NOVEL GIFTS: THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF GIFT EXCHANGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation draws on studies of gift exchange by cultural anthropologists and social theorists to examine representations of gifts and gift giving in nineteenth-century British novels. While most studies of the economic imagination of nineteenth-century literature rely on and respond to a framework formulated by classical political economy and consequently overlook nonmarket forms of social exchange, I draw on gift theory in order to make visible the alternate, everyday exchanges shaping social relations and identity within the English novel. By analyzing formal and thematic representations of gifting over the course of the nineteenth century, in novels by Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot, I consider the way that gift exchange relates and responds to the emergence of capitalism and consumer culture. I trace two distinct developments in nineteenth-century gift culture: the first, the emergence of an idealized view of the gift as purely disinterested, spontaneous, and free, and the second, the emergence of a view of charity as demoralizing to the poor. These developments, I contend, were distinct ideological formations of liberal economic society and reveal a desire to make the gift conform to individualism.

However, I suggest further that these transformations of the gift proceeded unevenly, for in their attention to the logic and practice of giving, nineteenth-century writers both give voice to and subvert these cultural formations. Alongside the figure of the benevolent philanthropist, the demoralized pauper, and the quintessential image of altruism, the selflessly giving domestic woman, nineteenth-century novels present another view of gift exchange, one that sees the gift as a mix of interest and disinterest, freedom and obligation, and persons and things. Ultimately, by reading the gift relations animating nineteenth-century novels, I draw attention to the competing conceptions of selfhood underlying gift and market forms of exchange in order to offer a broader history of exchange and personhood. In its recognition of expansive conceptions of the self and obligatory gifts, this dissertation recovers a history of the gift that calls into question the ascendency of the autonomous individual and the view of exchange as an anonymous, self-interested transaction.

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For Zubin, Quinn, and Milo

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE CULTURE OF THE GIFT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

And when from the husband, the lover, or friend,
You receive, as a proof of affection,
The Offering, oh, say what emotions must blend
With the gift, and cement the connection!

—"Introduction: Addressed
to the Ladies," *The Offering*
for 1834

As a typical example of the language of giving that permeated the enormously popular and commercially successful English literary annuals known as gift books, this introductory poem suggests the pervasiveness of gift giving as a cultural discourse and social practice within nineteenth-century England. Customary gift practices, which had been a significant feature of eighteenth-century literature and culture, so much so that writers frequently referred to the period as the "Age of Benevolence," remained a vital part of nineteenth-century social life and permeated the literary imagination, even as industrial and commercial capitalism began to dominate English society.[1] While the economic imagination of literature has been extensively explored, literary scholars have only recently begun to consider literary representations of nonmarket modes of exchange centered on gifts and gift giving.[2] Studies of gift exchange have begun to expand

[1] Rather than being marginalized by capitalist exchange relations, gift exchange remained a vital part of everyday social relations in nineteenth-century England. In his influential survey of gift exchange in "archaic" societies, Marcel Mauss points out that the "morality and organization" of gifts "still function in our own societies, in unchanging fashion and, so to speak, hidden, below the surface" (4). And, more recently, Natalie Zemon Davis observes that rather than "giving way before market principles and values," gift exchange persists as "an essential relational mode, a repertoire of behavior, a register with its own rules, language, etiquette, and gestures" (7-9).

[2] A growing number of literary scholars have begun to apply theories of gift exchange to the study of literature. For book-length studies of gifts and gift exchange in nineteenth-century literature, see Margot

understandings of economic behavior and attest to the overlaps between social and economic relations, but an account of the way nineteenth-century gift exchange fits into a larger history of exchange and personhood is still needed. That is, we need to understand how a discourse of generosity, like that expressed in *The Offering*'s self-reflexive encomium on gifts, emerges alongside liberal conceptions of economic behavior, which privilege contractual exchange between independent actors.

This dissertation focuses on the nineteenth century as a significant time for gift exchange, for with the emergence of industrial capitalism, the practice and discourse of giving underwent significant changes. Whereas the gift exchanges of the eighteenth-century were characterized by moral obligations and played a central role in structuring relations of power, nineteenth-century gift practices took on a more idealized character in the popular imagination.[3] Through an analysis of representations of gift giving in the nineteenth-century's most popular literary form, the novel, I trace two distinct ideological developments in nineteenth-century gift culture: the first, the emergence of an idealized view of the gift as purely disinterested, spontaneous, and free, and the second, the emergence of a view of charitable giving as demoralizing to the individual, a view which motivated efforts to organize and regulate charity. However, I contend that nineteenth-century writers challenged these cultural formations as well, for alongside these

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Finn's *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914*, Sarah Haggarty's *Blake's Gifts: Poetry and the Politics of Exchange*, and Jill Rappoport's *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture*. See also the following articles, which apply gift theory to Victorian literature: Kathleen Blake's "Between Economies in *The Mill on the Floss*: Loans Versus Gifts, Or, Auditing Mr. Tulliver's Accounts," Margueritte Murphy's "The Ethic of the Gift in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*," Steven Dillon's "George Eliot and the Feminine Gift," Ilana Blumberg's "'Love Yourself as Your Neighbor': The Limits of Altruism and the Ethics of Personal Benefit in *Adam Bede*," Silvana Colella's "Gifts and Interests: *John Halifax, Gentleman* and the Purity of Business," Simon Jarvis's "Wordsworth's Gifts of Feeling," and Kathy Alexis Psomiades' "Heterosexual Exchange and Other Victorian Fictions: The *Eustace Diamonds* and Victorian Anthropology."

[3] For a thorough account of eighteenth-century gift exchange, see the collection *The Culture of the Gift in Eighteenth-Century England*, edited by Linda Zionkowski and Cynthia Klekar.

developments, a counter-narrative persists within nineteenth-century novels, which represents gifts as neither disguised forms of debt nor purely disinterested acts of generosity. Rather than reiterating the division between a realm of self-interested exchange and a realm of altruism, novelistic portraits of obligatory gift relations present gift exchange as a mix of interest and disinterest, freedom and obligation, and persons and things.

In order to illuminate these formations and counter-formations as they took shape in the nineteenth-century popular imagination, I draw on studies of gift exchange by cultural anthropologists and critical theorists. Theories of gift exchange belie nineteenth-century constructions of the purely disinterested gift by making visible the obligations and interests within everyday gift practices and highlighting the role gifts play in establishing both social solidarity and hierarchical relations of dependence. In addition, the analysis of gift exchange inaugurated by Marcel Mauss's 1925 study *Essai sur le don* (*The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*) helps to situate nineteenth-century developments in the logic and practice of gifting within a broader history of exchange.[4] That is, with its emphasis on the dual character of the gift, the Maussian model of exchange reveals developments in middle-class gifting practices, such as idealized images of the purely altruistic gift and the belief in the demoralizing effect of

[4] As an analysis drawn largely from ethnographic studies of "archaic," non-capitalist and non-western societies, Mauss's examination of the gift might not seem immediately relevant for the study of gifting in nineteenth-century England. However, not only did Mauss extend his conclusions to contemporary industrial capitalist societies, but he also analyzed the customs of giving in pre-capitalist European societies. Indeed, he identifies traces of the morality of the gift in the customs of European societies even after the emergence of industrial capitalism: "[t]he morality and practice of exchange employed in societies immediately preceding our own still retain more-or-less important traces of all the principles [of gift exchange] we have just analyzed. We believe, in fact that we are in a position to show that our own systems of law and economies have emerged from institutions similar to those we describe" (Mauss 47). In particular, Mauss analyzes the prevalence of customary gift exchange within German peasant society and folklore, identifying the *Gaben* as a tradition, in which guests present gifts at an engagement party, wedding, baptism, or first communion, "that only a short time ago persisted, that doubtless still persists in the morality and economic customs of German villages" (60-3).

charity, to be unique cultural formations that have arisen alongside industrial capitalism while foregrounding a competing view of gift exchange persisting within the literary imagination.[5] Ultimately, by reading the formal and thematic gifts permeating nineteenth-century novels, this dissertation draws attention to the different conceptions of personhood animating gift and market forms of exchange. In its recognition of expansive conceptions of selfhood and obligatory gifts, this dissertation recovers a history of gift exchange that challenges the dominant narrative of autonomous individualism.

Gift Books and the Ideology of the Altruistic Gift

Because of their long-running hold on the Victorian popular imagination, gift books serve as a useful point of entrance in a consideration of the culture of the gift in its nineteenth-century manifestation, for they highlight several key aspects of nineteenth-century gift exchange.[6] With their ornate binding, the literary annuals mirrored the sumptuously wrapped presents circulated among the middle-class on holidays and special occasions as well as the elaborately decorated—tasseled, gilded, and velvet-covered—Victorian interiors they inhabited. As metonymic symbols of domestic spaces, gift books represented the cultural values of harmony, generosity, and "hierarchic happiness" associated with the bourgeois home, and, like the other objects crowding Victorian drawing rooms, the gift books were seen as markers of their owners' social status

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[5] For an overview of what he terms the Maussian approach to gift exchange, see James Carrier's "Gifts, Commodities, and Social Relations: A Maussian View of Exchange."

[6] These lavishly decorated books, bound in silk, leather, velvet, or pictorial paperboards and finished with gilt-edged leaves comprised a lucrative publishing market that spanned the 1820s, 30s, and 40s in England. They featured poetry, prose, short fiction, and engravings by both well-known and lesser known writers (including William Wordsworth, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walter Scott, Mary Shelley, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Caroline Norton). While literary annuals were often dismissed by contemporaries as sentimental trifles and have long been regarded by literary historians as meriting little critical attention, in recent years they have come to be viewed as significant cultural products, signaling the increasing commodification of literature as well as the growing influence of female readers upon the publishing industry and consumer practice.

(Hobsbawm 254). Their stated purpose, like that of the conduct books they resemble, was to instill moral values and offer models of proper conduct to their, largely, middle-class and female readers. As the preface to the 1831 *Friendship's Offering* indicates, not only did gift books seek to "impress the mind" and "assist in forming the taste," they also sought to "improve[e] the heart" (qtd. in Rappoport 20). And, with their emphasis on gift giving as a way to commemorate special occasions, gift books encouraged and helped formalize an aspect of Victorian middle-class domesticity that has remained one of its lasting legacies: the celebration of holidays. As the subtitle of the first literary annual, *The Forget Me Not: A Christmas and New Year's Present for 1823*, suggests, gift giving remained a significant part of formal social occasions.[7] However, in their role as courtship gifts and presents given by family and close friends to mark special occasions, gift books indicate the increasingly limited scope of gifting behavior in the nineteenth-century. As Margot Finn observes, "[w]here neighbourly gifts of produce, cloth and trinkets constantly punctuate Georgian diaries, presents made to family members on birthdays and holidays are far more typical in Victorian and Edwardian sources" (87). Gift books thus mark the narrowing of the sphere of gift relations to family and close friends and, consequently, the household's increasing role in establishing social identity and obligation.

In addition, the practice of giving a gift book begins with a purchase. In this way, gift books demonstrate the extent to which gifting practices began to accommodate the increasingly commercial character of Victorian society. As the introductory poem cited

[7] Hobsbawm notes that the "home was the quintessential bourgeois world" removed from the "problems and contradictions" of society; and this illusion of "harmonious, hierarchic happiness…found its culminating expression in the domestic ritual systematically developed for this purpose, the celebration of Christmas" (254).

above urges, when they receive *The Offering*—a book that is both a gift and commercial good—the lady recipients should experience a sentimental connection with their givers. By characterizing the book as a gift, gift book editors and publishers suggest that the bonds of affection typically produced through gift exchange can be transferred to a commercial good; in this way, they attempt to personalize a commodity and transform a commercial act by reconfiguring it as a sentimental exchange.[8] For instance, one contemporary reviewer proclaims that "[a]n annual is an offering at the shrine of friendship—a token of hallowed reminiscences" (qtd. in Feldman 7). Gift books thus presage a practice, now common, in which impersonal commodities are converted into personal, sentimental possessions. In light of this, the ornate bindings and covers of the annuals might be seen as more than an index of social status; they were also an early form of gift wrapping, serving to transform commodities into gifts.

Yet another aspect of nineteenth-century gift exchange is indicated by the prefatory materials affixed to the annuals: the introductions, advertisements, and dedicatory poems frequently express the editors' gratitude for the public's "patronage." Through these personalized addresses, the editors draw on the logic of patronage that had dominated eighteenth-century models of authorship, fashioning the books as gifts to the reading public and therefore participate in a reconceptualization of literature as a gift, a move that sought to identify literature with values that exceed those produced through market exchange. With the commercialization of book publishing in the early decades of the nineteenth-century, literary labor became increasingly alienated and, consequently,

[8] As Sara Lodge observes, "[i]n fact, acknowledging that all literature involved in transactions is always 'commercial', the movement the annuals enact might as easily be described as one from public to private. The annual text is a 'publication' that is designed to morph back into a 'personal' volume, signed and partly authored by its possessor" (38).

authors struggled to define the nature of literature and authorship. In order to reconcile the problematic status of literary labor with the more personalized relations of the gift, an image of professional authorship emerged that was configured as a personalized gift relation: a form of public patronage, between writer and readers.

Finally, and most significantly, gift books participate in a cultural discourse of giving that emerges during the nineteenth century, one which conceives of gift giving as a purely disinterested act. Over and over the literary annuals speak of gifts in idealized terms, referring to them as "tokens of remembrance, friendship, or affection" (Advertisement affixed to *The Forget-Me-Not* for 1823). From their prefatory materials to the themes pervading their poetry and stories, gift books deploy an ideology of the altruistic gift, in which gifts are depicted as spontaneous and selfless, free of self-interest and constraint. Thus, while they signal the way market exchange and gift giving increasingly intersect over the course of the nineteenth century, the literary annuals mark the emergence of an ideology of altruistic giving as it came to define middle-class gift relations.

Gift books, therefore, demonstrate the hold an idealized view of giving had upon the popular imagination during the mid-nineteenth century. In their proliferation of the idea of a purely selfless gift, gift books highlight a radical transformation in the discourse and logic of giving; they signal a transition from the highly stratified system of patronage that characterized the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century to the celebrations of disinterested generosity that abound in the nineteenth century. In this dissertation, I trace these cultural developments as they were expressed more widely in the nineteenth-

century popular imagination by examining depictions of gift exchange in the nineteenth century's most popular genre, the novel.

The ideology of the disinterested gift found its most lasting formulation in idealized images of the domestic woman that were a standard feature of the Victorian novel. In *Little Dorrit*, for example, as he sits despairing in the Marshalsea Prison, Arthur Clennam recollects the vision of altruism that has been before him all along: "in whom had I watched patience, self-denial, self-subdual, charitable construction, the noblest generosity of the affections? In the same poor girl!...Always, Little Dorrit" (753). This image of selflessly generous womanhood, a model of the Victorian domestic ideal, suggests the extent to which a conception of disinterested giving underpinned the ideology of separate spheres. As Mary Poovey observes, idealized images of woman's self-sacrificing nature proliferated in the pages of Victorian literature. In one of the most prominent instances, Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1854) presents an image of woman as "'[n]aturally self-sacrificing and self-regulating" and radiating "morality because her 'substance' was love, not self-interest or ambition" (*Uneven Developments* 8). Given the pervasiveness of this image of selfless femininity, one might ask, why does an emphasis on pure generosity emerge at this time, and why does it take the form of the "giving woman" as its most exemplary form (Rappoport 2)? And why, to paraphrase Jonathan Parry, do we even need a conception of the "free gift" in the first place?[9]

[9] In an important reassessment of Marcel Mauss's analysis of gift exchange, Jonathan Parry points out that "Mauss's real purpose here is not to suggest that there is no such thing as a pure gift in any society, but rather to show that for many the issue simply cannot arise since they do not make the kinds of distinction that we make. So while Mauss is generally represented as telling us how in fact the gift is never free, what I think he is really telling us is how we have acquired a theory that it should be" (458).

One explanation for the emphasis on sites of disinterested moral value is that Victorians were responding to the alienation endemic to market exchange. In the face of a burgeoning commodity culture, Victorians constructed the home as a haven removed from and opposed to the values of egoistic calculation. Another explanation, one which seeks to complicate the first, suggests that Victorian idealizations of altruism repeat and reinforce an opposition between altruism and self-interest, between gift and exchange that are the ideological preconditions of market exchange.[10] Building on this analysis, I would like to suggest that the polarities posited by market exchange are what make possible a conception of the purely disinterested gift and account for its realization in literary expressions of separate spheres ideology. This radical shift in the language and logic of gift exchange thus coincides with the emergence of liberal economic formations during the nineteenth century, for with the emergence of industrial and commercial capitalism, exchange becomes opposed to altruism and equated with a calculated transaction between autonomous and self-interested individuals. While the emphasis on personal gift relations existing alongside commodity relations regularly found in nineteenth-century literature does indeed suggest a nostalgia for a "traditional moral economy" in which more personal forms of social exchange predominated, as Margot

[10] On the mutual dependence of a sphere of self-interested exchange and an image of virtuous, non-economic domesticity, see Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*: "the rhetorical separation of spheres and the image of domesticated, feminized morality were crucial to the consolidation of bourgeois power partly because linking morality to a figure (rhetorically) immune to the self-interest and competition integral to economic success preserved virtue without inhibiting productivity" (10). For a parallel analysis of the political and economic function of the domestic sphere, see Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*: "As it became the woman's sphere, then, the household appeared to detach itself from the political world and to provide the complement and antidote to it. And in this way, novels helped to transform the household into what might be called the 'counterimage' of the modern marketplace, an apolitical realm of culture within the culture as a whole" (48). For a recent overview of this critical position and an analysis of the novel's treatment of the domestic ideal as form of secure property removed from the instabilities of market exchange, see Jeff Nunokawa's *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel.*

Finn has argued (34), I would like to explore the different manifestations of these gift relations further and contend that the emphasis on the purely altruistic gift that becomes salient at this time actually emerges as a corollary to capitalism.

Although altruism and exchange were ostensibly opposed throughout the nineteenth century and relegated, as it were, to separate spheres, I am arguing that they were in fact complementary cultural formations. Furthermore, the idea of the altruistic, or "pure," gift remains a central part of contemporary gift practices. As cultural anthropologists have recently shown, there is still a dichotomy between gifts and exchange in contemporary capitalist societies. According to Jonathan Parry, "[g]ift-exchange—in which persons and things, interest and disinterest are merged—has been fractured, leaving gifts *opposed* to exchange, persons *opposed* to things and interest to disinterest" (458). Today, gift relations are opposed to market transactions; they are "altruistic, moral and loaded with emotion" while commodity exchanges are interested and calculated transactions between independent agents (466). James Carrier suggests as well, in his analysis of the ideology of the perfect gift in contemporary American society, "the perfect gift is free, unconstrained and unconstraining" ("Gifts in a World of Commodities" 23). One of the goals of this dissertation, then, is to explore the connections between the popular view of gifting that emerged during the Victorian period and contemporary ideas of gift exchange. And by exploring the emergence of the idealized conception of the disinterested gift, the way it is both popularized and contested in the literary imagination of the nineteenth century, this dissertation seeks to recover what is obscured by the ideology of the "pure" gift: the fundamental role gift exchange

plays in establishing relations of power and obligation as well as its role in determining social identities and communities.

Ongoing debates within the field of anthropology over the question of reciprocity offer a surprising parallel to the developments within nineteenth-century gift culture, as early anthropological studies of gift exchange reproduced the polarity between altruism and interest. However, rather than a purely disinterested gift, early anthropologists saw the gift as a form of disguised self-interest, as they meticulously traced the "objective" interests involved in gift exchanges—the structural give-and-take of gifts—in the non-western societies they studied.[11] While it makes sense to respond to professions of altruistic giving such as those popularized by Victorians by exposing the interested and calculated side of gifts, this approach ends up seeing all gifts as disguised versions of commodity exchange, as the overemphasis on return gifts assumes the primacy of equivalent exchange and universalizes a notion of balanced reciprocity.

The problem with this approach is that the narrow focus on reciprocity actually perpetuates classical economic paradigms of equivalent exchange and further obscures the power dynamics, variability, and unpredictability involved in everyday gift practices. As Mark Osteen argues, the emphasis on the principle of reciprocity has often reduced the gift "to another form of equivalence that permits theorists to elide inequities of power and blur the myriad forms that exchanges can take" (5). By reading all gift exchanges as "essentially *dyadic* transactions between *self-interested individuals*, and as premised on some kind of *balance*" (Parry 454), early anthropologists therefore revealed a tendency to

[11] According to Jonathan Parry, scholars such as Marshall Sahlins and Peter Blau, following Bronislaw Malinowski, championed an approach to gift exchange that has dominated anthropology until recently. For them, "the gift is always an 'Indian gift'—that is, one 'for which an equivalent return is expected' – and the notion of a 'pure gift' is mere ideological obfuscation which masks the supposedly *non*-ideological verity that nobody does anything for nothing" (455).

impose western economic rationalities on non-western economies: "[s]o it is that anthropology often seems to be endlessly rediscovering the moral of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees.* Publick Benefit derives from Private Vice. Society is created by, and its cohesion results from, an endless sequence of exchanges in which all pursue their own advantage" (455). Annette Weiner elaborates a similar critique, arguing that the emphasis on the "norm of reciprocity" in the work of early ethnographers reveals an assumption about reciprocity as the basis of an autonomous, self-regulating market, what Adam Smith described as "the invisible hand" of the market, ensuring that "the give and take of market interests eventually would balance out" (28). While the approach to gift exchange inspired by Malinowski exposes the interested character of Victorian professions of altruism and disinterested charity, in its interpretation of interest as *self*-interest and its emphasis on precisely calculated reciprocity, it ends up reinforcing the very market rationalities it seeks to unmask.

Given the tendency to reduce gift relations to disguised versions of market exchange, there is a need for a more complex understanding of gifts. Recently, another understanding of the gift has emerged within anthropological studies of gifts. This approach calls for a return to Marcel Mauss's thesis on gift exchange in an effort to go beyond simple oppositions and demonstrate that gifts are neither acts of purely disinterested generosity nor simply disguised forms of debt. Jonathan Parry, for instance, points out that although he has often been interpreted as uncovering the interests hidden in every gift, Mauss, in fact, attended to the paradoxical character of gift exchange: "Mauss repeatedly stresses a *combination* of interest and disinterest, of freedom and constraint, in the gift. Nor, could 'interest' possibly be a matter of *self*- (in the sense of

individual) interest. It is not individuals but groups or *moral persons* who carry on exchanges" (456). That is, people involved in gift exchanges are not autonomous individuals but dependent social actors, representing particular positions and identities within complex social networks.

In *The Gift*, Mauss identifies the dual character of gifts: "in theory [presents] are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily" and while they are "apparently free and disinterested," they are "nevertheless constrained and self-interested" (3). While he notes that the present "generously given" is often accompanied by "a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit," Mauss also attends to the way gift exchange contributes to human solidarity, establishing social bonds and constructing relations of power and authority.[12] This is because what compels the return of a gift is not a set of contractual rules between independent agents, but a sense that the object given remains attached to the person who gave it: "What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary" (12). It is this sense that objects given as gifts are imbued with the identity of their givers that compels recipients to make a return. While Mauss's explanation of the demand for a return gift has been regarded by some as an uncritical acceptance of the explanations offered by indigenous people for their exchange practices, what is significant about this account of reciprocity is the conception

[12] See Mary Douglas's foreword to the 1990 edition of Mauss's *The Gift*: "The theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity" (x).

of selfhood that it assumes.[13] As Mauss points out, in gift exchange "[e]verything holds together, everything is mixed up together. Things possess a personality" (46). Thus, in this understanding of gift exchange, persons and objects intermingle.[14]

Mauss's insight about the "spirit of the gift" suggests as well that different definitions of personhood animate exchange systems and, therefore, offers a social history of exchange that helps to explain the opposition between interest and disinterest, between exchange and giving, which becomes prominent during the nineteenth century. Mauss argues that behind these polarities lies a legal and theoretical opposition between persons and things, which was introduced by classical civilizations and which is now fundamental to modern notions of property and market exchange: "[w]e live in societies that draw a strict distinction…between real rights and personal rights, things and persons….our civilizations, ever since the Semitic, Greek, and Roman civilizations, draw a strong distinction between obligations and services that are not given free, on the one hand, and gifts, on the other" (47). Along similar lines, literary scholars and cultural theorists have observed that the separation between persons and things is a central feature of capitalist societies. Peter Stallybrass, for instance, suggests that the "radically dematerialized opposition between the 'individual' and his or her 'possessions' (between subject and object) is one of the central ideological oppositions of capitalist societies" (185). Igor Kopytoff observes as well that since the emergence of "this conceptual

[13] For critical responses to Mauss's notion of the spirit within gifted objects—called the *hau* in Maori culture—see, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Raymond Firth, and Marshall Sahlins.

[14] (Mauss 48). Parry defends Mauss's emphasis on the "spirit of the gift" further, arguing that the Maori *hau* actually highlights "the general principle" behind gift exchange; that is, "the absence of any absolute disjunction between persons and things. It is because the thing contains the person that the donor retains a lien on what he has given away and we cannot therefore speak of an alienation of property; and it is because of this participation of the person in the object that the gift creates an enduring bond between persons" (457).

polarity of individualized persons and commoditized things" (64), persons and things no longer merge and exchange is viewed as a transaction between autonomous individuals.

Thus, the division between people and objects underlying the systems of property and market exchange in capitalist societies is manifested in an opposition between gifts and exchange. According to Parry, societies in which economics have become differentiated from other aspects of social life are characterized by a polarity between gifts and exchange; exchange becomes identified with self-interested transactions while the gift becomes associated with pure disinterest and is relegated to a non-economic, non-calculating realm: "[t]he interested exchange and the disinterested gift thus emerge as two sides of the same coin."[15] Moreover, although it is posited as a counter to the marketplace, the purely altruistic gift, given without expectation of reciprocity, ends up reproducing the logic of market exchange, for it presupposes the distinction between persons and things. As James Carrier has observed, "[t]his is a powerful ideology, one that is able to disembody objects, divest them of their material aspect and transmute them into pure, spontaneous expressions of being and love" ("Gifts in a World of Commodities" 23). That is, by being given away freely without constraint, interest, or the expectation of a return, the altruistic gift presupposes an alienable relation between the giver and the gift and therefore reinforces the separation between persons and things upon which capitalist exchange is premised.

The highly differentiated economic order that comes into prominence with industrial capitalism therefore produces its opposite: an ideal of the selfless, disinterested

[15] (Parry 458). Likewise, David Graeber points out that Mauss argued "that it is only with the market that it is even possible to imaginge a pure self-interest—a concept that, he remarked, could not even be translated into Greek, or Latin, or Sanskrit, or classical Arabic—and that the modern ideal of the pure selfless gift is simply an impossible mirror image of this notion" (155).

gift and a haven from the interests and calculations of market exchange. And, by the same token, the conception of a purely disinterested realm removed from economic exchange ends up reproducing the polarities upon which market exchange is based. By this account, Victorian conceptions of selfless domestic womanhood end up repeating the polarities posited by market exchange. With the relegation of the gift to a moral, non-economic realm, the home and its domestic angel came to be seen as the source of altruistic values. Presented as the antidote to capitalism's egoistic calculation and the moral complement to economic man, the idealized image of woman as selfless giver defines the realm of self-interested exchange by her very difference from it. As Mary Poovey has argued, the image of the domestic woman "constituted the basis both for the oppositional economy that seemed to (but did not) rest on a binary opposition and for the fundamental model of male identity in capitalist society" (*Uneven Developments* 9). In this way, the ideal of the disinterested gift and the transcendent self it assumes—a subject, Peter Stallybrass writes, "constituted by no place, no object" (186)—lingers in the portraits of the separate spheres idealized by Victorian culture. The ideal gift, manifested in an image of domestic woman, both reinforced the gendered social order and strengthened the opposition between the marketplace and the home. Thus, the very conception of a "pure" gift, removed from and opposed to the realm of calculated exchange, was a product of Victorian commodity culture. In other words, the purely altruistic gift goes hand in hand with possessive individualism.

The Gift of Charity and the Invention of the "Deserving" and "Undeserving" Poor

At the same time that the notion of the disinterested gift gained prominence, another development emerged in Victorian ideas about giving. Alongside the "pure" gift,

Victorian culture gave us the idea of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, that is, the need to take into account the character of the recipient of the gift. As Gareth Stedman Jones has argued, the dependence upon public and private charity, known as pauperism, came to be viewed as the greatest social evil facing London at midcentury. During the 1850s and 60s, London had witnessed an unprecedented rise in the number and scope of charities responding to an economic crisis in the East End of London, itself prompted by extreme poverty, prolonged unemployment, harsh winters, the cholera epidemic, and a failing system of poor relief (241-2). Sparked by fears of social unrest and a growing political threat, the wealthy governing classes moved quickly to pass the Metropolitan Poor Act of 1867, but because reformers believed that such measures were not enough to reign in the “pauperism and the demoralization of the working class” caused by the “‘indiscriminate almsgiver,’” a movement to coordinate and regulate charity got underway, which led to the foundation of the Charity Organization Society (C.O.S.) in 1869.[16]

The movement to organize charity was thus primarily motivated by anxieties about the demoralizing effects of indiscriminate almsgiving, believed to encourage “‘wasteful and improvident habits’” and enable the “‘clever pauper’” to exploit uncoordinated charity efforts (qtd. in Jones 246, 251). This view of charity as demoralizing to the “honest poor” resulted from what Jones calls the “deformation of the gift,” a breakdown in traditional gift relations that followed the geographical separation of the wealthy and the poor—the “exodus of the wealthy” from the East End (249).

[16] (Jones 247). According to Jones, the Metropolitan Poor Act reformed aspects of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, establishing a Common Poor Fund and allowing men of property to serve on local poor unions: “[i]t was hoped, by this measure, that the domination of local boards by small tradesmen would be significantly reduced” and that “the ardour of the ‘indiscriminate almsgiver’” would be dampened (254).

According to Jones, without the "methods of social control" built into traditional gift relations between the wealthy and the poor, charity underwent a crisis (251). Drawing on Marcel Mauss's theories, Jones writes that what was lost was the "central status-maintaining function" of the gift; "[i]f it is depersonalized, the gift loses its defining features: the elements of voluntary sacrifice, prestige, subordination, and obligation" (252). Thus, in addition to the desire to prevent the "clever pauper" from taking advantage of disparate charity societies, the movement to organize charitable efforts more systematically was motivated by a desire to restore personal relationships between the wealthy and the poor, which would reintroduce a sense of obligation to the recipients of charity. At the same time, these efforts attempted to distinguish between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor (255). Poor Law relief was restrained and made punitive, offering only the workhouse as relief to "'unworthy destitute persons'" (qtd. in Jones 255), while coordinated and regulated charity would "prevent overlapping and indiscriminate giving. By such means it was anticipated that the exploits of the 'clever pauper' would be brought to an end" (254). As Jones argues, these measures were thus intended to heal the "deformation of the gift" produced by the separation of classes and thereby restore a sense of social stability and, above all, prevent the moral degradation of pauperism.

While the idea of the altruistic gift ends up reinforcing the notion of the autonomous individual, the view of charity as demoralizing stems from a belief that accepting charity threatens autonomy. Behind both of these ideas of giving is the liberal conception of the individual, for the problem with pauperism is that the dependence upon charity was believed to erode "the spirit of independence," as Sir Charles Trevelyn put it

(qtd in Jones 244). J. R. Green, the vicar of Stepney, remarks in a similar vein that "[i]t is not so much poverty that is increasing in the East, as pauperism, the want of industry, of thrift or self-reliance" that resulted from charity (qtd. in Jones 244). So, as the liberal, middle-class values of self-reliance, hard work, and thrift gained prominence, the dependence on any form of charity came to be viewed as morally degrading.[17] Just as the disinterested gift parallels and reinforces the idea of autonomous and self-interested exchange, so also does the view of charity as demoralizing accompany the emergence of liberal individualism. That is, both the purely altruistic gift and the movement to regulate charity that demoralizes its recipients were distinct cultural formations of liberal economic society, developments which register the desire to make the gift conform to individualism.

Reading Novel Gifts

These developments within nineteenth-century gift culture provide a crucial context for an analysis of fictional accounts of gift exchange. In their representations of the logic and practice of giving, nineteenth-century writers both give voice and subvert the historical cultural developments I have outlined here. While narratives of gifts and giving pervade nineteenth-century culture—from poetry, novels, and plays to essays, diaries and letters—my focus is on the nineteenth-century novel in its realist form. Because of their emphasis on the "culture of everyday life," realist novels attest to the limits of the cash nexus by depicting a variety of day-to-day exchanges carried out by individuals within complex social networks (Moretti 35). As Margot Finn has argued, "[w]here legal theorists and political economists modeled their economic systems upon

[17] The widespread influence of liberalism is exemplified by the enormously popular books *Self-Help* (1859) and *Thrift* (1879) by Samuel Smiles, which celebrate the virtues of hard work, self-reliance, and frugality.

cash transactions, strict contracts, autonomous individuals and market mechanisms, novelists elaborated a more capacious view of economic behavior derived from the practices of daily life" (26). That is, its emphasis on the variety of quotidian exchanges of ordinary people makes the novel the ideal cultural form for analyzing the meanings and practice of everyday gift relations.

In this attention to ordinary social life, novels expose the failure of political economic theory to account for ordinary exchange. Novelistic representations of gift relations therefore offer a broader understanding of the meanings of interest, exchange, and economy. "The very word 'interest' is itself recent," Mauss observes, "originally an accounting technique: the Latin word *interest* was written on account books against the sums of interest that had to be collected" (76). He notes that "[t]he victory of rationalism and mercantilism was needed before the notions of profit and the individual, raised to the level of principles, were introduced. One can almost date—since Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*—the triumph of the notion of individual interest" (76). Moreover, he explains, the "interest" that is involved in gift exchanges "is not the cold reasoning of the merchant, the banker, and the capitalist….There is self-interest, but this self-interest is only analogous to what allegedly sways us" or suits individual conceptions of what is useful (75).

Pierre Bourdieu argues similarly that the failure to recognize an economy, like that of the gift, as an economy stems from "an unconscious acceptance of a *restricted definition of economic interest,* which, in its explicit form, is the historical product of capitalism" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 177). As a result, this view can "find no place…for any form of 'non-economic' interest" (*Logic of Practice* 113). That is,

because economic calculation has been viewed as appropriating "the remorseless logic of what Marx calls 'naked self-interest'" and, in the process, "relinquishing an island of the 'sacred', miraculously spared by the 'icy waters of egoistic calculation,'" it "can make nothing of universes that have not performed such a dissociation" (113). In this sense, classical economic theories can make nothing of novels that represent a "universe" that has not yet restricted the meanings of the terms interest and economic; it can make nothing of novels that continually blur the boundaries between the private, "domestic" realm and the public, "economic" realm. These novels, I suggest, can be distinguished by their resistance to the conventional divisions that underwrite market exchange, attesting instead to the continued overlap between public and private, between interest and disinterest, and between freedom and obligation.

Moreover, not only do novels reveal the descriptive limits of classical economic paradigms and thus broaden our understanding of interest and economy, but the array of exchange practices—the mix of "[g]ifts and commodities, equity and common law, credit and cash, animated things and objectified persons"—that overflow the nineteenth-century novel challenge the prevailing understanding of the novel as a vehicle of liberal cultural formations.[18] According to this view, the rise of the novel coincides with the rise of the autonomous individual; indeed, as Ian Watt and Nancy Armstrong have influentially argued, the novel is "a form of writing that helped to create this concept of the individual" (Armstrong 30). According to Watt, the novel marked a departure from

[18] (Finn 26). Like Finn, I view the novel as more than a vehicle of modern economic rationalities and therefore attempt to illuminate those forms of social exchange that fall outside of market definitions. While Finn explores the extent to which commercial transactions were shaped by social obligations, personal relationships, and, even, gifting practices, I focus on gift exchange, not as a subset of credit relations, but as a vital form of social exchange intersecting with and running counter to market exchange in order to make visible the complex ways that men and women of all classes used gifts to establish social bonds and negotiate relations of power and prestige.

previous genres in its emphasis on the particular and psychologized experiences of the individual through space and time. To Watt's history, Nancy Armstrong crucially adds an analysis of the way the novel produces gendered forms of subjectivity. Working along similar lines, Mary Poovey has demonstrated that the novel, by stabilizing transgressive desire and deploying idealized images of the domestic woman as a sanctuary far removed from the competition and upheaval of the marketplace, constructs "the reader as a particular kind of subject—a psychologized, classed, developmental individual" (90). These histories of Victorian domestic ideology ultimately suggest that the novel served as the primary vehicle of bourgeois values and economic individualism by producing the autonomous individual upon which market exchange and liberal, bourgeois ideology is based.

This view has proved fundamental to my readings of nineteenth-century novels. Indeed, I argue that the unique formations of the gift that dominate the popular imagination during the nineteenth century, particularly idealized images of disinterested giving and feminine altruism, actually reproduce the ideological preconditions of market exchange and shore up patriarchal social structures. However, whereas this approach informs my reading of the altruistic gift and movements to professionalize charity, in its totalizing view of capitalism it overlooks the subversive potential of alternative modes of exchange and different relations to objects.[19] As this dissertation demonstrates, alongside gifts, noncommercial objects such as heirlooms, keepsakes, and tokens fill the pages of nineteenth-century novels, playing a significant role in shaping social relations. By

[19] While largely focused on the tendency of the late-nineteenth-century realist novel to stabilize meaning, as a formal counterpart of commodity fetishism, Elaine Freedgood argues in *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* that what she terms a Victorian "thing culture" preceded and persisted alongside commodity culture (8). See, especially, her "Coda: Victorian Thing Culture and the Way We Read Now," pp. 139-58.

highlighting the obligatory and personified gifts circulating within novels, I suggest that the domestic sphere was animated by economic relations that not only adhere to the logic of reciprocity but were also bound by personal meanings, attachments, and obligations. By the same token, the analysis of novel gifts reveals that the gift economy was not restricted to domestic relations but remained a central part of public life, often overlapping with market exchange.

As I trace the representations of gift exchange in nineteenth-century novels, I emphasize the way gifts are expressed formally in texts. For example, in addition to portraying gift relations thematically, Victorian novels frequently enact the ideology of the gift through their narrative resolutions. A typical narrative trajectory involves the hero or heroine confronting and overcoming the temptation of money; only after characters have given up openly acquisitive behavior are they rewarded with a harmonious mix of financial success and domestic happiness. In this way, novels enact what Pierre Bourdieu calls the "(individual and collective) misrecognition" of the returns they never fail to disperse in their closings, for over time and the course of the narrative, novels give monetary and romantic returns to those characters who relinquish self-interest (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 5). The conventional happy endings of novels, therefore, mimic the delay between a gift and its counter-gift, which reinforces the collective denial of the "objective truth" of the exchange.[20]

This is Arthur Clennam's story in *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), which I discuss in chapter III, but it is also neatly encapsulated in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) as the object

[20] (*Logic of Practice* 104). As Bourdieu has argued, time is a critical component of gift exchange: "the lapse of time that separates the gift from the counter-gift is what allows the deliberate oversight, the collectively maintained and approved self-deception, without which the exchange could not function" (105).

lesson that transforms Bella Wilfer from a worshipper of mammon into a selflessly giving and capable housewife who regularly consults guides on domestic economy. As she witnesses Noddy Boffin's decline as a miser, Bella comes to realize the evils of money and renounces her inheritance. It is only after she has given up her obsession with money and fully embraced her role as a domestic woman, that she is rewarded with wealth. Furthermore, not only does this episode echo the altruistic gift's denial of self-interest, but it demonstrates the moral power of narrative. Like the novel itself, Boffin's scheme to act the part of a miser is a moral exemplum for the reader Bella: "'You saw that good fortune was turning my stupid head and hardening my silly heart…and you took the pains to be the dearest and kindest finger-post that ever was set up anywhere, pointing out the road that I was taking and the end it led to'" (775). Boffin's ruse is significantly a narrative of the "most detestable sides of wealth" (775). The transformative power of the gift and fiction come together in this scene, for the object lesson that prompts Bella's moral transformation is also a purely generous gift: "'I never shall be able to understand…how you, Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, could be so forgetful of yourselves, and take such pains and trouble to make me a little better….But I am very, very grateful'" (777). This scene ultimately serves as an allegory for the potential of narrative to bring about moral transformation, and, in this way, to act as a gift.

However, even as some writers popularized idealized images of giving, still others found formal means for depicting the obligatory and interested character of gifts. For instance, as I will argue in chapter II, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* parodies the double-sided language permeating the social relations of the landed gentry. From the frequent use of the 'not un-' formation—as in, "it would not be unbecoming in her to

make such a present" (312)—and the multivalent terms pervading the text—to be "much obliged," to possess "interest" and "principle," to gain "consequence," and act "creditably"—Austen highlights the way interest is couched in the language of indirection and expresses the overlaps between moral and economic systems of value.

Not only does *Mansfield Park* satirize the "polite fictions" of gentry society, but it is also deeply attentive to the obligations and interests—the claims—embedded in the objects circulating as gifts. For instance, Fanny Price's struggle to reconcile the demands entailed in the necklace given her by Mary Crawford with Edmund's gift of a chain indicates the difficulties involved in negotiating social interests and personal desire. Upon discovering that Miss Crawford's necklace doesn't fit the cross given by her brother, Fanny resolves to wear both gifts:

> [Edmund's gift] therefore must be worn; and having with delightful feelings joined the chain and the cross, those memorials of the two most beloved of her heart, those dearest tokens so formed for each other by every thing real and imaginary—and put them round her neck, and seen and felt how full of William and Edmund they were, she was able without an effort to resolve on wearing Miss Crawford's necklace too. She acknowledged it to be right. Miss Crawford had a claim. (250)

In this account of gift exchange, gifts carry obligations and identities. As with Miss Crawford's necklace, every gifted object carries a claim that is an index of the social status of the giver and, at times, of the recipient. In addition, persons and things are inextricable. The objects that are exchanged are inalienable in the sense that they continue to carry the identity of their givers: Edmund and William's gifts are "dearest

tokens" and, when she wears them, Fanny can see and feel "how full of William and Edmund they were." These gifts presage Maussian readings, for the objects that are given "speak" of persons and relationships (Mauss 44). Moreover, they show that gifts impose demands upon givers and recipients, obligating them to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (39). Consequently, these gifts belie the idea of the purely disinterested gift and imagine gift giving not as a disinterested alternative to market exchange but as a complex mode of social exchange in which the social bonds created through gifts oscillate between being socially beneficial and personally oppressive. Thus the counter-narrative of the gift that I trace in nineteenth-century novels helps to resolve the polarized view of gifts, as either "disguised self-interest" or "sentimentalized…remnant[s] of a golden age of pure generosity" (Osteen 1), and coincides with recent anthropological reading of gift exchange.

In refuting the polarized view of gifts, the anthropological, or Maussian, approach to gifts suggests that gifts are not simply opposed to commodities, but are related in complex ways. As Igor Kopytoff has pointed out, commodities can become "singularized" when given as gifts. Conversely, when pawned, gifts become commodities, denuded of their personal, sentimental value and endowed instead with exchange value.[21] Furthermore, the associations between women and commodities in Victorian images of the "marriage market" frequently overlay traditional structures of kinship and alliance, which view marriage as an exchange of women as gifts.[22] Despite these overlaps, gift and commodity exchange are nevertheless distinct forms of social

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[21] For a more comprehensive account of this transformation, see Peter Stallybrass's analysis of Dickens's "The Pawnshop" in his essay "Marx's Coat."

[22] See Kathy Alexis Psomiades's "Heterosexual Exchange and Other Victorian Fictions: *The Eustace Diamonds* and Victorian Anthropology" for an analysis of the increased emphasis on "archaic nature of heterosexuality" at the very moment marriage becomes "less like the marriages of alliance" than ever (94).

exchange. In C. A. Gregory's formulation, whereas "commodity exchange is an exchange of alienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal independence" (12), gift exchange "is an exchange of inalienable things between persons who are in a state of reciprocal dependence" (19). Alan Schrift clarifies this distinction further, observing that "while both commodity and gift exchange are potentially profitable, the nature of their respective profits differs dramatically. Where commodity exchange produces surplus value in the form of capital…gift exchange produces a surplus value in the form of relationships" ("Logics of the Gift" 118). In gift exchange, then, the emphasis is not on a quantifiable return but on the personal relations that are produced through the exchange of goods.

Additionally, the anthropological approach to gift exchange suggests a reorientation toward the way we read objects. According to James Carrier, we can distinguish between the way we typically read commodities and the way we might read gifts. When we analyze the social nature of commodities, he suggests, we read them as signs with "general cultural meanings" ("Gifts, Commodities, and Social Relations" 132): "[t]his is clearest in the many semiological studies of advertising, which focus on how people interpret an object by linking it to the common symbols with which it is associated in the advertisement" (132). And although people may draw on these meanings for self-definition, they are "part of impersonal frames of reference" (132). When we read gifts according to the Maussian model, on the other hand, "[o]bjects derive identity or meaning from the specific personal relationships in which they are transacted or in which they feature" (132). That is, we read them as objects laden with personal meaning. They are, as Peter Stallybrass puts it, "repositories of memory" with particularities and

histories (195). Thus, reading gifts involves examining the social significations that emerge through the exchange and possession of gifts.

As I have suggested, novelists, in particular, were keenly aware of this process of signification and often depicted it as another level of narration defining their characters. The following chapters trace developments in conceptions and practices of gift giving over the course of the nineteenth century, from the age of patronage, in which hierarchical gift practices still dominated the social order, to the age of capital, in which gift exchange persisted alongside market exchange. As I consider novelistic treatments of gifts and giving, I examine the various ways authors figure gift exchange in the context of the historical cultural formations I have outlined here, at times reproducing and at times contesting the popular, idealized view of gift exchange. Through an analysis of nineteenth-century novels that combines close, historicized readings with theoretical insights on gift exchange, I examine the historical and formal manifestations of the gift-nexus in nineteenth-century literature and culture.

In chapter II, I analyze *Mansfield Park*'s (1814) portrait of the "old society" as it was declining in the early decades of the nineteenth century (Perkin 38). As in Mauss's analysis of pre-capitalist societies, Jane Austen's portrait of the landed gentry illuminates the obligatory and interested side of gift exchange and serves as a model of the forms of exchange that later nineteenth-century idealizations of the "pure" gift sought to supplant. In this chapter, I argue that *Mansfield Park* satirizes the system of patronage by exposing the interests permeating the language and practices, the "polite fictions," of gentry society, from colonial enterprise to domestic relations.[23] Like Mauss, Austen views gift

[23] Patronage, according to Harold Perkin, was an intricate "social nexus" of "vertical friendship" based on gifts and favors binding society together throughout the eighteenth century (49).

giving as a combination of interest and disinterest, freedom and constraint, and persons and things. By drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's insights about the paradoxical, double-sided logic and language of gift exchange, I highlight the social function of gifts; that is, the role gifts play in establishing and maintaining one's consequence, a term Austen frequently uses to designate social status and value. Austen's depiction of the gift economy underpinning the landed gentry thus reveals the complex ways individuals use gifts to produce and accumulate power in the form of honor, prestige, and authority.[24]

Focusing on *Mansfield Park*'s treatment of the language of generosity illuminates the way in which the ideology of patronage extended into other discourses, particularly sentimental accounts of slave reform known as amelioration. In its satire of the coercive nature of gifts and attention to the way gifts enact forms of personal bondage and establish social dominance, the novel critiques the benevolent pretentions of calls for slave reform prevalent after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and before the abolition of slavery in 1833. What her satire reveals is the way in which the language and logic of generosity, which end up reproducing and naturalizing relations of power and inequality, function as a strategy of containment just as the institution of slavery was being challenged.

Austen's portrait of patronage emerges in Dickens's novels in the figure of the patriarchal giver. Whereas for Austen, gift exchange remained a holistic social relation, pervading every aspect of gentry life, for Dickens, the benevolent patriarch is a remnant of aristocratic patronage that persists as disguised self-interest. In chapter III, I analyze the way *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) responds to the commercialization of social life by

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[24] Pierre Bourdieu identifies these forms of power as symbolic capital. See, for instance, "Forms of Capital" and *The Logic of Practice,* pp. 112-21.

appropriating and transforming the residual gift economy of patronage society. This novel, I argue, positions images of sham benevolence, allied with government circumlocution and the mystified realm of financial speculation, against an idealized, middle-class conception of giving in the form of an industrious and selfless domestic woman. Typically, Dickens's novels have been viewed as responding to a sense of the pervasive and invasive character of commodity culture by fashioning the home as a haven from the uncertainty and self-interest of the market. *Little Dorrit*, however, begins with the failure of this Victorian ideal—like the house of Clennam, London homes have been invaded by commerce, and the middle-class family resides, not in a house, but in a debtors' prison. In this chapter, I examine the way in which *Little Dorrit* turns to the gift to resolve this crisis. I contend that through his portrait of Little Dorrit, Dickens presents an idealized vision of altruistic giving by contrasting it with purely interested economic transactions and with paternalistic forms of giving. His vision of the pure gift enables him to rewrite the angel in the house as an industrious giver whose domestic virtues are no longer affixed to the home but instead are diffused throughout the community, capable even of moralizing business. Dickens thus presents an ideal of disinterested generosity that remains impermeable to the alienating effects of commercial life even as it travels through public spaces.

I suggest further that the idealization of feminine domesticity as a form of labor that is freely given serves as a model for Dickens's conception of authorship. Significantly, "over and above her other daily cares," Little Dorrit labors to maintain the "genteel fiction" that sustains her father's sense of respectability (89). In this respect, the "polite fictions" that Austen details in *Mansfield Park* reappear in *Little Dorrit* as "pious

fraud[s]," the white lies that Little Dorrit tells to sustain her father. As the novel's central storyteller, Little Dorrit's "pious fraud[s]" also signal her capacity to construct stories that are gifts to others. While Austen satirizes the polite fictions permeating gentry society, Dickens celebrates Little Dorrit's fictions as a kind of necessary lie in the face of the alienating forces of capitalist exchange. In addition, instead of a simple opposition between truth and fiction, Dickens delineates a hierarchy of fiction, in which the stories of Little Dorrit and the legends and imaginative conceptions that enrich the lives of the debtors and Bleeding-heart Yarders are elevated over the genteel fictions, government circumlocution, and sham benevolence of the upper classes. In this way, Dickens distinguishes between different versions of language used to obfuscate, implying that the important distinction is in the social effects and meanings these fictions produce. Ultimately, I suggest, Dickens's conception of fiction as a "pious fraud" serves as a defense of his own fiction, implying that it too is a kind of virtuous lie.

Alongside its idealization of industrious generosity, *Little Dorrit* takes up contemporary debates surrounding the Poor Laws and the efficacy of Victorian philanthropy. In *Little Dorrit*, the belief in the demoralizing effect of charity is dramatized in the moral decline of Mr. Dorrit and his son Tip. Little Dorrit's plea to Arthur Clennam to stop giving money to her father and brother echoes the midcentury critiques of "the indiscriminate almsgiver" that culminated in institutionalized forms of charity (Jones 247). In addition, like the C.O.S, Charles Dickens emphasized personal forms of charity as an alternative to the impersonality and severity of the workhouse. From the generosity of the Plornishes to the visits and acts of charity of Arthur Clennam, *Little Dorrit* privileges a personalized economy of giving. However, unlike Victorian

charity organizations, *Little Dorrit*'s informal system of gifting and charity emerges among the working class characters and becomes a vital means of sustaining community. While the novel's construction of the industriously giving domestic woman reproduces the ideology of the altruistic gift, in the informal gifts and stories circulating among the poor, Dickens offers a more expansive view of gift exchange, and it is with this portrait of giving that Dickens comes closest to challenging the dominance of commodity culture.

Like Charles Dickens, George Eliot sought to elevate her work above market exchange by formulating literature as a gift capable of extending the sympathy of readers. And like Dickens, Eliot explicitly opposed her work to more commercialized genres, often speaking derisively of the literary annuals. In her essay "The Natural History of German Life," Eliot refers disparagingly to "the effeminate feebleness of the 'Keepsake' style" in her criticism of artists (108). Likewise, in a letter, Eliot commented on a painting of Dickens, noting "that keepsakey, impossible face which Maclise gave him" (5:226). And, in *Middlemarch*, Ned Plymdale presents the latest *Keepsake* to Rosamond Vincy as a token of his affection; the book, treated scornfully by the narrator even before Lydgate offers his scathing assessment, serves as a symbol of Rosamond's preoccupation with fashion and spectacle.[25] In chapter IV, I examine the way *Middlemarch* (1871-72) attempts to reconcile the polarity between altruism and egoism expressed in the popular discourse of the gift. Although Eliot differentiates gifting behavior, defining some acts as more interested than others, and celebrates a version of morality that calls for the suppression of egoism in favor of selflessness, her portrait of giving ultimately attempts

[25] "He had brought the last *Keepsake*, the gorgeous watered-silk publication which marked modern progress at that time; and he considered himself very fortunate that he could be the first to look over it with her….Mr. Ned was satisfied that he had the very best thing in art and literature as a medium for 'paying addresses'—the very thing to please a nice girl" (170)

to reconcile the opposition between altruism and egoism. The novel's celebration of Miss Noble's "luxury of giving" as well as Dorothea's impetuous, overpowering sympathy and need to "rule beneficently" suggest a form of giving that is not entirely selfless (108, 225). For Eliot, gifts combine altruism and egoism and, in this sense, serve as a central metaphor for her conception of sympathetic art. In her view, the gift of sympathy is an interpersonal exchange that breaks down social and emotional barriers and involves a negotiation between the needs of another and one's own desires.

Eliot further engages with and undermines the middle-class ideology of the gift by problematizing constructions of feminine altruism and images of philanthropy. By depicting Dorothea Brooke as inhabiting and eventually rejecting these traditional gender roles, as struggling against the oppressive role of selfless, self-denying wife and against the ineffective, self-aggrandizing role of philanthropic lady, the novel offers a feminist assessment of the gift. In addition, with her potential to "interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horses" (6), Dorothea registers a critique of male-dominated economic theories. To frame the novel's engagement with political economy, I draw on Georges Bataille's notions of the "restrictive" and the "general" economy in my analysis of the way *Middlemarch*'s conception of the gift—personified in Dorothea Brooke—interacts with and critiques the "restrictive" utilitarian economy of the commodity—personified in Rosamond Vincy. I contend that through this allegorical treatment of exchange, Eliot challenges liberal economic paradigms. Against the notion of the rational, self-interested individual, the novel advances a notion of the self as manifold and interconnected. Against the utilitarian model of exchange, the novel figures the

interconnections between individuals as a gift relation, which diffuses incalculable effects and a sense of social indebtedness throughout the wider community.

In chapter V, my concluding chapter, I examine Oscar Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) as a late-Victorian engagement with the ideology of the "pure" gift in order to situate the culture of the gift that emerges in the nineteenth century within a larger history of gift exchange. Using Wilde's critique of charity as a window into *fin de siècle* debates about charitable giving, and particularly the discourse of wealthy philanthropy, I analyze the way in which economic liberalism continues to appropriate gift exchange at the end of the nineteenth century. Finally, I close the dissertation with a brief consideration of the utopian implications of an alternative view of exchange by assessing the contemporary political and moral applications of gift theory as well as its applications for reading novel gifts.

Throughout this dissertation, I contend that the analysis of the gift as it occupied the popular literary imagination of nineteenth-century England enables us to reassess the history of personhood and to make visible forms of exchange obscured by political economic paradigms. While the ideology of the disinterested gift and efforts to make charity align with liberal individualism emerges in concert with a notion of self-interested exchange and the autonomous self, images of the personified, obligatory gift persist in nineteenth-century novels. Austen's depiction of the dual capacity of gifts to conceal claims and act as memorials of loved ones, Dickens's vision of literature as communal property, and Eliot's conceptions of manifold selves and diffusive gifts form a counter narrative to the story of possessive individualism. These novel gifts thus challenge the assumption that the modern liberal subject—atomistic, fungible, and self-interested—is

inevitable. Instead, the persistence of interested gift relations suggests that people are not isolated but enmeshed in complex social networks and that people and objects are less divided than we might imagine.

CHAPTER II

JANE AUSTEN'S POLITE FICTIONS: THE PRICE OF GIFTS IN *MANSFIELD PARK*

Fanny still resisted, and from her heart. The gift was too valuable.

—Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

An intricate economy of gifts operates within *Mansfield Park,* from the "doubtful good" of a necklace Fanny receives from Mary Crawford to William's cross and Edmund's chain, which Fanny wears as the "dearest tokens" of the "two most beloved of her heart" (204, 212). Characters routinely exchange acts of politeness and tokens of friendship and regularly dispense charity to the poor. Some gifts appear to be materializations of affectionate ties, while others are fraught with personal interest and obligation. Discussions of *Mansfield Park* have long explored the novel's treatment of slavery, empire, and gender politics, but the novel's preoccupation with the way gift exchange structures relations of power has frequently been overlooked.[26] By tracing the parallels between the novel's domestic economy of gifts and its historical moment, a moment characterized by the expansion of the system of patronage to the colonial setting, this chapter re-examines *Mansfield Park's* engagement with and critique of slavery and the subordination of women. In this chapter, I situate *Mansfield Park*'s treatment of gifts within the context of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fictional and abolitionist accounts of slave reform, which draw on sentimental discourses of

[26] For early treatments of *Mansfield Park* in the context of slavery, see Avrom Fleishman's *A Reading of Mansfield Park* and Wylie Sypher's "The West-Indian as a 'Character' in the Eighteenth Century." For more recent discussions of empire and slavery, see Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, Michael Steffes's "Slavery and *Mansfield Park:* The Historical and Biographical Context," Brian Southam's "The Silence of the Bertrams," and Joseph Lew's "'That abominable traffic': *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery." For considerations of the relationship between gender and slavery, see Jon Mee's "Austen's Treacherous Ivory: Female Patriotism, Domestic Ideology, and Empire," Moira Ferguson's "Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender," and Maaja Stewart's "The Shadow Behind the Country House: West Indian Slavery and Female Virtue in *Mansfield Park*."

benevolence. I contend that the central fictional tropes of the literature of amelioration—the benevolent master and grateful slave—emerge and are satirized within *Mansfield Park*'s domestic plot.[27] The irony pervading the narrative voice suggests that *Mansfield Park*, like *Northanger Abbey*, is a satirical novel offering a parody of a popular genre; in this instance, however, the targets of Austen's wit are the tropes of sentimental narratives of slavery reform, the benevolent master and the grateful slave.

Mansfield Park's allusions to slavery and the slave trade have long fueled critical discussions of the novel. In her plenary address at the 2006 NAVSA/NASSR conference, Catherine Gallagher returned to one of the most enduring debates by performing a dramatic reading of a conversation that could have taken place in the novel had Fanny Price's question about the slave trade not been met with "such a dead silence!"(155). The scene that inspired Gallagher's imaginative exercise is one that has been the subject of debate since Edward Said argued in his influential *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that the silence greeting Fanny's question is a sign of the novel's disavowal of the gentry's economic dependence on slavery and colonialism. Said contends that the novel remains silent about the gentry's sources of wealth, eliding the dependence of the country estate on profits from a slave plantation in Antigua and thus typifies the imperialist ideology pervading nineteenth-century European literature. As Gallagher recounts it, in response to Said, critics have attempted to defend Austen, accusing Said of "simplification, gender

[27] While Austen's parody of gothic romance in *Northanger Abbey* and of sentimentalism in *Sense and Sensibility* have long been noted, the possibility that *Mansfield Park* parodies sentimental treatments of slavery has never been considered. One of my goals in highlighting *Mansfield Park*'s intertextuality, therefore, is to broaden our understanding of Austen's satire and concern with genre and to add *Mansfield Park* to the list of Austen's parodic novels.

bias, deafness to irony, and blindness to satire."[28] Indeed, when considered within the context of the narrative, the scene does not indicate a moral discomfort with the topic of slavery; rather, as Edmund points out, it "would have pleased [Sir Thomas] to be inquired of farther" (*MP* 155). Moreover, it is Fanny's cousins Maria and Julia who were responsible for the "dead silence" as they "were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject" (155). Fanny's question and subsequent reticence to speak then have more to do with her desire to please and appear modest than they do with an aversion to the subject of the slave trade. Gallagher returns to this scene not to recapitulate these debates, but to show that during the early nineteenth century, rather than a silence, there was actually widespread public discussion of slavery and the slave trade. She also seeks to challenge the critical consensus that conflates British imperialism with the slave trade, pointing out that even as slavery continued to be a source of the nation's prosperity, public opinion in the early years of the nineteenth century was largely united against the slave trade.[29]

While Gallagher merely imagines what *Mansfield Park* might have said about the slave trade and slavery, I suggest that the novel actually dramatizes a particular discursive moment in the history of British slavery, a moment characterized by what historians have

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[28] Susan Fraiman offers one of the most comprehensive responses, arguing that Said fails to see Austen's implicit critique of the patriarchal figures in her novels: "[y]et had Said placed Sir Thomas Bertram, for example, in line with the deficient fathers who run unrelentingly from *Northanger Abbey* through *Persuasion,* he might perhaps have paused before assuming that Austen legitimates the master of Mansfield Park." (808). She goes on to highlight Said's neglect of the nuances of the text: "[i]f truth be told, Said's attention even to his chosen text is cursory: Austen's references to Antigua (and India) are mentioned without actually being read, though Said stresses elsewhere the importance of close, specific analysis. Maria Bertram is mistakenly referred to as 'Lydia' (*CI*, 87) – confused, presumably, with Lydia Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. And these are just a few of the signs that *Mansfield Park*'s particular complexity—including what I see as its moral complexity—has been sacrificed here, so ready is Said to offer Austen as 'Exhibit A' in the case for culture's endorsement of empire" (808).

[29] In fact, Gallagher notes, the public would have aligned anti-slave trade policy with imperial expansion, and the critique of the international slave trade was a crucial part of the vision of what she terms "the national ethical subject."

referred to as amelioration, when, following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, there was a concerted effort to reform slavery and establish more humane conditions within the colonies.[30] This chapter traces the parallels between the paternalistic form of gift exchange depicted in the novel and the colonial discourse of amelioration found in abolitionist writings and sentimental fiction in order to resolve debates about the novel's references to slavery. While *Mansfield Park*'s allusions to slavery have frequently been read as evidence of the novel's complicity with an imperialism that obscures its dependence on colonial wealth, I argue that the novel actually satirizes the paternal social order and its investment in ameliorative forms of slavery. Through a reading of Austen's treatment of gifts as polite fictions, which parade self-interest and obligation as generosity, I suggest that the novel offers a portrait of an absentee slave owner who turns to benevolence as a strategy for containing both unruly women and unruly slaves. In doing so, the novel parodies sentimental narratives of slavery that advocated a benevolent form of slavery. By revealing Sir Thomas's "benevolent plan," which unfolds over time, as a strategy for securing the prosperity of the estate and for recuperating his image, the novel dramatizes the way sentimental discourses professed to improve the conditions of slavery while perpetuating the profitability of slavery (14). Transformed by the gift economy into the ideal domestic woman possessing both "sweetness of temper" and "strong feelings of gratitude," Fanny Price becomes Sir Thomas's most profitable investment (19, 371). Thus, by delineating the hidden price of gifts, the novel ultimately exposes amelioration as a discourse that romanticizes benevolence and justifies oppression.

[30] See Markman Ellis's discussion of amelioration in *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender, and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel.*

The Polite Fictions of Patronage

When reading *Mansfield Park*, one is immediately struck by the multitude of gifts circulating within the novel and the extent to which the economy of gifts center on Fanny Price. In a representative scene, Fanny retreats to her room, the east room, hoping to recover from a humiliation brought on by her refusal to take part in Tom's play and her aunt Norris's subsequent accusations of ingratitude and obstinacy. As she sits in the room, hoping to find solace in her "nest of comforts," her gaze lights upon the gifts she has received from her cousins over the years:

> as she looked around her, the claims of her cousins to being obliged, were strengthened by the sight of present upon present that she had received from them. The table between the windows was covered with work-boxes and netting-boxes, which had been given her at different times, principally by Tom; and she grew bewildered as to the amount of the debt which all these kind remembrances produced. (120)

In this scene, the profusion of presents that literally fill up Fanny's personal space become importunate symbols of her dependent position. The pile of work-boxes, like the gifts that were customarily given to servants on Boxing Day, signal her subordinate status as a "handy" companion to Lady Bertram (16). The gifts literalize the way Fanny's behavior has been increasingly circumscribed by expectations of gratitude. The benign appearance of her things changes before her very eyes; instead of comforting her, these gifts belie their generous appearance and act as material reminders of her cousins' claims. By employing a monetary metaphor, Austen highlights the symbolic power of gifts to exact a return and establish relations of obligation. Strikingly, these "kind

remembrances" produce a debt, for when Tom asks Fanny to participate in the theatricals, he is not simply asking a favor, he is collecting on a debt.[31] And, while the return demanded by these gifts is non-monetary, it is figured in economic language: the gifts remind Fanny of "the claims" of her cousins and "produce" a bewildering "debt."

In drawing attention to the economic character of the gift relations of the gentry, Austen anticipates the discoveries of later anthropologists and social theorists of gift exchange. Her attention to the paradoxical nature of gifts—the way these gifts can be "kind remembrances" and yet produce a debt—anticipates Marcel Mauss's central claim, elaborated in his classic 1925 essay on the gift, *Essai sur le Don* (*The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*), that gifts appear "free and disinterested" but are "nevertheless constrained and self-interested" (3). According to Mauss, the "total" social phenomena he examines nearly always take the form of the gift, "even when there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest" (3). The altered aspect of Fanny's things registers this paradox: they are, in a sense, polite fictions, for while they appear to be "kind remembrances" (*MP* 120), the gifts produce social obligations. Building on Mauss's insights, other theorists of gift exchange have noted as well the paradoxical social character of gifts. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, maintains that gift exchange entails an "(individual and collective) misrecognition" of the gift's interested nature, a fiction made possible by the "lapse of time *separating* the gift from the counter-gift" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 5-6). For Fanny, then, the obligation to return her cousins' gifts is

[31] Literary critics have often noticed Austen's tendency to expose the economic character of social life. As Fraser Easton observes, "*Mansfield Park* is a novel steeped in forms of economy and exchange: from the marriages of the Ward sisters to Fanny's questions about the slave-trade, no human interaction—and certainly no ethical or moral commitment—is allowed to exist outside an explicitly economic network" (460).

delayed and signaled finally by the "sight of present upon present," which have been accumulating over time (*MP* 120).

Despite this veiled economic character, gift exchange remains distinct from commodity exchange in Austen's representation. As I have suggested in the introductory chapter, whereas, in theory, commodity exchange is an exchange of alienable goods between independent persons, gift exchange involves a transaction between interdependent persons who embody particular roles, identities, and status positions within a complex social network.[32] In addition, while gifts demand a return, that return is not always strictly quantifiable nor certain. As Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé suggest, "any exchange of goods or services with no guarantee of recompense in order to create, nourish, or sustain social bonds between people is a gift" (20). While gifts might demand a return, they also establish qualitative relationships between people. According to Marcel Mauss, gifts and gift exchange are materializations of the relationship between individuals, as the objects exchanged are imbued with the identities of the givers and, sometimes, the recipients. As Mauss puts it, "everything speaks" (44). In their capacity to establish and maintain social ties and obligations, gifts serve as the foundation of social life. Gifts, Mauss contends, are not simply exchanges of wealth, property, "movable and immovable goods, and things economically useful"; they are also "acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs" (5). Thus, in their dual character as polite fictions, which exert claims upon their recipients, and material symbols of social ties, gifts permeate gentry life in *Mansfield Park*. As Austen's portrait reveals, whether "acts of politeness," such as dinners, balls, visits and musical performances, or tokens of affective ties such as netting-boxes, books,

[32] For more on this distinction, see C. A. Gregory's *Gifts and Commodities*.

horses, and necklaces, or social alliances established through marriage and the adoption of children, gift exchange plays a fundamental role in the everyday life of gentry society, serving to reinforce a highly stratified social order.

Furthermore, in portraying the way characters use gift giving to establish fine social distinctions, the novel can be read as a commentary on patronage, the formal and informal system of support and influence practiced within English society during the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. According to Harold Perkin, patronage was an all-pervading system of gift relations, which established hierarchical social ties from the aristocracy to the poorest ranks of society and functioned as a "middle term between feudal homage and capitalist cash nexus" (49). Dominated by men of property, patronage was a means of reproducing and consolidating class power and securing paternal authority over dependents, whether women, children, tenants, or slaves. Perkin characterized patronage further as "'[v]ertical friendship,' a durable two-way relationship between patrons and clients permeating the whole of society,…a social nexus peculiar to the old society, less formal and inescapable than feudal homage, more personal and comprehensive than the contractual, employment relationships of capitalist 'Cash Payment'" (49). Given the hierarchical and paternalistic character of the patronage system, it is not surprising that the presents that assail Fanny in the east room are given "principally by Tom," the eldest son and heir to the family estate.

In drawing on anthropological theories of gift exchange to analyze the role of gifts in *Mansfield Park*, I argue that Austen offers a satire of patronage. In its treatment of Sir Thomas's resolution to "be the real and consistent patron" of Fanny Price (7), the ironic narrative voice consistently draws attention to the calculated side of gifts and

makes visible the complex social meanings embedded in gift relations, illustrating, for instance, the way objects continue to register their owner's identity even after they have been given away. But, despite this nuanced treatment of gift exchange, the narrative voice is largely concerned with demystifying the interested side of gifts. This ironic gaze, I contend, is a response to the gentry's need to justify itself through a characteristic denial of its self-interest. As Bourdieu suggests, a society's disavowal, or misrecognition, of its economic motives is fundamental to its maintenance; in this respect, the system of patronage exemplified this tendency to repress the "objective truth" that it is in fact "a system governed by the laws of interested calculation, competition, or exploitation" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 172). As if anticipating the anthropologist's model, *Mansfield Park* emphasizes the dual nature of gentry society: behind its polite façade, the gentry is a highly acquisitive society, which *invests* in benevolence in order to pursue its colonial and domestic interests.

Furthermore, a society that continually disguises its acquisitive side is characterized by its use of a language of indirection: "it is no accident," Bourdieu writes, "that the vocabulary of the archaic economy should be entirely composed of double-sided notions" (172). In what is arguably her most darkly ironic novel, Austen employs a style that echoes and parodies the "double-sided notions," or polite fictions, pervading the language of the gentry. Throughout the novel, the use of free indirect discourse creates a sense of ironic distance between the narrator and the characters, drawing attention to the gentry's pretensions to benevolence and propriety and the habit of cloaking self-interest in the language of duty and moral principle. For example, the narrator satirizes Mrs. Norris's self-serving professions of benevolence: "As far as walking, talking, and

contriving reached, she was thoroughly benevolent, and nobody knew better how to dictate liberality to others: but her love of money was equal to her love of directing, and she knew quite as well how to save her own as to spend that of her friends" (7). In addition, the narrative frequently adopts Fanny Price's perspective in order to highlight the hypocrisy of the other characters. When Tom asks Fanny to dance in order to avoid having to join in a card game, the narrator notes that "Fanny was led off very willingly, though it was impossible for her to feel much gratitude towards her cousin, or distinguish, as he certainly did, between the selfishness of another person and his own" (140). And Edmund, the paragon of moral authority within the family, reveals his moral inconsistency when he attempts to justify his decision to join the theatricals: "To be acting! After all his objections—objections so just and so public! After all that she had heard him say, and seen him look, and known him to be feeling. Could it be possible? Edmund so inconsistent!" (175). Much like the gifts that circulate within the novel, these obfuscations and hypocrisies pervade daily life in Mansfield Park, thinly concealing the selfishness of characters.[33]

The paradoxical character of the gift is further registered through Austen's frequent use of puns, those "double-sided" words like "interest," "principle," "worth," and "value" that have both a moral and economic valence. For instance, Sir Thomas's strict adherence to decorum is both a moral duty and an economic imperative, for he "had *interest*…from *principle* as well as pride, from a general wish of doing right, and a desire

[33] The general spirit of hypocrisy is made most explicit in the staging of *Lovers' Vows*. See, for instance, Claudia Johnson's "*Mansfield Park*: Confusions of Guilt and Revolutions of Mind."

of seeing all that were connected with him in situations of respectability."[34] Finally, Austen's style is characterized by the frequent use of litotes, a type of understatement that often takes the 'not un-' formation. As an observer of the theatricals, "Fanny looked on and listened, *not unamused* to observe the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all, and wondering how it would end" (emphasis added 104). This form of understated assertion parallels the logic of the gift as well. As with the litotes, the gift simultaneously expresses and denies its interested side.[35] Gifts then, Austen implies, are *not un*selfish forms of social exchange.

Whether detailing Mrs. Norris's false benevolence or Sir Thomas's economically-driven sense of principle, the narrator's commentary serves to expose the pretensions and calculations of gentry society, to demystify what Claudia Johnson refers to as the "moral wardrobe" of paternal authority (100). But it is Fanny's perspective as an amused observer of the inhabitants of Mansfield Park, that, we suspect, is shared by Austen, whose own position as an observer of the landed gentry allows her to perceive the selfishness and casuistry "more or less disguised" governing England's upper classes.

The History of Amelioration: From Overt Violence to Gentle Domination

While the plot of *Mansfield Park* focuses on courtship, Austen makes clear several times that increasing the social value of "the name of Bertram" initiates the action of the novel and that courtship and marriage becomes part of the larger project of improving and maintaining the family estate (17). As both the master of a slave plantation in Antigua and "master at Mansfield Park" (290), Sir Thomas "keeps every

[34] (emphasis added 4). "Interest" here means the "power to obtain places or appointments…a form of cultural capital" (Wiltshire, "Notes," 641).

[35] Following Mauss's claim that the gift is a polite fiction, theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu have emphasized the impossibility of the free gift, Jacques Derrida preferring to concentrate on the gift as an aporia and Bourdieu exploring the collective misrecognition entailed in gift giving.

body in their place" and looks upon his children, as he looks upon his affairs in Antigua, in terms of their capacity to increase the value of his family name and fortune (127): "[h]is eldest son was careless and extravagant…but his other children promised him nothing but good" (17). Sir Thomas's preoccupation with status, with upholding the family name, can be explained by both his rank among the landed gentry and his position as an absentee West-Indian planter.[36] For, as an absentee owner of a slave plantation, Sir Thomas would have been experiencing a moral and financial crisis. Published in 1814, the novel's central action takes place between 1810 and 1813, notably after the British slave trade has been abolished (1807) and before the emancipation of slavery (1833).[37] At this time, the old economic system of absentee slave owners is in decline—the Antigua estate is "mak[ing] such poor returns" (24)—and Sir Thomas would have been facing economic losses once abolition prevented him from replenishing his workforce. Moreover, British colonial profits were increasingly threatened by competition with other sugar markets and a war with France. Sir Thomas's efforts to increase the social value of his family and to project an image of himself as a benevolent gentleman can be seen, then, as a strategy for legitimizing an uncertain class position and an attempt to minimize the stigma associated with being an absentee slave owner.

[36] Sir Thomas's position within the landed gentry would have been a precarious one. While he is titled, the Bertrams are not fully aristocratic because, as one historian, David Spring, notes, this class would have been considered "pseudo-gentry"; they were "gentry of a sort, primarily because they sought strenuously to be taken for gentry" (60).

[37] Most scholars agree that the action is contemporaneous. Brian Southam, pinpointing Sir Thomas's return from Antigua as October 1812, argues convincingly that the narrative events occurred between 1810-13 (13-14). It is significant for my argument that Fanny Price is adopted and transported from Portsmouth to Mansfield Park before the slave trade was abolished in 1807.

Given these circumstances, Sir Thomas was likely to have been adopting a scheme of amelioration towards his slaves during his visit to Antigua.[38] In an account of the emergence of a "new humanitarian sensibility" found in sentimental literature, Markman Ellis defines amelioration as an argument for the mitigation but not the abolition of the conditions of slavery and suggests that it has been obscured by historians of the anti-slavery movement: "[m]any historians work with an understanding of the historical movement of abolition and emancipation that assumes a grand teleology that 'progresses' from chattel slavery through emancipation to wage labour" (87). Describing this view as the "Enlightenment reading of anti-slavery" established by the Abolitionists and the West Indian lobby alike, Ellis introduces the "third position" of amelioration in order to better account for the dubious logic so prevalent in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which sought to "transform the peculiar asymmetries of power endemic to the slavery economies, but without destroying the ideology or economy of slavery" (87). Austen's satire of the gentry's casuistry and its reliance on an economy of paternalistic giving can be seen then as an attack on this dubious logic, as it reveals the way sentimental ideals of benevolence serve to "veil and mystify" oppression and self-interest (87).

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of gift exchange as a form of symbolic violence offers another way to conceptualize this historical shift from brutal to ameliorative forms of slavery. In his discussion of modes of domination in *The Logic of Practice*, he notes that when the "overt violence" of a "usurer or the merciless master" is no longer tolerated in a

[38] See Avrom Fleishman's *A Reading of Mansfield Park: An Essay in Critical Synthesis* for an early reading of Sir Thomas as a benevolent reformer (36-38). For more recent accounts, see Moira Ferguson's *Mansfield Park:* Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender" and George Boulukos's "The Politics of Silence: *Mansfield Park* and the Amelioration of Slavery."

society, then "symbolic violence, the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such….cannot fail to be seen as the most economical mode of domination" (192). Whenever outright violence and overt coercion are "negatively sanctioned," he continues, then those who seek to dominate others turn to "gift, generosity, [and] conspicuous distribution" as "operations of social alchemy,…which tend to bring about the transmutation of economic capital into symbolic capital" (192). So, as public outrage increased in response to accounts of the dehumanizing conditions of slavery, both slave owners and abolitionists increasingly call for more humane forms of slavery. Sir Thomas's turn towards amelioration and renewed dependence on a system of patronage, even as it was waning, thus exemplifies this effort to transform overt forms of domination into symbolic, gentle forms of domination. In the wake of England's abolition of the slave trade, patronage towards slaves became a strategy of containment as overt forms of violence and coercion were no longer politically, morally, or economically feasible. As a result, both abolitionists and apologists of slavery sanctioned amelioration as a solution to the cruelty of slavery; and amelioration ironically becomes the means for transmuting the "overt domination" of slave owners into a "*legitimate authority.*"[39] Amelioration, thus, became another means of securing authority and establishing an ethical character in the face of conflict.

The writings of leading abolitionists present a striking illustration of this social alchemy. A prominent abolitionist and historian of the movement, Thomas Clarkson argued in his *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (1788) that the abolition

[39] Again, we see the process of collective misrecognition at work. According to Bourdieu, the "interested relationship is transmuted into a disinterested, gratuitous relationship, overt domination into misrecognized, 'socially recognized' domination, in other words, *legitimate authority*'" (192).

of the trade would be economically beneficial if accompanied by a more humane treatment of slaves:

> For let us see the planter at a future period, not the tyrant and destroyer, but the shepherd and the guardian of his slaves. Let us see them looking upon him in *return* as the dispenser of their blessings; *gratefully acknowledging his favours*, *endeared to him from the ties of principle and gratitude*. (emphasis added 107)

Though perhaps intended to improve the conditions of slavery, Clarkson's petition actually serves to legitimize the authority of the planter, who becomes, through acts of generosity, a "shepherd" and "guardian" rather than a "tyrant and destroyer." Moreover, Clarkson suggests, the gifts of the benevolent planter will prove to be more profitable than the slave trade, for they will elicit a "return" from his slaves. According to his logic, they will no longer be bound by the chains of slavery but by the "ties of principle and gratitude."[40] In a similar move, William Wilberforce argued, according to Henry Dundas Mackenzie, that with the "proper degree of care, attention, and mild treatment of the Negroes…the stock of Negroes…may be profitably kept up without importation" (qtd. in Ellis 124). Thus, the arguments of those abolitionists who called for amelioration actually reinforce the ideological grounds of slavery.

Benevolent forms of slavery appear to have been a welcome solution to West Indian slave planters as well considering the threat of revolution and the end of the slave trade. The moderate planter, Bryan Edwards, for instance, claims in his 1793 *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies,* "planters neither

[40] See Peter Kitson for a discussion of the way abolitionists drew on the conventions of sentimentalism to demonstrate the humanity of slaves and injustices of slavery while appealing to the economic interests of planters.

introduced, nor, as I shall hereafter shew, have been wanting in their best endeavors to correct and remedy many of the evils of slavery" (qtd. in Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave*, 204). Given this political agreement between abolitionists and moderate planters, it seems likely that Austen would have had ample models for her benevolent West-Indian planter, many who, like Sir Thomas, had experienced "recent losses on [their] West India Estate[s]" and felt compelled to adopt ameliorative forms of slavery (*MP* 19).

As a form of benevolent slavery that promised to remedy the evils of slavery while ensuring the continued profitability of slavery, amelioration found expression in fictional treatments of slavery as well. Maria Edgeworth's tale "The Grateful Negro" published in her 1804 *Popular Tales* presents a clear example of a sentimental portrait of amelioration. Although Edgeworth has been viewed by some as an abolitionist, this narrative employs the logic of the gift to advocate a moderate, pro-amelioration but not fully emancipationist, stance on slavery.[41] In this tale, Edgeworth urges reform in order to alleviate the brutality of current conditions but also to placate potential uprisings and reconcile slaves to their condition. The tale presents its moral: if planters treat their slaves more humanely, the slaves will be more devoted, more productive, and less likely to revolt. Edgeworth's hero, Mr. Edwards, is introduced as a benevolent slave owner, a frequent trope in sentimental treatments of slavery.[42] He is also notably modeled after the moderate planter Bryan Edwards, who Edgeworth praises in a footnote as a source for her story.

[41] See George Boulukos's "Maria Edgeworth's 'Grateful Negro' and the Sentimental Argument for Slavery" for a summary of those critical views of Edgeworth. Boulukos's assertion that the story "envisions slavery made palatable" coincides with my own reading of the way the story depends on a discourse of gift exchange to give a moral sanction to ameliorative forms of slavery (13).

[42] For an early analysis of this trope, see Wylie Sypher's "The West-Indian as a 'Character' in the Eighteenth Century."

In the story, Mr. Edwards attempts to curtail the harmful influence of the more negligent planter, Mr. Jefferies, by advocating a more humane form of slavery. But, despite his plans for amelioration, he does not endorse emancipation:

> He wished that there was no such thing as slavery in the world, but he was convinced, by the arguments of those who have the best means of obtaining information, that the sudden emancipation of the Negroes would rather increase than diminish their miseries. His benevolence, therefore, confined itself within the bounds of reason. He adopted those plans for the amelioration of the state of the slaves which appeared to him the most likely to succeed without producing any violent agitation or revolution….This reward, [extra wages for extra work,] for as such it was considered, operated most powerfully upon the slaves. (204)

As a typical example of the logic of amelioration, the passage's rhetorical moves are worth noting. Mr. Edwards asserts his integrity by conveniently placing responsibility onto unnamed authorities who "have the best means of obtaining information." He relies on these so-called authorities to suggest that emancipation would "rather increase than diminish" the miseries of slaves. Edgeworth goes on to employ a metaphor of enslavement to characterize his benevolence as necessarily bound by "reason." If we read "reason" as a euphemism for "profit," we see that Mr. Edwards feels that benevolence is possible only within the bounds of profit. Finally, Mr. Edwards reinforces the benevolent treatment by noting that it "operated most powerfully" to produce loyal and hardworking slaves.

Mr. Edwards discovers the profitability of benevolence when he decides to purchase the slave Caesar and his fiancée Clara, preventing them from being split up by the slave market. This initial act of benevolence marks the beginning of Caesar's feelings of loyalty toward Mr. Edwards. But it isn't until Mr. Edwards gives him a knife—a gift with an edge—that Caesar is transformed most completely into the grateful slave, for upon receiving the gift, he experiences a "transport of gratitude" (432). The gift operates so powerfully on Caesar that "the principle of gratitude conquered every other sensation"—even, it seems, the desire for freedom (433). Moreover, the gift manages to neutralize and transform the potential violence of the rebellious slave, symbolized in the knife itself, for Caesar is so moved by the gift that he declares that "with this knife, he would stab himself to the heart sooner than betray his master" (432-3). In an effusion of sentimental language, the narrative elevates giving and gratitude (and, by extension, the loyalty of slaves to their masters) to noble virtues. For, in return for Mr. Edwards's kindness, Caesar discloses the slaves' plot, helping to prevent an uprising.

As a representative portrait of sentimental accounts of slavery, this story reveals the contradiction inherent in the simultaneous appeals to sentimental humanitarianism and economic interest. In adopting the middle position of amelioration, abolitionists and sentimental writers further strengthened the very power relations they sought to undermine. As a subset of the literature of sensibility, sentimental portraits of slavery employ characteristic tropes of benevolent masters and grateful slaves in order to enact

the politics of amelioration, transforming in narrative form an imperious and cruel domination into a gentle violence that further legitimated the authority of slave owners.[43]

The "Benevolent Plan"

While *Mansfield Park* might at first appear to be another story about the profitability of benevolence, it differs from Edgeworth's tale in its illustration of the coercive nature of benevolence and its emphasis on Fanny Price's struggle with the gentle violence of the gift economy. As in Edgeworth's story, Austen's novel incorporates the conventional tropes of benevolent master and grateful slave, transferring these tropes to the domestic space. That is, as the adopted niece who must repay her benefactors by becoming a "handy" companion (16), Fanny Price functions as a literary substitute for the absent slave. Yet, even as the novel draws an analogy between the domestic subordination of women and slavery, it manages to critique the power relations underlying ameliorative forms of slavery. Often read as containing only passing allusions to slavery, the novel in fact draws on a complex imaginary of slavery, an imaginary that took shape in the literature of sensibility's treatments of slavery. The novel reverses the metaphorical relation between gender relations and slavery; rather than employing the metaphor of slavery to draw attention to women's subordination, the novel presents the domestic plot as an allegory for ameliorative forms of slavery. In satirizing Sir Thomas's benevolence, exposing it as a form of gentle violence and laying bare its calculated, interested nature, the novel thus encodes a critique of amelioration within its domestic plot.

[43] Amelioration did, in fact, have critics among abolitionists. Granville Sharp notably wrote scathingly that "[a] toleration of Slavery is, in effect, a toleration of inhumanity; for there are wretches in the world, who make no scruple to gain, by wearing out their Slaves with continual labour and a scanty allowance, before they have lived out half their natural days" (qtd. in Ellis 94).

The gift exchange in *Mansfield Park* begins with Mrs. Price's "not unproductive letter," a 'not un-' formation, which results in the "benevolent plan" of Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris to adopt and bring up one of Mrs. Price's daughters (4, 20). This act of charity illustrates the social and "symbolic alchemy" of gift relation; that is, the capacity of gifts to transform both givers and recipients (Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice* 205). As the mastermind of Fanny's adoption, Mrs. Norris "regaled in the credit of being foremost to welcome her, and in the importance of leading her in to the others, and recommending her to their kindness" (*MP* 10), and Sir Thomas becomes the sole benefactor, once Mrs. Norris artfully declines to share the expense of her support: he "soon grew reconciled to a distinction, which…was advantageous and complimentary to them" (24-5). While the "benevolent plan" serves to increase Sir Thomas's social status, it places Fanny in a seemingly perpetual state of obligation, which echoes, ironically, the position of his slaves. Even before arriving at Mansfield Park her position as the recipient of a gift is established: "Mrs. Norris had been talking to her the whole way from Northampton of her wonderful good fortune, and the extraordinary degree of gratitude and good behaviour which it ought to produce" (10). The benefits of their generosity are realized almost immediately, for when Fanny's adoption "was considered as settled the pleasures of so benevolent a scheme *were already enjoyed*" (*MP* 8). And, "as her appearance and spirits improved, Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris thought with greater satisfaction of their benevolent plan" (20). In emphasizing the immediate rewards of "their benevolent plan," the narrator exposes the "objective truth" of the gift (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* 6): the text thus highlights the immediate return that occurs in the very act of

giving, in which the gift-giver pays his or her self back "with a symbolic recognition" (Derrida 14).

As a form of gift exchange, Fanny's adoption marks a renewal of the correspondence between the Bertrams and Mrs. Price, for not only does it relieve Mrs. Price "from the charge and expense of one child entirely out of her great number" but it enables gifts to continue to flow to her and her children, in a sense, in return for Fanny: "Sir Thomas did not forget to do what he could for the children of Mrs. Price; he assisted her liberally in the education and disposal of her sons…and Fanny, though almost totally separated from her family, was sensible of the truest satisfaction in hearing of any kindness towards them."[44] While Fanny is expected to feel gratitude, as Mrs. Norris never fails to remind her, Mrs. Price continues to profit from the exchange. Igor Kopytoff has observed that in Western societies there is a "conceptual unease of conjoining person and commodity" that makes adoption illegal "if it invokes monetary compensation to the natural parents" (85). This is because "adoption through compensation is viewed as child-selling and therefore akin to slavery" (85). This conceptual slippage between gift and commodity is registered as an unease that characterizes Fanny's relationship with her mother when she returns to Portsmouth. Mrs. Price receives her somewhat coldly and seems to regard her more as the daughter of the Bertrams than her own; thus, in its "implicit commoditization of the child" (85), Fanny's transfer from Portsmouth to Mansfield Park echoes the slave trade (a commodity exchange) even as her adoption is characterized as patronage.

[44] (5, 17). Discussing the exchange of 'maternal goods,' i.e., children, in Polynesian culture, Mauss describes the child's function as a conduit for the exchange of wealth: "the channel along which possessions that are internal in kind, the *tonga,* continue to flow from the family of the child to that family. Furthermore, the child is the means whereby his parents can obtain possessions of a foreign kind (*oloa*) from the parents who have adopted him [or her], and this occurs throughout the child's lifetime" (9).

Once transported to Mansfield Park, Fanny is expected to be grateful for her "peculiar good fortune" and to embrace her dependent position (12). Fanny is transformed by the gift, for, as Mauss puts it, "to accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower" (74). When her cousins the Miss Bertrams make her acquaintance, they quickly assess her social worth: they "could not but hold her cheap on finding that she had but two sashes, and had never learnt French" (15). Sir Thomas's charity thus transforms Fanny into a kind of servant, "very handy and quick in carrying messages, and fetching what [Lady Bertram] wanted" (16), and establishes her inferior position in the household. Once she is established as a dependent, maintaining her social difference becomes crucial for her benefactors. Her "place" becomes an important question even before her arrival, for Sir Thomas is concerned with determining the "right line of conduct" for maintaining the proper distinction between his daughters and Fanny: "[t]heir rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different" (9). Mrs. Norris carries out his wishes quite literally, insisting at every opportunity on Fanny's inferiority to the Miss Bertrams. In response to Fanny's ignorance of geography, she remarks, "but you are blessed with wonderful memories, and your poor cousin has probably none at all. There is a vast deal of difference in memories, as well as in every thing else, and therefore you must make allowance for your cousin, and pity her deficiency" (15). Thus, Mrs. Norris recasts the social differences between the cousins as an essential difference. Maria and Julia too reinforce their father's paternalism by giving Fanny gifts: they "could do no more than make her a generous present of some of their least valued toys" (11). Similarly, Tom's "kindness was consistent with his situation and rights; he made her some very pretty

presents, and laughed at her" (14). Her marginal status is further marked by her place in the house, for she is put "in the little white attic, near the old nurseries…near Miss Lee…and close by the housemaids" (8). These efforts to maintain a "proper distinction" between Fanny and the Miss Bertrams, to demarcate her difference as an essential difference, again echo the discourses surrounding slavery, what Deirdre Coleman has described as "a panicky and contradictory need to preserve essential boundaries and distinctions" (359). In dramatizing the overly elaborate process of placing Fanny within the literal and figurative spaces of Mansfield Park, the novel highlights the role of gift giving in establishing and naturalizing hierarchical distinctions.

"'Heaven's *Last* Best Gift'": Mansfield Park's Exchange of Women

Once returned from Antigua, Sir Thomas manifests a changed attitude and manner towards Fanny Price. In place of his previously distant authoritarian stance, he adopts a more direct benevolence. This shift within the domestic plot—a turn to benevolence accompanied by a renewed interest in the exchange of women through marriage—mirrors the historical shift in slavery from brutal (and absentee) to ameliorative forms of slavery. Because the abolition of the slave trade prevented slave owners from renewing their labor force through trade, ameliorative reforms typically involved the encouragement of marriage and reproduction among the existing slave population. Rather than continuing to leave marriage arrangements up to Mrs. Norris, an overseer of sorts, as he did with Maria's engagement to Mr. Rushworth, Sir Thomas begins to take a more direct role in arranging marital affairs. Marriage, like adoption, is yet another form of gift exchange that offers the potential for enhancing Sir Thomas's social status. As Gayle Rubin has noted, Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* contributed "to the theory of primitive reciprocity the idea that

marriages are a most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts" (173). In this text, Lévi-Strauss refers to the woman who is exchanged in marriage as "the supreme gift" (65). Interestingly, *Mansfield Park* alludes to this conception of marriage as a gift exchange of women, for when Henry Crawford expresses his "disinclination" for marriage, he facetiously quotes Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "I consider the blessing of a wife as most justly described in those discreet lines of the poet, 'Heaven's *last* best gift'" (34). This allusion to Milton suggests how persistent this view of marriage continued to be in English culture. For the gentry society depicted in *Mansfield Park*, marriage plays a significant role in maintaining and improving the family estate; through marriage, women, wealth, and status are negotiated and transferred. In its treatment of courtship and marriage, I suggest, Austen's novel traces the view of marriage as an alliance-forming gift exchange, highlighting with characteristic irony the obligatory and interested character of this exchange, and registers the way in which marriage as gift exchange replicates and differs from the conception of marriage as a market exchange.

As Fanny approaches a marriageable age and becomes "the only occupier of that *interesting* division of a family," her "consequence" within the family begins to increase (emphasis added 160). At this time, Sir Thomas begins to reevaluate her worth and to speculate on her potential for making a profitable marriage. Upon his return to Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas greets Fanny "with a kindness which astonished and penetrated her, calling her his dear Fanny, kissing her affectionately, and observing with decided pleasure how much she was grown!" (139). Sir Thomas's kindness, "which astonished and penetrated," suggests the intrusive character of gifts. After greeting her, "[h]e led her

near the light and looked at her again" (139). In describing this sudden interest in and inspection of Fanny's altered appearance, the novel draws attention to its oppressive nature, suggesting that Sir Thomas appraises Fanny and assesses her potential for accruing interest in a profitable marriage. In this way, the scene, following so closely Sir Thomas's return from Antigua, echoes the assessment of human property that might have occurred after the abolition of the slave trade. In seeking out Fanny and leading her into the light to get a better look at her, Sir Thomas reassesses an asset he had previously neglected. Upon his arrival in Antigua, Sir Thomas would likely have taken a similar stock of his labor force and assessed their health and reproductive potential. Not only does this scene register a discomfort with Fanny's objectification but it also shows the oppressiveness of gifts, for his changed manner—his uncharacteristic kindness—is sudden and discomforting: "Fanny knew not how to feel, nor where to look. She was quite oppressed. He had never been so kind, so *very* kind to her in his life. His manner seemed changed; his voice was quick from the agitation of joy, and all that had been awful in his dignity seemed lost in tenderness" (139). The strict, imperious patriarch has become "lost in tenderness," even sentimental. Only moments before Fanny was waiting in alarm with the Crawfords: "all her former habitual dread of her uncle…returning" (138). He is the absentee returned with a kinder, more humane style of management; yet, this kindness nevertheless remains oppressive. Thus, his sudden kindness, which seems to recognize the profitability of gratitude, echoes the logic of amelioration.

In place of his previous severe domestic rule, Sir Thomas begins to adopt towards Fanny a more direct kindness. He takes up, in Clarkson's words, "a system of treatment more moderate and more humane" (93), seeking to correct, or ameliorate, much of the

damage done by Mrs. Norris in his absence.[45] For instance, soon after his return he redresses Mrs. Norris's severity and neglect by ordering a fire for Fanny's room, an act of kindness that incites in Fanny "painful gratitude" and which is further amplified by her recent act of ingratitude in refusing Henry Crawford's marriage proposal (252). Fanny is so struck by this kindness that she immediately falls into a sentimental soliloquy, reproaching herself for ingratitude: "'I must be a brute indeed, if I can be really ungrateful!'" (252). The power of the gift to transform the recipient and to establish the inferiority of the person who cannot reciprocate is cast here in the language of social difference. In calling herself a brute, Fanny begins to internalize the logic of the gift in its ability to naturalize social hierarchy.

With her increased consequence, Fanny becomes more than a commodity on the marriage market. In fact, as a marriageable woman, she becomes a kind of inalienable good, a gift that can be kept while being given away. Edmund, who also attends to his father's domestic interests in his absence, expounds the logic of women as gifts. When the question of Fanny's going to live with her aunt Norris is raised, Edmund encourages her to go because then she "will necessarily be brought forward" more often (21). While living with her aunt, she would continue to possess a connection to Mansfield Park: "you will *belong* to us almost as much as ever" (emphasis added 21). As both Marcel Mauss and Annette Weiner have demonstrated, after it has been given away, a gift continues to possess a symbolic connection to the giver, to belong to the giver. Thus, when women are "out" or "brought forward" in society, they are treated as gifts in the sense that they are exchangeable but remain inalienable.

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[45] Clarkson goes on to articulate the logic of gift exchange: "let [the slave] be treated with tenderness. Let his wants be supplied. This will operate as an incitement to his exertions: gratitude will demand a return" (97).

Before Sir Thomas fully realizes the profitability of benevolence, however, he attempts a more mercenary tactic in his effort to bring Fanny into the marriage market. Soon after he begins to take on a more direct role in managing domestic affairs, he arranges a ball in Fanny's honor. On the evening of the ball, when she enters wearing the dress he has given her, Fanny appears to Sir Thomas as "an *interest*ing object" (emphasis added 213). And later, watching Fanny at the ball, Sir Thomas feels "much complacency; he was proud of his niece, and without attributing all her personal beauty…to her *transplantation* to Mansfield, he was pleased with himself for having supplied every thing else;—education and manners she owed to him" (emphasis added 217). For him, the ball is an opportunity to display Fanny to possible suitors and to give credit to himself. Fanny, on the other hand, remains largely unaware of the purpose of the ball: "Miss Price had not been brought up to the *trade of coming out*; and had she known in what light this ball was, in general, considered respecting her, it would very much have lessened her comfort" (209). Here, Austen makes an explicit reference to the slave trade, drawing a structural parallel between the trade in slaves and the trade in women, perhaps in an effort to suggest that a form of human trade continues even after the trade in human slaves has been abolished (Lew 277). Later, in an attempt to market his niece, Sir Thomas constructs a tableau that demonstrates her pliant nature to Mr. Crawford: Sir Thomas advises her to go "immediately to bed. 'Advise' was his word, but it was the advice of absolute power" (220). The narrator's ironic commentary concludes this scene, highlighting the maneuvering and motives behind Sir Thomas's attentions: "In thus sending her away, Sir Thomas perhaps might not be thinking merely of her health. It might occur to him, that Mr. Crawford had been sitting by her long enough, or he might

mean to recommend her as a wife by shewing her persuadableness" (220). The final narrative comment highlights Sir Thomas's efforts to display his niece and exposes the calculations and interests behind the trade of coming out.

Once she is "out" in society, Fanny quickly becomes the target of Henry Crawford's attentions. Crawford's reliance on the obligations and social meanings of gift exchange in his courtship make a simple rejection of his marriage offer difficult, and, moreover, suggest that the view of courtship as a market fails to account for the complex negotiation of personal desires, interests, and obligations that it actually involves. Crawford attempts to establish a hold over Fanny with his first gift, the necklace, which he gives to Fanny through his sister. He acknowledges his role as the giver and emphasizes his expectations of Fanny's reciprocity: "there was a pointedness in his manner…which she did not like, and she saw his eye glancing for a moment at her necklace—with a smile—she thought there was a smile—which made her blush and feel wretched" (215). Henry's manner makes explicit the expectation of a return for his gifts, exposing the gift as simply a transaction in disguise.[46] From the moment Mary gives her the necklace, Fanny suspects an ulterior motive and views it as a "doubtful good" (204). In this exchange, in which their interests are so thinly veiled, the Crawfords make explicit the fictional, calculated side of the gift. But Fanny's resistance to the necklace and ultimate decision to wear the two necklaces is a consequence of her attempt to negotiate the competing demands of the gifts. In pairing Edmund's necklace with William's cross and wearing them along with Henry's, she resolves her sense of obligation to Mary and attempts to diminish some of the force of Henry's gift.

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[46] Fanny's full name, moreover, can be read as a kind of bawdy joke that signals women's sexual commodification. As Jill Heydt-Stevenson comments, "her very name signifies prostitution" (328). As an inalienable good on the marriage market, Fanny Price is indeed a fanny with a price.

Later, however, in helping to promote her brother William, Henry presents Fanny with a gift she cannot dismiss as easily. As a consequence of his role in the promotion, Henry "approached her with rights that demanded different treatment" (256). The text spells out the nature of her obligation further: "[s]he must be courteous, and she must be compassionate. She must have a sensation of being honoured, and whether thinking of herself or her brother, she must have a strong feeling of gratitude" (256-7). Austen's use of free indirect discourse here parodies the voice of society and demonstrates the added social pressure on Fanny. Indeed, from the Bertrams' point of view, Henry's marriage offer is a gift she must accept; and her refusal is viewed as a serious breach of the obligations of the gift: "[s]elf-willed, obstinate, selfish, and ungrateful. [Sir Thomas] thought her all this. She had deceived his expectations; she had lost his good opinion" (250). As Mauss notes, gift exchange entails, in addition to the obligation to give and reciprocate, the obligation to receive a gift (13). Lady Bertram joins in the effort, suggesting that it is "every young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this" (261). In response to this reasoning, Fanny "felt how unprofitable [in both senses of the word] contention would be" (261). Joining his petitions to Sir Thomas's, Edmund appeals to conceptions of the ideal woman—the grateful woman—celebrated in sentimental literature and conduct books, and who seems to have been the model for Fanny's education.[47] He reasons, "you have proved yourself upright and disinterested, prove yourself grateful and tender-hearted; and then you will be the perfect model of a

[47] Mary Poovey uses the term Proper Lady to explain the formation of upper class and middle class women in nineteenth century Britain. "Young Fanny," writes Poovey, "is effectively pushed and pulled into becoming a textbook Proper Lady. On the one hand, she is driven to self-effacement and passivity by Mrs. Norris's admonitions about the 'evil' of ingratitude, by Sir Thomas's stern and wary disapproval, and by her female cousins' 'easy indifference.' On the other hand, she is drawn toward propriety by the only attention she receives – the indolent tolerance of Lady Bertram and the more discriminating approval Edmund seems to offer" (*The Proper Lady* 98).

woman, which I have always believed you born for" (272). With this entreaty, Edmund implies that gratitude and an obliging temperament define feminine virtue.

Despite these appeals, Fanny continues to resist the proposal. She insists on her right to refuse a marriage offer, and thus interrupts the coercive power of the gift: "Let him have all the perfections in the world," she declares, "I think it ought not to be set down as certain, that a man must be acceptable to every woman he may happen to like himself" (277). Fanny's resistance to the coercive, gentle violence of gift exchange, while it lasts, is a significant challenge to the paternalistic system of dominance, which treats women as objects of exchange. While Mr. Crawford appears initially to be an unsteady libertine who threatens paternal authority, he ultimately upholds the paternalistic system of Sir Thomas. When she is around him, Fanny feels a sense of oppression and helplessness. For example, in one scene while forced to endure his attentions, Fanny eagerly awaits the arrival of the tea to deliver her "from a grievous imprisonment of body and mind. Mr. Crawford was obliged to move. She was at liberty, she was busy, she was protected" (270). Hinting at the parallels between Sir Thomas and Mr. Crawford, the narrator suggests here that marriage to Mr. Crawford, another absentee landowner, would be a kind of imprisonment.

In addition to resisting the coercive nature of Henry's offer, her resistance, like her deflection of his necklace, is a consequence of her involvement in another gift exchange. What allows her to resist Henry's importunities is not only her knowledge of his unprincipled character or her resistance to the coercion of women within the gift economy, but also the fact that she has already *given* her heart to someone else. Edmund's gifts to Fanny, like those of Sir Thomas, figure prominently in the novel. This

is not surprising as Edmund often acts as a proxy for Sir Thomas, implementing his benevolent reforms and upholding his strict rules of conduct. Edmund's gifts, tactful and thoughtful, cultivate Fanny's sense of propriety and attempt to educate her as the ideal sentimental heroine: "he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment….*In return for such services she loved him better than any body* in the world except William; her heart was divided between the two" (emphasis added 18). While Fanny continually recalls and emphasizes the gift exchange between them, Edmund frequently minimizes his kindnesses. For, in privileging his chain over Henry's gift, Fanny is asserting, if obliquely, her resistance to Mr. Crawford and the entire trade of coming out, even as she signals her acquiescence to Edmund's patronage. In wearing Edmund's gift, she asserts as well her forbidden desire for him, a desire that can be read in the language of objects Fanny is so proficient in: when she puts the chain and the cross round her neck, she "felt how full of William and Edmund they were" (212). And, in choosing his chain over Henry's necklace, she embraces one bond over another, choosing the ameliorative gifts of Edmund over the overtly mercenary presents of Henry Crawford.

Despite her subtle reworking of gifts within a patriarchal order, Fanny finally becomes reconciled to the economy of the gift during her exile to Portsmouth. In another moment of textual irony, the narrator details the motives behind Sir Thomas's decision: "It had occurred to Sir Thomas, in *one of his dignified musings*, as a *right and desirable measure*" (emphasis added 289), and yet, "his prime motive in sending her away, had very little to do with the propriety of her seeing her parents again, and nothing at all with any idea of making her happy" (289). In fact, the goal of his "medicinal project" of

sending Fanny indefinitely to Portsmouth is to "bring her mind into a sober state, and incline her to a juster estimate of the value of that home of greater permanence, and equal comfort, of which she had the offer" (289); that is, he hoped that "her Father's house would…teach her the value of a good income" (289). The success of this lesson depends on reminding Fanny of the unpleasant alternative. Again, the novel echoes the discourse of amelioration. As George Boulukos points out, "representations of slave gratitude consistently, if unwittingly, show that slavery depends on systematic brutality even as they celebrate the 'humane masters' who benefit from it" ("Maria Edgeworth," 23). In a similar way, Fanny's gratitude for Sir Thomas's home depends on her finding the poverty and commotion of her Portsmouth family inhospitable. The allusion to the need to cure Fanny's rebellious, "diseased," state of mind further echoes colonial discourses on the treatment of slaves. In his "Essay on the Management and Diseases of Negroes" published in 1802, Dr. James Grainger advises a treatment of humane paternalism on both moral and economic grounds. He writes, "[b]ut it is not enough to take care of Negroes when they are sick; they should be well clothed, and regularly fed. The neglecting either of these important precepts is not only highly inhuman, but is the worst species of prodigality. One Negro saved in this manner, more than pays the additional expenses which owners of slaves by this means incur" (88). Here, as in Mansfield Park, moral and economic concerns merge—kindness as a form of medicine becomes profitable. Austen's emphasis on Sir Thomas's "medicinal project" thus echoes the very measures advocated by reformers of slavery like Grainger, measures that were both humane and profitable.

Indeed, Fanny soon learns to value the wealth and order of Mansfield Park over the squalor and disorder of her parents' home. The dose of Portsmouth convinces Fanny to favor the polite fictions of Mansfield Park over the explicit calculation and overt threat of violence she encounters during her stay. Mr. Price, on receiving his daughter, "observed that she was grown into a woman, and he supposed would be wanting a husband soon" (299). Her feelings, bred on polite fictions, recoil from this crude assessment of her situation as an unmarried woman: she "shrunk back to her seat, with *feelings sadly pained* by his language" (emphasis added 299). Not long after her arrival, Fanny begins to feel an increased appreciation of Mansfield Park and to think of it nostalgically as home, forgetting the hardship and unkindness she had experienced there. The prolonged visit begins to have what Sir Thomas would perceive as a positive effect, for, not surprisingly, Fanny fancies she perceives a "wonderful improvement" in Mr. Crawford (325). However, what solidifies Sir Thomas's cause is Mr. Price's response to the news of Maria's adultery. After announcing the scandal in the paper, he expresses his views on the proper treatment of unruly women: "'I don't know what Sir Thomas may think of such matters; he may be too much of the courtier and fine gentleman to like his daughter the less. But by G— if she belonged to me, I'd give her the rope's end as long as I could stand over her. A little flogging for man and woman too, would be the best way of preventing such things'" (345). Confronted with this overt image of violence, evoking a typical means of punishment for rebellious slaves, Fanny begins to feel nostalgia for the gentle dominance of Mansfield Park.

Thus, torn between the overt threat of violence—raised by her father's threat of flogging—or the gentle violence of oppressive kindness, Fanny chooses Mansfield Park.

Fanny signals her acceptance of the gift economy by learning to engage in gift giving herself: “[h]er influence, or at least the consciousness and use of it, originated in an act of kindness by Susan” (311). The return of Susan’s silver knife—another gift with an edge—was “a means of opening Susan’s heart to her” (312). With this gift, Fanny establishes her authority over Susan; she gains an ally while she remains in Portsmouth and a willing replacement for when she leaves Mansfield Park: “Susan remained to supply her place—Susan became the stationary niece—delighted to be so!” (371). In this way, Fanny embraces her position within the paternalistic economy of gifts, internalizing what George Boulukos has described as the “paternalistic, sentimental contract” (“The Politics of Silence,” 14), and begins to perpetuate the system of gift exchange.

After the Portsmouth episode, Fanny returns to Mansfield Park with a renewed sense of gratitude, transformed into the sentimental ideal of the grateful woman; she is “devoted to her aunt Bertram, returning to every former office, with more than former zeal, and thinking she could never do enough for one who seemed so much to want her” (352). In the spirit of sentimental sympathy, Fanny also imagines and sympathizes with Sir Thomas’s misery: “Fanny felt for him most acutely….Her uncle’s displeasure was terrible to her; but what could her justification, or her gratitude and attachment do for him?” (355). Like Caesar, Fanny, who is overwhelmed and transported by kindness, becomes devoted to her benefactor. Unlike Edgeworth, however, Austen does not depict the effect of the gift as an unproblematic and natural transformation, for Fanny embraces the paternal gift economy of Mansfield Park only after she has experienced a more brutal form of paternal authority in Portsmouth.

Although she ultimately yields to the paternalistic ideology of Mansfield Park's gift economy, Fanny's initial resistance is significant. Early on, Fanny demonstrates a tactical resistance to this ideology, resisting certain gifts as "doubtful good[s]" and demonstrating a creative refashioning of those least valued objects as "dearest tokens" (204, 212). By embracing William's cross and Edmund's chain, for instance, Fanny asserts her desires and constructs bonds within the economy of the gift that become, in the end, as consequential as those strategic policies and projects of Sir Thomas. Fanny thus negotiates a place for herself within this economy, for indeed, after a time, Edmund "became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire" (369). The various gift exchanges—between Sir Thomas and Fanny and between Fanny and Edmund—culminate in this marriage.

In summing up this marriage plot, the narrator treats Edmund's change of heart in a strikingly anti-sentimental tone: "I purposely abstain from dates…that ever one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people"(369). The narrator's tone adds yet another ironic effect, in keeping with the novel's overall tendency to demystify polite fictions: for not long after declaring that he could think of no other woman as a wife but Miss Crawford, Edmund finds himself struck by the thought that "a very different kind of woman might…do just as well—or a great deal better" (369). As in its opening account of Miss Ward, who "had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas" and was "at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to" the match (3), the novel here satirizes the business of marriage. As Mary Crawford remarks, "'I consider that it is, of all transactions, the one in which people

expect most from others, and are least honest themselves….it is a manoeuvring business'" (37). While Miss Crawford gleefully endorses this attitude and joins in the "manoeuvring business" herself, the narrator, though adopting a similarly anti-sentimental tone, exposes and satirizes the mercenary character of marriage arrangements.[48]

Fanny's ability to carve out a space for herself within a paternalistic system suggests that Austen's treatment of gift exchange, while mostly critical of its paternal character, is a nuanced one, alert to the subtleties and ambiguities within gift exchange. To reinforce this point, I would like to return briefly to the scene that opens this discussion of *Mansfield Park* and consider again Fanny's room. Soon after coming to Mansfield Park, Fanny moves into the east room and builds a "nest of comforts" among those things "nobody else wanted" (119-20). Even as the gifts that populate her room—a mixture of her cousins' least-valued possessions—begin to circumscribe her personal space and mark her dependent role in the household, Fanny singularizes the objects and chooses to view them instead as memorials of those she loves: "she could scarcely see an object in that room which had not an interesting remembrance connected with it. —Every thing was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend" (119). Fanny's creative appropriation of things can be seen as an instance of "making do" as Michel de Certeau has theorized in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. "Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others" he writes (xii). In one such instance of sentimental self-assertion, Fanny "seize[s] the scrap of paper on which Edmund had begun writing to her, as a treasure beyond all her hopes, and reading with the tenderest

[48] It is not surprising that the narrative reinforces the critique of mercenary attitudes by thwarting Miss Crawford's plans to marry Edmund and rewarding Fanny instead with "that affection of which she has scarcely allowed herself to entertain a hope" (370).

emotion these words, 'My very dear Fanny, you must do me the favour to accept'—locked it up with the chain, as the dearest part of the gift" (207). This gift—a "specimen" of "Edmund's commonest hand-writing"—would appear illegible to all but Fanny who reads it as "a blessedness" (208). Thus, in Fanny's possession, gifted objects express personal meaning and affectionate ties. They are invested with a social value that exceeds their original worth; the gifts embody the identities of their givers, serving as memorials of persons and relationships. Thus, even as she depicts the coercive power of gifted objects, their potential to be "doubtful goods" (204), Austen does not neglect their capacity for multiple meanings and values. Fanny demonstrates here that gifts can also be "dearest tokens" (214); that is, gifts are more than a disguised form of debt, for they are often invested with social values that exceed the original debt they signal.

As I have attempted to show, in *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen incorporates the tropes of the literature of amelioration into her domestic plot and, in doing so, undermines the logic of dominance managing both the estate in England and the estate in Antigua. While Austen borrows from the symbolic power of slavery in her critique of the exchange and oppression of women, her text does not simply reproduce the "clichéd analogy between [women's] disenfranchised lot and the plight of enslaved Africans," nor does it do so to diminish the severity of slavery (Coleman 341). In fact, in reenacting the colonial discourse of gifts within the domestic setting, Austen calls into question the logic of amelioration. The novel highlights the hypocrisy of the ameliorative position by illustrating the gentle violence of the economy of gifts that constrain Fanny Price's identity and actions, the way that kindness becomes oppressive and gratitude painful. Furthermore, in parodying the stock figures of sentimental literature's treatment of

slavery—the benevolent master and the grateful slave—Austen denounces sentimentalism's complicity with and romanticization of relations of dominance.

Against a conventional reading of the novel's silence about slavery and its celebration of the return of domestic peace and order, I have been suggesting that a sense of unease emerges, which overshadows the "happy ending" of the novel. While surveying the perfectly managed affairs that lie "within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park" and detailing the lessons learned by the patriarch (372), the narrator strikes yet another ironic note. Sir Thomas, conscious of "errors in his own conduct," is comforted "in finding [Mr. Yates's] estate rather more, and his debts much less, than he had feared" (363), and rather than dwell on his "grievous mismanagement" of his daughters' education, he instead rejoices in his own generosity, acknowledging, conveniently for a West-Indian planter, "the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure" (363, 372). His greatest comfort, however, is in realizing the return on his charity towards his niece. Though time, as Bourdieu has argued, manages to disguise a gift's transactional nature, the narrator reminds us that Sir Thomas receives a profitable return on his investment in benevolence: "his charitable kindness had been rearing a prime comfort for himself" (371). The central gift, which has been unfolding all along, is repaid: not only does Fanny restore honor to the family name in marrying Edmund—transformed from a niece into a "great acquisition," the "daughter that [Sir Thomas] wanted" (371)—but she also supplies Lady Bertram with another "handy" companion.[49] That is, to borrow the language of Thomas Clarkson, the "ties of principle and gratitude" enable the stock of

[49] (16). Fanny becomes, as Eileen Cleere puts it, the "touchstone of Sir Thomas's family holdings" (114). As Sir Thomas's most valuable possession, Fanny increases and mirrors his social value.

useful companions to be maintained (106). The novel thus lays bare the logic of sentimental, ameliorative forms of slavery: as the absentee master returned to Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas discovers the profitability of benevolence, for, through the social alchemy of the gift, the "poor returns" of Antigua become, in the end, a "rich repayment" in Mansfield Park (*MP* 24, 371).

CHAPTER III

THE “PIOUS FRAUD” AND PUBLIC PATRONAGE: THE INDUSTRIOUS GIVER AND THE GIFT OF FICTION IN *LITTLE DORRIT*

Little Dorrit is certainly “the strangest of denominations,” as the effusive Flora Finching points out (438). Dickens’s decision to change the title of his most sustained satire from *Nobody’s Fault* to *Little Dorrit* while still in the early stages of writing has often been the subject of speculation among scholars.[50] As if aware of his readers’ surprise at finding out that the title is in fact the name of a person, and that person a young woman, Dickens had one of the novel’s characters voice that wonder. And, for all her disjointed volubility, Flora Finching hits the mark when she observes that Little Dorrit is “of all the strangest names I ever heard the strangest, like a place down in the country with a turnpike, or a favorite pony or a puppy or a bird or something from a seed-shop to be put in a garden or a flower-pot and come up speckled.”[51] It is clear, by Dickens’s own account, that the eponymous heroine—dubbed simply Dorrit in his Number Plans—had begun to assume significance early in the writing process. In September 1855, while drafting No. 3, he wrote to Forster: “I can make Dorrit very strong in the story, I hope” (qtd. in Forster 222). The standard critical explanation of the title is that the childlike appellation played a role in delaying Arthur Clennam’s acknowledgement of his feelings for Amy Dorrit and was a fitting title for the quiet

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[50] See, for example, John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson’s *Dickens at Work*.

[51] (289-90). Ruth Bernard Yeazell also comments on Flora Finching’s discerning assessment of Little Dorrit: “I believe we need to take seriously the famous protest of a shrewd critic—to my mind, indeed, the best critic this difficult novel is ever likely to have. I refer, of course, not to Lionel Trilling, but to Flora Finching” (33).

power of her virtuous nature.[52] This account, however, neglects another significance of the heroine, a significance that is signaled by her name itself, for Little Dorrit does indeed suggest something like a favorite pony or a puppy; that is, her name signals a gift, as "dor" was the ancient Greek word for gift. Thus, her name itself brings to mind a diminutive gift, like "a place down in the country with a turnpike, or a favorite pony or a puppy or a bird or something from a seed-shop to be put in a garden or a flower-pot and come up speckled" (*LD* 289-90).

In a novel that is very much about telling stories, the two titles suggest the novel's preoccupation with the "destined interweaving" of multiple narratives (114). While many scholars have excavated Dickens's satirical treatments of the governing aristocracy, financial speculation, and bourgeois "Society," which are signaled by the novel's original title, I would like to address the sentimental narrative that comes into view with the novel's eponymous heroine and suggest that the novel represents a vital, informal economy of giving circulating alongside and in opposition to the market economy. Centered in and around Little Dorrit, the gift economy emerges as a counter-narrative to the corruption of the governing aristocracy and the devastation caused by unchecked financial speculation.[53] But, as an idealization, a personification of pure generosity, Little Dorrit reproduces the oppositional logic that defines the marketplace she is set up to counter. In this way, *Little Dorrit*, I contend, presents an allegory of the middle-class ideology of the pure gift and its promise to restore a sense of trust, community, and

[52] John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson add that, "on the most practical level of attracting sales, the new title had the advantage of recalling the most popular of all his characters, Little Nell" (233).

[53] Dickens's social critique included his own social class, specifically those within the middle class who exhibited aristocratic pretensions. Writing to W. C. Macready on October 4, 1855, he lamented that the middle class was "nothing but a poor fringe on the mantle of the upper" (97).

mutual aid to a society encumbered by aristocratic "barnacles" and narrowed by self-interest. In addition, the idealization of Little Dorrit serves as the foundation of Dickens's conception of fiction and the source of his critique of the middle and upper classes in the novel. Through its depiction of a domestic giver whose gifts are often fictions, or "pious fraud[s]" (93), the novel articulates a conception of benevolent authorship that seeks to resolve the tensions involved in the increasingly alienating process of literary production. At the same time, Little Dorrit serves as the center of an informal gift economy that ties together the working-class characters and recalls an earlier moral economy, the "Golden Age revived" (600). Thus, by changing his title to *Little Dorrit*, Dickens identifies his novel with a diminutive gift, an act which signals an opposition to the grandiosity of aristocratic patronage and offers, in its place, his own, more humble, gift to Victorian society: the story of an industriously giving domestic woman.

The Industrious Giver and Portable Domesticity

Rather than another iteration of the angel in the house, that quintessential Victorian domestic ideal, Little Dorrit models a version of domesticity that is not rooted in the conventional middle-class home, for her domestic virtues emerge after the family has lost everything and found itself confined to the Marshalsea Prison. Instead, her domesticity is based on an economy of giving, which recuperates and modifies a pre-industrial vision of aristocratic exchange, which had been characterized by "notions of kinship and traditional, if modified, bonds of patronage" and obligation (Davidoff and Hall 199). But unlike the grateful woman formed by aristocratic patronage described in *Mansfield Park*, Little Dorrit expresses a seemingly intrinsic capacity for industrious

generosity, a trait that emerges, apparently, naturally and spontaneously in a very different social condition: she is "inspired" like "a poet or a priest", "impelled by love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life!" (86). Through its celebration of this "different and laborious" generosity, the novel highlights women's hidden domestic labor and suggests that it is what can sustain "the fallen family" (86-7). In other words, rather than a typical narrative of the Victorian domestic ideal, *Little Dorrit* represents a form of domesticity that survives the liquidation of the Victorian home, for not only is the giving domestic woman the emotional center of the family, but she also represents a type of domesticity characterized by its portability, its ability to transcend both social and spatial categories. Thus, in his portrait of a domestic caregiver whose generosity diffuses itself throughout the public sphere, Dickens rewrites the image of the angel in the house and privileges a form of social exchange that promises to move beyond the inequities of aristocratic patronage and resist the alienation of market capitalism. Yet, in imagining the industriously giving middle-class woman as an alternative to self-interested exchange and the false benevolence of the aristocracy, the novel ends up preserving a patriarchal tradition that sees women in essential terms; for, by ultimately locating the ideal gift relation within middle-class marriage and by constructing selfless giving as women's "natural" virtue, the novel replaces the class hierarchy with a gender hierarchy.

When the narrative follows Little Dorrit into the Marhalsea Prison for the first time, it surprises her in an act of selfless giving: "He had no sooner turned the handle, than the visitor saw Dorrit, and saw the reason of her setting so much store by dining alone. She had brought the meat home that she should have eaten herself, and was

already warming it on a gridiron over the fire, for her father" (96). Little Dorrit is thus introduced as embodying a self-sacrificing form of giving. As an apotheosis of the spirit of generosity, Little Dorrit is depicted throughout the novel as the moral antidote for those suffering from the "fever" of financial speculation, and, just as Mr. Merdle symbolizes an increasingly financialized form of capitalism, Little Dorrit emerges as a symbol of an economy of the gift as it persists within industrial capitalism. Indeed, over the course of the narrative, Little Dorrit seems to defy market logic; rather than being subject to the rule of equivalent exchange—quantifiable according to Mr. Meagles's scoop and scales—her value is incalculable. Although a "little" figure, she has a "great nature" full of an "inexhaustible wealth of goodness" (791). And, unlike "all the rest who have stands in the market" (330), Little Dorrit works "for the sake of the rest" (84). Thus, with her capacity for "infinite tenderness" (117), an ability to establish ties between individuals, and an affinity for fiction, Little Dorrit personifies the logic of the pure gift.

The narrative itself calls attention to Little Dorrit's allegorical significance, for when the Dorrits become wealthy, Flora Finching decides to set aside the dress Little Dorrit has been working on and vows "that the dress shall never be finished by anybody else but shall be laid by for a keepsake just as it is and called Little Dorrit" (438). In putting aside the dress, Flora gives voice to Little Dorrit's symbolic treatment as a gift. Like the gift, a keepsake is an object with sentimental value that is "laid by" and held back from commercial circulation and thus signals a form of inalienable property. In this way, the novel dramatizes an aspect of gifts observed by theorists as their capacity to be imbued with subjective values and symbolic meanings that exceed exchange value.[54]

[54] Early anthropologists of gift exchange failed to recognize the tendency of gift exchanges to exceed the balanced reciprocity of market exchanges. As I point out in the introductory chapter, Annette Weiner

The renaming of the dress highlights as well the coexistence of two economic orders—the commodity and the gift—and demonstrates the way an object assumes different identities depending on its "social life" within those orders (Appadurai 3).

The dress's changing status from product of Little Dorrit's paid labor to keepsake parallels Little Dorrit's own status in the novel, as she moves from wage earner—someone who "lets herself out to do needlework" (68)—to keepsake—a romantic object held in Arthur Clennam's embrace, "[n]ever to part" (850). As Jeffrey Nunokawa has argued, Little Dorrit's final role as wifely treasure reveals anxieties about the dominance of commodity exchange, for it is in the Victorian novel, he suggests, that "the diffuse, diffusive, subject of commodification comes home" (4). The novel's perpetual search for a form of property immune from the interminable cycles of gain and loss that characterize capitalist exchange ultimately underwrites the traditional marriage plot: "What a man, at the end of a hard day's unprofitable work or a long novel of financial disaster, 'lock[s] in his arms' and 'h[o]ld[s] to his heart' is a brand of property supposedly immune from loss" (10). Although his analysis does not explicitly address the way the relationship between Arthur Clennam and Little Dorrit is mediated by acts of generosity, Nunokawa's insights about wives as inalienable property parallel my own analysis of gift exchange in *Little Dorrit*. Reading their relationship as an exchange of gifts enables us to see the extent to which the narrative mystifies Clennam's possession of Little Dorrit. In this

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contends that anthropologists beginning with Malinowski were influenced by Western economic paradigms, particularly their "belief in reciprocity as a regulatory mechanism," and thus overemphasize the "norm of reciprocity" in their analyses of social exchange (2); this tendency prevents them from recognizing, as Jeffrey Nunokawa puts it, those "cultural practices that fail to conform to a narrowly Western conviction that exchange rules the world" (23). While gifts are indeed social fictions, which are more obligatory and self-interested than they first appear, they cannot be reduced to a cash-nexus model of exchange; doing so obscures the multitude of identities and relationships established by gifts as well as sentimental, even transcendent, appropriations of objects that limit their circulation or remove them entirely from circulation.

sense, middle-class marriage depends on the logic of the altruistic gift to give a husband's possession of "romantic fortune" a sense of "unacquisitive ownership" (32), for woman's love is given freely and spontaneously. As Nunokawa puts it, in having a virtuous wife, the husband possesses an "inalienable treasure," more stable than the family heirlooms and keepsakes it echoes (11). While I take up the way the romantic plot is underwritten by gift exchange later in the chapter, I am interested, first, in exploring the way that Little Dorrit's labor is portrayed as a gift, a kind of "inexhaustible wealth" that replaces her inherited fortune (*Little Dorrit* 791).

The changing status of the dress further represents the transition Little Dorrit's labor undergoes over the course of the novel. As her labor shifts from commodity to gift, from alienated to non-alienated, freely given labor, Little Dorrit follows a narrative trajectory Dickens imagined as the ideal of Victorian womanhood. That is, the novel is invested not only in establishing Little Dorrit as an "inalienable treasure," but also in establishing her labor as an inalienable good (Nunokawa 11). Her work—maternal, domestic, and fictional—is depicted as something that is done voluntarily, industriously, and selflessly without expectation of remuneration: "It is enough that she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were," observes the narrator, "and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest."[55] It is in its status as unpaid labor that Little Dorrit's domestic caregiving becomes crucial for Dickens. As with the commodity, the gift of labor gains value through exchange. It is only by giving her labor

[55] (*Little Dorrit* 86). See Ruth Barnard Yeazell's discussion of Flora Finching's identification of Little Dorrit with her work. I suggest similarly that Little Dorrit's name is associated with her labor but focus instead on the way the novel's efforts to establish her work as a gift reveal anxieties about her labor circulating as a commodity.

freely to others that Little Dorrit transcends exchange value and becomes an inalienable treasure.

In his *Book of Memoranda*, written between April and August of 1856, Dickens laid out his plan for Little Dorrit's return to her domestic station: "Arthur Clennam falling into difficulty and himself imprisoned in the Marshalsea. Then Little Dorrit, out of all her wealth and changed station, comes back in her old dress, and devotes herself in the old way" (qtd. in Forster 372). As it traces Little Dorrit's movement from seamstress to domestic giver, industriously devoted "in the old way" to a fatherly gentleman, *Little Dorrit* endeavors to resolve anxieties about women's labor circulating as a commodity. This general unease about the commodification of women's labor manifests itself in the novel in multiple ways. It surfaces most clearly in Little Dorrit's encounter with the prostitute. As the Victorian novel's quintessential image of the commodified female, the prostitute highlights both her proximity to and difference from Little Dorrit. Similarly, Pancks's adoption of the gypsy persona to frequently, and disquietingly, harass Little Dorrit calls attention as well to the ambiguity of women in public spaces.

The various iterations of Little Dorrit are all "acceptable" female identities and, thus, help to resolve this anxiety. As the maternal, domestic giver, or "Little Mother," she travels throughout the city on her errands for others. The fiction of the Child of the Marshalsea, similarly, preserves her innocence as she traverses public spaces: "[t]hough everywhere the leader and the guide, Little Dorrit, happy for once in her youthful appearance, feigned to cling to and rely upon Maggy" (190). While these guises enable her to travel through public spaces without obstruction, they also suppress a recognition of her potential as a desiring woman; under the guise of the child-woman, she conceals

her romantic feelings for Clennam. When Clennam offers, "'let me call you Little Dorrit,'" she replies, "'Thank you, sir, I should like it better than any name'" (183). To recognize her as desiring would be to acknowledge her subjectivity. Instead, by characterizing Little Dorrit's value as an intrinsic part of her nature, Dickens casts her as a desired object—"'the best of all the riches you can have elsewhere—the treasure at your side'" (440). Further, by establishing her value as one that emerges from within, Dickens suggests that her social value reflects her innate value and, in this way, attempts to reconcile the division within commodities between exchange value and materiality. Thus, woman as gift is imagined as a safer, more valuable form of property than woman as commodity.

The novel ultimately resolves the anxiety over woman's work, finding comfort in the image of Little Dorrit plying her needle, not for wages, but for the man she loves: "These various arrangements completed, she took out her old needlecase to make him a curtain for his window; and thus, with a quiet reigning in the room, that seemed to diffuse itself through the else noisy prison, he found himself composed in his chair with Little Dorrit working at his side" (791). With her quiet management of Clennam, Little Dorrit exemplifies Dickens's particular domestic ideal. As Elizabeth Langland has argued, Dickens's "angels of competence" add "a ready resourcefulness, energy, and efficiency" to an "angelic nature" (81). And it is this "capacity for management" which ultimately "secures [the hero's love]" (81). Thus, in *Little Dorrit*, it is only when he recognizes both her quiet and skilled performance of the household matters and her "inexhaustible" devotion to him that Clennam discovers his love for Little Dorrit: "it inspired him with an inward fortitude, that rose with his love. And how dearly he loved her, *now*, what words

can tell!" (*Little Dorrit* 791 my emphasis). According to Langland, Dickens modifies Victorian domestic ideology by redefining virtue as "managerial skill" (81). But he also suggests that what makes the heroine an angel is not only her capacity to manage the "household business" but also her "inexhaustible" ability to do this work for others (*Little Dorrit* 791). In this domestic order, the ideal woman both manages and serves.

The combination of these characteristics, which results in a "quiet reigning" over the domestic space, holds the potential for revising the relationship between the public and private spheres, for Little Dorrit's quiet management and service "seemed to diffuse itself through the else noisy prison" (791). Unlike traditional domestic angels, Little Dorrit belies the doctrine of separate spheres, traversing, like a gift, over public and private spaces alike, reproducing domestic comforts in the homes of her employers and within the un-homelike confines of the Marshalsea prison. Her domesticity offers a sense of peace that extends beyond the hearth space. In this regard, Little Dorrit is not just another iteration of the domestic ideal; through her industrious generosity and knowledge of the world—she is "worldly wise in hard and poor necessities" (93)—the novel offers a more expansive definition of domesticity and thus a wider realm of influence for women.

Thus, by evoking the image of the hardworking and giving domestic woman—one might even say, citing Flora Finching again, an "industrious little fairy" (303)—the narrative distances women from cash payment and consequently resolves anxieties about women's commodification. By emphasizing Little Dorrit's busy contrivances, Dickens rewrites the idle, domestic angel as an industrious giver: "she drudged on, until recognized as useful, even indispensable" (87). The critique of the idle angel in the house is further sharpened by the frequent references to Little Dorrit's work. Rather than

erasing evidence of domestic labor, the novel frequently emphasizes Little Dorrit's industriousness; indeed, what is striking about Little Dorrit and what sets her apart from other Dickensian heroines is the extent to which her labors are made visible in the text. Images of her working busily, if unobtrusively, recur throughout the novel: her "nimble fingers…worked on, without pause, and the busy head bent over them watching the stitches" (305). With "a quick little pair of busy hands," she is continually striving and "contriving" for "means of improvement" (68, 87). Moreover, her hard work is written in her face, which held "more consideration and care in it than naturally belonged to her utmost years," and in her shabby dress, which "must needs have been very shabby to look at all so, being so neat" (68). Her father's room shows the signs of her efforts as well: "constant pains and care had made it neat, and even, after its kind, comfortable" (99). While Dickens gives scant detail of the domestic work of his other angels, here hard work defines Little Dorrit. She is "uneasy without her work" (303), and it haunts her dreams after she becomes wealthy as a kind of irrepressible compulsion: "I have dreamed that I have sat with the heart-ache at table, calculating the expenses of the dinner, and quite distracting myself with thinking how they were ever to be made good" (580). Little Dorrit has so thoroughly internalized her resourceful domestic caregiving that she finds herself repeating it compulsively in her dreams. This repetition of her management of day-to-day business, which continues to haunt her even after the change in her family's fortunes, demonstrates Little Dorrit's thorough immersion in the ideology of industrious domesticity. As evidence of the extent to which this particular form of domestic caregiving has discursively produced her identity, she feels disoriented and lost without her role as her father's caregiver—"she had been unable to resign herself to it, and had

tried to retain her old place about him" (488)—and the opulent scenes of her new life appear unreal compared to the reality of the "old mean Marshalsea" (488). In this way, Dickens reproduces the ideology of the purely altruistic gift in the form of the industriously giving domestic woman.

Alongside the portrait of Little Dorrit's industrious labor, the narrative explicitly denounces the image of the idle angel of the house as an elaborate and unnecessary genteel fiction: "[t]o enable this girl to earn her few weekly shillings, it was necessary for the Child of the Marshalsea to go through an elaborate form with the Father," continually "keep[ing] up the ceremony and pretence of his having no idea that Amy herself went out by the day to work" (89). The novel's satire of the family fiction of her being just another idle angel in the house suggests a critique of both the denial of the dependence upon women's domestic labor and a particular class consciousness in which the appearance of any kind of labor is repressed. As the narrator observes, "[i]t was the family custom to lay it down as family law, that she was a plain domestic little creature, without the great and sage experiences of the rest. This family fiction was the family assertion of itself against her services. Not to make too much of them" (252). Their efforts not "to make too much of" Little Dorrit's services, the narrator implies, are a form of ingratitude; by downplaying her gifts, the family attempts to minimize the degree to which they are indebted to her. Ironically, while the narrative reproaches the family for its snobbery and social pretension in denying Amy Dorrit's work and frequently emphasizes the physical hardship of that labor, it nevertheless upholds middle-class prejudices about the inferior status of housework, for whenever he enters the Dorrits' rooms, Clennam politely averts his gaze from Little Dorrit's housekeeping: "[h]e made a

pretence of having mislaid his walking-stick, to give her time to set the bedstead right, to answer her sister's impatient knock at the wall, and to say a word softly to her uncle" (109). Women's industrious domestic labor, treated simultaneously as the noblest gift and the "lowliest work" (86), is privileged as the definitive female trait.

In rewriting the fiction of idle domesticity as industrious and portable caregiving, the novel opens up a broader critique of the reliance on women's domestic work. The charge of ingratitude that the narrative levels at the Dorrit family has a broader resonance in a capitalist, gender-stratified society. In idealizing Little Dorrit's humility, virtue, and industriousness, the narrative suggests that women's unpaid labor is the hidden strength behind the family: "she took the place of eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames" (87). In its image of the unrecognized yet vital labors of Little Dorrit, the novel draws attention to the social and economic function of women's surplus labor.[56] But idealizing women's domestic labor as a gift also serves to naturalize it and further obscure its status as labor, for the novel locates and rationalizes women's surplus, inalienable labor at "the heart of the capitalist dynamic" (Rubin 160), just as it locates Little Dorrit at the heart of Arthur Clennam's story.[57]

Sitting in the Marshalsea, Clennam reflects that Little Dorrit "was the centre of the *interest* of his life" and the "vanishing-point" of "his own *poor* story."[58] That is, as

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[56] One might even read the satire of the family's fictional gentility and dependence on Little Dorrit as an allegory of the leisured class's reliance on the hidden labor of the working class.

[57] In her influential analysis of the political economy of women's domestic labor, Gale Rubin writes that "it is through the reproduction of labor power that women are articulated into the surplus value nexus which is the *sine qua non* of capitalism" (162).

[58] (emphasis added 766-7). Indeed, as the center, "the vanishing point," of the novel itself, Little Dorrit represents the extent to which the domestic woman is the vanishing center and "centre of interest" of

he realizes the failure of financial speculation, Clennam discovers the profitability of the gift. He discovers "how much the dear little creature had influenced his better resolutions" (752). Throughout his reflections in the prison, the repeated refrain—"Always, Little Dorrit" —is a revelation of her hidden, freely given labor: "whom had I before me, toiling on, for a good object's sake, without encouragement, without notice, against ignoble obstacles…?"(752-3). And the revelations of her exemplary virtue and ceaseless labors lead Clennam to a further revelation of his love. So, even as the novel registers the extent to which women's work underwrites industrial capitalism, it de-politicizes this work by categorizing it as an altruistic gift given out of love and duty. That is, the amorous gift, portrayed as spontaneous and disinterested, serves to disguise the capitalist exploitation of women's labor, positing love rather than wages as the return for women's domestic labor. With this apolitical resolution, the narrative forecloses the broader critique of society's dependence on women's surplus labor. By figuring women's labor as part of an affective exchange, the novel further legitimizes gender inequalities. As the narrator observes, once she returns to the Marshalsea, it was Little Dorrit's "lot" to wait patiently while the fevers pass, "while she thought for Clennam, worked for him, watched him, and only left him still to devote her utmost love and care to him" (837). Thus, in restoring Little Dorrit to the role of domestic caregiver whose purpose is to fortify her husband, the novel further rationalizes the sexual division of labor even as it expands and elevates women's domestic role by rewriting domesticity as an industrious and portable gift.

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domestic fiction. Just as Little Dorrit sustains the family, the image of the domestic woman, selflessly and tirelessly working for others, becomes an inexhaustible source of popular fiction.

The Gift of Fiction, or, Little Dorrit's "Pious Fraud"

Beyond modifying domestic ideology, however, the construction of woman as an industrious, domestic giver proves central to both Dickens's conception of authorship and his social critique. In addition to her domestic work, Little Dorrit labors, significantly, to construct fictions: "So, over and above her other daily cares, the Child of the Marshalsea had always upon her, the care of preserving the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars together" (89). It turns out that of all her work, Little Dorrit's fictional labor is the most important and difficult. And, much like a gift, which Marcel Mauss described as a "polite fiction" (3), Amy Dorrit is wrapped in fictions, appearing in many guises throughout the novel: the Child of the Marshalsea, the Little Mother, the Princess, and the tiny woman, all of which might be subsumed under the single whimsical appellation Little Dorrit. While the novel is littered with stories—from interpolated tales such as "Nobody's Story" and "The History of a Self-Tormentor" to the legends of Bleeding Heart Yard and the Marshalsea Prison—Little Dorrit emerges throughout as the novel's central storyteller and author of fabrications.

In its treatment of Little Dorrit's capacity for fiction, the novel complicates the image of the altruistic gift, introducing a moral ambiguity to Little Dorrit and to the idea of the gift. The need to tell one's story, to define one's self through narrative, is a pervasive theme in the novel. This need is also closely associated with fiction as a form of falsehood. As the narrator observes facetiously, fictionalizing is a common habit: "for we all know how we all deceive ourselves—that is to say, how people in general, our profounder selves excepted, deceive themselves—as to motives of action" (159). The association of fiction with Little Dorrit and the prevalence of fictionalizing in the text

highlights the novel's concern with the status of fiction. Given the frequency of such mythologizing and the prevalence of deception in the novel, one might expect the novel to launch a critique of hypocrisy. But the treatment of the tendency to form fabrications is not straightforwardly critical. Rather than set up a stark opposition between falsehood and truth, the novel adopts a more nuanced outlook towards fiction.[59]

Throughout the novel, the fabrications that characters tell themselves and others are shown, at times, to be self-serving and destructive and, at other times, to be selfless and socially beneficial. Certainly Mr. Dorrit's pretensions to patronage, especially his treatment of Old Nandy as his "old pensioner" (395), are exposed as more self-serving than magnanimous. Christopher Casby's benevolent appearance is likewise exposed as a sham, a disguise for a rapacious form of money-getting, as Pancks reveals when he accuses "The Patriarch" of being "a shabby deceiver!'" (833). But other fictions, such as the story Little Dorrit tells of Maggy's perpetual childhood, are fictions that help individuals cope with their troubles: "'So Maggy stopped there [in the hospital] as long as she could,' said Dorrit, in her former tone of telling a child's story; the tone designed for Maggy's ear, 'and at last, when she could stop there no longer, she came out. Then, because she was never to be more than ten years old, however long she lived—'" (117). These types of fictions are distinguished by their beneficial effect. As Little Dorrit claims of the fabrication that she is at a party, "I hope there is no harm in it. I could never have been of any use, if I had not pretended a little" (185). Similarly, although "a young woman…dragged at by poverty and the children together" (153), Mrs. Plornish's

[59] This is in fact how many early critics read the novel. Janice Carlisle points out that most commentators identify a moralized dichotomy, in which empty forms and sham appearances give way to reality: "they are able to claim that appearances are false and therefore bad and that the destruction of appearances, the emergence of reality, is the highest moral good" (197).

“counterfeit cottage” helps to give her a sense of beauty and happiness amidst hardship: “To Mrs. Plornish, it was still a most beautiful cottage, a most wonderful deception; and it made no difference that Mr. Plornish’s eye was some inches above the level of the gable bedroom in the thatch” (600). Thus, in his celebrations of those imaginative fabrications that help sustain individuals in the face of imprisonment and poverty, Dickens suggests that fiction offers a way of coping with the “wretched truth” of everyday life (86).

While the novel attempts to distinguish between good and bad fictions, these distinctions often collapse as well. For example, Little Dorrit writes that Minnie Gowan’s self-deception enables her to bear her marriage: “I believe she conceals [his faults], and always will conceal them, even from herself. She has given him a heart that can never be taken back; and however much he may try it, he will never wear out its affection” (578). Although this fiction helps to sustain Minnie, her self-deception along with the fiction that love is a gift that cannot be taken back perpetuate what is certainly an unhappy and, very likely, abusive marriage. Similarly, the family fiction that Little Dorrit upholds, which entails the repression of her labor, becomes a tacit endorsement of the myth of gentility. These ambiguous distinctions suggest the difficulty involved in assigning moral value to fiction. As Janice Carlisle has argued, Dickens “repeatedly draws attention to the moral ambiguities involved in any attempt to present life in a fictional form” (196). This failure to offer “simple resolutions” is most evident in “the instances in which characters create ‘fictions’ to hide the ‘reality’ of their feelings or social positions” (198). Thus, in place of any clear demarcation, the novel offers a

conception of fiction that remains alert to its moral ambiguity and that parallels a view of the gift as paradox.

While it illustrates the moral ambiguity of fiction, the novel nevertheless carves out a conception of fiction as a paradoxical combination of truth and fiction, as a "pious fraud" midway between the "wretched truth" of poverty and the shabby deceptions of Christopher Casby (*Little Dorrit* 93, 86). In its commitment to honoring some forms of fictionalizing, the narrator calls Little Dorrit's concealment of Tip's imprisonment from his father a "pious fraud" (93). This fabrication, loyally upheld by the collegians, is portrayed as a kind of gift, which is moral in its purpose and effect.[60] Such seems to be the view that Dickens proposes for his own fiction; as an oxymoron, the "pious fraud" neatly captures the paradox and subtlety of fiction. Fiction may be an untruth, but it can also be a social good. That is, through its portrayal of "the pious fraud" and Little Dorrit as "a prevaricating piece of goods," the novel suggests implicitly that fiction, like a gift, is a kind of necessary lie, a kind of virtuous fabrication.[61]

In his preface to the 1857 publication of *Little Dorrit*, Dickens offered a defense against charges that his satire was overstated: "[i]f I might offer an apology for so exaggerated a fiction as the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office, I would seek it in the common experience of an Englishman."[62] And in his defense of "that extravagant

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[60] Incidentally, the appellation "the collegians" is itself another fiction, a euphemism that sustains the prisoners.

[61] (93, 391). My definition of the gift differs from Derrida's conception of the gift as a theoretical impossibility, an aporia. Instead, conceiving of the gift as a paradox enables us to see that the gift is a possibility and is, in fact, a widespread social practice despite its contradictory nature.

[62] (5). Dickens alludes to a review by James Fitzjames Stephen, entitled "The License of Modern Novelists" and published anonymously in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1857, attacking Dickens for unfairly misrepresenting government. Dickens addresses the criticism more thoroughly in his "Curious Misprint in the *Edinburgh Review*" published in *Household Words*.

conception, Mr Merdle," he writes, "I would hint that it originated after the Railroad-share epoch, in the times of a certain Irish bank, and of one or two other equally laudable enterprises" (5). By invoking historical events, Dickens defends a notion of fictional realism, which blends social and historical truths with imaginative embellishments in order to create a social vision. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, rather than a strictly realistic portrait, Dickens's method produces "a view of society—that is, of people and institutions—in which the question of realism is one of the whole imaginative insight and scale" (217). Indeed, Dickens asks in the preface that the novel be measured by its thematic veracity, that the "weaving may be looked at in its completed state, and with the pattern finished" (5). In this way, he presents his fiction of the Barnacles, the Circumlocution Office, and an industriously giving woman as his own "pious fraud," a paradox that defines the character and purpose of fictional realism.

Within the novel, this paradox is further expressed as a transformative power: "[m]any combinations did those spikes upon the wall assume, many light shapes did the strong iron weave itself into, many golden touches fell upon the rust, while Little Dorrit sat there musing" (310). As an image of the power of fiction, Little Dorrit's musing is strong enough to bend iron and turn rust into gold; it is able to turn actual rags into metaphorical riches. As in *Hard Times,* imaginative power is represented as a defense against dehumanizing forces. While fictions can do great harm—as the collapse of Mr. Dorrit's airy castles and the fiction of Merdle's wealth demonstrate—Dickens suggests they can do great good; they can "comfort[] [a] father's wasted heart" and "charm[] the imagination" of a poor couple (247, 600).

In *Little Dorrit*, the work of fiction and the work of domestic caregiving intersect in the character of Little Dorrit. In her influential study of the male professional writer and the formation of the domestic ideal, Mary Poovey notes the interdependence between women's maternal, domestic labor and literary labor. Discussing *David Copperfield*, she writes: "In both his representations of David's writing and Agnes's housekeeping,…Dickens displaces the material details and the emotional strain of labor onto other episodes—thereby conveying the twin impressions that some kinds of work are less 'degrading' and less alienating than others and that some laborers are so selfless and skilled that to them work is simultaneously an expression of self and a gift to others" (101). According to Poovey, domestic and, by analogy, literary labor is depicted as a gift that is "selflessly and effortlessly" performed (101). In *Little Dorrit*, however, domestic labor and fictionalizing are "neither effortless nor hidden" (101). As I have suggested, in this novel the ideal domestic woman appears "different and laborious" (*Little Dorrit* 86). While *David Copperfield* depicts authorship as a male activity, in *Little Dorrit*, fiction and fictionalizing are associated most often with Little Dorrit. In this way, *Little Dorrit* extends and modifies the parallels between women's domestic labor and literary labor.

In *Little Dorrit,* as in *David Copperfield*, the domestic woman models a form of non-alienated labor and provides the professional man with a haven from the competition and alienation of public life. But in *Little Dorrit* the heroine's ability to diffuse domestic peace wherever she goes suggests a form of domesticity that is portable and inviolable: "[w]orldly wise in hard and poor necessities, she was innocent in all things else" (93). What distinguishes Little Dorrit, then, is her ability to retain her virtue as she travels

through the London streets, "turning at the end of London Bridge, recrossing it, going back again, passing on to Saint George's church, turning back suddenly once more, and flitting in at the open outer gate and little courtyard of the Marshalsea" (93). In her capacity to preserve her innocence, to remain immune from market relations, Little Dorrit offers a model for literary labor: as a gift, fiction might occupy a similarly liminal space, to be both in the marketplace and in the domestic arena. This model of labor capable of pervading and moving through multiple social spaces—public, private, middle class and working class—helps to resolve one of the central problems confronting the professional writer at mid-century.

The Professional Author and Public Patronage

In order to explain what is at stake for Dickens in establishing women's domestic work as a gift, I would like to examine more closely the way definitions of authorship and literature were changing at the time Dickens was writing *Little Dorrit*. In doing so, I suggest that Little Dorrit's maternal, domestic, and fictional labor exemplifies an ideal of artistic labor that remains inalienable and inviolate even as it circulates within the commercial realm. *Little Dorrit's* version of the domestic ideal as a kind of inexhaustible generosity is motivated by a desire to preserve inalienability in an alienated world, to reverse the division and impersonality pervading market society and to elevate literature by establishing it as an invaluable social good, a public gift.

Dickens's concern with defining literature and literary labor as a gift can be understood within the context of sweeping changes that occurred in print culture during the Victorian period. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the traditional system of aristocratic patronage had given way to an increasingly industrialized model of

publishing. By the 1830s, technological innovations in publishing, the availability of circulating libraries, and the widespread use of the serial format had expanded the reading public and established a marketplace for books. As the literary marketplace emerged, the very idea of an author underwent significant changes, for during the 1840s and 1850s, "discussions of literary men struggled to define the place the writer occupied in Britain's increasingly secular, capitalist society."[63] Once writers no longer relied on aristocratic patrons to support their work, literature and literary labor became subject to market forces. In response to this commercialization of literary labor, Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Percy Byshe Shelley attempted to distance themselves from the marketplace by constructing a view of the poet as inspired genius (Poovey 103). In addition, the Romantics saw popularity and commercial success as antithetical to their art and thus embraced an image of the poet as a solitary intellectual, whose work could only be recognized posthumously. Thus, by eschewing profits, the independent, creative genius might avoid being associated with the hack, the writer for hire, who had emerged when aristocratic patronage gave way to the literary market.

For novelists, however, the notion of authorship remained problematic, as they were caught between a capitalist mode of production and the Romantic image of solitary genius. Like the Romantic poets, Victorian novelists wanted to remain immune from commercial pressures, but they sought to reconcile popularity and a steady income with an elevated view of art. What N.N. Feltes has identified as "The *Pickwick* moment" (1836-1837) marked the emergence of the "commodity-text," a text produced serially in

[63] (Poovey 102). For a comprehensive account of the various economies of authorship emerging during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee. For an overview of nineteenth-century developments, see N. N. Feltes (*Modes of Production*), Mary Poovey, and Bradley Deane.

“the capitalist literary mode of production” and which interpellates its middle-class readers (8). Serial publication thus typified the dilemma facing writers. On the one hand, serialization enabled writers to establish an ongoing, personal relationship with readers, while, on the other hand, subjecting them to a mode of production that treated them as fungible parts of the publishing process. As Mary Poovey puts it, “the serial mode of publication highlighted the inscription of writing in the capitalist market economy, the problematic status of the ‘genius,’ and the alienated nature of literary labor” (105). Because literary labor made the tensions endemic to capitalist production “more prominent than did most other kinds of waged or professional labor,” writing became, she argues, “a contested site during this period, a site at which the instabilities implicit in market relations surfaced, only to be variously worked over and sometimes symbolically resolved” (105). The tensions between a view of art as social good and the view of art as a commodity, between the elevated artist and the alienated worker, are thus symbolically written into the novels of the period. In order to resolve the problematic status of authorship, writers like Dickens, I suggest, began to adopt the discourse of the gift to characterize literary work.

It is well known that novelists constructed an image of the author as both a professional and an intimate acquaintance. The image of the socially earnest and economically prudent professional author promised to unify the social values and economic interests of the middle-class writer. But I would like to explore the way writers turned to the gift to reinforce this image and further elevate their art: they adopted a benevolent stance toward society, conceiving of their work “as contributing inestimable benefits to society; part of this representation was the image of the selfless writer, whose

altruism generously canceled the 'debt' his grateful readers incurred."[64] Furthermore, their use of the language of generosity to describe their work and relationship with readers enabled Victorian authors to invoke an alternative economic relation by which to regard their work. They accomplished this rhetorical coup by appropriating the language of aristocratic patronage which had characterized the previous era, expressing a nostalgia for an older, pre-capitalist economic order even as they recast this order in democratic terms. In place of an aristocracy, they posited a meritocracy, and in place of aristocratic patrons, they wrote for public patrons. Consequently, a reliance on the discourse of the gift helped to elevate the status of writers and their work while eliding their actual position within the literary mode of production.

In his 1847 essay on "The Condition of Authors in England, Germany, and France," G. H. Lewes celebrates Samuel Johnson for ushering in a new economy of authorship that enabled literature to become a profession: "[h]e was the first professional author—the first who, by dint of courage and ability, kept himself free from the slavery of a bookseller's hack, and free from the still worse slavery of attendance on the great. He sought his subsistence in public patronage, not in dedications to men of rank" (qtd. in Osteen and Woodmansee 6). Drawing on the metaphor of enslavement, Lewes distinguishes his ideal—the professional author, free to earn a steady income—from those authors who are beholden to aristocratic patrons on the one hand and to the pressures of writing for hire on the other (6). Yet, while he celebrates the economic and professional freedom of this new type of writer, Lewes invokes the economic order he

[64] (Poovey *Uneven Developments* 102). See also J. W. Kaye's review essay of *Pendennis,* "*Pendennis*: The Literary Profession," (*North British Review* (August 1850)): "of all professions, worthily pursued, it is the least selfish. It brings the worker for his daily bread into constant fellowship and communion with thousands of his fellow-creatures. Thousands are indebted to him for a share of the instruction and amusement of their lives" (qtd. in Poovey 102).

seeks to replace. Under a system of "public patronage," Lewes suggests, the writer might maintain independence from both aristocratic patrons and the market. Rather than a complete renunciation of the patronage economy, then, Lewes proposes that authors might continue to rely on the notion of writing as part of a gift economy even as the literary market flourished and literary labor became increasingly commodified. This gesture toward public patronage helped writers to retain some of the prestige of the residual social order as they negotiated their place within an uncertain market.

Among those who cultivated an image of the author as benevolent professional, Dickens was one of the most prominent.[65] Well-known for fostering a sense of personal intimacy with his readers, Dickens adopts an amicable tone in the prefaces to his novels and in the voices of his narrators, a tone that would become characteristic of many of the major novels of the Victorian period.[66] In his 1857 preface to *Little Dorrit*, for instance, Dickens expresses gratification at the increase in his number of readers and addresses those readers directly: "[d]eeply sensible of the affection and confidence that have grown up between us, I add to this Preface, as I added to that [of *Bleak House*], May we meet again!" (6). This note of gratitude and tone of friendly intimacy enacts a gift relation between author and reader, one that alters the aristocratic forms of patronage it echoes. In place of a hierarchical, paternalistic relation, the gift relation between friends, as posited by novelists like Dickens, might be egalitarian, reciprocal, and, ideally, not profit-

[65] Thackeray describes the relationship Dickens established as "a communion between the writer and the public…something continual, confidential, something like personal affection" (qtd. in Poovey 104).

[66] In addition to William Makepeace Thackeray and Wilkie Collins, Bradley Deane lists Charlotte Brontë, Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Gaskell, and later Anthony Trollope and George Eliot as novelists who nurtured an image of the author as friend (28). Citing a critic in the *North American Review* in 1868, Deane argues that "sympathetic friendship became a typical way for these writers to describe their relationship with their characters, but it also came to serve as the dominant metaphor of the relationship between novelists and their readers. 'No one thinks first of Mr. Dickens as a writer. He is at once, through his books, a friend'" (28).

driven. Dickens implies that in place of the older system of aristocratic patronage, fiction now relies on a newer, more public, form of patronage. And rather than shunning popularity and profits as the Romantics had done, Dickens can embrace them as signs of the public's friendly patronage of his work.

In his public remarks on literature, Dickens echoes, interestingly, the formulation G. H. Lewes used in in his discussion of contemporary authorship. Like Lewes, Dickens adopts the metaphor of slavery to distinguish the previous conception of authorship from his own. In his 1853 speech at Birmingham, he declared:

> To the great compact phalanx of the people…to that great centre of support, that comprehensive experience and that beating heart—Literature has turned happily from individual patrons, sometimes munificent, often sordid, always few, and has found there at once its highest purpose, its natural range of action and its best reward. (*Loud cheers.*) Therefore it is right also, as it seems to me, not only that Literature should receive honour here, but that it should render honour too, remembering that if it has undoubtedly done good to Birmingham, Birmingham has undoubtedly done good to it. (*Cheers.*) (92)

As Lewes had done, Dickens posits aristocratic patronage as the worst form of bondage, from which only a multitude of readers, "the great compact phalanx of the people," can free his work. He continues, "from all such evils the people have set Literature free. And my creed in the exercise of that profession is that Literature cannot be too faithful to the people in return—cannot too ardently advocate the cause of their advancement, happiness and prosperity. (*Loud applause*)" (93). In this speech, Dickens imagines the relationship

between readers and writers as a mutual exchange of obligations between acquaintances rather than a monetary exchange between independent and anonymous parties. Speaking of receiving and rendering honor, Dickens articulates a form of exchange, like that of the gift, which is motivated by personal and ethical rather than commercial, or monetary, interests. And with their parallel structure and repetition—"it has undoubtedly done good to Birmingham, Birmingham has undoubtedly done good to it"—his sentences echo the balance he describes. By redefining literature as a gift exchange, Dickens voices his own polite fiction, elevating literature and delaying recognition of its commercial rewards: the people give to literature "its highest purpose" and, in return, literature "ardently advocate[s] the cause of their advancement, happiness and prosperity." In return for carrying out its purpose, literature receives "honour" in the form of financial success and respectability. Interestingly, Dickens personifies literature—with a capital L—throughout this passage, syntactically replacing the writer with Literature. In doing so, he invokes the logic of the gift, for in personifying literature, he echoes the way that the gift is imbued with and animated by the identity of the giver.

This image of public patronage, the mutual exchange between novelist and readers, proved to be essential to the novel's commercial popularity and ascension to respectability. That is, by evoking the language of the gift to characterize their work and relationship with readers, novelists were able to define literature in opposition to the market economy, establish another order of value by which to measure their work, and posit gift exchange as a relation between social equals. In this way, Dickens imagined Literature as his gift to the People, a gift capable of obscuring both commercial interest and class differences. As Dickens famously claimed, he would "rather have the

affectionate regard of my fellow men than I would have heaps and mines of gold" (qtd. in Deane 30). Furthermore, through this characterization of his relationship with his readers as a generous exchange between equals, Dickens inaugurated an effort to establish literature as an inalienable possession capable of transcending market value. By drawing on the language of the gift, writers were enabled simultaneously to transform the economic realities of their place within the publishing industry and cultivate a sense of mutuality, generosity, and sympathy with their audience.

Within *Little Dorrit*, the potential alienation of labor and instabilities of the market that confronted the professional writer are given expression in the treatment of the contrast between Henry Gowan's sham art and Little Dorrit's virtuous fictions. Admitting that his art is not worth the price, Gowan justifies his art by suggesting it is just another commodity in the marketplace: "They all do it….Painters, writers, patriots, all the rest who have stands in the market"(330). Gowan's delight in the artist's position in the Victorian marketplace has to do with his dependence on a fictional gentility and the degree to which he benefits from an artistic marketplace in which goods appear better than they are: "'But what a capital world it is!' cried Gowan with warm enthusiasm. 'What a jolly, excellent loveable world it is!'" (330). The pun on "capital" here suggests Gowan's gleeful support of a capitalist system, in which everything is reduced to exchange value. His "characteristic balancing…which reduced everything in the wide world to the same light weight" suggests a convenient use of the leveling character of market relations even as he depends on aristocratic distinctions for his livelihood (330). Moreover, this philosophy of art expresses a collusion between modern commercial and class interests, between the market and the aristocracy. The danger of this seemingly

harmless “school for gentlemen” becomes apparent a moment later when he glibly acknowledges that the “Circumlocution Office may ultimately shipwreck everybody and everything” (330). This habit of looking upon everything as having “the same light weight” thus has social costs, as Clennam wryly observes: “‘It’s a very dangerous, unsatisfactory, and expensive school to the people who pay to keep the pupils there, I am afraid’” (330). Dickens’s critique of aristocratic pretense and its reliance on market principles contrasts with his celebration of Little Dorrit’s pious frauds and thus reinforces his own efforts to distinguish between art as a commodity and a conception of art as socially beneficial.

The novel’s villain, Rigaud/Blandois, further expresses the collusion between aristocracy and capitalist enterprise. Like Gowan, Rigaud/Blandois uses the prop of gentility to disguise and further avaricious economic interests. Rigaud/Blandois embodies an extreme version of this ethos, treating everyone and everything as a commodity with a price. He brags: “I sell anything that commands a price. How do your lawyers live, your politicians, your intriguers, your men of the Exchange? How do you live? How do you come here? Have you sold no friend? … Effectively, sir, … Society sells itself and sells me: and I sell Society” (818). In his generalization of this calculating, maximizing philosophy, Rigaud/Blandois echoes Gowan’s claim that “They all do it.” Against these domineering fictions—the commercial ethos and the commodified view of art—Dickens presents Little Dorrit’s pious frauds, fictional and material comforts, administered not with a price but with “a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or waned, through all his years of famine” (247). By intersecting and juxtaposing Rigaud/Blandois’s acquisitive plotting with Little Dorrit’s virtuous story, the

novel dramatizes the interaction between competing conceptions of fiction in a capitalist market economy. In her capacity to construct fictions that metaphorically enrich the lives of others—to bestow "many golden touches upon the rust"(310)—Little Dorrit helps to establish fiction above exchange value and to model a form of labor that remains virtuous and inalienable as it travels between public and private spaces. Little Dorrit's facility for pious frauds—her gifts of fiction—also involves her centrally in another gift economy rooted in fiction: the economy sustaining the poorest characters in the novel.

"The Golden Age Revived": Pastoral Songs and the Magnanimity of the Poor

Little Dorrit has long been considered one of Dickens's sharpest satires of government corruption and inaction. George Bernard Shaw famously observed that "*Little Dorrit* is a more seditious book than *Das Kapital*. All over Europe men and women are in prison for pamphlets and speeches which are to *Little Dorrit* as red pepper to dynamite"(290). Indeed, the various portraits of the unceasing grind of daily life in industrial society suggest Dickens's skepticism of political economy, the dominant explanatory narrative of capitalism, for as Mr. Plornish puts it, there are "'people of pretty well all sorts of trades you could name, all wanting to work, and yet not able to get it.'"[67] What makes *Little Dorrit* a seditious text, however, is not only its portrait of that "high old family, the Barnacles" and its account of the dehumanizing social conditions, which that family "had long been too busy with their great principle to look into" (153); that is, the novel's radical potential lies in its portraits of the informal, customary gift relations uniting and sustaining the poor. Characterized by hospitality, conviviality, and

[67] (157). According to G. R. Searle, Dickens's response to political economy was "neither approval nor rejection"; it "typified a 'dominant middle-class response' that was essentially ambivalent. But it is true to say that Dickens felt hostile towards those advocates of market society who tended, as he suggested, to 'push arithmetic and political economy beyond all bounds of sense'" (qtd. in Paul Young 246)

storytelling, this informal economy supports the debtors in the Marshalsea prison and sustains the community of Bleeding Heart Yard, humanizing life in the poorest conditions. Rather than retracing the effects of industrial capitalism registered in *Little Dorrit*, I would like to continue examining the way a vital economy of giving emerges within the novel in opposition to market exchange by turning to the examples of generous and obligatory giving among the novel's poorest characters. One way of approaching Dickens's response to political economy, then, is to consider, as Paul Young has suggested, "the figures, communities, and loci that lie outside or disrupt the hegemonic space and time of industrial capitalist modernity and its prevailing ideologies" (250). This section therefore examines Dickens's representation of folk culture as an informal mode of social exchange capable of unifying the communities within the Marshalsea Prison and the Bleeding Heart Yard and opposing both market exchange and aristocratic forms of gift giving.[68] Significantly, it is the most economically marginalized characters who engage in reciprocal and obligatory gift relations; through "loans of little comforts from their own scanty store" and communal storytelling, they reconceive the gift, transforming if from the basis of paternalist authority into a means of establishing social solidarity (76).

At the center of this informal gift economy is Little Dorrit. In locating his idealized version of the gift in Little Dorrit, Dickens endows his domestic ideal with a political significance. As Arlene Young has noted, Little Dorrit occupies an ambiguous class position: while she "is endowed with a number of typically middle-class characteristics," there are "nevertheless important ways in which Little Dorrit is

[68] In his portrait of the informal exchanges among the poorest characters, Dickens echoes Letitia Landon's poem: "Few, save the poor, feel for the poor" ("The Poor").

identified with the lower-middle-class" (505). Beyond her "shabby genteel" dress and her petite figure, which Young suggests signals her affiliation with the petite bourgeoisie (505), Little Dorrit's occupation as a seamstress and her friendship with the Plornishes associate her with the working-class community of Bleeding Heart Yard. Yet, while she moves within a lower-middle-class social circle, she displays a "natural" gentility: as Young puts it, "[s]he inhabits instead a singularity, an aristocracy of virtue that transcends the bondage of class or of iron bars. She defines a rank of which she is the sole member" (505). As the embodiment of selfless generosity, she is distinguished by a "strong difference between herself and those about her" (277). Few recognize her innate nobility; her uncle, who alone seems to register the truth of the family's poverty, is one of the few who recognize her gifts and, as a result, begins to treat her like a queen, with the "marked respect" she is owed by the other family members (481). With her capacity to be "something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest" (86), Little Dorrit enables Dickens to articulate a critique of the false gentility of the upper-class characters and to posit a hierarchy of virtue in which the capacity for giving and sympathy emerges among and unifies the lower-middle-class characters.

Like Little Dorrit, the economy of giving that emerges in the prison and the Bleeding Heart Yard is, so to speak, a Child of the Marshalsea. With its emphasis on communal legends and personalized charity, this economy privileges a notion of property that is both inalienable and held in common by the people. Little Dorrit herself is treated as communal property from the moment of her birth: "everybody knew the baby, and claimed a kind of proprietorship in her" (79). As a result of the circumstances of her birth, she is endowed with a legendary status. And, as a living legend, she represents an

unusual form of property, an inalienable possession that is part of the oral tradition maintained by the prisoners themselves:

> The baby whose first draught of air had been tinctured with Doctor Haggage's brandy, was handed down among the generations of collegians, like the tradition of their common parent. In the earlier stages of her existence, she was handed down in a literal and prosaic sense; it being almost a part of the entrance footing of every new collegian to nurse the child who had been born in the college. (83)

As she is figuratively "handed down among the generations of collegians" as one of the prison's legends, she is literally cared for by the community. Her treatment as both a legend and a child echoes the traditional customs of giving and inheritance. As Annette Weiner has observed, the stories and legends handed down by a community form oral traditions, which confer power and status upon the people who possess those traditions. Citing examples of inalienable possessions in Western cultures, she notes, "Lords and queens, however, are not the only benefactors of the power that inalienable possessions wield" (37). In fact, she continues, "[s]cattered in the ethnographic literature are examples of myths, genealogies, ancestral names, songs, and the knowledge of dances intrinsic to a group's identity that, taken together as oral traditions, form one basic category of inalienable possessions" (37). Oral traditions then are owned collectively by the people. They constitute a shared cultural heritage that defines the community as it is passed down from one generation to the next. For writers like Dickens, these oral traditions comprise a national literature and reinforce his conception of literature as a gift to the People. Furthermore, these traditions establish personal relationships, a sense of

communal responsibility, and, in being “handed down among the generations of collegians,” enact a gift exchange. Through the sense of shared ownership of the Child of the Marshalsea, the turnkey becomes Little Dorrit’s godfather: “This invested the turnkey with a new proprietary share in the child, over and above his former official one” (*Little Dorrit* 83). In this way, gift exchanges transform individuals, endowing them with new status and identities, making kin of non-kin. Gift exchange then helps to foster a kind of knowledge that is communal property and is the means of establishing quasi-kinship relations.

In addition to Little Dorrit’s treatment as communal property, a series of informal, non-market exchanges—in the form of hospitality, sympathy, charity, and loans—emerge within the prison. Initially, this realm of informal exchange is predominated by women. For, when Mrs. Dorrit goes into labor,

> [a]ll the ladies in the prison had got hold of the news, and were in the yard. Some of them had already taken possession of the two children, and were hospitably carrying them off; others were offering loans of little comforts from their own scanty store; others were sympathizing with the greatest volubility. The gentlemen prisoners, feeling themselves at a disadvantage, had for the most part retired, not to say sneaked, to their rooms; from the open windows of which, some of them now complimented the doctor with whistles as he passed below, while others, with several stories between them, interchanged sarcastic reference to the prevalent excitement. (76)

This description of the events surrounding Little Dorrit's birth at first presents a clear demarcation between male and female domains alongside hackneyed repetitions of female stereotypes. The doctor, a male, is mocked for his expertise in a female business, and the "prevalent excitement" of this family event is treated by the "gentlemen prisoners" with "sarcastic reference." The busy exchanges that occur among the women are nevertheless significant. Even as it repeats the clichéd image of women as gossips, this passage suggests that the work of child care is shared work and communal knowledge. "[A]ll the ladies…got hold of the news" and immediately set to work, enacting an economy of generosity through forms of hospitality and sympathy: they take "possession of the two children," offer "loans of little comforts from their own scanty store," and sympathize "with the greatest volubility" while the "gentleman prisoners," more comfortable with pecuniary pursuits, are at a loss and sneak away. In this prison, removed as it is from the workings of the market and official institutions of credit, a vital, informal system of social exchange nevertheless persists; with its mixture of sympathetic gifts, loans, and odd jobs, the economy that emerges within and maintains the community of debtors expresses forms of social exchange that fail to conform to market principles.

As the Child of the Marshalsea is handed down in the literal sense—"it being almost a part of the entrance footing of every new collegian to nurse the child who had been born in the college" (83)—Dickens suggests that the work of communal caregiving and acts of generosity are not limited to women but are an integral and everyday part of the community. This sense of public ownership and responsibility—expressed in her legendary status as the Child of the Marshalsea—enable Little Dorrit to improve her family's situation. She first finds a dancing-master who is willing to give lessons to her

sister Fanny for free; this is possible, the narrator observes, because the dancing-master has "such abundant leisure to bestow upon her (for it took him a matter of ten weeks to set to his creditors, lead off, turn the Commisioners, and right and left back to his professional pursuits), that wonderful progress was made" (87). The elaborate "dance" with his creditors, thus, leaves the dancing master with "abundant leisure" to give to his pupil. Little Dorrit later solicits training for herself from a milliner, who "was touched, took her in hand with good-will, found her the most patient and earnest of pupils, and made her a cunning workwoman in course of time" (88). In both cases, Little Dorrit appeals to the fellow debtor's sense of pity and knowledge of her legendary status, saying simply, "'If you please, I was born here'" (87). And their generosity is not without its rewards, for the dancing-master takes great pride in displaying Fanny's progress with a minuet in the yard and the milliner is gratified to find Little Dorrit "the most patient and earnest of pupils" (87, 88). With these informal instances of generosity, instances as well of freely given though rewarding labor, Dickens emphasizes the vitality of alternative forms of exchange, arising outside of formal market relations. And with his portrait of how productive "abundant leisure" can be, Dickens suggests that "wonderful progress" is possible outside of traditional economic paradigms.

Finally, the most remarkable instance of personal charity in the Marshalsea is Mr. Plornish's offering and friendship to Mr Dorrit. It is striking because it shatters the illusion of patronage Mr. Dorrit has maintained and reverses the traditional hierarchy of class associated with gift giving. When approached by a "mere Plasterer" (82), William Dorrit is outraged by the breach of the social order, for the custom of giving tributes to the Father, or as Mr. Dorrit affectionately calls them, "testimonials," is practiced by

people from the “aristocratic or Pump side” of the prison rather than the poor side (238). He is hurt by the plasterer’s generosity because it is conveyed as an honest offer of aid rather than a “testimonial” and as such fails to conform to the fictional custom of homage and patronage Mr. Dorrit has cultivated: “fustian splashed with white lime, bestowing halfpence on him, front to front, was new” (82). By disrupting Mr. Dorrit’s pretensions to benevolence, Mr. Plornish’s offering introduces another form of giving, one which contrasts with the hierarchical system of patronage: a form of aid bestowed without regard to social status.

This informal and communal gift economy is not confined to the Marshalsea prison; indeed, Dickens depicts customary gift relations as comprising a vital part of daily life among the novel’s working poor. The inhabitants of the Bleeding Heart Yard, like those of the Marshalsea, are united by a shared heritage of stories surrounding the Yard. Like the Marshalsea, The Bleeding Heart Yard has “a character”; it is a place with “some relish of ancient greatness about it” and the inhabitants of the Yard continually share and debate their favorite legends “respecting the derivation of its name” (150). Most prefer a gothic, romantic legend about a young lady imprisoned by her father for remaining true to her love, for they are reluctant to give up “the one little golden grain of poetry that sparkled in it” (151). As another instance of the persistence of oral tradition, the legends that surround the Bleeding Heart Yard reinforce Dickens’s conception of fiction as an inalienable possession, a “little golden grain” of poetic sparkle belonging to the people.

The novel’s depiction of the generosity and conviviality of the Plornishes illustrates as well the vitality of communal forms of social exchange existing outside of traditional market relations. While Dickens’s lower-middle-class characters are often a

source of comedy in the novel—from Mrs. Plornish's idiosyncratic speech habits to John Chivery's frequent composition of poetic epitaphs—these characters are also treated with affectionate humor and depth. Mrs. Plornish's daughterly devotion, a parallel to Little Dorrit's care for her father, indicates her generous character. Like Little Dorrit, Mrs. Plornish maintains the fiction of the Happy Cottage—"a little fiction in which Mrs. Plornish unspeakably rejoiced" (600)—and a belief in her father's musical talents that serve to give life in poverty some of the charms of an earlier bucolic time: to "hear her father sing a song inside this cottage, was a perfect Pastoral to Mrs. Plornish, the Golden Age revived. And truly if that famous period had been revived, or had ever been at all, it may be doubted whether it would have produced many more heartily admiring daughters than the poor woman" (600). Rather than mocking Mrs. Plornish for having aristocratic pretensions, the narrative depicts her "poetical heightening" as a sign of her goodness (600). Furthermore, with this affectionate rendering of "the Golden Age revived," the shared songs and fictions evoke an earlier age and a return to a traditional moral economy.

The Plornishes' Happy Cottage and shop also functions as the center of social exchange for the Bleeding Heart Yard community. The Yarders purchase goods from Mrs. Plornish on credit that is rarely repaid; and the Plornishes offer friendly hospitality to even the Yard's rent collector: "Mr. Pancks's object [in repairing to Mrs. Plornish's corner] was not professional, but social. He had had a trying day, and wanted a little brightening. By this time he was on friendly terms with the Plornish family, having often looked in upon them, at similar seasons, and borne his part in recollections of Miss Dorrit" (599). Thus, the people who regularly visit the "Happy Cottage" develop a sense

of community over time built upon their participation in and contributions to the culture of the community, that is, bearing their part "in recollections of Miss Dorrit."

Furthermore, in spite of their poverty, the Plornishes are magnanimous. Because they are unable to give material gifts, the Plornishes share imaginative gifts. On his birthday, Old Nandy visits from the workhouse and gives the family a song (359). And, in return, Mr. Plornish gives a speech honoring his father-in-law: "Here Mr. Plornish delivered himself of an oration which he invariably made, word for word the same, on all such opportunities" (359). The speech allows Mr. Plornish and Old Nandy to imaginatively exchange gifts and gratitude:

> "John Edward Nandy. Sir. While there's a ounce of wittles or drink of any sort in this present roof, you're fully welcome to your share on it. While there's a handful of fire or a mouthful of bed in this present roof, you're fully welcome to your share on it. If so be as there should be nothing in this present roof, you should be as welcome to your share on it as if it was something much or little. And this is what I mean and so I don't deceive you, and consequently which is to stand out is to entreat of you, and therefore why not do it?" (359)

And in reply to Mr. Plornish's oration, Old Nandy says, "'I thank you kindly, Thomas, and I know your intentions well, which is the same I thank you kindly for. But no, Thomas'" (359). Here, rhetorical effusions replace material gifts. In place of an abundance of "wittles or drink," Mr. Plornish's metaphorical profusions make much of scarcity. Unlike the abundance of language deployed by the Circumlocution Office, these elaborate declarations perform the work of the gift; they manifest generosity and

generate gratitude as if they were a feast of plenty. In their verbal magnanimity, too, they "resemble the nobles of former times," as Mauss put it (77). With this customary gift behavior, the Bleeding Heart Yarders seem to echo aristocratic patronage, but rather than mocking them for aping the upper classes as he does elsewhere to middle-class characters, Dickens treats the Bleeding Heart Yarders affectionately, celebrating their extravagant stories and their home as a place "much changed in feature and in fortune, yet with some relish of ancient greatness about it" (150). In this respect, Dickens reverses the class hierarchy of the novel and privileges instead a moral hierarchy, in which the participation in communal life is most valued.[69]

While the customary gift giving and storytelling, which enrich the lives of the inhabitants of the Marshalsea and the Bleeding Heart Yarders, attest to the vitality of nonmarket forms of social exchange, these busy acts of caregiving and sociability further imply a subject that is both socially and psychologically interdependent, formed by and through relations to others. As the Child of the Marshalsea who belongs to everyone, Little Dorrit exemplifies this conception of the interdependent self. As she explains

[69] Interestingly, it is this very portrait of the working classes that George Eliot takes issue with in her discussion of realist art in "The Natural History of German Life": "while he can copy Mrs. Plornish's colloquial style with the delicate accuracy of a sun-picture,…he scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness" (111). She goes on to say that without his humor, his "preternaturally virtuous poor children and artisans, his melodramatic boatmen and courtesans, would be as noxious as Eugène Sue's idealized proletaires in encouraging the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance, and want; or that the working classes are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of *altruism*, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and no one for himself" (111). My goal in this chapter is not necessarily to defend Dickens against Eliot's criticism, although one could point out that Eliot's own portrait of Miss Noble in *Middlemarch* is similarly humorous and unrealistic. Rather, I am emphasizing the way in which Dickens's representation of the circulation of stories and generosity among the poor reinforces his critique of the middle and upper classes and highlights the nonmarket forms of social exchange and object relations that regularly operate within daily life. Eliot's attention to the representation of altruism suggests as well the stakes both authors had in the meaning of giving.

herself to Clennam, she stresses the extent to which she has been formed by and is grateful to the prison community:

> "Nor am I so much ashamed of the place itself as might be supposed….[I]t would be ungrateful indeed in me, to forget that I have had many quiet, comfortable hours there; that I had an excellent friend there when I was quite a baby, who was very fond of me; that I have been taught there, and have worked there, and have slept soundly there. I think it would be almost cowardly and cruel not to have some little attachment for it, after all this." (112)

Little Dorrit's emphasis on her attachment and obligation to the Marshalsea, which has grown out of the generous caregiving of her "excellent friend" and the comforts of the Marshalsea, suggests a recognition of the obligations inherent in gift exchange, for, she says, "it would be almost cowardly and cruel not to have some little attachment for it." In this regard, Little Dorrit articulates a view of giving, which is not purely disinterested, but which, in its emphasis on attachments to others, opposes the impersonal character of market relations. Her reflection on her gratitude and attachment to the Marshalsea accompanies a defense of debtors: "[p]eople are not bad because they come there. I have known numbers of good, persevering, honest people, come there through misfortune. They are almost all kind-hearted to one another" (112). Furthermore, in its attention to the moralities persisting within an ostensibly criminal space, this social commentary insists that people fall into debt "through misfortune" rather than as a consequence of moral turpitude.[70]

[70] As Margot Finn observes, novelistic accounts of debtors' prisons, like that in *Little Dorrit*, "underline the multivalent meanings and character of personal debt and credit relations" (63).

Significantly, this sense of the self as interdependent implies an attachment to places and people that differs from the object relations that have long worried critics of commodity culture, Dickens included. As Dorothy Van Ghent has observed, Dickens details the process of dehumanization "brought about by industrialization, colonial imperialism and the exploitation of the human being as a 'thing' or an engine or a part of an engine capable of being used for profit" (128). Pointing out that Dickens's frequent use of the "the pathetic fallacy (the projection of human impulses and feelings upon the nonhuman, as upon beds and houses and muffins and hats)" is not simply a stylistic choice but a literary reflection of the processes of reification beginning to dominate nineteenth-century England (129), she writes that "[p]eople were becoming things, and things…were becoming more important than people. People were being de-animated, robbed of their souls, and things were usurping the prerogatives of animate creatures—governing the lives of their owners in the most literal sense" (128). While Dickens's use of the pathetic fallacy indeed serves as a vivid representation of the increasingly commodified nature of Victorian society, it is important to remember, however, that not every instance of Dickensian pathetic fallacy entailed the concurrent "thingification" of people, for Dickens also detailed the inverse of this process, a process in which objects and places become animated with the identity of their givers, owners, and inhabitants when they are exchanged as gifts or used from day to day. In this relation, imbuing objects and places with human attributes and identities implies an expanded sense of self.

When Arthur Clennam returns to Little Dorrit's room in the Marshalsea, he sees the room as a version of Little Dorrit herself: "[t]he room was so eloquent to Clennam…it spoke to him so mournfully of her, and of his loss of her; that it would have

gone hard with him to resist it, even though he had not been alone….He laid his hand on the insensible wall, as tenderly as if it had been herself that he touched, and pronounced her name in a low voice" (*LD* 756-7). The overly sentimental tone of such scenes, a kind of sentimental pathetic fallacy, suggests that the projection of human characteristics onto things is a basic human tendency and reflects an effort to depict those social practices that resist the reach of market exchange, a commitment to representing "those kinds of social bonds and cultural activities that were not organized by government or determined by the laws of the market, but which were embodied by particular individuals or groupings and which cultivated trust, love, imagination and a capacity both to question and to resist those socio-economic forces which engendered atomization and alienation" (P. Young 250). In this way, informal gift economies, such as the one which shapes Little Dorrit, imply, not the autonomous individual of political economic theory and liberal humanism, but a self that is interrelated and dependent. The communal bonds entailed through giving therefore imply an expanded sense of personhood; they suggest that people are enmeshed in and shaped by complex social structures.

The simple acts of personal generosity and communal care among the Bleeding Heart Yarders and the inhabitants of the Marshalsea contrast with the formal instances of public charity and more showy displays of genteel patronage occurring throughout the novel. As a counter to official charitable institutions such as the Coram hospital for orphans, the adoption of Amy Dorrit as the Child of the Marshalsea exposes the impersonality of public forms of charity. While both the Child of the Marshalsea and Tattycoram are given monikers signaling their institutional parent, the Marshalsea's adoption of Little Dorrit privileges a personal, informal version of charity over the

impersonal and ineffectual charity of official institutions. It affirms a sense that individual acts of benevolence will take up the slack left by government charity. As a writer more committed to reforming society's heart than its social institutions, Dickens's portrait of a spontaneous, informal, and, notably, effective gift economy emerging within poor and middle class communities is not surprising. But rather than abandon public institutions, the examples of personal charity serve as models for reforming those public charity institutions, which, like Old Nandy's Workhouse, privileged the principles of political economy over "indiscriminate" acts of compassion.[71]

The economy of generosity circulating around Little Dorrit is contrasted as well with Mr. Dorrit's empty displays of benevolence: "in the very self-same course of time, the Father of the Marshalsea gradually developed a new flower of character. The more Fatherly he grew as to the Marshalsea, and the more dependent he became on the contributions of his changing family, the greater stand he made by his forlorn gentility" (88). Thus, at the same time that it valorizes informal, personalized forms of giving, the narrative satirizes the hypocrisy of genteel patronage, a residual form of gift exchange associated with an older, aristocratic economic order. In an effort to elide his own poverty and inferior position as a recipient of charity, Mr. Dorrit plays at patronizing the poor: he "was in the habit of receiving [Old Nandy], as if the old man held of him in vassalage under some feudal tenure. He made little treats and teas for him, as if he came in with his homage from some outlying district where the tenantry were in a primitive

[71] Dickens's account of the Workhouse contains several satirical digs at political economy. For instance, the narrator evokes Christian ideals of charity and opposes them to political economy: "Mrs. Plornish's father…had retired of his own accord to the Workhouse which was appointed by law to be the Good Samaritan of his district (without the two pence, which was bad political economy" (386). And, in a reference to Malthus's economic theories about overbreeding among the poor, the narrator observes, "[i]t was old Nandy's birthday, and they let him out. He said nothing about its being his birthday, or they might have kept him in; for such old men should not be born" (388).

state" (358). Mr. Dorrit's pretense of patronage is depicted as part of his decline within the prison and is another fiction that serves as a psychological defense sustaining him in his imprisonment. It allows him to transform the charity he receives and, even, begs for, into a form of homage: "[h]e received the gifts as tributes, from admirers, to a public character" (81). With its mixture of parody and respect, the tributes to the Father of the Marshalsea become a tradition, like the care of Little Dorrit, nurtured by the legends surrounding the Father of the Marshalsea and, when those means begin to wane, prompted by hints from Mr. Dorrit himself. At the same time, Mr. Dorrit's acceptance of charity echoes Victorian characterizations of the demoralized pauper. When Little Dorrit entreats Clennam not to give her father money, she evokes the belief in the demoralizing effect of charity: "'Don't understand him, if he does ask. Don't give it to him. Save him and spare him that, and you will be able to think better of him!'" (187). In this plea, Little Dorrit echoes the mid-century charity reformers who exhorted "indiscriminate almsgivers" to stop dispersing aid to the poor.

The novel's parody of patronage extends beyond the Father of the Marshalsea in its treatment of residual versions of aristocratic patronage pervading government and Society. In his portrait of the Circumlocution Office, for instance, Dickens exposes the system of government appointment and promotion as a self-perpetuating system of favors based on social rank, gripping the nation like barnacles on a ship and underpinned by the principle "HOW NOT TO DO IT" (119). The portrait of Christopher Casby illustrates as well the way in which benevolence might be utilized to disguise an unrelenting acquisitiveness. In a comic rendering of the biblical story of Samson, Pancks exposes the source of the Patriarch's power when he confronts Casby and cuts short his "sacred

locks" (836): "'What do you pretend to be,' said Mr Pancks. 'What's your moral game? What do you go in for? Benevolence, an't it? YOU benevolent!'" (833). In this scene of comic revolt, Pancks delivers an oration exposing the Patriarch's exploitation of his benevolent image to conceal a ruthless drive to squeeze the inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard dry: "'You're one of a lot of imposters that are the worst lot of all the lots to be met with. Speaking as a sufferer by both, I don't know that I wouldn't as soon have the Merdle lot as your lot. You're a driver in disguise, a screwer by deputy, a wringer, and squeezer, and shaver by substitute. You're a philanthropic sneak. You're a shabby deceiver!'" (833). By literally unmasking the rentier Casby as the "'Winder'" of the "'Works,'" as the "'Proprietor'" who assigns his "'Grubber'" the task "'never to leave off conjugating the Imperative Mood Present Tense of the verb To keep always at it'" (834-6), Pancks reveals the ethos of bourgeois commercialism, a relentless drive for profit that demands a state of perpetual work from the lower classes: "'Keep me always at it, I'll keep you always at it, you keep somebody else always at it. There you are, with the Whole Duty of Man in a commercial country'" and "'there is but one tune, and its name is Grind, Grind, Grind!'" (176, 834). This particular satire of false benevolence illustrates the way the gift and the market might intersect in a collusion between benevolence and market principles.

Just as it exposes the self-interest of government Circumlocution and the rapaciousness of Christopher Casby, "a mere Inn signpost without any Inn" (163), the narrative critiques the showy benevolence of "Society," contrasting its sumptuary displays of wealth with Little Dorrit's modest acts of generosity and frugal domestic care giving. The most striking illustration of this contrast is the account of the dinner given by

the Merdles. In this episode, the narrative juxtaposes two forms of giving: “There was a dinner giving in the Harley Street establishment, while Little Dorrit was stitching at her father’s new shirts by his side that night” (267). The Merdles’ dinner is a type of giving that apes the aristocracy and is an echo of the potlatch described by writers like Marcel Mauss, in which showy and elaborate displays of wealth and waste establish social status. Thus, the narrator details Mr. Merdle’s gifts to Society: “Mrs. Merdle was magnificent. The chief butler was the next magnificent institution of the day. He was the stateliest man in company. He did nothing, but he looked on as few other men could have done. He was Mr Merdle’s last gift to Society” (268). These extravagant gifts, like the potlatch ceremony detailed by Mauss, are meant to display Mr. Merdle’s wealth and cement his social status and financial power. The chief butler, like Mrs. Merdle, serves as a signifier of Mr. Merdle’s wealth and, crucially, has no other social use: “He did nothing” (268). Mr. Merdle’s gifts, like his marriage, are also financial investments: “Mr Merdle drank twopennyworth of tea in a corner and got more than he wanted” (271). Mr. Merdle’s abstemiousness here seems an outrageous parody of the self-sacrifice involved in Little Dorrit’s acts of nurturance.

By satirizing government patronage, empty shows of patriarchal benevolence, and sumptuary displays of wealth, Dickens launches a critique of aristocratic forms of giving and attempts to transform the gift from the basis of paternal authority into a non-hierarchical, personalized form of exchange capable of establishing social ties among the middle and working classes. Furthermore, in the accounts of the stories and legends that unite these communities, Dickens celebrates the art of the people, envisioning fiction as a

gift that establishes social ties and adds "one little golden grain of poetry" to everyday life (151).

Doyce and Clennam and Dorrit

In this final section, I return to a consideration of the way in which gift exchange underwrites the romantic plot of *Little Dorrit* and argue that, even as the novel seeks to displace aristocratic patronage with the personal, communal, and non-hierarchical form of exchange animating social relations among the working-class characters, it nevertheless retains the hierarchical aspects of paternal giving as an essential feature of middle-class marriage. In its narration of the romance between Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam, the novel establishes the middle-class male as the original giver, who is surprised to receive a huge return for his generosity. As it concludes this romance, the novel rewrites the traditional marriage plot, rewarding its hero and heroine with a modest prosperity only after they have given up dreams of wealth. Finally, by twinning Clennam's return to Little Dorrit with a return to the idealized business partnership of Doyce and Clennam, the romantic plot allegorizes the moral potential of the gift and extends women's moral influence into the public sphere, suggesting the capacity of the industrious domestic giver to reform the commercial realm.

Whereas in the traditional system of aristocratic patronage men secure and perpetuate the family estate through the exchange of women, in the middle-class version of romantic gift exchange, the woman is both gift and giver. When Little Dorrit gives herself to Arthur Clennam, she declares, "I am rich in being taken by you" (850). Like the giver in a patronage economy, Little Dorrit suggests she gains metaphorically in giving herself to Clennam, and her language of mutual enrichment recasts an act of

appropriation as a gift exchange. By maintaining the language of gift exchange to characterize marriage, the narrative imagines women's love as a gift that transcends market exchange. Furthermore, in imagining woman as the active agent of this exchange, the novel opposes the hierarchical and coercive character of paternal gift exchange, treating Mr. Dorrit's encouragement of John Chivery's gifts as a shameful instance of this exchange of women: "he was…so conscious all the time of that touch of shame, that he shrunk before his own knowledge of his meaning" (244). And yet, despite this disavowal of the customary exchange of women between men, the narrative mystifies Clennam's acquisition of Little Dorrit through a similarly coercive exchange of gifts.[72]

Shortly after beginning his, somewhat disconcerting, patronage of Little Dorrit, Clennam pays Tip's debt. As the grateful recipient of Clennam's generosity, Little Dorrit offers her love in return, but the extent of Little Dorrit's obligation to Clennam is delayed and misrecognized for most of the narrative. It appears in allegorical form as part of the story of the tiny woman, which Little Dorrit tells to Maggy. In this story, Clennam's gift is characterized as the secret shadow, "a great, great, treasure" and a "remembrance" of "Some one" who had been "so good and kind" (314). And Clennam attempts to minimize the gift, acting anonymously and forbidding Little Dorrit from thanking him directly. Speaking of himself in the third person, Clennam remarks that the anonymous giver "would probably need no thanks" (184). However, by making light of the gift and minimizing the return, he maintains a posture of disinterested giving, which serves to obscure what the tiny woman's story registers: that there is in every gift a "secret

[72] Nunokawa also sees Clennam's possession of Little Dorrit as an echo of traditional inheritance principles, suggesting that their marriage reflects the novel's "wishful idea of inheritance," which seeks to cancel the work or appropriation, "of *taking* possession" (20). Clennam's embrace of Little Dorrit is thus represented as a "prior acquisition," and it is this "referentless representation" which forms "the subject of unacquisitive ownership" (32).

shadow," a remnant, or "remembrance," of the giver that compels the recipient's gratitude and that every gift accrues value, like interest added to a loan, at an incredible rate—his gift quickly becomes "a great, great, treasure." Although he attempts to minimize his patronage, Clennam's gifts establish Little Dorrit's dependence in the form of her unwavering gratitude, loyalty, and love. His early speculations on Little Dorrit, which take the form of generous action, have a surprising return, for he awakens from his fever for financial speculation to find Little Dorrit by his side, "pour[ing] out [her] inexhaustible wealth of goodness upon him" and declaring that her greatest happiness is to return to the prison with Clennam, "'comforting and serving [him] with all [her] love and truth'" (791, 850). While it demonstrates the profitability of giving, this romantic exchange also reproduces the differentiation between male and female roles that constituted the middle-class Victorian household.[73] The novel thus appropriates aristocratic forms of giving, reconfiguring giving as the means of establishing middle-class partnerships and obligations. In place of the hierarchy of aristocratic patronage, the middle-class gift produces a gender hierarchy in which the grateful woman offers her love and service in return for the gifts of the gentleman.[74] Hence, traditional class

[73] Dickens's use of financial metaphors to characterize Clennam's curiosity and patronage of Little Dorrit—"[h]is original curiosity augmented every day, as he watched for her, saw or did not see her, and speculated about her" (72)—suggest an effort not to do away with speculation entirely but to add a moral component to financial investment. Pancks's subplot makes Dickens's moral lesson more explicit. His side business of locating unclaimed inheritances—motivated equally by a desire to help Little Dorrit and a desire to make a profit—emphasizes the profitability of generosity. In this way, the novel emphasizes the importance of investing in giving.

[74] For a comprehensive social history of middle-class domestic ideology, see Davidoff and Hall. In discussing the religious foundation of woman's subordination to man, they write, "If a man's ability to support and order his family and household lay at the heart of masculinity, then a woman's femininity was best expressed in her dependence. Dependence was at the core of the evangelical Christian view of womanhood, and the new female subject, constructed in real religious terms, was the godly wife and mother" (114). *Little Dorrit* attempts to put a positive spin on women's subordinate status by elevating Little Dorrit spiritually and suggesting that her marriage to Clennam is a partnership with different spheres of action.

differences, underwritten by aristocratic giving, are transformed by heterosexual gift exchange into gender differences.

Furthermore, Little Dorrit's industriously giving nature offers a solution that is particularly well suited to Victorian economic conditions. Given the competition and constant fluctuations of the market, the husband gains a more certain form of property in conceiving women's labor as a gift; it is a portable and inviolable treasure, capable of withstanding the changing fortunes of market society: "'I am yours anywhere, everywhere! I love you dearly! I would rather pass my life here with you, and go out daily, working for our bread, than I would have the greatest fortune that ever was told, and be the greatest lady that ever was honored'" (850). By positioning middle-class marriage in opposition to the uncertain fortunes of both aristocratic inheritance and financial speculation, Dickens suggests that the only security is the inexhaustible love of a domestic woman, or, as Clennam describes her, "'the best of all the riches you can have elsewhere—the treasure at your side'" (440). Thus, Dickens presents middle-class marriage, mediated by gift exchange: the economic man, now committed to the public good, finds his complement in the industriously giving woman, committed to managing the "household business" (99). And, with this partnership between the benevolent man of business and the giving domestic woman, Dickens gives the traditional marriage plot a more humble conclusion; rather than receiving riches, the happy couple assumes a "modest[, middle-class] life of usefulness and happiness" (859). In this version, the hero and heroine give up "the greatest fortune that ever was told" and, in return, receive the gift of a happy union.

The Tattycoram subplot offers a parallel version of the gender inequality endemic to heterosexual gift exchange, adding the element of class to gender. Through this subplot, the novel registers and attempts to resolve the internal contradictions of middle-class gift exchange. As it details Tattycoram's rebellion, aided by Miss Wade, against the patronage of Mr. and Mrs. Meagles, this episode presents the resistance to and symbolic resolution of patronage, constituting a kind of object lesson for the reader. In Tattycoram's rebellion, the novel gives voice to the hypocrisy that remains in middle-class patronage in order to diffuse and subvert that criticism. As Miss Wade puts it, she recognized in Tattycoram a similar "'rising against swollen patronage and selfishness, calling themselves kindness, protection, benevolence, and other fine names'" (702). While the narrative exposes the inequalities inherent in patronage—"'Here is your patron, your master….You can be, again, a foil to his pretty daughter, a slave to her pleasant willfulness, and a toy in the house showing the goodness of the family'" (348)—it ultimately undermines the critique by characterizing Miss Wade as equally domineering, cruel, and, in an oblique reference to her queerness, perverse in her influence upon Tattycoram. As Mr. Meagles declares, "'I don't know what you are, but you don't hide, can't hide, what a dark spirit you have within you. If it should happen that you are a woman, who, from whatever cause, has a perverted delight in making a sister-woman as wretched as she is (I am old enough to have heard of such), I warn her against you, and I warn you against yourself'" (351). The narrative completes its object lesson by having Mr. Meagles draw aside Tattycoram and point out Little Dorrit as a model of filial gratitude and selfless duty: "'You see that young lady who was here just now—that little, quiet, fragile figure passing along there, Tatty? Look. The people stand out of the way to

let her go by'" (845). The moral that Little Dorrit represents, suggests Mr. Meagles, is the importance of "'Duty, Tattycoram. Begin it early, and do it well; and there is no antecedent to it, in any origin or station, that will tell against us with the Almighty, or with ourselves'" (846). Thus, the Tattycoram subplot illustrates for readers the reformation of a resistant and ungrateful version of womanhood; and, in doing so, it reveals and ultimately fortifies the inequality that remains in middle-class gift-exchange.

When Little Dorrit bestows the gift of her affection upon Arthur Clennam, she resolves the struggle that has haunted him from the novel's beginning; that is, the gift of her love restores Clennam to a virtuous vocation. Tired of "grasping at money and…driving hard bargains" and haunted by the "vague suspicion" that someone has been wronged by the family business (63), he sets out to find a more worthy course of action: "[i]n the constant effort not to be betrayed into a new phase of the besetting sin of his experience, the pursuit of selfish objects by low and small means, and to hold instead to some high principle of honor and generosity, there might have been a little merit" (328). But it is not until he has lost everything and is imprisoned in the Marshalsea that he discovers the principle of "honor and generosity" in the figure of Little Dorrit; he realizes only then "how much the dear little creature had influenced his better resolutions" (752): "So always, as he sat alone in the faded chair, thinking. Always, Little Dorrit. Until it seemed to him as if he met the reward of having wandered away from her, and suffered anything to pass between him and his remembrance of her virtues" (753). Clennam's plot can therefore be read as a moral of the gift: he strays from the ethic of generosity symbolized by Little Dorrit, becomes caught up in financial speculation, falls ill, and finally, by returning to Little Dorrit, is cured.

Clennam's reformation and return to Little Dorrit's virtues suggests, more broadly, the potential of the industrious, domestic giver to reform commercial enterprise. The refrain that brings Clennam to his senses—"Always Little Dorrit!" (766)—echoes and counters the feverish refrain of financial speculation that resounds throughout London, from the Stock Exchange to the Bleeding Heart Yard: "'Merdle, Merdle, Merdle. Always Merdle'" (608). In turning to Little Dorrit and the generous virtues she represents—"patience, self-denial, self-subdual, charitable construction, the noblest generosity of the affections" (753)—Arthur Clennam resolves at once his business and romantic troubles, finding in the heroine's quiet, steady, and generous labor the ideal complement to a form of business that remains personal and socially responsible.

The narrative symbolically links the business partnership with the marital partnership in the marriage scene: after promising that "a new and prosperous career" has opened up for Arthur, Daniel Doyce leads the way to the nearest church where he acts in a "paternal character" (856, 859). This resolution suggests the interdependence of business and domestic relations, the inseparability of the public and private spheres. Little Dorrit's ability to inspire the middle-class male hero "with an inward fortitude" (856), like her ability to bestow domestic peace wherever she goes therefore suggests a vision of domesticity, not as a haven from economics, but as capable of entering into and quietly reforming Victorian public life. In this way, *Little Dorrit* imagines women's domestic caregiving as more than a sanctuary from the competition and amoral world of business; in *Little Dorrit*, the industriously giving domestic woman might also shape the world of business, for the narrative's valorization of Little Dorrit's selflessness parallels

the novel's valorization of an earlier form of entrepreneurial business represented by the firm of Doyce and Clennam.

According to N. N. Feltes, Dickens accomplishes his critique of the contemporary phase of corporate and financial capitalism, a phase inaugurated by the passage of a series of legislative acts limiting financial liability (1855-56), by contrasting it with an earlier, entrepreneurial phase of capitalism, which was, "invariably local" and "constitute[ed] itself as a partnership among family relations or personal friends" ("Community and The Limits of Liability in Two Mid-Victorian Novels" 358). Noting Flora Flinching's adoption of "Doyce and Clennam," which she insists is "far more proper" and "probably more business-like" than first names (*Little Dorrit* 288), Feltes observes that she reminds us that "'Doyce and Clennam' is explicitly a partnership. For Dickens contrasts the 'blind' and 'anonymous' ambiance of 'one of England's world-famed capitalists and merchant-princes'…to the bond of mutual personal responsibility which links Arthur Clennam and Daniel Doyce" (364). In a similar way, Dickens's portrait of Little Dorrit draws on an earlier mode of exchange, which the novel posits as the corollary to the "partnership principles" of Doyce and Clennam (362). Alongside the nostalgia for a form of business based on personal relationships, the novel romanticizes women's domestic caregiving, suggesting that it echoes and modifies an older, communal, form of social exchange dominated by customary gift giving and hospitality and characterized by a sense of mutual responsibility.[75] While Daniel Doyce signals a

[75] Humphrey House has noted as well that Dickens's other depictions of beneficent men of business reflects a nostalgia for a form of business based on personal relationships and generosity: "[t]he peculiarly personal, man-to-man goodness, which gives the Cheerybles or Boffin…their almost infinite capacity for patronage, can be partly explained as an attempt to keep alive the virtues of domestic industry and business when the old relationships—master, apprentice, journeyman—were going forever" (67).

form of industry with a social purpose, Little Dorrit signals a form of domesticity, as industrious as it is quiet and selflessly giving.

Alongside Daniel Doyce and Arthur Clennam, men of active business and throwbacks to an earlier form of capitalism, Dickens gives his readers Little Dorrit, the selfless woman. By associating Little Dorrit and her domestic labor with a form of gift exchange that merges traditional conceptions of woman as a gift with the Victorian ideology of altruistic femininity, Dickens establishes Little Dorrit's domestic virtues as not only the antithesis but also the antidote to the alienation of financial capitalism. Through this union of business and romantic partnerships, the novel charts a return to patronage; in place of the cash-nexus, the novel imagines and figures a gift-nexus as the moral improvement to business relations.

The transformation of domesticity that *Little Dorrit* dramatizes ultimately suggests Dickens's view that the conventional image of the home as a civilizing refuge from the competitive, amoral world of commerce is no longer feasible.[76] From the House of Clennam to the Plornishes' "counterfeit cottage" (600), commercial pressures continually invade the home. The novel's third, ironically titled chapter "Home," highlights the current state of the un-homelike homes of London, as it details Arthur Clennam's return to England and to a house that is simultaneously a business and a home. The chapter begins with a description of London, "gloomy, close and stale" (43). It is a dreary and depressing scene: "Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets" (43). While it sets the mood for the prison theme that

[76] Describing the dominant Victorian conception of the home as woman's sphere and a moral sanctuary, removed from the amorality of the market, Davidoff and Hall write, "[w]oman had been created for man, indeed for one man, and there was a necessary inference from this that *home* was 'the proper scene of woman's action and influence.' The advances in English society which made possible this retreat of women, away from the dangers of the 'world' into the home which they could construct as a moral haven, was thus a mark of progress" (115).

permeates the novel, this scene suggests that rather than the ideal Victorian home there are only those "[f]ifty thousand lairs…where people lived so unwholesomely" (44). Moreover, in the midst of these melancholy habitations runs a polluted river: "[t]hrough the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river" (44). Like the fever associated with Merdle-ism, the polluted Thames ebbing and flowing through London serves as a literal reminder and stark symbol of the consequences of industrialization and government corruption. Under these conditions, the Victorian home has become a "place[] of imprisonment" (45). The story of a family inhabiting an actual prison, then, appears to further extend this metaphor, to make it clear that the home is no longer a place of relief for "an overworked people" (43). In this way, *Little Dorrit* charts the crisis of middle-class domesticity brought on by the development of industrial capitalism and the increasing dominance of *laissez-faire* economic policies.

In response to this crisis, *Little Dorrit* imagines a domestic ideal who secures the moral and social bonds of society by remaining industriously giving in the midst of "the roaring streets" (859). By establishing an industrious and selfless form of giving as the defining characteristic of women's domestic virtue and proposing that women's caregiving might reform commercial relations and serve as a model of literary labor, the novel attempts to reconcile moral values with the commercial changes sweeping England. No longer a *place* of refuge, domesticity is refigured as an alternative mode of social exchange, a mode that can be reproduced in any social condition and which is capable of counteracting the competition and amorality of the commercial realm. Thus, rather than finding repose in a domestic sanctuary removed from the toil and turmoil of industrialized society, *Little Dorrit* closes with an image of domestic peace that remains

inviolate as it travels through the busy London streets: “[t]hey went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the forward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar” (859-60).

CHAPTER IV

"INCALCULABLY DIFFUSIVE" GIFTS IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

Halfway through *Middlemarch*, George Eliot's narrator wonders,"[w]hich would turn out to have the more foresight in it [regarding Fred Vincy's fate] – [Susan's] rationality or Caleb's ardent generosity?" (350). In highlighting the tension between rationality and generosity, this question suggests the opposition between two views of the individual commonly held by Victorians: a view of the individual as calculating and acquisitive and a view of the individual as a social being susceptible to moral influence. This question also emphasizes the polarity that I have suggested becomes prominent during the nineteenth century, that is, the opposition between an economy based on market exchange and the morality of generosity. While the ways in which Eliot's novels register economic tropes in social life have been widely canvassed, there has been little discussion of George Eliot's representation of gift exchange. In this chapter, taking *Middlemarch* as a representative text, I consider Eliot's articulation of gifts and giving as an alternative form of social exchange that resolves the opposition between "rationality" and "ardent generosity" posed by such questions as the one above, for Fred Vincy's future ultimately relies on both rational calculation and ardent generosity. In addition, in highlighting Eliot's formal and thematic attention to gifts, I suggest that gift exchange functions as the grounds for her ideal of an art of sympathy.

Our understanding of Eliot's conception of sympathy is aided by a look at her treatment of gifts and gift exchange. For not only is sympathy celebrated as a counter to the commercial, utilitarian spirit, but is also figured in her novels as a kind of gift. Sympathy, like generosity, moves along a spectrum of egoism and altruism that is figured

in economic terms, associated with rational calculation and scarcity on the egoistic end and a spontaneous emotional overflow and incalculable abundance on the other, altruistic end. In *The Mill on the Floss,* Philip Wakem offers one of the clearest explanations of Eliot's conception of sympathy in a letter to Maggie Tulliver; in this description, he characterizes sympathy as a kind of gift:

> The new life I have found in caring for your joy and sorrow more than for what is directly my own, has transformed the spirit of rebellious murmuring into that willing endurance which is the birth of strong sympathy. I think nothing but such complete and intense love could have initiated me into that enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the life of others; for before, I was always dragged back from it by ever-present painful self-consciousness. I even think sometimes that this gift of transferred life which has come to me in loving you, may be a new power to me. (443)

For Philip, learning to sympathize with others allows him to move beyond his own narrow, and self-centered, viewpoint. In "caring for another's joy and sorrow" more than his own, Philip's "spirit of rebellious murmuring" is reborn as "strong sympathy," which gives him an "enlarged life." Often read as an expression of Eliot's doctrine of narrative sympathy, this passage is also significant in its articulation of sympathy as a "gift of transferred life." As a gift, sympathy connects individuals, transferring the cares of one person to the other. This sense of a permeable self, capable of growing and incorporating the joys and sorrows of others, echoes the logic of gift exchange. For just as gifts challenge the idea that there is a rigid separation between individuals and between

persons and things, Eliot's idea of sympathy assumes an open and expansive subjectivity, capable of extending beyond the self.

Moreover, like the gift, this relation is not purely disinterested; it enhances the self and can even be empowering: the self is "enlarged…by appropriating the life of others" and this "gift of transferred life" may "be a new power." In this way, Eliot's conception of sympathy more closely resembles a gift economy than a market economy. Furthermore, as a statement of her doctrine of narrative sympathy, the close affinities between the gift and sympathy that this passage articulates suggest a reassessment of Eliot's conception of art. In reading Eliot's sympathy as disguised self-interest, critics rely on an assumption that sympathy must be "pure," like the gift, without any sign of interest. But, in her conception of sympathy as enlarging the self as it adopts the views and interests of others, Eliot reconfigures sympathy as an interested gift.

In its analysis of Eliot's treatment of gift exchange in *Middlemarch* and its significance in her artistic project as a whole, this chapter reassesses Eliot's status as a bourgeois intellectual and suggests that rather than simply reproducing the middle-class ideology of individualism, Eliot saw her art as challenging the notion, popularized by political economics, of the individual as a rational, self-interested agent. While *Middlemarch* documents the ways in which money and commercial goods infiltrated all aspects of social life, it also traces the way gift practices underwrite social relations and structure subjectivity. In this chapter, I argue that a gift economy emerges in *Middlemarch* as an undercurrent throughout the narrative, countering the dominant movements and patterns of the market economy. As a distinct form of expenditure, gift exchange exceeds utilitarian calculation, establishing social status and relations of

dependency. By depicting the ways in which gift exchange interacts with and differs from the logic of market relations, *Middlemarch* presents a critique of possessive individualism, and suggests a more dynamic, interdependent, and expansive subjectivity—a manifold self—in place of the isolated and autonomous self of liberal capitalist culture.[77] I contend that Eliot ultimately situates her notion of the gift as the basis for her conception of art, presenting it as a "gift of transferred life," which initiates her readers into "that enlarged life" that comes from caring for the joys and sorrows of others. In doing so, Eliot defines her art as an inalienable good, capable of transcending the values of market exchange.

Eliot's Art of Sympathy

As is often noticed, George Eliot's conception of realism is based on her ideas about sympathy and morality. As I have suggested, Eliot's conception of gift exchange proves central to her art as well. In an essay that famously outlines her realist project, "The Natural History of German Life," she writes that "the greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies," for art is capable of giving us a "picture of human life" and thereby "amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot" (110). Notably, Eliot characterizes the relation between the artist and the audience as a relation of obligation and debt: "we owe" the artist a return for his or her gift, "the extension of our sympathies." She thus envisions the relationship between herself and her readers as a gift exchange. The greatest gift of the writer, she suggests further, is a realist portrait of ordinary people: "the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the

[77] I draw the phrase "manifold self" from Eliot's own formulation of the sympathetic relation between individuals described in Dorothea's vision and feeling of "the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance" (486).

life of the People" (110). As she writes in a letter, "[t]he only effect I ardently long to produce in my writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures" (*GEL,* 3:111). Significantly, her conception of sympathy is not simply an imaginative exercise but depends on gaining an understanding of and feeling for others; sympathy is capable of expanding the individual self "beyond our personal lot." Eliot thus envisions a form of realism that centers on the depiction of people of differing social classes, an art that enables readers to understand and feel not for an idealized version of the "the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant" but rather for "the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness" ("Natural History" 111). It is ironic of course that, with few exceptions, Eliot's characters belong largely to the middle-class and the gentry.

However, it is worth noting that Eliot goes on to emphasize the political and economic implications of an art that enlarges sympathies. In "The Natural History of German Life," she follows her declaration of the purpose of art with a discussion of its effect on our understanding of "social questions" and suggests that attaining a sympathetic understanding of "the People" will enable us to better observe the shortcomings of prevailing social theories (112). An art that provides a portrait of ordinary people, Eliot claims, is not only necessary for the enlargement of sympathy but "[w]e need it equally to check our theories," namely, "[t]he tendency created by the splendid conquests of modern generalization, to believe that all social questions are merged in economical science, and that the relations of men to their neighbours may be settled by algebraic equations" (111-2). In her derisive assessment of "economical

science[’s]” ability to explain social life, to settle social relations “by algebraic equations,” Eliot refers to theories of political economy and utilitarianism currently in vogue and expresses a prevailing concern among novelists responding to the commercial spirit of middle-class society.

Like other Victorians, George Eliot reacted against Jeremy Bentham’s elevation of an enlightened form of self-interest as the basis for morality. According to Walter Houghton, writers like Dickens, Carlyle, and Eliot repudiated the commercial, utilitarian character of middle-class society by adopting “a secular ethic of enthusiasm,” which sought to nurture “the moral sensibility to an acute sympathy for suffering humanity” (272, 274). In fact, Eliot’s insistence that art can act as a check on economic theory echoes Thomas Carlyle’s critique of Victorian society articulated in an essay in *Past and Present*, “The Gospel of Mammonism”:

> We call it a Society; and go about professing openly the totalist separation, isolation. Our life is not a mutual helpfulness; but rather, cloaked under due laws-of-war, named ‘fair competition’ and so forth, it is a mutual hostility. We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that *Cash-payment* is not the sole relation of human beings; we think, nothing doubting, that *it* absolves and liquidates all engagements of man. (148)

Carlyle’s insistence that cash relations are not the “sole relation of human beings” finds its echo in Eliot’s belief that realism, in its capacity to offer a “true conception of the popular character,” can challenge the belief that “all social questions are merged in economical science” (111-2). In this way, realism, she suggests, can remedy the atomism and competition prevailing in social relations. Moreover, Eliot saw realism as disputing

other popular "theories" then in circulation, those associated with Whig idealism—"the dream that the uncultured classes are prepared for a condition which appeals principally to their moral sensibilities"—and Tory nostalgia—"the aristocratic dilettantism which attempts to restore the 'good old times' by a sort of idyllic masquerading , and to grow feudal fidelity and veneration as we grow prize turnips, by an artificial system of culture" (112). In her view, realism can help to correct these misperceptions: "none of these diverging mistakes can coexist with a real knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives" (112). Notably, her reference to "aristocratic dilettantism" reiterates Carlyle's vituperative attack on the "Idle Dilettantism" of "an idle, game-preserving and even corn-lawing Aristocracy" (Carlyle 140, 152). Like Carlyle, Eliot sought to delineate those human relations not governed by "algebraic equations" and the cash-nexus, to expose the limits of Benthamite utilitarianism.[78] Finally, in place of economic theories, Eliot offers her alternative for developing social theories, the study of "the natural history of our social classes, especially of the small shopkeepers, artisans, and peasantry" (112).

When critics have considered Eliot's treatment of sympathy, however, they have often emphasized her liberal humanism, dismissing her as a conservative, bourgeois writer. Granted that Eliot viewed her work as fostering the enlargement of sympathies and a recognition of a common humanity rather than advocating particular social or political change, she did see her work in political terms. In "The Natural History of German Life," after outlining the impact that an art focused on enlarging sympathies has upon various political and social theories, Eliot argued that a study of "the interaction of

[78] Noting the parallels between Eliot and Carlyle as well, Anna Kornbluh observes that Eliot imagined her "own praxis as a response to Carlyle's mandate" to "create alternative media for 'the relation of human beings'" (941).

the various classes on each other…would be a valuable aid to the social and political reformer" (202). And while Eliot's work evinces a preference for individualized sympathy over political action and is inclined to "ameliorate social differences with assurances of mutual feeling and universal humanity" (Jaffe 15), it also engages with and responds to the problems of a commercial age and articulates a critique of economic individualism at the core of bourgeois subjectivity. As Lauren Goodlad has shown, Victorian liberal thought was multifarious, including the bourgeois economic ideologies inherited from Hobbes and Locke as well as such "antibourgeois discourses as the civic republicanism carried over from the seventeenth century, the romantic-influenced 'modern' liberalism of the post-French Revolutionary era, and the religious-inflected liberalism of many nineteenth-century Evangelicals and dissenters" (ix). J.G.A. Pocock observes as well that "through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has grown up a long tradition of attacking" the acquisitive individualism of bourgeois society (qtd. in Goodlad ix). Thus, George Eliot's commitment to the values of sympathy, community, and the complex personal ties established through the exchange of gifts can be understand as part of the humanist tradition running through liberalism which repudiated aspects of laissez-faire economic theory.

In addition to emphasizing Eliot's liberal humanism, recent criticism has taken issue with the notion of sympathy itself, locating its origins in the theories of sympathy developed by eighteenth-century moral philosophers, the most influential of whom was Adam Smith. According to Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, sympathy involves "changing places in fancy with the sufferer" (258). Scholars have often assumed that Eliot's treatment of sympathy was directly influenced by Smith and thus argue that

sympathy in Eliot involves a kind of representation in which the sympathizer becomes an impartial spectator.[79] These scholars, Suzy Anger has suggested, are motivated by Hobbesian ideas about self-interest and consequently consider Eliot's version of sympathy as always a disguised form of self-interest, connecting "it with appropriation and even sadism or masochism" (113). Such readings identify moments of failed sympathy as evidence that Eliot has, unintentionally, undermined her theory of sympathy.[80] However, as Suzy Anger demonstrates, Eliot's ethic of sympathy was in fact rooted in nineteenth-century Romantic hermeneutic theory, drawing primarily on the work of Rousseau, Feuerbach, and Comte.[81]

While the imagination plays a fundamental role in Eliot's conception of sympathy, her ideas about sympathy differ from Smith's in significant ways. Rather than positing a disinterested observer, Eliot emphasizes a more direct form of sympathy, involving the self in relation to others. Moreover, rather than a narcissistic affirmation of the self, Eliot's ideal version of sympathy entails a recognition of difference, an acknowledgment and accommodation of the other's "equivalent centre of self, whence

[79] David Marshall, for instance, claims that sympathy demands "we imagine that we are persons who can be only representations to us" (171); likewise, J. Jeffrey Franklin argues that in Eliot's view sympathy "is identification not with a real object or referent external to the self, but with a representation within the self of that object that is generated by the imagination" (123).

[80] For works representative of what Anger calls the "Hobbesian perspectives on Eliot," see Laura Hinton's *Perverse Gaze of Sympathy,* Marc Redfield's *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman,* and Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (114). Rather than identifying moments of failed sympathy as evidence of contradictions in Eliot's theory, one might see those moments as part of Eliot's realism, complications and challenges that she explores. Or, as I argue, one might see moments in which personal interest remains a central part of sympathy as exemplifying, as in her view of gift exchange, the way in which sympathy ultimately involves a negotiation between the interests of the other and the interests of the self.

[81] Anger lists the following thinkers as part of a "loose genealogy for Eliot's view": "Rousseau, whose belief that sympathy is innate greatly influenced the Romantics; Feuerbach, for whom sympathy is a key concept in his anthropology of religion; and Comte, to whom her model of sympathy is especially indebted" (112).

the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference."[82] Furthermore, sympathy involves an emotional transfer and posits a more permeable subjectivity that contrasts with the Smithian conception of the independent self.[83] As we will see with her treatment of gift giving, in *Middlemarch*, Eliot rejects the ideal of the disinterested spectator and posits instead a self that remains susceptible to others even as she attempts to wrest sympathy from the pure egoism of market relations. For Eliot, an art that enlarged sympathies was an answer to the competitive individualism that was increasingly dominating the nineteenth-century.

The "General Economy" of *Middlemarch*

George Eliot's engagement with questions of political economy and the idea of the rational, calculating agent anticipates the concerns of more recent social theorists and anthropologists such as Georges Bataille, Hélène Cixous, and Annette Weiner, who rethink classical economic theories in terms of the gift. These scholars offer various critiques of classic economic paradigms in order to challenge the predominance of the principles of utility and reciprocity. In a similar way, Eliot offered her novel as a "Study of Provincial Life," in which she attempted to depict the subtle alterations of everyday social relations, as a challenge to rigid social theories, particularly those that fell under the rubric of "economical science" ("The Natural History of German Life" 201). In

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[82] (*M* 135). According to Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, Feurbach's "model of individual relationship closely resembles George Eliot's idea of sympathy. In her novels any constructive action must be preceded by the recognition of difference: between oneself and another, or between the differing impulses of one's own complex motivation" (25)

[83] Evidence of this permeability abounds in *Middlemarch*. Caleb Garth, who "had a strong sense of fellowship with [workmen]" (346), is taken aback when Timothy Cooper accuses him of being on the side of the "big folks"— "'yo're for the big folks, Muster Garth, yo are'" (346)—and later seems to have taken the criticism to heart when he decides to refuse Bulstrode's employment. And, instead of maintaining an impartial position, characters such as Dorothea Brooke and Mr. Farebrother frequently struggle with their own desires before they act altruistically.

pairing critical theorists with George Eliot, my goal is to highlight the critical engagement with political economy running through Eliot's own work and, at the same time, to illuminate the economy of sympathetic and diffusive gifts running through *Middlemarch*.

In Georges Bataille's work we find an elaboration of Marcel Mauss's insights about the persistence of gift exchange within market societies. In his 1933 essay "The Notion of Expenditure" and in his later work *The Accursed Share*, Bataille sets out to overturn classical economic principles, which assume that all exchange is driven by the need to acquire. Bataille achieves this "Copernican transformation" of the "ethics that ground" classical economics by exposing the "insufficiency of the principle of classical utility," (*Accursed Share* 25, "Notion of Expenditure" 117). In place of what he calls the "restrictive economy," Bataille urges the recognition of a "general economy" of unproductive expenditures: "humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle *nonproductive expenditure*" (117). Whereas the "restrictive economy" fails to recognize any social activity that is not intended to produce or conserve life, the "general economy" registers an economic logic that embraces "squandering without reciprocation" and does not calculate a profit (*Accursed Share* 38).

Middlemarch takes up the theme of "nonproductive expenditure" in many forms, from the self-absorbed excesses of Fred Vincy to the depiction of Dorothea Brooke, a woman with a passionate, intellectual, and idealistic nature who does not conform to the ideal of domestic womanhood that market exchange relies on. The novel is permeated by formal excesses as well; its Prelude and Finale, frequent use of allusion and epigraphs,

interpolated allegorical and mythic elements, and mixture of epic and realist forms push the boundaries of realist literature. In addition, against the dominant market economy, the novel depicts an economy of abundance, whose currents of sympathy, gifts, and gratitude flow throughout the narrative. While Bataille seeks to expand our understanding of economy to include excessive, nonproductive expenditures, Eliot broadens the conception of economy to make visible the hidden lives shaping history.

Like Bataille, Hélène Cixous takes up questions of the gift and its relation to utilitarian economy, but Cixous goes further by situating her insights on the gift in the context of the social history of gendered economies. Cixous, too, repudiates the utilitarian, or "exchangist" (Schrift, "Introduction: Why Gift?" 11), logic governing economic theory, but she reframes these insights in terms of a gendered libidinal economy, characterizing the dominant, "restrictive" economy as motivated by a phallocentric "desire for appropriation," a desire to possess and to exact a return on one's expenditures (*Newly Born Woman* 79). She argues that the law of appropriation, forming what she terms *"L'Empire du Propre,"* the "Empire of the Selfsame/Proper," originated in Hegel's philosophy (79). In the Hegelian "schema of recognition," she writes, there "is no place for the other" (79). Rather than recognizing the "other in a type of exchange in which each one would keep the *other* alive and different" (79), the other appears different and unequal and therefore must be appropriated into the self; that difference is negated so that the subject goes "out into the other *in order to come back* to itself" (78). As I will argue below, Eliot's sympathetic, manifold self defies this formulation. Rather than negating the difference in the other, her conception entails the recognition of the other's "equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a

certain difference" (*M* 135). While Bataille observed that a process of acquisition has obscured the process of expenditure as the basis of exchange, Cixous identifies this desire to appropriate, to possess, as the basis of what she suggests is, historically, a "masculine" economy: "[t]his economy, as a law of appropriation, is a phallocentric production" (*NBW* 80). According to Cixous, the fear of loss plays as large a role in the economy of the *propre* as does the desire for appropriation; in fact, she suggests, these forces are two sides of the same coin of masculinity: "the Empire of the Selfsame is erected from a fear that, in fact, is typically masculine: the fear of expropriation, of separation, of losing the attribute" (*NBW* 80). That is, economies based on the ownership of private property are "driven not so much by the desire to appropriate" as they are "structured instead around the fear of loss, the fear of losing what is already possessed" (Schrift, "Introduction: Why Gift?" 11). Thus, Cixous adds to Bataille's critique of the utilitarian, "restrictive" economy a theory of gender difference.

In *Middlemarch,* Mr. Brooke typifies this drive, as the fear of loss proves a stronger motivation than the desire to acquire. As Mrs. Cadwallader perceptively observes when she decides to "put the leeches on him" (238), the fear of losing money is a much stronger influence on Mr. Brooke than concern for enhancing his reputation:

> 'he will not like to feel his money oozing away,' said Mrs. Cadwallader. 'If I knew the items of election expenses I could scare him. It's no use plying him with words like Expenditure: I wouldn't talk of phlebotomy, I would empty a pot of leeches upon him. What we good stingy people don't like, is having our sixpenses sucked away from us' (237).

Speaking for the "good stingy people," Mrs. Cadwallader articulates the class interests of the gentry. As a prime example of the economy of the *propre,* gentry society is dominated by masculine interests and action, though women like Mrs. Cadwallader play a subtle, supporting role that often remains unrecognized.[84] Eliot thus illustrates the way that gentry society is explicitly male-dominated but implicitly dependent on women. In a similar move, Cixous genders libidinal economies not in an effort to reproduce essentialist arguments about gender but to highlight and undermine the history of male privilege, which relies on a hierarchy of sexual difference.[85] Indeed, Cixous employs the terms "feminine" and "masculine" to reference the construction of socio-historical relations of gender inequality: "[t]he (political) economy of the masculine and the feminine is organized by different demands and constraints, which, as they become socialized and metaphorized, produce signs, relations of power, relationships of production and reproduction, a whole huge system of cultural inscription that is legible as masculine or feminine" (*NBW* 80-1). Cixous thus opposes the exchangist logic of traditionally male-dominated economies to the feminine economy that desires to give regardless of a return to the self. Against the "gift-that-takes," she posits the "desire-that-gives" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 893). As a gift relation, the feminine economy is an abundant, prodigious economy that refuses to measure its gifts and defies the logic of appropriation.[86]

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[84] Conversely, women who, like Dorothea, challenge the social order are rebuked.

[85] As Cixous explains, "I make a point of using the *qualifiers* of sexual difference here to avoid the confusion men/masculine, woman/feminine: for there are some men who do not repress their femininity, some women who, more or less strongly, inscribe their masculinity" (*NBW* 81).

[86] Cixous characterizes this gift relation further as an extravagant form of giving: "She doesn't 'know' what she's giving, she doesn't measure it; she gives, though, neither a counterfeit impression nor something she hasn't got. She gives more, with no assurance that she'll get back even some unexpected profit from what

Cixous goes on to place this account of the "masculine" economy that appropriates/fears loss in relation to what she says is "the problematic of the gift" (*NBW* 80). Gift economies, she suggests, can be governed by the law of return that animates commodity exchange: "loss and expense are stuck in the commercial deal that always turns the gift into a gift-that-takes. The gift brings in a return. Loss, at the end of a curved line, is turned into its opposite and comes back to him as profit" (87). This "masculine gift" echoes the emphasis on the law of return that scholars from Malinowski to Bourdieu and Derrida have described. As Bataille and Cixous have noted, the "gift-that-takes" tends to obscure incalculable forms of expenditure and runs the risk of reducing all gift exchanges to a kind of quantifiable exchange that looks very much like the market. What I want to draw from both Bataille and Cixous is the different logics animating these economies, regardless of whether one terms them "restrictive" and "general" or "masculine" and "feminine." In the "restrictive" or "masculine" economy, the exchange of gifts and commodities is regulated by the law of return, while in the "general" or "feminine" economy, gift exchange is characterized by expenditure (waste and loss) and diffusion (of the self, of wealth). Highlighting this distinction can help us to understand the ways that gift exchange, when governed by exchangist logic, can mimic commodity exchange, and, conversely, the ways that diffusive giving can expose the limits of the market economy.

Yet, it is important to note that even while certain gift relations seem to be dominated by an exchangist, oppositional, and hierarchical logic, gift exchange nevertheless remains distinct from commodity exchange. It is useful therefore to turn to

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she puts out. She gives that there may be life, thought, transformation. This is an 'economy' that can no longer be put in economic terms" (*NBW* 893).

the work of anthropologists to place the distinction between an economy governed by the law of return and an economy of plenitude in cultural and historical terms.

Anthropologists have often distinguished between gift and commodity economies. They suggest that whereas commodity exchanges are characterized by the transfer of objects of equivalent exchange-value between independent actors, gift exchanges privilege personal qualitative relations established through the transfer of inalienable objects.[87] That is, gift exchange and commodity exchange are social practices premised on different assumptions about selfhood. While this general definition helps to explain the ways that gift exchange differs from commodity exchange even as it adheres to the law of return, it does not fully account for those gift exchanges that fall outside of reciprocity. In her work *Inalienable Possessions*, Annette Weiner points out that early anthropologists often relied on classical economic rationalities to interpret the exchange practices in the societies they observed. According to Weiner, these anthropologists read the "norm of reciprocity" into the gift exchanges they studied, assuming that reciprocity regulated and stabilized so-called "primitive" societies, and ended up repeating Adam Smith's concept of the "invisible hand":

> The 'norm of reciprocity' is, in actuality, a theory of economic behavior whose anthropological tenets were shaped centuries earlier. During the rise of capitalism, the give and take of reciprocity took on an almost magical, sacred power among Western economists. In the eighteenth century, Adam Smith and others argued that reciprocal relations operated

[87] See C. A. Gregory's *Gifts and Commodities* and Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift*. As I've noted in the Introduction, Gregory distinguishes commodity exchange as "an exchange of alienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal independence" and gift exchange as "an exchange in inalienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal dependence" (12).

> in the marketplace *sui generis,* keeping the market equitable and stable without external legal controls. A century later, this same belief in reciprocity as a regulatory mechanism was described for 'primitive' societies when it was thought that 'natives' lived without governing bodies or legal codes. (2)

Like Bataille and Cixous, Weiner highlights the persistence of classical economic paradigms and the way these assumptions tend to obscure relations of exchange. For her, this "belief in reciprocity" has been imposed upon non-Western societies. Thus, in response to this ethnocentric approach to exchange, her goal, like that of Bataille and Cixous, is to push against the exchangist logic of the rational, "restrictive" economy, in order to account for different forms of exchange and possession, particularly a type of object that is withheld from circulation in order to imbue it with an incomparable and cumulative value over time (33).

In contrast to alienable goods, what she terms "inalienable possessions" are "symbolic repositories of genealogies and historical events…their unique, subjective identity gives them absolute value placing them above the exchangeability of one thing for another" (33). In addition, Weiner's study of the exchange practices of the Trobriand Islanders reveals another desire motivating the possession of inalienable goods, what she terms the paradoxical urge to "keep-while-giving," as a central motivation in exchange. The act of withholding objects from exchange, she suggests, expresses a desire for permanence and social status and can affirm social difference, for those who possess inalienable objects gain power and authority over others. Weiner's discussion of landed property as one of the oldest types of inalienable possession sheds light on the importance

of inheritance in eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels, allowing us to see inheritance plots as struggles for the authority and honor conferred by inalienable possessions. Weiner's insights also enable us to see that objects exchanged as gifts "speak" a social language and are in fact a type of inalienable possession, for gifts retain the identities of givers even after being given away. In general, Weiner's redefinition of the logic of exchange encourages us to see beyond the norm of reciprocity, to recognize gift exchange as part of a wider social economy.

Though quite varied, the work of these social theorists and anthropologists highlights the limits of Western economic rationalities and offers more expansive definitions of exchange. In a similar way, Eliot warned against "lac[ing] ourselves up in formulas" and sought to establish her art as conveying a more wide-ranging and instinctive view of ethical action (*The Mill on the Floss* 498). In its depiction of the multiple influences and circumstances that determine social behavior, what she described as "the mysterious complexity of our life [that] is not to be embraced by maxims" (498), the realist novel was, for Eliot, uniquely capable of providing a more complete picture of moral behavior and, in so doing, demonstrating the inadequacy of rigid, formulaic moral theories such as utilitarianism. Because their work expresses a similar resistance to rule-based theories and instead embraces a cultural perspective that seeks to go beyond the limits of rigid economic rationalities, Bataille, Cixous, and Weiner offer a useful framework for assessing Eliot's formal and thematic treatment of exchange. In particular, their insights allow us to notice the images of plenitude and excess that permeate *Middlemarch* and to read these images within the context of the wider economy depicted in the novel. Although committed to the realist perspective, with its

incorporation of non-realist generic conventions, such as epic and allegory, and its inclusion of extra-textual materials, such as the Prelude, Finale, and chapter epigraphs, *Middlemarch* challenges easy definition as a realist novel. For these elements defy the boundaries of traditional realist narrative and suggest that meaning is not contained within conventional narrative form. In addition, other formal excesses within the narrative, such as moments of metaphorical profusion, a plethora of literary and historical allusions, and characters who exemplify a Bataille-like form of expenditure, serve to counter the utilitarian ethos of economic rationalism. Thus, in its depiction of provincial life, *Middlemarch* offers a formal hybridity that continually highlights the limits of the cash nexus.

As a clear example of Bataille's description of the youthful man "capable of wasting and destroying without reason" ("The Notion of Expenditure" 117), Fred Vincy is a "buoyant-hearted young gentleman…. 'addicted to pleasure'" (*M* 145). As such, he regards the "debt on his mind" as merely an "immaterial burthen," easily forgotten in light of his imaginative resources, for his "assets of hopefulness had a sort of gorgeous superfluity about them" (*M* 145). Like Bataille's youthful man, Fred Vincy gives the lie to the principle of utility. However, Eliot differs from Bataille in her depiction of non-rational expenditure by distinguishing between those excesses that benefit and those that harm the community. Eliot explicitly places these excesses on a moral scale, suggesting that Fred's "superfluous securities of hope" are a socially harmful excess (146). The novel presents these social speculations as a form of gambling that has infiltrated social relations, for Fred "had only the tendency to that diffusive form of gambling which has no alcoholic intensity…keeping up a joyous imaginative activity which fashions events

according to desire" (149). The narrator suggests further that this excess is in part a consequence of society's double standard of accepting "with a philosophical smile" the thefts of a "youthful nobleman" while condemning "a ragged boy who had stolen turnips" (148). In its condemnation of Fred's behavior, the novel might at first seem to advocate a form of utilitarian rationality as the check for such wasting. But the novel actually suggests that another form of excess works to determine Fred's actions and moral character, that is, the "increasing ardour of his affection for Mary inclining him the more towards those who belonged to her" (147). And it is another non-rational value, his "sense of heroism—heroism forced on him by the dread of breaking his word to Mr. Garth, by his love for Mary and awe of her opinion" that ultimately works as a moral counter—a positive form of excess—to his imaginative gambling (149). In this way, the novel establishes a moral hierarchy of extravagant expenditures, portraying Fred's youthful excesses as a negative excess caused by social inequality while elevating affection and the dependence on the opinions of others as a positive excess to be nurtured.

From its opening lines, *Middlemarch* announces its intention to narrate an alternative history, a history of yet another form of excess, the exceptional "passionate, ideal" nature (3). Introduced in the Prelude, this excess—the "ardently willing" soul's search for a social purpose (3)—motivates the narrative as a social problem—concerned with the nature and "social lot of women" (3)—and as a problem of genre. As the Prelude details, such a nature, exemplified by Saint Theresa, "demanded an epic life" and is not satisfied with conventional narratives: "what were many-volumed romances of chivalry and the social conquests of a brilliant girl to her?" (3). This epic nature exceeds

rational, concrete explanation and is characterized instead in metaphoric terms: "[h]er flame quickly burned up that light fuel [i.e. the "many-volumed romances"]; and, fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self" (3). The image here of a flame burning up "that light fuel" is one that defies utilitarian consumption; the flame soars after something more and is characterized by adjectives such as "illimitable" and "rapturous," suggesting a desire that exceeds rational accounting. Moreover, by representing the desire to achieve a "consciousness of life beyond self," Eliot foreshadows her conception of sympathy and sympathetic art and suggests an expansive subjectivity that challenges the notion of the independent, atomistic self of Bethamite utilitarianism.

Turning to the nineteenth century, Eliot's narrator laments that "[m]any Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life," as they are brought up short against "the meanness of opportunity" and "domestic reality" (3). These "later-born Theresas" lack a narrative framework and cannot be explained within the terms of the rational economy; as a result, their "ardently willing soul[s]" are either "disapproved as extravagance" or "condemned as a lapse" (3). Because they are confined to "domestic reality," women with "ardently willing souls" represent a kind of social excess and loss: they find no outlet for their aspirations, they defy "scientific certitude" about the nature of women, and their energies are "dispersed among hindrances" (3). The Prelude thus announces the need for a different type of narrative. By depicting a heroic nature confronted by limited social circumstances—a "young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state" (514)—Eliot adapts the elements of

epic to a realistic social context. In this way, she privileges a kind of hybrid of realism and epic that seeks to tell a history neglected by traditional epic and social histories.

As is often noted, the Prelude serves to introduce Eliot's heroine, Dorothea Brooke, a "later-born Theresa" who struggles to find an outlet for her ardor within a society that privileges "the solicitudes of feminine fashion" and expects women of wealth and beauty to marry (5). Dorothea, however, is an atypical heroine, whose "love of extremes" hinders her marriage prospects:

> A young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles – who had strange whims of fasting like a Papist, and of sitting up at night to read old theological books! Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship. Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them. (6-7)

The narrator delivers the opinion of polite, gentry society in free-indirect discourse and through the distancing effect of this technique treats these traditional attitudes ironically and humorously. That is, from the point of view of the landed gentry, Dorothea appears to be a risky match financially, for her opinions might prove a threat to "political

economy and the keeping of saddle-horses." Dorothea's unconventional opinions defy gender norms and are seen by traditional gentry society as a sign of madness.[88] The feminine ideal—"women were expected to have weak opinions"—is implicated with the social and economic order as the "great safeguard of society and of domestic life." Eliot suggests that domestic ideology reinforces the socio- economic system. By possessing strong opinions and an ardent nature, Dorothea both defies gender norms and threatens the utilitarian economic order.

Dorothea's struggle with political economy throughout the narrative registers this complex intersection between gender politics and the socio-economic order. In an early scene, Dorothea, voicing her opinion on the use of wealth, speaks "with more energy than is expected of so young a lady": "'Surely,' said Dorothea, 'it is better to spend money in finding out how men can make the most of the land which supports them all, than in keeping dogs and horses only to gallop over it. It is not a sin to make yourself poor in performing experiments for the good of all'" (11). In response, Mr. Brooke remarks to Mr. Casaubon that "[y]oung ladies don't understand political economy, you know….I remember when we were all reading Adam Smith. *There* is a book, now. I took in all the new ideas at one time" (11). Here, Mr. Brooke "twits" Dorothea with her ignorance of political economy, "that never-explained science which was thrust as an extinguisher over all her lights" (12), when she expresses an opinion, which the narrator points out was regularly solicited. As one of those "provinces of masculine knowledge" from which Dorothea is excluded (41), political economy is represented as a tool that not only reinforces the gender hierarchy—it is simply something that "young ladies don't

[88] Mrs. Cadwallader, who frequently questions Dorothea's sanity in order to press her to conform, is the spokesperson for these views.

understand"—but also serves to extinguish Dorothea's radical ideas about the uses and distribution of wealth.

Soon after this conversation, Dorothea voices another unconventional opinion on wealth inequity: "'I think we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of small cords—all of us who let tenants live in such sties as we see round us. Life in cottages might be happier than ours, if they were real houses fit for human beings from whom we expect duties and affections'" (21). For all of her ignorance of political economy, Dorothea possesses a keen insight into the system of patronage underpinning Mr. Brooke's relations with his tenants. While her comment gestures toward revolutionary sentiment—"we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses"—it offers, in part, a more conservative defense of patronage when she points out the landowners' failure to reciprocate their tenants' "duties and affections."

Later, as a wealthy widow, Dorothea pores over her "little heap of books on political economy and kindred matters, out of which she was trying to get light as to the best way of spending money so as not to injure one's neighbours, or—what comes to the same thing—so as to do them the most good" (495). In this scene, which occurs on the second morning following her meeting with Rosamond, Dorothea awakens with a "great deal of superfluous strength" and seeks to steady herself by prolonged study (495). But the books on political economy fail to give her any clarity: "Unhappily her mind slipped off it for a whole hour; and at the end she found herself reading sentences twice over with an intense consciousness of many things, but not of any one thing contained in the text. This was hopeless" (496). While the narrator teasingly suggests that Dorothea's restlessness is attributed to the emotional excitement she experiences from the revelation

of Will's true feelings, there is also a comment on political economy, which remains mute on the question of how best to spend her money to help others. And as Dorothea fails to "get clear upon" political economy—just as she fails to glean the expected enlightenment from Mr. Casaubon's scholarship[89]—she realizes that political economy "was hopeless" in the face of excess energy, feeling, and wealth.

As the various references to political economy suggest, the novel is engaged with the dominant discourses of its day and takes as one of its motivating questions the problem that plagues Dorothea throughout, the problem of expenditure. As Gillian Beer puts it, Dorothea seeks to get at "the human meaning of political economy" (58). Feeling that "an unfair concentration of the property had been urged" in her interest, Dorothea laments, "'[m]y own money buys me nothing but an uneasy conscience'" (*M* 232). She views the "division of property intended for herself" as "excessive" (232) and explains to Casaubon: "'I have been thinking about money all day—that I have always had too much, and especially the prospect of too much'" (232). The problem of having "too much" wealth thus haunts Dorothea's desire to achieve some great goodness in the world.

Various responses to this problem of excess took shape in another influential discourse of Eliot's day, the discourse of Victorian charity. In addition to its engagement with political economy, *Middlemarch* registers public debates over charity and giving. Over the course of the nineteenth century, charity became increasingly professionalized and institutionalized; neighborly gift relations and localized acts of charity by the aristocracy gave way to more formalized occasional gifting and institutionalized charity

[89] "How was it that in the weeks since her marriage, Dorothea had not distinctly observed but felt with a stifling depression, that the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither?" (125).

that fell largely under the purview of middle-class reformers. As Margot Finn has shown, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century society was characterized by "day-to-day mutual sociability" along with customary charity to the poor and servants, while the latter part of the century is marked by a diminution in the "scale and scope of gifting" and a formalization of gifting occasions such as birthdays and holidays.[90] While middle- and upper-class practices of giving to the poor persist throughout the nineteenth century, gradually becoming more professionalized, the exchange of gifts among social equals became "increasingly problematic as liberal notions of personal autonomy became more current" (86). These historical changes in gift relations are registered in *Middlemarch*'s simultaneous historical emphasis on the years that preceded the first Reform Bill and its awareness of historical changes that occurred over the course of the century. This double narrative time suggests both a nostalgia for and wariness towards the moral economy of the age of patronage. By setting her novel at a time when aristocratic patronage is still commonplace but with the benefit of the knowledge of the impersonal forms of charity that replace it, Eliot can interrogate philanthropy even as she seeks to salvage the personal relations an economy of giving entails. This criticism of philanthropy can be seen in the journalistic satire of Mr. Brooke's philanthropy and in Dorothea's own discomfort with the "rarefied social air" of the country gentry (239, 203). So, while it registers the movement towards philanthropic reform, *Middlemarch* reconfigures gift relations as sympathetic relations capable of breaking down social differences. As lateral gifting became more limited and commercialized, Eliot sought to extend and perpetuate the social obligations of giving. Her novel thus expresses a nostalgia for the older order

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[90] (Finn 87). For additional overviews of the professionalization of charity over the course of the nineteenth century, see Dorice Williams Elliot's *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* and Daniel Siegel's "Losing for Profit."

of gift giving; it attempts to retain the solidarity of customary gift relations while amending, through a doctrine of sympathy, their hierarchical effects. In this way, the novel puts forward an ethic of sympathetic gift giving as part of a moral economy that runs alongside and (potentially) counter to the market economy.

Gifts-that-take

When one traces the gifts within the novel, one notices that the gift exchanges fall largely into two categories: those gifts that are calculated to elicit a return, what Cixous called gifts-that-take, and diffusive gifts, or gifts that fail to conform to the norm of reciprocity. Eliot subjects the former gifts to satire, exposing them as blatantly acquisitive and paternalistic forms of exchange, while distinguishing a form of giving that is sympathetic and mutually enriching. This latter version of giving further echoes the conception of gift exchange detailed by Cixous as it entails a “relationship to the other in which the gift doesn’t calculate its influence” and reveals an “open, extravagant subjectivity” (*NBW* 92). Just as Bataille sought to draw attention to the actual movements of energy, those expenditures—giving and wasting—that exceed the rational economy, Eliot explores the complexity of exchanges that lie beyond the cash-nexus relation, and the way these relations both resist and repeat the logic of commodity exchange. Her presentation of gifts, however, is distinct in its emphasis on ethics and in the fundamental role gift exchange plays in her conception of sympathetic art.

The gifts of Featherstone, Casaubon, and Bulstrode turn out to be “gifts-that-take” and thus exemplify acquisitive forms of giving. Peter Featherstone, for instance, regularly holds up the promise of inheritance as a means of gaining and maintaining power over others. The novel employs the metaphor of “the dead hand” to signify

inheritance as a gift that seeks to fetter its recipient and maintain a grip on wealth. In a satirical echo of the invisible hand, Smith's famous metaphor for the market, the "dead hand" appears as the gift's counterpart to the market's dominance.[91] For Featherstone, "the dead hand" takes on two metaphorical resonances, signifying both inheritance and gambling. As many have noticed, in gifting his estate to his illegitimate son, Featherstone attempts to hold on to wealth, to secure it fast after his death. Indeed, Featherstone's inheritance represents the kind of bequest that Annette Weiner describes as attempting to keep-while-giving, for his greatest pleasure is in "chuckling over the vexations he could inflict by the rigid clutch of his dead hand" (202). His desire to grasp wealth even after he has given it away in the most final sense is literalized in the moment of death: "[i]n a very little while there was no longer any doubt that Peter Featherstone was dead, with his right hand clasping the keys, and his left hand lying on the heap of notes and gold" (200). In another sense, Featherstone imagines his "dead hand" as a kind of speculation, a hand of cards to be played posthumously at the reading of his will. While he fully expects his "dead hand" to be a winning one, it is thwarted by his son's bluff: "the cool and judicious Joshua Rigg had not allowed his parent to perceive that Stone Court was anything less than the chief good in his estimation" (323). In fact, rather than intending to secure his father's land, "Joshua Rigg looked at Stone Court and thought of buying gold" (323). In transforming the property into capital, Rigg recirculates what Featherstone thought was inalienable. This doubling of metaphorical meaning not only signifies Featherstone's rapaciousness, but it also emphasizes the degree to which the principles underlying modern notions of property overlap with traditional gift exchange in Victorian inheritance law; although Featherstone views his

[91] Thanks to Deborah Shapple Spillman for suggesting this parallel.

property as a gift, which he can continue to hold after he has given it away, the property is in fact alienable and therefore subject to recirculation.

Edward Casaubon's gifts to Will Ladislaw turn out to be similarly domineering, and, in this respect, echo the system of patronage detailed in *Mansfield Park*. Through his financial support of Will, originally dispersed out of a sense of duty, Casaubon gains a feeling of having done the right thing (or, as Dorothea realizes with her unnerving perceptivity, he has appeased his guilt in appropriating wealth that would have belonged to Will). But later it becomes clear that Mr. Casaubon's generosity creates a relationship of inequality: "the drawing of cheques for him, being a superiority which [Will] must recognize" (224). When Will becomes restless under the yoke of Mr. Casaubon's financial support, a provision which entails obligation and prohibits Will from openly criticizing or rivaling Casaubon, he announces that "'Mr Casaubon's generosity has perhaps been dangerous to me, and I mean to renounce the liberty it has given me'" (142). Will gives up the "liberty" of Casaubon's financial support and embraces instead a middle-class ideology of independence: "'I mean to go back to England shortly and work my own way—depend on nobody else than myself '" (142). In this way, Will's refusal of the gift echoes Victorian anxieties about the acceptance of charity as an encroachment upon personal autonomy. Indeed, until Will gives up his dependence on Mr. Casaubon, their relationship is characterized by traditional conventions of patronage, which demand that Will adopt an obsequious manner. Writing from Rome, Will begins by expressing his gratitude in well-worn platitudes, "saying that his obligations to Mr. Casaubon were too deep for all thanks not to seem impertinent" (183). Will then argues that in giving up his acceptance of his relative's generosity, he "should make the best

return, if return were possibly, by showing the effectiveness of the education for which he was indebted" (183), couching even his rejection of generosity in the language of gift exchange.

Following Will's refusal of support, their mutual dislike sheds the veil of social niceties and the constraints of gratitude. Mr. Casaubon "had begun to dislike him still more," for "[n]ow Mr. Casaubon had been deprived of that superiority (as anything more than a remembrance) in a sudden, capricious manner" (224). Likewise, Will, "on his side felt that his dislike was flourishing at the expense of his gratitude" (225). Nevertheless, Mr. Casaubon writes to Will in order to deter him from taking the position at Mr. Brooke's newspaper, appealing to their previous relation of patronage: "That I have some claim to the exercise of a veto here, would not, I believe, be denied by any reasonably person cognizant of the relations between us" (231). However, Will begins to view Mr. Casaubon's generosity in a new light, to see that Mr. Casaubon "had never done more than pay a debt towards him" (228). The narrator adds here: "and when gratitude has become a matter of reasoning there are many ways of escaping from its bonds" (228). By rationalizing Casaubon's generosity, Will reduces it to a debt and thus relieves his own feelings of obligation. Will thus recasts Casaubon's pose of aristocratic patronage in utilitarian economic terms.

Like inheritance, Casaubon views marriage as a kind of gift exchange that can be subject to a balancing of social and financial value. Presented in free indirect discourse, his views on marriage express traditional attitudes about the nature and role of women: as "a man of good position" he can expect to marry a "blooming young lady—the younger the better, because more educable and submissive—of a rank equal to his own, of

religious principles, virtuous disposition, and good understanding" (175). In exchange for "handsome settlements," he would receive "family pleasures and leave behind him that copy of himself which seemed so urgently required of a man" (175). Not only does Dorothea promise to fulfill these expectations, she might also serve as a "helpmate" who would "enable him to dispense with a hired secretary" (176). The narrator sums up Casaubon's reflections on Dorothea's aptness as a wife, remarking that "Providence, in its kindness, had supplied him with the wife he needed."[92] The narrator then shifts from Casaubon's perspective and adopts a facetious tone, adding, "whether Providence had taken equal care of Miss Brooke in presenting her with Mr. Casaubon was an idea which could hardly occur to him" (176). This aside, one of Eliot's more overtly feminist statements, impugns society's patriarchal attitudes and mockingly carries this rigidly reciprocal view of gift exchange to its logical conclusions. It also satirizes the view of marriage as a gift exchange in which women are the objects of exchange. Furthermore, Casaubon's view of Dorothea as the Providential gift he deserves echoes stereotypical views of women as selfless and self-sacrificing. In his analysis of Eliot's treatment of gift exchange, Stephen Dillon draws attention to the significance of Dorothea's name as meaning a "gift of god" (716). With her ardent generosity, Dorothea is indeed idealized as an embodiment of the gift as Dillon claims, but I would suggest that this passage, which Dillon does not discuss, satirizes the view of woman as a gift. In fact, by playing on Dorothea's name here, as a gift of Providence, Eliot highlights Casaubon's egoism and critiques the patriarchal reliance on a religiously sanctioned view of women as gifts.

[92] (176). In his letter asking Dorothea to marry him, Casaubon makes this traditional view of the wife as a gift more explicit: "[t]o be accepted by you as your husband and the earthly guardian of your welfare, I should regard as the highest of providential gifts" (28).

As with Featherstone's will, Casaubon's legacy turns out to be a gift with fetters, another dead hand in its efforts to hold on to wealth and to "keep his cold grasp on Dorothea's life" (306). Again, in its treatment of Casaubon's will, the novel emphasizes the parallels between the dead hand of inheritance and the invisible hand of the market. In this instance, the paternalist gift of inheritance resembles the capitalist economy in its dependence on women's subordination. Just as the novel's introduction of Dorothea as antithetical to political economy exposes the reliance of capitalist patriarchy on women's relegation to the domestic sphere and dutiful acquiescence to masculine superiority, the novel demonstrates the way that marriage as a form of gift exchange, in which women are both exchanged as gifts and idealized as selflessly devoted givers, prevents the attainment of equality in marriage. The revelation of Casaubon's will spurs Dorothea to reevaluate her marriage and perceive it in a new light: "she was undergoing a metamorphosis in which memory would not adjust itself to the stirring of new organs. Everything was changing its aspect: her husband's conduct, her duteous feeling towards him, every struggle between them…. Her world was in a state of convulsive change" (304-5). One outcome of this revolution of thought and feeling is "a violent shock of repulsion from her departed husband, who had had hidden thoughts, perhaps perverting everything she said did" (305). Casaubon's gifts—the property and the "bequest of labour" (306)—are both gifts with fetters that were actually "exorbitant claims for himself" (306). But in the revelation of the alienated and oppressive nature of their marriage—"the embittering discovery that in her past union there had lurked the hidden alienation of secrecy and suspicion" leaving her with only "the retrospect of painful subjection to a husband whose thoughts had been lower than she had believed" (306)—

Dorothea is finally able to cast off the bonds of his oppressive bequests and, at the same time, cast off the role of selfless, self-denying wife.

Nicholas Bulstrode's gifts assume a wider impact, serving as a means of increasing his social influence within Middlemarch society. This is because his acts of charity help to fortify, and even become indistinguishable from, his business endeavors. Eliot underscores Bulstrode's hypocrisy by emphasizing the capitalist nature of his benevolence:

> Mr. Bulstrode's power was not due simply to his being a country banker, who knew the financial secrets of most traders in the town and could touch the springs of their credit; it was fortified by a beneficence that was at once ready and severe—ready to confer obligations, and severe in watching the result. He had gathered, as an industrious man always at his post, a chief share in administering the town charities, and his private charities were both minute and abundant….His private minor loans were numerous, but he would inquire strictly into the circumstances both before and after. In this way a man gathers a domain in his neighbours' hope and fear as well as gratitude; and power, when once it has got into that subtle region, propagates itself, spreading out of all proportion to its external means. It was a principle with Mr Bulstrode to gain as much power as possible, that he might use it for the glory of God. (100)

In characterizing Bulstrode's "minute and abundant" charities, Eliot's narrator parodies the rhetoric of financial exchange. Bulstrode is "an industrious man" who gathers a "chief share" in the town charities and thus gains a monopoly over benevolence. His

gifts are all careful investments—"he would inquire strictly into the circumstances both before and after"— and his precisely and scrupulously managed "private charities" become synonymous with his "private minor loans" in their accumulation of social and financial power. Indeed, while his numerous gifts serve as a supplement to his business and become a less formalized form of lending, Bulstrode views beneficence as even more profitable in its promise of eternal glory.

Not surprisingly, Eliot treats this type of public benefactor with distrust. Not only does she reveal Bulstrode's charity as a means of accumulating power that replicates the movement of monopoly capitalism, but Eliot also exposes his beneficence as ethically suspect, for Bulstrode's questionable involvement in Raffles' death is accompanied by a doubtful gift:

> [Lydgate] was conscious that Bulstrode had been a benefactor to him. But he was uneasy about this case. He had not expected it to terminate as it had done. Yet he hardly knew [how] to put a question on the subject to Bulstrode without appearing to insult him; and if he examined the housekeeper—why, the man was dead. There seemed to be no use in implying that somebody's ignorance or imprudence had killed him. And after all, he himself might be wrong. (440)

Lydgate's difficulty in putting "a question on the subject to Bulstrode" is a consequence of his awareness of his obligation to Bulstrode, and this awareness helps to explain away any scruples he may have about the circumstances of Raffles's death. Eliot demonstrates here the way that the benefactor's generosity dominates the recipient's consciousness. When Lydgate later acknowledges the extent to which his reputation has been damaged

by his association with Bulstrode, he suggests also the capacity of the gift to dominate him: "'Bulstrode's character has enveloped me, because I took his money'" (471). In summing up the internal contradiction resulting from Bulstrode's morality and his business interests, Eliot's narrator wryly observes that "[i]t was true that Bulstrode found himself carrying on two distinct lives; his religious activity could not be incompatible with his business as soon as he had argued himself into not feeling it incompatible" (382). Eliot's use of understatement here echoes the 'not un-' formation Austen uses to portray the way gentry characters formulate their interests through euphemism and indirection. Moreover, this mental sleight of hand, which allows Bulstrode to overlook his own hypocrisy, resembles the bourgeois mentality Bataille critiques, which hides its rapaciousness behind a celebration of the principle of economic rationalism ("The Notion of Expenditure" 124-5). With Bulstrode, however, that rapaciousness is more securely masked by the cultivation of a life of religious activity and charitable work.

What is striking about Bulstrode's investment in gifting is not that it replicates the customary patronage of patriarch's like Sir Thomas Bertram, but the way it alters that patronage to conform with modern forms of financial speculation. In this sense, Bultrode's attempts to make all of his charitable expenditures profitable suggest an effort to make unproductive expenditure conform to the utilitarian, "restrictive" economy. Bulstrode's investment in charity thus represents yet another cultural formation emerging out of the interaction between industrial capitalism and gift exchange. This trend arises in commercial enterprise, for over the course of the nineteenth century, businesses began appropriating the discourse of gift-giving as a means of sanctioning interested and calculated transactions. Capitalist exchange appropriates the principles of generosity and

reciprocal obligation that constituted the traditional, moral economy even as it supplants that order (Klekar 127). In this way, the new economic order overlays the older system of exchange.

For Bulstrode, the investment in public and private forms of charity serves the further function of mystifying the sources of his wealth. The revelation that Bulstrode's wealth is ill-gotten emphasizes the process of mystification Bulstrode enacts throughout the narrative; that is, the narrative traces a process by which, aided by gift-giving and investment in landed property (the purchase of Stone Court), Bulstrode transforms his ill-gotten wealth into respectability. As the narrator notes, "Nicholas Bulstrode had used his hundred thousand discreetly, and was become provincially, solidly important – a banker, a Churchman, a public benefactor" before ironically adding that he was "also a sleeping partner in trading concerns, in which his ability was directed to economy in the raw material, as in the case of the dyes which rotted Mr. Vincy's silk" (383). With his skill in the "economy of raw material," a subtle critique of his corrupt business practices, Bulstrode signals a new type of philanthropist, one whose wealth is acquired through capitalist venture. He thus represents a type of capitalist-philanthropist who transforms material wealth into symbolic capital, a process that enables him to become "provincially, solidly important," as Eliot's narrator puts it. In this regard, as Bulstrode attempts to reproduce aristocratic patronage, he tries to make that patronage conform to the rational calculations of capitalist speculation.

Bulstrode's efforts to transform his ill-gotten wealth into social respectability further signal a wider cultural trend occurring within the middle class during the nineteenth century. As Henry Staten asserts, in his analysis of the historical context of

Middlemarch, the novel does not champion middle-class ideology but rather records the harmful impact of a rising bourgeois culture (991). Citing Perry Anderson, Staten identifies the "gentrification" or "aristocratization" of the bourgeoisie, which consisted in "the slavish imitation of the landed aristocracy and its mores in the countryside or the West End of London" (qtd. in Staten 992). The novel thus details a social hierarchy still based on an aristocratic ideology "centered on the mystification of economics" (992), which can be seen in Bulstrode's eventual plans to settle in Stone Court, "withdrawing from his present exertions in the administration of business, and throwing more conspicuously on the side of Gospel truth the weight of local landed proprietorship" (*M* 322-3). In addition to cultivating his power and influence as a public figure—a businessman, religious figure, and public benefactor—Bulstrode attempts to transform his wealth into inalienable property with the purchase of Stone Court. Like Bulstrode, the Vincys, who live in an "easy profuse way," represent a bourgeois mystification of wealth (146). Mayor Vincy, a manufacturer with "expensive Middlemarch habits," also never speaks about the sources of his wealth and cultivates an appearance of having a surplus of money, so much so that his elder children possess "the infantine notion that their father might pay for anything if he would" (146) and his wife "had never been at her ease with Mrs. Garth, and frequently spoke of her as a woman who had had to work for her bread" (147). Thus, as representatives of the ascendant bourgeois, both Bulstrode and the Vincys attempt to conceal and mystify the sources of their wealth in an effort to appear more genteel.

The gifts of Featherstone, Casaubon, and Bulstrode are animated by a desire to appropriate, a desire to capitalize on and profit from giving, and, thus, continue to be

immersed in both traditional, paternalist and capitalist systems of exchange, mimicking at times the "invisible hand" and monopoly capitalism while attempting to gain power through giving. Although their strategic gifting frequently replicates a strict logic of reciprocal exchange, their gift relations are deeply embedded in social norms and obligations and are ultimately uncertain in their outcomes, as the failed legacies of Featherstone and Casaubon suggest. In her portrait of these "gifts-that-take," Eliot not only highlights the dual nature of gifts, their capacity to express generosity and assert control, but also demonstrates the complicity between political economic practice and gift exchange that emerges during the nineteenth century. In her account of the self-interested character of these gifts, one may wonder if Eliot, like Dickens, is also launching a critique of paternalistic gift relations in order to make way for an idealized version of the "pure" gift. But rather than turning to a purely disinterested image of the gift, she articulates another view of the gift, one that has the potential for immeasurable, beneficial effects even as it remains interested and socially obligated.

Currents of Generosity

Thus, another form of gift exchange emerges within the novel, one which is not dominated by classical, exchangist economic principles and which allows for a form of giving that is not continually trying to "recover its expense" (Cixous, *NBW* 87) nor calculating a profit but instead is a form of "squandering without reciprocation" (Bataille *Accursed Share* 38). As Cixous acknowledges, this alternative logic of giving often involves reciprocal relations, but a crucial difference lies in the role gifts play in forming

social bonds and the way these social relations take precedence over the rule of reciprocity.[93]

Against the dominant market economy, an economy of ardent generosity emerges as an undercurrent throughout the narrative, functioning, as Mauss once observed, "in unchanging fashion and, so to speak, hidden, below the surface" of market society (4). As opposed to the grasping and domineering gifts of Featherstone, Casaubon, and Bulstrode, which are often imbued with the language of monetary exchange even as they maintain the traditional forms of patronage, the novel figures sympathy, generosity, and gratitude as an "economy of abundance" through metaphors of flowing, of streams, rivers, wells, and currents.[94] Mary Garth, for example, possesses a "strong current of gratitude towards those who, instead of telling her that she ought to be contented, did something to make her so" (*M* 72-3), and she might "have become cynical if she had not had parents whom she honoured, and a well of affectionate gratitude within her" (197-8). Similarly, for Dorothea, the desire to do some great good "lay within that full current of sympathetic motive in which her ideas and impulses were habitually swept along" (55). By contrast, Mr. Casaubon's lack of sympathetic feeling is figured as a shallow stream: upon his marriage to Dorothea, he is "surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill" his "stream of feeling" was (40), and he possesses "that proud narrow sensitiveness which has not mass enough to spare for transformation into sympathy, and quivers thread-like in small currents of self-preoccupation or at best of an egoistic scrupulosity"

[93] Cixous clarifies the difference between "the commercial deal that always turns the gift into a gift-that-takes" and the gift that might "escape this law of return": "all the difference lies in the why and how of the gift, in the values that the gesture of giving affirms, causes to circulate; in the type of profit the giver draws from the gift and the use to which he or she puts it" (*NBW* 87).

[94] This phrase comes from Luce Irigaray, who describes women's resistance to their commodification as opening up the possibility for a "certain economy of abundance" (197).

(176). While Casaubon's failed sympathy is characterized as a scarcity, Mary's capacity for gratitude and Dorothea's generous sympathy are conveyed through metaphors of fullness and abundance.[95]

The novel further dramatizes the interaction between these two economic logics by characterizing them as existing along a continuum between egoism and altruism, with various characters personifying aspects of these forms of exchange.[96] Peter Featherstone, as his name suggests, represents the weight and impotence of hoarding. Mary Garth, however, with her capacity for satire along with her "generous resolution not to act the mean or treacherous part" (198), offers a comedic moral counterweight to Featherstone's tyranny and greed. Both Miss Noble and Will Ladislaw suggest a mythic register of the spirit of giving; Miss Noble as a Robin Hood figure with her surreptitious giving and Will as the spirit of spring with his "passionate prodigality" (225). Finally, Dorothea Brooke personifies a form of sympathetic giving whose influence is diffused throughout the narrative, while Rosamond Vincy is portrayed as an emblem of commodification. As the central figure of sympathetic giving, Dorothea's gifts of sympathy are not purely

[95] The images of flowing are some of the most frequently interpreted by scholars. According to Mark Schorer, the images of streams and currents suggest a "progressive, in no sense a cyclical view of human history" (589). While these images do seem to be "metaphors of progress," they also express Eliot's ideas about gratitude and the logic of gifts (589). Indeed, Eliot's idealization of gifts aligns with this progressive view, as gifts are frequently depicted as having a diffusive and improving effect on society.

[96] By treating its characters allegorically, as embodiments of forms of exchange, the novel seems to treat people as things. However, the novel is juxtaposing two processes of objectification. In one version, through commodity exchange, "the definite social relation between men themselves…assumes…the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 165). As Dorothy Van Ghent puts it, "[p]eople were becoming de-animate, robbed of their souls, and things…were usurping the prerogatives of animate creatures" (128). In the other version, through gift exchange, objects are anthropomorphized and linked to people. In this latter form of exchange, the animation of things suggests an affinity between people and things rather than the dehumanization of people. Hence, Eliot contrasts characters who seem most alive and lively with those who seem most dead. In addition to the "dead hand[s]" of Featherstone and Casaubon, Bulstrode is compared to a vampire: "he must have a sort of vampire's feast in the sense of mastery" (*M* 100). Further, by privileging gift exchange as an enlivening form of exchange, Eliot reverses the typical critical assessment of things, summarized by Elaine Freedgood: "the awful thing is to be like a thing; there is no sense that we might learn something important about subjects from objects" (160).

disinterested acts. While she is possessed with an ardent desire to do some good in the world, in her realization of sympathy, she struggles with both her own personal desires and the desires of the person she is helping.

The confrontation between Mary Garth and Peter Featherstone on his deathbed dramatizes the conflict between these economic orders and exemplifies the limitations of possessive individualism. It is foreshadowed by a conversation in which Mr. Featherstone admonishes Mary for giving her parents money and expresses a principle of Benthamite self-interest: "'you ought to be saving for yourself'" to which Mary responds, coldly, "'I consider my father and mother the best part of myself, sir'" (163). Mary's direct reply suggests a fellowship and sense of mutual obligation animating her relationships with others that runs counter to the isolated, self-interested subjectivity that Featherstone represents. We see this opposition more fully in Chapter 33 when Featherstone attempts and fails to bribe Mary to burn his second will. The chapter opens with a description of Mary Garth's comedic point of view: she "was fond of her own thoughts, and could amuse herself well sitting in twilight with her hands in her lap" and she "sat tonight revolving, as she was wont, the scenes of the day, her lips often curling with amusement at the oddities to which her fancy added fresh drollery."[97] Mary's droll view of life and her "generous resolution" to act no "mean or treacherous part" (198), the narrator suggests, is a consequence of a strong sense of gratitude that has been nurtured by her kind parents and childhood friendship with Fred Vincy. When Featherstone asks her to destroy the will, she responds: "'I must refuse to do anything that might lay me

[97] (197-8). Mary Garth, who "had plenty of merriment within" (198), might also be read as personifying the satiric point of view and thus as an analogue for the narrator. In her delight in the ridiculous, Mary echoes the narrator's ironic comments, frequently delivered through free-indirect discourse, on the illusions of characters like Mr. Brooke and Mr. Bulstrode.

open to suspicion'" (199). The narrative implies that her sense of integrity, which resists Featherstone's request and offer of bribery, has been fortified by the generosity of her parents and Fred.

As the scene progresses, it mingles elements of tragedy and comedy, becoming a dramatic interlude within the narrative. Featherstone's belief in his power over others through money is cast as a kind of hubris that causes him to overlook the strength of Mary's moral character. In a comic reversal of power, however, Featherstone is shaken and enfeebled by the shock of her defiance and Mary's resolve "to act no mean or treacherous *part*" becomes stronger as his demands weaken (my emphasis 198). Finally, he can only exclaim "with hoarse rage, which, as if in a nightmare, tried to be loud, and yet was only just audible" (200), and strike out at her futilely: "He lifted the stick, in spite of her being beyond his reach, and threw it with a hard effort which was but impotence" (200). From its use of melodramatic imagery—"Mary, standing by the fire, saw its red light falling on the old man" (200)—to its highly symbolic final image—"there was no longer any doubt that Peter Featherstone was dead, with his right hand clasping the keys, and his left hand lying on the heap of notes and gold" (200)—the scene has the quality of a theatrical sketch and enacts a simple fable-like moral: money is powerless in the face of true goodness and love. Mary's refusal to be bought further suggests an order of value that transcends monetary value, and, moreover, in dramatizing the confrontation between morality and greed as a confrontation between generic modes, the novel suggests an analogue between the comic mode and gift exchange.

In another allegorical treatment of gift exchange, Will Ladislaw and Miss Noble are depicted as a humorous parody of a romantic comedy. As Lydgate observes, "'[o]ne

of the old ladies—Miss Noble, the aunt—is a wonderfully quaint picture of self-forgetful goodness, and Ladislaw gallants her about sometimes. I met them one day in a back-street: you know Ladislaw's look—a sort of Daphnis in coat and waistcoat; and this little old maid reaching up to his arm—they looked like a couple dropped out of a romantic comedy'" (308). Both characters are associated with mythical elements: Will, "a sort of Daphnis," gives one the impression of "sunny brightness" and is characterized as "a bright creature, abundant in uncertain promises" who "looked like an incarnation of the spring" (293), while Miss Noble embodies the spirit of altruism in a simple "self-forgetful" way.

However, while she represents "self-forgetful goodness," Miss Noble's acts of charity involve small thefts from her own table: "tiny Miss Noble carried on her arm a small basket, into which she diverted a bit of sugar, which she had first dropped in her saucer as if by mistake; looking round furtively afterwards, and reverting to her tea-cup with a small innocent noise as of a tiny timid quadruped" (108). With her surreptitious thefts from her own share, Miss Noble functions as a whimsical comic relief. Her "beaver-like notes" and "inarticulate little sounds" are frequently treated as little more than a charming interruption in the general plot (483). But more than a "quaint picture" in the background of Middlemarch society, Miss Noble represents a version of the desire that Dorothea frequently expresses and is continually hindered from carrying out; that is, as an echo of the Robin Hood figure, Miss Noble expresses the radical desire for a redistribution of wealth that this legend suggests. In a direct address to the audience, the narrator draws attention to Miss Noble's significance:

> Pray think no ill of Miss Noble. That basket held small savings from her more portable food, destined for the children of her poor friends among whom she trotted on fine mornings; fostering and petting all needy creatures being so spontaneous a delight to her, that she regarded it much as if it had been a pleasant vice that she was addicted to. Perhaps she was conscious of being tempted to steal from those who had much that she might give to those who had nothing, and carried in her conscience the guilt of that repressed desire. One must be poor to know the luxury of giving!" (108).

It is in the narrator's conjectures at the end of this passage that the narrator points to a more subversive reading of Miss Noble. Her "guilt of that repressed desire" to steal from the rich in order to give to the poor, evocative of the Robin Hood legend, gestures towards the larger social inequalities and suggests redistribution as a possible remedy. In a typical revaluation of values that echoes Eliot's celebration of "unhistoric acts," the tiny, timid, and inarticulate Miss Noble is invested with honor. Though small and speechless, she is noble, as her name suggests; and though poor, she is able to experience the "luxury" of giving.[98] Giving, for Miss Noble, is both a "spontaneous…delight" and "a pleasant vice that she was addicted to." In this way, she merges the elements of interest and altruism.

Not only does Miss Noble hint at more radical impulses but she functions as a kind of fable of the gift. For, along with her resemblance to a "tiny, timid quadruped" (a possible nod to the beast fable), she exemplifies a moral thesis about giving and comes to

[98] Like Little Dorrit, whose diminutive name suggests her capacity for altruism, Miss Noble signals a return of the noble gift but without the hierarchical character of aristocratic patronage.

echo, in her role in the romantic plot, the movement of the gift. As if stating the moral in epigrammatic fashion, the narrator in the passage above observes that "[o]ne must be poor to know the luxury of giving!" (108). Against the images of acquisitive gifting, Miss Noble signifies a form of giving that is not concerned with profit, but instead views giving as a luxury and indulgence to oneself. In this way, Eliot suggests that the true "luxury" of giving is not the complacent gifts of the wealthy to the poor, but rather the delight in giving from "small savings" (108).

And although she might first appear as little more than a quaint interruption in the broader narrative, Miss Noble, ironically, comes to play a significant role in the romantic plot between Dorothea and Will, acting as a romantic envoy:

> The little old lady, whose bonnet hardly reached Dorothea's shoulder, was warmly welcomed, but while her hand was being pressed she made many of her beaver-like noises, as if she had something difficult to say….She lapsed into her inarticulate sounds, and unconsciously drew forth the article which she was fingering. It was the tortoise-shell lozenge-box, and Dorothea felt the colour mounting to her cheeks. "Mr Ladislaw," continued the timid little woman. "He fears he has offended you, and has begged me to ask if you will see him for a few minutes." (496)

For a scene in which little is said and done, quite a bit is conveyed through gesture, expression, and objects. This scene thus attests to the symbolic power of gifts, for in unconsciously drawing forth the tortoise-shell lozenge-box, Miss Noble "speaks" the emotions that are "difficult to say." Through this gesture, Miss Noble transfers the

original significance to Dorothea, asking her to recall Will's capacity for sympathy and generosity. Although originally a symbol of Will's generosity to Miss Noble, the box takes on new meaning for Dorothea as it signifies Will and his love, signaled by the "colour to mounting to her cheeks." The scene further illustrates the way that characters imbue objects with meaning and memories and, as Cherry Wilhelm has observed, the way that objects mirror subtle changes of consciousness (603). So while objects serve as symbols of the internal lives of characters, Eliot's characters demonstrate a different relation to the objects they give. In this scene, the sharing of the lozenge box exemplifies the way objects are imbued with meaning through exchange, becoming, as Weiner has suggested, "symbolic repositories of genealogies and historical events" (33). In Eliot's portrait, however, the objects are endowed not only with "genealogies and historical events," but also with personal meaning and memories. As the objects are imbued with unique, subjective meaning, they constitute an alternative system of value. According to Weiner, the process of attributing subjective value to objects, "gives them absolute value placing them above the exchangeability of one thing for another"(33). In this regard, as repositories of memories and social relations, gifts defy market equivalency.

Thus, this scene captures Eliot's efforts to represent an alternative, particularizing relation to objects, which she contrasts with the commodification of things. As Elaine Freedgood has observed, "the abstraction of the commodity into a money value, the spectacularization of the consumer good, the alienation of things from their human and geographical origins" were "not the only ways of imagining the things of that crowded world" (7-8). Indeed, Freedgood suggests that commodity culture "was preceded by…Victorian 'thing culture': a more extravagant form of object relations than ours, one

in which systems of value were not quarantined from one another and ideas of interest and meaning were perhaps far less restricted than they are for us" (8). I contend that Eliot's novel continues to participate in this "extravagant" culture of things, in its preoccupation with the way that people creatively reconfigure the meaning of things. While Freedgood suggests that the process of animating objects within a "system of private value….is left unconstructed in the novel" (130), I argue that it is very much a part of *Middlemarch*, most conspicuously in the novel's representation of gift exchange. It is precisely through personalized gift exchanges that Eliot seeks to reconfigure meaning and, in doing so, elevate objects and the social relations they materialize above exchange value.

Eliot dramatizes this process of signification in Dorothea's relationship to the miniature of Aunt Julia, an heirloom that decorates the blue-green boudoir Dorothea is given to use as a sitting room. When Dorothea returns from her "wedding journey," her changing view of her position as a married woman merges with her survey of her sitting room and the view from her window: "[t]he duties of her married life, contemplated as so great beforehand, seemed to be shrinking with the furniture and the white vapour-walled landscape" (173). Her disillusionment and realization of the "gentlewoman's oppressive liberty" is mirrored in the unreality of the landscape and the room: she "stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colourless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never-read books, and the ghostly stag in a pale fantastic world that seemed to be vanishing from the daylight" (173). In this scene, the objects serve to mirror Dorothea's internal disenchantment and oppression.

However, as Dorothea sits looking about herself, an object in the room seems to take on its own life, to be animated by a history that is separate from Dorothea's internal struggle but which she interprets as significant:

> her wandering gaze came to the group of miniatures, and there at last she saw something which had gathered new breath and meaning: it was the miniature of Mr Casaubon's aunt Julia, who had made the unfortunate marriage—of Will Ladislaw's grandmother. Dorothea could fancy that it was alive now—the delicate woman's face which yet had a headstrong look, a peculiarity difficult to interpret….What breadths of experience Dorothea seemed to have passed over since she first looked at this miniature! She felt a new companionship with it, as if it had an ear for her and could see how she was looking at it. Here was a woman who had known some difficulty about marriage. (173)

As she looks at the group of miniatures, the miniature of Julia comes alive; it "gathered new breath and meaning" and she "could fancy that it was alive now." As Dorothea continues to personify the object, she begins to feel "a new companionship with it" (174); it begins to take on a double resonance, signifying a headstrong woman who resisted the dictates of convention by marrying for love as well as Will Ladislaw himself, whose image—"vivid presentation"—"came like a pleasant glow to Dorothea" (174). Thus, this scene serves to dramatize the creative appropriation of gifted objects, in which, as Katherine Dunagan Osborne has argued, the heirloom comes to signify "new affective ties" and personal meaning rather than traditional bloodlines (467). In this moment, too, Dorothea reconfigures the genealogical significance of the heirloom, substituting her own

lineage of defiant women and foreshadowing, as she felt "a new companionship with it," her own place in this history.

The final current of generosity that I consider is also an aspect of a character endowed with allegorical significance. Dorothea Brooke, with her "fountain of friendship towards men" and her "full current of sympathetic motive" (474, 55), embodies Eliot's ethic of sympathy and conception of sympathy as a gift. While Dorothea's first name signals a sacred gift, her last name signals Eliot's central image of diffusion, the brook. Through the depiction of Dorothea's struggles to find an outlet for her ardent sympathies and desire to do some good in the world, Eliot engages both with the ideological construction of selfless female altruism—the wife as gift and selfless giver—and the complacent character of Victorian philanthropy. Thus, by illustrating Dorothea's struggle with and final abandonment of the dominant models of Victorian womanhood, Eliot revalues the selfless gift as an incalculably diffusive gift and rewrites the dominant images of giving women available to Victorian women and Eliot's readers: the selfless domestic woman and the lady philanthropist.

As I have discussed above, Dorothea's gradual disillusionment with her marriage signals a rejection of the conception of woman as a gift. Originally committed to the view that in marriage she must selflessly devote herself to her husband, Dorothea eventually casts off the oppressive pall Casaubon lays over her when she realizes with a "violent shock of repulsion from her departed husband" how he had "pervert[ed] everything she said and did" (305). Through this "metamorphosis" and "state of convulsive change" (304, 305), Dorothea rejects the idealized image of woman as selfless

and self-denying. Thus, by showing the devastating effects entailed in the denial of the self, Eliot challenges the ideology of altruistic femininity.

Similarly, Dorothea's struggle with philanthropy signals another critical engagement with Victorian ideas of the gift. As we have seen, Dorothea, whose heart "had always been giving out ardour" (141), struggles to find an outlet for her altruism, and thus represents the historical problem of how to give effectively. Early in the novel, Dorothea grapples with the question of vocation as it was framed for women of the middle and upper classes:

> What could she do? What ought she to do? [….] With some endowment of stupidity and conceit, she might have thought that a Christian young lady of fortune should find her ideal of life in village charities, patronage of the humbler clergy, the perusal of 'Female Scripture Characters', unfolding the private experience of Sara under the Old Dispensation, and Dorcas under the New, and the care of her soul over her embroidery in her own boudoir—with a background of prospective marriage to a man who, if less strict than herself, as being involved in affairs religiously inexplicable, might be prayed for and seasonably exhorted. From such contentment poor Dorothea was shut out. (19)

As a "young lady of fortune," Dorothea appears to be ideal for the role of philanthropic lady. As F. K. Prochaska describes it, "[p]hilanthropy was the vocation that most often sprang to mind. Throughout the nineteenth century it was seen as the leisured woman's most obvious outlet for self-expression" (5). Given Dorothea's altruistic energy, one might suppose that this model of femininity would suit her. But this tableau of the

philanthropic lady suggests that the vocation of the "leisured woman" proves inadequate for Dorothea, for she remains "shut out" from this form of contentment. Indeed, this passage seems to satirize the conventions of philanthropic literature and its philanthropic heroine, whose practice of perusing the Bible seems simply a self-serving habit.[99] In this version, localized charity work is depicted as an empty act that actually serves the philanthropist's own vanity. Such work is insufficient for Dorothea, who possesses "a nature altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent" and which struggles within "the bands of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses" (*M* 19). Not only does she seek a more practical outlet for her ambition, but she is also sensitive to the self-serving consequences of philanthropic work.

This problem of effective, unselfish giving constituted a central debate within Victorian discussions of philanthropy. This "midcentury crisis of philanthropy" was motivated by what Daniel Siegel refers to as the Lady Bountiful problem (167, 158); that is, the growing suspicion that the primary consequence of such work was not so much an improvement in the lives of the poor but the "glow of benevolent patronage" experienced by the wealthy philanthropist (qtd in Siegel 159). Oddly, the character in *Middlemarch* who most closely resembles the Lady Bountiful figure is not Dorothea but Mr. Brooke, who "sincerely believed" that the interests of the country "could be secured by his own return to Parliament: he offered the forces of his mind honestly to the nation" (*M* 302). As readers have become familiar by this point with the quality of those "forces of his

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[99] As Prochaska points out, the "perusal of 'Female Scripture Characters,'" was a common convention in the literature of philanthropy: "nineteenth-century writers ransacked the Testaments for insights into female character and used biblical women to illustrate important principles of sacred authority" (16). For a comprehensive historical analysis of women's changing role in philanthropic social work, see Dorice Williams Elliot's *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* in which she argues that Dorothea Brooke aspires but ultimately fails to become a philanthropic heroine.

mind," the text emphasizes the irony of Mr. Brooke's gift. Although she continues throughout the narrative to engage in "little errands of…charity such as occur to every lady of any wealth" (267), Dorothea, by contrast, strives for "some active good" and is frustrated by the social distance that is reinforced by wealthy patronage, lamenting that "everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know" (469, 19). Throughout the narrative, she is "not at ease in the perspective and chilliness of [the country gentry's social] height" and realizes that to do some good in the world she cannot simply "look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator" (203, 486). In the end, Dorothea's charitable efforts are largely frustrated. Eliot seems to suggest, then, that is it is only by overcoming social differences and approaching others on equal footing, that one can do "some active good" (469).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, in an effort to counteract the complacency associated with philanthropic work, both liberal and conservatives attempted to reform charity, a trend that was signaled by the formation of the Charity Organization Society (C.O.S.) in 1869 and is echoed within the novel in Dorothea's desire to bridge the social distance between herself and the poor and Mr. Garth's certainty that the building of "a great many good cottages" is work "of a healthy kind" that makes men "the better for it" (*M* 341). The novel's depiction of the difficulties besetting Dorothea and Mr. Garth and their emphasis on the need for charity to be effective echo contemporary discussions of charity reform, particularly, as Dorice Williams Elliott points out, Octavia Hill's efforts to build adequate housing for the poor (190).

Daniel Siegel identifies yet another response to perceptions of failed charity, "one typically associated with liberal guilt, [which] kept the feelings of the giver very much in the equation: charity needed to involve some kind of palpable sacrifice or compromise on the part of the one who gave" (159). Over the course of the nineteenth century, the enactment of loss becomes essential to acts of charity and can be seen as yet another permutation of the ideology of the altruistic gift. By dramatically giving up wealth, individuals demonstrate their lack of self-interestedness. Given its engagement with Victorian charity, it is not surprising that *Middlemarch* takes up and dramatizes this historical shift in its emphasis on loss as a defining marker of moral character. Beyond charitable deeds, the novel presents the process of giving up, the act of sacrificing one's economic self-interest, as an index of moral worth. This "drama of release," to borrow Siegel's phrase, is demonstrated by a series of renunciations in which characters refuse money they perceive as morally tainted: from Mary's rejection of Featherstone's bribe and Caleb's decision to turn down work for Bulstrode to Will and Dorothea's refusals of inheritance. As Caleb Garth explains to Bulstrode, "'I can't be happy in working with you, or profiting by you. It hurts my mind. I must beg you to seek another agent'" (429). Paradoxically, in giving up wealth, each character gains moral virtue.[100] In this way, the novel repeats the denial of self-interest that characterized Victorian conceptions of giving.

After her philanthropic plans are frustrated and reduced by patriarchal authority "in the shape of uncles" (3), Dorothea reformulates the question of vocation, this time

[100] Siegel points out that "[t]he idea that loss is a kind of mirror image of gain—that it is largely by giving up that individual persons construct their moral character, for better and for worse—is an idea especially resonant in the 1860s and 1870s, after the early Victorian faith in voluntary philanthropy had begun to slip, but before the socialist discourse branding charity a useless palliative had substantially taken hold" (172).

phrasing it in personal terms: "What should I do – how should I act now, this very day, if I could clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence, and think of those three?" (486). In arriving at this question, Dorothea struggles to quell her own grief in order to sympathize with and help others. Ultimately, Dorothea's inability to "clutch [her] own pain, and compel it to silence" in the meeting with Rosamond suggests an important counter to the "drama of release," for, instead of selfless altruism, or the enactment of loss, this scene depicts a mutual exchange of sympathies, a reciprocal recognition of suffering that ultimately benefits both women.

As the emotional climax of the novel, chapter 81 was written, Eliot claimed, "in one impulse with scarcely any revision" (Wilhelm 603). In this scene, Dorothea visits Rosamond to vindicate Lydgate and give Rosamond some peace of mind. As in the confrontation between Mary Garth and Mr. Featherstone, Dorothea's capacity for generous sympathy is set against Rosamond's commodified and isolated subjectivity. In this way, the two characters personify competing economic logics. In contrast to Dorothea's "impetuous generosity" (452), Rosamond is characterized by a self-centered, consumerist mentality. As if she were yet another ornament among the material goods with which she surrounds herself, Rosamond signals the autonomous logic of commodity exchange. According to Andrew Miller, Rosamond is the character "most fully associated with commodified goods" (197). Indeed, as Mr. Farebrother observes, she always seemed to be "a little too much the pattern-card of the finishing-school" (*M* 396).

In the character of Rosamond, Eliot dramatizes the way the egoism of market relations enters domestic relations, for Rosamond's failure to sympathize with others is associated with the tendency to treat others as objects: "[Rosamond] knew that Will had

received a severe blow, but she had been little used to imagining other people's states of mind except as a material cut into shape by her own wishes" (479). The use of the shopping metaphor to characterize Rosamond's limited imagination (and thus incapacity for sympathy) suggests a portrait of the isolated, consumerist subjectivity. As a commodified object, she can only relate to others as objects, as "material cut into shape by her own wishes." In this way, Rosamond's relations with others, as Marx famously suggested, assume "the fantastic form of a relation between things" and thus echoes the process of commodity fetishism (165). This passage suggests further that Rosamond's commodified subjectivity is responsible for her inability to conceive of other people's interior states, for her failed sympathy. When Lydgate confesses their debt, Rosamond thinks only of herself, "as if it were hers alone. He was always to her a being apart" (*M* 467-8). Seeking to clear herself of blame, she returns her husband's wedding gifts and thus severs the emotional ties between them: Lydgate "despairs at the distance she places between them" and "his dark eyes had a miserable blank non-expectance of sympathy" (369, 406). As an instance of alienated subjectivity, it is not surprising that Rosamond rejects Lydgate's gifts and the personal ties they embody. Equally telling, Rosamond fails to acknowledge Miss Noble: "[Mr. Farebrother's] mother could not forgive Rosamond because she never seemed to see that Henrietta Noble was in the room" (396). Thus, as personifications of diverging economic orders, Dorothea and Rosamond present an allegory of the interaction between the commodity and the gift economy.

As Rosamond prepares to meet Dorothea, the narrator emphasizes the parallels between Rosamond's interiority and her material possessions: "Rosamond, wrapping her soft shawl around her as she walked towards Dorothea, was inwardly wrapping her soul

in cold reserve" (488). Thus, in keeping with liberal ideas of personal autonomy and self-possession, Rosamond meets Dorothea with her "own prepossessions" and a "polite impassibility" (488). But Dorothea's own open and gentle greeting immediately begins to break through Rosamond's "cold reserve," for upon entering Dorothea removes her gloves and greets Rosamond with her "face full of a sad yet sweet openness," clasping Rosamond's hand "with gentle motherliness" (488). In this brief moment, the women's gestures and facial expressions register an unfolding emotional narrative; Dorothea's removal of her gloves, along with her motherly clasp and open expression, suggest her openness and sympathy for Rosamond, and this act of removing physical barriers serves to melt the emotional distance between the women, for Rosamond, whose "eye was quick for faces," gains an impression of Dorothea's state of mind that was "quite different from what she imagined" (488). In contrast to Rosamond's usual act of reading superficial social markers, this act of reading Dorothea's physical cues as signs of her emotional state allows Rosamond to begin to extend her imagination, first to doubt "her own prepossessions" (488), then to experience "shrinking fears" and a "new ease of her soul" (489), and finally to experience a shattering of "her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others" (490). Thus, in its capacity to shatter Rosamond's "dream-world," Dorothea's gift of sympathy overmasters the recipient as well as the giver.

As the scene unfolds, we see that the catalyst for Rosamond's gradual internal transformation is an emotional transfer from Dorothea: "[t]he cordial, pleading tones which seemed to flow with generous heedlessness above all the facts which had filled Rosamond's mind as grounds of obstruction and hatred between her and this woman,

came as soothingly as a warm stream over her shrinking fears" (489). Significantly, the "generous heedlessness" of Dorothea's emotions is figured as water imagery: rather than being a gift that harms, it flows "soothingly as a warm stream." This emotional transfer—Dorothea's gift of feeling—brings on a "newer crisis in Rosamond's experience" and allows Rosamond to recognize and finally sympathize with Dorothea's own suffering (490). Rosamond's awakening to sympathy is signaled by her gradual "sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken in upon her" (490). Her emotional transformation is finally realized through Dorothea's "strange unexpected manifestation of feeling," that is, through Dorothea's gift of sympathy (490). Incidentally, what enables Dorothea to sympathize with Rosamond is her ability to imaginatively identify with Rosamond's trouble: she "forgot everything but that she was speaking from out of the heart of her own trial to Rosamond's" (489). Rather than the disinterested sympathy of Smith's model, Dorothea's sympathy entails her own personal interest. In fact, it is her "own trial" and emotions that enable her to connect with Rosamond's trouble.

In this moment of sympathetic exchange, the emotions that are transferred between the women become personified: "The emotion had wrought itself more and more into her utterance, till the tones might have gone to one's very marrow, like a low cry from some suffering creature in the darkness. And she had unconsciously laid her hand again on the little hand that she had pressed before" (490). Through its grammatical personification in this sentence, emotion seems to become a living thing overpowering both women and is materialized in Dorothea's act of laying her hand on Rosamond's hand. Although heedless of a return, Dorothea's sympathy compels a reciprocal return

from Rosamond: "Rosamond, taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own—hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect—could find no words, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea's forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck" (491). As it overwhelms and carries Rosamond along, emotion is again figured as an active force that seems to have a life of its own. As a current that has become a sea, the emotion notably sweeps over both women, so that they embrace "as if they had been in a shipwreck." The metaphorical matrix that Eliot uses to figure the flow of sympathy—as a current and a sea—is mirrored in Cixous's characterization of the infinite and permeable self that is written into being by the feminine economy of giving.[101]

As a dramatization of sympathy as a gift, this scene suggests a vision of sympathy that is distinct from the Smithian notion of sympathetic spectatorship in which the subject maintains a coherent and independent self. Here, instead, the self is permeable and intersubjective. The flow of generous sympathy, like that of a wave, is also spontaneous, powerful, and incalculable. Though "taken hold of" and "hurried along" by the force of Dorothea's emotion, Rosamond is soothed and strengthened, inspired finally to return

[101] The parallels between Eliot's and Cixous's use of water imagery to characterize the gift are striking. In her discussion of the infinite giving self, Cixous echoes Eliot's description of Dorothea's impetuous emotional outpouring in her comparison of the giving self to a tumultuous, ever-changing sea: "[u]nleashed and raging, she belongs to the race of waves. She arises, she approaches, she lifts up, she reaches, covers over, washes a shore, flows embracing the cliff's least undulation, already she is another, arising again, throwing the fringed vastness of her body up high, follows herself, and covers over, uncovers, polishes, makes the stone body shine with the gentle undeserting ebbs, which return to the shoreless nonorigin, as if she recalled herself in order to come again as never before" (*NBW* 90-1). And this sea is contrasted with the narrow female self that is envisioned by the masculine order: "So! Now she's her sea, he'll say to me (as he holds out to me his basin full of water from the little phallic mother he doesn't succeed in separating himself from). Seas and mothers" (88). The oppressive, limited nature of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon is characterized in similar terms: "[h]aving once embarked on your marital voyage, it is impossible not to be aware that you make no way and the sea is not within sight—that, in fact, you are exploring a close basin" (*M* 125).

those feelings, to clasp and kiss Dorothea, and acknowledge the truth about her relationship with Will: "'You are thinking what is not true' said Rosamond, in an eager half-whisper, while she was still feeling Dorothea's arms round her….'He has never had any love for me—I know he has not—he has always thought slightly of me. He said yesterday that no other woman existed for him beside you'" (491). In this scene, the exchange of sympathy is characterized as a mutual overflow of emotions, which, as it culminates in a passionate embrace, resembles an erotic exchange.[102] Furthermore, as the women embrace, Rosamond is drawn, if only for a moment, out of her selfish narcissism and is able to perceive and soothe Dorothea's own sorrows. Through its narration of the powerful exchange of emotional currents between the women, this scene allegorizes the gift of sympathy as it overcomes the independent and self-interested subject of political economy. This scene thus enacts the inter-subjective self and incalculable emotional values generated through gift exchange and celebrates an economy of abundance that resists the quantifying logic of the utilitarian economy.

Eliot's Novel Gifts: Manifold Selves and "Incalculably Diffusive" Effects

In figuring sympathy as a gift exchange, Eliot establishes an alternate order of value upon which to view her novels, an order that is based on an economy of abundance. Mary Poovey has recently considered the way imaginative artists, novelists and poets alike, addressed the question of literary value, arguing that midcentury novelists in particular sought to demarcate literary value by establishing literariness as a formal elevation of values that are "no longer jeopardized by the values associated with money" (*Genres of the Credit Economy* 382). She takes up *Silas Marner* as "a particularly clear

[102] For a fuller analysis of the homoerotic tone of this scene, see Sharon Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, pp. 73-81.

example of the way that midcentury novelists subjected economic matters—in this case, the monetary value of gold—to the alchemy of a moral lesson by emphasizing the connotative capacity of language—that is, the elevation of figuration and suggestion over denotation and reference" (383). In this move, writers suggest that "metaphor trumps such literalness" (383). As in *Silas Marner*, *Middlemarch* transforms monetary tropes into forms of transcendent value, but I would add that most often this use of metaphor takes the form of a gift exchange and is characterized by metaphors of excess.[103] In an effort not just to privilege metaphorical meaning over denotation, *Middlemarch* suggests that social relations are subject to new configurations, for monetary relations can become gift relations. For example, when Caleb Garth must ask to borrow money from his daughter Mary, remarking sadly, "'it's hard to run away with your earnings, child,'" she replies, "in her deepest tone of remonstrance. 'Take pocketfuls of love besides to them all at home'" (163). In giving the money along with "pocketfuls of love," Mary suggests that the abundant, limitless character of love takes precedence over the limited, exactly reckoned money. In doing so, she insists that her relation with her family is something more than a calculating monetary relation. Further, by emphasizing the metaphorical value of love, Mary's comment endows the gift of money itself with metaphorical significance as a sign of her love. In giving more, in embracing an excess that supersedes the finite character of money, she implies that affective values are capable of exceeding and redefining monetary value.

[103] Both of the texts Poovey examines, *Silas Marner* and *Our Mutual Friend*, support this claim. Because he views Eppie as a gift that restores him to humanity, Silas begins to relate to others through gift exchange rather than cash transactions. Similarly, the generosity of the Boffins transforms Bella Wilfer into the ideal, and grateful, domestic woman.

By drawing out the way relationships are underwritten by gift exchange, Eliot suggests that novels offer a more complex and valuable vision of human relations than that offered by the cash-nexus. And by figuring sympathy as a gift, which is given away both freely and dutifully and which constitutes an economy of abundance, Eliot endeavors to establish her fiction as a source of transcendent value and, therefore, as itself a gift. The production of an art capable of enlarging the sympathies of readers—as a performative experience of sympathy in which readers extend their contact with and sympathy for others—enables Eliot to portray her novels as offering the "gift of transferred life, " an "enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the life of others" (*Mill on the Floss* 435). As the mocking reference to the *Keepsake*—"'I wonder which would turn out to be the silliest—the engravings or the writing here,' said Lydgate, in his most convinced tone, while he turned over the pages quickly" (171)—and its function as a symbol of Rosamond's concern for fashion suggests, Eliot viewed some books as more commodified than others. In referencing another type of book presented as a gift, Eliot attempts to distinguish her literary gifts from the more commercialized gift books. Eliot presents her novels as capable of extending readers' understanding and sympathies, that is, as capable of producing an inward, moral experience while suggesting that fashionable books like the *Keepsake* serve as mere adornment for readers, producing only an outward, superficial experience. She thus equates literariness with a notion of the invaluable, diffusive gift.

Like Dickens's, Eliot's elevation of literary gifts draws attention to the extent to which literary labor was a contested site, as Mary Poovey puts it, "at the heart of the mushrooming capitalist economy" (*Uneven Developments* 14). According to Poovey,

nineteenth-century writers (and literary critics since) cultivated a sense of the writers' immunity from market relations, a move that simultaneously obscured and revealed their involvement in the market: "because of received (and recently elaborated) associations between writing and the expression of wisdom or even 'genius', the literary man seemed immune to market relations; telling universal truths, he was—or should have been—superior to fluctuations in taste or price" (14). Although Poovey focused her observations on the construction of the "literary man," her insights are applicable to a "literary woman" like Eliot, for Eliot's investment in gifts reveals her own attempts to negotiate her place as a writer within an increasingly secular, capitalist society (102). Like Dickens, Eliot sought to establish the writer as immune from market conditions, replacing the capital relations of production with an involvement in a different economy, the economy of the gift. As an art capable of extending the sympathies of readers, Eliot's novels offered a social benefit that resisted and exceeded market calculation.

In *Middlemarch*, representations of "nonalienated labor" as gifts (14)—Dorothea's gifts of sympathy, Caleb Garth's praise of farming as "'a great gift of God'" (*M* 251), and Eliot's own literary labors incarnated in the narrator's cultivation of sympathy—serve to reinforce a set of values capable of transcending the market. The cultivation of the literary man and woman thus ushered in a new form of inalienability; the inalienable ideas of the writer, ideas that were produced, ironically, through a commercial process, replace the inheritance of the older, aristocratic order. In this way, middle-class writers substituted literary inheritance for aristocratic inheritance. In conceiving narrative as a sympathetic gift, Eliot attempts to distinguish her literary work from commercialized forms of writing and thereby symbolically resolve the contradiction

experienced by all writers, between their efforts to offer a social and moral benefit to the public and their complicity with commodity production.

Eliot's reliance on gift exchange as the basis for her art draws further attention to the fraught place of the writer in a capitalist society, raising questions about the writer's relationship to the market. One might ask, then, does Eliot, in representing personal gift relations as a form of exchange that contests dominant market forms of exchange, inadvertently legitimize the capitalist market and class relations by reinforcing the "illusion of an alternative to competition" (Poovey, *Uneven Developments* 10)? At first glance, the answer seems to be 'yes,' for, in its emphasis on the morality of personal gift relations, *Middlemarch* might appear to depoliticize and relegate virtue to the domestic sphere. But Eliot's representations of alternative forms of subjectivity and alternative social relations are not immune from personal interests and desires but in fact are deeply immersed in personal and social obligations. The exchange of sympathy in *Middlemarch* is far from disinterested; in its capacity to overwhelm the recipient, it appears as a form of domination. As the model for her art, then, Eliot's conception of the gift is not purely altruistic. In this way, the incalculably diffusive gifts Eliot celebrates constitute a counter-narrative that exposes the limits of liberal, capitalist ideology. Moreover, with Dorothea, whose "impetuous generosity" proves to be antithetical to political economy (*M* 453) and who foregoes available models of feminine giving (such as the self-denying wife and the philanthropic lady), *Middlemarch* interrogates the very "domesticated, feminized morality" that was "crucial to the consolidation of bourgeois power" (Poovey, *Uneven Developments* 10). While Dorothea starts out as an incarnation of the domestic

ideal, she ultimately embraces an abundant, prodigious economy of giving that does not dehumanize the self or others.

Eliot rests her notion of sympathy and giving, finally, on a generalized sense of social responsibility, which she opposes to the individualism of liberal discourse. *Middlemarch* works to expose the illusion of individualism in its treatment of the naiveté of characters like Lydgate who believe that they can adhere to an independent course of action and remain immune from outside influence. As the narrator observes, "there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (514). In *Middlemarch* this interdependence is figured as a kind of universalized gift relation. Mr. Farebrother, for instance, articulates this sense of fellowship as a general feeling of gratitude to everyone: "'I don't enter into some people's dislike of being under an obligation: upon my word, I prefer being under an obligation to everybody for behaving well to me'" (399). Similarly, Caleb Garth suggests that the older generation is obligated to help the young: "'Yes, my boy, you have a claim,' said Caleb, with much feeling in his voice. 'The young ones have always a claim on the old to help them forward. I was young myself once and had to do without much help; but help would have been welcome to me, if it had been only for the fellow-feeling's sake'" (348). And when Dorothea has her central epiphany, the vision and feeling of "the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour," she realizes that she "was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining" (486). Rather than adopting the role of the disinterested spectator, Dorothea realizes that she is a part of the lives of others. By introducing a sense of

universal obligation, Eliot privileges a view of the self as manifold and interdependent rather than narrowly self-interested and independent.

In this way, Eliot anticipates the moral conclusions Marcel Mauss proposes in his analysis of gift exchange. For, like Eliot, Mauss argues that daily life "is still not wholly categorized in terms of buying and selling," that, in fact, it is "still permeated with this same atmosphere of the gift, where obligation and liberty intermingle" (65). In place of a "constant, icy, utilitarian calculation" in dealing with one another, he urges us to adopt "as the principle of our life what has always been a principle of action and will always be so: to emerge from self, to give, freely and obligatorily" (76, 71). For Mauss, this principle is realized in the form of social welfare programs, which recognize a debt to those who give their life and labor to society (67-9). In a similar way, Eliot generalizes the freely- and obligatorily-given gift, though without advocating a particular social program, in her closing to *Middlemarch*: "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs" (515). Like Mauss, Eliot urges a recognition of the hidden labors of "insignificant people" (515), and, especially, women like Dorothea who have an "incalculably diffusive" effect on those around her (515). In this regard, she illuminates the hidden history of women, who have been excluded from traditional realms of power.

Finally, by gesturing toward "the lives of many Dorotheas" (515), the Finale generalizes Dorothea's story, suggesting that the novel is not simply a history of Miss Brooke as a social type, like a St. Theresa or an Antigone, it is also a history of the gift. As a current within a society dominated by capitalist exchange, the gift, like Dorothea,

"has still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible" (515). In this way, Eliot goes beyond a commentary on gender roles and extends her vision to the wider society. While she seems to be advocating, like Mauss, that we make a general rule of Farebrother's sense of "being under an obligation to everybody" (399), Eliot is also pointing out that this movement of the gift exists already and remains hidden from official history, which registers only those narratives that conform to liberal paradigms of exchange and giving. Just as Dorothea's own history and second marriage is regarded as a form of squandering, "as a mistake" within the "tradition concerning it in Middlemarch" (514), the movement of the gift is "unhistoric" and diffusive, "like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth" (515). Although viewed as an unproductive expenditure from a utilitarian point of view, the gift, like Dorothea, nevertheless has an "incalculably diffusive" effect on those around it; rather than spending itself fruitlessly, the gift is responsible for the "growing good of the world" (515).

CHAPTER V

SOME MORAL AND ECONOMIC CONCLUSIONS

> This is what I call cultural capitalism at its purest. You don't just buy a coffee, you buy—in the very consumerist act—you buy your redemption from being only a consumer…. It's not just buying a cup of coffee; at the same time, you fulfill a series of ethical duties. This logic is today almost universalized ….My point is that this very interesting short circuit where the, as it were, act of egotist consumption already includes the price of its opposite. Based against this, I think we should return to good old Oscar Wilde, who still provided the best formulation against this logic of charity.
>
> —Slavoj Žižek

On the Political Economy of the Gift

In his commentary on the way consumerism now incorporates charity, Slavoj Žižek points to a development that I have been tracing throughout this dissertation and that can be observed in nascent form in the popular gift book fad of the nineteenth-century. Capitalism, by his account, now comprehends its opposite; the market has capitalized on the gift. Before the emergence of post-modern cultural capitalism, he suggests, there was a simple moral opposition between exchange and philanthropy, but now "the tendency is to bring the two dimensions together in one and the same gesture."[104] Through this paradoxical merger, then, acts of charitable consumerism end up reinforcing egoistic consumption. In a similar way, the various developments within nineteenth-century gift culture that I have been following—idealized images of altruistic femininity and efforts to organize charitable giving—end up perpetuating the ideological preconditions of market exchange. In this conclusion, I would like to take up Žižek's

[104] While Žižek seeks to explain why "charity is no longer the idiosyncrasy of some good guys but the basic constituent of our economy," I have been arguing throughout that even the simple moral opposition between exchange and philanthropy served an ideological function which reinforces market behavior.

suggestion that we "return to good old Oscar Wilde" in order to analyze the attitudes towards gifting that were in play at the end of the nineteenth century and to suggest that Wilde's critique of charitable giving highlights the way gift practices, rather than being marginalized in the face of capitalist forms of exchange, were often appropriated and reshaped within a highly commercial and industrialized society, and thus served a central cultural and economic function.

It was in his 1891 essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism," published in the *Fortnightly Review*, that Oscar Wilde set out his "formulation against this logic of charity." With his characteristic wit and provocative reversals, Wilde presents a critique of charity, arguing that the "altruistic virtues," while admirable, actually neglect to address the causes of poverty. As he puts it, those who turn to charity to remedy the evils of poverty end up prolonging the disease they seek to cure; "indeed, their remedies are part of the disease" (231). He argues that because altruism actually reinforces the system of private property, which produces extreme economic inequality in the first place, it "is not a solution: it is an aggravation of the difficulty" (232). The real solution, for Wilde, then, is "to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible" (232). With this critique of altruism and call for socialism, Wilde offers his provocative spin on contemporary socialist critiques of philanthropy.[105]

[105] Wilde's essay was likely inspired by a series of essays published in the December 1890 edition of *Nineteenth Century* entitled "Irresponsible Wealth," which were responding to the essay "The Gospel of Wealth" by American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie (Guy "Commentary" 554). And, as Josephine Guy has shown, far from being original, Wilde was drawing on arguments already in circulation. In fact, Guy points out, a similar argument had been made in 1889 by Grant Allen, who, in his "Individualism and Socialism," had attempted to combine "Individualist anti-statism with a Socialist critique of private property" ("A (Con) extual History" 77-8). Wilde's essay echoes Rev. Hugh Price Hughes as well, who claims in "Irresponsible Wealth" that a society which produces excessive wealth and extreme poverty is itself unchristian: "I am bound to say that an American millionaire ironmaster, the artificial product of such measures as the McKinley Bill, is a far greater 'demoralising power.' In a really Christian country—that is to say, in a community reconstructed upon a Christian basis—a millionaire would be an economic impossibility" (891). In addition, in his 1892 preface to *The Condition of the Working Class in England*,

Wilde supports his radical proposal by upending many of the typical arguments calling for charity reform. That is, he echoes and reverses the criticism of indiscriminate almsgiving that prompted the Poor Law Act of 1834 and the formation of charity organizations during the 1860s. As I have discussed, contemporary arguments about charity tended to view charity as demoralizing to the poor and thus proposed reforms that would curb indiscriminate almsgiving and systematize the dispersal of aid. However, in his critique of charity, Wilde argues that the problem with charity is not that it gives aid to the "undeserving poor" but that it perpetuates the inequalities produced by the system of private property.[106] He observes that those "who have really studied the problem and know the life" have been imploring "the community to restrain its altruistic impulses of charity…on the grounds that such charity degrades and demoralizes. They are perfectly right" (232). Wilde appears at first to reiterate well-known arguments about charity as demoralizing, but he quickly reverses those arguments to suggest that what makes charity immoral is the way in which it reinforces the system of private property: "Charity creates a multitude of sins….It is immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property" (232). In a similar way, Wilde takes up and reverses Victorian stereotypes about the morality of the poor as well: "[s]ometimes the poor are praised for being thrifty. But to recommend thrift to the poor

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Friedrich Engels echoes Wilde's view of philanthropy as part of the disease of poverty when he remarks that in response to the increase of trade unionism, a "new spirit came over the masters" (314), in which "[t]he largest manufacturers, formerly the leaders of the war against the working class, were now the foremost to preach peace and harmony" because, he observes, "[t]he fact is that all these concessions to justice and philanthropy were nothing else but means to accelerate the concentration of capital in the hands of the few" (314). Thus, for many socialist thinkers, charity was seen as simply another means of strengthening existing relations of inequality.

[106] As Josephine Guy points out, despite his explicit appeals to Individualism, Wilde is criticizing "the very system that Individualists had tried to legitimate th[r]ough their interpretation of Spencerian evolution" ("A (Con)textual History"75).

is both grotesque and insulting. It is like advising a man who is starving to eat less….No: a poor man who is ungrateful, unthrifty, discontented, and rebellious, is probably a real personality, and has much in him" (235). Thus, in this way, Wilde subverts typical attitudes about the problems with charity and the morality of the poor. In doing so, he exposes the contradictions inherent in a form of giving that reinforces the social and economic inequalities it seeks to address.

In one of his most memorable moves, Wilde further implicates the "altruistic virtues" in the system of economic inequality by equating philanthropists with slave-owners:

> Just as the worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realized by those who suffered from it, and understood by those who contemplated it, so, in the present state of things in England, the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good. (232)

Through the analogy with ameliorative forms of slavery, Wilde condemns efforts to alleviate poverty through charity by exposing their complicity with the economic system that produces poverty in the first place. His argument is striking in its parallel with the critique of ameliorative slavery that emerges in *Mansfield Park*. Like Austen's novel, Wilde's essay reveals the ways in which benevolent reform actually bolsters the existing social hierarchy and reinforces the economic system which produces inequality. While Austen's novel exposes the logic behind patronage, Wilde's critique of philanthropy demonstrates the way that gift giving has been shaped by industrial capitalism. Just as Sir Thomas deploys benevolence as a strategy of containment and legitimacy, so the

charity of wealthy philanthropists proves to be a "sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannize over" the poor (234). So, not only do their efforts "prevent the horror of the [economic] system being realized," but wealthy philanthropists gain respectability and honor as public benefactors and, by transforming their profits into gifts, further legitimize their economic activity.

Wilde's critique of philanthropy points to another development in late nineteenth-century gift exchange: the emergence of a new patronage, exemplified in the figure of the wealthy industrialist turned philanthropist, an echo of Eliot's fictional capitalist philanthropist, Bulstrode. As a typical example of the discourse of the new patronage, Andrew Carnegie's essay on "The Gospel of Wealth," published in the *North American Review* in 1889, sets out to resolve the "problem" of surplus wealth, which he claims is dangerous for the wealthy.[107] Carnegie declares in his opening that "[t]he problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship" (1). Echoing mid-Victorian calls for more carefully organized forms of charity, Carnegie laments the "mutual distrust" that has arisen between the rich and poor and therefore wants to restore a personal relationship (4). And just as those movements were motivated by the threat of political unrest, Carnegie's treatise on philanthropy is haunted by the "specter of communism" (Marx and Engels 8), for he declares that "in [philanthropy] we have the true antidote for the temporary unequal distribution of wealth…differing, indeed, from that of the

[107] Both Hughes and Wilde satirize this position in their essays. Hughes observes sarcastically that Mr. Carnegie "assumes that millionaires are necessary results of modern industrial enterprise, and that consequently the only question ethical writers can discuss is the best way of enabling these unfortunate persons to get honestly and beneficently rid of their superfluous wealth. But there is a much more important prior question—how to save them from the calamity of finding themselves the possessors of a huge fortune which is full of most perilous temptation, both to themselves and to their children" (892). Similarly, Wilde notes facetiously, "[p]roperty not merely has duties, but has so many duties that its possession to any large extent is a bore….In the interest of the rich we must get rid of it" (234).

Communist in requiring only the further evolution of existing conditions, not the total overthrow of our civilization" (Carnegie 12). As with the ideology of the "pure" gift, Carnegie's conception of philanthropy "is founded upon the most intense Individualism" (12). In his account of philanthropy, Carnegie elevates the philanthropic distribution of wealth as a "gospel" of wealth and, in so doing, elevates the philanthropist: despite adopting a humble role "as mere trusteed and agent for his poorer brethren," the "man of wealth" nevertheless has "superior wisdom, experience, and ability to administer" (15). Thus, Carnegie's idealized version of philanthropy ends up sanctioning both the concentration of wealth—serving ironically as a gospel of wealth accumulation—and providing the wealthy industrialist with the moral prestige and social legitimacy that he had previously lacked.

Toward a Utopian Gift

> Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure.
>
> —Igor Kopytoff

While Wilde's critique of charity serves to demystify the idealized view of altruism and philanthropy that comes into prominence during the nineteenth century, we should keep in mind that his essay is also utopian in its social vision. As he suggests, Socialism would ultimately prevent poverty: "Socialism, Communism, or whatever one chooses to call it, by converting private property into public wealth, and substituting co-operation for competition, will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism, and insure the material well-being of each member of the community" (233). This social organization, he suggests paradoxically, would enable a new Individualism and thus a truer kind of altruism: "[u]nder Individualism people will be

quite natural and absolutely unselfish….When man has realized Individualism, he will also realize sympathy and exercise it freely and spontaneously" (264). By invoking a free and spontaneous sympathy, Wilde echoes the ideology of the disinterested gift and thereby reproduces the logic of individualism that underlies market capitalism. According to Josephine Guy, Wilde's essay fails to resolve the internal contradictions posed by his advocacy of a marriage between Socialist and Individualist principles.[108] I agree and suggest as well that Wilde's claim that a cooperative social organization would lead to a free and spontaneous form of giving seems rather inconsistent. In fact, one might approach the question of the relationship between cooperative social organization and gift exchange from a different perspective and ask instead whether a different conception of the gift might give rise to communitarian models of exchange and organization. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the anthropological model of gift exchange addresses precisely this question.

In his now famous conclusion to *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss presents his own "moral conclusions" on the gift, calling for a return to "the old principles" of the gift, in which "obligation and liberty intermingle" (66, 65). In this section, Mauss extends his ethnographic observations to contemporary, industrial societies in order to identify the persistence of the logic of gift exchange in everyday social customs and legal codes. While Wilde's essay does not explain how socialism would lead to individualism and the free gift, Mauss outlines the causal link between the "themes of the gift"—"of the freedom and the obligation inherent in the gift, or generosity and self-interest that are

[108] Guy suggests that, "[f]or all its paradoxes and reversals, Wilde's essay shares the same fundamental conservatism of not only Spencer but also those high Tory, landowning Individualists," and although he opposes private property, the essay's "paradoxes and reversals cannot bear the weight of detailed analysis" ("A (Con)textual History" 77).

linked in giving"—and political practice (68). He cites social welfare programs, such as health insurance and social security, as key examples of the political application of the principles underlying gift exchange:

> All our social insurance legislation, a piece of state socialism that has already been realized, is inspired by the following principle: the worker has given his life and his labour, on the one hand to the collectivity, and on the other hand, to his employers. Although the worker has to contribute to his insurance, those who have benefited from his services have not discharged their debt to him through the payment of wages. The state itself, representing the community, owes him, as do his employers, together with some assistance from himself, a certain security in life, against unemployment, sickness, old age, and death. (67)

Significantly, the logic of giving Mauss describes here begins with the worker's gift, not the gift of the philanthropist or the charity of the state. Rather than a top-down model of exchange, which underlies the models of patronage and charity current during the Regency and Victorian periods, Mauss presents a bottom-up, and ultimately more egalitarian, conception of exchange. And yet, Mauss preserves a notion of the gift as a mix of obligation and liberty, generosity and (both social and personal) interest; the labor of the worker, too, is not an alienable, fungible good but something inalienable.

Mauss's view, like Wilde's, is ultimately utopian, and many have argued that his application of gift exchange to social democratic political programs was too hasty and idealistic. Mary Douglas, for instance, suggests that the analogy between social programs and gift exchange was inadequate because such programs "are legislated for in

elected bodies and the sums are drawn for tax revenues" and therefore "lack any power mutually to obligate persons in a contest of honour"(xv). But such criticism fails to acknowledge the way in which legislation is always based on principles and understandings of the way a society should work. Moreover, such criticism does not mean we should ignore the political potential of this model of exchange nor the new readings of literary gifts it prompts. Contemporary applications of gift theory do indeed explore the potential of gift economies to challenge the assumptions underlying liberal economics.[109] In addition, gift theory makes visible alternative forms of personhood and enables us to read sentient things in literature, to discover the way we enliven objects and transform ourselves when we hold them and give them away.

Gift theory thus illuminates the gift relations within nineteenth-century novels and demonstrates the way that gift exchange, for many novelists, continued to be a vexed, personal, moral, and obligatory form of social exchange. It also enables us to see nineteenth-century novels as sites in which alternative conceptions of persons and things compete with political economic paradigms of exchange and liberal ideas of personhood. Just as the Maussian model of gift exchange enables us to reorient the way we read cultural exchange, it also enables a reorientation of the way we read fiction. Rather than reading the novel as producing the autonomous individual of modern capitalist society, gift theory enables us to identify a plural and relational self and to recognize the myriad object relations in nineteenth-century novels. By reading novel gifts, we can begin to see

[109] For assessments of the potential of gift economies to subvert capitalist models of exchange, see, for example, studies of open source software such as *The Cathedral and The Bazaar* by Eric S. Raymond and movements to reclaim "the commons"—both natural and technological resources—outlined by David Bollier in "Reclaiming the Commons" and by Peter Barnes in *Capitalism 3.0: A Guide to Reclaiming the Commons.*

the multiple ways that people endow the objects they give and possess with personal histories, values, and obligations.

While I have been using anthropological theories of gift exchange to illuminate the practice and meaning of the gift in nineteenth-century novels, I have also suggested throughout this dissertation that the formal expressions of gifts in novels enhance theoretical understandings of gift exchange by enacting alternative forms of personhood and exchange. By presenting literary modes that correspond with the idea of persons as inter-subjective, or manifold, and gifts as symbolic repositories of human relations, which are simultaneously obligatory and free, generous and interested, the nineteenth-century novels I have considered perform and produce alternative gift economies. With its double-sided language, simultaneously moral and interested, *Mansfield Park* expresses the polite fictions that underpin gentry society's domestic and colonial affairs. And while it perpetuates the ideal of altruistic giving, *Little Dorrit* posits communal fictions as inalienable possessions that sustain community. Similarly, the comedic impulse, images of abundance, and generic excesses that pervade *Middlemarch*—expressed in Miss Noble's stealthy and luxurious giving and Dorothea Brooke's overpowering current of sympathy—perform the economy of the gift. Thus, in various and uneven ways, the novel gifts I have considered give expression to Marcel Mauss's injunction that we "adopt as the principle of our life what has always been a principle of action and will always be so: to emerge from self, to give, freely and obligatorily" (71). Whether coercive, disingenuous, or diffusively good, these novel gifts suggest that we are not isolated and self-contained but rather plural and interrelated.

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