and proposes that "[the] lack of story is in part the subject of *Emma*…: life's tedium and how to make it bearable" (95). Yet this interpretation depends upon Emma's ability to recognize the tedium *as* tedium, and to bear it in spite of its monotony. Todd insists on the novel's demonstration that "there is nothing more necessary or cheerful than to see the world realistically but with enough imaginative power to let it 'answer'" (95). Emma's conversion of *nothings* into *somethings*, however, indicates that she does not see the world or her place in it very realistically at all. Recall, for instance, her conviction that Mr. Elton, the vicar, means to marry Harriet, the "natural daughter of somebody" with no family or expectations; similarly, the novel begins with her transparently absurd declaration that she made the match between the Westons—four years before they were married. She also creates a salacious back-story for Jane Fairfax in order to make Jane's innocent connection with the Dixons "answer" her expectations, and her conduct toward Jane for much of the novel is based on this unsubstantiated, manufactured history. It is therefore not quite accurate, I would argue, to claim as Todd does that *Emma* showcases the value of imagination in navigating a life of tedium—or, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar do, that Emma experiences "the pain of the 'imaginist' who encounters the relentless recalcitrance of the world in which she lives" (159). Rather than the folly of an overactive imagination, Emma illustrates the consequences of willful misperception in a world whose monotony is unlikely to answer to a lively young woman's anticipations.

It is not just Emma's expectations of future moments that contribute to her vacancy, but also her memory of the past. A short passage renders her memory graphically and characterizes it

in terms of evanescence. When Emma takes Harriet along on a charitable visit to the poor, she remarks on the transience of her own impressions:

> …she quitted the cottage with such an *impression* of the scene as made her say to Harriet, as they walked away,
>
> "These are the sights, Harriet, to do one good. How trifling they make every thing else appear!—*I feel now as if I could think of nothing but these poor creatures all the rest of the day; and yet, who can say how soon it may all vanish from my mind*?"
>
> "Very true,' said Harriet. 'Poor creatures! *one can think of nothing else*."
>
> "And really, I do not think the *impression* will soon be over," said Emma, as she crossed the low hedge, and tottering footstep which ended the narrow, slippery path through the cottage garden, and brought them into the lane again. "I do not think it will," stopping to look once more at all the outward wretchedness of the place, and recal the still greater within. (*E* 118, emphasis added)

Though affected by the emotional scene of illness and poverty she has just witnessed, Emma knows that it may not last. Indeed, despite the magnitude of a sight that makes all other thoughts impossible, her mind cannot sustain the impression past the next bend in the road. Mr. Elton appears, and the cottagers "vanish" from memory. The poor family that was at first the object of great sympathy is abstracted into an object that may enhance the sympathy between potential lovers: "'To fall in with each other on such an errand as this,' thought Emma; 'to meet in a charitable scheme; this will bring a great increase of love on each side" (*E* 119). Now, Emma can only think about how to bring about a private interview between the vicar and her friend in the hopes that he will propose. Although Emma recognizes that Mr. Elton's approach is a "trial" of her "stability in good thoughts," she is nevertheless unable to pass through it successfully (*E* 119).

The imagery of vanishing mental impressions hearkens back to John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and the theory of sensory epistemology it presents. The mind, Locke supposes, is originally "white paper, void of all characters" (109). External objects make "impressions" upon the mind—or, in other words, sensory perception produces

ideas (Locke 142-43); additionally, reflection—or, in other words, the mind's observations of its own actions—gives rise to ideas (Locke 128). Together, sensation and reflection "furnish" the "white paper" with knowledge (Locke 109). In this context, the novelistic account of the "vanishing impression" in Emma's mind suggests instability and intermittent *blankness*, as impressions pass away and fade out. The cottagers vanish from her memory, "leaving no more footsteps, or remaining characters of themselves, than shadows do flying over fields of corn; and [her] mind is as void of them, as if they never had been there" (Locke 148).[22] Emma's understanding of the world around her is already distorted due to her misperception: her habit of making *nothing* answer her expectations of *something*. The scene of her charitable visit gives more dimension to the state of her mind, illustrating the instability of her impressions and memory. As Locke points out, "*Memory*, in an intellectual creature, is necessary in the next degree to perception. It is of so great moment, that where it is wanting, all the rest of our faculties are in a great measure useless" (Locke 150). Her perception obstructed and her memory inconsistent[23], Emma's mind comes to be characterized as a "void" and a blank.[24] Though Emma is continually occupied with ideas for what she calls match-making and Waldron terms "social

[22] This quotation forms part of Locke's description of ideas "fading" from the memory and captures the essence of Emma's experience remarkably well.

[23] At times, Emma's memory is quite reliable. She "perfectly" remembers, for instance, a morning that found Mr. Knightley and Mr. Elton discussing spruce beer at Hartfield (*E* 299). Similarly, she recalls the precise substance of a conversation with Harriet some months after it originally took place, insisting, "The impression of it is strong on my memory" (*E* 349). The things that linger in her memory, however, are almost always related to Mr. Knightley. Since she eventually realizes her love for Knightley, this pattern indicates that her own limited self-interest determines the contents of her memory; there is no lasting place, therefore, for the poor cottagers.

[24] For most of the novel, Emma lacks reflective powers as well. Not until Harriet reveals her feelings for Mr. Knightley does Emma stop to evaluate her own mental activity. The resulting "confusion of all that [rushes] on her" leads to a "*first* series of reflection" (*E* 353, emphasis added).

engineering" (223), Austen employs the charitable visit and the language of impressions to establish that her heroine is nevertheless complexly "empty-headed."

Emma's relationship to the world around her, and the manner in which her mind is filled with ideas about other people, are addressed for their formal implications in Deidre Lynch's *The Economy of Character* (1998). As Lynch notes, Austen's heroines have heads filled with other people's emotions. According to her argument, this state of mind arises from the tension attending novel-reading at the turn of the nineteenth century: the reader's "intimate transactions" with a text juxtaposed with the "murmuring spirit of mass consumption" symbolized by the book itself (210). The contradiction underlying such an ironic reading experience is reproduced, Lynch posits, in the minds of characters like Emma, so that

> [at] the same time that Austen mobilizes the hallmarks of literary psychology to endow her heroine with an inner life, she also depicts her (to adopt a locution the novelist favors throughout her oevre) as conscientiously "mindful" of "the feelings of others." Her "mind filled," this heroine has a head supplied with emotions that belong to other people, a mental life that unfolds in what accordingly is at once an interior and a social space…. Austen handles point of view so that listening in on the self-confirming language of depth that endows a heroine with an inner life consistently involves hearing in the background the murmurs of a crowd. (210)

Emma's crowded mind is of great formal significance, according to this point, because it provided contemporary readers of *Emma* with a model that helped them understand interiority as both constitutive of a distinct identity and constituted (at least in part) by an awareness of the crowd without. It offered, in short, "a new means of locating oneself in social space" (Lynch 128-29). Lynch's reading suggests that Emma's mental life is in many ways exemplary of a successful negotiation of the boundaries between the self and the social mass.

However, what must come into play here is that Emma's mind is frequently "filled" with erroneous ideas about the feelings of others, and this seriously impacts the way she "locates

[herself] in social space." She may be able, in Lynch's terms, to create a mental life that is both interior and social, but her misperceptions of the specific relationships that govern her social sphere distort her judgment and blind her to the reality of her position in Highbury. This is not to disqualify Emma from the emerging models of perspective that Lynch identifies in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century literature. Rather, it is to argue that if Emma's mind, as Lynch's argument suggests, provides the reader with practice for plumbing her own depths by way of plumbing Emma's depths[25], then *Emma* offers an important lesson about the links between subjectivity, social positioning, and perception. When Austen shows us the contrast between Emma's distorted conclusions about Mr. Elton's feelings, for instance, and the observable evidence of his expressions and actions, she offers a tacit caution about the ways that partial perception can contribute to a misreading of social cues and to a wrong understanding of one's relation to others. Because Emma is "too eager and busy in her own previous conceptions and views to hear [Elton] impartially, or see him with clear vision," she fails to perceive the signs that *she* is the object of his desire, not Harriet (*E* 135). It is not enough, Austen suggests, merely to grasp the means of locating oneself in social space as being "mindful" of others' feelings. The insubstantial conclusions with which Emma's mind is filled insinuate—through the mortification they cause her (and Mr. Elton)—that an effective mindfulness must be founded on empirical perception that does away with "previous conceptions" and partialities.

Moreover, Emma's is not the only position in social space affected by her vacancy; it has far-reaching implications across the social "web" whose center she occupies. Her friendship with Harriet Smith, for instance, not only makes Emma's vacancy evident, but also shows how vacancy may be communicated to others in the guise of good judgment. As the novel opens, we

[25] This paraphrases Todd's reading of Lynch (27).

learn that the Westons' marriage has left Emma in need of a "new" social project. As she looks about her for something to do, her mind distinguishes Harriet as the most eligible object for her "kind designs" (*E* 71). The association she decides to cultivate with Harriet is based on her assessment of their differences in status and ability: where Emma is "clever, and rich," Harriet is a boarding school orphan, and her "strength of understanding must not be expected" (*E* 55, 68, 71). As the undisputed sovereign of Highbury society, Emma deigns to befriend this parentless girl because it will reflect well upon herself and suit her elevated status:

> *She* would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers. (*E* 69, emphasis original)

Emma appreciates Harriet as an object of education and charity, who proves herself worthy of notice through a willingness to be guided by her social superior. Harriet is "docile" and "grateful," and her "power of appreciating what was elegant and clever, shewed that there was no want of taste" in her (*E* 71). Submission to Emma's direction and appreciation of elegance and cleverness—which are, conveniently, Emma's own personal qualities—makes Harriet "exactly the something which [Emma's] home required" (*E* 71).

The formation of this friendship is motivated by the (supposedly) complementary sensibilities of the two young women: Emma's refined sensibility gives her excellent taste, and Harriet is sensible of Emma's talents and willing to submit her own taste to Emma's direction. Taste both governs the power dynamic in this relationship and is the presiding determinant of sensory perception. Emma's appreciation of Harriet's character centers on her supposed possession of "taste"; likewise, Harriet's submission to Emma's direction boils down to an acceptance of Emma's aesthetic values in relation to things like letter writing and personal

appearance. Following Denise Gigante's observation that "modern aesthetics as evolved from the concept of taste involves pleasure, and pleasure is its own way of knowing" (2), the role Emma so eagerly adopts is of instilling in Harriet a new epistemology. She wants to correct Harriet's affection for and inclination toward Mr. Martin, for example, by making her understand that he is not a suitable object for her admiration. She wants Harriet to realize, in other words, that she is not seeing Mr. Martin in the proper light—after all, taste is not just about the pleasure received from an aesthetic object, but about rightly judging which objects ought to give pleasure and which are unworthy of notice.

As a historically situated category, taste is an objective measure of aesthetic value. Edmund Burke insisted that the faculties of judgment and sensibility determine the quality of a person's taste: "From a defect in the former of these qualities arises a want of taste; a weakness in the latter constitutes a wrong or a bad one" (23).[26] Emma clearly agrees with the immutability of these rules: "there is no disputing about taste," she pronounces (*E* 198). While these dictates were often used to support arguments about inborn powers of aesthetic judgment and, accordingly, to justify class discrimination, there was also a powerful sense that the "culture" of taste could be taught: that it was, in fact, itself a "complex civilizing process in which individuals were taught to regulate themselves, and their motivating appetites, from within" (Gigante 7). This is precisely what Emma sets out to do for Harriet: to teach her to regulate her motivating appetites (i.e. her attraction for certain men) and, by "civilizing" her, to elevate her social status. To this end, Emma turns a chance encounter with Mr. Martin into a teachable aesthetic moment, making it abundantly clear that he is an object unworthy of being appreciated or even seen: "I may have seen him fifty times," she admonishes, "but without having any idea of his name. A

[26] William Gilpin's *Three Essays* likewise refers to "correct taste" (55).

young farmer, whether on horseback or on foot, is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity…[and is] in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it." "Oh! yes," Harriet quickly replies, "it is not likely you should ever have observed him" (*E* 74). Emma has pronounced that the yeoman should not be noticed, and Harriet follows Emma's lead in the appropriate exercise of her sensibility and judgment. The tutorial successfully concludes with the student's acquiescence to direct her sensory attention to more pleasing masculine objects.

Broadly, this is a lesson in taste and sensibility. More specifically, however, this is a lesson in *not-seeing*. In essence, Emma tells Harriet that perception should be willfully disabled in order to block out sensory information that is deemed socially undesirable. The rules of taste predetermine the reception of what presents itself to observation, and when it comes to Robert Martin, the predetermination is that he is "beneath notice." Harriet comprehends the epistemological nature of this aesthetic lesson immediately, acknowledging that there is no reason for Emma to have ever looked at him; quite the opposite, in fact. Whether rhetorically above her notice or below it, it is apparent that Robert Martin is never admitted to Emma's line of sight, and is consequently prevented from ever entering her mind in form or character. In taking only a partial view of the people, relationships, and social cues with which she is surrounded, Emma cannot accurately interpret what she *does* see and hear. (Little wonder, then, that she finds so much amusement in the uninteresting view of the street outside of Ford's.) Austen is critical of prejudice elsewhere as a frame of mind that creates predeterminations, yet she makes clear that it is an error into which anyone may fall: it is a weakness, but a thoroughly human one. Taste, on the other hand, is the focus of a much more serious censure because it is *voluntarily* taken up, culturally propagated, and proudly wielded as a mark of discernment. In the willful blindness advocated by Emma's aesthetics lesson, Austen censures taste in its role as an

ideological tool that weakens the perception of those who use it and, she implies, actually cripples their ability to see what stands in front of them.

With her own sensibility directed by the objective and objectifying dictates of taste, and her habit of making something out of nothing, Emma frequently treats the Highbury community as a pageant enacted for her own amusement. She interprets circumstances to fit her idle expectations (e.g. she infers a liaison between Jane Fairfax and her employer from the anonymous delivery of a piano) and, in the process, turns people into objects. Indeed, Emma teaches Harriet to view people as aesthetic objects, to which end she appraises Mr. Elton's "air" and Mr. Martin's plainness and vulgarity (*E* 76-7); but for all that, Harriet herself is just as much of an aesthetic object in Emma's eyes: "exactly the *something* which her home required" (*E* 71, emphasis added). Like the collection of riddles on which the young women collaborate, Harriet is an ornamental hobby for Emma. The "variations" in her mind, as she forms a liking for Mr. Elton but cannot forget Mr. Martin, afford Emma "entertainment" (*E* 103, 187). The behavior that results from Emma's vacancy affects everyone from the humble cottagers, whom she objectifies and then forgets, to Mr. Knightley, to whom she unconsciously (but undeniably) directs Harriet's affection. Mr. Elton is mortified by Emma's failure to perceive his intentions toward her, and although in the end perhaps we are not so sorry for the humbling effect this has on the social climber, we can neither deny the reality of his pain nor refuse to acknowledge Emma's role in bringing it about. Elsewhere, because she is insensible of the possibility that it could affect anyone else, Emma flirts openly with Frank Churchill and thereby keeps his secret fiancée, Jane Fairfax, in a perpetual state of nervous anguish. Poor Mr. Martin and Harriet are very nearly kept from each other forever by Emma's pronouncements on aesthetic value's relation to personal worth, and the perfectly amiable Martin sisters and their mother are often the

incidental casualties of Emma's curriculum. From center to periphery and back again, Emma's mental vacancy sends tremors throughout Highbury society.

From a bird's-eye view as well, Emma's activities threaten the stability in Highbury and the continuity of an established order. The three most devastating possibilities she encourages (knowingly or otherwise) include Harriet's status-inappropriate matches; Jane Fairfax's break from Frank Churchill and her miserable descent to a life as a governess; and, finally, because she does not perceive (until the very end) her own love for Knightley, the eventual extinction of Highbury's social and economic core: its gentry. The blunders emanating from Emma's vacancy are very public, in the sense that they pervade her community, and very powerful in their capacity to destabilize relationships. The flurry of marriages that take place in the novel's closing pages assure us that all is now in order; but they also remind us of the confusion and distress to which they signal a period.

This period is brought about by Emma's realization that she loves Knightley—an idea that "darted through her, with the speed of an arrow" (*E* 350)—and is part of an abrupt shift in the way she sees the world and herself. "A few minutes," we are assured, "were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like her's, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress" (*E* 350). The implication is that her feelings for Knightley have been there all along, only she has never chosen to observe them. If the novel reader has learned something about introspection and self-knowledge from *Emma*, it can hardly be thanks to following Emma's example. For it is not until she is confronted with the prospect of Knightley's marriage to another that she understands "Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!" and that "blindness" has ruled her experience of the world up to this point (*E* 350, 353). This is the moment when Emma really goes through "a development of self," for this is the moment when

the partiality of her perceptive habits gives way to "a clearness which had never blessed her before" (*E* 351, 350). Only now is she able to properly locate herself in social space as the wife of Mr. Knightley—first, psychologically, and later, legally.

Moreover, now she understands that the individuals that populate social space must be encountered with eyes wide open, with no "previous conceptions" to restrict her mental gaze or direct her conclusions. Where her habit had formerly been to objectify the feelings of people around her and, in doing so, spin *nothings* into rather weighty suppositions, her newfound clarity reveals to her that people are not subject to the dictates of taste. Emma had limited her vision according to a cultural apparatus that imposes ready-made categories on people and things, without seeing that this entailed drawing her own boundaries around other people's inclinations in a manner problematically resembling her father's practice. A significant part of recognizing that she has made *nothing* answer her expectations for too long is her admission that "she had not quite done nothing—for she had done mischief" (*E* 354). And yet even as Emma's penitence and dawning self-awareness are rewarded with the revelation of Mr. Knightley's affections for her, Austen does not allow us to lose sight of the way that Emma has enhanced her protégée's relationship with vacancy—for her gain puts Harriet's lack into relief: "she was every thing herself," and "Harriet was nothing" (*E* 366).

Harriet Smith's Blank Prospects

The blind partiality that Emma comes to encourage in her friend is in addition to the vacancy that already permeates Harriet's character. Being "the natural daughter of *nobody* knows whom, with probably *no* settled provision at all, and certainly *no* respectable relations," Harriet arrives at Hartfield verily clad in nothingness, with the added attraction for Emma of "know[ing]

nothing," (*E* 97, 80, emphasis added). The deference with which Harriet receives Emma's management seems predicated upon her own lack of prospects and knowledge: Harriet "certainly [is] not clever" and "only desir[es] to be guided by any one she look[s] up to," while the triumvirate of qualities with which Emma is introduced—"handsome, clever, and rich"—lays out her advantages plainly (*E* 71, 55). As we have seen, however, Emma's cleverness is no guarantee against vacancy, and both the narrator and Mr. Knightley make plain that neither she nor Harriet has real knowledge of any value. He observes that Harriet "knows nothing herself, and looks upon Emma as knowing every thing…. How can Emma imagine she has any thing to learn," he asks, "while Harriet is presenting such a delightful inferiority?" (*E* 80). Although Harriet agrees to adopt certain habits of misperception at Emma's behest for much of the novel, she already displays distinct markers of mental blankness when they first become acquainted.

Harriet's education at Mrs. Goddard's boarding school—which Austen makes a very particular point of describing at length—has no doubt played a large part in the development of her intellectual (in)capabilities. Mrs. Goddard's is, first and foremost, a school that allows its students no pretensions: it is "not…a seminary, or an establishment, or any thing which professed, in long sentences of refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality upon new principles and new systems"; nor is it a place "where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity." No, this is "a real, honest old-fashioned Boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies" (*E* 67-8). This description rests on a conservative view of women's education that values useful knowledge over fashionable "accomplishments." In addition, it suggests a conservative view of class: this is a

school that offers practical knowledge to young women of limited means, and it makes sure they do not let it go to their heads. There is no place for "refine[ment]," "elegance," or "vanity" at Mrs. Goddard's.

The implicit program at Mrs. Goddard's is modesty, and the model of instruction inherent to a boarding school reinforces that aim. The differences in subject formation suggested by Emma and Harriet's disparate educational experiences do much to explain why Emma is quick-witted and Harriet is "docile" (*E* 71). Where the education of upper-class Emma Woodhouse was directed by a governess whose "mildness of…temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint" (*E* 55), Harriet's lessons are delivered in a school-room whose spatial arrangement tacitly sets up invisible lines of power that place Harriet under the authority of her teachers. Emma eagerly draws up lists of books that she means to read—a plan that she never completes and for which she is never held to account (*E* 79). In a school setting, the curriculum is set in place by the teachers, not the students: there is no need (perhaps no place, either) for proactivity or cleverness. Emma's education, such as it is, has allowed her autonomy and reinforced the legitimacy of her will; Harriet's education, such as it is, has trained her to be obedient to her superiors and to trust in the legitimacy of their knowledge.

The dynamic between Harriet's perceptive faculties and the external world is largely due to the accidental circumstance of her birth, therefore, which has led to an education that stresses personal and social modesty. Harriet—unlike Emma—has a very particular sense of her own location in social space, and the "deference" she displays on their first meeting is one of her most conspicuous qualities (*E* 69). Her submissive social conduct combines, crucially, with a sensibility that seems easily overcome: she is "artlessly impressed by the appearance of every thing" (*E* 69). Her expectations, both in terms of everyday social exchanges and in terms of her

prospects in life, are significantly limited by the social and intellectual modesty she has been taught. The result is that Harriet is "impressed" by "every thing." Where Emma's habit is to make *nothing* answer her expectations, Harriet *expects* nothing, and finds her expectations continually exceeded.

Such a mind as Harriet's is therefore easily filled up with the force of a single impression, as she acknowledges after visiting the poor cottagers with Emma. Emma's "impression" of the family's circumstances is expressed in temporal terms: she thinks it will be a long-lasting one (*E* 118). Harriet's impression, however, is spatial. She thinks she shares Emma's state of mind exactly, but her language implies otherwise: "Very true," she concurs; "Poor creatures! one can think of nothing else" (*E* 118). The cottagers so completely occupy Harriet's mind that there is no room for other thought. Importantly, spectacle has produced this impression, as Emma stresses: "These are the *sights* to do one good," she pronounces. "How trifling they make every thing else appear!" (*E* 118, emphasis added). The sensory perception of the cottagers' poverty and ill-health has pushed trivial thoughts to the periphery. While we see a morally desirable sympathy produced in both young women, we must also notice that the impression takes over Harriet's mind completely. This moment pointedly illustrates that Harriet's mind is susceptible to strong impressions and easily overtaken by whatever object presents itself to her perception—be it domestic finery or sympathetic spectacle.[27]

As objects of charity and sympathy, the cottagers may fill Harriet's mental space, but the objects of her affection completely overwhelm it. Such overpowering impressions as they present to her modest expectations actually cause her mind to go blank. When rain interrupts a

[27] Emma notices that Harriet is "artlessly impressed by the appearance every thing" at the dinner-party at Hartfield, where all is in a "superior style" to what Harriet is accustomed (*E* 69). "Every thing" implicitly encompasses Hartfield's domestic finery and comforts.

walk to Hartfield, Harriet takes shelter at Ford's: and "there she had set, without an idea of anything in the world, full ten minutes, perhaps," until she sees Mr. Martin and his sister enter (*E* 183). At the same place where Emma's lively mind "[sees] nothing that does not answer," Harriet experiences a total suspension of thought. If Harriet's view at Ford's, sitting "near the door," is as dull as the one that presents itself to Emma there, we can see that the vacancy of Harriet's thoughtless mind reflects the nothingness of her view (*E* 182). In this case, to the notion that she is "impressed by every thing" must be added the fact of her being impressed by nothing, to the extent that for Harriet to look at nothing is to think nothing.

Additionally, however, Harriet admits knowing that the Martins "always dealt at Ford's," so that it can hardly be a surprise when such regular customers take shelter there from inclement weather. The ten minutes that she passes with no thought in her head begin to look like a period of distracted anticipation in this light, brought on by the possibility of Mr. Martin's appearance. Surely there are many shops in which Harriet may have taken shelter; Ford's is "first in size and fashion" in Highbury, but certainly not the only respectable public structure in which to wait out a shower (*E* 182). In fact, Harriet's account hints that Ford's may not have been the closest option, and that she ran there with a specific purpose: "soon after she came out [of a dress-maker's house] it began to rain, […] so she *ran on* directly, as fast as she could, and took shelter at Ford's" (*E* 182, emphasis added). Her wording may be held to mean that "directly" implies a proximity to Ford's and her choice of it as the closest shelter. However, her knowledge that the Martins are often to be found there, and the blankness that overtakes her mind once she arrives, put this in a new light, so that we may understand "directly" to refer to the immediacy with which she "ran on" *past* other shops to reach Ford's. The anticipation of seeing Mr. Martin under

such circumstances, then, would contribute to her mental blankness as much as does the *nothing* that forms her view during that interval.

When Mr. Martin finally does appear with his sister, Harriet's agitation is extreme. Although she has expressed acquiescence to Emma's instructions about Mr. Martin being unworthy of notice, this test finds her corrected taste in tension with her lingering attraction to him. As a result, the impression Mr. Martin produces in Harriet's mind is doubly intense: he is an emotionally appealing figure and an object that Harriet has been forbidden to observe. This moment shows her "impressed" almost to the limits of cognition by the sight of him. All a-tremble when Mr. Martin sends his sister over as a friendly emissary, Harriet brings away virtually no memory of their dialogue: "we shook hands, and stood talking some time; but I know no more what I said—" (*E* 183). Reproducing the mental blank she is describing, her speech abruptly falls off. Between Emma and Harriet herself, Mr. Martin has been freighted with all the significant variables of Harriet's as-yet undetermined future: emotional happiness, security, and the connotations of social status. So excessive is Harriet's response to the impression he produces that when faced by only a representative in the form of Miss Martin, Harriet becomes a blankness in her own story; any perception of her own activity is suspended, and both the moment of her articulation and the memory of it are lost in oblivion.

In the rest of the story she tells to Emma, Harriet describes a similar suspension of self-awareness and exhibits the same inability to put the experience into words. Due to advice from Mr. Martin about avoiding flooded footpaths, Harriet believes she has arrived at Hartfield by way of Mr. Cole's stables. The blankness produced by Mr. Martin's address, however, makes plain that she has been too oblivious to know for sure: "I came round by the stables—I believe I did—but I hardly knew where I was, or anything about it" (*E* 183). Lost in space, blind to her

surroundings, and devoid of self-awareness, she can be said not only to experience blankness here but also to embody it. While Emma will later determine that Harriet is "nothing," such nothingness has to do with her place (or lack of it) in Mr. Knightley's affections (*E* 366). In the case of her trip round the stables, however, her sensory perception is so absolutely suspended that she loses all awareness of herself, and even the act of self-narration is undermined.

In Harriet's blank moments, Austen illustrates the degree to which a young woman's mind might be totally overcome by anything relating to her marriage prospects, and this is reinforced when Emma teaches Harriet to see Mr. Elton as a more fitting object of admiration. Having been "talked into love" by Emma, Harriet is "not so easily to be talked out of it," and Mr. Elton proves to be an enduring "object to occupy the many vacancies of Harriet's mind" (*E* 186-87). Vacancy here denotes a kind of mental vacuum that only draws in romantic objects. While Mr. Elton occupies this vacancy for a time, Emma knows that "the waverings of Harriet's mind" may soon designate Mr. Martin as the object to occupy her (*E* 187). In any case, these vacancies are distinctly plural, and Harriet is liable to moments of blankness brought on by any number of prospective suitors. Where at first it seemed that Mr. Martin had particular power to overwhelm her, Mr. Elton is shown to have equal influence, even after his engagement to another woman. On the day that he departs for Bath for his wedding, Harriet crosses paths with his luggage, at which moment, "everything in this world, excepting that trunk and the direction, was consequently a blank" (*E* 188). Whether it reminds her of her disappointment in Elton or of her love for him (or both), this material token of his future nuptials is enough to banish all thought and perception from Harriet's mind.

Marriage is the common thread in each episode of Harriet's mental blankness, and the urgency of marriage in her life is crucially bound up with class status. She is most likely without

any prospect of support from the "somebody" that funds her schooling, and so must look to the marriage market for her future economic security. Because her expectations are dependent upon the match she can make, the various objects of her hopes (Martin, Elton, and, later, Knightley) have great power to impress her mind, as we have seen. While the wealthy and clever Emma has "very little intention of ever marrying at all," Harriet is rendered mentally vacant by the men who embody this pressing requirement (*E* 116). In Harriet, then, Austen psychologizes a feminine experience of the marriage market and its vicissitudes. Harriet's is of course only one example of this experience, and Austen does not suggest otherwise. She does, however, seem to lay special stress on the relevance of Harriet's social status and the ways in which it determines her response to nuptial exigencies. Mental vacancy, the novel implies, is the logical result of Harriet's status, since her standing as a "natural" daughter restricts both her education and the prospects that her education trains her to expect. Such a young lady cannot but be completely overwhelmed by the imperative of finding a husband and, consequently, by the possibility presented by any man that she believes can fulfill that role. The bewilderment Harriet expresses when Emma declares she has no intention of marrying—"'Dear me!—it is so odd to hear a woman talk so!'— […] 'you will be an old maid! […] what shall you do? how shall you employ yourself when you grow old?'"—is a sign of how she regards marriage not simply as in the natural course of things, but as the necessary means for a woman to have a future, something she cannot imagine Emma having if she remains unmarried (*E* 116, 117).

Harriet's role as a single woman with no certain prospects, prone to mental vacancy, has been played by others in Austen's cast of characters. Her previous depictions of this type of woman stress the dire position of the unmarried woman in search of a husband as well as the questionable judgment of the man who would take an empty-headed wife. As noted earlier in this

chapter, Mrs. Allen of *Northanger Abbey* "was one of that numerous class of females, whose society can raise no other emotion than surprise at there being any men in the world who could like them well enough to marry them" (*NA* 44). The vacant woman's attractions are few and slight, but Austen acknowledges that her goals are the same as any other woman's: to secure financial stability through marriage. The opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) give shape to the urgency of this task:

> It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (*PP* 5)[28]

Numbers are against the women in this endeavor: where there is only one eligible man, there are many families, each with multiple daughters (the Bennets, we may remember, have five). The competitive field is dense, and the contending parties can afford to waste no time in advancing—hence Mrs. Bennet urges her husband to call on Mr. Bingley as soon as he arrives in the neighborhood (*PP* 6).

The negative example of Lydia and Kitty Bennet provides an unmistakable precursor to Harriet's blankness when it comes to courtship. The narrator emphasizes that these two possess minds "more vacant than their sisters'" (*PP* 29), a fact that seems always to bear on the girls' attitude toward young men. All they care about at Mr. Bingley's ball is having a partner for every dance, and they can talk of "nothing but officers" (*PP* 14, 30). It is not surprising, then, that they are the two involved in the story's marriage scandal. Lydia's secret marriage to Wickham (to which Kitty is party) is, on the one hand, a cautionary tale of imprudent sexual enthusiasm. The couple's travel to Gretna Green for their nuptials is implicitly a precipitation of

[28] All references to *Pride and Prejudice* are cited parenthetically in the text as *PP*, and refer to the Penguin edition.

their sexual intimacy as much as of their legal bond.[29] However, the marriage also demonstrates that Kitty and Lydia's "vacant" minds are clearly unequal to serious reflection. Not only are they oblivious to the potentially disastrous consequences of Lydia marrying Wickham, but they are also unable to recognize the dishonorable qualities that make him something rather less than an ideal husband. The Wickhams quickly exhaust both their economic means and their affection for each other, and the ironic tone in which we are told that Lydia "retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her" carries the remembrance of Wickham's low conduct and disgraceful irresponsibility (*PP* 366). The marriage market may be a desperate place, but Austen warns against a hasty match that may turn out to be unsatisfactory, and she suggests in *Pride and Prejudice* that the "empty-headed" woman is in the most danger of making this mistake.

In *Emma* and in Harriet Smith, the problem lies not in the possibility of a hasty match, but rather in the power of the marriage market to affect young women's mental capacities. Austen is less concerned in this later novel with admonishing the conduct of "silly" girls and more interested in delineating the psychological effects that such a socioeconomic system has on young ladies. As illustrated in Harriet's character, the cultural rules that govern gender politics and expectations about marriage bear down unremittingly on young women without means, until their mental limits are contracted—and then breached, with blankness. As an added hindrance, Austen shows how the deference instilled in young women makes them susceptible to misguidance. In the marriage market, Harriet is a commodity of varying worth; in the parlors of Highbury, she is an object that appeals to Emma's vanity. The problem of Harriet's general

[29] Gretna Green was the nearest city across the Scottish border. Until 1856, marriage laws there did not require the same waiting periods that English laws did, and they allowed minors to be married without parental permission. It was the first destination for many couples wishing to be married without the interference of disapproving family members.

objectification and vacancy are irresolvable given the limits of realism within which Austen works, and although Harriet is thankfully married off to Mr. Martin at last, we cannot forget that this union is owing, in Mr. Knightley's words, to "her extreme good luck" (*E* 97).

Although many readers have found Harriet merely "silly"[30], I maintain that Austen endows her with a distinct form of vacancy that stands as a cultural critique of both the pressures attached to marrying and the education with which young women are equipped to meet such pressures. Harriet's marriage and economic provision are very delicate possibilities, and Austen is careful to show how this is reflected in certain psychological habits.[31] She may not have much sense, but Austen imbues her with a measure of gravity heretofore withheld from "empty heads." In the process, she adds depth not only to Harriet herself, but also to the question of mental vacancy and women's portion in it.

Mental Furnishings

Mrs. Allen, Mr. Woodhouse, Emma, and Harriet Smith are a remarkable set of empty heads: not only because of the pivotal roles they play in their respective novels, but also because of the development they represent in literary depictions of vacancy. Through these characters and their psychological portraits, Austen problematizes the cultural attitude toward empty-headedness that was registered in Johnson's *Dictionary* in the eighteenth century and persisted through the nineteenth. The image of a person being "vacant of head" and "unfurnish'd with

[30] For instance, a Miss Bigg, of Austen's acquaintance, found Harriet "too silly in her Loves" (qtd in Chapman, 436-39).

[31] Waldron argues in favor of Harriet's prospects, contending that she has "a special position in the marriage stakes in Highbury, for while most people's origins and situations are known, and their possibilities therefore apparently to some extent circumscribed, Harriet's are a mystery…" (220). While this assertion might hold up if we consider Harriet's conviction that, in turn, Mr. Elton and Mr. Knightley plan to marry her, it loses strength when we recall that such possibilities only exist in the imaginations of Emma and Harriet.

materials for thought" is all very well for strictly editorial or comedic purposes, Austen seems to say; but there is a subtler and more humane perspective to be taken on the issue.

With her depictions of vacancy in *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*, Austen exhibits appreciable psychological and cultural insight. More than earlier writers like Johnson and Steele may have done, Austen exposes the pure metaphorics attached to the traditional "empty head" and invites her readers to encounter a more realistic rendering: one that understands the vacant mind as incompletely or inappropriately "furnished"—but that grants it some degree of "furniture" in any case—and that suggests not only the impossibility of dismissing vacancy from consideration, but also the necessity of understanding its social and political imbrications. Austen's work thus transforms the "empty head" from a mere trope into a weighty psychological issue, and prompts her readers to set aside their own previous conceptions and take a more judicious view of the prospect that vacancy suggests.

CHAPTER TWO

Vacancy and the Bonds of Family in *Barnaby Rudge*

In a November 1850 number of *Household Words*, Charles Dickens published an allegory called "A Crisis in the Affairs of Mr. John Bull; as Related by Mrs. Bull to the Children." It participated in recently stirred anti-Catholic sentiment resulting from the papal bull that only weeks before had restored the Roman Catholic hierarchy within the Church of England. The narrative chiefly recounts Mrs. Bull's lecture to her children about the "intolerable" Roman Bulls, by which she refers to Roman Catholics generally and priests especially. Punning on the linguistic similitude between "John *Bull*" and "papal *bull*," she explains that the Roman Bulls are a family that in the past has claimed a connection with the John Bulls—but who, she insists, are "not only the enemies of our family, but of the whole human race" ("Crisis" 194). As she tutors her children in the correct attitude toward the Bulls of Rome, Mr. Bull alternates between dozing in his armchair and performing kicks and dances out of perturbation every time "the B.'s of R." are mentioned. The views expressed in this piece are characteristic of Dickens, who elsewhere compares Protestantism's "neatness; cheerfulness; [and] industry" to Catholicism's "disease, ignorance, [and] misery" (Dickens "Letter"). Crucial to his partisan argument is the rhetorical strategy of representing English citizens as members of a national family. Dickens employs a familiar personification of the English nation—"the good gentleman" John Bull ("Crisis" 193)—and by depicting a domestic scene in the Bull household, he is able to present the English population as comprising a single family with common interests. Arranging the Bull family around the perennial Dickensian symbol of communal comfort and sympathy, the hearth, this article emphasizes the importance of familial (and, thus, national) tradition, communication, and cooperation. Even Mr. and Mrs. Bull's Tractarian children are included in the story's dialogue,

signaling that religious differences may generate domestic conflict, but that these differences are ultimately superseded by the more fundamental claims of national kinship.[1] The way to meet a threat to the English nation, Dickens' allegory argues, is to recognize and act upon the shared concerns that guide the English family in both of its vital forms: as a discrete individual unit, and in comprehensive national dimensions.

"A Crisis in the Affairs of Mr. John Bull" is a distilled example of Dickens' domestication of the political, which is enacted in a similar yet more complex way in his historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). Like the "Crisis" narrative, *Barnaby Rudge* addresses "the Catholic question" alongside the workings of the national family and its paternal leadership. And like the "Crisis" narrative, *Barnaby Rudge* argues that the cooperation and cohesion of the national family is a moral imperative. Because of these similarities, beginning with the "Crisis" article is a helpful avenue into a discussion of the 1841 historical novel. The article's encapsulation of the domestic political (or, the political domestic) provides a shorthand that can prepare readers for Dickens' rhetorical strategy in the novel, which is a much longer and far more convoluted text. Understanding the similarities between these two works also makes their important differences more apparent: the "ferociously partisan" tone of the *Household Words* piece, which aims at galvanizing the national family in a deep opposition to Catholicism, is a stark contrast to the sympathetic portrayal of Catholics in *Barnaby Rudge* (Slater). When we know that Dickens held a lasting interest in "the Catholic question," and when we are acquainted with his anti-Catholic attitude as set forth in the "Crisis" article, the appearance of Catholic sympathy in *Barnaby Rudge* becomes all the more significant. In fact, a juxtaposition of these

[1] "Tractarian" described supporters of the Oxford Movement (1833-1845), which proposed a revival of pre-Reformation practices and rituals within the Church of England. For an overview of the Tractarian presence in England and the backlash against it, see Michael Wheeler, *The Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English Culture*.

two texts strongly suggests that, although *Barnaby Rudge* is ostensibly concerned with religious conflict, the novel is not invested in exploiting that conflict in order to make a political point about systems of belief. Rather, as I will argue in this chapter, *Barnaby Rudge* takes the English family (individual and national) as its primary subject and employs the inverse of the strategy Dickens draws upon in the "Crisis" narrative: instead of using the imagery and rhetoric of family to make a point about religion, *Barnaby Rudge* uses the historical occurrence of religious riots to forward an argument about social cohesion and the constitution of family. This inversion enacts a shift in focus, from a consideration of *external* threats to the English family to a consideration of threats that originate from *within* the family itself. In *Barnaby Rudge*, this danger is not simply internal to the family unit, but is located inside individual family members. Namely, the novel contends that a form of mental vacancy disrupts communication within the family unit and contributes to moral confusion, thereby fundamentally damaging the social order. While Dickens imagines the most dramatic consequence following an external threat to the English family to be John Bull's agitated caper in the parlor, what follows from an internal danger to the English family—in the form of mental vacancy—is nothing less than death and destruction.

Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty is a fictionalized (though heavily researched) story about the anti-Catholic riots that occurred in London in 1780, which were spurred by widespread hostility to Catholic relief. Known as the Gordon Riots, these violent demonstrations were in the end laid at the door of Lord George Gordon, a Member of Parliament and the president of the Protestant Association, which coordinated much of the opposition to the Catholic Relief Act. In the first half of the novel, Dickens presents a set of families and a series of domestic scenes, which enable readers to develop a focused emotional investment in the physical and moral assault the riots enact in the second half of the book. By the time Lord

Gordon (literally) rides his horse into the story, readers have been primed to intuit that the conflict he brings will invade the homes of the novel's families and ravage domestic emblems and relationships.

Although *Barnaby Rudge* allows that many selfish, power-hungry figures contributed to the build-up and explosion of violence in June of 1780, and although it reserves a significant portion of its scorn for the rioters themselves, the novel gives mental vacancy a special role in the riots through the titular character, Barnaby, whose explicit mental vacancy facilitates the riots' disruptive potency. Barnaby is, in the language of the novel and the times, an "idiot," and the chief characteristic of his idiocy is a sympathetic disconnect from the people around him. This chapter argues that the "vacancy" explicitly and repeatedly ascribed to Barnaby is synonymous with his sympathetic distance from others—specifically, with his inability to participate in an economy of social feeling and expression that bonds other characters to each other. Barnaby consistently misreads facial and verbal expressions, and as a result misjudges both character content and the nature of the relationships between people. The most disastrous consequence of his vacancy is the outbreak of the riots, in which Barnaby delivers the initial blow. Because the novel stresses that sympathetic familial relationships provide the foundation for social order, Barnaby's role in disrupting that sympathetic structure points to profound implications for mental vacancy in a social context. For Dickens, then, vacancy is a high-stakes factor in questions of social order, national identity, and human community.

The novel form itself is central to Dickens' argument about vacancy and community. The difference in focus that sets *Barnaby Rudge* apart from "A Crisis in the Affairs of John Bull" necessitates a difference of form, not least because the problem of mental vacancy is more complex than the problem of papal aggression. The short form in which Dickens presents his

religious diatribe balances the space required to present a simple allegory with the brevity that guards against a popular audience's wandering attention. Additionally, the form of an allegory makes sense for the argument of "Crisis" because Dickens clearly regards the papal bull of 1850 as mere repetition of an already-familiar Roman presumption. The relationship between the English Protestant family and the intruding "Holy Father" from Rome has always been and always will be, Dickens tacitly argues, in the same state of antagonism, and can therefore be easily glossed in the broad strokes of an allegory. As emotional as he is about this religious conflict, his allegory and the short form it takes indicate that he sees it as a fairly simple and relatively static problem.

Questions about social order and human community, however, are (as Dickens presents them) more nuanced and more vulnerable to fluctuating historical and cultural conditions. *Barnaby Rudge*'s composition and publication were contextualized not only by religious conflict within England, but also by economic and class unrest that presented new challenges to the stability of the national "family." As Dickens lays out the problem of sympathetic disconnection for his audience, the novel offers two sets of formal components that are crucial to his argument. First, the chronological range and perspectival flexibility available to the novel enable him to trace mental vacancy over a long period of time and through a multitude of individuals and groups, thereby representing it as both a short- and long-term problem with far-reaching, dynamic effects upon the individual family unit as well as the national "family." Second, the novel's narrative dimensionality—the compounded effects of duration, dramatic action, and detailed description—is capable of eliciting an intense emotional investment from an audience. Sustained emotional engagement from readers would assist Dickens on two fronts: in the first place, it would represent vacancy as an urgent problem because readers would experience an

emotional response to it as soon as they encountered it in the novel, and, in the second place, the audience's sustained emotional engagement would enact exactly the kind of sympathetic responses to social "family" members (in this case, literary representatives of social "family" members) that Dickens was so very concerned about promoting in the first place. Though opinions on the strengths of *Barnaby Rudge*'s plot tend to vary, there can be little doubt that the novel is the most effective formal vehicle for the social project that drives the story.

Vacant Smile and Glassy Eye: Barnaby Rudge's Sympathetic Distance

More attention has been paid to this novel's working title—*Gabriel Vardon: The Locksmith of London*—than to its published title, *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty*.[2] Myron Magnet, for instance, enlarges upon the thematic centrality that the working title gives to Gabriel Varden, the morally upright locksmith. In his psychoanalytic study of Dickens' social conservatism, Magnet proposes that the original title telegraphs the novel's advocacy of "institutionalized social authority" and a preoccupation with the "literal instruments of restriction" (148). Yet he opts not to address the significance of Dickens' eventual choice to make Barnaby, not Varden, the titular protagonist. This avoidance is convenient for Magnet's argument, but even from a more general perspective it is not a particularly surprising choice. For one thing, it would be a stretch to consider Barnaby a hero in any traditional sense. Because he lacks moral accountability, he serves neither as a heroic pattern nor as a cautionary example. Furthermore, at one point he disappears from the plot for nineteen consecutive chapters, complicating the question of whether he even qualifies as a protagonist.[3] In the end, however,

[2] Myron Magnet documents that this was the novel's working title when it was first conceptualized in 1836 (148).
[3] Barnaby does not appear for the duration of Chapters 26-44.

whether Barnaby is technically a protagonist matters very little, and the question of his being the hero of the tale named for him (an issue Dickens would later take up more directly in *David Copperfield*[4]) is merely a formal difficulty. For the title makes plain that Barnaby is the novel's most important character, and, as I will show, the narrative reinforces this fact through the effects of his mental vacancy.

Critical readings posit a variety of arguments about Barnaby and his significance in the novel for which he is named. In some of these readings, such as Sally Ledger's and Mark Willis', Barnaby is represented as unimportant through omission. Thematic patterns like paternalism and the politics of the crowd take precedence over particular characters, and even the titular figure is subsumed beneath a discussion of historical and political developments. In other readings, like Natalie McKnight's "The Erotics of *Barnaby Rudge*," Barnaby is an incidental element, mentioned only to note his exemption from the novel's driving theme. McKnight posits that the novel's violence and power differentials are consistently related to erotic desire, and that within this parallel the urban forces itself upon the rural, the male upon the female, the violent upon the peaceful (34, 25). She spends particular time with what she identifies as the novel's problematic (read: incestuous) father-daughter relationships, and interprets the destruction of one its primary domestic settings as being charged with the imagery of sexual assault. Barnaby has no role to play in such a sexualized story. He is completely asexual—and McKnight in fact designates him androgynous (34). Thus excluded from the novel's argument altogether, Barnaby is reduced to a figure of comic absurdity: from McKnight's perspective, "a particularly addled Jack Sparrow" (34).

[4] The first sentence of *David Copperfield* (1850) is, "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (11).

Other readers have addressed Barnaby at length, yet have concluded that he is purely symbolic. As an "idiot" who joins a mob, he is variously understood to represent different social groups or conditions. For Valerie Pedlar, he is symbolic generally of "the weaker element in society," repressed and vulnerable to manipulation (50). This social group depends upon the quality of its leadership and may erupt in "idiocy" at any time (Pedlar 50). Patrick McDonagh more specifically identifies Barnaby as a stand-in for the working classes of the 1830s and 40s, who appeared to Dickens as an "unruly crowd" in need of paternal authority (412, 420). Barnaby's idiocy is a "cipher," according to McDonagh, for the working classes' incapacity for social, moral, and political self-guidance (420). Like Pedlar, McDonagh reads the novel as arguing for the necessity of benevolent paternalism (a frequent critical conclusion, and one on which I will later build). In another symbolic interpretation, Iain Crawford reads Barnaby's idiocy as a warning about imagination ungoverned by reason and uses Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy" (1798) to argue for the complexity of Dickens' fictional argument. Crawford reads the natural world as the analogue for imagination in both texts, and points out that while the Nature with which Johnny Foy communes turns out to be benign in Wordsworth's poem, Dickens shows in *Barnaby Rudge* that Nature (embodied by the mob) harbors immense violence and aggression. The unreasoned imagination in Barnaby Rudge, therefore, symbolizes shockingly dark possibilities, and Barnaby's condition serves as "a paradigm of the failings which afflict individuals and households, and finally threaten the stability of the very nation itself" (Crawford 46).

A third set of critics has focused on Barnaby's idiocy as a force in itself, and has noted that it resonates most strongly in a moral register. These critics argue that his "moral idiocy" is the fundamental quality that lends meaning to his role in the novel. Magnet, for instance, while

he skirts Barnaby's place in the title, eventually argues that Barnaby's idiocy excludes him from "civilization" and makes him a "natural man." When he becomes a leader of the anti-Catholic mob (whose motives he does not understand), Magnet contends that his moral idiocy is implicitly extended to the mob as well (71-80). He reads Barnaby's participation in the riots as Dickens' critique of the mob as an immoral entity, and works to prove a larger point about what he sees as Dickens' authoritarian attitude and advocacy for modes of social restraint. Approaching from another angle, Scott Dransfield sees *Barnaby Rudge* as a commentary on moral management and the "internalization of control" (69-72). In his reading, Barnaby's moral idiocy is contextualized by cultural conceptions of madness, which were shifting from ideas about mad people as incurable alien objects toward beliefs about mad people as treatable human subjects. Dransfield thus reads Barnaby's condition as illustrating "the social dangers of unmanaged pathologies," which are dramatized on a larger scale by the mob Barnaby joins (87). Where Magnet insists that the novel exhibits the need for oppressive and restrictive social mechanisms in order to stave off anarchy, Dransfield believes that it demonstrates the need for a social program of moral management whereby citizens could learn how to better conduct themselves.[5] In other words, from Dransfield's point of view the novel illustrates that it is necessary "to minister to the pathologies of the social body rather than to exert mere force in restraining the rabble" (90).

Because they zero in on the moral implications attached to the "idiot," I believe this third set of readings gets closest to the novel's most fundamental point, which has to do with how morality is constituted and upheld. In order to fully recognize this point, my reading of Barnaby

[5] Magnet writes: "The entirely consistent vision on which the whole of *Barnaby Rudge* is constructed, the thesis of which it is an elaborate and coherent dramatization, is that if you do not have civilization with its concomitant personal oppression and unhappiness, then you must have universal anarchy and brutality, the war of all against all" (102).

moves beyond equating idiocy with amorality and considers these two things in a cause/effect relationship. It asks, in other words, what aspect of idiocy renders Barnaby unable to evaluate the moral character of people and situations. Rather than reading idiocy simply as a synonym for moral ignorance, then, I trace a specific argument in the novel about what quality in Barnaby produces the "moral idiocy" taken for granted by other readers. The answer, as I will shortly show in detail, is vacancy. Dickens consistently uses "vacancy" as a descriptor for Barnaby's facial features, and thereby refers to his inability to express emotion and distinguish emotional signals in others. Barnaby is thus cut off in important ways from a vast social community of "family" members whose characters he cannot evaluate and whose needs and interests he cannot recognize. Unaware of how his behavior might affect others—and how it might affect himself—Barnaby joins the mob of people whose intentions are anything but self-evident to him, though malice is written starkly on their faces. Vacancy shapes Barnaby's behavior, and the consequence of his alienation from the social family's expressive mode of communication is moral ignorance. Morality is thus shown to lie within the domain of the community for Dickens: the isolated individual does not have access to moral understanding because it must be learned through sympathetic interactions with one's extended social family.[6] By identifying vacancy as the specific source of Barnaby's moral ignorance, I join with critical assessments about the centrality of his moral character while contributing new perspectives on both the social order that Barnaby disrupts and Dickens' social ideology. I argue that the novel's central problem is neither Barnaby's sanity nor the degree of his "civilization," but rather his inability to participate in a

[6] Willis, on the contrary, finds an important role for the individual in his Freudian reading of *Barnaby Rudge*, insisting that "Dickens places more emphasis on the transforming possibilities of the *individual*, the potential for Christian self-sacrifice, rather than a loss of self to the mayhem of the multitude" (100-1, emphasis original).

social network of sympathetic feeling: a network that, for Dickens, is the mechanism of social order's creation and maintenance.

Barnaby Rudge is introduced to the reader late at night in a dangerous part of London, having witnessed a stabbing. Dickens' description renders him an embodiment of mental disorder and sympathetic disconnection:

> His hair, of which he had a great profusion, was red, and hanging in disorder about his face and shoulders, gave to his restless looks an expression quite unearthly—enhanced by the paleness of his complexion, and the glassy lustre of his large protruding eyes. Startling as his aspect was, the features were good, and there was something even plaintive in his wan and haggard aspect. But the absence of the soul is far more terrible in a living man than in a dead one; and in this unfortunate being its noblest powers were wanting. (*BR* 35)[7]

The detail devoted to Barnaby's appearance (particularly to his face and expression) is consistent with diagnostic approaches inherited from eighteenth-century "mad-doctors," who often relied upon external bodily signs to confirm various forms of madness (Andrews and Scull 77). Introducing Barnaby through his general facial expression, Dickens enacts a focus on physiognomy with which his mid-century audience would be familiar and is thus able to quickly signal mental debility.

Of the utmost importance in his descriptive catalog is the "glassy lustre" of Barnaby's "large protruding eyes." In both the eighteenth-century medical tradition and in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century discourse of physiognomy, the eyes were regarded as "especially telling windows" to the mind (Andrews and Scull 77).[8] The glassy expression in Barnaby's eyes as he looks on at the wounded man echoes contemporary descriptions of idiocy that draw significant meaning from an uncomprehending stare. Late eighteenth-century medical

[7] All references to *Barnaby Rudge* are cited parenthetically in the text as *BR*, and refer to the Penguin edition.

[8] On the eyes in physiognomy and phrenology, see James John Garth Wilkinson, *The Human Body and its Connexion with Man* (343).

narratives, for instance, took note of the kind of man who "had the true mad stare with his eyes, that is they seem'd fix'd as if regarding the object they were directed towards, & yet at the same time without sensibility and shewing a vacancy of thought" (qtd in Andrews and Scull 77). Johann Caspar Lavater, whose writings on physiognomy included "the most influential study of idiocy for the nineteenth century" fortified the correlation between a vacant expression and idiocy (as a specific sub-category of insanity) (Pedlar 35).[9] Idiocy's "most common" symptoms, Lavater wrote, include: "Indolent distortion, animalistic obtuseness, convulsive attitude, crooked smiles, inconstancy, indifferentiatedness, [and] vacancy" (qtd in Gilman 63).[10] Drawing on imagery that Lavater and others had made familiar to the British public, Dickens points to the "glassy lustre" of Barnaby's eyes in this initial scene (and to his explicitly "vacant" stares elsewhere) to reinforce the basic fact of his idiocy. Most importantly, however, Dickens singles out vacancy as the defining element of Barnaby's idiocy. Vacancy becomes, in *Barnaby Rudge*, the chief determinant of Barnaby's difference from others. Moreover, as Barnaby's first scene illustrates, the nature of vacancy in *Barnaby Rudge* is an inability to recognize or relate to the feelings of other people. This mental quality, writ large upon Barnaby's face, signifies the tragic—and dangerous—impossibility of sympathetic exchange.

It becomes quickly apparent in this scene that Barnaby is not fully engaged with his surroundings and that there is a mental barrier between him and the reality of his situation, though we meet him "hovering" over an injured man and calling for help (*BR* 34). He seems

[9] Pedlar explains that in the nineteenth century insanity came to be understood as a term encompassing three distinct conditions: idiocy, lunacy, and unsoundness of mind. An idiot was defined as a person "whose mind from his birth by a perpetual infirmity is so deficient as to be incapable of directing him in any manner which requires thought or judgment" (2).

[10] Gilman notes that this description comes from the "sixteenth fragment" of Lavater's second volume on physiognomy; because this "fragment" presumably went unpublished, no specific title for it is available.

estranged from earthly concerns and not quite of this world. His appearance is juxtaposed to a description of urban London, which is ominous and otherworldly: it lies "like a dark shadow on the ground, reddening the sluggish air," "visible in the darkness by its own faint light, and not by that of Heaven" (*BR* 33). Barnaby's "profusion" of red hair combines with his "unearthly" expression—"strangely lighted up by something which was *not* intellect"—and echoes these phrases with their suggestion of a vaguely dangerous, alien quality (*BR* 34). That Barnaby lacks a soul enhances the degree of his alienation, because it sets him apart from the majority of humanity—and it must be noted, in light of this point, that his first appearance takes place on a deserted street, so that we meet Barnaby in a context of social solitude.

Moreover, where his facial expression is "unearthly" in this moment, so is the direction of his gaze: when Gabriel Varden arrives on the scene, he has great difficulty in drawing Barnaby's focus away from the stars and toward the plight of the wounded man in front of him (*BR* 35). In spite of admitting that he knows the insensible victim, Barnaby believes that the remote stars have more responsibility to intervene and help than he himself has: "If they are angels' eyes, why do they look down here and see good men hurt, and only wink and sparkle all the night?" (*BR* 37). Though Barnaby is revealed as a friend of sorts to both Varden and the injured man, Ned Chester, he cannot provide the sympathetic consideration that the emergency requires, nor does he comprehend that the appropriate form of attention in this case is humane rather than cosmic. In his first appearance in the novel, Dickens does everything to indicate Barnaby's emotional distance from others, and to highlight the abnormality of this distance.

To establish that this is Barnaby's habitual temperament rather than mere absent-mindedness in the face of a discomposing emergency, Dickens provides an introduction to the Rudge household shortly afterward in which Barnaby's countenance is contrasted with his

mother's. "Any one who had bestowed but a casual glance on Barnaby," we are told, "might have known that this was his mother, from the strong resemblance between them; but where in his face there was wildness and vacancy, in hers there was the patient composure of long effort and quiet resignation" (*BR* 50). Each face broadcasts the principal qualities of the character that wears it, and these qualities are enduring: the temporal indeterminacy of the passage implies that we may observe Barnaby and his mother at any time and these same marks would be always evident. The significance of the comparison itself lies in the emotional content expressed in Mrs. Rudge's face that is completely lacking in Barnaby's. The strong evidence of maternal sacrifice in her features not only draws attention to the absence of affect in his, but also reinforces the correlation between moral character and physical legibility that Dickens had established in his initial description of Barnaby. Mrs. Rudge's features broadcast her emotional state, enabling observers to gauge their sympathetic engagement with her. Barnaby's face, on the other hand, is "vacant," and communicates nothing. Furthermore, the descriptor "wildness" implicitly sets up a "civilized" human community from which Barnaby is excluded. With this term, Dickens refines the nature of Barnaby's relationship to others: at first, he was generally "unearthly" and remote; now his singularity is shown to lie in his incapacity for "civilized" emotional expression. Human society functions, the novel increasingly insists, according to rules about emotional expression and sympathetic communication. Barnaby's vacancy—closely linked to wildness—therefore excludes him in important ways from his own community.[11]

[11] From a diagnostic perspective, Barnaby's sympathetic distance from the people around him is evocative of twenty-first-century theories about autism. Dickens' depiction of Barnaby is somewhat inconsistent, however, and includes moments of mania, unsettling images of "ghastly…cunning" (*BR* 209), and instances of what seem like perfect clarity and self-possession. This inconsistency problematizes a definitive diagnosis, which in any case would not contribute productively to a literary interpretation.

Dickens begins to build a case for the importance of emotional expression almost immediately after contrasting Barnaby with his mother, through an exchange between Mrs. Rudge and the novel's moral hero, Gabriel Varden. This scene is centered around a secret and presents transparency as a moral quality: emotional expression is revealed to be a social practice that leads to trust and support not just among friends, but also across class lines. After a suspicious stranger attempts to visit Mrs. Rudge while Varden is in her house, she begs the locksmith to keep the episode a secret and ask her no questions about the man (later revealed to be her husband—a murderer and blackmailer). At her terrified plea for his silence about the mysterious visitor, Varden is completely taken aback—less by Mrs. Rudge's pervasive fear, however, than by her insistence on concealment. During this moment, Dickens illustrates Varden's ethic of transparency through his behavior as well as his words:

> Gabriel, not knowing what to think, stood staring at the door with a countenance full of surprise and dismay…. To find this widow woman […] linked mysteriously with an ill-omened man, alarmed at his appearance, and yet favouring his escape, was a discovery that pained as much as it startled him. Her reliance on his secrecy, and his tacit acquiescence, increased his distress of mind…. "Why did I let her say it was a secret, and she trusted it to me!" said Gabriel, putting his wig on one side to scratch his head with greater ease, and looking ruefully at the fire… "Why didn't I say firmly, 'You have no right to such secrets, and I demand of you to tell me what this means.'" (*BR* 55)

Even when there is no one in the room to observe him (Mrs. Rudge has withdrawn at this point), Varden does not interiorize his state of mind. His emotional reaction is, in a very literal sense, written on his face, and he articulates his thoughts aloud. As he asks himself why he has not lived up to his own expectations regarding secrecy, he grows particularly theatrical, assuming a regretful expression and scratching his head in thought as for the benefit of some invisible audience. This audience is, of course, the reader, who in witnessing the transparency of Varden's

state of mind even in solitude is thus able to verify the force of his ethical commitment to that transparency.

For Varden, the pain of discovering that Mrs. Rudge has an unsavory acquaintance is outweighed by his moral responsibility toward her and those under her roof (including Ned Chester, the stabbing victim from the previous night). Consequently, he believes, she "has no right" to keep a secret from him, however distressing the nature of the secret might be. Secrecy obscures the real needs of those in Varden's care and inhibits his ability to fulfill his obligations to the community, which includes the aristocratic Ned and the dependent Mrs. Rudge alike. In the case of the shadowy visitor, secrecy not only prevents Varden from understanding Mrs. Rudge's moral position (has she turned to crime to supplement her small income, or was the man simply a drunkard who mistook the house?) and advising her accordingly, but it also puts Ned Chester's safety in doubt. Varden also "trembles" for Barnaby in this situation: if the stranger turns out to be an intimate acquaintance of Mrs. Rudge and is as criminal as he appears, the locksmith knows that Barnaby is "a notable person […] to put to bad uses" (*BR* 220). These anxieties are indexed in Varden's "countenance full of surprise and dismay," which also reproves Mrs. Rudge's reticence through its principled refusal to hold anything back.

Yet the more forceful commentary on transparency and expression in this episode is implicitly aimed at Barnaby. While Mrs. Rudge chooses to keep the secret of her husband's identity and the reason for his visit (which is extortion), her emotional reaction to the terror of Mr. Rudge's presence is plainly visible: at first, she wears a "stony look of horror," and later, although she attempts to subdue her distress in the company of Barnaby and Varden, her face is deathly white (*BR* 53, 62). The locksmith may criticize her refusal to divulge situational facts, but he does not (and cannot) find anything lacking in her emotional disclosure. However,

Barnaby's "wildness and vacancy" are in full evidence at the same time that his mother's agitation is so thinly veiled. The scene moves upstairs, where Barnaby sits "smiling vacantly" by the fire, and where he "[stares] vacantly" at Varden (*BR* 58, 61). His emotional distance from the other people in the room, signaled by these blank looks, is significantly juxtaposed to his affinity with the animal in the room: his raven, Grip, who is his constant companion and who he regards as his "master" (*BR* 61). Varden's ruminations on transparency are countered by Barnaby's vacant features: significantly, his smile and his stare are both blank, so that he appears incapable either of articulating emotion or of seeing and comprehending it in another. Indeed, when his mother enters the room there is no real indication that the visible signs of her emotional restraint make any impression whatsoever on him. He is much more closely linked with the profane sentience of Grip, who regularly declares himself to be a devil, than with the socially constitutive emotive habits of his mother and Varden.

All this is not to say that Barnaby is completely lacking in emotional content: at times, he emits visceral expressions that prove he is not without affect. At the sight of Ned Chester's blood, for instance, "he shivered from head to foot, and evidently experienced such an ecstacy of terror that the locksmith could scarcely endure to witness his suffering" (*BR* 37). Even as this scene illustrates that Barnaby is capable of feeling, it also problematizes his emotion by suggesting that it is not connected to other people. Ned's blood is only terrifying as an object abstracted from his condition of injury. Ned's vulnerability and pain do not disturb Barnaby—he will not even help Varden move Ned until the blood can be covered up and hidden from view. He reacts to the blood as to a preternatural object, terrible in and of itself, rather than as a sign of a fellow man's mortality. In fact, since Barnaby bears a birthmark like a smear of blood on his wrist—the uncanny symbol of his father's violent sin—the "ecstasy" of his terror points most

tellingly back to Barnaby's own body, not to Ned's (*BR* 50). While Varden is absolutely stricken by the spectacle of Barnaby's suffering, Barnaby's own emotional experience is rooted in a visual referent to his own body and takes no cue from the other people around him. With such an insular emotional life as is exemplified in this moment, it is little wonder that Barnaby should be alienated from the sympathetic exchanges that are so commonplace for others.

Furthermore, the sequence of this emotional expression points to the necessity of recognizing emotion as socially constructed. Barnaby's reaction to the sight of blood involves, notably, an initial physical reaction followed by an emotion: Dickens describes him first as shivering "from head to foot" and as exhibiting terror afterward. This sequence, Dickens suggests, is troubling because it disconnects emotion from meaningful social exchange and links it instead to the physical. Later in the century, this type of model would be championed by figures like Charles Darwin and William James. They would argue that emotional expression is biologically determined, and that the body's reaction to external stimuli gives rise to emotional states and determines their intensity.[12] This emotional pattern, suggestively illustrated by Barnaby's reaction to blood, allows an observer to trace emotion back to a source in an individual's environment, but not to his character. In the face-to-face encounters upon which social exchange depends, such an inaccessibility of character throws up serious obstructions to sympathetic communication and therefore to construction of social bonds. By evoking this emotional model in conjunction with Barnaby's vacancy, Dickens pathologizes the biology of emotion. When the body's reaction to a stimulus (blood) produces emotion in Barnaby, Dickens

[12] See William James, "What is an Emotion?" and *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1, especially Chapter IV, "Aestho-Physiology," 97-128; and Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

suggests that the body improperly eclipses character as the spring of feeling, and that the resulting emotional perversion is intimately linked to social and sympathetic dysfunction.

Barnaby's occasional spontaneous expressions of emotion are important, moreover, for their co-existence with his otherwise blank features. Though one of the most consistent descriptors attached to him is "vacant," Barnaby's mental life is clearly not a total blank. He is emphatically animated by "something which [is] *not* intellect," and yet even as he displays this "something" that is like "cunning," he gazes at the world "with a wild and vacant eye" (*BR* 34, 209). His regular glassy expression, the narrative suggests, is not a sign that there is no affective content to be expressed. In addition to his striking reaction to the sight of blood, Dickens offers editorial asides on the constant delight Barnaby finds in nature, and in the affection he bears toward his mother (*BR* 208, 388-89). The point is that his blank expression is coupled with emotional activity that, although it may be otherwise than typical, is nevertheless real and substantive. The unique thing about this representation of vacancy is the emphatic necessity of its externalization. Dickens might be said to turn vacancy inside out, so that instead of referring to an interior mental space characterized by a void, it refers to an incapacity for external signification. In other nineteenth-century novels vacancy is first and foremost a psychological quality, indicative of the structure or activity that characterizes an individual's inner life; in *Barnaby Rudge*, it is an emphatically social quality, indicative of an individual's capacity for communicating and sympathizing with other people. Because the novel demands that character be communicated through physical and verbal signs, character becomes knowable (to the reader as well as to other characters) only inasmuch as it is articulated in speech and gesture. Only in terms of speech and gesture, then, can a deficiency become evident, and it is for this reason that Dickens so insistently and explicitly registers Barnaby's vacancy in his facial features.

While the question of expression bears heavily upon the way that others may socially encounter Barnaby and his blank features, it becomes a weightier issue when we turn to his inability to understand the expressions of his extended social "family." It is one thing that Barnaby himself is often emotionally illegible, in other words, and quite another that he continually proves unequal to the task of understanding others—particularly because his vacancy prevents him from making basic distinctions between positive and negative feelings. Loitering one evening at the Maypole Inn (where he is, according to the proprietor, "as free of the house as any cat or dog about it"[13]) Barnaby is dispatched as a messenger to the neighboring Haredale estate to fetch its reclusive landlord for an interview with John Chester (*BR* 92). The reader will shortly discover what Barnaby never realizes: that aristocratic hypocrite John Chester and melancholy Catholic Geoffrey Haredale have hated each other for decades. When Barnaby returns from delivering his message, therefore, his report proves somewhat shocking: Mr. Haredale "will be in the saddle again as soon as he has eat and drank, to meet his loving friend" (*BR* 96). When Chester asks Barnaby if this was Haredale's exact response, Barnaby cheerfully confirms, "All but the last words. He meant those. I saw that, in his face" (*BR* 96). Although Barnaby fancies himself a capable reader of faces, able to put into words what Mr. Haredale had only gestured toward in his facial expression, he makes a profound error and misreads enmity as friendly feeling. The degree of his mistake is driven home when Haredale finally appears and manifests a highly expressive character: he broadcasts in "every tone and gesture" a "determined opposition and hostility" to Chester when they meet face to face (*BR* 103). The novel indicates

[13] John Willet thus describes Barnaby's liberty at the Warren, the Haredale estate where his father had been steward and from whence Mrs. Rudge, supposed a widow, receives a small pension. Yet Barnaby's frequent visits to the neighboring Maypole—and particularly his friendship with Hugh the stable boy—make this expression an apt one to characterize his presence at the inn as well.

through this succession of dialogues that only a supremely incompetent observer would misunderstand the expressions of a man as transparent as Haredale. While Barnaby's error here is a confusion of hate for love—a misreading of a momentary emotion that, fortunately, results in nothing more than John Chester's cruel amusement—it is not long before this inadequacy applies to more sustained signs of character and brings much weightier consequences during the Gordon Riots.

Barnaby's vacant gaze proves central to his participation in the riots because it prevents him from recognizing the marks of bad character and violent emotion in the people around him. As tensions and crowds gather in the London streets, Barnaby comes face to face with Lord Gordon and his secretary, Gashford. During their dialogue, he can do little more than "[shake] his head and [look] vacantly" at them, unable to understand the purpose of the demonstration they have organized and to which they invite him, or to comprehend the signs of character imprinted in each man's bearing (*BR* 398). Lord Gordon, for instance, has a "very bright large eye, which betray[s] a restlessness of thought and purpose" that is conspicuously at odds with his very somber manner (*BR* 293). More capable men are "infected" by Lord Gordon's contradictory appearance and recognize something in him that is not quite right: good John Grueby sees a vulnerable, manipulable man who needs protection, and "sly and slinking" Gashford sees these as qualities he can turn to his advantage (*BR* 293). But Barnaby does not see the infirmity in Lord Gordon's expression or the calculation in Gashford's face, and he cheerfully joins their company over the protestations of his mother.

When Barnaby follows Lord Gordon and Gashford to the gathering anti-Catholic crowd, its leaders quickly evaluate his vacancy as a great asset. Hugh, the Maypole stable boy, gives him a bright flag to wave and draws him to the front of the concourse, conspiratorially

whispering to his compatriot Dennis, "Don't you see man, that the lad's a natural, and can be got to do anything, if you take him the right way" (*BR* 406). Barnaby does not see Hugh wink at Dennis, preoccupied as he is by the inanimate flag in his hands; he only looks "vacantly" at them and keeps in step with the crowd (*BR* 405). Convinced that his new position is one of great prestige that will lead to all the finer things in life, he vows to carry out his sacred duty as Lord Gordon's flag-bearer, even as the crowd becomes a mob and devolves into "a mad monster" around him (*BR* 408).

Barnaby's blank gaze glides disastrously past not only these situational marks of tone and attitude, but also the permanent signs of his companions' bad characters. Hugh has a pervasive air of "negligence and disorder," "with something fierce and sullen in his features" that makes him look like a "poaching rascal" even when asleep (*BR* 98). More observant companions frequently note his animalistic disposition, which contains a strong note of predation: he attempts to sexually assault Dolly Varden more than once, and resembles during those episodes a "satyr" (*BR* 176). Similarly, he is referred to as a "centaur" on multiple occasions (*BR* 131, 194), as well as a "Bruin" (*BR* 334) and, more broadly, "a animal" (*BR* 98-100). Even his merriment is "ferocious" (*BR* 325). Hablot K. Browne's illustrations of him plainly signal Hugh's antisocial attitude through defiant, mistrustful postures and telegraph his unruly, belligerent character in a hideously contorted expression and disheveled hair.[14] Dennis the hangman bears similarly obvious marks of depravity. He has close, beady eyes, a "low retreating forehead" that denotes meanness, and an overall "vile face" (*BR* 310). The bodily evidence of his appetite for others' bad fortune lies just below his hideous countenance: "A dingy handkerchief twisted like a cord

[14] For illustrations featuring Hugh's defiant posture, see pages 253, 286, and 646 of the Penguin edition. For illustrations featuring his belligerent and disheveled manner, see pages 176, 197, 320, 322, 451, 498, and 646 of the Penguin edition.

about his neck, left its great veins exposed to view, and they were swoln and starting, as though with gulping down strong passions, malice, and ill-will" (*BR* 310). Where Hugh revels in "a good scuffle," Dennis's tastes are downright bloodthirsty, and he often gazes at his companions "with a horrible kind of admiration, such as that with which a cannibal might regard his intimate friend, when hungry" (*BR* 336, 317). In spite of the cruelty and barely suppressed violence staring at Barnaby from these two faces (and, implicitly, from many of the other faces in the throng around him), he is convinced "with his whole heart and soul that he was engaged in a just cause" (*BR* 412).

In the following chapters that depict the progress of this great sea of demonstrators, Barnaby's vacancy comes to seem, significantly, like the spirit of the riots. His inability to understand others and to gauge the morality of an action or attitude is reflected in Dickens' depiction of Lord George Gordon, the historical face of anti-Catholic sentiment. One of Gordon's most serious missteps is his evaluation of his secretary, Gashford, whose support is only a feint for power. Gordon believes he has Gashford's loyalty as well as his moral accord in religious opinions, and through his own uncertainty he turns Gashford into a moral crutch. Unsure of the viability of his own stance against Catholicism, he turns to a man he has grievously misread for reassurance, asking, "There can be no doubt of ours being the true [religion]. You feel as certain of that as I do, Gashford, don't you?" (*BR* 297). In his interpretation of historical events, Dickens reads Lord Gordon not as a hateful provocateur, but as a weak man, easily misled and certainly not in his right mind.[15] In fact, one of the pivotal moments in the novel—when Lord Gordon meets Barnaby in the street—turns upon the question

[15] John Bowen's introduction to the Penguin edition notes that the motives driving people to participate in the riots are "anything but" political. "Although Gordon himself is sympathetically treated," Bowen writes, "Dickens clearly did not think of him as being in his right mind" (xxv).

of Gordon's sanity. As Barnaby's mother begs Gordon and Gashford to recognize that Barnaby is "not in his right senses," Barnaby becomes a mirror reflecting Gordon's fears about himself and his own anti-Catholic enthusiasm:

> "It is a bad sign of the wickedness of these times," said Lord George, evading her touch, and colouring deeply, "that those who cling to the truth and support the right cause, are set down as mad…. He has surely no appearance…of being deranged? And even if he had, we must not construe any trifling particularity into madness. Which of us"—and here he turned red again—"would be safe, if that were made the law!" (*BR* 400)

Gordon's character blindness is willful here, evident in his declaration that there is nothing deranged about Barnaby's appearance. Not only Barnaby's vacant expression, but also his habitual attire, plainly convey his madness: "The fluttered and confused disposition of all the motley scraps that formed his dress, bespoke, in a scarcely less degree than his eager and unsettled manner, the disorder of his mind, and by a grotesque contrast set off and heightened the more impressive wildness of his face" (*BR* 35). Confronted with a figure that couples enthusiasm for the anti-Catholic cause (albeit totally ignorant enthusiasm) with physical marks of mental derangement, Lord Gordon is faced with the possibility that his own eccentricity and "ungovernable wildness" are signs that he, like Barnaby, is mad (*BR* 298).[16] His determination to believe in Barnaby's perfect "self-possession" gives the lie to his own mental competence.

Increasing his similitude with Barnaby's vacancy, Lord Gordon participates in the demonstrations in great measure because he does not recognize the character of the people around him. Many of those who turn out to support his religious cause "had never heard a hymn or psalm in all their lives," and in their hypocrisy they chant "any ribaldry or nonsense that

[16] Dickens suggests that Lord Gordon shares Barnaby's wild qualities in his first appearance in the novel: "It would be difficult to convey an adequate idea of the excited manner in which he [spoke]; of the rapidity of his utterance, or the violence of his tone and gesture; in which, struggling through his Puritan's demeanour, was something wild and ungovernable which broke through all restraint" (*BR* 298).

occurred to them" as they prepare to march on Parliament (*BR* 402). Lord Gordon is "quite unconscious" of his holy army's obvious insincerity, even though many of these irreverent ditties "were sung under [his] very nose" (*BR* 402). Gordon goes forward with the marches as planned because, just as Barnaby does, he believes with his whole heart and soul that he is engaged in a just cause—in spite of the spirit of animosity developing all around him, not least in the conspicuous figures of Hugh and Dennis. In the earlier days of his campaign, he had been able to decipher "some plaguy ill-looking characters" among his audiences (*BR* 296), but, placated by Gashford, he is at last trained into an uncomprehending gaze that is much like Barnaby's. This political figurehead, as devoid of sense as of sight, troublingly reflects a more public and more influential form of the vacancy that is most ostensibly depicted in Barnaby.

Dickens' allegory of the John Bull family and the vehement anti-Catholic attitude he expresses therein become again important here, insomuch as they can help explain this critical depiction of an anti-Catholic public figure in *Barnaby Rudge*. In the "Crisis" article, Dickens' censure is aimed at the intrusion of a foreign country; the indignance that saturates the piece stems from one national "family" attempting to interfere with the structure of another national "family." While the two families are characterized by different religions, the larger organizing category within which Dickens represents them is national and familial. Furthermore, his prejudice against Catholicism's "disease, ignorance, [and] misery" seems to have been more a nationalist prejudice than a religious one, based on an impression of the state of things where a community's religious majority was Catholic (in particular, Ireland, as well as parts of Switzerland) (Dickens "Letter"). The Catholic minority in England, as the "Crisis" article represents them, are merely misled children who are not to be viewed as any sort of serious problem. Their Catholicism does not expel them from the traditional comforts of English hearth,

health, and home. In spite of their religion, they will always be the offspring of John Bull, and Dickens suggests in his allegory as well as through the Catholic gentlefolk of *Barnaby Rudge* that an English Catholic's most important identity marker remains his or her Englishness. While Dickens may have represented himself as anti-Catholic, then, these two texts reveal that this attitude was deeply rooted in his nationalist views. That his allegory presents the Catholic enemy as the "Bulls of Rome"—and thus assiduously styles them in familial and national terms—emphasizes the nationalist source of his animosity.

Knowing this, Lord Gordon's anti-Catholic campaign is absolutely indefensible, for it targets the English family that Dickens holds so dear. While Gordon seems to think that he is working on behalf of the English population to purify its principles of faith, Dickens' novel exposes anti-social forces both underlying Gordon's cause and issuing from it. The sympathetic interest that ideally characterizes the social sphere is interrupted, obstructed, and condemned through Gordon's highly visible promotion of intolerance and persecution. Thus, the fracture within the English family that Gordon helps to precipitate (in terms of hostile attitudes as well as public demonstrations) is not only anti-social, but in fact anti-English. Because he attempts to create separation rather than reconciliation within the English community, Gordon is an enemy to the English family and appears—though he is a Protestant—far more dangerous than the Bulls of Rome. Mirroring the fractures that Barnaby's vacancy causes in the social family's sympathetic network, Gordon's anti-Catholic demonstrations devastate emotional and physical structures that are crucial to English familial stability.

The vacancy that prevents both Lord Gordon and Barnaby from fully understanding the social sphere they disrupt is traced out to its most disastrous consequences when the riots themselves are set in motion. Initially given shape by Lord Gordon's oratory, they are pushed

over the tipping point by Barnaby's hand. Dickens takes pains to trace a sequence in which a handful of rocks the rioters throw at the Horse Guards is followed by the first direct physical blow to authority, which Barnaby delivers. Brandishing his flag, Barnaby knocks a Horse Guard out of his saddle at a whisper from Hugh (*BR* 413). Thus, amidst thousands of witnesses, he models an unhesitating challenge to the representatives of social order, encouraged by a man whose reprehensible character he cannot recognize. This act inspires many in the crowd to follow Barnaby as he, Hugh, and Dennis, "like hideous madmen," lead a throng of despoilers to destroy a Catholic church—a throng whose appearance dramatizes the same vacancy that led Barnaby to join it, a throng "in which so much was seen, and yet so little" (*BR* 419). The elements of this mob so strongly resemble Dickens' first description of Barnaby that the riot seems like an embodiment of the most troubling qualities in Barnaby and in the city melded together. The unearthly red aura that characterized both Barnaby and London in the novel's opening chapters is echoed in the "red…smoky light" illuminating the mob's "phantom" members as well as the streets through which they pour (*BR* 419). There is even a man "borne upon a shutter, in the very midst, covered with a dingy cloth, a senseless, ghastly heap" that appears like a shadow double of Ned Chester after his stabbing (*BR* 419). The eerie declarations of Grip the raven—"I'm a devil! I'm a devil! I'm a devil!"—return here to haunt the image of Barnaby, the bird's vacant disciple, conducting a mob of "demon heads and savage eyes" (*BR* 419).

Barnaby's role in such a crowd—as a participant and as a leader—draws renewed attention to the links between vacancy and insanity that colored contemporary standards for defining idiocy. Broadly speaking, as Valerie Pedlar points out, any form of otherness qualified as madness in the early nineteenth century, and the insane were regarded as being alienated from

their right minds as well as from typical social life (11). Barnaby's alienation and the vacancy that causes it are initially depicted as largely harmless. Once Barnaby joins the riots, however, that vacancy takes on new implications, losing some of its sheen of innocence as it merges with the madness of the mob. The church that he helps destroy is a sacred place, and his behavior is a violation of an entire community's venue for comfort, peace, and sympathetic exchange. Dickens makes clear that this is the behavior of insanity, and Barnaby is purposefully positioned as one of the "hideous madmen" leading this campaign. He is unaware, it is true, that the mob is motivated by immoral urges to indiscriminate violence and devastation. He understands himself as a soldier struggling for the triumph of Lord Gordon's just cause: he is "the most devoted and the blithest champion that ever maintained a post, and felt his heart lifted up with a brave sense of duty, and determination to defend it to the last" (*BR* 443). Yet this is precisely the danger lurking in his vacant gaze: because he is blind to the signs of character and numb to the mood of his company, he is capable of reprehensible deeds. Dickens relentlessly describes the mob as a "moral plague" that sweeps the city and wreaks such havoc that it seems as though "the last day had come and the whole universe were burning" (*BR* 438, 569). And in spite of the monstrosity the crowd plainly represents, Barnaby carries on "blithely," in a manner that is not a bit less dangerous for being completely unwitting.

Having positioned vacancy—in Barnaby and in Lord Gordon—as an important impetus for the riots' buildup and explosion, Dickens drives home the social threat it poses by turning from the violation of religious space to the destruction of the sacred domestic. The "army of devils" that comprises the mob proceeds to defile household artifacts at the Haredales' country house, where Dickens laments "the exposure to the coarse, common gaze, of every little nook which usages of home had made a sacred place, and the destruction by rude hands of every little

household favourite which old associations made a dear and precious thing" (*BR* 461). As the Haredales' property falls beneath a mass effort of arson and axes, so fall the private tokens of memory and lived experience that constituted *home*. The razing of the Warren stands as a dark antithesis to the "bright household world" that the novel elsewhere celebrates, and Dickens infuses the scene with some of his most gruesome imagery (*BR* 665). Maniacs "trampled on the beds of flowers as though they trod down human enemies; and wrenched them from the stalks, like savages who twisted human necks"; some men paddle in the fire with their hands in an insane caricature of swimming; some must be "restrained by force from plunging in, to gratify their deadly longing" (*BR* 462). Perhaps the grisliest fate belongs to a young man whose head is melted "like wax" when the lead roof streams down upon him "in a shower of liquid fire" (*BR* 462). To deliberately wreck the material and emotional emblems of domesticity, Dickens seems to say, is to be mad and, in effect, to bring about one's own destruction. It is to forfeit one's humanity and become instead part of a roaring sea or a "dread fever," alienated from meaningful sympathetic exchange because emotion has been completely deregulated and overflows all its defining bounds (*BR* 438).[17]

Earlier in the novel, vacancy's direst consequence seemed to be Barnaby's inability to assist a wounded man; but here Dickens shows that it may in fact facilitate the very worst disruptions of social order and violations of domestic security. That Barnaby's vacancy alienates him even from the mob he voluntarily joins gives the lie to vacancy's seemingly insulated consequences. Even as Barnaby is sympathetically disconnected from the mob's excessive play of passions, he leads the mob in its first stages of destroying the social family's important spaces. If the mob wreaks far more havoc after Barnaby has been arrested and jailed than it did while he

[17] For commentary on the crowd as natural force in *Barnaby Rudge*, see Magnet, Crawford, and Dransfield.

was a part of it, Dickens nevertheless insists that the individual unpredictability and social alienation that come with vacancy are pathological social dangers comparable to that posed by the mob's insane, self-destructive energies. Barnaby's removal to the country in the novel's conclusion signals that amorality and character blindness are traits far too dangerous to be left at liberty in London's dense social network.

That this novel came to be called *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty* makes a great deal more sense once we understand that Barnaby's vacancy is one of the most fundamental problems that Dickens identifies in the collective antisocial behavior of the Gordon rioters. To have kept the title's concentration on Gabriel Varden—who saves Barnaby from the gallows after the riots are dispersed—would have been to present the book as a tale of heroism in the face of chaos. But by trading a focus on Varden for a focus on Barnaby, Dickens indicates the need to acknowledge that sympathetic exchange is the foundation of social order—and that alienation from or abandonment of the economy of sympathetic expression is the root of social *dis*order. That the mob, inspired and consolidated as a result of Barnaby's vacancy and the vacancy of his character double (Lord Gordon), turns from the violation of household gods to the ruination of prisons and the annihilation of a judge's law library compounds the gruesome social carnivalesque that Dickens forcefully condemns.[18] Barnaby is central to the novel for which he is named, therefore, because he embodies the spirit of the riots, even though he is not *of* the riots. Barnaby's story, as the novel's title implies, is the story of the riots.

[18] Dickens grieves for the loss of knowledge and life experience symbolized in the destruction of Lord Mansfield's home, in which were: "a beautiful gallery of pictures, the rarest collection of manuscripts ever possessed by any one private person in the world, and worse than all, because nothing could replace this loss, the great Law Library, on almost every page of which were notes in the Judge's own hand, of inestimable value, —being the results of the study and experience of his whole life" (*BR* 551).

That story ends with Barnaby exiled to the country, restricted primarily to the company of farm animals and vegetables (*BR* 687). It seems that the problem vacancy presents is one that Dickens can only solve through quarantine: Barnaby's condition is constitutional, and therefore beyond the power of the social sphere to cure. As a biologically determined quality, therefore, vacancy exposes sympathy's limits. This is profoundly troubling to Dickens as a champion of sympathy's near-miraculous power, and his anxiety is evident in the novel's gothic patterns of repetition and return: men presumed dead come back to life, characters and relationships are doubled, and the chaos of social upheaval in England echoes familiar images of revolution in France.[19] Dickens' apprehension seems even to reach past the pages of his novel, and beyond the bounds of his own life: the novel's final statement is that Grip—the impish raven who acts as Barnaby's totem—"has very probably gone on talking to the present time" (*BR* 688). The promise of Grip's immortality is also the warning of vacancy's inevitable return. Yet even as vacancy exposes sympathy's limits, Dickens renews his insistence that sympathetic bonds are the best defense against the fractures caused by anti-social forces. In *Barnaby Rudge* (and in all of his other novels), Dickens advocates a very specific sympathetic strategy to counter disruption in the social sphere—and it is to this strategy that my discussion now turns.

Dickens' Sympathies and Vacancy's Political Work

In 1855, Anthony Trollope snidely dubbed Dickens "Mr. Popular Sentiment" (149). This jab was meant as a dismissive criticism of what he viewed as Dickens' uninspired pandering, but despite his flippant tone he showed himself unable to write off Dickens' popularity so easily. Elsewhere, he resentfully commented, "It has been the peculiarity and the marvel of this man's

[19] For a sustained reading of the novel's gothic patterns, see Bowen, xvi-xviii.

power, that he has invested his puppets with a charm that has enabled him to dispense with human nature" (qtd in Kearns 137). What infuriated Trollope about "this man" was that his success seemed due to charisma rather than literary talent: that he had enchanted the reading public despite having no apparent skill in representing human nature or psychological depth.

While Trollope's observation is framed as invective, it speaks to the same element of Dickens' literary style that has formed the subject of my discussion thus far. Dickensian characters are, in many significant ways, all surface. Their external appearance (ideally) provides the clues to personality and moral worth; thoughts and feelings are continually externalized, articulated through verbal speech and physical gesture even in soliloquy; nearly every scene and every character in it brims with emotional intensity. Psychological interiority, constituted in large part by unexpressed (and sometimes inexpressible) mental activity, seems impossible under such conditions of transparency. Yet where Trollope saw Dickens as some type of literary charlatan operating upon the regrettable tastes of a popular audience, I want to consider his style of characterization as the result of deliberate artistic choice and his sentimentalism as a consequence of political conviction. By viewing Dickens' aesthetic as an extension of his social theory, we can understand his privileging of surfaces and externals in a context that can help put into perspective the sweeping moral implications that Dickens assigns to Barnaby's vacancy.

Recent books by Elaine Hadley and Juliet John have provided compelling arguments about Dickens' concentration on character surfaces by analyzing his use of melodrama. The defining characteristics of the melodramatic mode, as Hadley lays them out in *Melodramatic Tactics* (1995), read like a catalog of Dickensian components:

> …familial narratives of dispersal and reunion [,] emphatically visual renderings of bodily torture and criminal conduct [,] atmospheric menace and providential plotting [,] expressions of highly charged emotion, and [a] tendency to personify absolutes like good and evil… (3)

Even in this kind of broad list, preliminary to Hadley's discussion of Dickens specifically, melodrama's focus on externals is strongly apparent.[20] Visual effects are of great importance, as is a tone established by the physical conditions of atmosphere. The rate of coincidence in melodramatic stories indicates that not character, but either luck or divinely willed fate drives the plot. The externalization of emotion is more important than the internal experience of it, and representing the signs of emotion takes priority over exploring the psychology of feeling. Finally, the personification of absolutes contributes to a population of one-dimensional heroes and villains, as well as a host of simplistic secondary characters.[21] In a neat supplement to Hadley's list, John succinctly observes: "Dickens dramatizes rather than analyses the psyche" (3). While these qualities are generally observable in Dickens' novels, the work that Hadley and John perform is to explain the history and politics informing melodrama, which reveals the ideological currents flowing through cultural texts that make use of this mode.

The historical context for melodrama is explored in Hadley's book, which argues that the melodramatic mode was utilized in response to early and mid-nineteenth century cultural shifts that redefined the classificatory basis of social relations and "disinherited" the nation's poor (101-2). From the early seventeenth century, England's laws concerning poor relief emphasized local jurisdiction, and each parish was required to assist its own impoverished residents. Hadley explains that the local scope of this obligation enabled the parish unit to be conceptualized like a patriarchal family:

> The parish unit was in many respects an extension of the family, the means by which a patriarchal structure was also a national and institutional one. Parallel if

[20] Hadley's work with Dickens is focused on *Oliver Twist* (1838) and does not extend to any of his other novels.

[21] For more on fundamental melodramatic elements, see Michael R. Booth's *English Melodrama*.

> not always identical codes of rights and obligations served as ties between landlord and tenant, father and son. The aristocracy and gentry of each parish, those wellborn and propertied, determined, as a father would, how and to whom the levied poor rates would be dispensed, while the poor, the father's obedient children, generally respected his rules. Much changed in the intervening centuries, and sundry modifications to poor relief had been introduced, and yet in the early nineteenth century England was still a rural society mostly guided by these channels of deferential authority. (80-1)

If such parochial deference communities were grounded in an increasingly dubious correlation between birth and rank, they nevertheless provided a sense of security for England's laborers and paupers, who were assured the right to appeal face-to-face for relief to overseers and magistrates who knew them and their characters well (Hadley 82). The familial logic of the relationships that structured local communities ensured not only that an individual's moral fiber could be reliably apprehended, but also that authority figures in the upper classes would be genuinely invested in contributing to the support of the poor.

This security disappeared, however, with the New Poor Law of 1834, which nationalized poor relief and set down "mandatory classes of relief for specific classes of the poor" (Hadley 89). This reorganization dissolved local parochial/patriarchal units in favor of a centralized Poor Law commission based in London. It also exchanged a classificatory system based on personal relationships within a local community for a system that redefined personhood in terms of individual economic production and drew moral conclusions about the poor's supposedly inherent laziness and financial irresponsibility (Hadley 89-90). In doing so, the New Poor Law effectively made social orphans of England's poor inhabitants and disinherited them of the relief for which they had once had a legal right to petition. As Hadley writes, the law transformed poor people from extended family members into legal commodities, "without legacies, without lineal connections to their superiors, without histories, without homes…. [It] determined that familial and lineal identity were now the exclusive possessions of the upper ranks" (102-3).

An anonymous 1840 *Times* article strongly condemned this "failed" legislative "experiment," whose explicit intention, the author writes, was "to persuade the rich that the poor have no claim on them for protection; that all their old associations may be safely broken up, and their feelings trampled upon; and to reduce the poor to that degraded condition in which they are assumed to be already—a burden to their country" (4). Wherever the New Poor Law is in effect, the *Times* article charges, "the ties which bound together the wealthy and poorer classes have been torn asunder, […] the latter have become alienated from the former, and have learned to regard them no longer as protectors, but as enemies" (4). As far as opponents of the New Poor Law were concerned, the social cohesion formed through patriarchal communities had been replaced by an antagonistic class structure in which differences were viewed as essential rather than merely circumstantial.

In response to these serious social changes, melodramatic fictions and performances were mobilized to remind their newly divided audience members of their commonalities by diminishing the sympathetic distance between them. Theatrical gestures and demonstrative speeches made a speaker's personal character reliably apparent, and this transparency collapsed the distance between observer/reader and actor/character. By means of the visibility of character and sentiment, readers and observers were provided with "substitute 'families' in the form of characters with whom they [could] form empathic identifications," in a strategic insistence "that the ties of feelings are not limited to domestic-familial networks," but can be formed in the social sphere as well (Klages 60-1). Not only did melodrama aim to recuperate sympathetic ties by drawing audiences together with actors and characters, but it also worked to lessen the perceived class distances that fragmented the audience itself. The crucial tactic for this goal was to "dispense virtue and vice across class lines," thereby showing that "good and evil know no rank

[or] class" and that "they are generically social attributes" (Hadley 110). In melodramatic characters, then, the post-New Poor Law notion of "inherent" class traits does not apply because the villain or hero may come from any class. Class identity is translated, through this strategy, into family relation, with a view to "regenerat[ing] paternalist attitudes among estranged 'family' members," i.e. the audience (Hadley 101).

One of the most easily recognizable ways in which Dickens' novels participate in this familial narrative of social relations is in the sins of their villains. *Barnaby Rudge*, perhaps more than Dickens' other novels, is replete with immoral and malevolent figures that bring about the destruction or perversion of the familial unit. Simon Tappertit, the apprentice of Gabriel Varden the locksmith, is a menacing presence in the Vardens' home because of his lust for Varden's daughter, Dolly. John Chester's vanity leads one son (Ned) into shameful debt, keeping him for years from the woman he loves, and propels his other son (Hugh) to the gallows, from which Chester declines to save him. Lord Gordon's political advisor, Gashford, separates Barnaby from his mother and leads him to join the anti-Catholic demonstrations that destroy so many homes and institutional edifices. Barnaby's own father commits murder and is therefore responsible for the great grief of the Haredale family, as well as for the terror and poverty that afflict Mrs. Rudge and put her duty as a wife into tragic conflict with her maternal responsibility. It is no coincidence that almost all of these malefactors are fathers. Through these figures, *Barnaby Rudge* exposes the paternalist failures that wreak havoc among and within English families—failures facilitated by the greed, vanity, and pride that are the perfectly visible and unadulterated determinants of each villain's character.[22]

[22] While my prevailing point about villainy in *Barnaby Rudge* (and, implicitly, in all other Dickens novels) has to do with its threat to familial relations, Juliet John makes a fascinating argument about the melodramatic villain embodying a danger to melodramatic principles

Dickens' attraction to melodrama in the first place—the purpose he imagines for encouraging a sense of family among his audience—stems from a politics of inclusion. Juliet John writes that "a belief in 'popular' culture was Dickens' most firmly held political view," an assertion that makes "Mr. Popular Sentiment" begin to sound like an unwitting compliment rather than an insult to craft (3). Where Hadley's discussion of melodrama takes large historical shifts as its point of departure, John's focuses on competing approaches to theorizing the social subject in order to make a claim about what melodrama offered to Dickens from an artistic point of view. To this end, John traces Dickens' antipathy to a "psyche-centered approach to people and society"—an approach inaugurated largely by the Romantic Movement in philosophy and literature, which placed high values on introspection and the private life of the mind (3). This kind of individualistic framework for contemplating and representing human experience was, for Dickens, "divisive" and isolating, not to mention elitist because it privileged intellectualism (John 3). For the substantial numbers of working class English, it was important to be taken "out of oneself," to use a common nineteenth-century figure of speech. Psyche-centered forms of art and entertainment only took them further inside themselves—a position from which they could achieve no relief from life's difficult conditions (John 5). The aesthetics of transparency and excess inherent to melodrama, however, objectify human emotions as well as values like good and evil by turning them into spectacle: these things may be seen, felt, and understood by any observer. From an aesthetic point of view, then, melodrama offers a more class-inclusive experience than realism's intensely subjective and intellectual representations.

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themselves: "In melodrama, as in any genre, […] villains are villains because of the threat they pose to the value system upheld by the parent genre. This means that melodramatic villains […] can act duplicitously rather than 'ostensibly'; they are invariably individualistic rather than socially constructive; they expose the existence of the private self which melodrama works so hard to downplay; and, perhaps most importantly, they are often the most intelligent characters in the genre, threatening its general elevation of emotion over intellect" (11).

Read in the context of the melodramatic mode and its cultural history, Barnaby Rudge begins to take on an even more pivotal function in the novel. Even as he is a largely irremediable problem within the novel's sympathetic community, Barnaby also serves as the justification for the melodramatic system itself. The vacancy that alienates him socially even from those he considers friends—and that makes possible his participation in the rioters' antisocial exploits—is implicitly a growing problem in the English population. Through Barnaby and the rioters he leads, Dickens dramatizes the increasing fragmentation of the English population and the growing sympathetic distance between individuals. The novel may be set during the singular moment of the Gordon Riots, but Dickens composed and published it during a period of increasing social unrest in England that included the Oxford Movement (which fractured England's religious life) and Chartist demonstrations (which drew attention to widespread economic inequality and discontent). The visions of riot and domestic destruction that Dickens presents in *Barnaby Rudge*, then, are pictures of England's possible future as well as of its past, and the familial structure that melodrama idealizes (which brings benefits like cohesion, cooperation, moral guidance, and benevolent leadership) is cast as the antidote to this problem. This kind of social hierarchy is not merely the opposite of social turbulence: in addition to preventing disorder, it can also resist the power of the already-unleashed mob, heal damaged relationships, and save errant, ignorant social exiles like Barnaby from the dangers of their own actions.

The novel provides an embodiment of this kind of benevolent leadership in Gabriel Varden, the locksmith that lent his name to the novel's working title. Dickens consistently presents Varden in terms of emotional transparency, establishing a clear link between melodramatic expression and moral leadership. Within his home and in the public sphere,

Varden's character demonstrably works to preserve and strengthen familial relations and social cohesion. We have already seen him, for instance, endeavor to gain Mrs. Rudge's confidence so that he can help her address the threat of the dubious-looking stranger (i.e. Mr. Rudge). His offer is motivated by good will and a sense of patriarchal responsibility, which he extends to Barnaby and Ned Chester as well, and in whose safety he is equally interested. Not only does he labor to protect these members of his family from pain and suffering, but he also squares off with the mob and saves Barnaby from death. He is not only Dickens' ideal patriarch, but also an unequivocal symbol of the positive social power of melodramatic expression.

Confronted by the mob at the height of its authority, Varden demonstrates the moral strength residing in benevolent patriarchy and stands in opposition to the perversion of justice toward which the mob strives. Led by Hugh and the locksmith's erstwhile apprentice, Sim Tappertit, the "angry sea" of rioters demands that Varden unlock Newgate Prison and release its inmates (*BR* 522, 527). Although Varden knows that the men in front of him have kidnapped his beloved daughter, Dolly, he refuses to yield on the basis of transparency. Because he believes that all of his actions are manifestations of his own beliefs and desires, to capitulate—even to save his own life or his daughter's—would be tantamount to joining the mob in spirit. Hence he repeatedly declares his opposition to the crowd, calling upon the head jailer as a witness to his "respectable" moral position, and charging him in the king's name to resist the crowd's assault on the prison walls (*BR* 530). Varden makes his resistance as evident as possible, declaring it over and over to the rioters coercing him, and appealing to authority figures (the jailer in person, the king in name) to verify his moral stance. Though the crowd roars for his death, the locksmith adheres staunchly to the code of transparency that governs him in everyday situations, and in doing so places the good of his community ahead of his individual existence.

Moreover, in answer to this throng of "wolves" howling for his life, Varden asserts the bonds of family and attempts to recall the proper balance of justice. The locksmith's refrain, "Give me my daughter!" calls attention to the rioters' corrupted sense of morality by reminding them (and the reader) that they have imprisoned an innocent even as they demand the destruction of an edifice that secures the apparently guilty. The crowd's wild energies present absolutely horrific possibilities in this moment: the violation of the innocent and the terror of unleashed madness. Dolly's incarceration (as the locksmith can guess) comes with overt threats of rape, as the more distressed and disheveled she becomes in her captivity, the more her guards' attraction to her grows. One of them announces that he is not "a party in the present business further than lending a willing hand to my friends: but if I see much more of this here sort of thing, I shall become a principal instead of an accessory" (*BR* 495). Coupled with its sexual menace is the mob's overthrow of social order, epitomized in its attack on Newgate. A "moral plague," it infects and corrupts the social hierarchy: "The crowd was the law, and never was the law held in greater dread, or more implicitly obeyed" (*BR* 438, 521). Varden is the only person to call attention to the crowd's evil authority, and does so specifically by recalling its attention to the immoral inversion of guilt and innocence driving its behavior.

Of crucial importance in this scene outside Newgate is the relationship between Varden's emotional transparency and the mob's unruly passion, which represent opposing forms of productive and destructive expression. Juliet John points out that melodrama follows "excessively passional models of character," but that this excess coexists with restraint (John 9, 106). The gesture or the dialogue that dramatizes a strong feeling also contains the feeling and sets expressive limits upon it. Varden's demand that the rioters return his kidnapped daughter to him is forceful in its repetition and tone, but the anger and anxiety it expresses do not overflow

their verbal limits into physical aggression (*BR* 531). Varden's virtuous self-possession is set in stark opposition to the mob's boiling and inchoate energy:

> The savage faces that glared upon him, look where he would; the cries of those who thirsted, like wild animals, for his blood; the sight of men pressing forward, and trampling down their fellows, as they strove to reach him, and struck at him above the heads of other men, with axes and with iron bars; all failed to daunt him. (*BR* 531)

The vague specificity attached to the faces, heads, axes, and iron bars in this passage quickly devolves into a confusing cacophony of ringing instruments and leaping fire, as malevolent passion spreads like a "contagion" through the crowd and they burn Newgate halfway to the ground (*BR* 533-34, 438). By bringing the locksmith together with the mob, Dickens draws careful attention to the moral difference between the intense expression of virtuous emotion and the unregulated spread of antisocial passion.

Dickens is particularly insistent upon this point, offering vivid contrasting images of the mob's assault on domestic spaces and Varden's guardianship of domestic harmony in a way that underscores the fluidity between the individual family unit and the larger social "family" connected across class lines. Consecutive with the razing of the private Haredale estate (quoted at length above), Dickens lingers over the assault on the Maypole Inn and uses much of the same language of sanctity and violation. The social family that gathers in various combinations around the Maypole's hearth (which includes gentlemen, tradesmen, and the poor[23]) is under attack as much as the blood relations living at the neighboring Warren, and Dickens emphasizes the wreck of their comfort and privacy as proof of the madness by which the mob is possessed. The Maypole's inviolable coziness is transformed in moments by the sacrilegious temper of the invading "holy army":

[23] Mr. Haredale is a visitor there, along with Gabriel Varden and Barnaby.

> Here was the bar—the bar that the boldest never entered without special invitation—the sanctuary, the mystery, the hallowed ground: here it was… changed all at once into a bear-garden, a madhouse, an infernal temple; men darting in and out, by door and window, smashing the glass, turning the taps, drinking liquor out of China punchbowls, sitting astride of casks smoking private and personal pipes, cutting down the sacred grove of lemons, hacking and hewing at the celebrated cheese, breaking open inviolable drawers, putting things in their pockets which didn't belong to them, dividing [John Willet's] own money before his own eyes, wantonly wasting, breaking, pulling down and tearing up: nothing quiet, nothing private. (*BR* 450)

Dickens thickly strews the language of purity throughout this description, so that the destruction of the Maypole is an act of rape nearly comparable to the threats leveled at Dolly Varden and Emma Haredale by the same group of men.[24] The intruders enact a cruel parody of its hospitable function, misappropriating holy implements like China punchbowls and pipes and mutilating sacred relics like the "celebrated cheese" and the Edenic "grove" of lemons. Most significantly, they violate the privacy that constitutes the Maypole's protective hospitality, "breaking open inviolable drawers" and finally thrusting the maypole for which the place is named through a front window in a physical assault on its walls (*BR* 454). Only hellish fiends and madmen could be capable of such blasphemy; only those defying imperatives to order and sympathy could so gleefully wreck what Myron Magnet aptly describes as "a secular temple dedicated to the daily celebration of [community] values" (51).[25] In these terms, the rioters are the enemies of the English family in all its forms, from individual household and local community to the national fellowship that Dickens extrapolates from them. In *Barnaby Rudge*, the family's most terrible foe is clearly not Catholicism, but very emphatically and fundamentally the antisocial force of riot.

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[24] McKnight compares the Maypole's hospitable function to a womb and argues, as I have noted, that its "architectural rape" is the novel's central metaphor (25).

[25] Magnet notes the significance of the inn to Dickens' humanistic aesthetic and identifies the Maypole as "the Dickens inn *par excellence*" (51).

Against these forces of ravishment, division, and sympathetic deregulation, Varden stands as the singular force of healing. In an inversion of the Newgate mob episode, Varden ushers Barnaby to his own home above his shop in the company of a triumphant crowd after saving him from the gallows at the very last moment. In his progress through the streets, he is continually "greeted by the outstretched hands of half a hundred men" cheering him, and he "echoed their shouts till he was hoarse as they, and in a glow of joy and right good-humour" (*BR* 660). Repeating rather than reversing the crowd's sentiments this time, Varden is delighted by the brotherly feeling the crowd bears toward the justly pardoned young man and the excitement they display in anticipation of Barnaby's reunion with his mother. The locksmith, who makes locks as well as the keys that open them, most particularly in this episode combines security and authority with powers of disclosure and revelation.[26] In fact, Dickens twice reminds us during this scene that Varden's shop is called The Golden Key, a detail that emphasizes Varden's capacity for liberating what has been wrongly locked in and locked up.

Dickens finally lays the disruption of sympathetic economy to rest with a picture of the Vardens' thorough domestic harmony. Gabriel Varden in the end of the novel fairly bursts with happiness at his wife's good humor (up to this point, she had been intensely fractious) and at his daughter's betrothal to Joe Willet. Physical and emotional satisfaction is made vividly manifest in the context of family reunion and the anticipated production of new heirs. It is in honor of Dolly and Joe that this sumptuous tea is prepared,

> for whom the tea-kettle had been singing gaily on the hob full twenty minutes,

[26] Magnet glosses Varden's trade in a purely restrictive sense, contending that it signals Dickens' advocacy for "institutionalized social authority." Varden, he says, "makes his living from society's need to keep things 'bottled up and corked down,' the locks he makes being literal instruments of restriction, by means of which we secure ourselves against others by locking them out or, in extreme cases, locking them up" (148). However, we must also acknowledge the fact that the locksmith is responsible for providing the means of *unlocking* these mechanisms.

> chirping as never kettle chirped before; […] to tempt whose appetites a clear, transparent, juicy ham, garnished with cool green lettuce leaves and fragrant cucumber, reposed upon a shady table, covered with a snow white cloth; for whose delight, preserves and jams, crisp cakes and other pastry, short to eat, with cunning twists and cottage loaves, and rolls of bread both white and brown, were all set forth in rich profusion; in whose youth Mrs. V. herself had grown quite young, and stood there in a gown of red and white; symmetrical in figure, buxom in boddice, ruddy in cheek and lip, faultless in ankle, laughing in face and mood, in all respects delicious to behold—there sat the locksmith among all and every these delights, the sun that shone upon them all: the centre of the system: the source of light, heat, life, and frank enjoyment in the bright household world. (*BR* 665)

Where an earlier version of this scene had required Mrs. Varden's place to be supplied by Dolly, here familial relations are restored such that Mrs. Varden is central to the production of tea and Dolly is paired off with Joe. In this tableau, Mrs. Varden is described alongside the consumables as "delicious to behold"; her merriment now provides emotional nourishment to the family in a way that supplements the physical nourishment supplied by the cornucopia on the table. All is right in the Dickensian world when the table is spread and the company is agreeable, and this tea table is one of the most delightful and satisfying domestic images in the Dickens canon.

Anchoring this perfect familial abundance is Varden himself, who both syntactically encompasses these elements of pleasure and is surrounded by them. The description quoted above is related in one very long sentence, which begins with, "There he sat," and closes with a repetition: "there sat the locksmith" (*BR* 664, 665). The image of Varden seated at the table, awaiting the enjoyment of his family's company and a good meal, bookends on both sides a Dickensian catalogue of all that is most pleasant: good cheer, delectable dishes, and a comfortable chair from which to take it all in. Varden embodies, in an almost literal sense here, domestic contentment: "the rosiest, cosiest, merriest, heartiest, best-contented old buck, in Great Britain or out of it […]: a sight to turn the vinegar of misanthropy into purest milk of human

kindness" (*BR* 664). Before he has even taken a bite, he is so full of happiness that even his waistcoat "smil[es] in every wrinkle" (*BR* 664).

By the end of the passage, Varden is established as the mainstay of domestic contentment in addition to embodying or containing it within his person. He is "the sun" at "the centre of the system," the locus around which all the elements of harmonious domesticity revolve and the gravitational nucleus that keeps them on course. He provides "light, heat, life, and frank enjoyment" to "the bright household world" (*BR* 665). Although his wife prepares the meal over which he will shortly preside, and although the tea is explicitly in honor of Dolly and Joe, Varden is the heart of the jovial atmosphere; he is the essential inspiration for the family's pleasure and contentment, and the means by which it is sustained. This status, coupled with his effectiveness at restoring order and harmony to the larger social sphere as well as to his own nuclear circle, makes Varden not only the model patriarch within the novel, but also an emblematic paternal figure within the larger Dickensian universe. As John Plotz observes, "[l]audable domesticity […] is the best defense against both madness and crowds" (55). Considered in this light, sitting at his tea table, Gabriel Varden is suggestive of a merry general in the cause of domesticity, his family members acting as cheerful lieutenants of order and comfort, and the juicy ham, sweet preserves, and singing tea kettle serving as the infantry of good spirits. If domestic space and harmony has its greatest foe in the crowd, its greatest defender is the husband and father who derives his satisfaction from the fortifying sympathies symbolized in and exchanged during the family meal.

Vacancy and Paternalism: The Affairs of John Bull

Once we recognize that Barnaby's vacancy is a profound disruption in the melodramatic community and that Varden's paternalism is the remedy for such disruptions, we might better appreciate Dickens' apparent difficulty in designating a titular character. Varden and Barnaby have a symbiotic thematic relationship, in which each stands as the validation for the other's existence. As a fictional argument for the melodramatically constituted community, the novel needs Barnaby's vacancy to demonstrate the need for Varden's paternalism, and needs Varden to supply a solution to Barnaby's estrangement from the melodramatic system. Barnaby grows "more rational" in the end of the novel but retains his affinity with all things animal and vegetable, suggesting that the melodramatic mode needs vacancy's sympathetic disconnect in order to perpetuate its usefulness (*BR* 687). The supernatural longevity given to Grip and Barnaby in the novel's final lines therefore signals the eternal necessity for the "shining sun" embodied by Varden and enabled by the practice of melodramatic expression (Pedlar 42).[27] Where Dickens' use of gothic tropes signals his unease with the obstruction vacancy presents to sympathetic energies, his application of melodrama manages to transform that obstruction into a remarkably stimulating challenge that actually expands the scope and range of sympathy's power.

That the sympathetic disconnect represented in Barnaby is apparently an enduring social issue suggests that existing approaches to social order have failed. The picture of local, communal paternalism that the novel offers through Varden does not simply fill a void in the social hierarchy, but rather (as Elaine Hadley's historical outline may lead us to expect) presents an alternative to an existing form of institutional paternalism that is maddeningly ineffective. The

[27] Pedlar writes, "Grip is, as it were, an externalisation of Barnaby's inner darkness, the 'blindness of the intellect,' as Stagg the evil blind man puts it" (42).

Lord Mayor, for instance, hides in his bedroom during the riots and refuses to heed or address the city's dangers (*BR* 509). Even worse is the novel's infamous country magistrate, who mercilessly bullies Barnaby and Mrs. Rudge on their return to London right before the riots. As a public counterpart to the domestic tyranny exercised by John Willet and John Chester, the magistrate embodies the state's insensitive and oppressive tendencies:

> Now, this gentleman had various endearing appellations among his intimate friends. By some he was called 'a country gentleman of the true school,' by some 'a fine old country gentleman,' by some 'a sporting gentleman,' by some 'a thorough-bred Englishman,' by some 'a genuine John Bull;' but they all agreed in one respect, and that was, that it was a pity there were not more like him, and that because there were not, the country was going to rack and ruin every day. He was in the commission of the peace, and could write his name almost legibly; but his greatest qualifications were, that he was more severe with poachers, was a better shot, a harder rider, had better horses, kept better dogs, could eat more solid food, drink more strong wine, go to bed every night more drunk and get up every morning more sober, than any man in the country. In knowledge of horseflesh he was almost equal to a farrier, in stable learning he surpassed his own head groom, and in gluttony not a pig on his estate was a match for him. He had no seat in Parliament himself, but he was extremely patriotic, and usually drove his voters up to the poll with his own hands. He was warmly attached to the church, and never appointed to the living in his gift any but a three-bottle man and a first-rate fox-hunter. He mistrusted the honesty of all poor people who could read and write, and had a secret jealousy of his own wife (a young lady whom he had married for what his friends called 'the good old English reason,' that her father's property adjoined his own) for possessing those accomplishments in greater degree than himself. In short, Barnaby being an idiot, and Grip a creature of mere brute instinct, it would be very hard to say what this gentleman was. (*BR* 390)

The catalog of the "gentleman's" sins is remarkably lengthy and detailed, and ends by pointing out that even *idiot* and *brute* are titles of which he is decidedly unworthy. Dickens outlines in this episode a gluttonous, petty character that thoroughly transforms "gentleman" into a dirty word. Purportedly a representative of English justice and ethics, the magistrate makes clear that the state is self-serving and ignorant, as well as suspicious of and antagonistic toward those who most deserve its protection. He refuses to believe in Barnaby's idiocy, insisting rather that it is an act designed to "excite charity" so that the Rudges can avoid real labor. In the highly unlikely

case that Barnaby's "disorder" is real, he says, Mrs. Rudge should try flogging him as a curative; that failing, she ought to "shut him up" in an institution—presumably to prevent uncomfortable encounters between idiots and polite society (*BR* 389-90). The magistrate is a forcefully critical picture of a state paternalism that is both boorish and actively hostile. In fact, he returns to the narrative after the riots and tips the legal scales against Barnaby, testifying to his sanity and revolutionary sentiments. The ironically termed "country justice" thereby "solve[s] the doubt that tremble[s] in [Barnaby's] favour" and almost single-handedly sends him to the gallows—a fate from which only the efforts of Gabriel Varden can save him (*BR* 622).

In the reprehensible John Bull presented here, Dickens vehemently rejects hollowed-out forms of paternalism in which the familial responsibility for which the system is named is circumvented.[28] Like the domestic fathers Mr. Willet and Mr. Chester, the country magistrate refuses the moral obligations he bears toward the politically and economically powerless in the public sphere; and like Mr. Willet and Mr. Chester, he turns the power of his authority against those least able to counteract it. Dickens' obvious contempt for Willet, Chester, and the magistrate, however, clearly does not extend to all paternal figures. Gabriel Varden, the glowing center of gravity for all things familial, works to repair the bonds of family damaged through bad fathering, usually by reminding the involved parties of their moral responsibilities to each other.[29] In the strongest example of this advocacy, the locksmith secures Barnaby's pardon

[28] Sally Ledger interprets *Barnaby Rudge* as a metaphorical rejection of "despotic" state oppression, arguing that this "genuine John Bull" crystallizes Dickens' thoroughgoing opposition to the "politics of paternalism" (135, 107). The conclusion that Dickens is against the *politics* of paternalism does not adequately acknowledge, I would argue, Varden's positive role in the novel and his clear function as communal father. I contend, rather, that Dickens is in favor of the politics of paternalism but speaks out against its corrupted manifestations.

[29] In the first chapter, Varden tries to make peace in the Willet household, advising John Willet to treat his son like an adult instead of a child and counseling Joe to deliver "temperate remonstrance" to his father rather than "ill-timed rebellion" (*BR* 31). In one of the final chapters,

through a series of emotional appeals to government officials that ends (and is effective) with that supreme earthly patriarch, the King of England himself (*BR* 662). It is therefore not subversion of the paternalist system that serves the innocent and helpless (as the description of the magistrate might initially imply), but rather an appeal to its better nature. Dickens offers Varden as an alternative paternal model, one that substitutes informal, local, and overtly familial interests for the divisive institutional qualities at work in the country magistrate. Barnaby's sympathetic disconnect calls out specifically for Varden's brand of paternalism, which approaches his deficiencies as vulnerabilities of which to be mindful (or perhaps vigilant) rather than as offenses to be punished.

Barnaby Rudge is a novel alarmed by the vacant individual's estrangement from the social family, and especially by the antisocial behavior made possible by that alienation. Yet in spite of the profoundly disturbing consequences of emotional derangement Dickens depicts, he refuses to endorse institutional methods of subjugation as a remedy—or to believe that such methods could ever be successful. Instead, he insists that the sympathetically disconnected must be shepherded and cared for by the rest of the community, led by a responsible and gentle father figure. And if Barnaby Rudge is never "cured" of his idiocy, Dickens nevertheless holds out the promise of an emotional education to his audience. Through the novel itself, Dickens attempts to tutor his audience in sympathetic connectivity, taking on the role of paternal moralist to a national family of readers.[30] In so dramatizing vacancy's dangers for the social sphere and in

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he urges John Chester to recognize his illegitimate son, Hugh the Maypole stable boy, and to exercise his political authority to save him from a death sentence—the same fate met by Hugh's gypsy mother years earlier, whom Chester also refused to rescue (*BR* 628-29).

[30] Hadley argues that the privacy in which novels are often read problematizes the effectiveness of such a sympathetic project: "Just as the principle of classification instituted under the New Poor Law disrupted traditional modes of social exchange, divided the public, and reconstituted personhood, so might writing fiction for perusal in the private home facilitate the dispersal of

exhibiting the productive power of emotional expression, “Mr. Popular Sentiment” declares that the person who does not put the popular ahead of the singular, the communal ahead of the individual, is (like Barnaby) missing the point.

community and inhibit the public exchanges of ‘social feeling’ that Dickens so valued in the melodramatic performance” (118).

CHAPTER THREE

Chambers of Consciousness: Vacancy and Classed Interiority in *Villette*

In Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Lucy Snowe leaves her native England for the shores of Labassecour and leads an exiled life as a boarding-school teacher. She feels alienated by the continental culture into which she has transplanted herself: the companions of her working life spy on her, her students disgust and disappoint her, and the few friends she has often neglect her. Lucy's loneliness is ratcheted up to a fever pitch during her school's long summer vacation, when the *pensionnat* is left almost completely empty. With nothing but her own thoughts to contemplate, she falls into a depression that culminates in a frantic escape to the streets of Villette. She finds herself drawn into a Catholic church and the unfamiliar ritual of confession, where she gains relief from her emotional suffering:

> I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight…. [The] mere relief of communication in an ear which was human and sentient, yet consecrated—the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel whence it could not be again diffused—had done me good. I was already solaced. (*V* 231)[1]

For the people that enter the confessional before Lucy, consolation lies in the priest's response: in his absolution of their sins or in his assignation of their penance (*V* 230). For Lucy, however, it is the act of "pouring out" her emotions that brings solace. She does not need the priest to respond to her (and, indeed, he admits that he does not know how to answer such an unconventional use of the confessional); verbally decanting her pain into another human "vessel" is enough to allay its terrible pressure (*V* 231).

[1] All references to *Villette* are cited parenthetically in the text as *V*, and refer to the Broadview edition.

This expulsion of overwhelming emotion is one act in a pattern of psychological evacuation that Lucy describes throughout her narrative. Her frustration and melancholy frequently build to unbearable intensity, and she cultivates mental vacancy in order to attain relief. When painful feelings become more than she can tolerate, she evacuates her emotions like she does in the confessional, transferring them to another "vessel" from which they cannot return to hurt her—an act that implies Lucy's thoughts and emotions are stored in psychological "containers," and that involves the transfer of emotional content from a container within herself to a container outside herself. This evacuation may empty Lucy of overwhelming emotion verbally (whereby she "pours out" her pain in spoken or written words) or by way of a referential act (whereby she renounces possession of physical tokens that are saturated with emotion). In addition to the act of evacuation, Lucy describes maintaining vacant "rooms" within herself. This architectural metaphor amplifies the representation of her psychological interior as a type of container, and not only echoes the imagery of enclosure but also carries connotations of shelter, protection, and accommodation. The material of Lucy's psychological life is thus housed within her, in the distinctly dimensional sense of being interior to her body. She can maintain vacancies within these architectural structures by refusing admittance to certain ideas and emotions altogether, as well as by carefully assigning ideas and emotions to certain "rooms" while leaving other rooms empty. This strategy helps her keep inconsequential ideas and potentially painful feelings at a distance from her intimate recesses, thereby sparing her from unnecessary grief and preserving the integrity of her "best" rooms for worthier visitants.

Villette's depiction of vacancy—in both of its manifestations—sets it apart from the other literary works studied here. In the other novels discussed in this project, vacancy is the failure of a mental operation: of perception, of sympathetic communication, or of volition. Charlotte

Brontë, however, imagines vacancy as a mental function and condition in and of itself: as an action (as when Lucy "pours out" her feelings), or as an intentionally cultivated state of mind (as when psychic "rooms" are kept empty). Moreover, it is a tactical mental function, in which Lucy very deliberately creates and maintains vacancy in her psychological spaces. This purposeful use of vacancy lends it a uniquely custodial connotation, which draws attention to the necessity of continuing mental maintenance. Where vacancy in novels like *Barnaby Rudge* and *The Woman in White* is a dysfunction to be corrected, in *Villette* it is a strategy for regaining or sustaining psychological equilibrium, and as such it may be brought into play repeatedly. In contrast to other novels, then, *Villette* does not depict the mind in terms of a developmental endgame. In other words, Lucy's mind does not reach a conclusive point of education or formation; rather, her psychological structures and the material of consciousness that occupies them require ongoing management. The need for this continuous administration highlights the shifting, regenerating nature of psychological energies. The spaces of Lucy's psychic life are insistently dynamic—pulsating, filling like wells, and alternately welcoming and repulsing "guests"—and operate much more vigorously than what is depicted in the other novels I examine. Because Lucy's negotiation of the contents and integrity of her psychic containers is a continual obligation, her relationship to and understanding of her mind relies not so much on a view of that mind as an instrument or a tool that enables her to interpret and interact with the world, as on a sense of her conscious life as an ever-unfolding tangible experience, diffused throughout an interior network that extends far beyond the physical boundaries of her head.

Characterized by flux and flow rather than by stasis or completion, Lucy's psychic spaces and the metaphors used to describe them create intimate links between psychological life and the fluctuations of the body in which they are enclosed. The vacancy that she utilizes is predicated

upon multiple sites of consciousness: it is not only her mind, but also her heart that houses ideas and emotions, that registers and conducts the current of her conscious life. The novel's psychological anatomy—vividly rendered through Lucy's descriptions of vacancy—highlights the participation of the head and the heart in psychological states and processes, in addition to the network of nerves on which critical readings of *Villette* often concentrate. The critical preoccupation with nervous anxiety frequently frames Lucy Snowe in the light of neurosis or repressive self-discipline, but my analysis shows that by attending to her uses of vacancy, we can reframe our understanding of her psychological life without resorting to pathology, and can see that life as being animated by dynamic variations in which vacancy figures as a temporary and beneficial quality.

Turning attention to Lucy's vacancy and embodiment allows us to rethink the conditions that shape her psychological life. Scholars have habitually accounted for neurosis and repression in *Villette* through mechanisms of patriarchal subject formation like medical and religious discourse. I propose that a shift in perspective allows us to recognize the importance of a less overt instrument of psychological influence: class stratification. This chapter will show that Lucy's liminal class affiliation—as a middle-class woman forced to become a boarding-school teacher—leads to a magnitude of emotional pressure that she is compelled to relieve through evacuation. Her class status not only profoundly intensifies her physiological experience of emotion, but also informs the architectural metaphors she utilizes to explain psychological life. My consideration of Lucy Snowe's vacancy thus exposes how class shapes Lucy's awareness of her body and its processes, as well as the imaginative structures through which she explains her conscious experience to herself and others.

Reading Lucy Snowe

Villette is the narrative of Lucy Snowe's life through part of her youth in England and through her early residence in the continental city of Villette. Her youth is blighted by upheaval: she describes a shipwreck in such a way as to suggest that both family and home are lost to her. She writes that "the ship was lost, the crew perished," and she is forced to learn "self-reliance" as a result (*V* 100). Obliged to earn a living, Lucy first becomes nurse to a wealthy gentlewoman and then, upon that woman's death, leaves England for the Continent to become a *bonne* and a teacher in a boarding school. Before her family crisis, she demonstrates a reserved disposition that keeps her at the outside edges of most social situations—an observer more than a participant. Once she "falls overboard" and is cut off from familial and financial support, her social alienation intensifies (*V* 99).

Not only is Lucy without friend or confidante, but also she must occupy socially and economically liminal positions whose conditions cause frequent emotional pain. Particularly as a teacher in Villette, Lucy has little opportunity to forge meaningful relationships. She is born into the middle class, and social conventions dictate that she should seek companionship within that sphere. Yet as an employee, she is socially inferior to the middle-class parents of her students, to her employer, and even to the middle-class family with whom she had found friendship in her youth. She is therefore continually subject to loneliness, sadness, and despair, an influx she tries to manage by periodically evacuating it from her mind and heart. When she falls in love with the son of that middle-class family, Graham Bretton, she is overwhelmed by surges of affection and desire. When Graham disappoints her and courts the gentlewoman Paulina de Bassompierre, Lucy's melancholy makes her physically sick, and she becomes emotionally alienated from even the tiny social sphere that had briefly made the foreign city less lonely. She works to expel her

feelings for Graham from her consciousness by burying in a tomb the material traces of their relationship: his letters to her. Lucy's narrative ends with another shipwreck; this one suggests the death of her new love, M. Paul, and hints at her own perpetual loneliness and disappointment. Lucy's life as a working middle-class woman—constantly subject to both social alienation and frustrated hopes—thus requires assiduous emotional management, and she frequently enacts vacancy in order to relieve herself of unbearable pressures.

Critical readings of *Villette* often take a psychoanalytic approach, due to the imagery of containment and Lucy's struggle with emotional excess. Such interpretations of the novel often characterize its narrator in terms of the neurotic suppression of emotion, and frequently argue for a version of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar term "the buried life of Lucy Snowe" (399).[2] Gilbert and Gubar organize their discussion of Lucy around the conviction that her mind is "a dark and narrow cell," and a "chamber of terrible visions, not the least of which is that of being buried alive" (401). Denied the opportunity for self-actualization by a society that retains that privilege exclusively for men, Lucy's compulsory confinement leaves her psychically torn between a tendency for repression and self-control, and the need to give her imaginative power expression—a struggle that results in the narrative itself.[3]

Readings like Gilbert and Gubar's draw illuminating conclusions about the cause/effect relationship between Lucy's suffering and her textual production, but describe her mental life in

[2] "The Buried Life of Lucy Snowe" is the chapter title for Gilbert and Gubar's discussion of *Villette*.

[3] For readings that focus on the fact of Lucy's psychic confinement and argue that *Villette* is essentially about female repression, see Mary Jacobus, "The Buried Letter: Feminism and Romanticism in *Villette,*" and Cannon Schmitt, "Border Crossings: Nationality, Sexuality, and Colonialism in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." For an argument that resists reading Lucy's reserve as unhealthy repression and instead seeks to redefine it in terms of passion, see John Kucich, "Passionate Reserve and Reserved Passion in the Works of Charlotte Brontë."

immaterial terms, and imply that it is relatively distinct from her physical experience.[4] Their discussions of Lucy's emotions unfold through abstract terms like *privacy*, *fragmentation*, and *internal conflict*. Although she often expresses her persistent despair in the language of physical pressures—she writes, for instance, of the "weight" of her nightmares and of the *pensionnat*'s roof as "crushing as the slab of a tomb" (*V* 229-30)—these critical approaches seem to view the physical freight of her emotion as purely metaphorical. If we consider that emotion also has physical dimensions in *Villette*, however, then we can better understand that Lucy's psychological experience proceeds in multiple registers (on a physical level as well as on an abstract, metaphorical level), and that she must therefore manage that emotion in multiple ways (both physically and metaphorically). In other words, we can read her narrative as just one of a number of important expressive strategies that Lucy uses to manage her emotional excess.

In contrast to Gilbert and Gubar, Athena Vrettos organizes her psychoanalytic reading of *Villette* around the figure of the nervous body. Her discussion is predicated on the belief that Lucy's emotional life plays out in her physical nervous system, and she reads Lucy's "confession" and its language of "pouring out" as "an expression of her disease"—an attempt, in other words, to "reimpose order upon the chaos of her nerves" (Vrettos 568, 563).[5] In spite of the productive relationship it locates between Lucy's profound sensitivity and her narrative perspicacity, this reading draws on a view of the human body that privileges the nerves above all

[4] Jon Hodge's reading of *Villette* also concentrates on Lucy's need for imaginative expression, and on her obsessive *re*writing of her encounters with masculine oppression and interpersonal disappointment. Hodge claims that this textual revision provides Lucy a way to repeatedly escape the constraining bounds of each of her various obsessions and "put her longings to rest" (909).

[5] For additional discussions of the nerves and nervous illness in Victorian culture and literature, see: Janet Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England*, Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture*, and Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves & Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in 19th-Century British Prose*.

else. The use of such a model seems to leave Vrettos no choice but to blur distinctions among other body parts so that they may be subsumed under a general category of physicality, and then conflated with the nerves that are supposed to define that category. For instance, when Lucy recounts her visit to the confessional to Dr. John, she explains her experience in cardiological terms:

> "I suppose it was all the fault of what you call my 'nervous system.' I cannot put the case into words, but my days and nights were grown intolerable; a cruel sense of desolation pained my mind: a feeling that would make its way, rush out, or kill me—like…the current which passes through the heart, and which, if aneurism or any other morbid cause obstructs its natural channels, seeks abnormal outlet." (*V* 254)

While Lucy's description includes a reference to the nervous system, she implies that this term belongs to Dr. John's diagnostic repertoire and is not adequate to explain her experience. She replaces it with her own anatomy of feeling, which involves an intimate connection between body and consciousness, between heart and mind: her mental desolation is like a heart aneurism, and the danger it poses to her is as real as a heart attack. Vrettos subtly sidesteps the link between mind and heart, however, and writes that Lucy's *confession*—not her mental pain—is like a heart attack (Vrettos 568). She then explicates the vivid heart imagery as the invocation of a vaguely defined "physical mode," arguing that this passage "neurotically" links the verbal confession to a physical domain implicitly dominated by the nervous system (Vrettos 568). Vrettos thus reads the passage above as proof of Lucy's neurosis—as further evidence, in other words, of a pathological linkage between mind and body.

As my discussion will show, however, Lucy's conscious experience is predicated at all times on the necessary conjunction of mind and body (where the body includes not only the nerves, but also the cardiovascular and muscular systems and the head). In other words, *Villette* suggests that the body's participation in mental processes is natural and inevitable, whether that

participation means the body serves as a map or metaphor for psychological management, or whether it means that psychological activity has a material presence within physical networks. That her mental anguish is like a heart attack is not a signal of pathological, psychosomatic neurosis; it is an acknowledgement that emotion manifests through physical processes. *Villette* also includes positive feeling in its physiology of emotion: for instance, when Lucy receives a letter from Graham, "I experienced a happy feeling—a glad emotion which went warm to my heart, and ran lively through all my veins" (*V* 310). When hope is realized and external circumstances lift emotional oppression, the link between mind and body is still in vivid evidence: Lucy apprehends the letter as vital emotional sustenance—as "nourishing and salubrious meat" (*V* 310). This "healthful" emotional experience depends on the body's participation just as much as the "morbid" occasion of Lucy's confession, indicating that, from one end to the other of the emotional spectrum, the physical is a necessary component in experiencing and describing feeling (*V* 310, 254).

Moreover, it is not only emotion that involves the body: intellectual activity is also bound up in the physical. Lucy views "Reason" as an "envenomed step-mother" whose "savage, ceaseless blows" have the power to kill her (*V* 300). This imagery refers to reason's material effects, and it challenges the traditional divide between reason and feeling. Reason is clearly saturated with emotional associations, including the pain and betrayal of domestic abuse. Sometimes it "turns [Lucy] out," and sometimes it "shakes" at the doors of her heart and forces its way inside (*V* 300, 324). Even in moments when Reason seems like an instrument rather than an adversary, it takes on physical dimensions: put on the spot in an impromptu essay exam, Lucy writes that "answers to the questions surged up fast, my mind filling like a rising well" (*V* 473). In spite of the moments when Reason and Feeling seem to be mutually exclusive faculties, the

novel illustrates that they are not so different as they seem: both have a share in emotional life, both have a distinct physical presence in the body, and both occupy psychic spaces. In Lucy's experience, then, her body is the constant conductor of her conscious experience, whether that experience consists of thinking or of feeling.

A turn to mid-century scientific theories of emotion shows that Lucy's psychological descriptions as well as her performance of evacuation echo emerging ideas about the typical relationship between mental life and physical body. Herbert Spencer's "The Physiology of Laughter" (1860) provides a concise explanation about the role of material sites (like the heart and other muscles) in consciousness: it argues that laughter and other muscular contractions are the result of excess emotion. Emotions and sensations, he writes, "tend to generate bodily movements," and do so proportionally: a faint emotion or sensation generates a slight muscular contraction, and a strong emotion or sensation generates a powerful muscular contraction (e.g. "winking" in response to bright light *versus* violent physical convulsions in response to a burn) (Spencer 396, 395). Spencer points out that when the muscular "channels" for expending this excess emotional energy are blocked, it must "discharge" by way of an alternative direction—often, toward the viscera (397). In this case, "a certain portion overflows into the visceral nervous system, increasing the action of the heart" (Spencer 397).[6] Spencer's explanation, with its language of overflow and its argument for emotion's physical resonance within the heart, recalls Lucy's description of the feeling that drove her to the confessional: a "feeling that would make its way, rush out, or kill me," a feeling so visceral that it is like the current of blood that passes through her heart (*V* 254).

[6] Spencer also writes: "That the heart and bloodvessels [sic] […] are quickly affected by pleasures and pains, we have daily proved to us. Every sensation of any acuteness perceptibly affects the pulse; and how sensitive the heart is to emotion is testified by the familiar expressions which use heart and feeling as convertible terms" (396).

Furthermore, Spencer's inclusive anatomy of emotion suggests that the nerves alone cannot account for the bodily schema that registers Lucy's emotional activity, and it also explains the routes and reasons for her emotional discharge. He explains that nervous excitement often "expends" itself in multiple directions, producing an increase in mental activity, in visceral stimulation, and in motor movements (396). This helps account for the happiness that "[runs] lively through all [Lucy's] veins" as well as her multi-faceted sense of oppression, which gives rise to a "fever of the nerves *and* blood," and which "strains" the chords of her heart *and* produces a dream that "[wrung] my whole frame with unknown anguish" (*V* 310, 228, emphasis added). Her depression courses through her body, flowing through heart, nerves, and mind alike. Since emotion is conducted through these physical channels, relief from the pressure of emotion is also carried out in a physical register. As a form of motor movement, Spencer explains that the oral production of sound is one of the most "habitual" outlets for emotion. Not only laughter, but also speech, may be considered an important act of release:

> For an overflow of nerve-force, undirected by any motive, will manifestly take first the most habitual routes; and if these do not suffice, will next overflow into the less habitual ones. Well, it is through the organs of speech that feeling passes into movement with the greatest frequency. The jaws, tongue, and lips are brought into action not only to express strong irritation or gratification, but that very moderate flow of mental energy which accompanies ordinary conversation, finds its chief vent through this channel. (Spencer 398)

While Lucy's lonely life gives her very few occasions to express gratification, she often feels forms of what Spencer terms "strong irritation"—her despair during the long vacation being one of the most acute instances. She finds relief from this physical pressure of emotion, at last, by "communicating" it verbally in the confessional (*V* 231). In this moment, her feeling "passes into movement" through the speech organs and she "pours out" her "pent-up pain" in words (Spencer 398; *V* 231). Lucy uses the same language when she "[pours] out [her] sincere heart" to Graham

in a letter (which she tears up once she has gained relief) (*V* 324). Her entire narrative thus begins to take on the shape of an evacuation, one achieved through the muscular movements of writing in response to a prolonged emotional "irritation."

Yet Lucy's sentience and its "angular vagaries" are not solely to be found in the blood's pulsing current or in the muscular contractions of mouth or hand, and when she runs up against physiological psychology's descriptive and conceptual restrictions, she crafts metaphors and symbols that can express the qualia of subjective experience she feels compelled to trace (*V* 78). For Lucy, psychological experience is intense and mediated through the body, but it is also abstract and symbolic, and exceeds the limits of physiological definition. Her physiologically inflected confessional outpouring is coupled with her identification with architectural structures: with her purely metaphorical rendering of her mind, for instance, as a lodging-house (*V* 380-1). Where her descriptions of pulsing emotion point to the blood vessels, heart, and nerves as physiological containers of conscious life, her architectural metaphors position selfhood as interior to the bodily frame as a whole.

Villette thus goes beyond physiological psychology in accounting for emotional experiences, creating a metaphorics of containment that represents the subjective experience of consciousness in a way that mid-century science had difficulty accepting, much less accounting for. Although writers like Spencer and Alexander Bain argued earnestly that consciousness was constituted by a dynamic relationship between the material and the immaterial, they disagreed on what types of language and imagery should be used to describe that relationship. According to Spencer, material terms are "the only ones available for analyzing the mind," and he "defies his readers to do any better" (Cohen 5). For him, material terms are imperfect, but because they are the only option, they must be used if the mind is to be analyzed at all. Bain, in contrast, believes

that the precision at which scientific inquiry aims prohibits the use of material language to explain what are partly immaterial phenomena. When it comes to explaining the "alliance" between mind and body, Bain notes that existing analogies are lamentably inadequate. It is inaccurate, he insists, to understand mind and body "as container and contained, or in any other mode of local conjunction," because a material form can have no physical relationship with something that is immaterial (Bain 137). Although they disagreed on whether material language was an appropriate contingency for describing the mind-body relationship, scientists in the field of physiological psychology implicitly concurred that material terms could not wholly convey the character of the conjunction between mind and body.

For Lucy Snowe, however, the only way to capture the qualitative experiences of thought and emotion is to use precisely the analogy of containment that Bain discounts. She uses three forms of this analogy as it suits her aim: the body is the container of the soul/mind; the mind and heart are like architectural structures in which thought and emotion are organized in particular ways; and emotions are conducted through the body's physical channels (blood vessels, heart, and nerves). Each one contributes to an understanding of the body as a container of consciousness, and each one frames thought and feeling in profoundly physical terms. Lucy's descriptions suggest that representing the relationship between material body and immaterial mind is only a struggle for a scientific perspective that endeavors to understand consciousness objectively. In contrast to science's impersonal, objective accounts of the mind, *Villette*'s descriptions of emotional and intellectual occurrences put relentless emphasis on the subjective nature of conscious experience and on that experience's residence within the body.

My case for *Villette*'s phenomenological description of embodied consciousness builds on the work of scholars like William Cohen, who has recently argued that the "essence" of the

human in the Victorian era was imagined as being interior to the individual, within the body and its physical substance (xi-xii). In consequence of this perspective, he argues, literary metaphors of containment, protection, and admission—often in the form of architectural elements—were frequently made to stand in for the body, "that porous, material container of inner human entities" (Cohen 27). His book posits that, by writing about the body, Victorian authors achieved "a concrete means of giving form to intangible thoughts and feelings" (Cohen 27). Cohen's analysis of Charlotte Brontë's work is tightly focused upon *The Professor* (1857), which he selects for the way it "exaggerates" the conditions of embodiment through recurrent metaphors of subjective entombment and invasion.[7] According to him, *The Professor*'s argument is that "subjects resist or submit to the incorporation of variously aversive and attractive objects, and that which is other than the self enters the self through processes that often painfully alter the subject" (Cohen 42). The novel thus illustrates that the subject's relationship to the material world is one in which the world of objects may "enter the body of the subject and remake its interior entities." (Cohen 6). Cohen's discussion is particularly attuned to moments of incursion in *The Professor*, and implies that Brontë's theory of selfhood can be fully explained through the embodied subject's resistance to breach.

In turning to *Villette* and its coupling of embodiment and vacancy, I modify this account of Brontë's theory of materialized personhood. *Villette* outlines two important conditions of selfhood that do not appear in *The Professor*. First, it demonstrates that embodiment necessitates an *outward* flow of materialized emotion. If the body is a container and if thoughts and feelings

[7] The events and characters in *The Professor* are drawn from Brontë's own experience in a Belgian boarding school, where she fell in love with the proprietor. Originally completed in 1846, *The Professor* was rejected for publication several times, and Brontë eventually reworked it into *Villette*, which was written between 1851 and 1853. *The Professor* was published posthumously, two years after Brontë's death. See Margaret Smith's introduction to the Clarendon edition of *The Professor* (xi-xxxviii).

are given tangible form as a result, then the container's finitude is an important factor in psychic life. The container may become full—even painfully full—and require emptying out. Lucy's confessional scene emblematizes this evacuation of excess psychological material and indicates the need to recognize that discharge is just as inevitable as penetration to the condition of embodiment. *Villette* thus proposes a more dynamic model of embodied selfhood than *The Professor*, adding the outward flow of emotion to incursion from external forces.

Second, because *Villette* depicts vacancy as a physiological act as well as a metaphorical practice, it presents a compound theory of selfhood. Pairing metaphors of interiority with descriptions of physical containers of consciousness, Lucy's narrative combines figurative and tangible forms of experience. Cohen argues that Victorians viewed thoughts and feelings as "intangible," and that conscious life could only be described metaphorically (27). Yet Lucy Snowe's rich narrative not only insists upon the concrete forms that consciousness may take, but also argues that these forms must be paired with metaphor in accounting for her conscious experience.

This theory of selfhood, I argue, reflects a particular social experience: that of the middle-class woman expelled from her social position and obliged to earn her living. Like the governess residing in her employer's house, Lucy lives in a strangely provisional space (a boarding school) that she cannot consider a home no matter how long she stays there. Her use of architectural forms to describe her mental interior is therefore a way to suggest a metaphorical solution to a problem she cannot solve physically. Moreover, her social alienation—which is signaled (in part) by the number and frequency of eyes turned upon her, as though her alienation is a visible tattoo—increases her awareness of her own body. Excluded from the social pleasures that would "take her out of herself," Lucy remains constantly aware of the social boundaries separating her

from others and restricting her to the confines of her physical frame. Her descriptions of physically oppressive emotions indicate the tangible effects of these abstract social regulations. *Villette* thus offers a theory about the impact of class stratification on individual psychology. Within this theory, vacancy is a classed concept enacted to counter very specific accumulations of emotion caused by painful class difference.

In comparison to the other novels discussed here, *Villette* suggests that while the *condition* of vacancy can afflict individuals in various class positions (poor people, professionals, and the landed gentry), the *deliberate act* of vacancy is particularly the purview of those who are estranged from middle-class privileges, who are acutely conscious of this estrangement, and who understand this estrangement as largely insurmountable. In Victorian narratives concerned (at least in part) with class, such as *The Woman in White* (the subject of Chapter Four), psychological hardship may be transformed into a motivation or a means for upward mobility. The professional man—the drawing-master, for instance—may change the mode and setting of his hardship by participating in imperial adventure, thus facilitating his own character development and subsequent social and economic agency. But the Victorian woman working as a teacher or governess is unlikely to have access to any type of adventure, and instead continues to suffer in the same manner and place. For her, upward social movement can only be the result of inheritance or marriage that removes her from the sphere of domestic labor. Lucy's work as a teacher thus forecloses in large part on the possibility that she could convert her emotional hardship into a means of escaping her liminal position and (re)attaining middle-class status. She has no socially productive outlet for her suffering, therefore, and the performance of vacancy becomes her best option for relief.

Empty Chambers: *Villette*, Vacancy, and Classed Interiority

When Lucy leaves the Catholic church and its confessional after her emotional evacuation, her physical weakness is compounded by stormy weather, and she faints in the street. She regains consciousness in the Brettons' parlor, and describes the process as her soul's return to her body:

> I know she re-entered her prison with pain, with reluctance, with a moan and a long shiver. The divorced mates, Spirit and Substance, were hard to re-unite: they greeted each other, not in an embrace, but a racking sort of struggle. The returning sense of sight came upon me, red, as if it swam in blood; suspended hearing rushed back loud, like thunder; consciousness revived in fear…. At first I knew nothing I looked on: a wall was not a wall—a lamp not a lamp…. But the faculties soon settled each in its place; the life-machine presently resumed its wonted and regular working. (*V* 235)

This account renders Lucy's understanding of mind/body relations in rich detail: the physical frame is animated from within by the soul, and consciousness is constituted through bodily structures: only after sight and hearing resume can consciousness "revive." Conceptually formed by the (re)union of spirit and matter, Lucy uses the term "life-machine" to indicate a relationship of enclosure or containment of the former within the latter. As the life-machine's faculties settle back into place, Lucy describes her sense of sight as coming "*upon*" her, "red, as if it swam in blood." Her body is explicitly positioned between her mental comprehension and the external world into which she wakes: vision does not simply resume but rather comes "upon" her as though advancing upon her awareness from a point outside of it. Moreover, her view appears to swim in blood, a detail that emphasizes perception's enclosure within the material body: visual information, in other words, is originally collected by and *through* the physical eye and the lifeblood that sustains it. Within this passage that attempts to depict the transition from unconsciousness to consciousness—and which therefore acts as the novel's most explicit

description of the nature of conscious life itself—Lucy encapsulates a theory of enclosure whose foremost concern is acknowledging that her mental life is located in her body's material interior.

Critical analysis of class and interiority in *Villette* focuses on this scene, in which the homeless Lucy finds her consciousness reconstituted in a middle-class parlor. Eva Badowska proposes that Lucy's longing for a material home results in her identification with the artifacts of middle-class life that surround her when she wakes in the Brettons' house. Badowska argues that this domestic *Wunderkammer* has a "subjectivity effect on Lucy's reconstitution as a subject of memory" (1515). As sight comes upon her, she begins to recognize the relics in the Bretton home: blue damask chairs, arabesqued carpets, gilded mirrors, miniatures, vases, and "some relics of a diminutive tea-service…preserved under glass"; inside this "cabinet" of a room, "old acquaintance were all about me, and 'auld lang syne' smiled out of every nook" (*V* 236). Her return to consciousness is simultaneous with the recognition of familiar objects, and Badowska encourages us to read this occurrence as evidence that Lucy's is a bourgeois interiority, constituted through commodity-objects so that it resembles the *Wunderkammer* by which it is defined.[8] Yet the fact is that those "household gods" do not make Lucy feel welcome or at home, and in spite of recognizing them, they do not help her place where she is—or *when* she is: "Where was I? Not only in what spot of the world, but in what year of our Lord?" (*V* 238, 236). Acutely aware of the rules of bourgeois identity, Lucy knows that this is not *her* home, even if she recognizes in it the objects with which she was once "so thoroughly intimate" (*V* 237). In fact, she wishes that the room were not so well lit, and that its objects were not so easily discerned: they remind her, it seems, of her distance from any sense of home and belonging (*V*

[8] For other readings of Lucy Snowe's spatialized interiority, see Rachel Malane, "Gendered Brain Spaces and the Anxiety of Transgression in Charlotte Brontë's Novels," and Karen Chase, *Eros & Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot* (47-91).

237). While the Brettons' parlor may indeed have a "subjectivity effect" on Lucy as she regains consciousness, the text indicates that this effect is an amplified sense of her estrangement from bourgeois spaces.

Historically, this type of alienation seems like a foregone conclusion of Lucy's social role, as a middle-class worker in the domestic sphere (a consequence that Brontë also illustrates in *Jane Eyre* and that she herself experienced as a governess). Kate Lawson explains that:

> Middle-class employees—governesses, secretaries, housekeepers, and companions—were also domestic workers. And yet, […] the place where such domestic workers worked was *a* home, but was not *their* home. Women (and men) working in these roles bore witness everyday to the 'exquisite absorption of home, the delicious retirement of dependent love' as they were thrust into the intimate sphere of another's family life; but it was not *their* family life…. [*Villette*] is a careful record of [Lucy's] alienated experience, of the vertiginous foreignness of living—not just in another country—but in another's home. (22-3)

The contingent position that a governess or (in Lucy's case) a teacher in a boarding school occupies is not just lonely and uncomfortable, but it also paradoxically precludes her from establishing her own home even as she is excluded from the one in which she works. The *pensionnats* in which Lucy resides—whether Mme. Beck's or her own—are too much implicated in professional labor to serve as the kind of home in which middle-class Victorians found class stability. "[E]ven if one grants that a woman may carry 'home' with her," Andrea Kaston Tange writes, "Victorian middle-class status required not only a clear sense of the ideological imperatives of domesticity but also a proper house in which to create that home... [F]or the Victorians, home was not just an idea; it was an idea that was explicitly rooted in a material object" (5). These social rules and conditions can help explain why Lucy's interiority is not, in fact, like a cluttered middle-class parlor, but instead resembles a working-class structure punctuated by vacant rooms.

In Lucy's metaphorical descriptions, she is the managing proprietor of interior domestic structures, and must decide which ideas and feelings may be admitted and which "rooms" they may occupy. In her account of her miserable long vacation and then later, during a discussion with Ginevra Fanshawe about her origins and family history, Lucy makes striking use of this architectural metaphor:

> I found [life] but a hopeless desert: tawny sands, with no green fields, no palm-tree, no well in view. The hopes which are dear to youth, which bear it up and lead it on, I knew not and dared not know. If they knocked at my heart sometimes, an inhospitable bar to admission must be inwardly drawn. When they turned away thus rejected, tears sad enough sometimes flowed; but it could not be helped: I dared not give such guests lodging. (*V* 225-6)

• • •

> …it quite sufficed to my mental tranquillity that I was known where it imported that known I should be; the rest sat on me easily: pedigree, social position, and recondite intellectual acquisition, occupied about the same space and place in my interests and thoughts; they were my third class lodgers—to whom could be assigned only the small sitting-room and the little back bed-room: even if the dining and drawing-rooms stood empty, I never confessed it to them, as thinking minor accommodations better suited to their circumstances. (*V* 380-1)

Lucy understands these spaces as parallel architectural microcosms, which are not occupied by the permanent residents or domestic accoutrements of a middle-class household, but are rather approached by "guests" and "lodgers." Consistent with the divisions she sets up elsewhere, Lucy assigns abstract ideas (e.g. pedigree) to the mind's "rooms" and links more emotionally resonant concepts (e.g. hope) with the heart's quarters.[9] In both cases, though, she figures herself as a superintendent who must make decisions about which "guests" to lodge and which vacancies to maintain. That Lucy uses the metaphor of a lodging-house and not a middle-class home to

[9] On the history of the heart's significance and symbolism in Western culture, see Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart*, Robert A. Erickson, *The Language of the Heart, 1600-1750*, Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart*, and Scott Manning Stevens, "Sacred Heart and Secular Brain." For a Victorian medical view of the heart and its role in conscious life, see James John Garth Wilkinson, *The Human Body and Its Connexion with Man*.

organize her thoughts and feelings indicates that class dictates have profoundly shaped the way she thinks about her psychological being. With no "proper house" in which to make her home, she identifies with an architectural structure whose occupants must be carefully maneuvered so that the best rooms may be kept empty: reserved for the most important and desirable ideas and emotions, the "lodgers" good enough for such privileged accommodations.

The "rooms" in Lucy's mind and heart, then, are quite different from the parlor into which she awakens at the Brettons. Her homelessness—an effect of her position as a teacher in a foreign country—creates a desire for permanent shelter and hospitality, and in a way she can create such a space within herself. Yet the "lodging-house" within her offers a distinctly qualified form of domesticity: mind and heart take in "lodgers" and "guests," so that Lucy's position is not as the mistress of a home, but rather a hybrid role in which the efficient domestic offices of the landlady are coupled with the sentinel's duty to repel intruders. Her architectural mind is characterized by provisionality, and its inmates are always only imagined as temporary. In the novel's conclusion, Lucy becomes the proprietor of her own *pensionnat*, and thus takes charge of a space that combines the professional with the domestic in much the same manner that already characterizes her mind and heart. This situation implicitly guarantees that *home* will always be provisional for Lucy, both inwardly and outwardly.

The "lodging-house" with which Lucy identifies thus suggests a distinctly classed interiority, one shaped by alienation and contingency. The fact that vacancy characterizes these spaces—that her heart is kept devoid of hope, that the best rooms in her mind are kept "empty" for the benefit of future ideas—indicates that, in her position, she cannot afford the kinds of domestic luxuries that fill middle-class spaces—both architectural and psychic. Indeed, the domestic metaphors of mind that Lucy uses maintain a deliberate distance from the bourgeois

Victorian home emblematized by the parlor at La Terrasse. Told that many Englishwomen find good positions as nurses with foreign families, Lucy "stored up this piece of casual information, as careful housewives store seemingly worthless shreds and fragments for which their prescient minds anticipate a possible use some day" (*V* 109). She repeats this image later, writing, "A thing there was which puzzled myself, and I sought in my brain a key to that riddle almost as sedulously as madame had sought a guide to useful knowledge in my toilet drawers" (*V* 187). While these moments underscore strong parallels between the "thingified" spaces of psychological life and the compilation of domestic objects in a house, they also invoke domestic spaces that are very decidedly not bourgeois. When she compares herself to a "housewife," she does not refer to the middle-class concerns of planning a dinner menu or netting a new purse; rather, she aligns herself with the working-class housewife, who must be "careful" to store up those "worthless shreds and fragments" that she can ill afford to throw away (*V* 109). Her "household" psychological economy requires a balance, then, of storing up fragments of ideas, and of emptying out her mental spaces and channels when she becomes overburdened. Lucy's performance of vacancy is therefore a psychological activity very different from the endless accumulation that characterizes the "parlor" of the bourgeois mind, which is "never unfurnished," and "is a room only insofar as it is cluttered with historically specific objects" (Badowska 1515). While commodities invade and subjugate bourgeois interiority, Lucy frequently empties out her psychological structures and maintains that emptiness in some places for prolonged periods. She "pours out" her heart in words and in writing, and the "dining-room" and "drawing-room" of her mind are often vacant due to her careful management.

In a revealing episode of evacuation, Lucy turns to material objects to facilitate an emotional evacuation and relinquish a portion of herself. This act distinguishes Lucy's attitude

toward objects from the bourgeois relationship to commodities (in which subjectivity is positively constituted through the commodities themselves). When she realizes that her love for Graham will be forever unrequited—and can therefore only be a source of pain—Lucy conflates her affection for him with the letters he has written her and then seals them (affections and letters both) up in a jar. Psychoanalytic critics in particular have cited this behavior as repressive, often interpreting it as a failed attempt on Lucy's part to tamp down her romantic desires, which then inevitably resurface, they argue, in the form of the ghostly nun.[10] Foucauldian critics also consider this a crucial scene, contending that it dramatizes Lucy's efforts to keep her inner self from the social gaze that would seek to regulate and discipline it.[11] However, Lucy consistently discusses this gesture in terms of bereavement, and the letter burial can therefore also be read as a renunciation, a letting go, and a release in the same way that her confession provided solace through pouring out.

Graham's five letters to Lucy are "sacred documents," and the conviction that he will write no more (now that he is preoccupied with his love for another woman) transforms her painful anticipation of his next missive into the welcome death of her hopes. "In the end," she writes, "I closed the eyes of my dead, covered its face, and composed its limbs with great calm" (*V* 365). She resolves to lock the letters away so their remembrance cannot pain her heart, and the "final disposal" of her epistolary "treasure" is hastened by the discovery that Madame Beck has shown them to M. Paul (*V* 365-6). The sight of the pear tree's "skeleton" in the *pensionnat*'s garden sparks the idea of interment, and Lucy hurries to bury the letter at its roots. Although many scholars have traced a general emphasis on entombment, this language of sacred

[10] See Schmitt, Gilbert and Gubar, Jacobus, and Christina Crosby, "Charlotte Brontë's Haunted Text."
[11] See Lawson and Margaret L. Shaw, "Narrative Surveillance and Social Control in *Villette*."

documents, treasure, skeletons, and tending to dead bodies is in fact strikingly evocative of Egyptian mummies and mummification—and, by extension, of a ritualistic process by which individuals are physically and symbolically emptied out.

Mummy imagery thoroughly characterizes Lucy's preparations of her "dead." Before deciding on the pear tree, she rejects the attic as too dangerous a repository for the letters because its mold, mice, and damp air would surely obliterate the writing: the idea is to bury, but also to preserve—and thereby to sustain the spirit of the letters' content (*V* 366-7). A jar is the instrument of this preservation, which Lucy purchases from "an ancient place, full of ancient things" (*V* 367). She seals the letters inside the jar, places it in a "deep hollow" at the root of the pear tree, and constructs a stone roof to keep all from being disturbed (*V* 367-8). As a body's contents are removed and placed in jars as part of the mummification process, so Lucy—whose inner emotions find their analogues in Graham's letters—evacuates much of what occupies her interior psychological recesses, seals it in an "ancient" jar, and buries it deep beneath the earth and a roof of rock. This symbolic mummification buttresses Lucy's other representations of vacancy. Crucially, she admits that the "impulse under which I acted, the mood controlling me, were similar to the impulse and the mood which had induced me to visit the confessional" (*V* 367). This comparison invites the reader to view the burial as another instance of salutary pouring-out. The jar and the earth sepulcher into which Lucy commit her feelings replicate the "consecrated" vessel (the Catholic priest) into which she pours her emotion in the confessional scene, and from which her thoughts and feelings cannot be diffused again. Not only her emotion itself, but also the *record* of it, must be cleared out: a proliferation of archival material is just as troubling to her equanimity as the surplus of emotional matter for which it acts as an index.

Later in the story, Brontë reiterates the link between Lucy's emotional containers and mummification's principle of emptying out. Making her way out of the *pensionnat* one night, Lucy stumbles into the city streets to discover a festal celebration, and the first people she recognizes are Graham Bretton and his sweetheart, Paulina. Unrecognized, Lucy watches the pair as they gaze into each other's eyes, and she sees Polly dressed in bridal white, sitting across from Graham in the position that Lucy herself once coveted. Tellingly, the theme of the city's celebration is Egyptian architecture. Lucy walks through "a region, not of trees and shadow, but of strangest architectural wealth—of altar and of temple, of pyramid, obelisk, and sphinx; incredible to say, the wonders and the symbols of Egypt teemed throughout the park of Villette" (*V* 527). These structures are resonant with the same themes of reverence and burial that characterize Lucy's mummification of Graham's letters, and their symbolic links to the ritual of mummification invoke a sense of this episode as a conclusive expulsion of Lucy's oppressive feelings for Graham. The "architectural wealth" that sets the scene is rich with the suggestion not only of ritualistic emptying-out, but also of veneration that belongs to a distant history, of emotional vitality that has passed out of practice and into memory. The "dream-like" quality of the fête—in which "every shape was wavering, every movement floating, every voice echo-like"—points to the faintness of the impressions that Graham and Paulina now make on Lucy, and to the notion that she is "safe" from the torturous pressures of passion and jealousy where they are concerned (*V* 526).

The humble elements in this mummification signal Lucy's philosophy about the relationships governing people and objects. When Lucy describes moments of evacuation—the burial, the confessional—the containers of psychological matter in each case are very simple: a "vessel," a bureau, a jar. They are hardly reminiscent of the Brettons' parlor, which is packed

with the evidence of bourgeois spending and is itself part of a large chateau. When Lucy explicitly turns to architectural metaphor, moreover, she is not interested in the question of decor or furniture: the determining characteristics of her head- and heart-structures are protectiveness and hospitality. For Lucy, in other words, architectural imagery is an apt analogue to her psychological containers because of the structural integrity it connotes. The function of this metaphor is to communicate a sense of shelter. There are no other occupants than the ideas or emotions housed within; psychological material has no need of domestic objects, and Lucy refers to none. She does not believe that people can be constituted through commodity objects because she understands that people are not objects.

Her knowledge of Graham's heart, however, reveals that he does not share her philosophy—for it is Graham the physician, not Lucy the boarding-school teacher, who carries the bourgeois parlor's fetishistic clutter within himself:

> I believe in that goodly mansion, his heart, he kept one little place under the skylights where Lucy might have entertainment, if she chose to call. It was not so handsome as the chambers where he lodged his male friends; it was not like the hall where he accommodated his philanthropy, or the library where he treasured his science, still less did it resemble the pavilion where his marriage feast was splendidly spread; yet, gradually, by long and equal kindness, he proved to me that he kept one little closet, over the door of which was written "Lucy's Room." (*V* 530)

Graham's "goodly mansion" is the picture of material wealth and status: there are "handsome" chambers, "treasure," and a "feast…splendidly spread." Yet for all the "accommodation" it appears to provide, his heart seems incapable of genuinely welcoming guests. Domestic temporality is remarkably lacking: the images are static, and no one actually resides in this heart—even Graham himself is not explicitly present. He has "furnished" this psychological recess with the domestic trappings of hospitality, but in doing so has privileged material show over real affection. His marriage feast is spread on the "pavilion," for instance, but his wife

herself makes no appearance there. Like the actual home he shares with his mother, the domestic space within his heart is encountered through its décor. Unlike at La Terrasse, however, the objects in Graham's heart are not charged with emotion or memory, and the effect is a disparity between genuine affections and the display of wealth. Despite the ostensible praise Lucy directs toward this heart-mansion, she is only able to admire its architectural grandeur and the luxuriance of its rooms, and seems unable to imagine any dynamic emotional life in Graham.

Against this vision of shallow consumerism, Lucy sets the final image of her own emotional structure. Her facility for feeling is clearly much greater than Graham's and also more appropriately focused on people rather than things. Devoid of the domestic trappings that mark Graham's "mansion," Lucy's emotional space carries near-magical temporal and spatial contingencies:

> I kept a place for him, too—a place of which I never took the measure, either by rule or compass: I think it was like the tent of Peri-Banou. All my life long I carried it folded in the hollow of my hand—yet, released from that hold and constriction, I knew not but its innate capacity for expanse might have magnified it into a tabernacle for a host. (*V* 530)

As Lucy declares in her earlier exchange with Ginevra Fanshawe, the signs of social status do not occupy any of the important "rooms" in her mind; here, again, she illustrates her privileging of real human connection over material interests. Compared to the treasured contents evident in the tableau of Graham's heart, Lucy's "tent" appears devoid of furnishings, characterized by its "capacity for expanse" rather than its amenities. The "little closet" Graham keeps for Lucy contrasts starkly with the measureless "tabernacle" that Lucy keeps for Graham. Her "tent's" lack of object-trappings provides a much more dynamic interior than Graham's frozen manor house, and is a structure in which the loved one rather than "household gods" are revered. This expansive tent signals a crucial kind of emotional capability in Lucy: whereas she has strictly-

defined limits for the pain to which she is often subjected, the place where her love resides is flexible and voluminous. *This* is her best room, and its simple yet diffuse form suggests that her alienation has in fact yielded a profound capacity for friendship, affection, and devotion.

Lucy's description of Graham's heart-mansion suggests that he and Paulina—herself a "perfect cabinet of oddities"—are the ones with problematic ties to commodity objects. In fact, Graham and Paulina emblematize the way that material objects and gender mores combine to profoundly shape bourgeois interiors (*V* 92). For Paulina's part, she identifies with the commodity's attractive power, but also comes to conflate herself *with* the commodity until she becomes one herself, ready-packaged for the marriage market—a forum in which she is an object and Graham is a consumer. Whereas Lucy utilizes psychological vacancy as a kind of safety valve that allows her to feel deeply yet avoid becoming overwhelmed, Paulina explicitly represses her feelings so that she will continue to be an attractive object of desire.[12] Even her letters must abide by the predetermined "tastes" of the man to whom she devotes herself:

> I almost trembled for fear of making the answer too cordial: Graham's tastes are so fastidious. I wrote it three times—chastening and subduing the phrases at every rescript; at last, having confected it till it seemed to me to resemble a morsel of ice flavoured with ever so slight a zest of fruit or sugar, I ventured to seal and despatch it. (*V* 448)

Paulina recognizes Graham as a consumer that will literally take in and digest her "morsel" of a letter, a consumer toward whose "fastidious tastes" she must market not only her body, but also her modes of expression. Graham's preferences are clearly fulfilled by her "little hands," "tiny scissors," her "morsel" of a letter, and her apparent need to "live, move, and have her being in another" (*V* 90). Lucy sees that Paulina's submission to objectifying and commodifying gender

[12] For instance, when Polly must say goodbye to her father for a period of time, Lucy reports that, "The little creature…did for herself what none other could do—contended with an intolerable feeling; and, ere long, in some degree, repressed it" (*V* 86).

constructions has reduced her to something less than an individual: she is "a bond…a mutual concord" that mediates the relationships between men (*V* 508-9).[13] As Graham's wife, she is a doll that may be paraded through the drafty mansion of his heart as an accessory to his marriage feast. Contrary to Badowska's claim that Lucy's life is encapsulated in a "dollhouse" by the end of her narrative, it is Paulina who turns herself into a toy for exhibition and ends up a possession on display in the *Wunderkammer* of Graham's heart (Badowska 1520).

In contrast, Lucy's material interior is constituted by the conjunction of her bodily interior with symbolic images of shelter and enclosure. Psychological experience is a sensory experience, often couched in the language of *weight*: sensibility is "burdensome," an emotionally fraught exchange between Polly and her father is "too brimful" of feeling, and the mysterious and obviously traumatic eight years between Lucy's youthful stay at Bretton and her companionship with the invalid Miss Marchmont inflicts an "icy pressure on [her] lungs" that is far from the threatening "pressure of *things*" that Badowska cites (*V* 79, 99). Emotion courses through her heart, blood vessels, and nerves, fevering her; when obstructed, the results are mournful tears and a pain like aneurism. The interior spaces that house thought and emotion are like lodging-houses or fortresses, structures whose functions are distinctly physical: shelter and nourishment, protection and security from invasion. Even the magical tent to which Lucy alludes is described in terms of embodiment: constrained by the hold of her hand, this tabernacle of veneration depends upon her body for its dimensions. Against the static, object-filled interiors of Graham and Paulina, Lucy's interiority is strikingly dynamic, flexible, and vividly apprehended.

By attending to Lucy's relationship to vacancy and to her vivid descriptions of embodied consciousness, we can recognize that it is not Lucy's psychological life that seems pathological,

[13] Andrew H. Miller's *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* argues that goods inevitably mediate human relations in a consumer culture (20).

but rather that of characters like Graham and Paulina. After all, their material(istic) interiority renders them, in various ways, *objects*. Paulina, whose first rule of social interaction is self-constraint for the sake of accommodating others' tastes, is quite emphatically characterized as a doll throughout Lucy's acquaintance with her; and Graham's clinical perspective—his "dry, materialist views"—gives him an "unimpressible" nature that is incapable of feeling deeply and is drawn to Paulina as an object of desire suitable for incorporation into his heart-mansion, which is more like a museum than a home (*V* 328, 331). Lucy's material interiority, on the other hand, marks her as a vital *subject*. She experiences intellectual and emotional life through profound sensations: a dawning belief in happiness comes upon her like light pouring into a starved hollow, and M. Paul's departure for the West Indies makes her declare that "all my life's hope was thus torn by the roots out of my riven, outraged heart" (*V* 323, 517). Her inner spaces are often in flux, filling like wells or being poured out. She regards the capacity to think and feel—to examine, question, and form conclusions, to rejoice, to rage, and to mourn—as fundamental to human experience, and as critical functions regardless of whether they end in contentment or misery. Facing a series of paintings titled, "La vie d'une femme," Lucy is exasperated by the "flat, dead" images of gray women, who are "cold and vapid as ghosts" (*V* 271). "What women to live with!" she exclaims, "insincere, ill-humoured, *bloodless*, *brainless* nonentities!" (*V* 271, emphasis added). She associates the vitality of conscious life—the quality that separates living people from ghosts—with the blood and the brain. If these channels lie cold, if thought and feeling are anything less than materially-felt phenomena animating the subject from within, then the subject is only a simulation: a "flat," one-dimensional nonentity—a doll (or a painting of a doll) in a museum. By contrast, Lucy's reverberating heart and commodious mind are linked to a psychic dynamism of almost holy dimensions: to a tabernacle carried in the hollow of her hand.

The development of this valuable emotional vitality comes, paradoxically, out of Lucy's painful social alienation. While the novel draws attention to the problematic marginalization attached to domestic labor, it also seems to suggest that marginalization is the only way to avoid a static and shallow form of subjectivity that objectifies the self as well as others. Graham and Paulina's stable bourgeois status seems to ensure their material comfort, but it is clear that the price of this status is the cultivation of "dry," "unimpressible," and frozen interiors. In Lucy's case, the cost of dynamic psychological life—which is marked by powerful surges of feeling and by continual successions of filling up and emptying out—is frustration and disappointment. Vacancy and its performance are therefore the special purview of those excluded from middle-class life and from the precepts that shape middle-class interiority. *Villette* is at once a record of Lucy's alienation as a teacher estranged from her caste and her home, and a careful account of social class's impact on the individual mind—and heart. Brontë's melancholy narrative documents in detail the psychological costs of class stratification and of resultant forms of modern subjectivity. If *Emma* and *Barnaby Rudge* had inquired into the individual mind's role in maintaining the social order, *Villette* examines the ways in which the social order is responsible for shaping the individual psyche.

Embodiment, Perspective, and Novel Reading

The rhetorical effect of a first-person narrative that repeatedly details *emptying out* in such vivid fashion is to characterize subjectivity by means of inwardness. Lucy's consistent focus on her interior life—both in terms of conscious activity and physiological processes—not only establishes her consciousness and perception as embodied, but also tacitly builds a case for subjectivity being constituted through sensations and experiences that are emphatically located

within the body and its sites of consciousness. Lucy sets up mind and heart as doubly-functioning entities: as the nucleal centers to which thoughts and emotions tend (and to which they are admitted or from which they are turned away), and as the twin fountainheads of consciousness (ideas emerge from the wellspring in her mind, and emotions vibrate outward from the heart at the center of her body). As both the receptacles for and the sources of conscious life, the figures of mind and heart in *Villette* highlight the constitution of subjective experience within and around structures that are both materially and symbolically internal to the bodily frame.

This emphasis on inwardness results in a significant division between the subject's interior consciousness and the world that lies beyond the boundaries of her body, and sensory experience takes on the burden of negotiating between these two realms. *Villette* identifies sight as the most powerful of these mediating capabilities, and Lucy's narrative contains recurrent references to eyes and to the activity of watching. Her narrative establishes the eye as a crucial point of exchange between the perceiving subject and the world she inhabits, such that vision becomes a faculty that emphasizes even further the subject's situatedness within a body. In an illuminating early passage, young Paulina looks out a window to see her beloved father coming up the street to Mrs. Bretton's, and Lucy describes her companion's behavior with a distinct emphasis on her own view as well as the little girl's:

> She had sat listlessly, hardly looking,…when—my eye being fixed on hers—I witnessed in its irid and pupil a startling transfiguration. These sudden, dangerous natures—*sensitive* they are called—offer many a curious spectacle to those whom a cooler temperament has secured from participation in their angular vagaries. The fixed and heavy gaze swum, trembled, then glittered in fire; the small overcast brow cleared; the trivial and dejected features lit up; the sad countenance vanished, and in its place appeared a sudden eagerness, an intense expectancy. (*V* 78)

Lucy observes Polly closely enough to see not only her face light up at the sight of something outside, but, even before that, to discern a change in the expression of her eyes and the dilation of her pupils. In this depiction of watching another person watching, Brontë calls attention to the eye as a site of mediation. Polly, in this scene, presents the eye as an opening into the body, and into the conscious life contained therein: her eyes allow an observer to discover her inner "fire" and "expectancy."[14] Lucy's eye demonstrates mediation in the other direction, as it registers external perceptions to be considered by an internally situated mind. This moment at the window shows how the eye in *Villette* is often *like* a window: a point from behind which to observe the exterior world as well as a pane through which others may glimpse the materials and activities of a dynamic interior. It is no coincidence, therefore, that watching others in the novel consistently proves to be an exercise in eye contact or observing another's eyes.[15,16]

Lucy's intensely perspectival experience becomes central to her narrative from the beginning, as she relates a series of scenes, like the one quoted above, in which she observes others but does not interact much with them. In these scenes at her godmother's house, Lucy "gazes," "watches," "witnesses," "looks," "peeps," and refers to her companions as "object[s]…before one's eyes" (*V* 72-99). In assuming a position from which she watches social interaction without participating in it, Lucy offers her audience a view of other characters but not

[14] Elsewhere in these first chapters, Lucy observes of Polly that "the longing wish for the indulgence of a ride glittered in her eye" (*V* 91); and of Graham Bretton that "a sort of complacent wonder at [Polly's] earnest partiality would smile not unkindly in his eyes" (*V* 93).
[15] When Lucy first meets her class at Mme. Beck's, she declares, "I beheld opposite to me a row of eyes and brows that threatened stormy weather" (*V* 145). Elsewhere, her eye is "transfixed through its very pupil…by [M. Paul's] 'lunettes'" as she tries to deliver a message to him (*V* 397).
[16] Foucauldian critics explain *Villette*'s motif of watching as a dramatization of panopticism and social discipline. See Shaw, Shuttleworth, Lawson (especially 23-36), and Sally B. Palmer, "Projecting the Gaze: The Magic Lantern, Cultural Discipline, and *Villette*." On the application of the Foucauldian theory of surveillance to the Victorian novel in general, see D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*.

of herself, with the effect that we find ourselves, as it were, looking on from a point directly behind her eyes. Unlike Brontë's other first-person heroine, Jane Eyre, who frequently reminds her reader of her plain face, small stature, and physical attitude when interacting with other people, Lucy does not provide many details about her own appearance and often avoids explaining her bodily position in relation to others. This refusal to provide a self-portrait has been cited as evidence of "her alienation from her own self and her own body" (Lawson 12), but if we consider this "omission" as part of an aesthetics of embodiment, we can view it as a narrative strategy that reproduces the effect of looking outward from a body. Indeed, we would do well to bear in mind the configuration Lucy lays out in a comment about Dr. John, which is as psychological as it is anatomical: "He…never remembered that I had eyes in my head; much less a brain behind them" (*V* 164).[17] In combination with Lucy's physiological and architectural descriptions of her psychological life, the orientation of her perceptive consciousness behind her eyes creates a rich rendering of embodied subjectivity: of the subject's inescapable boundedness by the bodily frame and of the profound way that her perspective is determined by and situated within those bounds.

Lucy insists, in fact, that the eye is focal point for her consciousness of the external world and her position within it. When her soul re-enters its physical frame after she faints in the street, the return of consciousness is bound up with the recommencement of vision: "The returning sense of sight came upon me, red, as if it swam in blood" (*V* 235); and her attempts to reorient herself are all visual: she has "glimpses of furniture," she "gazes" around the room, and although at first "I knew nothing I looked on" her eyes "ache" as she begins to recognize the objects in the

[17] Nicholas Dames argues that *Villette* advocates an objective rather than a subjective view of selfhood and the body, emblematized in the phrenological diagram to which Lucy sometimes refers (76-124). Also see Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth's entry on Charlotte Brontë and phrenology in *Embodied Selves* (40-1).

parlor as relics of her life with the Brettons (*V* 235-6). In a singular moment, she catches sight of her reflection in a mirror across the room, and sees how ill she looks. She notes that her eyes are large and deep-set, and her hair is dark against her thin and ashen face; "I looked spectral," she writes (*V* 236). Badowska argues that this glimpse of her own body in a "gilded" mirror marks Lucy as just one commodity among many in the parlor, and that she becomes herself "a piece of furniture in the parlor of her mind" in this episode (1515). It seems unlikely, however, that Lucy would identify herself with the furniture around her after such a painstaking description of her Spirit's reunion with Substance and of the reanimation of her senses and "faculties" (*V* 235). Indeed, her description of her reflection is immediately followed by a reiteration that the room is unfamiliar to her, so that she seems to turn quickly away from her reflection both rhetorically and physically (*V* 236). This pivot suggests that part of the strangeness of the room comes from seeing herself as an object rather than looking outward from her body as a seeing subject. The mirror simulates the experience of looking at herself from a point outside of herself, and the fact that her next thought returns to the strangeness of her view points to the jarring reorientation of her perspective from its accustomed place behind her own eyes to a point outside of and in front of them.[18]

In addition to the descriptions of embodied experience that emphasize the body's role in thinking and feeling, then, Lucy weaves this aesthetics of embodiment throughout her narrative to demonstrate the central role that visual perspective plays in her conscious experience of the

[18] Psychoanalytic critics have been drawn to Lucy's relationship with mirrors and mirroring (identity doubles). They argue that Lucy's frequent refusal to describe her reflection is commensurate with her seeing no reflection at all. According to such interpretations, Lucy is "an invisible woman" who refuses to reflect masculine expectations; they also claim that the mysteriously recurring nun in the *pensionnat* induces Lucy to enter the Lacanian mirror stage of identity formation. See Keryn Carter, "The Blank Space of Lucy Snowe's Reflection," and Christina Crosby, "Charlotte Brontë's Haunted Text."

external world—and in the reader's. The first-person novel lends itself to positioning the reader "inside the mind" and "behind the eyes" of its narrator; Lucy's perspective is fitted over our mind's eye like a lens that amplifies subjective experience, and increases our sensitivity (when we set down the imaginative optic of Lucy's narrative) to our own embodied condition. Moreover, the novel calls for a solitary mode of reading that narrows and intensely focuses the attention, and separates us from our environment for an interval—only to return us to it with a more acute sense of the ways in which our bodies mediate between our material interiors and the external world. Being imaginatively transported into another world, another life, another perspective while reading a novel—and perhaps also forgetting about our bodies for a time—briefly defamiliarizes our own habituated position within this world, within our own lives, within our own bodies. Returning to this subjective position with a renewed sense of its material dimensions and its perspectival intensity, we are encouraged by *Villette* to also turn renewed attention to powerfully substantive forms of feeling and thinking.

For *Villette* also fills us with emotion by way of our imaginative alignment with Lucy Snowe and creates the conditions for us to utilize vacancy ourselves. The narrative is laden with detailed descriptions of Lucy's suffering over dozens of chapters and hundreds of pages, and these accounts exert their own pressures on the reader's mind. We encounter this emotional material from an intimate imaginative position, and because of the dual effects of our perspectival proximity and our sympathetic engagement, we become freighted with emotion—feeling both with Lucy and for her. In this way, *Villette* creates the conditions that invite its reader to test vacancy's salutary potential without the necessity of his or her own social marginalization. A young Victorian woman writes in an 1853 letter that Brontë's "powerful" narrative "goes very deep into one's heart" (Winkworth). As we read, we may likewise find our

emotion overflowing into our viscera, increasing the action of our hearts, and feel compelled to find relief—as the young lady does—by "communicating" our feeling into another vessel (*V* 231).

Together with its depiction of classed interiority, *Villette*'s relentless accumulation of feeling encourages readers to cultivate the kind of inner psychological spaces that, like Lucy's, resist constitution through commodity objects and instead favor personal affiliations. The same young lady whose heart *Villette* pervades writes about Lucy in terms that echo Lucy's own narrative: she feels "an extreme reverence for any one capable of so much deep feeling and brave endurance and truth" (Winkworth). Like Lucy's measureless "tabernacle," she is suffused with "reverence" for a person she admires, and her own great capacity for feeling will create an important link, she implies, between her and "any one" that shares this emotional resonance. Prepared by her reading of *Villette* and her emotional connection to Lucy Snowe, she points to her ability to accommodate others in the devotional chambers of her psychological interior—a model that *Villette* submits to all its readers. Through its twin rhetorical strategies of perspectival alignment and emotional saturation, *Villette* asks us to likewise acknowledge that meaningful connection with the world outside us depends upon the conditions of our material interiors.

CHAPTER FOUR

"What a Man's resolution can achieve": Gender and Vacancy in *The Woman in White*

Probably the most well known passage from Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860-61) is the one in which the titular "woman in white" suddenly materializes on a dark country road, sending terrified sensations through the narrator's body. Late one sultry evening, Walter Hartright walks from his mother's cottage back toward London "when, in one moment," he writes, "every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me" (*WW* 63).[1] The description of physical contact and the paralysis it causes are typical of sensation fiction's aesthetics, which rely on and appeal to physiological responses to shocking events. The body plays a central role in sensation fiction, with the reader's physical reactions to fictional events being as vital to the genre as the characters' reactions. Perhaps because of the genre's focus on the visceral, and because *The Woman in White* is widely regarded as the first sensation novel, readers of Walter Hartright's encounter with the mysterious woman have tended to miss the presence of a more psychological element. Soon after his intense physical response to her touch, Walter indicates his inability to mentally reconcile the woman's appearance with his prior expectations of the walk home:

> It was like a dream. Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays? Had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally-domestic atmosphere of my mother's cottage? (*WW* 67)

The concrete sensation produced by the woman's touch gives way to a dreamy reverie that has far less to do with Walter's body than with his mental sense of his own identity and relationship

[1] All references to *The Woman in White* are cited parenthetically in the text as *WW*, and refer to the Broadview edition.

to the world around him. Not only does he question his own sense of self (Was I Walter Hartright?), but he also becomes doubtful about the reality of his environment (Was this the road where holiday people strolled on Sundays?), as well as his experience of time-space relations (Had I really left my mother's cottage an hour ago?). Long after the initial shock to Walter's nervous system, the woman's presence has a lingering effect on his mental apprehension of himself and his surroundings—an effect that suggests a crucial role for the mind's workings in *The Woman in White* in addition to the body's susceptibilities.

In concentrating on the mind's workings in *The Woman in White*, the following discussion modifies the critical appraisal of this novel as being preoccupied solely by the physical nervous system, and argues for its significant ambivalence about physiological psychology's theories of automatic processes. Rather than physical reflexes, I show that the mechanism of will power itself is the novel's central concern. In doing so, I enact a shift in perspective away from a materialist focus on the body, and toward a consideration of psychological habits and character. Specifically, I examine instances when will power is absent, creating a condition of mental vacancy that allows for external influences to direct thoughts and actions. This condition is plain in Walter Hartright's dreamy disorientation, quoted above. His mind is passive to external forces and seriously lacking in active will power. He does not (and, seemingly, cannot) decide the direction of his thoughts. Rather, the elements by which he is surrounded—the road, the night, the woman—determine the state of his mind. Even as he is otherwise occupied by his curiosity about the mysterious woman, there is a marked absence of deliberate, willed thought. He is unable even to positively assert his own identity in order to try and make sense of the woman's incomprehensible presence; instead, he is only able to wonder, "Was I Walter Hartright?" The effacement of his own sense of self leaves him "too bewildered"

about his relationship to the world around him even to speak (*WW* 67). Walter's mental vacancy—his lack of will power—renders his mind functionally incomplete and frequently subject to external influences. Consequently, both his physical surroundings and the people around him are able to direct his thoughts and behavior. In some instances, vacancy results in Walter losing touch with his own identity or his sense of reality (as shown in the passage above). At other times, it leads to a significant life change, which Walter himself is always disinclined to undertake.

Walter's deficiency of will power is not merely a momentary condition brought on by surprise; it continues to affect his mental activity for a sustained period of time. After escorting the woman in white from the country into the city, Walter remains so disoriented that he cannot collect himself even after he has hailed her a cab and watched her depart in it. He begins to doubt whether it was right to help her and spends a long interval in strangely agitated reverie:

> Ten minutes, or more, had passed. I was still on the same side of the way; now mechanically walking forward a few paces; now stopping again absently. At one moment, I found myself doubting the reality of my own adventure; at another, I was perplexed and distressed by an uneasy sense of having done wrong, which yet left me confusedly ignorant of how I could have done right. I hardly knew where I was going, or what I meant to do next; I was conscious of nothing but the confusion of my own thoughts… (*WW* 70)

The language of uncertainty and indirection continues to characterize his mental activity, which he can neither organize nor calm. *Doubt, perplexity, uneasiness,* and *confusion* are the fruit of his encounter with the woman, and they overtake him until he is "conscious of nothing but the confusion of [his] own thoughts." The appearance of the woman in white continues to have the same disruptive effect on his state of mind as it initially had upon his view of the road, and he can no more regulate this mental confusion than he could un-see the mysterious white figure. He is powerless to form a conclusion about anything that has just happened: about the virtue of his

actions, about whether his encounter with the woman actually happened, or even about how he will spend the rest of the night. His mental indecisiveness repeatedly brings him to a physical stop, and he is unable to progress either in thought or in space. He is so absorbed in confusion that he is "conscious of *nothing*" except for his tumultuous mental activity, which makes deliberate physical movement impossible. His mental reverie draws his complete attention—remaining all the time beyond his will power—and consequently his body resorts to automatic movement. The resemblance between his fitful progress along the sidewalk and the vacillating course of his thoughts points to his inability to retain control over either his mind or his body. He may be aware of a great many sensory impressions or confused thoughts, but the absence of will power makes it impossible for him to intervene in the interpretation or management of either, much less to focus his steps steadily down the street. This mental vacancy will turn out to have much higher stakes for Walter Hartright—and for the novel—than merely the inability to (literally) move past an unusual encounter or make sense of it.

Broadly, those stakes are rooted in the relationship between psychological interiority and the external world. In *The Woman in White*, Collins is concerned with the mind's role in shaping social relationships and external conditions, and he singles out the will as the source of such capacity for action. Collins was an enthusiastic reader in physiological psychology, and was particularly fascinated by the work of William Carpenter. Collins' later novel, *The Moonstone* (1868) in fact quotes directly from Carpenter's *Principles of General and Comparative Physiology* (1839) as part of an investigation into the involuntary operations of memory.[2] While

[2] In *The Moonstone*, the physician Ezra Jennings has copied a passage from Carpenter's book, which reads: "There seems much ground for the belief, that every sensory impression which has once been recognised by the perceptive consciousness, is registered (so to speak) in the brain, and may be reproduced at some subsequent time, although there may be no consciousness of its existence in the mind during the whole intermediate period" (459).

Collins explicitly draws on Carpenter's work in depicting involuntary mental activity in *The Moonstone,* his reliance on Carpenter's general theory of volition in *The Woman in White* is implicit—but just as evident. In *The Principles of Human Physiology* (1842), Carpenter contends that the will is a vital part of an individual's humanity and writes that every person possesses a "*self-determining power*, which can rise above all the promptings of external suggestion, and can, to a certain extent, mould external circumstances to his own requirements, instead of being completely subjugated by them" (539, emphasis original). He theorizes that the essence of will power lies in its resistance to external influences, in its ability to "rise above" external circumstances and change them rather than be changed by them. If we recall Walter Hartright's state of mind following the appearance of the woman in white, we can recognize that he has exactly the opposite relationship to his surroundings, and that his plunge into bewilderment and confusion represents a "complete subjugation" to the upheaval in his environment. Afterward, as he "mechanically" paces down the street in a confused state, he perfectly resembles what Carpenter calls a "Biologized" subject, whose mind is "possessed" by a train of thought to which it is wholly "given-up," and whose physical actions are reflexively subject to the reigning succession of ideas (590). In this state, Carpenter explains, the will is "suspended or weakened," cerebral reflexes take the place of deliberate movements, and the subject "*acts*" his reverie—just as Walter physically acts out the halting character of his thoughts (Carpenter 590, emphasis original). In characterizing Walter, therefore, Collins draws on the principles of Carpenter's theory of volition in order to explore the *absence* of will power—a condition that Carpenter deems exceptional and intermittent. If a typical subject is assumed to have a self-determining power that can rise above external circumstances, in other words, Collins imagines what might

happen when the ability to manage the sensory and social pressures of the external world is persistently lacking.

Collins goes beyond imagining a simple inversion of Carpenter's theory, however. He also adds significant dimension to the question of volition and its exercise by incorporating cultural and historical variables. Mental vacancy in *The Woman in White* is embedded in a set of narratives that are dependent upon modern technologies: temporal precision (possible because of the recent standardization of time) and changes in travel and communication (such as the railway and the telegraph) structure both the sequence of the multiple narratives as well as the events within them. These historically specific technological changes alter the Victorian individual's relationship to his everyday environment. His psychological identity—and in particular the development of his will power—is deeply affected through this daily contact with automated space and time. Collins' novel highlights these contemporary anxieties about individual volition in a novel that showcases the stakes of its atrophy. Moreover, Collins points out the uneven development of the will across social groups; his cast of characters draws attention to the ways in which Victorian gender conventions shape volition, such that men are given opportunities to develop will power, while feminine volition is constricted and stifled. The mentally vacant Victorian man, in other words, need not remain so, while mental vacancy is likely to be a permanent condition for the Victorian woman.

In thus bringing together nuanced cultural context and contemporary scientific discourse, *The Woman in White* is a thought experiment about mental vacancy, the chief goal of which is verisimilitude. In the hands of a scientifically-minded man who is also a novelist, emergent theories about will power offered an opportunity to explore a new form of mental vacancy, one that avoided taking artistic liberties about representing the suspension of mental activity (as Jane

Austen had done in *Emma*), and that did not emerge from the author's social ideology (as in Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* and Brontë's *Villette*). As a novelist, Collins is committed to the authenticity of his storylines, as evidenced in his Preface to the first edition of *The Moonstone*:

> Having first ascertained, not only from books, but from living authorities as well, what the result of that experiment would really have been, I have declined to avail myself of the novelist's privilege of supposing something which might have happened, and have so shaped the story as to make it grow out of what actually would have happened. (47-8)[3]

In depicting Walter Hartright's mental subjection to his surroundings, Collins follows the same dedication to scientific and historical authenticity. There is therefore an implicit claim to the theoretical legitimacy of mental vacancy in *The Woman in White*: Walter's lack of self-directing power is conceptually rooted in published theories, a relationship that sets Collins' depiction of mental vacancy apart from earlier models.

This new volitional form of mental vacancy is made possible by a unique element of physiological psychology: its reliance on the language of energy. Within this discourse, the will is characterized as a mental force—a "self-directing *power*." Older theories of mind like faculty psychology and phrenology posited a mind constituted by spatially arranged faculties. Faculty psychology organized mental function according to a hierarchy: reason, faith, love, spiritual awareness, and exercise of the will were all "higher faculties"; sensation, feeling, appetite, and desire were all "lower faculties" (Rylance 27). Faculty psychology was derived from the ancient discourse of the soul; its ladder of faculties, therefore, was a purely conceptual map of intangible mental function, not in any way applicable to the physical brain. Phrenological theory applied spatialization more literally and mapped mental function onto the brain and cranium. Each

[3] In the Preface to the 1861 single-volume edition of *The Woman in White*, Collins similarly asserts the accuracy of the story's legal points, writing that he was guided by "a solicitor of great experience" who corrected every proof-sheet that referred to legal matters (*WW* 620).

mental faculty was localized, and its physical development or size determined intellectual (and social) character. The phrenological diagram emblematizes this theory's profound spatialization of the human mind, which could supposedly be thoroughly understood by any layman merely by studying a two-dimensional chart.

Mid- and late-century theories, in contrast, tended to understand the mind in terms of dynamic processes. Physiological psychologists like Carpenter and Alexander Bain wrote about *currents* of thought and *successions* in mental states.[4] They argued that energy was more important than spatial dimensions to understanding mental activity. Such conceptual vocabulary transformed the will from a "higher faculty" into what Carpenter terms a "self-directing power" (539). In Carpenter's work and in *The Woman in White*, the will is no longer a vaguely defined faculty, but a current of mental energy that directs thought and behavior. Only through physiological psychology's discourse of energy, therefore, does it seem that the will could finally be meaningfully theorized: early faculty psychology is more interested in organizing mental operations than in analyzing them, and the phrenological diagram—quite strikingly—does not include the will at all.[5] Mental models based on a spatialized mind could not satisfactorily account for the intangible power of volition itself, as much as they took its exercise for granted. Physiological psychologists like Carpenter and Bain, however, in turning to the language of energy and force, could not only begin to hypothesize about the will, but could also acknowledge its prominent role in mental life. "Mind is now generally admitted to have a three-fold aspect," writes Bain, "—three different functions—expressed by FEELING (including Emotion), WILL or Volition, and THOUGHT or Intellect" (44). The mind thus came to be explained in terms of

[4] See Carpenter, *Principles of Human Physiology*, and Alexander Bain, *Mind and Body: The Theories of Their Relation*.

[5] In his *System of Phrenology* George Combe cites "firmness" as a distinct organ, but clarifies that while its effects are frequently mistaken for will, firmness is not volition itself (215).

function rather than *faculty*, and was understood to be explicitly reliant upon volition as a crucial component of its most basic operations.

Because Collins' representation of mental vacancy is based on scientific theories that employ the language of dynamic energy, there is little need in *The Woman in White* for the type of metaphorical language employed by earlier novels, like the imagery of mental emptiness in *Emma* or of mental architecture in *Villette*. Mental vacancy in Collins' novel is referred to in terms of power as opposed to structure. Instead of the spatial emptiness or structural cavity that might have characterized vacancy in earlier novels, vacancy within the model of physiological psychology is best thought of as a *power vacuum*. And because Collins relies on concepts that come equipped with their own discourse, the language and imagery of vacancy do not appear as overtly as in *Barnaby Rudge* and *Villette*. Instead, mental vacancy in *The Woman in White* is expressed through the language and imagery of passivity, in which the vacant individual is mentally overpowered by sensory impressions or yields to others' directions. As depicted in the novel, the power vacuum created by a lack of volitional force offers an opportunity for outside forces to supply the directing power that the thinking individual cannot. The thoughts, behavior, and character of such individuals are therefore often determined according to external circumstances rather than internal self-direction.

Gender is the basis for mental vacancy's variation across characters in *The Woman in White*, and this part of the novel's argument depends upon Carpenter's theory of the will's development. The will "*can* rise above all the promptings of external suggestion," he suggests, so long as it is properly cultivated. "The whole theory and practice of Education," he writes, is founded upon the knowledge that, "until this self-directing power has been acquired […] the character of the individual is formed *for* him and not *by* him" (Carpenter 540). Walter Hartright

is, as we will see in more detail shortly, a perfect dramatization of this principle, and yet even as *The Woman in White* endorses Carpenter's definition of volition, it suggests the need for a more thoughtful consideration of how volitional power is cultivated. Education, after all, is a function of culture, and culture is something in which Collins as a novelist is very interested, even if Carpenter as a scientist is not. *Human Physiology* does not inquire into social and cultural factors that might affect the education of the will, such as class, religion, race, nationality, and gender; Carpenter does not even acknowledge that such factors exist. *The Woman in White*, on the other hand, in its dramatization of the weak will, tacitly addresses Carpenter's silence on the influences of culture and offers a picture of the cultural context in which the will does (or does not) develop.

The tension between Carpenter's emphasis on "Education" and his avoidance of historicization is perfectly emblematized in an anecdote about the long-standing antagonism between materialism and spiritualism, with which he introduces his theory of the will. He takes both materialists and spiritualists to task for using blinkered approaches to human consciousness and insists upon the importance of considering both together. To illustrate his point, he tells a fable about two knights who argued over the material of a shield that they viewed from opposite sides, "the one maintaining it to be made of gold, the other of silver, and each proving to be in the right as regarded the half seen by himself" (Carpenter 537). Carpenter extends the metaphor to explain his own approach to theorizing mental operations:

> Now the moral of this fable, as regards our present enquiry, is, that as the entire shield was really made-up of a gold-half and a silver-half *which joined each other midway*, so the Mind and the Brain, notwithstanding those differences in *properties* which place them in different philosophical categories, are so intimately blended in their *actions*, that more valuable information is to be gained by seeking for it at the points of contact, than can be obtained by the prosecution of those older methods of research… (537, emphasis original)

By framing his argument with the image of two knights locked in mortal contest, Carpenter elevates his discussion with an air of nobility and timelessness while simultaneously hinting at the antiquated approaches taken by "those older methods of research." In spite of the rhetorical advantages it provides, however, the comparison excises the messiness of history and culture from Carpenter's account of mental life. He may lay claim to a new and improved approach to understanding the mind, but in laying out his basic principles he turns to fable, the generic function of which is to exhibit eternal truths through unchanging and already-familiar narratives.

While Wilkie Collins was drawn to Carpenter's call for a new perspective within psychology, in *The Woman in White* he tacitly critiques the physiologist for relying on the language and imagery of changeless universals, and for sidestepping questions about history and culture. Carpenter's innovative idea was that material and spiritual elements are *both* crucial to human life and that their interaction produces mental activity, but Collins' novel highlights the profound importance of social influences upon the mind as well. What Carpenter circumvents through the fable of two knights, I argue, Collins attempts to explain through a novel that places mental life within a social narrative, a narrative that is profoundly rooted in historically specific times and places as well as in a culture subject to rapid change.

The Woman in White therefore forwards an argument about how culturally modulated gender differences play out in the development and exercise of the will. In addition to Walter, Laura Fairlie (later Laura, Lady Glyde, and finally Laura Hartright) is also remarkably passive and suggestible. Yet while Walter has opportunities to strengthen his poorly developed will, Laura is continually subjected to circumstances that further weaken her volitional capabilities. The power vacuum in Walter's mind is ultimately replaced with a properly masculine volitional force, developed through adventures that drive him to take charge of his thoughts and behavior in

the interests of self-preservation. Because of her gender, however, Laura is legally and socially obliged to submit to the wills of others—specifically, men: her uncle, her husband (Sir Percival), her husband's menacing confidante (Count Fosco), and—perhaps most significantly—her dead father, who contracts Laura to Sir Percival on his death bed. Laura is propelled through the story as a constant object of masculine power. The physical, emotional, and mental confinement to which that masculine power subjects her weakens her own self-determining power to the point of silence and immobility. If Laura occasionally exhibits a degree of determination, the end of the novel shows her fairly bereft of that energetic force, reduced to a static aesthetic object in her own home.

Through the juxtaposition of two mentally vacant characters, Collins draws attention to the gender inequalities attending the education of the will in Victorian Britain. As a man, Walter has privileged access to adventurous experience and to modes of mobility that extend to his body and mind, as well as to social, economic, and legal spheres. These privileges present Walter with chances (and sometimes obligations) to exercise and strengthen his power of self-determination—chances that are rarely, if ever, available to Laura as a middle-class woman. By juxtaposing categories of gender and mental operation in Walter and Laura, Collins makes a vivid argument for the role of culture in the uneven development of psychological identities.

The Woman in White: Story, Context, and Interpretation

"This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and of what a Man's resolution can achieve" (*WW* 49). So begins the Preamble of *The Woman in White*, in a statement that designates gender difference and will power as principal themes. More specifically, this declaration positions the will as the pivot on which gender difference turns: Woman endures, and

Man resolves. In the case of *The Woman in White*, Woman endures marital misery, emotional abuse, subjugation, imprisonment, torture, and perpetual infantilization. Man resolves to save Woman and in the process to improve his own lot in life. The author of this statement turns out to be Walter Hartright, who reveals himself later in the Preamble as the editor of the novel's collected first-person narratives. Even before the story gets underway, his resolution is shown to lead to the achievement not only of masculine autonomy, but also of editorial and representative authority.

The novel's convoluted action begins with Walter taking a position as drawing-master to Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe, half-sisters who reside on a rural estate. Almost immediately, Walter falls in love with Laura Fairlie, who has been betrothed to Sir Percival Glyde by her father's dying wish. Unable to disguise or suppress his love, Walter signs on as draftsman for an expedition to Central America and removes himself from Laura's presence—and, for many chapters, from the narrative. When he returns from his overseas adventure, he discovers that Laura's marriage to Glyde has resulted in her emotional abuse, her imprisonment in an asylum, the simulation of her death, and the theft of her fortune by her husband. With Laura now socially as well as psychologically helpless, Walter is finally in a position to "take possession" of his beloved. He, Laura, and Marian take a modest lodging in London, where Walter simultaneously supports the ladies through magazine illustration and begins a quest to restore Laura's rightful identity by extracting confessions from Glyde and his insidious comrade, Fosco.

The titular woman in white is Anne Catherick, who is eventually revealed to be Laura's other half-sister. When Walter meets her on the London road at the beginning of the novel, she has just escaped from the asylum in which Sir Percival Glyde had confined her, believing

(mistakenly) that she knows that his own aristocratic identity is the result of forgery and fraud. Anne haunts the story, trying—and failing—to warn Laura more than once about Sir Percival's black character and driving Sir Percival to desperate measures to secure Laura's fortune before the secret of his identity can be exposed. The uncanny resemblance between Anne and Laura serves Glyde and Fosco in their plan to fake Laura's death and take possession of her inheritance. They dress the women in each other's clothes and send Laura to the asylum, while Anne is taken to London in the guise of Lady Glyde. Anne's weak heart is shaken by the trauma of her abduction, and she dies as Lady Glyde. Only by unraveling the mystery of Anne Catherick's past can Walter get the upper hand on Glyde and Fosco, and restore Laura to her proper place.

This action unfolds across a series of first-person narratives contributed by Walter, Marian, the Fairlie family lawyer, Count Fosco, and other eyewitnesses that include Mrs. Catherick (Anne's mother), the doctor who attends the sick woman he believes to be Laura, and even Laura's tombstone. Walter, of course, is the person that commissions, compiles, and edits these testimonies long after the action has taken place; the only contributions to be written during the course of the novel's events are Marian's diary entries. Strikingly, Laura herself is not allowed to write an account of her traumatic experience. Long after the story's events have taken place, she remains silent about her role in them while her husband takes charge of reporting them. Within the plot and at the narrative level, Laura proves passive to the point of silence. The strengthening of Walter's will, however, is a turning point in the plot, the event that enables the narrative mode, and the impetus for the story being told at all. Developing his volitional powers is equivalent, according to Walter himself, to becoming a man. Before he enacts this cultivation, he is problematically effeminate; the thrill he receives from the woman in white's touch might be

said to literally unman him, and to expose a "feminine" vulnerability to sensory impressions and to the operations of his own body. If overcoming passivity marks Walter's successful education into a culturally sanctioned gender identity, then the novel (which he has managed from beginning to end) is the thesis that demonstrates how well he has mastered his lesson.

As a sensation novel, *The Woman in White* depends heavily upon modern technologies, and consequently its representations of mental life are far more historically inflected than William Carpenter's timeless tableau of contesting knights. Henry Mansel's 1863 review of sensation fiction as a genre emphasizes the modernity of such stories, which are "laid in our own days and among the people we are in the habit of meeting" (489). Sensation authors kept their stories firmly rooted in contemporary conditions by drawing on periodical publications for themes and events. Among these source materials were newspaper reports of crime and detection; reports of murder trials; divorce cases following the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857; debates about the rights of women and their roles within and outside of the home; press campaigns about prostitution and the "social evil" it posed; investigations into the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, and, of course, "wrongful incarceration of the vulnerable in asylums" (Pykett "Collins" 52). *The Woman in White* incorporates several of these issues, and the most sensational elements of its plot (i.e. Anne and Laura's identity switch, and Laura's imprisonment in an insane asylum) depend upon other modern technologies of communication: the railroads by which Count Fosco transports Anne and Laura to London, the telegraph system he uses to falsely document the time line of Laura's death, and the emergence of national time, standardized for the sake of efficiency in rail travel, which Fosco exploits together with his use of the telegraph in order to falsify the schedule of his own movements. Sensation fiction was, according to Lyn Pykett, "the product of an age of rapid communication in which railways (and steam power in

general), newspapers and the electric telegraph system changed the physical and social geography of Britain and transformed conceptions of time and space" ("Collins" 53). In the 1850s and 60s, then, Victorians faced a multi-dimensional shift in their experience of the world around them. In the face of such change, William Carpenter's timeless fable of the knights and their shield seems particularly unsatisfying as an explanatory metaphor for human consciousness, and Wilkie Collins' sensational story of fraud, abuse, and railway travel seems like an increasingly fitting context for exploring questions about human will power.

For all the indications, however, that *The Woman in White* is interested in questions of will power, this focus often goes unacknowledged. While Walter Hartright's interactions with his environment resonate strongly with Carpenter's theories and the Preamble clearly designates volition as a principal theme, many critical readings have glossed over it. Even while recognizing the crucial importance of gender politics in this novel, readers frequently overlook the contrast in volitional capacity set up by Walter himself: Man *resolves*, and Woman *endures*. Those critics that concentrate on gender in *The Woman in White* quite consistently argue for Walter's effeminacy in the first half of the novel, but account for it by way of his socioeconomic status or his relationship to his body. As they forward claims about Walter's gender identity, these readings tend to deal in broad statements about gender and implicit power differentials: statements about a "rupture in the male psyche," or about exorcising the woman within (Kucich 132; Miller 155-56). Yet despite their assertion that Walter's outward gender markers are (early on) in tension with his interior existence, these readings often ignore Walter's actual thoughts and mental habits. Consequently, they do not recognize (though Walter himself has announced it) that gender identity is intertwined with will power, and that will power is part of the trinity of mental functions upon which Collins bases his psychological portraits. Collins attempts to

expose the psychological inculcation of gender difference, and to show how this contributes to outward manifestations of gender difference in the social sphere. Yet because they do not examine the details of Walter's mental activity, many interpretations of *The Woman in White* mistake Collins' claims about psychological training for an argument about art or the body.

Walter's profession as an artist is the basis of one such group of critical interpretations. Critics such as Dennis Denisoff, John Kucich, and Tamar Heller contend that mid-century Victorians viewed any form of artistry as a less-than-masculine way to make a living. In this type of reading, Walter's social position as a drawing-master is the most significant factor in his gender identity, and the main obstacle he must overcome in the novel is to increase the respectability of his creative endeavors. He achieves this, according to Dennis Denisoff, by redefining what it means to be an artist. This involves detaching Victorian labels of effeminacy from artistic undertakings by recasting middle-class professional careers as gentlemanly. Such a radical re-framing of creativity was possible, Denisoff says, because the gentleman was a figure "compatible with a masculinity understood as a strenuous psychic regimen, which could be affirmed outside the economic arena, but nonetheless would be embodied as a charismatic self-mastery akin to that of the daring yet disciplined entrepreneur" (42). Denisoff reads Walter's expedition to Honduras as the beginning of this transformation; it is the point at which Walter's professional dependence on private patronage is removed and he is forced into a state of economic self-reliance (Denisoff 45). Working as a magazine illustrator back in London, Walter's continued endeavors as an artist become evidence of his virtuous perseverance, and are therefore worthy of reward in the form of economic stability and a "heteronormative, bourgeois family" (Denisoff 43).

John Kucich posits, similarly, that the novel re-genders art and the artist in order to bolster Walter's masculinity. He argues that cultural shifts in emotional pathology are the obstacles that the novel must overcome in order to render Walter sufficiently masculine at novel's end. Kucich points to Byron and Shelley as traditional examples of privileged male melancholia, a state associated with masculine creative genius. This association had faded by mid-century, and the male melancholic artist instead became "mundane," "déclassé," and identifiable by his effeminacy (Kucich 126-27). Walter's career moves, from drawing master to draftsman to illustrator for a magazine, symbolize a reclamation of status and worth for the male artist, "[expressing] in vocational terms a synthesis of melancholic sensibilities with practical action" (Kucich 134). In other words, the novel successfully negotiates a position for Walter that places him equally in the world of art and the world of commerce, so that his artistry is justified by economics. The result is not only the achievement of proper masculinity on Walter's part, but, on behalf of British male artists at large: the stitching back together of what Kucich calls the cultural "rupture in the male psyche" (132). For all that Denisoff and Kucich are both productively focused on psychic regimens, self-mastery, and emotional pathology, however, they seem interested in Walter only as he presents a case study of the larger cultural trends in which their discussions are invested. The progress of his career and the elevation of his economic status serve merely as structures that lend convenient support to their arguments about Victorian masculinity. Consequently, the novel's particularity is subordinated to expansive claims about masculine creativity, and the possibility that *The Woman in White* makes unique contributions to cultural discourse is rhetorically foreclosed.

Taking a similar position to Denisoff and Kucich, Tamar Heller acknowledges that Walter's effeminacy is wrapped up in making a living as an artist. But where Denisoff and

Kucich view *The Woman in White* as a sort of *Bildungsroman* for Walter, Heller sees a great deal of ambivalence surrounding his ascension to the status of masculine professional. Heller foregrounds the novel's gothic tropes in her reading, contending that Collins' fraught social position as a novelist (and therefore as an implicitly effeminate man) made gothicism and its gender politics particularly resonant for him. Able to identify with the victimized woman and value her transgressive power, *and* to desire a connection to the masculine power that would bring about feminine subjugation, Collins harbored a particular affinity with gothic themes that is distinctly evident, according to Heller, in *The Woman in White* (6-8). Walter Hartright's achievement of a social position in which his artistry is compatible with stable masculinity, she argues, must be viewed alongside Collins' representation of "the social invisibility that renders women blank pages to be inscribed by men" (Heller 112). The problem of Walter's effeminacy, in other words, is inextricably linked to the problem of feminine powerlessness—and in a gothic novel, only one of these issues may be resolved. Walter's masculinity comes at the cost of reinscribing the social values that keep Laura silent and helpless. While Heller's reading, along with Denisoff's and Kucich's, throws useful light on Victorian attitudes about gender and intellectual labor, each of these discussions is largely limited to how that intellectual labor is viewed from social and economic perspectives. They forward arguments about how mental labor is valued from the outside, and about how the value of that labor corresponds to particular categories of gender and class identity. Despite their emphasis on the centrality of Walter's mind to his gender identity, there is little direct engagement with his mental habits in this set of arguments.

In a second group of gender-focused readings, Walter's body is the source of his early, emasculated condition. These discussions posit that the relationship between social coding of the

gendered body and internal physical processes (those associated with the physiology of emotion and nervous conditions) provides the basis for gender identity. Rachel Ablow, for instance, proposes that Walter reinvents himself as a man when he identifies Laura *as* Laura. After her "death," staged by Glyde and Fosco, Laura is socially nobody. When Walter testifies to her identity, he simultaneously takes advantage of the masculine privilege of naming and solidifies his masculinity by making Laura the issue of his Adamic power. The basis of this power, Ablow says, is Walter's assertion that he *feels* that Laura is Laura, and that his physiological responses to her presence attest to her identity (a thrill, a shudder, etc.) (164). In her reading, Victorian men are accorded the power of feeling, of naming that feeling, and of persuading others that such feelings are legitimate (Ablow 173). Walter's gendered body, therefore, is the basis of his social redefinition and the novel endorses this form of men's self-invention that transforms women into vehicles for establishing masculine identity. In contrast to the arguments discussed above, Ablow does not believe that Walter has to take a defensive position in regard to his profession or his awareness of his own effeminacy. In other words, Walter need not mount an effort to change the way others perceive his masculinity; instead, he need only take advantage of the masculine power to which he always already has access in order to intensify his possession of it. According to Ablow, Walter does not become a man over the course of the novel: he becomes a more powerful one.

D.A. Miller's reading of the gendered body in *The Woman in White* is centered around a basic premise about Victorian gender identity: namely, that Victorian men were imagined to begin with improper homosocial relationships and to have a problematic femininity within themselves. The novel, Miller argues, addresses the first problem by redirecting homosocial desire back into the family, in the relationship between father and son. The problem of the

woman within is exorcised through physical hardship, and by incarcerating women in order to make them submissive and pliable. In this way, men "master" not only the woman inside them, but also the women they desire, who become—through the institutional prisons of marriage and asylums—dependent upon them and subject to them. Walter's experience as a draftsman in Honduras is the physical hardship that frees him from his problematic effeminacy, and his marriage to Laura is a continuation of the confinement she experienced in the asylum. For Miller, the nervous body is the keystone of the novel, which depicts nervousness as a contagion that destabilizes gender identity; he documents how feminine anxiety infects and contaminates the men with whom it comes into contact—as most poignantly demonstrated when the woman in white touches Walter on the shoulder (Miller 152).

Ablow and Miller's body-centered readings of gender in *The Woman in White* are firmly grounded in the novel's sensational elements and concentrate on moments of physical sensation and nervous response. Yet in doing so, I would argue that—in different ways—they exceed the maximum value that Collins' narrative actually grants the body. The "feeling" by which Walter verifies Laura's authentic identity, and around which Ablow constructs her argument, for instance, cannot accurately be said to originate from within his body—nor does Walter attempt to suggest that it does. Walter recalls that "the shuddering of an unutterable dread crept over me from head to foot" as the veiled figure of Laura approaches him, and that she "had possession of me, body and soul" (*WW* 419). Yet as his own narrative documents, Walter's consciousness of rapt attention and foreboding is owing to Marian's terrified expression and her dramatic spoken prayer for heaven to strengthen Walter so that he can bear an impending shock (*WW* 419). He is galvanized to recognize Laura as Laura because Marian prepares him for a powerful revelation, and the panic with which she does so evokes a physical response in Walter. In other words,

Walter does not respond physiologically to Laura's presence, as Ablow claims, but to Marian's. When he later writes of his certainty that Laura is Laura, moreover, Walter makes no reference to physical sensation: "Not the shadow of a suspicion," he succinctly avows, "[crossed] my *mind*" (*WW* 422, emphasis added).

Where Ablow's argument grants Walter's body more epistemological authority than Walter himself claims for it, Miller's proposal about the body in *The Woman in White* is constructed upon a problematic view of Victorian gender identity as culturally monolithic. His discussion rhetorically suggests that every Victorian discourse was permeated by a consistent strain of homosocial anxiety and a consistent tendency toward heterosexual violence. Yet, as I have pointed out, the physiological psychology by which Collins was famously fascinated was often silent about the question of gender difference. The implied subject in treatises like Carpenter's *Human Physiology* was certainly male, but contrasting examples were typically drawn from what Victorians considered the "brutish," "lower" orders of humankind rather than from assumptions about essential gender differences.[6] Miller's argument about the nature of Victorian gender identity, therefore, may be said to reasonably extrapolate from popular narratives about nerves, lunacy, and women's rights, but it ignores (while pretending not to) the character of the psychological discourse in which Collins regularly steeped himself.[7] Consequently, Miller's reading of gender in *The Woman in White* mistakenly concludes that the

[6] For instance, William Carpenter's explanation of will power supposes a male subject: "The real *self-formation* commences with *his* consciousness of the possession of that power which enables *him* to determine *his* own course of thought and action; a power which is exercised by the Will, in virtue of its domination over what may be designated as the *automatic* operation of the Mind" (540, emphasis original). To this typical subject Carpenter contrasts the "brute" who "has never heard of a God, of Immortality, or of the worth of his Soul," and who is governed by his lower impulses and appetites (540-1).

[7] For examples from cultural narratives about nerves, lunacy, and women's rights, see Appendices D and E in the Broadview edition of *The Woman in White*.

novel's gender politics are merely mimetic, and that Collins reproduces textually the gender relations and dynamics that structure Victorian social life.

While all of these critical interpretations offer interesting and productive ways to read *The Woman in White*'s gender politics, they do not explicitly take up psychological questions as part of their inquiries. They are interested in the ways that gender identity is socially re/constructed and attached to individuals—either in terms of the social connotations of profession, or in terms of the body's nervous system and modes of feeling. Characters' particularized psychological habits are not analyzed *per se*, in spite of the novel's first-person narratives that offer themselves as expressions of discrete mental lives. Therefore, these various approaches tend to decouple inner life from the matter of gender by way of omission, and consequently they produce readings that overlook the ways in which individuals may be trained (we might also say *engendered*) to perceive, understand, judge, and decide according to gender expectations. This psychological training significantly affects how individuals experience the world, and gender should not, therefore, be discussed as a performance that can be sufficiently comprehended from the outside. As Collins suggests, gender is also created through and manifested in mental activities and habits, the careful parsing of which is vital to understanding the gender constructions belonging to a given culture or era.

For a distinctly psychological approach to gender in *The Woman in White*, we must turn to Jenny Bourne Taylor's *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (1988). Her book explores the potentially radical function of "moral management" in nineteenth-century psychological discourse and argues that Collins took particular advantage of its inherent ambivalence in his novels. The "overarching ideological framework" for Collins' novels in general, Taylor contends, is the equivocation located in two

terms: in *self-control*, which can refer both to the internalization of a regulating gaze and to a struggle for "self-definition and autonomy in the face of established power"; and in *moral management*, which could "promote the belief that a stable, sane identity could be built up by proper training and self-regulation, yet at the same time it could also tacitly suggest the very fragility of the identity that it aimed to sustain" (31). There is a hermeneutic tension, in other words, that Collins exploits and dramatizes, which is directly related to Victorian ideologies concerning identity and its construction from within.

Taylor reads *The Woman in White* as particularly focused on the intersection of psychology and gender identity. She argues that the novel aims to expose the mutually reinforcing relationship between social hierarchies and mental frameworks of perception. This novel, she writes, is "a complex investigation of the interaction of psychic and social forces," and explores "the ways in which social identities are formed by and within particular frameworks of perception, which in turn determine and are determined by social and sexual hierarchies" (Taylor 99). In Taylor's reading, perception is the most significant psychological element through which the external world shapes individual identity. For example, she writes that Walter "sees others in accordance with their conformity to established conventions," and that he "projects" meaning onto people and events based on his preconceived expectations (Taylor 117, 112). When those expectations are thwarted, his sense of self and of reality are so shaken that he begins to suspect he is losing his sanity (Taylor 113-14). This lack of self-control and autonomy, Taylor writes, is compounded by Walter's "feminized" social situation as a drawing-master (113). Eventually, he learns how to properly see the world around him, and his improved ability to interpret people and events, she argues, is reflected in his mounting control over the narrative in the second half of the novel (Taylor 126). Considering the novel's multiple first-person narratives—the construction of

which Collins claimed was his primary interest in writing the novel[8]—a focus on perception is a logical critical choice.

However, Taylor's decision to pair perception with the framing terms of her reading (*self-control* and *moral management*) seems incongruous with the psychological hierarchy inherent in those Victorian concepts, in which the will—not perception—is paramount. For instance, throughout *Self-Help* (1859), a quintessential Victorian text on moral management for a general readership, Samuel Smiles emphasizes the importance of continuous intellectual labor by repeating terms like *industry, perseverance*, *energy*, and *application*. Through the constant use of the language of mental effort, Smiles makes sure to establish the fundamental importance of the will in any program of self-improvement and -control. "[E]nergy of will," he writes, "may be defined to be the very central power of character in a Man—in a word, it is the Man himself" (Smiles 203). George Combe, who popularized phrenology in England and was one of those responsible for presenting it as a system of moral self-improvement, similarly stressed the importance of "the degree to which men [could manage] to *subjugate* their lower animal propensities to the *control* of their higher sentiments and intellectual faculties" (Shuttleworth 65, emphasis added). The will is thus the key force in the Victorian ideology of character on which Taylor builds her argument. In creating and maintaining constant mental labor, the will provides both the means and the evidence of self-control, and is the basis of identity re/construction.

In light of the will's significance in mid-nineteenth century ideas about self-control and character formation, Taylor's decision to analyze perception in *The Woman in White* seems to ignore a crucial element of the very discourse on which her discussion depends. The psychological change in Walter that enables his ascent to social and editorial power is not a

[8] See Collins' Preface to the 1860 London edition of the novel, as well as his Preface to the 1861 French translation (*La Femme en Blanc*).

question of changing the manner in which he perceives the world. Rather, according to contemporary authorities like Smiles and Combe, his increasing control in the novel is owing to a strengthening of will power, which makes him more capable of directing his thoughts about the world and his own actions within (and upon) it. The dynamic relationship between psychic and social forces in this novel cannot therefore be adequately characterized through ways of seeing; instead, the central psychological variable in questions of social identity and gender is the will.

By adjusting the critical perspective on *The Woman in White* so that questions about gender politics converge with psychology in general and will power specifically, we can gain a better appreciation for Collins' engagement with physiological psychology. If we acknowledge the novel's serious literary response to William Carpenter's scientific theory of volition, then we can begin to see a hitherto unacknowledged ambivalence that Collins had toward physiological psychology. For one thing, while Collins was interested in the points of convergence between the material and the spiritual, his work with will power in this novel indicates that he saw the need for significant historicization in accounts of individual mental life. The direction and content of mental life are not timeless and universal, precisely because will power is *self-directing* and varies in its tendencies among different people. Collins' propensity for creating odd characters like Count Fosco and Frederick Fairlie speaks to his belief in such psychological particularity. Human physiology may be universal, Collins suggests through his novel, but human psychology is far from it.

A critical turn toward the psychological can also add to our understanding of Collins as a sensation novelist. Sensation fiction can all too easily be reduced to its depiction of nervous bodies and its influence on the reader's nervous system: to a literary demonstration, in other words, of the body's primacy in conscious life, and of the central role that involuntary processes

have in everyday lived experience. However, as my reading will show, *The Woman in White* also labors to psychologize the lives of its characters: to account for their interiorized thoughts and feelings, and to represent mental processes distinct from physical processes. Collins may "preach to the nerves" of his readers, but he also hints that it is a mistake to constrain our understanding of the mind to the nervous system alone. He gives nefarious voice to overly materialist notions through the despicable Frederick Fairlie, who represents himself as "a bundle of nerves dressed up to look like a man," and through the diabolical Count Fosco, who perversely extols the chemist's ability to turn other men into his puppets by poisoning their bodies and thereby taking charge of their minds (*WW* 370, 594-5). While the human body has a significant presence in *The Woman in White*, it is important to also recognize the crucial role the novel gives to the immaterial power of volition, which emerges as the psychological source and proof of our humanity.[9]

Walter Hartright: From Harmless Domestic Animal to Resolute Man

Walter's encounter with the woman in white is shot through with the evidence of his mental vacancy and of the ways in which elements in his environment fill the power vacuum created by his weak will. The woman's unexpected appearance, as we have seen, disrupts his expectations about what should meet his eyes and consequently disrupts his sense of time, space, and self-identification. In Carpenter's language, Walter is "completely subjugated" by his external circumstances; he is dependent upon his surroundings to create and sustain his sense of reality, and to direct the course of his thoughts. When he feels disconnected from his

[9] On this point, Carpenter argues: "In reducing the Thinking Man to the level of 'a puppet that moves according as its strings are pulled,' the Materialist Philosopher places himself in complete opposition to the undoubting conviction which almost every one feels…that he really possesses *a self-determining power*" (539).

environment, his mental activity becomes unruly and ceases to follow a productive direction—as when he ruminates about meeting the mysterious woman: "I hardly knew where I was going, or what I meant to do next; I was conscious of nothing but the confusion of my own thoughts" (*WW* 70).

Not only the organization but also the focus of Walter's mental activity is determined by his surroundings during his first narrative. Moments before the woman in white appears on the London road, the current of Walter's thoughts shifts significantly:

> So long as I was proceeding through this first and prettiest part of my night walk my mind remained passively open to the impressions produced by the view; and I thought but little on any subject—indeed, so far as my own sensations were concerned, I can hardly say that I thought at all. But when I had left the heath and had turned into the by-road, where there was less to see, the ideas naturally engendered by the approaching change in my habits and occupations gradually drew more and more of my attention exclusively to themselves. (*WW* 62)

Just as Walter will be unable to withstand the jarring influence of Anne Catherick's sudden appearance a few steps further down the road, he describes here the way that his view bears quite profoundly upon his ability to form thoughts and enter into a state of reflection. An appealing view fixes Walter's attention in spite of the fact that he has a great deal to think about regarding his impending move to Limmeridge House. Only when the powerful attractions of his surroundings have receded behind a bend in the road does a substantial train of thought gradually form. Yet even then Walter does not seem to direct this thought willfully: rather, the ideas "*drew* more and more of my attention exclusively *to themselves*." The ideas are presented as the agents in this statement; even when there is "less to see," a reduction in visual stimuli does not necessarily allow Walter any more deliberate control over his thoughts.

It is deeply ironic that this power vacuum in Walter's mind has a proxy in his physical environment. Drawing-masters are charged with, literally, *mastering* landscapes and teaching

that mastery to their pupils. While it might seem natural for a drawing-master to concentrate on "the prettiest part of [his] night walk," Walter's account of doing so makes clear that he is not subjecting the view to artistic appraisal. He is not, in fact, exercising any direction whatsoever over his mental activity: "indeed, so far as my own sensations were concerned, I can hardly say that I thought at all." With his mind laid "passively open" to the influence of the landscape through which he walks, Walter fails to render the space around him an object—which is the proper relationship between a Victorian artist and landscape. Instead, he submits to the object position himself, allowing the inanimate landscape to master him: to "draw" him, as he is incapable of drawing it. This striking reversal of drawing subject and drawn object vividly illustrates the power vacuum in Walter's mind and his consequent "subjugation" to external circumstances.

Wilkie Collins' own descriptions of scenery elsewhere echo the idea that the landscape should not have this type of effect upon the workings of an artist's mind. In *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851), Collins' narrative of a walking-tour of Cornwall, he describes the picturesque scenery he encounters while walking to Land's End. There,

> Nature appears in her most triumphant glory and beauty—there, every mile, as you proceed, offers some new prospect, or awakens some fresh impression. All objects that you meet with, great and small, moving and motionless, seem united in perfect harmony to form a scene which presents a wild primeval aspect—a scene where original images might still be found by the poet; and where original pictures are waiting, ready composed, for the painter's eye. (197)

Nature may offer "impressions," and scenery may be capable of affecting the viewer with an emotional response to its beauty, but Collins specifically describes it as "a scene," emphasizing the artistic opportunities available to poets and painters in studying and representing it. Throughout *Rambles*, Collins extols Nature's beauty, sublimity, and recuperative properties, but

ultimately frames these landscapes in terms of how they offer themselves up to artistic rendering. It is natural, in these terms, for the artist to be "impressed" by the view, but the proper response is for him to, in turn, act upon the view by representing it artistically, thereby preserving the subject/object relationship between Man and Nature.

Walter's passivity to environment, however, makes this relationship wholly impossible for the span of his first narrative. The views that should be, as Collins writes in *Rambles Beyond Railways*, "*objects*" to the artist's eye in fact exert extraordinary influence upon the drawing-master's trains of thought, his sense of self, and even his memory. Looking out of a window at Limmeridge House on his first morning there, Walter undergoes his greatest objectification yet. As he gazes at the Cumberland shoreline, he experiences the onset of a new thought pattern as well as a severance from his life as he had understood it only a moment before:

> The view was such a surprise, and such a change to me, after my weary London experience of brick and mortar landscape, that I seemed to burst into a new life and a new set of thoughts the moment I looked at it. A confused sensation of having suddenly lost my familiarity with the past, without acquiring any additional clearness of idea in reference to the present or the future, took possession of my mind. (*WW* 73)

Even with the architectural aid of the window that imposes a frame upon his view, Walter cannot look upon the landscape as an object of aesthetic value. In fact, the borders by which it is confined seem to concentrate its influence as it rushes into the power vacuum in Walter's mind, until he "bursts" with new thoughts and a new sense of identity. As the landscape permeates his mind and wrenches it in a new direction, it also drains his recent memories of immediacy and impact, until they are "dull and faint" (*WW* 73). Standing at his window, external circumstances "[take] possession of [his] mind" and subjugate him so completely that he loses all sense of time—of his past, present, and future. Although Walter's recollection of this moment may be suggestive of the new possibilities that will open to him at Limmeridge (in the form of his future

wife), this passage makes clear that there is little chance that his own volition will play a role in their development. At this point, he is no more capable of applying Carpenter's "self-directing power" to his prospects in life than he is of mastering the prospects that it is his job to draw.

Walter enters Limmeridge House, in fact, in the guise of a "harmless domestic animal," a figure accustomed—even trained—to yield to others (*WW* 103). And in this capacity, Walter regularly submits to the guidance of family and friends. It is through the combined remonstrance of his mother, sister, and Professor Pesca, for instance, that Walter is moved to take the position at Limmeridge House—in spite of his own "inexplicable unwillingness" to do so (*WW* 59). "Though I could not conquer my own unaccountable perversity," he writes, "I had at least virtue enough to […] end the discussion pleasantly by giving way" (*WW* 61). Walter thus makes a virtue of passivity when he takes his position at Limmeridge, and justifies the continuation of that passivity through the power of love when he finds that his "hardly-earned self-control" has crumbled, and he has become enamored of his pupil, Laura Fairlie (*WW* 103). Laura herself is far too weak-willed to articulate the pain she feels at being promised to Sir Percival (while returning Walter's affection), and Walter, too, is unable to take steps to resolve the tension. "My situation," he writes, "aggravated by the sense of my own miserable weakness…was becoming intolerable…yet how to act for the best, or what to say first, was more than I could tell" (*WW* 105).

Up to this point, the narrative merely hints at the effeminizing effect of Walter's mental vacancy. When he falls in love with Laura and becomes paralyzed by doubt, however, his equivocal gender identity quickly becomes an explicit focus. Love is a paradigmatic instance of the will's subjugation: it overrides all intentions and, according to poetic convention, renders the loving subject helpless in its wake—renders him, in other words, the helpless object of

circumstance. Yet Walter's vulnerability as a man in love is compounded by his constitutionally atrophied will, and his position is one of absolute powerlessness. At Limmeridge House, Walter's thoughts and actions are subject to Laura's influence as his beloved, and, finally, to Marian Halcombe's influence as a well-intentioned friend: "From this position of helplessness and humiliation, I was rescued by Miss Halcombe" (*WW* 105). The drawing-master-in-love becomes the damsel in distress, dependent upon a strong woman to "rescue" him from his inability to direct his own action.

Even before this crisis, Walter's narrative has established Marian as a hermaphroditic figure, possessed of a classically feminine body and a masculine face. Her complexion is "almost swarthy," and "the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache" (*WW* 74). Where these general features are *almost* manly, her organs of expression (mouth and eyes) are thoroughly so, and her piercing gaze is, very tellingly, "resolute" (*WW* 74). This resolve, which the Preamble designates the province of Man, is the foundation of Marian and Walter's inverted gender relationship and the means by which Walter takes on the position of damsel in distress and Marian plays the heroic savior. In a dramatic scene, she calls attention to the weakness that has allowed Walter to fall in love with Laura. He must suppress his feelings and leave Limmeridge, she says, because Laura is engaged to be married:

> "Crush it!" she said. "Here, where you first saw her, crush it! Don't shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man!"
>
> The suppressed vehemence with which she spoke, the strength which her will—concentrated in the look she fixed on me, and in the hold on my arm that she had not yet relinquished—communicated to mine, steadied me. We both waited for a minute in silence. At the end of that time I had justified her generous faith in my manhood—I had, outwardly at least, recovered my self-control. (*WW* 110)

Far from a "generous faith" in his manhood, Marian clearly believes that she needs to bolster Walter's masculine strength, and she channels her will into him. The strong will, resolute heart,

and self-reliant mind that Walter will later claim for himself in a declaration of his manhood must be supplied from an external source at this moment. He confesses at the end of this passage that only his external self-control is intact; inwardly, we are to understand, he still cannot take control of his thoughts or feelings.

In choosing for this interview the very spot where he first met Laura, Marian seems to recognize Walter's susceptibility to his environment. She insists that he conquer his love for Laura in the exact place where it began: "Here, where you first saw her, crush it!" This instruction is gendered, so that to be vulnerable to this emotionally charged space is to be feminine ("Don't shrink under it like a woman"), while to vanquish the emotion is commensurate with conquering the space, and is masculine ("trample it under foot like a man"). Marian clearly realizes, moreover, that Walter is not yet man enough for the gendered task with which she charges him. She does not give him the option to conquer his feelings and remain at Limmeridge because she knows the space still holds a great deal of power over him—that he *cannot* conquer his feelings, in other words, as long as he is subject to the influences of the house and grounds. This is the same reason that, several weeks later, she takes charge of his situation and finds him a place as draughtsman in the Honduras expedition: "in his unhappy position, how can I expect him, or wish him, to remain at home?" (*WW* 205).

The expedition takes Walter away from the action for many months and pages; his second narrative begins when he returns to England from "a new world of adventure and peril" (*WW* 416). The language with which he thus refers to his time in Honduras offers a striking comparison to the language of his earlier experiences. Describing his encounter with the woman in white, Walter had found himself, only moments afterward, "doubting the reality of my own *adventure*" (*WW* 70, emphasis added). Before going to Central America, Walter's idea of an

adventure was encountering an unexpected moral choice: the "adventure" of meeting the woman in white leaves him wondering whether he has helped a victim of false imprisonment escape or helped unleash a dangerous madwoman upon the metropolis (*WW* 71). His role in this early adventure is primarily as a moral agent, and in that capacity Walter's choice involves a minimum of action on his part: he merely hails her a cab and allows her to go on her way without interfering in her affairs. His time in Honduras, however, has effected a change in his understanding of adventure. Instead of a moral choice, an adventure now refers to an encounter with danger, and implicitly requires physical vigor and action. "Death by disease, death by the Indians, death by drowning": Walter has escaped all three, and in doing so has demonstrated a new ability to resist environmental forces (*WW* 415). While he has not yet begun, in the words of Carpenter, to "mould external circumstances to his own requirements," the education of his will has undeniably commenced (539). The threat of death spurs him to take control of his thoughts and behavior, and to take action rather than submit to annihilation.

Where these perilous encounters trigger the cultivation of Walter's will power and enable him to resist external influences, his written account of his return to England is an opportunity to direct his will power outward and to begin shaping his circumstances and gender identity. Although imperial adventure may be the mechanism that activates his volitional forces, in other words, the *development* of those forces is owing to Walter himself. Carpenter points out that "real *self-formation* commences with [a man's] consciousness of the possession of that power which enables him to determine his own course of thought and action" (540, emphasis original). This principle is reflected in Walter's second narrative: once self-preservation has prompted him to take full charge of himself, he becomes aware of his ability to determine the circumstances of his life, and of the right to claim his own identity. The first step he takes in this self-formation is

declaring that what happened in Central America is not relevant to the story at hand: "These pages are not the record of my wanderings and my dangers away from home," he states firmly (*WW* 416). The textual lacuna that Honduras consequently becomes serves as a blank space onto which Walter can inscribe a heroic masculinity. In waving away the significance of escaping death three times, he dismisses the significance of his own physical peril. The vague, terse phrases ("Death by disease, death by the Indians, death by drowning") are a second level of dismissal in themselves, as if the threats are not worth elaborating upon (*WW* 415). The bravery and implicit humility displayed in this declaration are the foundation upon which Walter fortifies his masculinity. They are also the first seeds of self-confidence offered to the reader, who can only now begin to imagine Walter as capable of saving Laura.

The cultivation of a self-denying heroism in turn gives Walter the opportunity to act upon the audience's admiration and sympathy by explicitly laying claim to additional growth. Even as he modestly denies the importance of his experience in Honduras, he simultaneously spins that modesty into a justification for expounding upon his newfound strength:

> From that self-imposed exile I came back, as I had hoped, prayed, believed I should come back—a changed man. In the waters of a new life I had tempered my nature afresh. In the stern school of extremity and danger my will had learnt to be strong, my heart to be resolute, my mind to rely on itself. I had gone out to fly from my own future. I came back to face it, as a man should. (*WW* 416)

Not only does Walter claim masculine autonomy through this declaration, but he also identifies a triumvirate of will power (strength, resolution, and self-reliance) that multiplies his accomplishment by three. He repeatedly asserts that he is "a man," and saturates the interval between those assertions with the language of effort. With specific details of the expedition suppressed and replaced with assertions of Walter's growth and strength, there is no room for the reader to entertain thoughts of Walter as anything but brave and persevering. His conduct and his

emotional state during the various visitations of death are concealed, and the reader is encouraged to project Walter's new characteristics back onto those experiences and imagine him as courageous and resolute in the face of danger.

His newfound will and mental autonomy finally put Walter in a position to evaluate the space around him instead of reacting to it in a state of mental vacancy. He begins to demonstrate a proper relationship to the landscape, claiming the active subject position for himself and maintaining the view before him as an object upon which his eye and mind act. This is most evident in his description of Welmingham, the town in which Anne Catherick's mother lives, and where he travels in his determination to trace the woman in white's history. Located close to a river for convenience of trade, the town is exceptionally ugly—evidence of its mercantile aspirations contrasts starkly with the picturesque rural scene that Walter seems to have expected—and his response is to compare the English town with foreign spaces of ruin:

> Is there any wilderness of sand in the deserts of Arabia, is there any prospect of desolation among the ruins of Palestine, which can rival the repelling effect on the eye, and the depressing influence on the mind, of an English country town in the first stage of its existence, and in the transition state of its prosperity?.... And the tradesmen who stared after me from their lonely shops; the trees that drooped helpless in their arid exile of unfinished crescents and squares; the dead house-carcasses that waited in vain for the vivifying human element to animate them with the breath of life; every creature that I saw; every *object* that I passed—seemed to answer with one accord: The deserts of Arabia are innocent of our civilised desolation—the ruins of Palestine are incapable of our modern gloom! (*WW* 483-4, emphasis added)

The sight of Welmingham affects Walter, but he responds to the sensory experience with an active, creative comparison to the Middle East. His thoughts are not arrested when his expectations of the view are thwarted, nor does he himself does sink into a depression at the sight of desolation (despite knowing that the view has the potential to depress). Instead, he moves beyond his immediate sensations to draw this comparison in an impersonal way ("*the* eye"; "*the*

mind"), joining his own evaluative perspective to a collective one: "*our* civilised desolation," "*our* modern gloom." The view is evaluated, described, and offered to a collective audience like a painting would be (although it reproduces a rather ugly prospect). In thus describing Welmingham, Walter's mental subjugation to physical surroundings is shown to have been replaced with a cosmopolitan Englishman's critical appraisal. No longer does the landscape rush into the power vacuum where the will should be; rather, Walter's fortified will acts upon his sensory impressions of the landscape, not only enabling him to organize his thoughts and describe the view, but also to authoritatively critique what he sees from a subject position that appraises the environment as an object.

Walter's description of Welmingham avoids the problematic linkage between his view and his mental activity that so often characterized his first narrative, but he does draw connections between his mental operations and certain views elsewhere in a way that echoes his pre-adventure passivity. The difference with these later passages is that the landscapes in his second narrative are always subordinate to the exercise of his will. After learning of Laura's apparent death, Walter goes to Limmeridge to visit her grave. As the house and grounds come into view, Walter vividly remembers the happier times he associates with the place—without actually losing touch with the present:

> The chances and changes, the wanderings and dangers of months and months past, all shrank and shrivelled to nothing in my mind. It was like yesterday, since my feet had last trodden the fragrant heathy ground! I thought I should see her coming to meet me, with her little straw hat shading her face, her simple dress fluttering in the air, and her well-filled sketch-book ready in her hand.
>
> Oh, Death, thou hast thy sting! oh, Grave, thou hast thy victory!
> I turned aside… (*WW* 417-18)

Even though the sight of Limmeridge House awakens his remembrance of Laura, it does not change the direction of his current of thought (he is there to visit Laura's grave, and it is no

significant change in his train of thought to remember her as she lived), nor does it unmoor his temporal orientation as it once might have (his remembrance of her walking across the moor to meet him is unhesitatingly coupled with the acknowledgment that she is dead, and that to meet her now he must direct his steps to the churchyard). The changes of recent months shrink only momentarily before Walter allows himself to contemplate them again in light of the Death in which they have (supposedly) resulted.

When Marian appears in the churchyard with a veiled figure that Walter almost immediately recognizes as Laura, the shock of seeing her alive momentarily weakens him and brings his narrative abruptly to a close. But this test of his strength, like the adventures in Honduras, becomes an opportunity to fortify his resolve even further. In describing this life-changing moment, he turns again to landscape imagery, but this time he casts himself as an adventurer poised to dominate it: his life "turned at once and for ever into a new direction—this is the prospect which now opens before me, like the burst of view from a mountain's top" (*WW* 421). Astride the mountaintop, Walter is in a powerful, exhilarating position and the prospect "opens before" him, as if submitting itself to assessment by his gaze as well as to the possibility of traversal by his body. The metaphorical "prospect" suggestively calls to mind Laura herself, who is, Walter declares, "mine at last!" (*WW* 423). Laura's sudden appearance may have taken possession of Walter at first, but he soon overcomes his surprise and exerts himself to take possession of her instead. Walter's implicit comparison of Laura to an expanse of land seen from a mountain top is a rhetorical strategy doing double duty: it reinforces his subject position as a powerful man in relation both to the landscapes that used to dominate him and to the woman he will marry. As he asserts his masculine ownership, the landscape loses its role of compelling agent and becomes a feminine object similar to Laura herself.

Moreover, this landscape is purely imaginary: Walter does not draw from any part of the view in front of him in creating it; he conjures it up as a symbol for his new relationship to Laura. In his earlier state of mental vacancy, the landscape viewed through his window at Limmeridge had effectively penetrated his mind and taken over his thoughts. In this passage, however, he creates and projects a landscape onto the page, reversing the flow of power and proving that the mental vacuum that had once afflicted him has been filled with a significant force of resolution. Where landscapes had once exceeded the limits of their frames in affecting the drawing-master, now Walter imposes the boundaries of metaphor on them and neatly encloses the people they represent within their confines. The prospect opening before him, then, is the deeper cultivation and exercise of his will, both upon his environment and upon the people around him. The natural result of this process, in accordance with Carpenter's theory, is that Walter becomes "the arbiter of his own destinies" (Carpenter 540). More than that, however, he assumes the arbitration of others' destinies as well.

After he lays claim to Laura, Walter leaves behind mere metaphors of domination and begins enacting the heroic masculinity that his foreign adventures had given him the opportunity to assert. He takes charge of Marian and Laura (homeless after Count Fosco's scheming), and establishes a poor household in London under an assumed name. Where Walter had once been a "harmless domestic animal," a live-in drawing-master hired to teach affluent young women how to sketch, in London he is "an obscure, unnoticed man, without patron or friend," whose artistic skills must pay not only for his own room and board, but also for those of two dependents as well (*WW* 422). Where Marian had once rescued him from a helpless position, now it is Walter that does the rescuing—and the directing as well. Neither Laura nor Marian is allowed to leave their lodging without Walter's company, nor admit any visitor without his consent (*WW* 439).

Through his resolve to help the two women, he elevates himself from his former position as domestic employee to the head of a household. The same women from whom he used to take his cues now look to him for direction and leadership.

Walter's strength of will is evident in every action after he reunites with Laura and Marian, particularly in his quest to untangle the scheme that imprisoned Laura and robbed her of her identity. "Whatever result events might be destined to produce," he declares, "I resolved to pursue my own course, straight to the end in view, without stopping or turning aside, for Sir Percival, or for any one" (*WW* 493). He is prepared to square off against the powerful baronet, to "force him from his position of security," and to "crush" him (*WW* 455, 489). The man that had once obliged Walter to "crush" his love for Laura is now a vulnerable object that Walter is determined to destroy. To this end, Walter tracks down and interviews a host of people that he believes can provide him with compromising knowledge about Sir Percival. Taking on the role of an amateur private detective and archivist, he traces people's whereabouts, makes accurate deductions concerning clues, secrets, and slips of the tongue, and discovers the secret of Sir Percival's illegitimate birth. His search drives Sir Percival into a panic, and the baronet's frenzied attempt to thwart Walter's progress ends in his own fiery death. Though Walter had resolved to crush him only metaphorically, his fortitude leads (albeit indirectly) to a fatal reckoning.

The greatest external force with which Walter contends is Count Fosco, whose formidable power leads Marian to describe him as "a man who could tame anything" (*WW* 240). More than simply strong-willed, the Count is a mesmerist who frequently seems able to force his way into other people's minds, probing and directing their thoughts. Like a "magician," Fosco has subdued his once-outspoken, feminist wife into "a faithful dog" (*WW* 240, 239). He makes

himself "master of [the] springs of action" in Laura and Sir Percival, and "manages" them daily in a way that often forces their will power "into abeyance" in spite of themselves (Carpenter 544, 539; *WW* 245). Most telling, perhaps, is Marian's first-hand narrative of the Count's influence over her. He often "[fixes] his unfathomable grey eyes on me, with that cold clear irresistible glitter in them, which always forces me to look at him, and always makes me uneasy…. An unutterable suspicion that his mind is prying into mine, overcomes me at these times" (*WW* 286). Fosco's glittering gaze is more than a match for Marian's "resolute brown eyes" (*WW* 74), and she admits that she cannot resist its compelling force. This moment showcases the Count's ability to subdue her will; shortly afterward, she reveals the extent to which he can take advantage of her subjugation:

> His eyes seemed to reach my inmost soul through the thickening obscurity of the twilight. His voice trembled along every nerve in my body, and turned me hot and cold alternately. (*WW* 307)

Body and soul are violated in the Count's exercise of a potent volitional force. Not only does he have the power of discovering Marian's thoughts, but he can penetrate the workings of her body with just his voice. The Count declares his belief in a "window in our bosoms," which facilitates a poetic rapport between the heart and scenes of natural beauty (*WW* 306). What he demonstrates, however, is the possibility of a far more disconcerting kind of window, by which he may force his way into others' minds and bodies.

This enemy, who even Walter recognizes as "unassailable," presents the only chance to restore Laura's identity after Sir Percival's death (*WW* 556). Walter's victory over the Count is due, crucially, to his own ability to penetrate Fosco's mind and body. Face to face with the mesmerist, Walter knows that Fosco has the advantage, and that his own life "hung by a thread" (*WW* 579). Yet he wrenches the balance of power into his own favor by anticipating and parrying

the Count's attempts to maintain his dominant position. Walter's eventual triumph is forecasted in his dramatic invasion of Fosco's hitherto "unassailable" consciousness: "I thought with *his* mind; I felt with *his* fingers" (*WW* 580). He discovers, through this striking occupation of the Count's mind and body, the literal mechanism of his enemy's power (a gun) and in doing so demonstrates that his will power exceeds Fosco's. Having successfully faced down his opponent, Walter clinches his advantage by warning that he has exposed Fosco's identity to an enemy, and then he makes the Count's future subject to his own conditions—which he states in the form of demands (*WW* 582-83). The result of this battle of wills is Fosco's written confession of fraud, and his flight to the Continent. By molding the circumstances of his meeting with the Count to his own requirements, Walter gains the means of proving publicly that the woman he has married is in fact Laura, Lady Glyde. Consequently, he also significantly improves his own social position: his chivalrous resolution in his wife's interests demonstrates that he is a gentleman in character, and his newly-recognized matrimonial link to the landed gentry makes him a gentleman in the eyes of society. The pages of Fosco's confession come to be symbolic of Walter's own triumph—not just over Fosco, but over the psychic and social limitations associated with his weak will. Moreover, Walter's penetration of Fosco's mind and fingers is a reversal of that earlier scene at Limmeridge, in which Marian had penetrated Walter and channeled her will into him. Once a mentally vacant man, unable to direct his own actions and subject to profoundly affecting impressions from his environment, Walter demonstrates in Count Fosco's study that his will now produces both directions and impressions. Not only can it be channeled into others for a given purpose, but it can also impress upon the page written characters that record and verify his authority.

While Fosco's confession is a pivotal text due to its content, it is only one of many important texts that are produced as a result of Walter's resolution. In addition, Mrs. Catherick feels constrained to send Walter a long letter detailing how she helped Sir Percival commit the forgery that hid his parents' illicit union; Frederick Fairlie, Laura's uncle, obliges Walter with a narrative of his meeting with Count Fosco; and Walter himself secures Fosco's cooperation by sending a notice of the Count's real identity under seal to his friend Professor Pesca. Once he has solved (and proven) the case of Laura's victimization, he strengthens his relationship to writing by taking on the editorship of her story: he collects the narratives of other relevant witnesses, composes his own first-person account, and arranges them into the volume titled—presumably by Walter himself—*The Woman in White*.

This authoritative position in relation to text vividly demonstrates Walter's increased powers of will. Not only do his own narratives trace his transformation from a passive object into an active, resolute man, but also the text itself is a product of his effort that emblematizes his intellectual authority and autonomy. Those critics that have cited his ascent to magazine illustrator as the definitive sign of his waxing masculine power often overlook the supremacy he wields as editor. They consequently miss Walter's double transition, from visual to textual representation, and from the natural to the legal world (in which his Preamble firmly situates the collected "testimonies"). Moreover, Walter declares toward the end of his final narrative that he has changed the names of everyone involved in the story to protect their anonymity. This power to determine others' identities—what Tamar Heller calls "the Adamic power of naming" (115)—indicates that Walter not only takes charge of organizing and presenting the story of the woman in white, but also of determining how its players may be known. Throughout most of the story, Walter is hired to represent what others dictate: as a drawing-master, as a draftsman on the

expedition, and in London as a magazine illustrator. But the text of *The Woman in White* is proof that he is his own master—and, to varying degrees, master over other people. His sense of his own dominance in the end leads him to claim ownership of what he has elsewhere designated Laura's: "such a story as *mine*," he writes (*WW* 560, emphasis added). Just as he makes willful impressions on the page that signal his recovery from and reversal of vacancy's affliction, so he deliberately overwrites other people's identities as well as their implicit claims on the reader's consideration.

It is no accident, then, that the story Walter makes his own culminates in a scene centered on ownership and possession. Asked to meet Laura and Marian at Limmeridge House, Walter discovers that his son has inherited the estate on the death of Laura's uncle. Marian introduces Walter to his child, now legally a member of the landed gentry: "Let me make two eminent personages known to one another: Mr. Walter Hartright—*the Heir of Limmeridge*" (*WW* 617, emphasis original). Marian's speech, as Walter reports it, juxtaposes Walter's name to the announcement of an inheritance, which suggestively links Walter himself to the propertied position under which he has so long been a subordinate employee. Walter's narrative thus ends with the promise of a future filled with social and economic power, both of which he is now very capable of exercising. This final ascent in power resonates dramatically as Walter concludes his narrative: "In writing those last words, I have written all," he declares (*WW* 617).

Thus Collins offers a representation of the education of a man's will. With striking consistency, Walter's increasing powers of volition are both explicitly and implicitly linked to his increased masculinity. Not only does Walter's case show that a powerful will is concomitant with an effective masculinity, but it also implies that manhood is actually a condition of the will's cultivation. The dangerous adventure and global mobility that initially bolster Walter's

will power are opportunities to which he has privileged masculine access. The chance to escape the everyday conditions that subjugate him and to redefine his relationship to his surroundings can only be taken advantage of because of his implicit masculine right to act in his own interest and on his own authority. His achievement is therefore not the result, as some have argued, of a struggle with or redefinition of the terms of masculinity; nor is it a physical performance in which he stabilizes and exploits the masculine body's social power. Rather, it is possible because the means to ascendancy are inherent in the psychological construction of the Victorian man. Carpenter signals this fact when he writes that "real *self-formation* commences with [a man's] consciousness of the possession of that power which enables him to determine his own course of thought and action" (540, emphasis original). In the context of *The Woman in White*, this means that the development of Walter's will power depends merely upon his recognition that, as a man, he already possesses it. As Collins illustrates through the figure of Laura, however, the cultivation of a Victorian *woman's* will is, quite literally, another story.

"What a woman's patience can endure": Feminine Volition and Vacancy

The title of *The Woman in White* is remarkably ambiguous because it can indicate Anne Catherick (who always dresses in white) *and/or* Laura Fairlie, who often wears the color. The fact that these women are physical doubles and thus interchangeable (a resemblance upon which Count Fosco's dastardly plot depends) points to the insubstantiality of their personalities. Similarity of figure and feature makes Count Fosco's sleight of hand effective in fooling people who have never met the two women; more significantly, though, the faintness of their personal identities allows the scheme to fool even Laura's former neighbors in Cumberland into believing that she is not herself. Laura and Anne are both like white-clad blanks, perfectly silent in the

narrative and subject to representation by almost any person but themselves. Their words and actions are reported by the people allowed to write an account—Walter, Marian, Fosco, etc.—but neither contributes a narrative to the story that is purportedly theirs: Anne because she dies, Laura because Walter decides she is too fragile for such a task. Maintained in silent submissiveness from first to last by her father's dying wish, her first husband's intimidation, and her second husband's protectiveness, Laura's is the undesirable condition William Carpenter describes so dispassionately in *Human Physiology*: "…so long as the circumstances are unfavourable to the development of the self-directing power, and to the operation of those higher tendencies which should furnish the best motives to its exercise, so long the character of the individual *is* formed *for* him and not *by* him" (540, emphasis original).

Laura's character is formed for her through the Victorian gender expectations to which she dutifully submits. The conditions that shape her life are made up of expectations for submissive, self-sacrificing women that recognize and fulfill their obligations to others. Women are, in Marian's words, "condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats," and must meet all trials with a "frail composure" (*WW* 222-23). Marian is acutely aware of the inequality in gender expectations and fulfills them only facetiously, with a sense of self-loathing for the weakness that she is expected to maintain. Laura, on the other hand, wholeheartedly believes in her duty to conform to them.

Nowhere is that imperative to gender conformity more strictly obeyed than at Limmeridge, when Laura insists on informing Sir Percival of her feelings for another man. Her decision is based on the obligations she believes she has to her (dead) father and to Sir Percival himself, and the situation highlights the consistency with which her relationships to men determine her choices in life. Although Marian points out that Laura has the right to end her

engagement to Sir Percival, Laura renounces any such privilege. "I can never claim my release from my engagement," she says. "Whatever way it ends, it must end wretchedly for *me*. All I can do, Marian, is not to add the remembrance that I have broken my promise and forgotten my father's dying words" (*WW* 192). To act in the interests of her own happiness, in this situation, is to betray her father—a man "notoriously thoughtless of moral obligations where women were concerned" (*WW* 549).

Not only does Laura believe in her unprincipled father's right to direct her future from beyond the grave, she firmly declares that Sir Percival has "a right" to be informed of her private thoughts (*WW* 192). She views her feelings for Walter as a form of infidelity and tells Marian that she cannot bear to be "false to [Sir Percival] in thought," and then to be "mean enough to serve my own interests by hiding the falsehood" (*WW* 193). The sense of honor and duty instilled in Laura—whom all the other characters hold up as an angelic and highly moral figure—is rooted in the policing of her very thoughts. The feminine honor to which she adheres results in a compulsive confession, the virtue of which lies in the submission it demands of her. Her disclosure is the direct consequence of habitual deference to masculine prerogatives, and it has the tidy effect of perpetuating that deference by establishing Sir Percival's power over her.

Even though she seems to know that her inability to exercise her will for her own benefit is the source of her predicament, she also knows that she has no way to escape from her subjugation: "I am miserably helpless," she laments; "I can't control myself" (*WW* 192). The statement that she cannot control herself refers immediately to the tears to which she has recently given way; in that context, it is an expression of frustration at not being able to withstand the power of her own emotions and invokes the Victorian commonplace that women were trapped by their own bodies, subject to its unpredictable, irrational fluctuations. "I am miserably

helpless," we might understand her to say, "*and* I can't control myself." In one sense, then, her words suggest a constitutional helplessness that requires direction from some external power. However, juxtaposed as it is to her discussion with Marian about her future, this statement also carries the suggestion of protest at the situation into which she has been forced. Understood in this way, we could read her lamentation in a cause/effect rhetorical sequence: "I am miserably helpless *because* I can't control myself." Because Laura is always filtered through the perspectives of others, her opinions about her position as a woman in Victorian Britain are ambivalent or, as is often the case, totally inaccessible. Whatever her views, though, the fact of her submission is a constant.

Furthermore, whatever Laura's own views on the subject, it is clear that her passivity is looked upon by others as a highly desirable moral quality. Even within her most intimate relationships, Laura is faced with distinct pressures to maintain her deferential behavior to others. When she stands firm in her decision to confess to Sir Percival, Marian is overcome with admiration: "we had changed places; the resolution was all on her side" (*WW* 193). The appearance, yet again, of the term *resolution* highlights the novel's dramatic distinction between Laura's womanly resolution—which is a determination to submit to a man's judgment and direction—and Walter's manly resolution—which is a determination to act in his own interests. Although Marian believes that Sir Percival has no real right to the knowledge of Laura's heart, she is nevertheless struck by the trusting innocence that Laura exhibits in committing to expose her own vulnerability, and the esteem in which she holds her sister compels her to quiet her own objections to this plan (*WW* 193).

More insidiously, Laura's virtuous resolution to submit herself to Sir Percival is admired (unsurprisingly) by the man himself. He shocks both Laura and Marian by renewing his

enthusiasm for the engagement after hearing Laura's confession, and in doing so hints at the power inequality Laura's act has established: "You have left it to *me*, Miss Fairlie, to resign you. I am not heartless enough to resign a woman who has just shown herself to be the noblest of her sex" (*WW* 199, emphasis original). Precisely because she has submitted herself to his judgment, Sir Percival recognizes a desirable "nobility" in his fiancée that he is not "heartless" enough to let slip through his fingers. Laura's avowed inability to love him is a negligible drawback, diminished by the capacity for self-denial she has demonstrated. (It may be more to the point for Sir Percival to declare that he is not *stupid* enough to loosen his hold on a perfectly deferential wife.) Marian's account of his reaction registers the subtle gender politics at work in Laura's confession: "Every word she had spoken had innocently betrayed her purity and truth to a man who thoroughly understood the priceless value of a pure and true woman. Her own noble conduct had been the hidden enemy, throughout, of all the hopes she had trusted to it" (*WW* 199). Educated in a moral code that turns out to be inimical to all of her own interests, Laura is betrayed into voluntarily taking on a powerless position by Victorian gender codes just as much as by the duplicity of the villain to whom she is engaged. The anguish she experiences as a result is so oppressive that she begs Marian, "Don't let me think—that is all I ask now" (*WW* 214).

The passivity that can make thought painful for Laura also has the unfortunate effect of making it seem as though she *cannot* think. For all that Marian admires her sister's innocence, she believes that Laura is "a child…still in many things" (*WW* 212), who must be alternately protected from a truth for which she is too fragile and informed of a truth too worldly for her to recognize without assistance. The same social conditions that train Laura to submit her will to others also encourage others to infantilize her, and she finds herself repeatedly in the position of begging to be treated like an adult. At Blackwater Park, after their marriage, Sir Percival bullies

her to sign a mysterious document without disclosing its contents. In her single act of resolute resistance, Laura will not sign until she is allowed to read it in its entirety. "I will sign with pleasure," she tells her husband, "if you will only treat me as a responsible being. I care little what sacrifice is required of me, if it will affect no one else, and lead to no ill results" (*WW* 269). Even though she challenges Sir Percival's treatment of her, and asserts her intellectual and moral capacity, the deferential relationship she has already cultivated with him turns her resolution into an act of bargaining: she is prepared to sacrifice anything, if only he will afford her some respect. Paradoxically, she tries to use her capacity for self-denial as currency for gaining autonomy—a strategy that proves ineffective with a man who knows the priceless value of a pure and true woman. As it will elsewhere, Laura's resistance to being infantilized does not increase her own power but rather intensifies her subjugation, because in bargaining for her adulthood she draws attention to the fact that she lacks the power to simply enact it.

The same plea is even more pathetic when denied by a far more benevolent man than Sir Percival. During their residence in London following Laura's escape from the asylum, Marian and Walter believe that Laura is too frail to either remember the past or learn about the future. Taking charge of her best interests, they occupy her with children's games and structure their everyday interactions with her using "little cautions" (*WW* 440, 441). Seeing her solely in the light of a victim, Walter denies her any active part in the recovery of her name: "the wrong that had been inflicted on her, if mortal means could grapple it, must be redressed without her knowledge and without her help" (*WW* 442). Refusing to grant her any agency not just in her own life, but in the question of her own identity, Walter perpetuates the denial of Laura's personhood that had commenced in earnest at the asylum where she had been imprisoned as Anne Catherick.

In response to these daily conditions, Laura once again protests against infantilization, and the manner of her request intensifies her subjection just as it had at Blackwater. Too physically weak for a forceful statement of her unhappiness, Laura can only sigh out her complaint to Walter: "I am so helpless! Oh, don't, don't, don't treat me like a child!" (*WW* 480). Once more pleading for someone else to grant her adulthood because she is too helpless to do it herself, Laura emphasizes the puerile state of her own will power. Although her words draw attention to the modes of confinement in which she is kept (she recognizes, in other words, that she is being unjustly treated like a helpless child), she cannot manage to resist that confinement except from within the unequal power dynamic in which it has placed her. Supplication, therefore, is the only form of expression she can muster. Not surprising, then, that Walter's response is to patronize her: to make her believe she is contributing to the household earnings, he pretends to sell the "poor, faint, valueless sketches" she draws, and "pays" her out of his own earnings (*WW* 481).

Laura's sighed protest against helplessness is her last self-conscious comment on the subjugation of her will. Soon after this inadvertent establishment of a permanent childhood for herself, she marries Walter and fades into relative insignificance in her own story. The volitional power vacuum that has long characterized her becomes so pervasive that by the end of the novel she is an incidental presence in the domestic landscape of Limmeridge House. There, in Walter's old studio—the space of his masculine creativity—Laura stands next to "the well-remembered drawing-table…with the little album that I had filled for her, in past times, open under her hand" (*WW* 616). Literally and symbolically linked to the past, Laura's final appearance freezes her in a tableau, which forecloses her meaningful participation in a future that is held out promisingly to her husband and her son, from whom she stands apart. In this way, Laura is denied a voice and

the power to articulate the conditions of the future—for it is Marian who informs Walter of baby Hartright's inheritance. Laura is far removed from the matrix of meaning invoked by the presentation of her son as an heir, which includes intersections of the domestic, the economic, the social, and the familial. Instead, she retains the character of a child; her motherhood signifies only as a conduit to wealth, and appears insignificant in terms of actual familial ties or generational authority. As a woman, she is a child-like blank that cannot move forward, while her son is a child with all of the potential for growing up and acting upon the world that his mother lacks. Yet in her attractiveness to a man like Walter, who achieves a remarkably powerful agency, Laura is a past that seems destined to be repeated. She represents the mental vacancy of "ideal" womanhood perpetuated by Victorian gender politics, which value women in terms of blank slates and ready wombs, cultivated to reproduce what men plant there.

The hopelessness of Laura's vacancy might prompt us to read Marian's willfulness and fortitude as a critique of these Victorian gender politics. Her resistance to the cultural conditions that generally subdue feminine volition enable her to act effectively in many situations when a woman like Laura proves helpless. Most notably, she eavesdrops on Sir Percival and the Count and discovers their plot to steal Laura's inheritance. Although she performs this rooftop feat tremblingly, with "only a woman's courage," she also boasts that, dressed only in a few petticoats and a cloak, "no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I" (*WW* 335, 336).

Yet her persistent determination also destabilizes her gender identity, as evidenced physically in her swarthy face and faint mustache, and in the telling description of her eyes as "resolute." It also transforms her into the fetishized object of Count Fosco's perverted admiration—a dubious honor that horrifies her. Moreover, Marian's admirable character traits,

which stem from her constitutional resolve to discover and to take action, are nevertheless circumscribed by Victorian masculine privilege. She simply cannot undertake the tasks that Walter performs because she lacks the social authorization to discover and take action beyond the bounds of her home and neighborhood.

Marian's appeal as an unconventional woman and the implicit challenge she presents to the ideal womanhood that Laura embodies are both overwritten, in the end, by Walter's resolute authority. His narrative, which ends the novel, reiterates the social desirability of feminine vacancy in its suggestive juxtaposition of his blank wife and his own heroic economic ascension. His sleight of hand in the novel's final lines similarly drains Marian of the potency he would rather retain for himself. "[L]et Marian end our Story," he concludes (*WW* 617). Yet he himself has already taken on the responsibility of marking the end of things: after Marian declares Walter Hartright "*the Heir of Limmeridge*," Walter declares that, "In writing those last words, I have written all" (*WW* 617). If Marian's are the last spoken words in the narrative, Walter reminds us that this is only because he has written it that way: "*I* have written all," he pronounces. In pretending to allow Marian to serve as the closing image of the novel, furthermore, Walter actually installs *himself* as its concluding subject, for Marian's last words are: "Mr. Walter Hartright—*the Heir of Limmeridge*." Considering Walter's productive psychological development and his resultant social rise, the picture with which he would most want to leave his audience would certainly be the announcement of his gentrification. All the better if that announcement comes from someone other than Walter himself: after all, it would be vulgar for a land-owning gentleman to boast about his wealth.

The tensions between Walter's ascent to power and Laura's perpetual subjugation, between Marian's admirable hermaphroditic character and her admiration of Laura's abject

submission, make it difficult to arrive at a stable conclusion about whether *The Woman in White* upholds patriarchy, challenges it, or does both. But pinning down the novel's attitude about the social justice of gender inequality actually seems secondary to the unequivocal fact of unequal access to psychological development. Through the illustration of gendered vacancy in Walter and Laura, Collins quite simply and vividly forwards the claim that men and women do not begin with inherently unequal mental capacities, but that these capacities are allowed to develop very unequally due to culturally-determined differences in education: men are tutored in active resolve, women are instructed in passive endurance. Thus, Walter's will is tempered and strengthened, and Laura's is constrained and atrophied. The development of a self-directing power that physiological psychology assumes for every person except "heathens" and "brutes" is revealed, in *The Woman in White*, to be profoundly subject to the conditions of history and culture (Carpenter 541). Where earlier depictions of mental vacancy had been primarily concerned with accounting for its effects upon the individual and his/her community, Collins (while preserving the issue of consequences) lays special emphasis on how vacancy is produced and perpetuated. He thereby indicates that it is just as important to understand vacancy's formation as it is to trace its outward impact.

Sensational Shocks and the Reader's Will Power

The Woman in White's serial publication in *All the Year Round* in 1860-61 sparked a craze both in terms of reading (future Prime Minister William Gladstone reputedly canceled social engagements to stay home and read the novel's final installment) and in pop culture marketing (there were "Woman in White" cloaks, bonnets, perfumes, toiletries, and songs) (Ryan 51; Bachman and Cox 11, fn 1). Circulation of Dickens' weekly periodical sharply increased

during *The Woman in White*'s run, and sparked the growth of what Henry Mansel would call a new "class of literature" with the power to mold the minds and tastes of the public by "preaching to the nerves" (Bachman and Cox 11; Mansel 482). Sensation fiction had arguably come into being before 1860, but the popularity and commercial success of *The Woman in White* nevertheless marks an important developmental moment for the genre.[10] The novel was quickly followed by an explosion of sensational publications like Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863), Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Collins' own *No Name* (1862), and sensation fiction remained extremely popular for the rest of the decade.[11]

In his notorious review, Mansel roundly censures the genre's regrettable appeal to "Excitement, and excitement alone," and catalogs the different "species" of sensation novel that impose themselves upon the reading public:

> A great philosopher has enumerated in a list of sensations "the feelings from heat, electricity, galvanism, &c.," together with "titillation, sneezing, horripilation, shuddering, the feeling of setting the teeth on edge, &c.;" and our novels might be classified in like manner, according to the kind of sensation they are calculated to produce. There are novels of the warming-pan, and others of the galvanic-battery type—some which gently stimulate a particular feeling, and others which carry the whole nervous system by steam. (482, 487)[12]

As Mansel notes, sensation novels aimed to affect the nerves of their readers and to produce certain sensations related to shock and excitement. The relationship between novel and audience was a galvanic one, in which the novel's incidents electrified the reader and stimulated a

[10] Mansel's review of 24 sensation novels includes two pre-1860 texts: *Philip Paternoster* (1858), by "an Ex-Puseyite," and *Wait and Hope* (1859), by John Edmund Reade. Additionally, Bachman and Cox suggest that Collins' earlier novels *Basil* (1852), *Hide and Seek* (1854), and *The Dead Secret* (1857) all contain the sensational elements that *The Woman in White* would popularize (9-10).

[11] Lyn Pykett calls the 1860s the "sensation decade" (*Sensation* 1).

[12] *Horripilation* is the erection of hairs on the skin due to fear or excitement, otherwise known as goose bumps.

response. Such reading required no rational judgment, Mansel argued, because the novel acted directly upon the reader's nervous system, resulting in involuntary physical responses like shuddering and goose bumps. Sensation fiction drew attention, in other words, to the power of involuntary nervous processes. As an electrical current produces muscular and vascular convulsions in a subject over which s/he has no control, so the sensation novel could circumvent the reader's volition and elicit a quickened heartbeat, heightened blood pressure, agitated breathing, etc. (Miller 146).

A remarkable tension is built into *The Woman in White*, therefore: its narrative is concerned with the adequate development of will power, while its form often demonstrates the very real limits of volitional forces. Even as Walter Hartright's "self-directing power" increases, *The Woman in White*'s audience continually experiences involuntary reactions to his and others' narratives. There are situations, the novel shows, in which the will's cultivation (and the cultural biases that contribute to that cultivation) becomes irrelevant and in which automatic reflexes take over. In such moments, when physiological processes take distinct precedence over deliberate thought, we become subject to circumstantial influences in spite of ourselves: when the woman in white touches Walter Hartright's shoulder from behind and every drop of blood in his body freezes, so do we become momentarily paralyzed by the shock of the incident; as Walter's fingers tighten on his stick, so do our fingers tighten on the book we hold.

This tension between the will's increasing power and its circumvention in *The Woman in White* produces two significant effects. First, by using a novel to dramatize the role of volition and to bring forth automatic responses, Collins emphasizes the great power he wields as an author. As he uses his novel to elicit and bring attention to involuntary physiological reflexes, the force with which he does so is quite clearly aligned with authorial influence. If Count Fosco's

voice "[trembles] along every nerve" in Marian's body and turns her "hot and cold alternately," Collins' literary method has a similar effect upon the reader (*WW* 310). Yet where Fosco's ability to mesmerize is overtly sinister and unsettling—a raw demonstration of one person's self-interested power over another—Collins' ability to electrify his audience is an artistic argument about the tangible power of the novel, and of the author who writes it. If Collins was beset by anxieties regarding his social position as a male novelist, as Tamar Heller argues, and saw himself (through the eyes of Victorian society) as effeminized by his profession, then there seems no more effective way that he could have challenged that view than by imposing his will, through the very artistic medium of that "effeminate" profession, onto and *into* an audience of tens of thousands. While critics like Mansel were quick to devalue the power of the sensation novel and its writer by labeling the genre "morbid," they nevertheless recognized the intensity of the writer's influence, which could "carry the whole nervous system by steam" (482, 487). Indeed, the supposition that a sensation author had the power to act directly upon the nerves of his reader was an alarming enough reason for many Victorians to immediately and vociferously denounce their work as poisonous garbage in an effort to destroy it by destroying the demand for it.[13]

At the same time, *The Woman in White*'s relationships to will power and reflex discourages a reading of the novel as a purely physiological exercise. Even as it draws out automatic reflexes that appeal to the reader's sense of excitement, it also foregrounds the importance of cultivating and exercising the will to meet external circumstances. It is no coincidence that the story's most threatening villain is a mesmerist; Fosco embodies the

[13] Mansel compares sensation fiction to a drug and calls it "garbage" (485-86). An *Athenaeum* review of the sensation novel *Checkmate* varies this characterization only slightly in referring to it as "highly seasoned garbage." See Ellen Miller Casey, "'Highly Flavoured Dishes' and 'Highly Seasoned Garbage': Sensation in the *Athenaeum*."

insidious forces that may subjugate the will, and the novel dramatically argues that resolution must be cultivated so that such forces can be resisted and overcome. Fosco's defeat not only exposes his fraud, but also stands as an indictment of the physiological fallacy by which he lived: "Mind, they say, rules the world. But what rules the mind? The body" (*WW* 622). In *The Woman in White*, the will is foregrounded as the abstract mental force that, according to Carpenter's *Principles of Human Physiology*, disproves Materialist theories reducing "the Thinking Man" to an automaton or puppet (Carpenter 539). It is the mental "*something beyond and above*" the nervous system that subordinates automatic bodily activity (Carpenter 539, emphasis original). In *The Woman in White*, volition is the "*something*" that Walter Hartright very dramatically exercises as he acts upon the world around him, increasingly challenging his circumstances in order to "mould" them to his own requirements. Will power, in *The Woman in White* and in physiological psychology, is proof that conscious life is not entirely built upon physical operations, and that the individual is not merely a passive product of his environment. That the sensation novel "consists of nothing [but incident]" (Mansel 486)[14]—that, in other words, its narrative is allegedly constructed around extraordinary circumstances rather than individual character—increases the importance of the will in *The Woman in White*, precisely because the circumstances to be overcome are extraordinary. Walter's success in a situation involving kidnapping *and* theft, multiple forms of fraud *and* false imprisonment, espionage *and* conspiracy, is actually an astonishing argument for the capacity of human will power to combat and transform uncommon conditions.

Furthermore, the novel's sensational moments (e.g. the woman in white's first appearance; Count Fosco's sudden written invasion of Marian's diary narrative) must be

[14] Mansel goes on to say that "The human actors in the piece are, for the most part, but so many lay-figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident" (486).

considered in light of their textual form and the mental channels through which they must pass before reaching the nervous system. While the reader may be shaken when Fosco infiltrates Marian's narrative, that involuntary physical reaction is necessarily preceded by a series of mental operations that are involved in reading: converting the symbolic characters on the page into recognizable words and ideas, understanding their sequence and consequent literal meaning, and, crucially, maintaining and updating one's knowledge of the relationships between the ideas, events, and characters over the course of reading the novel. This last is fundamentally necessary to recognizing that Fosco's sudden narrative appearance in Marian's diary is shockingly invasive. The reader must recall the suspicious acts and speeches that have made the Count a distinctly untrustworthy figure in order to perceive that his "postscript" constitutes a villainous assault upon a helpless woman's thoughts; only then can the reader be jolted by the audacity of his intrusion.[15]

While Mansel and other like-minded critics viewed sensation fiction as a drug that readers ingested for the physical intoxication it provided, or as a galvanic jolt that morbid readers sought out in defiance of their own best interests, the fact is that drugs and electricity are physical stimuli that work directly upon the material body (Mansel 485, 487). A sensation novel, in contrast, must be read, interpreted, and understood in order for its ideas to bring forth shudders and goose bumps; such physiological reactions are actually mediated and made possible by the mental process of reading. What enables the reading process itself is the constant exercise of the will in order to concentrate, to remember, to interpret, and to deduce. Only as a result of the reader continuously directing her attention and understanding is she in a position to be

[15] This moment's powerful shock is also constituted by the reader's understanding that, after reading Marian's diary, the Count has gained access to important knowledge that further empowers him, and that therefore this invasion represents an unforeseen and unfortunate obstacle in Marian's plan to help Laura.

physiologically affected by the story. As a text, therefore, *The Woman in White*'s multiple narratives and proliferation of significant details draw attention not only to the resources required to tell a story, but also to the effort necessary to understanding and responding to it. The physiological effects that come afterward—the "drams" and "doses" in which readers take so much pleasure—act as rewards for their continued focus and understanding (Mansel 485). So it is that *The Woman in White* actually incentivizes the reader's sustained mental effort with the bodily shocks that Victorians would continue to seek out for the next decade. In doing so, the novel promotes the cultivation of its reader's will and thereby increases her capacity for persistent attention and analysis.

This function of Collins' novel belies the seemingly hopeless condition of feminine volition presented in the story it tells. The female reader of *The Woman in White* would exercise her volition as she moved through the story, attending to its events, making mental decisions about its clues and evaluating characters. If her education at the hands of institutional Victorian society left her insufficient strength to capably direct her own thoughts and behavior (acutely illustrated by Laura's diffident manner when she emerges from that most colorful Victorian institution, the asylum), sensation novels like *The Woman in White* emerge as tools for ameliorating those effects. Exactly what the outcome of this form of cultivation might be, either in form or extent, Collins does not say: Laura and Marian both become somewhat weaker-willed at story's end, so we have no specific hints as to what changes when a woman becomes stronger-willed. Consequently, the possibilities attached to strengthening the will through reading sensation fiction seem somewhat vague and unshaped, but this is consistent with the concealed nature of the exercise itself, which takes place under ironic cover of morbid self-intoxication. The sensational curriculum suggests that although feminine volition is enfeebled by social

means, it may be fortified through literary ones. If patriarchal Victorian institutions make conscious efforts to reserve the privilege of autonomy for men, *The Woman in White* subversively makes use of the willful act of reading to combat the damage.

Coda: Literary Shifts in Psychological Representation

Sensation fiction's appeal to involuntary processes marks a significant shift in novelistic representations of the mind. Much of earlier fiction had tended to work with models of mind that had presupposed its accessibility and order as well as the legitimacy of introspection, rational intervention, and self-direction. With *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins participated in a turning away from these precepts and in the composition of less transparent mental models—and his affinity for physiological psychology had much to do with this pivot. Because scientific writers of that school (particularly William Carpenter, Alexander Bain, Herbert Spencer, and G. H. Lewes) understood consciousness to be constituted in part by involuntary or unconscious processes, Collins and many other important novelists began working to depict the elements of mental life that lay *beyond* will power, in the realm of non-intentional thought.[16] For instance, while *The Woman in White* approached involuntary processes through its effects upon its readers, Collins' later novel, *The Moonstone*, would engage directly and extensively with those processes at the level of narrative, through a plot line built around opium and sleepwalking.

As Vanessa L. Ryan's *Thinking Without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (2012) argues, *The Moonstone* is part of a very important cadre of Victorian novels that represented the mind in terms of unconscious processes inaccessible to perception. Ryan interprets *The Moonstone* as a "psychological detective story," in which the mind rather than the household is the object of

[16] See Ryan, 1-26.

investigation (32). Once it becomes evident that Franklin Blake stole the lost diamond while sleepwalking under the influence of opium, the novel's focus shifts: from Rachel Verinder's missing diamond to Franklin Blake's lost recollection of the theft—which is ultimately shown to have been hidden in his unconscious memory (Ryan 32). Through this storyline, Ryan argues, Collins introduces two questions that were of great interest to physiological psychologists: "What are the causes of the failure and unpredictability of memory? And how can a person perform complex behavior unconsciously?" (32). *The Moonstone*'s innovative concentration on the mysterious workings of the mind is part of a larger literary move, according to Ryan, toward addressing the obscure operations going forth in the mind on an everyday basis.

Within the emergent logic of such an opaque model of mind in the 1860s, interest in mental vacancy as an object of sustained novelistic representation diminishes. Whether vacancy takes the form of deficiencies in perception, expression, or will power, or whether it refers to a deliberate act of mental self-preservation, it can only have very slight footing in the realm of *unconscious* processes and non-intentional thought. To represent mental vacancy, as Austen, Dickens, Brontë, and Collins each do, is to work from the assumption that it is possible to clearly identify and track mental operations, and to satisfactorily account for their functions and failures. Mental vacancy is a workable idea within a model of relative mental transparency, and the life of that model seems to fade in the 1860s when prominent novelists begin to seriously engage with physiological psychology and the notion of mental opacity. In the wake of scientific discoveries about nervous reflexes and non-deliberate thought, the questions that mental vacancy had been employed to address and clarify—objective questions about the nature of mental structure and essence—gave way to questions about "the subjective experience of thinking" (Ryan 2).

The key breakthrough came when physiologists learned that "most reflexes need not travel up to the brain to be processed," a phenomena that William Carpenter first termed "unconscious cerebration" (Ryan 17). The notion that reflex was the "central functional unit of the nervous system" provided, Ryan contends, a new perspective on the mind (2). If deliberate reason was not the only mode in which everyday thinking occurs, scientists and novelists wondered, how might the experience of thought that lies outside or beyond consciousness be understood and represented? Ryan traces the literary answer to that question through novels by Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, Henry James, and George Meredith, which showed how consciousness can often only access the results of mental processes, but not the processes themselves.

In a representative illustration from her study, Ryan quotes from Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879) to show how mid- and late-Victorian novelists often tried to draw attention to the mind's inaccessibility. As Clara Middleton becomes increasingly aware of her distaste for her fiancé, her verbal description of this opinion mirrors the apparently uneven and vague progress of its development:

> "I have found that I do not…"
> "What?"
> "Love him."
> Mrs. Mountstuart grimaced transiently. "That is no answer. The cause!" she said. "What has he done?"
> "Nothing."
> "And when did you discover this nothing?"
> "By degrees, unknown to myself; suddenly." (qtd in Ryan 10)

Ryan's explication of the unconscious mental operation referred to in this passage includes a very useful comparison to the representation of the mind in *Emma*, which is the subject of my first chapter, and which works from a very different perspective on the mind's accessibility.

Ryan characterizes Clara's realization as an "inversion" of Emma's discovery that she loves Knightley:

> Austen describes Emma's realization as rapid and as yielding complete knowledge: 'A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress; she touched, she admitted, she acknowledged the whole truth.' Emma's mind, once awakened, is legible to itself…. Where Austen depicts a moment of epiphany of 'the whole truth,' Meredith traces a protracted and long-unnoticed coming to consciousness 'by degrees,' with uncertain causes…. Clara's realization is a moment of unconscious cerebration: the emphasis for Meredith is not on the moment of clarity but on the process of realization and its paradoxical place outside of awareness. Quite different from Emma's sudden epiphany, Clara's moment of greatest self-clarity is also a recognition of her own mind's nontransparency. (Ryan 10, 11)

Similar examples from Henry James, George Eliot, and Collins compellingly reinforce Ryan's contention: that at a certain point in Victorian fiction, it became untenable to continue imagining the mind as an object of unobstructed observation and rational direction.

However, in the decades before the mind's imperceptible nature becomes a prevailing trope in nineteenth-century novels—before the metaphorical "windows in our bosoms" become fogged over and unknowability becomes a paradoxical kind of certainty—vacancy is a vital literary tool in representing the discernable incongruities that characterize mental life. Novelistic depictions of mental vacancy highlight how partial perception can result in total blindness. Vacancy is used to illustrate how a person might be completely incapable of expressing or interpreting emotion, but may still have sympathetic connections with others. It helps explain the ways that people experience the world through their bodies, but also draws attention to how that subjective experience transcends the physical. And it reveals that forces in the mind do not always originate from within it. During a period when the novel increasingly takes on the task of investigating the mind's form and function, mental vacancy as a literary concept helps readers come to terms with the mind as an observable entity that is fraught with weaknesses and

contradictions. Vacancy also puts those weaknesses and contradictions in a dynamic context of social relationships and influences, not only tracing the play of the personal and the social, the psychological and the behavioral, but also drawing attention to the profound interdependencies that shape the relationships between social formations and psychological life.

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