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# Common Sense and the Condition of England: Critical Reflections on Anti-Dialectical Thought

Sanazaro, Marie

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COMMON SENSE AND THE CONDITION OF ENGLAND:  
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON ANTI-DIALECTICAL THOUGHT

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## Abstract

This dissertation reads British common sense, understood as a kind of knowledge or practical know-how supposedly held in common by all members of a social body, as a form of anti-dialectical thought that seeks to do away with abstraction by submerging thought itself immediately in daily life. Common sense has had opposite trajectories in the German dialectical tradition that culminated in Critical Theory, and British philosophy and letters, respectively. From Kant to Adorno, Critical Theorists and their forebears critiqued common sense's vulgar empiricism, atemporality, and social conservatism. Conversely, common sense became wildly popular in British culture starting in the eighteenth century. British appeals to common sense posited an opposition between a "common life" defined by uniform social practices—eating and drinking; buying and selling—and a socially deleterious tendency toward abstraction that they attributed to specialized thought. By identifying the kind of thinking that common sense supposedly was with the practices of "common life," British thinkers effectively conflated thought with practice, attempting to circumvent the mediation on which dialectical thought insists. The twin trajectories of common sense converge in the mid-nineteenth century, when Marx and Engels begin to observe and theorize English industrial capitalism. Alongside the development of a mode of dialectical materialism that identifies British common sense as paradigmatic of bourgeois ideology, the mid-nineteenth century sees the transfer of British common sense from philosophy and literary criticism to the novel. There, common-sense orientations to facts, relations, and practices infuse new social-realist sensibilities. I analyze how several of what Raymond Williams called the "industrial novels" imagine a common British epistemological life that would naturalize the mid-nineteenth century's heightened rates of inequality and exploitation. Common sense in these novels opposes history's unfolding in the form of workers' movements, and thought's abstraction from life in the form of social critique. I show, however, that their narrative forms invariably register the contradiction inherent in the attempt to institute social stability at the level of mutual understanding. These forms, I suggest, record the same dialectical interplay between the categories of the political, the social, and the cultural that critical-theoretical observers of industrial-era struggle confronted.

In memory of my wonderful grandfather, Winton Laubach.  
He hoped I would become a mathematician.

## Acknowledgments

A medieval folktale recorded by the brothers Grimm tells the story of a giant who challenges a tailor to squeeze water out of a stone, only to be deceived when the tailor takes a small piece of cheese out of his pocket and squeezes that instead. The giant should have challenged the tailor to write a dissertation, a task analogous to squeezing water out of a stone but more confounding, since a piece of cheese cannot easily be mistaken for a dissertation. There are many people without whose support, guidance, and fellowship I could not have kept diligently squeezing. I owe thanks to my adviser, Claudia Brodsky, for helping me to find a critical-theoretical approach to materials not themselves critical or theoretical, for teaching me to write, and for years of unrelenting advocacy and concrete assistance navigating the material aspects of graduate school. I'd like to thank her most of all for her repeated encouragement to pursue the dissertation project I wanted to pursue. If any projections of false authority still haunt the result, the fault does not lie with her. Russ Leo helped me to find formulations for which I was reaching. He also recalled me to historical analysis that does not collapse into blinkered empiricism, and theoretical analysis that does not lose sight of historical context. Before Benjamin Conisbee-Baer's seminar on *Capital*, I had not asked many of the materialist questions that mobilize this project. I am grateful to have had Ben as an interlocutor, particularly when he read quotes from *Mary Barton* out loud in a Lancashire accent. I am also grateful for the generosity of Simon Gikandi, whose approach to the politics of narrative form has impacted my own approach to the novel and who stepped in, despite a mountain of other commitments, after the project moved into the nineteenth century from the eighteenth.

Faculty outside my committee exposed me to materials and helped me to develop ways of thinking that have been essential to this project. At Princeton, these include Peter Brooks, Johannes Wankhammer, and Sophie Gee. Faculty at U.C. Berkeley helped to make this dissertation possible before I conceived of it. By inviting me to take part in her graduate-level proseminar, Maryam Sas made pursuing a PhD in Comparative Literature legible to me as an option. Karen Feldman's course on Luther, Kant, and Hegel first introduced me to the German Enlightenment that operates in the background of this dissertation. Anne-lise François taught me what close reading looks like. Judith Butler patiently advised me on my bachelor's thesis on Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution on France*, in retrospect my first pass at a project on British common sense.

As I worked on a dissertation that circles around thought's contradictory relationship to material life and practice, I am grateful to have had friends who resisted fetishistic accounts of graduate school's own abstraction from labor and material life, even while they carved out spaces for learning non-identical with professional academic life. Paresh Chandra, Andreas Strasser, Yaul Perez-Stable Husni, Candela Potente, Elias Kleinbock, Mari Jarris, and Aliya Ram accompanied me on orbits around Firestone Library's C Floor (or, as we sometimes called it, the "Sea Floor") both small and large, quotidian and significant. In conversation with Andreas Strasser, I got my teeth into George Eliot's "The Natural History of German Life," Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, and other texts that either became foci or clarified my thinking about dialectics and anti-dialectical thought. Paresh Chandra has been a wise co-interpreter of the dilemmas that populate the interstices of thought, daily life, and political practice. Paco Brito Núñez read Hegel's *Phenomenology* with me over the course of a year. From Craig Best, I learnt that thought, artworks, culture, and ideology do not just "reflect" life.

Many other friends and colleagues offered invaluable feedback on this project in its prospectus and draft stages. I'd like to thank RJ Bergmann, Elias Kleinbock, and Alonso Burgos Vazquez Mellado for organizing the Writing and Dissertation Colloquium and Works in Progress events over the years, and all my colleagues who both offered up their own work and took the time amidst the pressures of graduate school to read and comment on mine. I'd also like to thank Valerie Kanka for her administrative support, and the organizers of academic conferences where condensed versions or portions of all of this dissertation's Chapters have previously been presented: Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association (2021), The Princeton-Rutgers Victorian Symposium (2021), The Stanford/Berkeley English Symposium (2021), the Annual Meeting of the New England Modern Language Association (2022), and the Marxist Literary Group's Institute on Culture and Society (2023).

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The fallacy that the *ordo idearum*, the order of ideas, is the *ordo rerum*, the order of things, is founded on the imputation of immediacy to something mediated.

Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form"

## Introduction

“As far as ‘the dialectic’ is concerned,” writes Fredric Jameson in *Valences of the Dialectic*, “it would seem that what is at stake in the most general way in its polemic effects is the belief in common sense or non-dialectical thought.”<sup>1</sup> This dissertation examines the dialectic between common sense and “the dialectic” itself from the point of view of common sense, arguing inversely that what is at stake for common sense is the belief in dialectical thought. I take up common sense as a mode of thought that seeks to quickly and easily resolve the problems that Critical Theory insists on keeping open. However, I also suggest that common sense’s very internal contradictions, its attempt to repress and negate all mediation, brings it into some surprising, if unwilling, confrontations with Critical Theoretical concerns. Like Jameson, dialectical thinkers from Hegel to Horkheimer identified common sense as the antithesis of dialectical thought. Culminating in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Critical Theory, this tradition ultimately designates common sense as a synonym for ideology. Yet even as dialectical thinkers working in the German critical tradition indicted common sense’s atemporality and vulgar empiricism, appeals to common sense became wildly popular in British philosophy, literary criticism, and political writing starting in the eighteenth century. These appeals posited an opposition between a “common life” defined by uniform social practices—eating and drinking; buying and selling—and a socially deleterious tendency toward abstraction that they attributed to specialized thought. By identifying the kind of thinking that common sense supposedly was with the practices of “common life,” British common sense effectively conflated thought with practice, attempting to circumvent the mediations on which dialectical thought insists.

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 13.

The trajectories of German dialectical thought and British common sense converge in the mid-nineteenth century, when Marx and Engels begin to observe and theorize English industrial capitalism and designate Benthamite common sense as the ideology of the British bourgeoisie. We do not think of the British intellectual tradition as dialectical materialism's progenitor. Rather, we picture Marx and Engels theorizing the unprecedented development of industrial capitalism in England—expounding, in the process, a new account of culture's relationship to material production—from within the Hegelian dialectical tradition, while British thinkers committed philosophically and socially to utilitarianism. However, even British thinkers hostile to the unfolding of history in the form of workers' movements, and to thought's abstraction from life in the form of social critique, confronted the critical-theoretical problems to which dialectical materialism responded. Against the backdrop of nineteenth-century industrialization's violent unmasking of societal relations, problems foundational to what Critical Theory would call ideology critique—such as the relationship between social reason and material interest—were as unavoidable for British writers as for Marx and Engels. Just so, problems that nineteenth-century British writers articulated in Victorian terms haunt Critical Theory long after the inception of dialectical materialism.

Reading common sense as a form of anti-dialectical thought that cast a long shadow over British culture *after* its peak in the eighteenth century, I examine the conflation that common sense effects in several British industrial novels between subjective epistemological processes, on one hand, and social facts, actions, or events, on the other. While some nineteenth-century critiques of political-economic rationality drew on common sense to oppose scholastic distinctions that nakedly served social processes, the notion of a socially universal common sense provided the British industrial novel with symbolic resolutions to class conflict and political crisis amenable to

the propertied classes. Many of these novels implicitly or explicitly proposed that a socially common understanding between the classes would do away with political conflict between the classes—as though the material and social processes that gave rise to that conflict were equivalent to a communicative or conceptual misunderstanding and did not require a political solution. In the narratives I analyze, common sense attempts—albeit infeasibly—to make the facts or activities of social life fully represent thought, opinion, or argument. But at the same time, language and narrative form track and respond to the impossibility of fully excluding reflective thought from social life. As though the subordination of thought to the social dominion of common sense would foreclose narrative itself, attempts to subordinate thought to social structures and processes instead fuel their own narrative dysfunction, resistance, expansion, and/or excess.

I begin this introduction by offering a brief overview of the German critical tradition's remarks on common sense, on one hand, and the contemporaneous rise of British common sense discourse and philosophy in the eighteenth century to which I devote my first chapter, on the other hand. I then situate British common sense in the mid-nineteenth-century period that is this dissertation's main focus, sketching out how and why common sense symbolized the resolution of class conflict at a moment when the destruction of the agricultural commons was more or less a *fait accompli* and the exploitation of those proletarianized by this destruction was intensifying. Pointing to some narrative problems faced by authors who looked to mutual understanding between the classes to resolve political conflict over inequality and exploitation, I clarify my approach to the industrial novels as a subgenre. Finally, I outline the dissertation's chapters.

## ***Common Sense in Critical Theory***

In his 1947 book *The Eclipse of Reason*, the Frankfurt School Critical Theorist Max Horkheimer wrote: “Vested interests opposed to the traditional humanitarian values will appeal to neutralized, impotent reason in the name of ‘common sense.’”<sup>2</sup> Published the same year as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, although less prominently discussed today, *The Eclipse of Reason* contributed to Horkheimer and Adorno’s postwar inquiries into fascism’s Enlightenment origins. Like *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *The Eclipse of Reason* addressed reason’s instrumentalization by social interests and its resulting incapacity to evaluate social ends. Whereas *Dialectic of Enlightenment* wasn’t translated into English until 1972, however, *The Eclipse of Reason* was written in English and intended to be intelligible to an Anglo-American audience. It also focused heavily on the trajectory of reason in the Anglo-American tradition. For example, Horkheimer read eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American spokesmen for slavery such as George Fitzhugh, author of *Sociology for the South*, as key architects of a devitalized kind of Enlightenment reason that “furnishes...the ideology for profit and reaction as well as the ideology for progress and revolution.”<sup>3</sup> Horkheimer quoted Fitzhugh’s remark that:

Men of sound judgments usually give wrong reasons for their opinions because they are not abstractionists...Philosophy beats them all hollow in argument, yet instinct and common sense are right and philosophy wrong. Philosophy is always wrong and instinct and common sense always right, because philosophy is unobservant and reasons from narrow and insufficient premises.<sup>4</sup>

For Horkheimer, Fitzhugh’s claim that “common sense” is the only basis of “sound judgment”—even though usually justified by “wrong reasons” from the perspective of philosophy—perfectly

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<sup>2</sup> Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (London: Continuum, 2004), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 18.

encapsulated reason's subordination to concrete social ends. By appealing to the interests of a supposed majority, "common sense" eliminates any means by which those interests might be known, debated, and justified.

Horkheimer traced common sense's usurpation of objective reason to the major spokesman of the eighteenth-century Scottish School of Common Sense Philosophy, Thomas Reid, suggesting that Reid's work marked a turning point in the trajectory of Enlightenment philosophy away from objective reason. In the work of predecessors of Reid such as Locke and Rousseau, Horkheimer argued, the "democratic principle" was not "empirical."<sup>5</sup> These philosophers, too, had "respect for the majority." But this respect "was based on a conviction that did not itself depend on the resolutions of the majority."<sup>6</sup> They were open to the possibility that the majority might make resolutions that contradicted their objective interests. In contrast, Horkheimer wrote, Reid "identified the principles of common sense with self-evident truths and thus reconciled empiricism with rationalistic metaphysics."<sup>7</sup> In other words, unlike Locke and Rousseau, Reid's appeal to common sense did depend on the "actual resolutions of the majority"—his philosophy tautologically confirmed whatever the majority happened to think.

Horkheimer was only the latest philosopher to worry about attacks on reason on behalf of "common sense." Thinkers in the German critical tradition that culminated in Critical Theory had, and have, long articulated critical thought's function and character in opposition to common sense. Horkheimer's diagnosis of "common sense," and of the Scottish School as the crucial moment when Enlightenment turned back on itself, has much in common with Kant's commentary on the Scottish School, whose appeal to "common sense" Kant characterized as a "convenient method of

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<sup>5</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 19.

being obstinate without any insight.”<sup>8</sup> Even as Hume himself defended the “Academic or Sceptical philosophy” that the Scottish School attacked for “renouncing all speculations which lie not within the limits of common life and practice,”<sup>9</sup> Reid, along with James Oswald and James Beattie, critiqued Hume on behalf of what they perceived as a “common sense” beleaguered by Hume’s philosophy of mind. “I should think, however,” Kant wrote:

that *Hume* could lay just as much claim to sound common sense as *Beattie*, and on top of this to something that the latter certainly did not possess, namely, a critical reason, which keeps ordinary common sense in check, so that it doesn’t lose itself in speculations, or, if these are the sole topic of discussion, doesn’t want to decide anything, since it doesn’t understand the justification for its own principles.<sup>10</sup>

As Fitzhugh would openly confirm and Horkheimer would critique, Kant is suggesting that “common sense” lacks the means of evaluating its own conclusions. “Critical reason” is necessary to control “common sense” and to evaluate decisions outside the tautological frame of the multitude. At this moment in the *Prolegomena*, Kant frames critical reason, or what would come to be called Critical Theory, as the counterbalancing antithesis of “common sense.”

Kant’s inauguration of Critical Theory as common sense’s opposite would persist into Hegelian dialectical philosophy. “Should anyone ask for a royal road to Science,” Hegel wrote in the “Preface” to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “there is no more easy-going way than to rely on

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<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science: With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Gary C. Hatfield, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9. The “sensus communis” was essential to Kant’s own philosophical account of judgments of taste, but unlike the Scottish School Kant did not characterize the *sensus communis* as an empirical faculty of the mind.

<sup>9</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding with A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh and Hume’s Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Eric Steinberg, 2nd ed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 26.

<sup>10</sup> Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 9. Kant’s word for common sense here is “einen gesunden Verstand.” For this passage in the original German see Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena Zu Einer Jeden Künftigen Metaphysik Die Als Wissenschaft Wird Auftreten Können*, ed. Konstantin Pollok (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2001), 8-9.

sound common sense...but the high sense for the Eternal, the Holy, the Infinite strides along in the robes of a high priest, on a road that is from the first no road.”<sup>11</sup> Though we are offered common sense as a “substitute” for “the long process of culture towards genuine philosophy,” this is as false a substitute as “chicory is for coffee.”<sup>12</sup> Ironically, Kant himself comes to stand for a commonsensical moment in what Hegel described as “the long process of culture”; what from Hegel’s perspective is Kant’s unsatisfyingly categorical, atemporal philosophy becomes the exemplar of common sense. The *Phenomenology* as a whole charts Spirit’s progress beyond the false immediacies and object-oriented thinking of common sense, which Hegel characterizes as a kind of thinking that falls prey to the whirl of the abstractions it seeks to avoid.

The notion of common sense as Critical Theory’s antithesis would also persist into dialectical materialism. For Marx, the atemporal, naturalizing posture of common sense describes Liberalism and its tendency to reify as normal the historically specific characteristics of the bourgeoisie. In Volume 1 of *Capital*, for example, Marx describes the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham as “that soberly pedantic and heavy-footed oracle of the ‘common sense’ of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.” “Bentham is a purely English phenomenon,” Marx goes on in a footnote, who “assumes that the modern petty bourgeois, especially the English petty bourgeois, is the normal man. Whatever is useful to this peculiar kind of normal man, and to his world, is useful in and for itself. He applies this yardstick to the past, the present and the future.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 43.

<sup>12</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 42. Hegel uses “Gesunde Menschenverstand” for common sense in both passages. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Reclam, Bamberg, 1807), 58, 60.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin books, 1990), 758-9. Marx’s word for “common sense” here is “gemeinen Bürgerverstandes.” See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1 (Karl Dietz Verlag, 2017), 636-7. All subsequent references to *Capital* designate Volume 1.

## *A Purely English Phenomenon*

A series of essays by the British Marxist historian Perry Anderson in the 1960s affirmed Marx's identification of common sense as not only the ideology of "the modern petty bourgeois" but also a particularly English ideology. Identifying a "mystique of common sense"<sup>14</sup> whose latest instantiations included the ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein, Anderson asserted that this "linguistic philosophy is essentially an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon."<sup>15</sup> Its "social import," he went on to theorize, "is obvious enough": "If, as Gramsci once wrote, common sense is the practical wisdom of the dominant class, the philosophical cult of it says something about the role of linguistic analysis in England. The philosophy of ordinary language has functioned as an anaesthetic ideology, blotting out mental alternatives."<sup>16</sup> Though E.P. Thompson would criticize the anti-British exceptionalism of Anderson's critique of "The English Ideology" as a form of "inverse Podsnappery,"<sup>17</sup> it is true that common sense has been a peculiarly English or at least peculiarly Anglo-American phenomenon. Even as the German tradition that included Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Horkheimer critiqued common sense as the bad antithesis of critical thinking, dialectical

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<sup>14</sup> Perry Anderson, "Components of the National Culture," in *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992), 67.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, "Components," 68.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, "Components," 67-8.

<sup>17</sup> E.P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," *The Socialist Register*, 1965, 312. Responding most directly to another essay by Anderson, "The Origins of the Present Crisis," Thompson quoted Dickens' satire of a vapid English exceptionalism in *Our Mutual Friend* and attributed a similar, except negatively inflected, exceptionalism to Anderson:

"And *other* countries," said Mr. Podsnap remorsefully. "They do how?"  
 "They do," returned Messrs. Anderson and Nairn severely: "They do – we are sorry to be obliged to say it – in Every Respect Better. Their Bourgeois Revolutions have been Mature. Their Class Struggles have been Sanguinary and Unequivocal. Their Intelligentsia has been Autonomous and Integrated Vertically. Their Morphology has been Typologically Concrete. Their Proletariat has been Hegemonic." (312)

progression, and philosophy per se, a British line of thought celebrated common sense as a social and intellectual value. Epitomized by Samuel Johnson's famous refutation of George Berkeley's idealism "thus," by kicking a rock, the "philosophical cult" to which Anderson refers became foundational to British critiques of philosophical idealism, specifically, and academic abstruseness and impracticality more broadly, in the eighteenth century.

What came to be known as The Scottish School of Common Sense was just one strand of a larger intellectual moment in British culture. A popular keyword for a movement in literary criticism away from the rules and perceived pedantry of neoclassicism, "common sense" also permeated writings by the philosophical contemporaries and designated enemies of Reid and his associates. What mainly distinguished the Scottish School from this larger milieu was the earnestness with which Reid, along with James Beattie and James Oswald, characterized "common sense" as a universal faculty of mind—one they imagined was empirically or even biologically based—and system of philosophy in its own right. Appeals to common sense elsewhere in eighteenth-century British culture generally affirmed traditional distinctions between rhetoric and argument. Characterizing rhetoric as a uniquely social register of discourse and the province of common sense, polemicists who launched attacks on scholarly abstruseness on behalf of common sense usually accepted some boundary between social and institutional thought and literary criticism and philosophy. The Scottish School, in contrast, sought to establish common sense as the sole legitimate source of philosophical argument.

There is something to Horkheimer's and Kant's identification of Reid and other members of the Scottish School as proponents of a kind of philosophy antithetical to critical theorization or dialectical thought. Hume's defense of "Academic or Sceptical philosophy," that it "renounce[d] all speculations which lie not within the limits of common life and practice," accepted and

rearticulated the Scottish School's own call for philosophy to reconcile with the set of relations and activities that make up daily life. Reid locates "common sense" in the set of social practices that he calls "the common concerns of life"<sup>18</sup> and appeals to philosophy to return to these "common concerns." Pushed to its logical conclusion, Reid's critique of certain kinds of philosophical thought assumes the reducibility of thought itself to practice: of "sense," with this word's ambiguously epistemological connotations, to "life." Much as analytic philosophy (itself descended partly from common sense philosophy via G.E. Moore) implies a set of social and political claims at the level of its methodology, it is possible to see why Horkheimer read foreboding authoritarian logics between the lines of the Scottish School's attempt to restrict philosophical speculation within "the limits of common life and practice." Without abstraction, there could be no social critique. If thought could be banned from exceeding existing social practice, history would presumably advert to an unchanging, socially self-reproducing procession of convention. To this extent, whereas Hegelian and post-Hegelian thought attended to the countless mediations that link abstraction to the concrete, the Scottish School attempted to do away with abstraction. And whereas the Critical Theory of Horkheimer and other members of the Frankfurt School sought to reserve some independence for thought from the instrumentality of twentieth-century life, the Scottish School sought to embed thought in life without any remainder.

Inflected less by the Scottish School in particular than by the longer tradition of British common sense on which the Scottish School drew, Edmund Burke's counter-revolutionary appeals to common sense in the context of Britain's encounter with the French Revolution would, later in the eighteenth century, become synonymous with social and political conservatism. A

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Reid, *Thomas Reid's Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 9.

commonsensical subordination of thought to the social facts and activities that make subjects authorizes Burke's political response to the French Revolution:

Instead of casting away all our untaught prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages.<sup>19</sup>

The authority to which Burke appeals when he situates himself as the voice of “the general bank and capital of nations and of ages” is not an authority derived from intellectual deliberation or political decision. Burke appeals to the common sense of “the people of England” yet constructs them as unreflective inheritors of the prevailing political order. A common sense that seeks identity with common life or traditional English life—one that cherishes “prejudices”—in this sense encapsulates the philosophical dimension of Burke's entire encounter with the Revolution. The charge that Burke levies against the French Revolutionaries is that they allowed thought to become independent from and even to direct social processes. In contrast, common sense in the context of Burke's polemic against the French Revolution is what Burke elsewhere calls “wisdom without reflection,”<sup>20</sup> an ideology so submerged in social processes that thought does not abstract itself into distinct ideas to grasp the social conflict from which it emerges or to which it reacts.

### ***Common Sense's Literary Afterlife***

The common sense the Scottish School helped to popularize also circulated through other theaters during the global Age of Revolution. Thomas Paine's immensely influential pamphlet

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<sup>19</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 76.

<sup>20</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 29.

*Common Sense* owed its name to Benjamin Rush, who in turn had spent years in Scotland immersing himself in the Scottish philosophy.<sup>21</sup> Transmitted from Aberdeen to Philadelphia and internalized by drafters of the Constitution, it is no exaggeration to say that after the Revolution common sense provided part of the intellectual blueprint of the American state.<sup>22</sup> As Sophia Rosenfeld argues, an “unexpected marriage...began in Philadelphia in 1776 between self-evidence, on the one hand, and self-rule, on the other—a pairing that, by now, has become largely invisible to us because it is so thoroughly internalized and embedded in what might be called ‘democratic common sense.’”<sup>23</sup>

Only in the nineteenth century, and only in Britain, however, did common sense become a major concern of literature. While Scottish Common Sense dominated academic philosophy in the United States in the early nineteenth century, the allegorical, Romantic fiction of nineteenth-century American novelists such as Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne gravitated to epistemological opposites of common sense such as monomania and the *idée fixe*. Melville’s Ahab, and Hawthorne’s Hollingsworth, are characterized by the socially destructive force of their “absorption in one idea.”<sup>24</sup> If the “sense” of “common sense” connotes either sense-perception or an intuitive openness to latent information, then the monomania that structures these narratives constantly brushes aside and rejects “sense” as so much moderating input from the outside

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<sup>21</sup> Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 138, 141.

<sup>22</sup> Scottish Common Sense also shaped the early American university system. At the College of New Jersey, lately Princeton University, three separate administrations (John Witherspoon’s, 1768-1812, Samuel Stanhope Smith’s, 1795-1812, and James McCosh’s, 1868-1888) drew on the philosophy of Reid, Beattie, et. al., for pedagogical principles. See Charles Bradford Bow, “Reforming Witherspoon’s Legacy at Princeton: John Witherspoon, Samuel Stanhope Smith and James McCosh on Didactic Enlightenment, 1768–1888,” *History of European Ideas* 39, no. 5 (September 2013): 650–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2012.735138>.

<sup>23</sup> Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History*, 139.

<sup>24</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 166.

environment. Likewise, if the commonness of common sense names an ethos of reconciliation with common life, these narratives situate the thinking subject in a problematic or even pathological relation to a potentially mediating social life, pushing to its boundaries the possibility that ideas could be abstracted from a life lived in common with others. The oneness of Ahab's object of fixation reflecting onto Ahab himself, *Moby-Dick* has crystallized for readers in the image of "Ahab sitting alone, and gazing out."<sup>25</sup>

In Britain, however, common sense migrated into an emergent social realist tradition at the same time as the term waned in popularity as philosophical *cri de coeur*. I focus in this dissertation on how a specific literary subgenre—the "industrial" or "condition of England" novel—imagined a common British epistemological life that would naturalize the mid-nineteenth-century class order, and I will focus on this subgenre and its historical context here as well. However, the industrial novel is not the only site of nineteenth-century British literature and culture into which common sense offers a fruitful point of entry. On the contrary, as an insistence on subjectivity's subordination to the facts, relations, and practices that constitute social life, common sense allegorized realism's riposte to Romanticism and structured social-realist form throughout the nineteenth century.

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), with its Burkean insistence on the stability of the organic community, is one bookend of the novelistic tradition that drew on common sense for realist sensibilities regarding the objective social structures that shaped experience. On the other end of this tradition, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) marks a crisis of common sense and the novel's departure from its realist horizon. While common sense coordinates the narrative of *Mansfield Park* as characters return to and reconcile with the organic community, *Daniel Deronda*

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<sup>25</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Charles Child Walcott (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984), 160.

thematizes how the resistance of common sense to social and historical alteration can also function as an internal force of resistance to narrativity. Common sense or what the narrator variously calls “worldliness,”<sup>26</sup> or “sound English, free of nonsense”<sup>27</sup> characterizes the patriarchal kin of both Eliot’s heroine, Gwendolen, and her hero, Daniel. These patriarchal figures assume that their acts of “persuasive reflection”<sup>28</sup> will have immediate “effects.”<sup>29</sup> This is made explicit at the end of the passage in which Gwendolen’s uncle encourages Gwendolen to take a position as governess after her family’s financial ruin:

The rector ended very cheerfully, leaving the room with the satisfactory conviction that Gwendolen was going to adapt herself to circumstances like a girl of good sense. Having spoken appropriately, he naturally supposed that the effects would be appropriate; being accustomed as a household and parish authority to be asked to ‘speak to’ refractory persons, with the understanding that the measure was morally coercive.<sup>30</sup>

For the rector, Gwendolen’s “good sense” will indicate her immediate compliance with his advice, since it is “appropriate.” The expected simultaneity between Gascoigne’s act of speech and its “effects” suggests that what it might mean to be in a community of common sense is that nothing need be negotiated in intervals between the speech of one person and the action of another. Casting up the possibility of a world without deliberation, conflict, or any reaction to action, here common sense also implies the impossibility of literary narrative. But, as the story of *Daniel Deronda* converges unexpectedly on Daniel’s proto-Zionist exodus away from British life, Eliot ultimately indicts the causal logic of conventional narrative form itself as complicit with the presumed authority of common sense. A type of reflection that contravenes the sedimented social reason of

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<sup>26</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23.

<sup>27</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 226.

<sup>29</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 227.

<sup>30</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 227.

common sense is the crucial instigator of Daniel's self-chosen membership in Jewish "common life."<sup>31</sup>

### ***The Industrial Era: Between Critical Theory and Common Sense***

The "industrial novels," a term that Raymond Williams coined in his 1959 book *Culture and Society* to designate Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Dickens' *Hard Times*, Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil*, Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, and George Eliot's *Felix Holt*, were written at a point of convergence for the two trajectories I sketched out above: the dialectical philosophical tradition that would become Critical Theory, and English common sense. Although the tradition of dialectical thought has long anchored itself in the German language and German intellectual history, dialectical *materialism* emerged in great part in relation to industrial-era British life as Marx and Engels observed the social conditions of the new industrial proletariat and this proletariat's struggles against these conditions through Trades Unionism and Chartism, the working-class movement for universal male suffrage. Written in Paris, Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* often stand in for—as Marcello Musto puts it—"the discovery of the proletariat and, through it, of revolution; the new commitment to communism, still unclearly defined and semi-utopian; the critique of Hegel's speculative philosophy and the Hegelian Left; the first outline of the materialist conception of history and the beginnings of his critique of political economy."<sup>32</sup> Engels' relatively dry and statistical *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, also written in 1844, is less often read as a philosophical contribution to dialectical materialism.

However, I propose that Engels' analyses of Chartism in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and a series of essays in the 1840s also mark important moments in the

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<sup>31</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 609.

<sup>32</sup> Marcello Musto, "Marx in Paris: Manuscripts and Notebooks of 1844," *Science & Society* 73, no. 3 (July 2009): 387.

intellectual history of dialectical materialism. For almost all its observers, the relationship of Chartism as a political movement to the social condition of the industrial proletariat was a vexing problem. To articulate the basic outlines of this problem here, it is helpful to recall Fredric Jameson's discussion of the distinction, via Althusser, between billiard-ball and expressive causality (structural causality, while perhaps also relevant, is best left for another time).<sup>33</sup> Chartism invoked billiard-ball causality because, as a movement for political representation, it seemed to propose a sequence of historical events wherein working-class political power would lead to social amelioration. It invoked expressive causality because it emerged at a moment of social crisis and to that extent seemed to express—in the sense of signify—the social misery of the industrial proletariat. Both these models opened interrogations of Chartists' own political and social theories and attempts to recode Chartism as (merely) political or (merely) social. Chartists and those who theorized their movement from the outside—whether in a supportive or hostile posture—invented the categories of the social and the political in real time as they contested Chartism's means and ends. The ideological front of the battle over Chartism was fought on this ground during the 1840s: as I argue in Chapter Two, a depoliticizing model of Chartism's expressive *meaning* repressed and re-wrote the early model of Chartism as political *means* to a social end over the course of the movement's gradual defeat.

Despite Chartism's political form, Engels assessed Chartism as a historically unprecedented social movement. "Therein lies the difference between Chartist democracy and all previous political bourgeois democracy," he wrote in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, "Chartism is of an essentially social nature, a class movement."<sup>34</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>33</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 23-33.

<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, ed. David McLellan, trans. Florence Kelley-Wischnewetsky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 242.

Engels warned against mistaking the political form of the movement for the ultimate horizon of social transformation, writing in a review of Carlyle's *Past and Present*, for example, that the "evil" the working class suffered "was social—and social evils cannot be abolished as the monarchy or privileges are abolished. Social evils cannot be cured by People's Charters, and the people sensed this—otherwise the People's Charter would be today the basic law of England. Social evils need to be studied and understood, and this the mass of the workers has not yet done up till now."<sup>35</sup> Engels also identified the ambiguous intersection of working-class education with both the political and the social at a time when useful knowledge movements and educational initiatives of all kinds were becoming important sites of class struggle. Acknowledging the real social and political stakes of education for working people, he also pointed to the tendency of bourgeois reformers to redirect working-class political energies into the social arena of education:

Since, as we have seen, no single field for the exercise of his manhood is left him, save his opposition to the whole conditions of his life, it is natural that exactly in this opposition he should be most manly, noblest, and worthy of sympathy. We shall see that all his energy, all the activity of the working men is directed to this point, and that even their attempts to gain general education all stand in direct connection with this. True, we shall have single acts of violence and even of brutality to report, but it must always be kept in mind that the social war is avowedly raging in England; and that, whereas it is in the interests of the bourgeoisie to conduct this war hypocritically, under the disguise of peace and even of philanthropy, the only help for the working men consists in laying bare the true state of things and destroying this hypocrisy.<sup>36</sup>

Engels' commentaries on Chartism articulated a problem that many contemporaries of the movement confronted in some form: that the categories of the social and the political were dialectically interrelated terms. While it was crucial conceptually to distinguish the social from the

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<sup>35</sup> Friedrich Engels, "The Condition of England. Past and Present by Thomas Carlyle, London, 1843," in *Collected Works*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, trans. Christopher Upward, vol. 3 (New York: International, 1975), 450.

<sup>36</sup> Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 221.

political to avoid confusing symbolic for material change, the social and the political each referred, in historically specific ways and with contextually specific stakes, to the other. Engels also showed how working-class education functioned in the 1840s as a switch-point between the social and the political, the material and the symbolic. One of many forms of “opposition” to the conditions of working-class life, “general education” was also a weapon of bourgeois “hypocrisy” intended to keep those conditions in place.

In the same review of Carlyle’s *Past and Present* that I quoted above, Engels wrote that “the conclusion of all English philosophizing is the despair of reason, the confessed inability to solve the contradictions with which one is ultimately faced, and consequently...devotion to pure practice, without a further thought to metaphysics, etc.”<sup>37</sup> Even to British thinkers maniacally committed to “pure practice,” however, the process of industrialization posed troubling questions regarding the relationship between consciousness and material life. At a time, in and around the 1840s, when the material condition of English workers elicited an efflorescence of studies and analyses—the “commissions of inquiry into economic conditions,” “factory-inspectors,” “medical reporters on public health,” and “commissioners of inquiry into the exploitation of women and children, into housing and food”<sup>38</sup> to which Marx contrasted the dearth of statistical research in other Western European countries in the preface to the first edition of Volume 1 of *Capital*—it was not only the relation of the English working classes to material production that was revolutionizing. The relation of the working classes to educational and literary institutions and to intellectual activity—whether as leisure or as labor—was also changing. State and private spending on education increased. Acts of state legislation that sought to limit capitalists’ right to

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<sup>37</sup> Engels, “The Condition of England,” 460.

<sup>38</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 91.

exploit child labor included educational provisions, and, despite the “tricks and dodges”<sup>39</sup> with which capitalists got around laws such as the 1844 Factory Act that combined factory labor with education, literacy was eventually expanded to the English population at large.<sup>40</sup>

The epistemological condition of the English working classes, and England at large, was therefore inextricable from the nexus of sociological observations, reform proposals, political interventions, and literary narratives that converged around what Carlyle, in his 1839 essay *Chartism*, first called the “Condition of England.”<sup>41</sup> The education, literacy, and intellectual condition of the working classes became a topic of discussions about the condition of England alongside topics like sanitation, health, and housing—not solely, however, as a concrete extension of these classes’ material condition (e.g., as statistics about the attendance of working people at educational institutions), but also as a set of interrogable representations of material and political reality. In *Chartism*, Carlyle queried rhetorically: “is the discontent itself mad, like the shape it took? Not the condition of the working people that is wrong; but their disposition, their own thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that are wrong?”<sup>42</sup> Carlyle meant to elicit a retort from the reader that the “thoughts, beliefs, and feelings” of the “working people” must have some relationship to their “condition,” a supposition that many reformists would have found uncontroversial. The government inspector H.S. Trevelyan, for example, sought awareness of the causal relation between a “material” and an “intellectual” condition when he wrote that “great employers who

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<sup>39</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 523.

<sup>40</sup> A relatively high level of working-class literacy is one of the main characteristics that distinguishes Chartism from nationalist projects and the dismantling of *ancien régimes* happening in continental Europe in and around 1848. See Dorothy Thompson, “‘The Question “What Is a Chartist?” Answered’: Chartist Tracts,” in *The Dignity of Chartism: Essays by Dorothy Thompson*, ed. Stephen Roberts (London: Verso, 2015), 49-55.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism* (London: James Fraser, 1840), 1, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t08w3hh09&seq=5>.

<sup>42</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, 4.

collected large bodies of labourers on wild districts” failed “to acknowledge...the dependence of moral and intellectual conditions on its material surroundings.”<sup>43</sup> Yet the idea that the “thoughts, beliefs, and feelings” of the working classes could simply be a form of “mad[ness]” equally represented the range of possibilities that commentators on the condition of England treated as plausible.

It was relatively simple to posit causality between the organization of labor and the nonspecific degradation, constriction, or impoverishment of working people’s consciousness, and more complicated to describe the relationship between “material surroundings” and the contents of working-class thought. The apparent complexity of the latter relationship generated theoretical problems: the possibility that working people’s “thoughts, beliefs, and feelings” might be “wrong,” and the task of critique, theorization, and communication to working people that this possibility necessitated in the minds of some, opened up questions about mediation, about the interpretation and representation of consciousness in relation to a social “condition,” and about the relationship between theory (originating in the interests of one social or economic class), and praxis (of another social or economic class). Resistance to absolute abstraction of working-class thought from the condition of the working classes, in the form of narratives that sought to relate the condition of workers in a time of accelerating exploitation to what working people thought and felt, characterized the industrial novels of the period—as did good- and bad-faith critiques of (notions and representations of) working-class thought.

Carlyle’s *Chartism* suggests some of the conceptual contradictions that followed common sense into the industrial novel, once it became the keystone of a reformist program, and some of

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Asa Briggs, “Introduction,” in *Chartism: A New Organization of the People with an Introduction by Asa Briggs*, by William Lovett and John Collins (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1969), 12.

the formal contradictions that industrial novelists confronted as they sought to work out this program in narrative. Carlyle oscillates in *Chartism* between hope for an understanding of the “condition of England” on one hand, and “understanding” *between* the classes or in general, on the other. Despite the presence in *Chartism* of the “Carlylean motif of Chartism as an inarticulate expression of grievances by an ignorant population,”<sup>44</sup> Carlyle both calls “thinking men of the community to think of this vital matter”<sup>45</sup> and interrogates the thinking of the “ignorant population” itself. While the phrase “thinking men” indicates MPs and other powerful social actors whom Carlyle urges to comprehend and diagnose the “condition of England,” Carlyle’s query whether “the condition of the English working people [is] so wrong; so wrong that rational working men cannot, will not, and even should not rest quiet under it”<sup>46</sup> concerns working people’s own reasoning about their “condition.” Correct understanding by both classes appears to offer the very solution to the problem of the “condition of England” in *Chartism*—not only insofar as an economic and political analysis of living and working conditions would enable the Parliamentary intervention that Carlyle urges, but as an immediately meaningful social transformation in itself. For Carlyle, “perfect clearness on” the condition-of-England question “were equivalent to remedy of it. For, as is well said, all battle is misunderstanding; did the parties know one another, the battle would cease.”<sup>47</sup>

As Carlyle moves from “clearness on” the condition of England question, to a socially universal understanding of each class by the other that would do away with the question itself, he places working people’s “thought” in a new interpretive frame: calling for “a genuine

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<sup>44</sup> Gregory Vargo, *An Underground History of Early Victorian Fiction: Chartism, Radical Print Culture, and the Social Problem Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 152, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108181891>.

<sup>45</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, 7.

understanding by the upper classes of society what it is that the under classes intrinsically mean; a clear interpretation of the thought which at heart torments these wild inarticulate souls.”<sup>48</sup> “[U]nderstanding” the “intrinsic... mean[ing] of “the thought” of “the under classes” refers not to an act of accessing and assimilating any specific content of working-class thought (the latter, after all, is “inarticulate”) but to a second-order interpretation of working-class “thought” in general. This movement from the content to the social form of thought triggers a speculative leap in *Chartism*. “With perfect intellect,” Carlyle writes:

were such possible without perfect morality, the world would be perfect; its efforts unerringly correct, its results continually successful, its condition faultless. Intellect is like light; the Chaos becomes a World under it: fiat lux. These Twenty-four million intellects are but common intellects; but they are intellects; in earnest about the matter, instructed each about his own province of it; labouring each perpetually, with what partial light can be attained, to bring such province into rationality.<sup>49</sup>

The difference between Carlyle’s urging of inquiry “into” “discontents” and his musings on the “perfect intellect” of the “Twenty-four million” is the difference between the chronological structure of reform, the sequentiality of problem and solution indicated by Carlyle’s “before,” and the subjunctive “perfect[ion]” of a counterfactual “world” established literally by “fiat.” In this sense it is the difference between a linear and a nonlinear account of historical time. For Carlyle, Chartism in part represents the threat of historical events taking place before the forces involved can be understood and managed: “A Reformed Parliament, one would think, should inquire into popular discontents *before* they get the length of pikes and torches!”<sup>50</sup> Yet temporal language like “*before*” or after vanishes from Carlyle’s speculative description of a “World” in which “Twenty-four million” “common intellects” achieve “perfection.”

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<sup>48</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, 6-7.

<sup>49</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, 101.

<sup>50</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, 4.

### ***Common Sense and the Condition of England***

Carlyle's leap to the subjunctive mode in this move from understanding *of* to understanding *between* discloses a tension that became pressing in the industrial era between common sense's desire for immediate resolution, and the unfolding of social and political history. At every turn, the wish that common sense expressed for a world made perfect at once by "perfect intellect" encountered resistance from the processual character of reform. Whereas Engels urged "laying bare the true state of things and destroying [the] hypocrisy" of philanthropic social reform through programs of working-class education, almost the whole spirit of British bourgeois engagement with the crisis of the 1840s exerted itself to resolve these problems on the at-once social and epistemological ground of common understanding. In this context, the eighteenth-century notion of common sense, connoting an absolutely universal knowledge, epistemological procedure, or "sense," split apart. Though a nineteenth-century notion of a specifically working-class common sense recalled eighteenth-century common sense's connotations of perceptual immediacy and grounding in daily life, this explicitly classed common sense by definition did not signify universality. Eighteenth-century common sense's foundational association with social universality found its industrial-era parallel, rather, in actual and imagined programs of reform of working-class common sense through education, combined with upper-class understanding of the lower classes, which envisioned as their endpoint the achievement of an inter-class epistemological unity that would resolve some of the political crises of the era.

Both a classed common sense, and a political vision of an inter-class common understanding that would negate and transcend this classed common sense, appear in Elizabeth Gaskell's 1848 novel *Mary Barton*. I will discuss this novel in detail here because Gaskell's work exemplifies both common sense's role in industrial-era reform projects and the novelistic problem

of historical narrative that Carlyle's speculative leap in *Chartism* anticipates.<sup>51</sup> In a long passage, Gaskell's narrator describes the series of "contrast[s]" which a "poor weaver" suffering from "the vicissitudes of lowered wages, short hours, fewer hands employed, etc." observes between himself and his employer, and the resentment which the observation of these "contrast[s]" creates in the poor weaver's mind:

Large houses are still occupied, while spinners' and weavers' cottages stand empty, because the families that once filled them are obliged to live in rooms or cellars. Carriages still roll along the streets, concerts are still crowded by subscribers, the shops for expensive luxuries still find daily customers, while the workman loiters away his unemployed time in watching these things, and thinking of the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough of food—of the sinking health, of the dying life of those near and dear to him. The contrast is too great. Why should he alone suffer from bad times?<sup>52</sup>

The narrator begins the next paragraph with the abrupt disqualification that "I know that this is not really the case; and I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks."<sup>53</sup> The "truth" that Gaskell's narrator "know[s]" is the "truth" of Victorian political economy, that the "masters" cannot control fluctuations in supply and demand in the market or the price of labor. "[W]hat the workman feels and thinks" does not comprehend this "truth," yet it is notable that the assertion "I know that this is not really the case" does not here respond to any robust misinterpretation of "the case." The weaver only strays into inference and judgment when he opines—from his perspective unavoidably, as Gaskell's narrator herself

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<sup>51</sup> Kingsley's *Alton Locke* interrupts its own narrativization of the kind of template Gaskell's novel offers, Dickens' *Hard Times* satirizes this template, and George Eliot's *Felix Holt* is a historical novel, looking backward from 1866, that quietly replaces Gaskell's kind of proposal for social reform through working-class education with an Arnoldian conception of culture that does not make necessary reference to working-class minds.

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. Alan Shelston (London: Everyman, 1996), 24.

<sup>53</sup> Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, 24.

underlines—that the “contrast is too great”: his observations are minimally interpretive and indeed almost entirely factual.

If the weaver’s observations of “contrasts” offer the spectacle of a working-class common sense that does not comprehend the “truth,” a dialogue between the factory owner Mr. Carson and the working-class amateur naturalist Job Legh near the end of the novel adumbrates a program of reform of this kind of common sense by political-economic understanding. This dialogue stages a confrontation between Carson’s “Political Economy” and a more intuitive kind of knowledge, one that takes recourse to sense data gathered through the “eyes,” and to “thoughts” as they come immediately into Job’s “head,” rather than to the forms of expression and communication of knowledge acquired through “learning”:

“That’s the notion you’ve all of you got,” said Mr. Carson. “Now, how in the world can we help it? We cannot regulate the demand for labour. No man or set of men can do it. It depends on events which God alone can control. When there is no market for our goods, we suffer just as much as you can do.”

“Not as much, I’m sure, sir; though I’m not given to Political Economy, I know that much. I’m wanting in learning, I’m aware; but I can use my eyes.” ...

“My good man, just listen to me. Two men live in solitude; one produces loaves of bread, the other coats,—or what you will. Now, would it not be hard if the bread-producer were forced to give bread for the coats, whether he wanted them or not, in order to furnish employment to the other? That is the simple form of the case; you’ve only to multiply the numbers. There will come times of great changes in the occupation of thousands, when improvements in manufactures and machinery are made.—It’s all nonsense talking,—it must be so!”

Job Legh pondered a few moments. ...

“I’ll never misdoubt that power-looms, and railways, and all such-like inventions, are the gifts of God. I have lived long enough, too, to see that it is part of His plan to send suffering to bring out a higher good; but surely it’s also part of His plan that as much of the burden of the suffering as can be, should be lightened by those whom it is His pleasure to make happy, and content in their own circumstances. Of course it would take a deal more thought and wisdom than me, or any other man has, to settle out of hand how this should be done. But I’m clear about this, when God gives a blessing to be enjoyed, He gives it

with a duty to be done; and the duty of the happy is to help the suffering to bear their woe.”

“Still, facts have proved and are daily proving how much better it is for every man to be independent of help, and self-reliant,” said Mr. Carson, thoughtfully.

“You can never work facts as you would fixed quantities, and say, given two facts, and the product is so and so. God has given men feelings and passions which cannot be worked into the problem, because they are for ever changing and uncertain....be hanged to the facts! I ask your pardon, sir; I can't rightly explain the meaning that is in me. I'm like a tap as won't run, but keeps letting it out drop by drop, so that you've no notion of the force of what's within.”

Job looked and felt very sorrowful at the want of power in his words, while the feeling within him was so strong and clear.

“What you say is very true, no doubt,” replied Mr. Carson; “but how would you bring it to bear upon the masters’ conduct,—on my particular case?” added he, gravely.

“I'm not learned enough to argue. Thoughts come into my head that I'm sure are as true as Gospel, though may be they don't follow each other like the Q. E. D. of a Proposition. The masters has it on their own conscience,—you have it on yours, sir, to answer for to God whether you've done, and are doing all in your power to lighten the evils that seem always to hang on the trades by which you make your fortunes.”<sup>54</sup>

It would be less accurate to describe the kind of epistemology Job displays in this dialogue as Job's common sense, the possessive implying a consistent identification between Job's character in *Mary Barton* and his refusals here of “learning,” than it would be to describe the factory owner's recitation of the principles of market competition as Carson's political economy. Job, whom Mary describes as “one of the few among her acquaintance gifted with the knowledge of hard words,”<sup>55</sup> is the most educated of all the working characters in *Mary Barton*. Gaskell's narrator thematizes Job's scientific mind; Job collects specimens, rejects Will Wilson's account of a mermaid in a lengthy scene that demonstrates his hard-nosed factuality, and can be relied upon by Mary Barton to navigate the legal system in the days before Jem Wilson's trial for John Barton's murder of Carson's son. In this moment, however, Job permutates into a more commonsensical character to

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<sup>54</sup> Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, 384-5.

<sup>55</sup> Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, 248.

assist the narrator's purpose of staging an encounter between representatives of Manchester's masters and workers, respectively. As Job's inability practically to apply "the force of what's within" him to the "particular case" of "the masters' conduct" suggests, this encounter involves an asymmetrical exchange of a sentimental for an analytic capacity. Carson's encounter with Job reforms Carson in a Christian and an emotional sense in the subsequent narrative, teaching Carson to overcome vengefulness in response to his son's murder. But it is not Job who can "settle out of hand" how to alter the state of affairs between the masters and the workers in Manchester that the narrator suggests led to the murder. Though the narrative confirms the truth of Job's general outline of God's "plan," it also confirms that the path to practical solutions runs through the kind of thought-problem, familiar from the annals of Ricardian reasoning, that Carson deploys when he posits two men living in "solitude" who (implausibly) subsist on a two-commodity capitalist economy and corresponding division of labor. It is the possibility of working-class people like Job learning the principles of Carson's Victorian "Political Economy"—overcoming resistance to forms of transmission of institutionalized "learning" like this thought problem, or the "Q.E.D of a Proposition"—that promises substantively to resolve class tensions in the narrative's terms.<sup>56</sup> To the end of his life, the "wish" remains with Carson:

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<sup>56</sup> Gaskell echoes other nineteenth-century reformists who posited working-class education in political economy as a means of forestalling working-class unrest and industrial action. In his 1825 *Practical Observations upon the Education of the People*, for example, the politician and (in 1826) founder of the Society for the Dissemination of Useful Knowledge, Lord Brougham, had advocated just the kind of education of workers in the principles of political economy that Gaskell proposes:

I can hardly imagine...a greater service being rendered to the men, than expounding to them the true principles and mutual relations of population and wages; and both they and their masters will assuredly experience the effects of the prevailing ignorance upon such questions, as soon as any interruption shall happen in the commercial prosperity of the country, if indeed the present course of things, daily tending to lower wages as well as profits, and set the two classes in opposition to each other, shall not of itself bring on a crisis.

H. Brougham, *Practical Observations upon the Education of the People: Addressed to the Working Classes and Their Employers.*, 20th ed. (Richard Taylor, 1825), 5,

that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognized that the interests of one were the interests of all, and, as such, required the consideration and deliberation of all; that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men.<sup>57</sup>

Carson's "wish" for a socially common—because shared by all classes—"understanding" requires the general working-class population to become "capable of judging" through a program of education. Carson envisions an end to class conflict, in other words, through a reformed common sense, now common knowledge of "Political Economy": the truly universal common sense of the future. Against this common knowledge, Job's and the weaver's common sense appear superannuated and—because working-classed in an interpretive economy that designates bourgeois values as universal—merely particular.

### ***Common Sense, Divided Life***

While the logic of a future "perfect understanding...between masters and men" mobilized the industrial novel, this logic also carried with it internal contradictions. The contradiction between the notion of common sense and an actually divided social reality was nothing new. In his "Sensus Communis, An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour in a Letter to a Friend" (1711), Lord Shaftesbury describes a "conversation" among "friends" who each "appeal to

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[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CVBWTJ380853242/NCCO?u=prin77918&sid=bookmark-NCCO&xid=48027e28&pg=1](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CVBWTJ380853242/NCCO?u=prin77918&sid=bookmark-NCCO&xid=48027e28&pg=1). Gaskell's narrator agrees strongly with what Brougham implies here: that strikes and other forms of working-class agitation were irrational, the result of workers' ignorance about the external pressures of capitalist competition on individual capitalists. To reformists like Brougham, programs of working-class education that converted working class ignorance to working-class understanding of "true principles" of political economy presented themselves as a solution, by epistemological conquest of workers, to working-class political reactions to the extreme rates of exploitation of the early- to mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>57</sup> Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, 388.

common sense” to support their various positions.<sup>58</sup> “Common sense” itself becomes a topic of discussion after a certain “gentleman” decides to “call the authority of the court” of common sense “in question”:

Amid the different opinions started and maintained by several of the parties with great life and ingenuity, one or other would every now and then take the liberty to appeal to common sense. Everyone allowed the appeal and was willing to stand the trial. No one but was assured common sense would justify him. But when issue was joined and the cause examined at the bar, there could be no judgment given. The parties however were not less forward in renewing their appeal on the very next occasion which presented. No one would offer to call the authority of the court in question, till a gentleman, whose good understanding was never yet brought in doubt, desired the company, very gravely, that they would tell him what common sense was.<sup>59</sup>

In Shaftesbury’s anecdote, the “gentleman” of “good understanding” next summarizes a worry that frequently accompanied usages of the term “common sense” in the eighteenth century: if “common sense” denoted agreement among people in general, it was difficult to locate. “Mankind,” after all, was notoriously a site of disagreement. Shaftesbury paraphrases the “gentleman[’s]” remarks: “‘If, by the word “sense,” we were to understand opinion and judgment and, by the word “common,” the generality or any considerable part of mankind, it would be hard...to discover where the subject of common sense could lie. For that which was according to the sense of one part of mankind was against the sense of another.’”<sup>60</sup> The “subject of common sense”—if this is defined as “opinion and judgment” shared among most or all people—is unlocatable in the world of *social* subjects. Since the “opinion[s]” and “judgment[s]” of “mankind” are inevitably multiple, “common sense” is impossible to find.

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<sup>58</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour in a Letter to a Friend,” in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence Eliot Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>59</sup> Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis,” 37.

<sup>60</sup> Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis,” 37.

The observation was prescient in a century when social processes including political partisanship, privatization of lands, colonialism and commercial imperialism were putting increasing pressure on the concept of commonness. The rural subsistence economy in England was vanishing as enclosures diminished common lands. To the continuously increasing populations of peasants proletarianized due to loss of the commons, British colonial and imperial activity added, racialized, and enslaved new, non-citizen subjects of the British Empire. “Common sense” had historically been a popular term precisely in the face of obvious social heterogeneity, especially political partisanship. But as a global system of power and commercial relations expanded, and the eighteenth century became the nineteenth, popular discourses around common sense issued from social sites that were self-consciously fractured not just by ideology but also by emerging national boundaries. Though Shaftesbury initially defines “common sense” as the “sense” of “the generality...of mankind,” Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* counterintuitively sought to undermine rather than bolster the idea that the English and the English emigrants to America had anything in common. The subject of Paine’s pamphlet was not the whole of “mankind,” or even of English culture represented as fundamentally common, but specifically the American “emigrants” who found themselves in a “sequestered part of the earth, unconnected with the rest.”<sup>61</sup>

By the time common sense split into two—a bourgeois common sense that had to be consciously implemented through programs of working-class education, and the working-class common sense that this education sought to supplement or replace—common sense pretended to fewer descriptive claims than previously. In the industrial era, common sense now implied a political project whereby, at some future moment, the social universality that common sense had

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 66.

always designated would come into being. The historical character of this process exposed common sense in new ways to the non-identity of terms it sought to bring together without necessary mediation. If for the Scottish School these terms were philosophy and common life; sense and practice, for the industrial novelists they had become the social and the political, on one hand, and education and material life, on the other.

In an era thoroughly imprinted by class conflict in the forms of both Trades-Unionism and (with its fractious encounters between protesters and police) the early Chartist movement, class itself exposed common sense to its internal contradictions. The most obvious challenge to *Mary Barton*'s narrator's assumption that the distance between masters and men would be bridged if only the poor understood the principles of "Political Economy" is that Job's common sense, and Carson's "Political Economy," are traceable to each man's respective class interests as much as or more than to their respective levels of education, complicating Gaskell's narrator's attribution to their encounter of a formula for "perfect understanding...between masters and men"—sans the abolition of class interests—as the future political accommodation between the classes. Indeed, considering Job's status throughout Gaskell's novel as a scientist and someone capable of navigating the legal system, Job's refusal to engage with Carson on Carson's epistemological terrain is legible as much as a social mannerism that obliquely reveals knowledge of the class interests that Carson's "Political Economy" serves, as it is legible as the ignorance it pretends to be. Reading their dialogue in terms of the class interests that frame the basic concerns of *Mary Barton*, instead of the form of class as understanding that emerges in this moment, complicates the narrator's assertions that providing Job and people like Job with an education in "Political Economy" will institute social harmony. Gaskell does not really confess this contradiction in *Mary Barton*. But it is with more doubt regarding the realizability of this accommodation in reality as

opposed to “theory” that her 1854 novel *North and South*, in many ways a re-writing of *Mary Barton*, attributes to the factory owner Mr. Thornton the “theory” that: “My interests are identical with those of my workpeople, and vice versa...On some future day—in some millennium—in Utopia, this unity may be brought into practice.”<sup>62</sup> Recalling Carlyle’s own speculative leap in *Chartism*, this jump to “theory” and “Utopia” in this revisionist moment of *North and South*—the abandonment of the incremental timeline reaching toward the future that Gaskell had described in *Mary Barton*—may register Gaskell’s perception of a limit to her premise that social reform could be achieved solely with the resources of collective knowledge.

### ***Resistance to Reason: Common Sense and Critique***

Above I discussed how “common sense” paraphrases Burke’s famous inauguration of modern Conservatism in the latter’s critique of the French Revolution. But a less familiar Burke, Burke as critic of Imperial abuses in India, shows otherwise. In the context of the Trial of Warren Hastings, the attempt between 1788 and 1795 to impeach the first Governor General of Bengal in the British Parliament, Burke draws on common sense to cast suspicion on thought’s submersion in social processes—thought’s justification of economic interests after the fact. This less familiar Burke unexpectedly lays the groundwork for something like a critique of ideology. The impeachment of Warren Hastings was in part a debate about the conduct of a powerful employee of the East India Company. But it was also a debate about Imperial conduct in general as Britain extracted wealth from its colonies. In one of his speeches during the years-long trial of Hastings, Burke made the following remark:

An opinion has been insidiously circulated through this kingdom, and through foreign nations too, that, in order to cover our participation in guilt, and our common interest in the plunder of the East, we have invented a set of scholastic distinctions, abhorrent to the common sense

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<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 167.

and unpropitious to the common necessities of mankind, by which we are to deny ourselves the knowledge of what the rest of the world knows, and what so great a part of the world both knows and feels.<sup>63</sup>

From the standpoint of “common sense,” the “scholastic distinctions” that permeate Hastings’ trial are a means of “deny[ing]” the “knowledge” of Great Britain’s “participation in guilt” and justifying acts that go against “the common necessities of mankind.” As Burke elsewhere explains to the House of Lords, Hastings constructed “not only a long, connected, systematic series of misdemeanors, but an equally connected system of maxims and principles invented to justify them.”<sup>64</sup> It is hard to imagine Burke placing “common sense” in moral tension with the “common interest” of the English in his better-known commentaries on the French Revolution. There, “common sense” and “common interest” were the same. But here, “common sense” must try to see through the “cover” which English “common interest” has erected in order to pursue its goals. One of Burke’s major diagnoses of the French Revolution was that abstract revolutionary thought had *caused* the Revolution. It had not followed behind the Revolution but was—horrifically—its source. In contrast, “common sense” in Burke’s remarks on Hastings critiques a kind of thought which follows behind action, justifying “misdemeanors.”

Even as common sense attempts to subordinate thought to life by stripping thought of its autonomy, Burke’s political rhetoric collectively suggests, common sense also interrogates how and why life might instrumentalize thought. Burke is not the only example. Horkheimer shows us how common sense justifies slavery in the writings of Fitzhugh, but there is also a tradition of commonsensical critique of the very justifying apparatus of slavery of which Fitzhugh is a type. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe describes the form of appearance from a

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<sup>63</sup> Edmund Burke, *Burke’s Speech at the Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Calcutta: Printed by N. Chakravarty at the “Bangabashi” Press, 1909), 13-14.

<sup>64</sup> Burke, *Burke’s Speech*, 3.

common-sense vantage point of a political-economic rationality that contorts itself in all directions in order to justify slavery: “that which can bend and turn, and descend and ascend;”<sup>65</sup> that which can “warp and bend language.”<sup>66</sup> Beecher Stowe’s novel draws on common sense to cast suspicion on the identity between slavery and slavery’s apologias—the latter no autonomous exercise in thought, but a driving force behind slavery’s reproduction. The late novels of Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), show how the common sense of Victorian convention contribute to the oppression of women by taking as read the dead letter of collective social law. But in an earlier short story by Hardy, “The Distracted Preacher” (1879), common sense effects a proto-feminist critique of the blandishments that cover for male social power. In the story, a preacher finds himself tentatively affianced to a woman only to discover that she, along with her whole community, are engaged in a criminal liquor-smuggling enterprise. To the preacher’s repeated attempts to force both a definite engagement and a promise from his intended to give up a life of crime, she points not to reasons for refusal but to habit: “‘It is too much to ask. My whole life ha’ been passed in this way.’”<sup>67</sup> By proposing that the woman may choose a life of crime not for this or that reason but simply and unaccountably for its own sake, here common sense interrupts a form of male desire that equates its own fulfillment with the erasure of another’s identity.

The texts I analyze in this dissertation do not generally adopt anything approaching a Critical-Theoretical lens on the social world. Rather than confront and overcome the abstract character of sense certainty, the common sense they represent or promote tends unwillingly to

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<sup>65</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ed. Mary R. Reichardt (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 242.

<sup>66</sup> Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 291.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Hardy, “The Distracted Preacher,” in *The Distracted Preacher and Other Tales*, ed. Susan Hill (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 93.

reproduce the abstractions it ostensibly avoids. The one text of all those I analyze that is critical of *common sense*, Dickens' *Hard Times*, satirizes this tendency illustratively. "Strong common sense"<sup>68</sup> operates in Dickens' *Hard Times* as a series of infeasible attempts to make coercive social action take the place of reflection. Excluding everything but "Facts,"<sup>69</sup> characters who promote "strong common sense" attempt to ban reflection from all social transactions. But Dickens' plot demonstrates the impossibility of a social order based on the exclusion of reflection from action, and the language of Dickens' characters' "common sense" excessively mimics the forms of reason and reflection in order to exclude them. Nonetheless, I will suggest that precisely common sense's poverty in critical-theoretical resources provides visibility onto some of the same problems that critical-theoretical observers of industrial life, such as Engels, confronted—particularly mediations between the categories of the social, the political, and the cultural. As common sense twists, turns, and doubles back on itself, it leaves in narrative form a record of these problems' conceptual and historical intractability to those they implicated.

Before briefly summarizing the dissertation's four chapters, I want to offer a note on a critical problem that the industrial novels pose. The industrial novels emerged directly out of the cheap literature and useful knowledge movements of the 1830s, encompassing a set of texts "so intent," as Patrick Brantlinger remarks, "on individual and social improvement that it almost ceases to be literature."<sup>70</sup> To the extent that they imagined their novels as vehicles of common sense, the industrial novelists, too, sought not only to represent the "condition of England" but actually to effect social change by the persuasive and pedagogical means available to the novel. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three, the didacticism of the industrial novels has attenuated the

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<sup>68</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1966), 2.

<sup>69</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832-1867* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 23.

literariness of the novels I discuss for many readers just as the didacticism of the earlier cheap literature does for Brantlinger. Raymond Williams, for example, wrote of *Alton Locke* that a “very large part of it is like reading old newspapers, or at least old pamphlets. The issues are there, but the terms are arbitrary and the connexions mechanical. The book is not an ‘autobiography’ but a tract.”<sup>71</sup> The impression that *Alton Locke* and the other industrial novels are tracts stuffed roughly into narrative form can induce a mode of critical engagement that seeks to translate out of narrative form the social and political thought that underlies, motivates, and determines a particular narrative. Readers of Dickens’ *Hard Times*, in particular, have often fantasized a compositional procedure in which Dickens’ social and political analysis of the industrial situation came first and his narrativization of this analysis came second. As a result, discussions of *Hard Times* have often revolved around disagreements over the content and adequacy of this analysis.

In a critical environment that sometimes circularly defines literary form, literary value, and realism in terms of each other, the perceived under-development of the industrial novels’ literary forms has made it difficult to locate them in a genealogy of British realism. Compared to some of the late-nineteenth-century novels that critics identify as exemplars of British realism, the industrial novels can read as documents from a moment before the cultural achievement of social-realist form took place. Whereas tableaux of working-class life and struggle were crucial to the development of French realism, this gives the impression that the British novels most directly engaged in representing the social reality of British industrial life and its attendant social crises are not realist texts. Whether this is a satisfying or unsatisfying conclusion may depend on our investment in (a particular definition of) realism. Rather than recuperate the industrial novels for realism, I suggest that the industrial novels are a limit case for the usefulness of realism as a critical

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<sup>71</sup> Raymond Williams, “The Industrial Novels,” in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1958), 101.

lens. Focusing on the industrial novels through the lens of realism can get in the way of accounting for them as literary works of social representation, whose complex narrative forms reflect the contradictoriness of industrial social life.

**Chapter One**, “Common Sense, Common Life: The Scottish School’s Critique of Abstraction,” a philosophical preview of the dissertation’s main, literary focus, takes up the eighteenth-century transfer of common sense from the rhetorical domain of literary criticism to the Scottish School. Culminating in Thomas Reid’s argumentative attempt to ground philosophy in “common life,” the equation that common sense discourse and philosophy suggest between thought and daily activity is so total that—if possible to enact—it would lead to the elimination of whatever distinguishes contemplative reflection from, for example, buying groceries or building a house. Counterintuitively, however, I argue that this attempt to legislate an impossible identity between thought and life registered emergent distinctions (e.g., between mental and material activity) and divisions (e.g., between the institutionalized production of knowledge and the production of knowledge in a social sphere), that lie at the bottom even of our contemporary everyday consciousness about thought’s relations to the social world.

**Chapter Two**, “From Means to Meaning: Politics as Allegory in the Era of Chartism’s Defeat,” examines Charles Kingsley’s promotion of working-class self-improvement through education as a substitute for working-class politics in his 1850 novel *Alton Locke*. Kingsley co-founded Christian Socialism in 1848 to promote working-class social cooperatives in place of what he saw as a misguided grasp for political power by a population unprepared to wield the franchise responsibly. In *Alton Locke*, Kingsley seeks to present education to the working-classes as a superior alternative to Chartist politics. I argue that Kingsley substitutes education for Chartism both through the historical narrative that his novel unfolds, *and* at the level of the text—Kingsley

represents his eponymous Chartist hero as always-already committed to education rather than Chartism. Kingsley's preemptive erasure of Chartism from a novel ostensibly about Chartism's defeat and sublation into Christian Socialism troubles his attempt to narrate a historical transition away from Chartism in the historical moment of Chartism's 1848 defeat. When 1848 arrives in the narrative, no distinctly political content has surfaced in the text. As I argue, Kingsley's propagandistic conflation of Chartism with working-class education sheds light on twentieth-century debates among social historians about the political versus social character of Chartism. In a 1983 essay, Gareth Stedman Jones argued that the movement should be understood in the political terms of Chartism's own adherents, not the social terms of class consciousness. I show that Kingsley, and Chartists laboring under repeated experiences of defeat, successively re-narrativized and repressed early political accounts of Chartism. A movement originally understood as the political means to a social end came to be understood as the social means to an increasingly elusive political end. In this sense, the political or social status of Chartism was, under shifting historical and ideological conditions, continually at stake for Chartists and their contemporaries themselves.

**Chapter Three**, "Literature for Hard Times: Dickens' Industrial Novel and the Problem of British Realism," takes up Dickens' critique of "strong common sense" in his 1854 novel *Hard Times*. Critics have read *Hard Times* as a social problem narrative that begins with an intent to discredit the ideology of utilitarianism and ends either in a successfully comprehensive critique of the essence of industrialism, or in an incoherent and unsatisfying dichotomy between this utilitarianism and the irrepressible human spirit. Shifting the terrain of discussion from Dickens' satisfying or unsatisfying social diagnosis of industrial life to what I argue is *Hard Times*' socially mimetic *formal* character, I argue that the excessiveness of plot and dialogue in the novel generates

itself against a “strong common sense” that seeks to eliminate thought, deliberation, and representation itself from social processes. This “strong common sense” does not, I suggest, stand in one-for-one with utilitarianism understood either as an ideology of self-interest or an educational ethos hostile to the imagination. Rather, “strong common sense” in *Hard Times* mobilizes formal reflection on literature’s own subsumption by industrial social processes.

**Chapter Four**, “‘Power’ over ‘Brains’: The Meaning of Realism in Felix Holt,” examines the connection in George Eliot’s late industrial novel *Felix Holt* (1866) between a method of psychological realism attentive to the truth of inner life, and Eliot’s conviction that the uneducated poor are incapable of cognitive abstraction. The political plot of *Felix Holt* revolves around the misrecognition by distant spectators of its eponymous protagonist’s involvement in a working-class mob. Insisting on the capacity of Felix’s intentions to vindicate the appearance of his actions, Eliot reverts to a mode of close examination that she earlier characterized as realist in her 1856 essay “The Natural History of German Life.” As I show, however, what is at stake for Eliot both in “The Natural History of German Life” and *Felix Holt* is not false appearance in general, but the specific false appearance of working-class political participation. Conceptualizing what she calls the “meaning” of politics as abstract, and political participation as a comprehension of this abstract “meaning,” Eliot deploys the contents of Felix’s mind as a proxy for her fundamental concern, the absence of political “meaning” from working minds. While the “meaning” to which both Eliot’s realism and her political theory refer is never present within the pages of *Felix Holt*, I suggest that she offers the novel itself as a substitute for this absent “meaning”—not in the directly interventionist, reformist sense of earlier improving literature, but in the Arnoldian sense of culture or what Eliot calls a “common estate” of intellectual production whose value consists in its non-instrumentality.

## Common Sense, Common Life: The Scottish School's Critique of Abstraction

At the same time as one Scottish philosopher, Adam Smith, was developing an unprecedented account of specialization's function in the capitalist accumulation of wealth, another set of Scottish philosophers waged an all-out war on specialization. Published twelve, ten, and six years before *The Wealth of Nations*, respectively, Thomas Reid's 1764 *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, James Oswald's 1766 *An Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion*, and James Beattie's 1770 *An Essay on The Nature and Immutability of Truth In Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* sought to dissolve boundaries between intellectual elites and the common people, philosophy and common life, and even thought and practice itself. As George Elder Davie remarked in a 1972 lecture titled "The Social Significance of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense," taken together the Scottish Enlightenment appears as a "paradoxical effort to conciliate opposites—specialisation, indeed individualism in the material production of society on the one hand, and anti-individualism, almost a sort of socialism, in its spiritual productivity on the other."<sup>72</sup>

One of the great ironies of the Scottish School's fate after its own time is that scholarship would cordon Reid's, Oswald's, and Beattie's work into precisely the kind of specialized sphere of academic knowledge-production to which these philosophers were most hostile. In his 2014 book *Common Sense in Early 18th-Century British Literature and Culture: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics, 1680–1750*, for example, Christoph Henke differentiates between a "special discourse" of common sense that pertains to "the actual discussion of concepts of common sense within a

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<sup>72</sup> George Elder Davie, *The Social Significance of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Dundee: University of Dundee Press, 1973), 9.

more or less institutionalized framework of intellectual scholarly debate (as for instance in the Scottish school of common sense philosophy)” and “common sense as mere rhetoric,” something that “occurs primarily in the social sphere of politics and becomes a fashionable rhetorical commonplace in the course of the eighteenth century.”<sup>73</sup> I will argue in this chapter that eighteenth-century invocations of common sense are best understood neither as “actual discussion of concepts” nor as “mere rhetoric,” but as a discourse within which “rhetoric” *figuratively* contests the abstraction of thought from the social and material forms of “common life.” Whether in the public sphere of eighteenth-century letters or in universities, “common sense” contested the autonomy of concepts from “common life,” “mankind,” or “the world.” I will also suggest that common sense discourse is one origin point for the very sociology of knowledge on which Henke draws when, to separate one part of common sense discourse from another, he divides a “rhetoric[al]” from a “concept[ual],” a “social” from an “institutionalized” field of intellectual activity. Common sense discourse posited a world divided into a “social sphere” (“common life”) and an “institutionalized framework” (“the schools”). As it traversed some of the spheres, practices, disciplines, and social and institutional spaces which our contemporary imagination may sort into just such a division—from literary criticism, with its claim to a particularly “social” realm of intellectual practice, to institutionalized academic philosophy—it negotiated their emergent boundaries.

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<sup>73</sup> Christoph Henke, *Common Sense in Early 18th-Century British Literature and Culture: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics, 1680-1750*, ANGLIA, volume 46 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 38.

## *Common Sense, Common Life*

A frequent refrain in Thomas Reid's critique of idealist philosophy is that "common sense" is an epistemological necessity for all subjects insofar as they participate in social life: subjects must universally have "common sense" in order to function in a social world with common economic, legal, and material laws. In *Essays on the Intellectual Power of Man* (1785), for example, Reid wrote that an:

inward light or sense is given by Heaven to different persons in different degrees. There is a certain degree of it which is necessary to our being subjects of law and government, capable of managing our own affairs, and answerable for our conduct towards others: this is called common sense, because it is common to all men with whom we can transact business, or call to account for their conduct.<sup>74</sup>

Designating the ability to be recognized and engaged by others as a potential partner in the "business of social life," "common sense" is "common" because it is necessary in order to negotiate certain structures of social life—"law," "government," "business," and "conduct"—that are broadly shared.

To dramatize the pervasive necessity of "common sense" in practical life, Reid often rhetorically contrasted the principles of philosophers with the necessary actions of the common life in which they, too, participated. Against the backdrop of universal participation in "the common concerns of life," the "skeptical" idealism of these philosophers represented a departure from "common sense" that was not only misguided but ironic. For example, in his *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), Reid wrote:

It is probable the "Treatise of Human Nature" was not written in company; yet it contains manifest indications that the author every now and then relapsed into the faith of the vulgar, and could hardly, for half a dozen pages, keep up the skeptical character. In like manner, the great

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Power of Man*, ed. James Walker, 2nd ed. (John Bartlett, 1851), 352.

Pyrrho himself forgot his principles on some occasions; and is said once to have been in such a passion with his cook, who probably had not roasted his dinner to his mind, that with the spit in his hand, and the meat upon it, he pursued him into the marketplace. It is a bold philosophy that rejects, without ceremony, principles which irresistibly govern the belief and conduct of all mankind in the common concerns of life; and to which the philosopher himself must yield, after he imagines he hath confuted them.<sup>75</sup>

The skepticism that Reid attributes first to Hume (the author of “‘The Treatise of Human Nature’”), then to Pyrrho, then to “the philosopher” can only endure, according to Reid, until each figure has to engage in one of “the common concerns of life.” Reid implies that the “skeptical character” that Hume, according to Reid, presents in the *Treatise* was only possible because the *Treatise* “was not written in company.” Only as long as Hume kept himself in solitude—a way of refraining from “the common concerns of life”—could he persist in skepticism. Even then, Hume often “relapsed” into a belief in the material world. The principles which “the philosopher” resists are ultimately “irresistibl[e].” Once a philosopher rejoins “company,” or finds his chicken not properly roasted, he must “yield” to common sense “principles.”

The distinction in Reid’s thought between “common sense” and “what we call absurd,” then, rests on what he means by the “common concerns of life.” In Reid’s *Inquiry*, this most frequently means engagement with material life and “society.”<sup>76</sup> As Reid writes when he argues that Hume’s “curious system” is not “fitted to the present state of human nature,”<sup>77</sup> philosophers meet inevitably with the “necessity” of “principles of common sense” when they “condescend to mingle again with the human race, and to converse with a friend, a companion, or a fellow citizen.”<sup>78</sup> In the passage in the previous paragraph, the scene of Hume composing the *Treatise*

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<sup>75</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, 8.

<sup>77</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, 21.

<sup>78</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, 22.

away from “company” opposes engagement with “the common concerns of life.” Hume composes “absurdity” as long as he refrains from “the common concerns of life” by insisting on solitude: the very act of thinking away from “company” is inimical to “common sense.”

It is worth pausing on the fact that the scene of Hume’s writing of the *Treatise* represents what it conventionally meant in the eighteenth century to engage not only in “skeptical,” idealist, or philosophical thought, but in contemplative thought per se. Figuring large in eighteenth-century literature and epistolary culture, the private closet or dressing room was the designated location for thinking and writing; it was the condition of possibility for thought because it enabled withdrawal from the social demands and the processes of everyday life Reid calls “the common concerns of life.” Against the privacy and withdrawal which was often considered to enable thought, the phrase “the common concerns of life” in Reid’s text represents what it means to engage in anything *but* contemplative or reflective thought, such as socializing, or finding a chicken not to one’s taste. “The common concerns of life” exclude both the time and place of any thinking which could be construed as contemplative or reflective. Although Reid appears to conceive of “common sense” as a kind of thinking, or as having something to do with thought, Reid’s identification of “the common concerns of life” as the only possible scene for “common sense” raises the question of what it means to define a kind of thinking in terms of activities that oppose thought.

Reid even seems to suggest that social activities that exclude the time and place of contemplative thought “signify” common sense. It is clear from Reid’s commentaries on language in the *Essays* that the social activities involved for him in “the common concerns of life” do not so much elicit as “express” common sense. Reid writes:

The language of mankind is expressive of their thoughts, and of the various operations of their minds. The various operations of the

understanding, will, and passions, which are common to mankind, have various forms of speech corresponding to them in all languages, which are the signs of them, and by which they are expressed; and a due attention to the signs may, in many cases, give considerable light to the things signified by them. There are in all languages modes of speech by which men signify their judgment or give their testimony; by which they accept or refuse; by which they ask information or advice; by which they command, or threaten, or supplicate; by which they plight their faith in promises or contracts. If such operations were not common to mankind, we should not find in all languages forms of speech by which they were expressed. All languages, indeed, have their imperfections; they can never be adequate to all the varieties of human thought; and therefore things may be really distinct in their nature; and capable of being distinguished by the human mind, which are not distinguished in common language. We can only expect, in the structure of languages, those distinctions which all mankind in the common business of life have occasion to make. There may be peculiarities in a particular language, of the causes of which we are ignorant, and from which, therefore, we can draw no conclusion. But whatever we find common to all language must have a common cause; must be owing to some common notion or sentiment of the human mind.<sup>79</sup>

The “signs” of language “express” “thought,” along with the other “operations” of the mind, especially in “the common business of life,” which connotes social transactions like giving “judgment” or “testimony,” entering into “contracts,” accepting or refusing, etc. But social actions like these have special status in Reid’s argument because they strenuously *do not* stand for the practice of reflective thought. More specifically, they have this status because their performance does not require the specialized language proper to spheres of social life that are not common. It is worth recalling that Reid bases his description of all language that describes operations of the mind as “analogical” in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* on his view that the fundamental function of language is to refer to material objects. Thus, Reid may believe that the language of thought is less reliable than the “language of common life” *because* it is more abstract. As the objects to which language refers become more distant from material objects, the more

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<sup>79</sup> Reid, *Essays*, 23-24.

analogical and for that reason the less reliable (we may infer, the less commonsensical) Reid believes language to be. Largely performative rather than constative, what these social acts “express” is their own fulfillment in a sphere removed from reflection. If common sense is a form of thought, Reid’s explanation seems to further equate the “common notion” to which the “common language” of the “common business of life” “ow[es]” with certain social activities that themselves require speech. As a kind of thought, Reid suggests, common sense is “signifie[d]” by these social activities.

Before eventually returning to Reid’s formulation of a kind of thought “signifie[d]” by—or identical to—a notion of practice that excludes most conventional understandings of what thought is, I want to situate Reid’s project in relation to common sense discourse in eighteenth-century British literary culture as a whole. The basic premise of Reid’s project in his *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, the institutional codification of a set of “principles of common sense” aimed at overturning existing systems of academic thought, contravened the usual, wholly anti-institutional, anti-academic connotations of “common sense.” By tracking these inversions of “common sense” by Reid (and to some extent by the other common sense philosophers), I will read Reid’s identification of the kind of thought that “common sense” supposedly was with the practices of “common life” as one response to a crisis of representation of the social division of intellectual labor—a crisis related not to post-Cartesian philosophical polemics but to the post-neoclassical project of British literary criticism.

The main eighteenth-century critic of the Scottish School, Joseph Priestley, registered the irony of such a thing as academic common sense philosophy when he remarked of Reid’s *Inquiry* that it seemed to him out of place in a “public university”:

It appeared to me to be an ingenious piece of sophistry, and had it been written for the purpose of amusement, I might have been pleased with

it; but I own I was rather surprised to see such a production ushered in the world with great gravity, by a professor in a public university; and I was more surprised to find that the work was very seriously admired both in Scotland and England.<sup>80</sup>

Priestley responds to the fact of Reid's position in an academic institution and to the "serious[ness]" with which Reid himself, and his readers, treat Reid's "production." If Reid's argument had been "written for the purpose of amusement," Priestley "might have been pleased with it," but he is "surprised" by the work's earnest reception as an equally earnest piece of philosophical inquiry.

Priestley's suggestion that Reid's work would be intelligible in another context, just not in "a public university," points to the essential irony of such a thing as common sense philosophy. The line between literary-critical and academic thought occupied the imaginations of those who—from a vantage point that they imagined as social rather than institutional—appealed to "common sense" to attack abstruse scholarship. That common sense discourse should stray across this line, migrating into the academy, was in this context absurd. The oppositions that the common sense philosophers rehearsed between "common life" and "the schools" were staples in the writing of such figures as Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and Samuel Johnson, prominent English literary critics of the eighteenth century. In service of an emergent style of literary criticism busy opposing itself to the rule-based neo-classicism that dominated in the seventeenth-century, a "common sense" that derogated "unnecessarily speculative, esoteric, or passionate enterprises, including highly learned ones"<sup>81</sup> grounded the projects of publications like *The Spectator* and *The Tatler* under Addison's and Steele's direction and motivated Johnson to condemn abstruse speculation.

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<sup>80</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind, Dr. Beattie's Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, and Dr. Oswald's Appeal to Commonsense* (New York: Garland, 1978), vii-viii.

<sup>81</sup> Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History*, 30.

This literary-critical common sense opposed a kind of intellectual practice adequate to “common life” or “mankind” to the solitary abstraction of academic thinking. According to Addison, Steele, and, a generation later, Johnson, scholarship was a problematically anti-social pursuit: according to these critics, one should install knowledge into social dynamics and practices, not acquire it in an isolation they represented as inert. Addison summarized a popular attitude to “Learning” vis-à-vis “common life” when he wrote, in a dedication of the second volume of *The Spectator* to Charles Lord Halifax:

When Learning irradiates common Life, it is then in its highest Use and Perfection; and it is to such as Your Lordship that the Sciences owe the Esteem which they have with the active Part of Mankind. Knowledge of Books in recluse Men, is like that sort of Lanthorn which hides him who carries it, and serves only to pass through secret and gloomy Paths of his own; but in the Possession of a Man of Business, it is as a Torch in the Hand of one who is willing and able to shew those, who are bewildered, the Way which leads to their Prosperity and Welfare.<sup>82</sup>

“Knowledge of Books” as the solitary pursuit of “recluse Men” who do not use their knowledge as a support to “Business” disappears, with disparaging connotations, from the social context that this “Learning” might otherwise benefit. Only when “learning irradiates common life”—when the scholar abandons his inactive solitude in favor of “active” engagement with “Business”—does it carry social value, and Addison’s approbation. In his essay “The Need for General Knowledge,” Johnson expressed similar sentiments:

Nothing has so much exposed men of learning to contempt and ridicule as their ignorance of things which are known to all but themselves. Those who have been taught to consider the institutions of the schools as giving the last perfection to human abilities are surprised to see men wrinkled with study yet wanting to be instructed in the minute circumstances of propriety, or the necessary forms of daily transaction; and quickly shake off their reverence for modes of education which they find to produce no ability above the rest of mankind. “Books,”

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<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Susan Fitzmaurice, “English Aristocratic Letters,” in *Letter Writing and Language Change*, ed. Anita Auer, Daniel Schreier, and Richard J. Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 159, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139088275>.

says Bacon, “can never teach the use of books.” The student must learn by commerce with mankind to reduce his speculations to practice, and accommodate his knowledge to the purposes of life.<sup>83</sup>

Just as Addison valorizes the “active part of Mankind” against studious “recluse Men,” Johnson valorizes “practice,” “daily transaction,” and “the purposes of life” against the “study” of “Books” in “the institutions of the schools,” censuring scholarship in its self-removal from a sphere predicated by sociality and by the “reduc[tion]” of all “speculations” to “practice.”

Implicit in the prescription to “accommodate...knowledge to the purposes of life” is at once a set of ideas about what criticism itself should look like or do and a set of ideas about “common sense” as the antidote to “speculations” over and above “practice.” Significant overlaps existed between these two sets of ideas; they were in some ways indistinguishable. By problematizing knowledge of “books,” critics addressed “the ‘common reader,’ Johnson's imaginary critical arbiter, famous for being ‘uncorrupted with literary prejudices’ and free from ‘the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning’.”<sup>84</sup> They addressed, in other words, the subject of “common life,” a subject to whom “common sense” could logically be imputed. Both “common sense” and eighteenth-century criticism designated a specific set of social and intellectual activities defined—contradictorily—in terms of their universality. “Common sense” paraphrases the contradictions of the very concept of a social sphere, a space of informal intellectual production that somehow unites the predicates of universality (the social as such) and specificity (the sphere in which properly social activities take place in opposition to the supposedly anti-social spheres of specialized knowledges and discourses of “institutionalized framework[s]”). Terry Eagleton notes

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<sup>83</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Samuel Johnson: The Major Works*, ed. Donald Johnson Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 224.

<sup>84</sup> James Basker, “Criticism and the Rise of Periodical Literature,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 323.

in *The Function of Criticism* that what enabled the “general appeal” of Samuel Johnson’s *The Rambler* “was in part Johnson’s renowned ‘common sense’: for him, as for Addison and Steele, the act of literary criticism inhabits no autonomous aesthetic sphere but belongs organically with ‘general ideology,’ indissociable from common styles of judgement and experience, bound up with a *Lebenswelt* which precedes and encompasses all specialist disciplinary distinctions.”<sup>85</sup> Eagleton’s main subject is “literary criticism” rather than the “common sense” from which “the act of literary criticism” is “indissociable,” but the vocabulary of an “autonomous [...] sphere” that “the act of literary criticism” does not “inhabit” describes “common sense’s” own claims as much as those of “literary criticism.” “Common sense,” like “literary criticism,” posits itself as continuous with “‘general ideology’”—refusing specialization.

It is possible to see from this remark of Eagleton’s how the very concept of academic specialization goes hand in hand with opposites: “common life,” “common sense,” the commons itself, and any number of public spheres or literary milieus. Crucial to the self-posed freedom of “common sense” from an “autonomous...sphere” is the concept of just such an autonomous sphere: the space of antisocial scholarly “Learning” against which common sense discourses warred in the pages of eighteenth-century periodicals. The recurrent idea within common sense discourse of a “specialist disciplinary distinction” that “common sense” *did not* admit rendered the category of “common sense” as “‘general ideology’” intelligible in the first place. If, according to Eagleton, “the act of literary criticism...precedes and encompasses all specialist disciplinary distinctions,” this pertains to common sense as well. common sense “precedes” “specialist disciplinary distinctions” in the sense that it locates itself in relation to them, taking priority over them; it “encompasses them” in the sense that it ultimately refuses their “autonomy” from itself.

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<sup>85</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso, 2005), 33-4.

Reid sounds like Addison or Johnson when he writes: “It is a bold philosophy that rejects, without ceremony, principles which irresistibly govern the belief and conduct of all mankind in the common concerns of life.”<sup>86</sup> So does James Oswald in *An Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion* when he writes that “young people...must not be kept too long in the schools, lest they contract habits of thinking that are opposite, or foreign at least, to common practice.”<sup>87</sup> Notwithstanding Oswald’s dependence on the university system for his livelihood, he offers as superior to an institutional education “a very dangerous school, the world, where [young people] may get acquainted with men and things.”<sup>88</sup> James Beattie likewise echoed literary-critical “common sense discourse,” endeavoring to give proper place to worldly, rather than scholarly, concerns, in *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*. “Our systems,” he wrote, “have more the appearance of liberal sentiments, good taste, and correct composition, than those of the schoolmen; we disclaim (at least in words) all attachment to hypothesis and party; profess to study men and things, as well as books and words.”<sup>89</sup> Beattie’s opposition between “men and things” and “books and words” echoes literary critics’ differing valuations of scholarly knowledge vs. the knowledge of “common life” or “mankind.”

### ***The Rhetoric of Common Sense***

What was novel to Priestley about the Scottish School was not on its own the fact that Reid, Oswald, and Beattie had academic careers. Common sense discourse crossed over easily into academic and other spaces, floating freely between institutions, disciplines, and sectors. Appeals

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<sup>86</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> James Oswald, *An Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: 1768), 29, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0121531287/ECCO?u=prin77918&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=fb163d47&pg=1>.

<sup>88</sup> Oswald, *Appeal*, 28.

<sup>89</sup> James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (London, 1818), xv-xvi.

to common sense issued from the pens of philosophers, including the Scottish School's bugbear Hume himself, no less than from publications like the *Tatler* or *Spectator*. What troubled Priestley was the "great gravity" with which Reid, as "a professor in a public university," "ushered" common sense "in the world." Rather than a mere insult, Priestley's reference to "gravity" designates a perceived transgression by the Scottish School of the boundary between rhetoric and argument. In its literary-critical mode, whether invoked by critics or philosophers, common sense was overwhelmingly a rhetorical discourse, not a set of principles. Plato's disparagement of rhetoric for appealing to the passions rather than to reason, and the distinction that he implies between rhetorical and argumentative kinds of discourse, were by no means reflected in the eighteenth century by a consensus that rhetoric and argumentation were different or opposed. George Campbell, who wrote the eighteenth century's most famous study of rhetoric, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, departed from classical theories of "the rhetorical" by defining rhetoric as a universal element of communication. For him, rhetoric was grounded in human nature and therefore predicated all communicative acts. There was, nevertheless, a traditional distinction between argumentative and rhetorical discourse in the eighteenth century. Campbell's view can be contrasted with Whately's later *Elements of Rhetoric*: Whately "insists upon initial distinctions that Campbell dismissed—as between investigation and argumentation, and between argumentative and nonargumentative discourse."<sup>90</sup> And Priestley's differentiation of appropriately received appeals to "common sense" from the "gravity" of academic philosophy suggests the conscious avoidance of "arguments," the preference for wit over analysis, that characterized the relationship to rhetoric of common sense discourse in particular.

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<sup>90</sup> Lloyd Bitzer, "Introduction," in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, by George Campbell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), xx.

As a particularly social form of expression, rhetoric even analogized and figured the social forms in which common sense discourse continually located thought. The politician and writer Lord Shaftesbury's 1709 essay "Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour," for example, assimilates rhetoric to the notion of a social body of "discourse" that concretizes thought in the spatially and temporally determinate process of "conversation." In the first part of the essay, Shaftesbury critiques the self-seriousness of certain "writers"<sup>91</sup> in the face of "ridicule"<sup>92</sup> and defends the "liberty" of "amicable collision" against "the imposition of authority"<sup>93</sup> in conversation. As I mentioned in this dissertation's introduction, Shaftesbury describes a "conversation" among "friends" "of a free kind."<sup>94</sup> As Shaftesbury narrates, a "gentleman" at this social gathering raises the following problem: "'if, by the word 'sense,' we were to understand opinion and judgment and, by the word 'common,' the generality or any considerable part of mankind,"<sup>95</sup> then it is hard to see how there can be "common sense" in the world, since different members of "mankind" disagree with each other. Shaftesbury's solution is to correct the "gentleman[']s" definition of "common sense." Shaftesbury remarks on a line by Juvenal in which the poet derogates the Roman "nobility and Court": "*For common sense is quite rare in that situation.*" This line, Shaftesbury suggests, should not be taken to mean that the "nobility and Court" were not "the standard of politeness and good sense." The better interpretation, the one "the most ingenious commentators" have taken, is that Juvenal is denying that "humanity or sense of public good and the common interest of mankind" was "properly the spirit of the Court":

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<sup>91</sup> Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis," 32.

<sup>92</sup> Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis," 29.

<sup>93</sup> Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis," 34.

<sup>94</sup> Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis," 33.

<sup>95</sup> Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis," 37.

They [the “ingenious commentators”] make this common sense of the poet, by a Greek derivation, to signify sense of public weal and of the common interest, love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness, or that sort of civility which rises from a just sense of the common rights of mankind, and the natural equality there is among the same species.<sup>96</sup>

As Shaftesbury sums up, “it is the heart, rather than the head, he [Juvenal] takes to task.” Whereas the first, problematic definition of “common sense” attributed shared cognitive faculties or judgments to a “mankind” clearly divided by “opinion,” Shaftesbury’s second definition of “common sense” centers instead the intuitive and emotional connotations of “sense,” and, along with these, the “public weal,” the “common interest,” “community,” and “society.” Severing the link between common sense and “opinion and judgment” altogether, Shaftesbury assimilates common sense instead to the various affective bonds that constitute sociability.

In order to arrive at “common sense” as the “sense of public weal” from “common sense” as “opinion and judgment” held by “the generality or any considerable part of mankind,” Shaftesbury not only critiques the supposed relationship between “common sense” and specific “opinion[s] and judgment[s]” but also replaces “opinion[s] and judgments[s]” with the social practice of “discourse.” This is the project that justifies Shaftesbury’s act—so apparently “paradoxical”<sup>97</sup> to the friend to whom he addresses the essay—of “commending a conversation as advantageous to reason which ended in...a total uncertainty of what reason...established,”<sup>98</sup> i.e., his deprivileging of intellectual conclusions in favor of the “habit alone of reasoning.”<sup>99</sup> Shaftesbury stages a series of confrontations between the content of thought and the material, social process of dialogue: something happening in the space and time of “scene[s]” of “discourse,” like the scene

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<sup>96</sup> Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis,” 48-9.

<sup>97</sup> Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis,” 33.

<sup>98</sup> Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis,” 33.

<sup>99</sup> Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis,” 33.

of the “conversation” that motivates the essay, or “the scene” of “the ancients” which was “laid at table or in the public walks or meeting places”<sup>100</sup>:

The manner indeed in which they treated the gravest subjects was somewhat different from that of our days. Their treatises were generally in a free and familiar style. They chose to give us the representation of real discourse and converse by treating their subjects in the way of dialogue and free debate. The scene was usually laid at table or in the public walks or meeting places, and the usual wit and humour of their real discourses appeared in those of their own composing. And this was fair. For without wit and humour, reason can hardly have its proof or be distinguished. The magisterial voice and high strain of the pedagogue commands reverence and awe. It is of admirable use to keep understandings at a distance and out of reach. The other manner, on the contrary, gives the fairest hold and suffers an antagonist to use his full strength hand to hand upon even ground.<sup>101</sup>

The “representation” of “real discourse” ought to be the mode of “treating” even “the gravest subjects.” This “representation,” Shaftesbury implies, has something to do on the one hand with the staging of “discourse” in definite social sites—“at table or in the public walks or meeting places”—and on the other hand with the rhetoric of oral “discourse”: the “wit and humour” of lively conversations.

It is surprising that Shaftesbury presents an overtly theatrical staging of a “discourse” in a “scene,” and the reproduction of the “wit and humour” of that “discourse” in “composition,” as parallel technologies for the “treating” of “subjects.” These phrases refer to two different events: on one hand the “scene” of a “real discourse,” and on the other the act of writing. But even in the act of writing, for Shaftesbury “wit and humour” concretize “subjects” of discussion as though physically—as though in a “scene.” As a form of “representation,” “wit and humour”—or rhetoric—make “discourse” available to listeners insofar as they render that “discourse” as material as a listener or reader himself is to the extent that he is bound in a specific social and

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<sup>100</sup> Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis,” 35.

<sup>101</sup> Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis,” 35.

material experience.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, although Shaftesbury's focus in this passage is the "representation" of "discourse" by "the ancients," his identification of the rhetoric of a composed "discourse" with the "scene" of a discursive event renders "representation" itself—if representation is the difference between the primary "scene" of "discourse" and a "composition" that records elements of this "discourse"—inconsequential. The sentence: "the scene was usually laid at table or in the public walks or meeting places, and the usual wit and humour of their real discourses appeared in those of their own composing," compares what Shaftesbury notably calls the speakers' "real discourse" with its "representation" as though the act of "composition" represents no different level of mediation. By implication, "representation" here is not the "the composition" but the actual production of the "real": it is an act of rendering "discourse" immediately.

No definitive conclusion or idea is ultimately represented in this account of "representation" as immediate social experience. If Shaftesbury's aim is to show that "truth...may bear all lights, and one of those principal lights, or natural mediums, by which things are to be viewed, in order to a thorough recognition, is ridicule itself," his essay in fact replaces any possible "truth" claims with truth's own supposed "natural mediums," such as the purely reactive force of "ridicule" or derision, leaving no room for conceptual abstraction. The phrase "opinion and judgment" in Shaftesbury's "gentleman[']s" remark names something largely absent in the essay in any exemplary specificity. Shaftesbury rarely confers a positive noun—such as "idea," "argument," "concept," etc.—on any notion of what could be "advanced" in a "discourse" and thereby exist as an outcome of "discourse" in the form of conclusive agreement.

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<sup>102</sup> If here "wit and humour" function as forms of "representation" of "discourse" analogous to that "discourse's" primary "scene," elsewhere in the essay, terms like "burlesque" (30) and "pleasant amusement" (30)—terms that converge around "raillery," "ridicule," or, in certain crucial senses, rhetoric—are almost interchangeable in Shaftesbury's essay with terms like "habit" (34) or "exercise" (36). Both sets of terms "represent" "subjects" in the concretely social and practical form of "discourse."

Disclosing common sense's intuition that seriousness is a form of abstraction from the body, from social practice, or from life, Shaftesbury's essay raises the possibility of defining thought not in terms of propositions or systems but in terms of rhetoric as the material of "discourse" and social and material processes themselves (these are, for him, analogous). Accordingly, if Shaftesbury's essay is a "defense of ridicule," a critique of overly "grave reasonings,"<sup>103</sup> it is simultaneously a defense of "discourse" as a practice with social, rather than conceptual, ends. This is one way of accounting for the at first perplexing titular role of "common sense" in an essay that begins with a "commendation of raillery."<sup>104</sup> The exclusion of any contents of thought from the social "scene" of "discourse," from its "wit and humour," is inseparable from Shaftesbury's critique of "common sense" defined as "opinion and judgment"—his redefinition of the term as a "sense of public weal and of the common interest, love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness," etc.

With its hostility to the abstraction of thought contents per se to the extent that these are irreducible to the social practice of "discourse," the rhetoric of common sense does not readily furnish an epistemological system. Obvious contradictions ensue when, decades after the publication of Shaftesbury's essay, members of the Scottish School experiment with retrofitting common sense discourse as an epistemology. For example, Oswald's obviously rhetorical intentions come into tension with his recurrent framing of common sense as a cognitive faculty. Oswald defines "common sense" as a "power of the human mind"<sup>105</sup> as "the perception of obvious truth and palpable absurdity,"<sup>106</sup> as a synonym for reason as opposed to "an art so nice and

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<sup>103</sup> Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis," 33.

<sup>104</sup> Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis," 29.

<sup>105</sup> Oswald, *Appeal*, 24.

<sup>106</sup> Oswald, *Appeal*, 117.

fallacious as that of abstract reasoning,”<sup>107</sup> and as “a simple act of judgment” by which “we pronounce immediately upon all the obvious relations of those beings which are the objects of perception, their relations to one another, and the relation they bear to us.”<sup>108</sup> At stake in Oswald’s basic thesis that one ought to submit to the “authority of common sense,”<sup>109</sup> however, is ultimately a *social* critique of thought in the concrete terms of space, time, and practice—not a rational critique of any specific system of thought. The emphasis on proportion in Oswald’s assertion: “if in well-regulated societies we meet with as much regard to truth and justice as is necessary for the commerce of life, it is well,”<sup>110</sup> discloses that his concern is about the proper role of thought in general vis a vis “the commerce of life,” not about the contents of thought.

Common sense philosophy in this sense has feet both in an anti-argumentative rhetoric that it does not greatly alter, and in philosophical argumentation. Its identification, under these self-contradictory conditions, of the kind of thought that “common sense” supposedly is with the practices that supposedly constitute “the common concerns of life,” recalls Shaftesbury’s strategic conflation of the social and material process of “discourse” with the contents of thought. But whereas Shaftesbury rejected analytic engagement with “grave subjects,” the Scottish School identified thought with “the common concerns of life” as though analytically—excluding from the operations of “common sense” the element of abstraction without which thought as such is not conceptualizable.

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<sup>107</sup> Oswald, *Appeal*, 4.

<sup>108</sup> Oswald, *Appeal*, 24.

<sup>109</sup> Oswald, *Appeal*, iii.

<sup>110</sup> Oswald, *Appeal*, 10.

## *Common Sense and the Division of Intellectual Labor*

So long as “common life” denoted a universal in battle with “the schools”—the latter an undigestible particular against which “common life” defined itself as the universal social space that criticism inhabited—common sense discourse contested the very possibility of specialization, even or especially the specialization of criticism itself. But the social division of labor as common sense discourse represented it also had undeniable resemblances to, and connections with, concretely *disciplinary* distinctions as they emerged in the eighteenth century and after. Robin Valenza has documented how, starting in the eighteenth century, disciplines appeared less capable of being divided according to a “logical division of our faculties,”<sup>111</sup> each discipline theoretically able to be practiced by a single individual. The increasing prevalence of the idea of a social rather than a psychological division of disciplines parallels the trajectory of the very term “common sense,” which increasingly represented intellectual activity as divided socially rather than by the cognitive and sense faculties that processed input.

In a passage from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume suggests how “common sense” pointed in two directions at once: toward a universal notion of concrete sociability, on one hand, and toward a more specifiable disciplinarity, on the other hand, writing:

A philosopher who purposes only to represent the common sense of mankind in more beautiful and engaging colours, if by accident he falls into error, goes no farther; but renewing his appeal to common sense, and the natural sentiments of the mind, returns into the right path, and secures himself from any dangerous illusions. The fame of Cicero flourishes at present, but that of Aristotle is utterly decayed. La Bruyere passes the seas, and still maintains his reputation: But the glory of Malebranche is confined to his own nation, and to his own age. And Addison, perhaps, will be read with pleasure, when Locke shall be entirely forgotten.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Robin Valenza, *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain, 1680-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>112</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, 2.

“Common sense” taxonomizes thinking in terms of the location of intellectual activity vis-à-vis “mankind.” Hume wants to draw attention to the non-commonsensical philosophers’ non-participation in an active nexus between affairs of life or state, society, and their respective publics. When Hume distinguishes between philosophers who “only represent...common sense in more beautiful and engaging colours” and other philosophers, he gives us a category of thinkers—the commonsensical Cicero, La Bruyere, and Addison—whose endeavors are modest (they “[purpose] only” to represent “common sense”), aesthetic (“in more beautiful...colours”), and oriented towards a reader’s pleasure or interest (“engaging”). And he gives us a category of thinkers who, we infer, drift inevitably from “the natural sentiments of the mind” because they fail to modestly and wisely limit their “purpose.” By deploying “common sense” as a measuring stick, Hume draws a line between a kind of intellectual activity with a social orientation, and another, a de-valorized kind of intellectual activity that pretends to occupy itself with thinking above and beyond social life. “Common sense” defines thought in social terms and critiques the abstraction of thinking from readerships: the bodies in which the “reputation[s]” of “philosopher[s]” popularly reside according to the degree of a philosopher’s “appeal to common sense.” At the same time, and even as Hume refers to all six of his figures as “philosopher[s],” Hume adumbrates a more specific division than the division between socially grounded and abstract thought. Implicitly, what Hume calls “appeal[s] to common sense” pertains to figures identifiable as literary critics (Cicero, La Bruyere, and Addison), either in his own time or retroactively.

If Hume’s remark exemplifies the way “common sense” alluded at once to the division between social and institutional space and to more properly disciplinary divisions, the Scottish School treated these two kinds of divisions as though they were one. Common sense discourse in its literary-critical, rhetorical mode revolved around the negative possibility, more than any

historical reality, of specialization. But common sense philosophy deployed the notion of “the common concerns of life” to contest philosophical activity from philosophical activity’s point of view. By purporting to systematize the rhetorical discourse of “common sense” as a set of positive conceptual “principles” capable of providing an alternative to existing philosophical theories, Reid, Oswald, and Beattie in effect specified the unspecifiable. The founding myth of modern English-language literary criticism—the style of writing about literature and society that distinguishes itself, as an anti-professional practice, from academic analysis—comes most clearly into view in this most philosophical and argumentative moment of a common sense discourse that otherwise served literary criticism’s rhetorical rebellion against the top-down conceptuality of neoclassicism. Treating the more-or-less universalist notion of a social sphere as though it were a meaningful site in which to locate a particular *disciplinary* formation, the Scottish School brought this rebellion to its logical conclusion.

## ***Conclusion***

What I have described as a representation of thought by common sense discourse in terms of the division of intellectual labor implies the coexistence of two practices—“common sense” and “learning”—within a total social space. But common sense discourse’s commitment to an absolutely encompassing “common life” renders this coexistence logically unsustainable. Specialization and the “common sense” of “common life” cannot truly coexist within the logic of common sense because “common sense” and “common life” already include—have already negated—specialization. The result is a circular contestation between common sense and specialization as common sense posits each in turn. According to the logic of common sense, no intellectual activity is abstracted from “common life” defined as the sum of social and material practices; thought is reducible to its status as a life-activity, like eating and drinking, participating

in the economy, and socializing. And yet, common sense discourse admits the possibility of the converse: that thought is *irreducible* to its status as a life-activity. This possibility is the condition of possibility for common sense discourse itself, since the notion that academic-institutional or professional thought is unreconciled with “common life” instigates common sense discourse in the first place in the form of tirades against erudition.

The self-contradiction of the attempt by common sense discourse to represent and critique thought in terms of the socially defined sites of “common life” and institutions ultimately discloses tensions inherent in the social division of labor as a form of representation of thought in general. Assigning thought a place in the social division of labor equates two terms—thought and practice—whose relationship is notoriously problematic. Just so, the polemics that constitute common sense discourse and posit “common sense” as a maximally concrete kind of thought or thinking identify “common sense” with “common life” and the social and material practices that constitute the latter. In the end, for them, “common sense” does not stand for a kind of thought or thinking at all, but for an exercise in excluding thought and thinking from social and material life by stipulating the non-difference of the one from the other. But, corroborating the inevitable failure of this attempt to equate thought with life, common sense discourse posits the very specialization that it seeks to annihilate: thought removed from “common life” and its practices and requiring reconciliation by “common sense discourse.”

The act of representing thought by dividing social from institutional intellectual space thus potentially invokes questions not just about the intellectual division of labor, but about conceptual abstraction. If, as Robin Valenza writes, “the conflict between disciplinary jargon and the ‘language of common life’ was...both a cause and the most obvious sign of a larger process of

intellectual stratification,”<sup>113</sup> this “conflict” attended not only to emergent disciplinary divisions but to the more fundamental division between thought and social practice. At stake in the contestation between “common life” and intellectual specialization within common sense discourse is finally the difference or non-difference of thought from the sum of social and material activities that Reid calls the “common concerns of life.” Common sense discourse and common sense philosophy in particular frame and struggle with this difference precisely because common sense lacks any theory of mediation between the two. From the point of view of common sense discourse, specialists only pretend that their thought is irreducible to social facts or material necessities. But, because common sense philosophy holds social life to be immediate, abstract thought appears to it as what threatens this immediacy and as the nagging suspicion that what institutions represent is indeed something separate from “common life.” Defined by its irreducibility to “common life,” abstract thought is a preoccupying possibility for common sense discourse even while it remains problematic or impossible in “common sense’s” own terms. Although common sense discourse seeks to annihilate abstraction by reducing it to “common life,” the distinction that common sense discourse itself creates between “common life” and “the schools” retains abstract thought as a necessary concept. Common sense conceives as necessary, even as it seeks to destroy, the possibility of thought’s abstraction from “common life.”

Hegel might as well have been referring to the Scottish School’s own attempt to contain thought within the immediate self-evidence of “sense” when he described Sense Certainty’s turn into its own opposite, this “very certainty prov[ing] itself to be the most abstract and poorest truth.”<sup>114</sup> By virtue of its own dialectical turnings, common sense philosophy’s polemic against abstraction contains all the elements of a potentially critical account of thought’s relationship to

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<sup>113</sup> Valenza, *Literature*, 27-8.

<sup>114</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 58.

social life, even as common sense philosophy seeks to quickly resolve this relationship into identity. Neither the members of the Scottish School themselves, nor any thinker wholly committed to common sense, would conceptualize this relationship as mediated. However, I will show in the next chapters how common sense in the industrial era, now functioning as the ahistorical thesis that political conflict can be resolved immediately through socially universal understanding, encounters the very mediations it wants to evade. In the era when dialectical thought takes on its materialist form, common sense's attempt to stall and negate dialectical progression will structure literary form.

## From Means to Meaning: Politics as Allegory in the Era of Chartism's Defeat

Long after the epistemological and methodological crisis of social history of the 1970s and '80s, many of social history's disciplinary heirs look(ed) back on Gareth Stedman Jones' 1983 volume of essays *Languages of Class* as a still-unavoidable challenge to the notion of "the social" as the ultimately determinative ground of a historical process, whose political eruptions within state and legal frameworks expressed—without being reducible to—a more deeply-churning current of class struggle.<sup>115</sup> As Geoff Eley and Keith Nield claimed in their 2007 book *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?*, a stock-taking retrospective on this crisis, "in consequence of Stedman Jones' critique, the foundational ground of Thompsonian social histories of the working class can never be reclaimed or reoccupied in the same way again."<sup>116</sup> Stedman Jones' "critique" comprised a corrective privileging of historical language over theoretical categories such as class, which Stedman Jones claimed social historians had imposed detrimentally on historical phenomena such as Chartism. In the collection's centerpiece essay, "Rethinking

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<sup>115</sup> Emerging "apparently out of the blue" onto the scene of social history, *Languages of Class* was a surprising follow-up to Gareth Stedman Jones' previous work. Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 45. Stedman Jones' polemic essays from the 1960s and '70s, and his 1971 book *Outcast London*, placed him in the British Marxist tradition that also included historians of the working classes such as E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and John Saville. But in *Languages of Class*, Stedman Jones questioned assumptions that were common sense for many within the British Marxist milieu, among these "the independence or even primacy of social history" itself. In 1997, he announced that "the main intention in *Languages of Class* was to dispel the illusion of the independence or even primacy of social history, to restore the central position of political history and to recast the pre-occupations of the social historian as a set of concerns encompassed within it." "Anglo-Marxism, Neo-Marxism and the Discursive Approach to History," in *Was bleibt von marxistischen Perspektiven in der Geschichtsforschung?* ed. Alf Lüdtke (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1997), 183.

<sup>116</sup> Eley and Nield, *Future of Class*, 123. More recently, Peter Gurney writes that "many historians now accept the theoretical and methodological force of [Stedman Jones'] insight. It has become part of our mental furniture." "The Democratic Idiom: Languages of Democracy in the Chartist Movement," *The Journal of Modern History* 86, no. 3 (September 2014): 569, <https://doi.org/10.1086/676730>.

Chartism,” Stedman Jones sought to re-align Chartist history with “what Chartists actually said or wrote,”<sup>117</sup> revising what he claimed was a near-universal tendency to read into Chartism the class-consciousness or social discontent of the new industrial proletariat—reading *past* Chartists’ own articulations of Chartism as a movement concerned with political, rather than social or material, oppression.<sup>118</sup> According to Stedman Jones, interpreters had misidentified Chartism as a working-class social movement, eliding and subordinating Chartism’s political “form” by taking for granted different versions of Engels’ programmatic assertion regarding political struggles for rights, that:

the struggle for the franchise, etc., etc., are merely the illusory forms—altogether the general interest is the illusory form of common interests—in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out amongst one another.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Stedman Jones, “Rethinking,” 94. Despite *Languages of Class*’s association with the linguistic turn in history, there were significant differences between the typical methods and concerns of this turn and Stedman Jones’ concerns in *Languages of Class* and “Rethinking Chartism” in particular. Hayden White is a major figure associated with this turn, but White’s analysis of the language of historians had little in common with Stedman Jones’ prioritization of the language of Chartism. Approaching language as the structure of any historian’s self-created reality, White was interested in the historian’s investment of the object of her analysis with meaning through the linguistic form in which she reported history. In contrast, Stedman Jones located the reality of the Chartist movement (precisely) in Chartist political language. Whereas White underscored the contingency and bias of historical representation, Stedman Jones incurred the accusation that he committed “a serious misreading of the Saussurean legacy” by disavowing language’s historical referent. David Mayfield and Susan Thorne, “Social History and Its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language,” *Social History* 17, no. 2 (May 1992): 179, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4286014>. The idiosyncrasy of Stedman Jones’ turn to “language” recalls the multiple threads of the linguistic turn, dividing: (1) a poststructuralism invested in language’s non-identity with reality from a postmodernism invested in a critique of the hermeneutic metaphor of depth, and (2) the problem of historical reality’s linguistic mediation from the problem of social reality’s political mediation. These threads are particularly difficult to disentangle in “Rethinking Chartism,” because Stedman Jones used Chartists’ accounts of Chartism as a political program more or less interchangeably with the term “language”: harnessing a revised interpretation of Chartism as a ‘political’ rather than a ‘social’ movement to a statement about the role of historical agents’ own self-representations in historical methodology.

<sup>118</sup> “Rethinking Chartism” was previously published in shorter form as “The Language of Chartism” in *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830–1860*, eds. Dorothy Thompson and James Epstein (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 3-58.

<sup>119</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “The German Ideology. Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to its Various Prophets,” in *Collected Works* (New York: International, 1976), 5:46-7.

When it came to interpretations of Chartism, Stedman Jones suggested, this notion of political struggle for rights as the “illusory form” of a “real struggle” was not solely historical materialist: historiography of Chartism had yielded liberal, conservative, and Marxist “social interpretation[s]”<sup>120</sup> of the movement since the movement’s own time.

Stedman Jones argued that the social approach to Chartism came at the cost of interpretive errors. In particular, the Marxist notion of Chartism as a form of class consciousness failed to explain why this form of consciousness culminated in Chartism before ceding to a regime of politically passive mass consumption, whose own status as a form of class consciousness required increasingly energetic hermeneutic leaps to sustain. Offering a “non-referential”<sup>121</sup> account of the Chartists’ own terms for their political activity, Stedman Jones proposed resisting “the temptation to collapse questions posed by the form of Chartism into questions of its assumed substance.”<sup>122</sup> The Chartists distinguished between the represented and the unrepresented—not between owners and workers—when they theorized their own political activity, so the Chartist movement could not “satisfactorily be defined in terms of the anger and disgruntlement of disaffected social groups or even the consciousness of a particular class.”<sup>123</sup> Aligning Chartism with the older radical tradition whose language Chartism shared, Stedman Jones posited that Chartism slid into meliorism in the mid-nineteenth century because its political language failed to remain persuasive in the industrial era. Because “economics and politics were increasingly sundered”<sup>124</sup> after 1848, the Chartists’ legalistic and political account of oppression had only a limited power to recruit constituents after the Chartist defeat on Kennington Common in April of that year.

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<sup>120</sup> Stedman Jones, “Rethinking,” 92.

<sup>121</sup> Stedman Jones, “Introduction,” 21.

<sup>122</sup> Stedman Jones, “Rethinking,” 95.

<sup>123</sup> Stedman Jones, “Rethinking,” 96.

<sup>124</sup> Stedman Jones, “Rethinking,” 178.

Indeed, for Stedman Jones, Kennington Common marked not only the end of the Chartist era, but the beginning of an era of unexplained discrepancies between the expectations of Marxists and “real [English] history.”<sup>125</sup> After Chartism’s defeat, the Marxist tradition no longer offered a persuasive interpretive apparatus:

Marx's and Engels' conception of the English proletariat...could not survive the Chartist defeat at Kennington Common. The 'independent working class party' disappeared and, when it eventually re-emerged as the Labour Party, its goals and practices were more notable for their native idiosyncrasy than for their embodiment of an immanent proletarian logic. Thus, from the 1850s to the 1940s, there was little serious attempt, even among socialist and labour historians, to align the Marxist picture with the course of English development or to explain their discordance.<sup>126</sup>

Though the postwar period saw a renewal of Marxist attempts “to align the Marxist picture with the course of English development,” Stedman Jones argued that these attempts relied on theoretical inventions with no real power to explain—in Hobsbawm’s formulation—the “forward march of labor halted.” For example, in “Class Expression versus Social Control?” Stedman Jones depicted the production of terminology such as “social control” by late-twentieth-century Lukácsian theorists of class-consciousness as an attempt to explain away the empirical absence of class-consciousness from working-class British life:

but for the effective maintenance of social control, the hegemony of the bourgeoisie, the capitalist confiscation of leisure time, or whatever other ideological instrument is assigned this function by the analyst, we might expect workers to be singing revolutionary songs and preparing the uprising. The reason why they do not do so is because their putative class consciousness has been confiscated from them and diverted into

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<sup>125</sup> Stedman Jones impugned social history’s “surreal model of revolutionary proletarian class consciousness, which has nowhere been observed to occur in real history.” “The problem for advocates of this model,” he argued, was “to discover why history has deviated from it.” “Class Expression versus Social Control?” in *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 86.

<sup>126</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, “Introduction,” in *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4.

some system-maintaining channel—chauvinism, sport or consumerism, for instance.<sup>127</sup>

Because Chartism's 1848 defeat marked the transition from the era of vigorous working-class politics of the 1830s and early 1840s to "stabilization,"<sup>128</sup> in Stedman Jones' view the absence of working-class social consciousness in Britain after 1848 should impel historians seeking to understand that conjuncture and their own to return to Chartism to reassess Chartism's supposedly social character. Stedman Jones posited that Chartism itself had been misrecognized as a social response to the industrial revolution, and a forebear of twentieth-century working-class politics, when it was really the last gasp of an eighteenth-century political tradition.<sup>129</sup>

Britain's mid-Victorian "stabilization" continues to implicate the transitional moment of Chartism's 1848 defeat in questions about class and class-consciousness as objects of historical interpretation, and about (historical) interpretation itself as a method of mediating between form and content. Much as Stedman Jones' critique of theories of class consciousness and "social interpretation" in *Languages of Class* sought to respond to the reactionary and consumption-oriented regime of the Thatcher era, calls to re-theorize capitalist historical development today refer to the failure of anything like a revolutionary working-class to appear on the scene of a global, late-, or finance-capitalist world. Martin Jay recently wrote:

In 1988 Fredric Jameson may have still been able to call *History and Class Consciousness* an "unfinished project" and stubbornly endorse Lukács's belief that the mark of reified bourgeois consciousness was precisely its helpless embrace of contingency and chance, in which

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<sup>127</sup> Stedman Jones, "Class Expression," 87.

<sup>128</sup> Stedman Jones, "Introduction," 17.

<sup>129</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union emphatically confirmed this line of thinking for Stedman Jones. "There are still radical social theorists who have been reluctant to accept the implications of 1989;" he wrote, "some still behave as if the survival of capitalism and its triumph over the communist world were merely a technical flaw in Marx's argument." The major error he had made in *Languages of Class* was that he had there put forth "crucial propositions" in an "unduly hesitant manner." He wished to retract in particular "one or two statements which implied that a discursive approach might coexist with the traditional research perspectives of social history." Stedman Jones, "Anglo-Marxism," 208.

“events that are meaningful socially or historically turn incomprehensible, absurd or meaningless faces to individuals who can henceforth only ratify their bewilderment with the names of accident or of well-nigh natural convulsion and upheaval.” But today, the putative standpoint of the collective class whose shared experience somehow allows it to discern beneath the chaos and fragmentation a deeper meaning seems more tenuous than ever.<sup>130</sup>

Jay proposes that the Lukácsian figure of the proletariat as bearer of revolutionary class consciousness confronts an increasingly solid impasse in the “judgement of history” to which Lukács, in the Preface to the 1967 edition of *History and Class Consciousness*, referred the “complex of questions” raised by his earlier “struggle for a true Marxist method.”<sup>131</sup> As one of the major “origins of the present crisis”<sup>132</sup> for British Marxist historians—who, too, thought they had encountered the “judgment of history” in the 1960s-80s—the transitional moment of Chartism’s 1848 defeat remains a crucial punctum to which to trace the emergence of an intensified—rather than fundamentally transformed—“present.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Martin Jay, “Fidelity to the Event?: Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* and the Russian Revolution,” in *Genesis and Validity: The Theory and Practice of Intellectual History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 118.

<sup>131</sup> Georg Lukács, “Preface to the New Edition (1967),” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), xxxviii.

<sup>132</sup> Perry Anderson wrote in his 1964 essay “Origins of the Present Crisis” that “the early years of the working class were...the one period in its history when it rose frontally, if confusedly, against capitalist society. In the absence of any structured socialist ideology, the crushing defeats it suffered were almost a pure loss. Armed with a coherent vision of the world, it would probably still have been defeated, but its experience and its aspirations would have entered an enduring tradition and have been saved for the future.” “Origins of the Present Crisis,” *New Left Review* I, no. 23 (February 1964): 42.

<sup>133</sup> Anton Jäger recently posited the end of an era of “post-politics” and the beginning of an era of counter-intuitively de-politicized “hyperpolitics.” “Without the re-emergence of mass organisation,” he argued, what today appears as an increasing presence of politics in the public sphere “can only occur at a discursive level or within the prism of mediatic politics.” Anton Jäger, “From Post-Politics to Hyper-Politics,” *Jacobin*, February 14, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/02/from-post-politics-to-hyper-politics>, no page numbers available. Under conditions of what Jäger calls “hyper-politics,” “if everything is political, then nothing is political.” Just so, if from a different point of departure, I will suggest that the exclusion of Chartist politics ends by politicizing social life and so removing the distinctions and oppositions that in the first place render the term politics meaningful. Jäger’s focus on “the discursive level” suggests how this lack of distinctions relegates politics to the sphere of culture. I attend in this essay to how political meaning attaches to the social—embodied in the sheer activity of self-education—in the vacuum left by politics’ historical and narrative exclusion in *Alton Locke*. But education also carries

Yet insufficient attention has been paid to how this transition itself generated some of what Stedman Jones called “social interpretations” of Chartism. Treating “the political” and “the social,” not as theoretical options with which to align Chartism, but as a contradiction internal to Chartist historical experience, in what follows I will suggest how some attributions to Chartist politics of social meaning strategically re-wrote other, causal, notions of Chartism as means to a social end in the course of Chartism’s de-politicization. Tracking how Chartism’s defeats placed new conceptual ellipses between political activity and any imaginable social reform, I read some assertions of what Stedman Jones called the “social interpretation” of Chartism as the endpoint of reaction to Chartist political demands by Chartism’s detractors, and to Chartism’s political defeat by Chartists themselves. Social reform through working-class political power no longer appeared achievable by the mid-1840s, and the kind of active political confrontation that characterized the late 1830s was in any case vanishing from the scene. It became untenable to claim that Chartist politics were leading towards social reform, producing openings for detractors of Chartism who sought to temper or deflate the movement. This produced an escalating crisis of representation for Chartists who had previously treated Chartist politics as the future cause of social reform. In this context, social reform was re-imagined as the underlying substance of Chartist politics, while politics was re-imagined as the underlying substance of otherwise apolitical social interventions.

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political meaning in Kingsley’s novel as a means of access to culture. For example, the censoring of political content from Alton’s poetry which is at the center of moral pathos in the novel attaches political (non-) commitment to the actualization or non-actualization of acts of political speech, even in the sphere of literary production. What seems to mark a boundary between literary production and political activity, since Alton must leave the sphere of literary production after this event in order to perform loyalty to the people’s cause, turns out to be only a difference in degree. Alton’s act of speaking in the agricultural district overcompensates for his failure to produce political content in his writing.

The Chartists' original claim that politics was a means of social reform thus became the claim that the meaning of Chartist politics was all along social reform as the movement lost steam.<sup>134</sup>

Comparing Chartist texts to the major work of English literature about Chartism, Charles Kingsley's 1850 novel *Alton Locke*, I show that narratives of Chartist history achieved this re-imagination of means as meaning by figuring Chartism's political defeat as its social sublation. Kingsley's novel depicts the Chartist defeat on Kennington Common two years before as Chartism's political death and social rebirth as Christian Socialism. Transforming Chartist politics into the social self-improvement of the working classes that Kingsley suggests the best version of Chartism always represented, the novel supposedly elevates, while really displacing, Chartism. Kingsley's method of displacing politics with social self-improvement, while representing social self-improvement as a form of Chartist politics, brings to their extreme logical conclusion tendencies within late, meliorist Chartism. As I will show, the argument that the content of Chartist politics was always ultimately social extenuated Chartists' relinquishment of the notion of suffrage as preliminary to social reform. According to both Kingsley and Chartists reckoning with defeat, turning to projects of social self-improvement in lieu of the Chartist political fight for the franchise did not represent the demise of Chartism, but a reconciliation between Chartism's underlying social substance and a properly social form.

Where notions of Chartist politics' social substance directly respond to Chartism's depoliticization, this contrasts with Stedman Jones' view that "social interpretation" inflected theory after Chartism's defeat despite the historical failure of Chartism and other political movements to realize social outcomes. In the instances I analyze, interpreters who attribute social meaning to

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<sup>134</sup> In other words, if Stedman Jones offered a "non-referential" account of Chartist political language, the vanishing of distinctly political referents from Chartist history between 1838-1848 led to the assertion that politics was now the substance or referent of social reform.

Chartism cope with—rather than evade—the vanishing of politics per se from social life, the lack of any necessary link between politics and social change, that ensued from Chartism’s defeat. Connecting the political and the social aspects of Chartism without representing that connection as causal, their notions of Chartism’s social meaning capture the unfulfilled social promise and the unfulfilled social threat of Chartist politics alike. In this qualified and revised sense, ideologically disparate statements about Chartism converge on a mode of comprehension and representation of the movement that we could, with Stedman Jones, call “social interpretation.” Reading Chartism and other political movements for their social meaning—that is, allegorically—registers the historical conditions of obstruction and defeat that render politics a mediated “form” of social life rather than a discernible pathway to social change.

### ***Tailor and Poet***

“Charles Kingsley,” wrote Thomas Hughes, Esq. in his “Prefatory Memoir” to *Alton Locke*, “was first widely known, as the most out-spoken and powerful of those who took the side of the labouring classes, at a critical time—the crisis, in a word, when they abandoned their old political weapons, for the more potent one of union and association, which has since carried them so far.”<sup>135</sup> Though it was typical of the dominant narrative that congealed around events in London in April of 1848, there are good reasons to qualify the common claim that the final large demonstration of the Chartist movement, the presentation to Parliament of the so-called ‘monster petition’ on April 10, 1848, constituted a genuine political “crisis.” In contrast to the mass meetings and demonstrations, violent confrontations between Chartists and police, and—in 1842—the general

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<sup>135</sup> Thomas Hughes, “Prefatory Memoir,” in *Alton Locke Tailor and Poet an Autobiography* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1881), 2.

strike in the Northern and Midland districts that characterized Chartism's first two waves, the third presentation of the Charter in April of 1848 was "so effectively policed that it posed no practical threat to authority."<sup>136</sup> Rather than any authentic truth about the events of 1848, Hughes' framing discloses the narrative end to which Hughes, Kingsley, and their set represented these events as a "crisis." In Hughes' terms, 1848 distills and justifies what historians would later call the "social turn" (Chartists actually turned away from politics and towards social self-improvement projects, like land-sharing enterprises and the building of educational institutions, during the 1840s and '50s). It initiates a historical movement away from Chartism per se—the "old political weapons" of the working classes—and towards the social cooperative endeavors that Hughes calls "union and association."

For Kingsley, this turn ideally would take a Christian Socialist shape. Oriented towards a model of clerical guidance of the working classes, Kingsley, F.D Maurice, and J.M Ludlow founded Christian Socialism in 1848 to promote working-class social cooperatives in place of what they saw as a misguided grasp for political power by a population unprepared to wield the franchise responsibly. Their short-lived publication, *Politics for the People*, frequently critiqued the Chartists' prioritization of political power over and above working-class self-improvement. In a "letter to the people," for example, Kingsley accused the Chartists of making "the mistake of fancying that legislative reform is social reform, or that men's hearts can be changed by an act of Parliament."<sup>137</sup> "God," he insisted, "will only reform society on condition of our reforming every man his own self."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> John Walton, *Chartism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1. As Dorothy Thompson argues, "the high point of Chartism" had come and gone "in the years 1838-40." Thompson, "'The Question 'What Is a Chartist' Answered,'" 160.

<sup>137</sup> Charles Kingsley, "Letters to the Chartists—No. 1," *Politics for the People*, 1848, 28, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101074719103&view=1up&seq=40>.

<sup>138</sup> Kingsley, "Letters," 29.

Composed in the aftermath of the 1848 march on Kennington Common, Kingsley's *Alton Locke* represents this event as a pivotal historical moment capable of turning working-class activity and sentiment in this socially inward-looking direction. The conclusion Kingsley gives to *Alton Locke* represents April 10 as a flashpoint for Chartist "repentance"<sup>139</sup>: it urges recognition of the greater wisdom of Christian resignation than political agitation on behalf of a working class that does not (yet) merit political power. After the events of April 10, an exclamation from the tailor and Chartist Crossthwaite expresses his and (Kingsley's fictional autobiographer and protagonist) Alton's assent to the aristocrat Eleanor Stanton's judgment that the working classes were not "fit for those privileges which" they had "so frantically demanded"<sup>140</sup> by engaging in Chartist politics: "I see it—I see it all now. Oh, my God! my God! what infidels we have been!"<sup>141</sup> Affirming his and Crossthwaite's regret at having "forgotten" Christ, Alton echoes Crossthwaite's suggestion of sudden clarity regarding the past mistake of making political demands instead of "believ[ing]" that their "kingdom is not of this world."<sup>142</sup>

If the ideological project of *Alton Locke* is to represent the events of April 10, 1848 as the end of Chartism, it is however challenging for the reader to understand how these events could initiate the turn away from Chartism that Kingsley depicts in their aftermath. Alton's report of the historical event of the "Tenth of April" does not read as capable of mobilizing either profound "repentance" or a reflective turn to Christian Socialism (and indeed, Kingsley's subsequent narrative only sputters into a phase of delirious interiority before culminating in Alton's emigration and death):

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<sup>139</sup> Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke Tailor and Poet an Autobiography*, vol. 2. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1881), 329.

<sup>140</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 328.

<sup>141</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 329.

<sup>142</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 329.

We had arrayed against us, by our own folly, the very physical force to which we had appealed. The dread of general plunder and outrage by the savages of London, the national hatred of that French and Irish interference of which we had boasted, armed against us thousands of special constables....The practical common sense of England, whatever discontent it might feel with the existing system, refused to let it be hurled rudely down .... Above all, the people would not rise...the meeting broke up pitiably piecemeal, drenched and cowed, body and soul, by pouring rain on its way home—for the very heavens mercifully helped to quench our folly—while the monster-petition crawled ludicrously away in a hack cab, to be dragged to the floor of the House of Commons amid roars of laughter.<sup>143</sup>

Belying the somber emotional tones of his references elsewhere to April 10 as a “bitter lesson”<sup>144</sup> and a “death-day of liberty,”<sup>145</sup> Alton’s narration of the events of “the Tenth of April” emphasizes the embarrassment of the event: the “laughter” with which Parliament greeted the monster petition (on grounds that many of its signatures were visibly forged), the “pitiably peacemeal” breakup of the too-small crowd on Kennington Common, the rain that drenches the bedraggled individuals afterwards. Because the day involves humiliation but not violence—or even the destruction of property—it is unclear to what to attribute the profundity of remorse and spiritual regeneration that the denouement locates in these events.

If we are supposed to read the novel as justification for a historical transition from politics to social reform, then it is also puzzling that Alton himself is hardly involved in Chartism for most of the novel. Apart from a single Chartist meeting which he leaves undescribed—impressing Alton in the aftermath only for the “fluency and eloquence”<sup>146</sup> with which the workmen speak (“Such a fund of information—such excellent English—where did they get it all?”<sup>147</sup>)—Alton has no political experiences to speak of until his former employer Mr. O’ Flynn attacks Alton repeatedly

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<sup>143</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 265-66.

<sup>144</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 56.

<sup>145</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 357.

<sup>146</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 303.

<sup>147</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 303.

in print and so precipitates Alton into “The People’s Cause.” According to O’Flynn in his polemic, Alton has betrayed this “Cause” (though, again, Alton has not been active in Chartist political organizing at this point in the narrative) by becoming a hack writer, sacrificing ideological consistency and loyalty to the working classes in the process: “Such paltry talent as I had, I had prostituted for the sake of fame. I had deserted The People’s Cause for filthy lucre.”<sup>148</sup> Alton’s reaction to the first sally of O’Flynn’s attack is defensive, but with an admixture of guilt for a specific literary sin that O’Flynn has not yet mentioned: “Had he actually heard of the omissions in my poems?—and if he once touched on that subject, what could I answer?”<sup>149</sup> Alton’s guilty conscience reproaches him for his assent to his aristocratic patron Dean Winnstay’s request to remove the politically explicit passages in his poems before their publication, news of which “expurgation”<sup>150</sup> in fact arrives in the next installment of O’Flynn’s campaign against him. Only at this point, after Alton overhears the “whisper” from a working “scholar and poet” that Alton’s “talk” is “all in his day’s work,”<sup>151</sup> does the narrative turn in earnest to Chartism as a political movement and to the historical events of the 1840s: anxious for redemption, Alton hastily volunteers to be a deputy from the London Chartists to a suffering agricultural district, where he unintentionally incites a riot.

Rather than Chartist politics, it is the psychically unbearable double bind of writing for a market—insofar as both aristocratic and working-class consumers of Alton’s texts demand adjustments to the content of his writing—that engrosses most of the novel’s plot. The conclusion’s message about Alton’s and the working classes’ unworthiness to wield political power seems to

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<sup>148</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 140.

<sup>149</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 140.

<sup>150</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 144.

<sup>151</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 145.

displace, rather than revise, this central conflict, those “miserable compromises” that Alton makes as a writer, of which the pivotal “expurgation” of his poetry is the most consequential example:

To try and serve God and Mammon too; to make miserable compromises daily between the two great incompatibilities, what was true, and what would pay”; to speak my mind, in fear and trembling, by hints, and halves, and quarters; to be daily hauling poor Truth just up to the top of the well, and then, frightened at my own success, let her plump down again to the bottom; to sit there trying to teach others, while my mind was in a whirl of doubt; to feed others' intellects while my own were hungering; to grind on in the Philistine's mill, or occasionally make sport for them.<sup>152</sup>

If we read *Alton Locke* as a whole as a story about the sublation of Chartism into Christian Socialism in 1848, we have to read the themes of Alton’s subjective trajectory—especially the psychic toll of writing for audiences with contradictory class investments—as the beginning and middle of a narrative about Chartist politics, despite the important differences between the morality of self-censorship of poetry and the kind of “agitat[ion]”<sup>153</sup> which (after he and Alton are fired from their tailor jobs for signing a strike agreement) occupies Crosssthaite during the same period in the narrative.<sup>154</sup>

I will return to the apparent contradiction between the story of Chartism’s transformation into Christian Socialism that *Alton Locke* tells, and Kingsley’s failure to provide either Chartism to be transformed or a convincing account of 1848 as a transformative event: offering instead a “work preeminently about writing.”<sup>155</sup> For now, I want to dwell on the idea that, if we were to read *Alton Locke* as a unified and consistent narrative about Chartism, this would be to interpret the

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<sup>152</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 54.

<sup>153</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 54.

<sup>154</sup> The difference between the larger scope of Alton’s literary production and “agitation” is more extreme. As Catherine Gallagher notes, “Alton’s poetry is absorbed into ever larger categories of writing, until it is finally lost in a tide of literature that is no longer specifically about anything.” Catherine Gallagher, “The Tailor Unraveled,” in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 107.

<sup>155</sup> Gallagher, “Tailor,” 104.

Chartism of *Alton Locke* in terms other than narrowly political ones: we would have to take ‘Chartism’ to encompass for Kingsley not just public assemblies and speeches, the writing and presentation of petitions, and confrontations with police, but—potentially—any of the activities of Alton’s individual life: reading, writing, selling writing, mingling with literati, or resentfully touring Cambridge. Making sense of Alton’s political regret after the “Tenth of April” as the culmination of the fictional autobiography that Kingsley gives us would require us to read past the general absence of what we tend to think of as politics in the first and middle parts of *Alton Locke*. We would perhaps then find a political element in Alton’s “miserable [publishing] compromises.”

At least since Carlyle, who inextricably linked Chartism to the ‘condition of England’ in “Chartism,” Chartism has (as Stedman Jones most memorably noted) offered to generations of its interpreters some version of this invitation to go beyond the political level of Chartism, to sound a buried, presumably social, dimension. The attempt to read Chartism as the political expression of a covert redistributive agenda was typical of reactions to Chartism from its inception. Putting into words the fear of a Chartist insurrection that swept the English upper classes after the overthrow of Louis Philippe in France, an English resident of Paris commented in *The Times* in February of 1848 “that the present revolutionary tendencies are social rather than political—aiming at equality of possessions, or an equal distribution of the national revenue, rather than the mere establishment of democratic institutions.”<sup>156</sup> Despite the theoretical and ideological gulf that separated Carlyle from Engels, Carlyle’s description of the Chartists’ “social rather than political” “tendencies” is not totally dissimilar from Engels’ remarks on “the peculiarly social character of the working men’s Chartism.”<sup>157</sup> In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels cited

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<sup>156</sup> Quoted in John Saville, *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 98.

<sup>157</sup> Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 237.

a Methodist Parson's assertion during an 1838 meeting on Kersall Moor that "Chartism...is no political movement, where the main point is your getting the ballot. Chartism is a knife and fork question."<sup>158</sup> As Engels summarized, "'Political power our means, social happiness our end,' is now the well-formulated war-cry of the Chartists."<sup>159</sup>

Chartism has inspired what Stedman Jones called social interpretations partly because the very notion of political representation, for which Chartism at its most overt level constituted a demand, implies social interests (to be) represented. Yet social interpretations of Chartism have not solely depicted Chartism as representing working-class social interests. They have also frequently depicted Chartism representing the condition, threat, or sheer presence of the working-classes themselves. As Stedman Jones wrote, "[e]ven the more sympathetic middle-class observers virtually ignored the political case of the Chartists. Mrs Gaskell's novel, *Mary Barton*, for instance, analysed Chartism solely in terms of anger, distress and the breakdown of social relationships."<sup>160</sup> It is worth closely differentiating the slogan "political power our means, social happiness our end," or even the *Times* commentator's assertion that the Chartists were "aiming at" property redistribution, from Carlyle's summation in Chartism that "Chartism means the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad, the wrong condition therefore or the wrong disposition, of the Working Classes of England."<sup>161</sup> Connecting the Chartists' political demands to their social needs, desires, or intentions, the first two of these social interpretations both posit Chartist politics representing a future social effect. However different the attitudes towards Chartism of Engels and the *Times* commentator, they both describe Chartist politics as the means of achieving a social end. But Carlyle's phrase posits Chartist political activity as representing present social bitterness and

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<sup>158</sup> Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, 237.

<sup>159</sup> Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, 243.

<sup>160</sup> Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism," 91.

<sup>161</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, 2.

discord, not a future social outcome. The object of representation in Carlyle's assertion that Chartism "means the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad" is a spectacle that reduces political representation to the tautology of social presence. This difference between objects of representation is a difference between senses of representation itself. Engels and the *Times* commentator imply a causal notion of political representation. In their accounts, Chartism tends towards the social result of reform. When Carlyle claims that Chartism "means" social discontent, on the other hand, he evokes Chartism as social discontent's form of expression.

I will show that this second type of social interpretation overwrote the first within attempts to contemporaneously narrate Chartist history within and outside the movement, culminating in the kind of narrative encoding of 1848 as a transitional event of which *Alton Locke* is the prime example. Chartists writing in the early and vigorous days of the movement posited the franchise as the future historical achievement of Chartist politics. The two competing Chartist accounts of the proper "means"<sup>162</sup> of gaining the Charter, "physical force" and "moral force,"<sup>163</sup> referred to the shared political end of gaining the right to vote, what the first historian of the Chartist movement,

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<sup>162</sup> Robert George Gammage, *The History of the Chartist Movement, from Its Commencement Down to the Present Time* (London, 1854), 83, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0112219264/MOME?u=prin77918&sid=bookmark-%20MOME&xid=a2a9cfce&pg=1](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0112219264/MOME?u=prin77918&sid=bookmark-%20MOME&xid=a2a9cfce&pg=1).

<sup>163</sup> Both nineteenth-century and recent commentators, including in other places Gammage himself, have discredited as reductive the common notion of different "schools" of Chartists, since "'moral force' always needed the threat of insurrection in the background to give it credibility, while 'physical force' needed the legitimization which could only be provided by the visible exhaustion of all alternative routes. They were broad bands along a shifting continuum, rather than polar opposites." Walton, *Chartism*, 59. Chartists themselves continually drew attention to the co-constitutive function of physical and moral force rhetoric. For example, George Bown, editor of the Leicester Chartist newspaper the *Midland Counties Illuminator*, declared in his 1848 pamphlet *Physical Force*: "Physical force has the useful property of quickening the too tardy operations of Moral Force. The latter puts a check, a control, upon the too ardent enthusiasm of its potent ally. Combined, their reciprocal action and reaction serves to increase their joint momentum. The one abridges the time, the other secures the perpetuity." George Bown, *Physical Force: An Address to All Class of Reformers, but Especially to Those Who Are Unjustly Excluded from the Franchise* (Leicester, 1848), 14, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0106810564/MOME?u=prin77918&sid=bookmark-MOME&xid=7fad62ff&pg=1](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0106810564/MOME?u=prin77918&sid=bookmark-MOME&xid=7fad62ff&pg=1).

R.G Gammage, called the Chartists' "common object."<sup>164</sup> Chartists reasoned that once the working classes gained the franchise, working-class political power would offer a means to social reform.<sup>165</sup>

I argue that later Chartists revised this notion of Chartist agitation politics as a means to the end of the franchise, and the franchise as means to the end of social reform. Social reform was now—and always had been—the meaning of Chartist politics. To engage in social reform was thus to continue to engage in Chartist politics, even while dropping the goal of the franchise. In this sense the notion of 'end' in the sense of 'goal' also negotiated Chartism's historical 'end' as a specifically political movement.

In *Chartism: A New Organization of the People*, the 1840 plan for a program of working-class education and self-improvement written from Birmingham jail, John Collins and William Lovett wrote that "we are anxious...to effect our object *in peace*."<sup>166</sup> The notion of "peace" as a means to obtaining the Chartists' "object" suggests the conventional moral force argument that working class self-education and self-improvement would persuade Parliament to give the working classes the Charter. Anticipating the objections of those who "may suppose that" their plan could place "political emancipation at a greater distance,"<sup>167</sup> Lovett and Collins themselves described their plan of education as "the nearest means towards the accomplishment of" that "object."<sup>168</sup> Yet the chronological relationship between what Collins and Lovett here designate as means and ends—respectively, moral force and working-class enfranchisement—is ambiguous elsewhere in

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<sup>164</sup> Gammage, *History*, 83.

<sup>165</sup> Stedman Jones sought to de-emphasize and problematize historical conclusions drawn from the assertion that (in Mark Hovell's words) "'by 1838 the Radical Programme was recognized no longer as an end in itself, but as the means to an end, and the end was the social and economic regeneration of society.'" Yet, as Stedman Jones himself acknowledged, "something like" this statement "had been said on occasion by Chartists themselves." "Rethinking," 99.

<sup>166</sup> John Collins and William Lovett, *Chartism: A New Organization of the People*. (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1969), 21.

<sup>167</sup> Collins and Lovett, *Chartism*, 23.

<sup>168</sup> Collins and Lovett, *Chartism*, 23.

Collins' and Lovett's text. In the preface, for example, Lovett and Collins assert their interest in "preparing our brethren to receive all the social advantages, of the political power they are now seeking to obtain."<sup>169</sup> "Peace" in the other formulation (working-class self-improvement as a political "means") preceded and tended toward the acquisition of the Charter. But here the project of working-class education and self-improvement appears at once to refer to the moment after the conquest of political power and to displace the project of that conquest. With the "enjoyment" of working-class social institutions ostensibly to follow the working classes' conquest of political power, Lovett and Collins nevertheless strongly imply that if the political conquest is not achieved the working classes will in any case have the social enjoyment.

In a way, this act of recoding political defeat as social success anticipates tendencies leading up to and especially after 1848, when "radicalism lost both its confrontationalist stance and its resistance to meliorist alternatives and cultural assimilation."<sup>170</sup> It isn't that Lovett's and Collins' project approximates the material organization of the version of Chartism that emerged after the collapse both of O'Connor's Land Plan and the defeat of the demonstration on Kennington Common, but many of the moments in which a 'turn' was legible involve a similar ascension of levels of meaning of effectivity, a replacement of the political goal of the Charter with forms of social enjoyment that no longer needed the accomplishment of the political goal to precede them. Critical comments by the Chartist leader O'Brien about (notorious advocate of physical force) Feargus O'Connor's Land Plan expresses contemporaneous shock in response to this process:

The strangest thing of all [is] that the philanthropic Feargus should have dragged millions of people after him to torchlight meetings, demonstrations, etc., all attended with great sacrifice of time and money, and caused the actual ruin of thousands through imprisonment,

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<sup>169</sup> Collins and Lovett, *Chartism*, vi.

<sup>170</sup> John Belchem, "1848: Feargus O'Connor and the Collapse of the Mass Platform," in *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860*, eds. Dorothy Thompson and James Epstein (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 270.

loss of employment and expatriation, when all the while he had only to establish a “National Chartist Cooperative Land Society” to ensure social happiness for us all, and when, to use his own words...he had discerned that “political equality can only spring from social happiness.” Formerly, he taught us that social happiness was to proceed from political equality.<sup>171</sup>

O’Connor, O’Brien’s skepticism suggests, is falsely representing a present to which only social tactics of engagement were left available as the social future formerly imagined as the end of Chartism.

It was due partly to slippages like this—future into present; politics into social reform—that the historical experience of 1838-42 lent itself to identifications of working-class projects of social self-improvement or self-help with a “form” of Chartism, rather than to something like post-Chartism. Of course, forms of working-class social self-improvement had been understood as political before the Chartist era. If William Lovett “did not separate education from politics”<sup>172</sup> in *Chartism*, this is in part the legacy of Lovett’s experience in free press agitation in the 1830s, which linked the Owenism of the ‘20s to the Chartism of the ‘30s. But there are important differences between the political movement that centered around education and freedom of the press in the 1830s and the set of rhetorical shifts that—as a response to the defeats of 1838-42—reformulated a demand for the vote as social “enjoyment” that could take place even without enfranchisement. The post-1838-42 reformulation of social reform as politics negotiated a landscape in which the distinction between politics and the categories of material, economic, or social life eroded in response to the increasingly apparent infeasibility of any concrete political

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<sup>171</sup> Quoted in Stedman Jones, “Rethinking,” 167. In the context of Stedman Jones’ argument, O’Brien’s comment supports the claim that “economics and politics were increasingly sundered” from the early 1840s onwards, stripping Chartism of its long-term credibility insofar as it remained a movement with a strictly political explanation for the condition of England. According to Stedman Jones, the “staleness and anachronistic flavour” of the Chartist revival of 1848, still a campaign in the strictly political terms of the franchise, “became apparent even to its strongest supporters.” “Rethinking,” 178.

<sup>172</sup> Briggs, “Introduction,” 18.

achievement. Chartist politics as such receded into the background of what continued to be some form of a Chartist movement even after 1848: blending imperceptibly into a variety of interventions into economic or social life.

The similarities between this Chartist rhetoric and Kingsley's own articulation of the social turn suggests that Chartism's editing of the notion of political equality as a means to "social happiness" laid the groundwork for further editing from outside the movement. As in Lovett's and Collins' language, the social end of politics suggests not just the new means to political rights, but Chartism's social meaning in *Alton Locke*. Alton's death-bed dialogue with Eleanor Stanton, which asks the working classes to prove that the fight for the Charter was all along a political "means" to a social "end" by replacing the political struggle with social self-reform, recalls the inversion of means and ends that put a rhetorical end to political Chartism within the movement itself:

"The Charter, like its supporters, must die to itself before it lives to God. Is it not even now farther off than ever?"

"It seems so indeed—but what do you mean?"

"You regarded the Charter as an absolute end. You made a selfish and a self-willed idol of it. And therefore God's blessing did not rest on it or you."

"We want it as a means as well as an end—as a means for the highest and widest social reform, as well as a right dependent on eternal justice."

"Let the working classes prove that, then," she replied, "in their actions now. If it be true, as I would fain believe it to be, let them show that they are willing to give up their will to God's will; to compass those social reforms by the means which God puts in their way, and wait for His own good time to give them, or not to give them, those means which they in their own minds prefer. This is what I meant by saying that Chartism must die to itself before it has a chance of living to God. You must feel, too, that Chartism has sinned—has defiled itself in the eyes of the wise, the good, the gentle. Your only way now to soften the prejudice against it is to show that you can live like men and brothers and Christians without it."<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 2, 350.

Where, in Lovett's and Collins' text, social "enjoyment" preempted the political achievement that Chartism originally posited as the "means" to social reform, Kingsley proposes that the working classes give up the fight for the franchise and immediately pursue those "social reforms" that Alton claims were the Chartists' "end" out of penitent resignation. What is in question in this passage is not the recoding of political defeat as social success, as it was in the writings of committed Chartists. Rather, it is the castigation of Chartist politics as a sinful fall that can be redeemed by the conversion of these politics into social reform. The result, however, is the same. Encouraging the transubstantiation of Chartist politics into "social reforms"—the latter to be accomplished now without the political "means" which the Chartists "in their own minds prefer"—Kingsley rhetorically replaces political activity with social types of intervention.<sup>174</sup>

Puns, between "means" and meaning, and between the social "end" that was political Chartism's goal and the historical end of Chartism as a specifically political movement, extend in this passage beyond any inversion of means and ends: they identify the political with the social, Chartism with Christian Socialism, outright. The notion of the "social reforms" for the sake of which the working classes "want" the Charter is available to Eleanor's inversions of means and ends because Alton's claim that political Chartism is the means to social reform is so much like the claim that political Chartism *means* social reform. Eleanor treats Alton's notion of Chartism as a "means" like a notion of Chartist politics as social reform's form of representation. Meanwhile, Kingsley's enforcement of political Chartism's historical end in 1848 draws on the notion that Chartism's end—in the sense of goal—was always social. When Chartism "die[s] to

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<sup>174</sup> Hayden White calls to mind the resonances of Kingsley's narrative of Chartist social and religious sublation with Hegelian analyses of historical narrative when White writes that Hegel "set his perception of" the historical field "within the means-ends question which he insisted is raised in the consciousness by moral reflection on it ('to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered')." *Metahistory*, 107.

itself,” it will continue to “live to God” in Eleanor’s terms because, when it sheds its political form, the movement will reconcile with its preexisting social end.

While Kingsley clearly draws on the changing self-representations of Chartists in order to construct his narrative of Chartism’s sublation into Christian Socialism, Kingsley’s temporal as well as ideological distance from Chartists like Lovett and O’Connor comes across in his obsession with Alton’s educational *Bildung*, which—as I discussed earlier—at first reads as inconsistent in a novel supposedly about Chartism. I argue that Kingsley makes sense of his self-posed notion that the meaning or substance of Chartist politics was always social by identifying Chartist politics with the act of working-class social self-improvement which is Alton’s education, classing social self-improvement as a form of politics before 1848 just as he classes Christian Socialism as a new form of Chartism after 1848. Retrospectively, Kingsley’s narrative of sublation collapses into the revisionist insistence that Chartist politics and working-class social self-improvement never were separate terms. This renders incoherent Kingsley’s claim to locate a historical transition in the events of 1848. Framing all working-class self-improvement and even activity per se as at once social and political, Kingsley renders the period in his narrative before 1848 indistinguishable from the period after 1848.

As Chris Vanden Bossche notes, Kingsley “depicts Chartism as seeking not to gain the right to vote but rather the right to education.”<sup>175</sup> The early trajectory of the novel continually redirects Alton’s possible Chartist radicalization towards resentment related to Alton’s exclusion from British educational institutions. For example, Alton’s first conversation with Crossthwaite, which begins in the tenor of physical and moral force after the two encounter a group of armed dragoons, quickly veers into a discussion of the “monopoly of education in England” kept up by

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<sup>175</sup> Chris R. Vanden Bossche, *Reform Acts: Chartism, Social Agency, and the Victorian Novel, 1832-1867* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 150.

parsons whose interest it is “to keep up the price of their commodity, and let no man have a taste of it who can’t pay down handsomely.”<sup>176</sup> Alton’s naïve question to Crossthwaite—“What is there so very wrong about things, that we must begin fighting about it?”<sup>177</sup> could in another novel invite a political analysis of the tailor shop in which Crossthwaite and Alton work. It is possible to imagine the Chartist Crossthwaite connecting the material conditions of London garment workers, Henry Mayhew’s depiction of which inspired Kingsley to write *Alton Locke*, to the working classes’ lack of political power. Instead, Crossthwaite draws Alton’s attention to Alton’s equal “right” with “gentlemen” to “tutors and professors.”<sup>178</sup> Alton’s own address to the reader earlier in the novel defines education as a—rather, in the absence of any mention of the franchise, *the*—Chartist project: “nine-tenths of the improvement has been owing, not to the masters, but to the men themselves;... —the Chartists; the communist Chartists.”<sup>179</sup> Alton, Kingsley’s working-class prodigy whose main desire is for education, substitutes for the political activist whose direct representation Kingsley eschews as bad propagandistic strategy. Even while occupying the narrative role of a Chartist whose political commitments are rewired as social commitments by his historical experience, Alton displaces political Chartism from Kingsley’s narrative.

This displacement of politics in advance undermines Kingsley’s attempt to narrate a transition away from politics. Eleanor’s repetition of the word “now” in the passage above indicates distinct historical zones on either side of the third presentation of the Charter to Parliament. Before 1848, “social reforms” wait on the working classes’ preliminary achievement of political power. After 1848, political power—the “means which” the working classes “in their

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<sup>176</sup> Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke Tailor and Poet an Autobiography*, vol. 1. London: Macmillan and Co., 1881, 212.

<sup>177</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. 1, 209.

<sup>178</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. I, 210.

<sup>179</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. I, 179.

own minds prefer”—waits on God’s grace and the working classes’ patient pursuit of “social reforms.” Yet a close examination of Kingsley’s narrative shows that the “Tenth of April” divides an epoch of social self-improvement *qua* Chartist politics from an epoch of social self-improvement in place of Chartist politics. Removing politics *per se* both from what precedes and from what follows April 10, 1848, Kingsley ultimately renders indistinguishable the before and after of Eleanor’s “now.” If the novel’s own best example of the social self-improvement that should follow Chartist political history is working-class education, Kingsley’s re-writing of Chartist political history as all along expressing a demand for education excludes from the frame any genuinely political object of renunciation.

It is worth noting in this regard that Kingsley concentrates in 1848 an historical transformation of Chartist “political” into “social” commitments that arguably resulted from defeats a decade earlier. Beginning in historical time in about 1843, Kingsley’s narrative avoids contemporaneity with either of the first two of the three waves of Chartist activity: those of 1838-9 and 1842. Because Kingsley ascribes the spiritual and historical status of Chartism’s decisive end to the relative non-event of the third presentation of the Charter, Kingsley forces a mainly psychological event for the middle classes—the fear that something like the continental revolutions could happen in London—to have real effects for the working-class characters in *Alton Locke*. At the same time, he proleptically suppresses the specifically political dimension of Chartism long before the arrival in his narrative of the historical event (the “Tenth of April”) that supposedly performs this suppression.

In this sense, Kingsley not only maps the notion of Chartism as social self-improvement which supposedly emerges in 1848 backward onto the narrative. He also brackets out from his narrative all the most distinctly political events in Chartist history and so forces Alton’s very

“autobiography” to signify Chartist politics by virtue of Kingsley’s exclusion of any more distinctly political referent from his narrative of Chartist history. This overdetermined erasure of politics as such from *Alton Locke* results in the double bind of political resignation when all Kingsley has allowed into the frame is the social remainder of Chartism’s political defeat. If Eleanor’s prescription to the working classes to show that they “can live like men and brothers and Christians without” the Charter identifies a politically conflict-less life as the condition upon which the working classes’ worthiness of political power depends, the corollary is a life that means political conflict in its very character as working-class. While Eleanor in her capacity as aristocratic guide to the working classes will light the way to Christian Socialism, the only way out for Alton is emigration and death.

## ***Conclusion***

I have differentiated two types of what Stedman Jones called the “social interpretation” of Chartism within Chartism’s own time. On one hand, the logic that working-class political power, or even a show of working-class political force, would lead to social reform, attributed a social end to Chartism. Chartism within this logical structure had the status of a means. On the other hand, the notion that Chartism “mean[t]”—in Carlyle’s word—the social experiences, consciousness, or sheer presence of the working classes, attributed to Chartism the capacity expressively to capture some social content. I have argued that *Alton Locke* rehearses a narrative process by which notions of Chartism’s social meaning usurped the notion of Chartism as means at a time when the movement was turning away from the goal of the franchise and towards social self-improvement. Preserving and yet cancelling Chartist politics as means to social reform, Kingsley’s narrative presents social kinds of working-class activity as Chartism in another form.

Because Chartism's social "end" is the true meaning of Chartist politics, Kingsley suggests, this meaning should be reconciled with properly social forms of working-class activity.

If Kingsley's narrative of Chartism's sublation into Christian Socialism relates a social content to the political form of Chartism through what Stedman Jones called reference, the historical vantage point from which Kingsley wrote *Alton Locke* in 1850 facilitated this mode of representation. Whether Chartism's defeat took place in 1838-42 or 1848, this defeat increasingly foreclosed the logics of causality through which commentators were able to relate Chartist politics to future social reforms—or threats—in the early days of the movement. Kingsley has this vantage point in common with many other interpreters of Chartism who ascribed to the movement a social meaning. Though Kingsley does not share the ideological positions or conceptual resources of the various theorists of class consciousness Stedman Jones critiqued in *Languages of Class*, he shares even their general frame of reference, the non-realization (whether due to defeat or capture) of working-class politics itself. What Stedman Jones called "the gulf between theoretical expectation and actual history,"<sup>180</sup> the disappointment of social hopes that found its inflection point in the Chartist defeat of 1848, is one condition of possibility for Kingsley's narrativization of Chartism as social substance and for any ascription of class consciousness to a de-mobilized population. Removing from the historical scene any politics that could be conceived as socially effective, one of the major interpretive options that defeat repeatedly leaves available is the politicization of social activity (and, concurrently, the retroactive ascription of social meaning to politics). We might want to say, in Jameson's words, that Stedman Jones "presuppose[d] a radical distance between meaning and empirical reality" in "Rethinking Chartism," ascribing to Marxist, Liberal, and Conservative social interpretations of Chartism "a failed attempt to produce an impossible

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<sup>180</sup> Kingsley, *Alton Locke*, vol. I, 6.

unification of these dimensions[.]”<sup>181</sup> This would register skepticism towards Stedman Jones’ modes of interpretation, yet it would also be to accord to Stedman Jones’ diagnostic invention and polemic object, “social interpretation,” a revised unity: acknowledging that interpretations of working-class political movements from a number of ideological vantage points allegorize politics where conditions of defeat and de-politicization seem to remove the option of reading politics as a socially effective force.

At the same time, it is worth recalling that certain notions of Chartism’s social meaning replaced, re-wrote, and repressed notions of Chartism as means to a social end. As I have argued, Kingsley draws his narrative of sublation from rhetoric within Chartism that inverted means—political agitation—and ends—social “enjoyment”—, encoding as a form of Chartism the social “enjoyment” that had previously been imagined as the outcome of Chartism. Turning to institution-building in the wake of political defeats, Chartists like Lovett and O’Connor advocated engaging immediately in the kind of social reform that had previously been imagined as the effect of political equality. Kingsley’s narrative further reformulates these figures’ own reformulations of Chartism. Kingsley echoes Chartists’ rhetoric when he argues through Eleanor that the working classes ought “to compass...“social reforms by the means which God puts in their way, and wait for His own good time to give them, or not to give them, those means which they in their own minds prefer.” But if we take in the whole narrative of *Alton Locke*, it is not clear that Kingsley sanctions Chartism’s historical “end” as a specifically political movement for the sake of a shortcut to collective social amelioration. More than “reform,” Kingsley’s notion of social substance affirms the sheer social activity that outlasts political defeat. He attaches social meaning (Christian

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<sup>181</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), 2.

Socialism) to the political (Chartism) only to attach political meaning (Chartism) to the nominally social (working-class education and ultimately Alton's very autobiography).

In other words, what might elsewhere read as a strategic turn towards a more fundamental reality than politics is in *Alton Locke* a symptom of politics' overdetermined absence: both from the historical scene by the late 1840s, and from the novel's narrative frame. A conceptual as well as ideological difference between the Chartists' and Kingsley's respective positions, the symptomatic status of the social in *Alton Locke* also differentiates Kingsley's mode of social interpretation from, say, Engels' statements on Chartism, to which Stedman Jones' "Rethinking Chartism" was in large part a response. Positing that Chartism would have to unite with English socialism in order to express its "social character" in social terms, Engels wrote in *The Condition of the Working Classes in England in 1844* that "the approach to Socialism cannot fail, especially when the next crisis directs the working men by force of sheer want to social instead of political remedies."<sup>182</sup> For Engels in 1844, Chartist politics was a form of appearance that didn't yet adequately represent an underlying social struggle. Kingsley, on the other hand, sought to give the social remainder of Chartism's 1848 defeat the appearance of a political struggle that had already been forcibly relegated to the historical past.

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<sup>182</sup> Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, 243.

## Literature for Hard Times: Dickens' Industrial Novel and the Problem of British Realism

Like the other English industrial novels of the mid-nineteenth-century, Dickens' 1854 *Hard Times* has been read as a failure of realism to the same extent that the novel has been read as didactic. The centrality in *Hard Times* of utilitarianism, as a merely ideological object of critique and representation, supposedly detracts from the literariness of the novel's form—leaving us with a text that reads too much like a tract—and from the novel's fidelity to concrete social life. As a system of thought and a constitutional feature of nineteenth-century life, however, utilitarianism in fact troubles the distinctions between ideology and industry, discursive analysis and literary form, upon which this critical assessment rests. In this chapter I will show that utilitarianism poses historically specific problems of literary representation that Dickens navigates in *Hard Times* to formally productive effect. Dickens' industrial novel, I suggest, offers a novel responsive to the transitional character of the 1850s, when neither ideas nor the novel itself regarded political and economic life from within a perceptibly separate and reified sphere of culture.

### ***Content, Form, and Utilitarianism***

George Orwell once remarked: "One crying evil of his time that Dickens says very little about is child labour. There are plenty of pictures of suffering children in his books, but usually they are suffering in schools rather than factories."<sup>183</sup> Orwell didn't mention how tightly linked schools were to factories in Dickens' metaphorical imagination. Recalling Carlyle's 1929 remark that "not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and

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<sup>183</sup> George Orwell, "Charles Dickens," in *A Collection of Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953), 53.

spiritual also...we have machines for Education,”<sup>184</sup> educational institutions in Dickens’ work are not just spiritually and intellectually stultifying—they are spiritually and intellectually stultifying on the model of the industrial factory. The phrase “grinding in the mill of knowledge”<sup>185</sup> describes Paul Dombey’s sufferings at the Blimbey school in *Dombey and Son* before resurfacing in *Hard Times*. And in an 1857 speech by Dickens on “the sort of schools” he didn’t “like,” the machine-like quality of educational institutions transfers to the children they produce: “I have never,” Dickens declares, “seen among the pupils, whether boys or girls, anything but little parrots and small calculating machines.”<sup>186</sup>

It is true, however, that the factory seldom appears in Dickens’ work literally. Even in the novel usually considered Dickens’ major attempt to depict and critique the industrial situation, *Hard Times*, Dickens locates utilitarianism or “strong common sense,” the focus of his critique, in Coketown’s school more than in its factory. Critics have consequently read *Hard Times* as the novel by Dickens that deals with the industrial situation, but fails to deal with it adequately by foregrounding as representative of that situation a utilitarianism whose main purpose is to stifle the imagination in service of a brutally factual model of education. If the question of “schools” or “factories” is nowhere more pressing than in *Hard Times*, nowhere have critics answered this question with more resounding accusations of displacement, avoidance, and misrepresentation. As thematic content, on one hand, and as a form-altering presence or preoccupation, on the other hand, Dickens’ schoolhouse anti-utilitarianism has seemed to critics to compromise the novel’s realism.

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<sup>184</sup> Thomas Carlyle, “Signs of the Times,” in *A Carlyle Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. G. B. Tennyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 35.

<sup>185</sup> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Andrew Sanders, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 629.

<sup>186</sup> Quoted in Philip Collins, *Dickens and Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1963), 77.

### *The Content Problem*

In some versions of the critical indictment of *Hard Times*' anti-utilitarianism, readers have suggested that the centrality of utilitarianism in the novel compromises the novel's representativeness of social reality: the more Dickens focuses on utilitarianism, the less socially representative his novel supposedly is. Readers contend that utilitarianism itself was an ideological dimension of mid-nineteenth-century life that cannot stand in for the material realities of industrial exploitation and class conflict; negatively evaluating *Hard Times* as a work of social representation because—in their view—Dickens ignored the essence of industrial society in favor of critiquing its ethos. Rendering the scene of factory workers and bourgeois masters in terms of a contest between the humane forces of empathy and the imagination and the inhumane forces of utilitarianism, Dickens supposedly effaces distinctions more germane to the industrial exploitation of labor. Dickens' overweening concern with the suppression of human sentiment yields, for example, a portrait of the Trades-Unionist Slackbridge as indistinguishable from the industrialists in the novel, the Gradgrinds and Bounderbys: the utilitarianism of union-man and factory master appearing equally antithetical to the play of fancy and imagination and to the demonstration of human warmth, and thus basically equivalent to each other.

Readers also argue that Dickens' account of utilitarianism in *Hard Times* does not give us an accurate image of how utilitarianism actually related to industrial life. The utilitarianism of *Hard Times* is imposed above all not in Coketown's factory but in its classroom, where children learn to prioritize facts above all else:

“Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the

principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!”<sup>187</sup>

These first few sentences of *Hard Times* constitute only one of many appeals to “Facts” above all and the plot of the novel revolves around the social effects of implementing utilitarianism as an educational principle. Dickens sprinkles industrial metaphors throughout the text. Thomas Gradgrind gives “himself up to be taken home like a machine”<sup>188</sup> from the circus. Louisa is (according to her father Mr. Gradgrind’s aspirations for her) “metallurgical,”<sup>189</sup> and Mr. Bounderby, whom Louisa eventually marries, has a “metallic laugh.”<sup>190</sup> Daily life at the Gradgrind’s house, Stone Lodge, goes “monotonously round like a piece of machinery which discouraged human interference.”<sup>191</sup> But we have to wait fifty pages for any factory hands to enter the picture, and when Chapter Ten finally introduces a working-class character in Stephen Blackpool, the social and dramatic problem that he faces is not so much poverty or exploitation as these conditions’ exacerbation of an unhappy marriage and the legal inaccessibility of divorce. Not until Chapter Four of the Second Volume, one hundred pages into the Norton critical edition of the novel, does a strike take place. Meanwhile the effects of the Coketown system on the mind and spirit take continual priority over their effects on the body. Stephen Blackpool stands outside the factory with “the sensation upon him which the stoppage of the machinery always produced—the sensation of its having worked and stopped in his own head.”<sup>192</sup> The narrator himself refers to an “analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds,” but the analogy is to the “Fancy” which demands, in the Hands as well as the Gradgrind children, “to

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<sup>187</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 8.

<sup>188</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 15.

<sup>189</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 15.

<sup>190</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 16.

<sup>191</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 47.

<sup>192</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 52.

be brought into healthy existence instead of struggling on in convulsions.”<sup>193</sup> In short, education seems to draw on industrial metaphors while displacing the actual industrial situation in *Hard Times*—and, with it, the very material that a realist work should take up. As Peter Brooks writes, “There is no attempt to tell us what is manufactured in Coketown, and how. There is no attempt to show us the workers at work, the gestures of their labor at the looms—...one could tax Dickens with a certain refusal to see, an avoidance of the inventories of the real that we normally associate with realism.”<sup>194</sup>

### *The Form Problem*

Dickens’ anti-utilitarianism seems to compromise *Hard Times*’ realism on a formal level due not to utilitarianism’s specific representational inadequacies, but to how this idea *as an idea* structures *Hard Times*. Critics have read *Hard Times*, much more than Dickens’ other novels, as a work structured at its foundations by a social-theoretical project. Lionel Stevenson writes that Dickens “began with the conscious purpose of examining the relationship between industrialists and workers in the new manufacturing cities, and of discrediting the utilitarian philosophy which was the ideological basis of current capitalism.” “This,” claimed Stevens, “had been foreshadowed in *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*. But in those novels he had started with characters and evolved the social implications; in *Hard Times* the characters are obviously invented to demonstrate the theory.”<sup>195</sup> Stevenson suggests that in *Hard Times*, unlike Dickens’ other novels, the “theory” comes first, and all the other narrative materials fall around this “theory.” John Holloway connected this theoretical bent of *Hard Times* to what he characterized as the novel’s literary failure in a rejection of “*Hard Times: An Analytic Note*,” the famous essay by F.R. Leavis

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<sup>193</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 24.

<sup>194</sup> Peter Brooks, “Dickens and Nonrepresentation,” in *Realist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>195</sup> Lionel Stevenson, *The English Novel: A Panorama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 311.

that dominated critical discussion of *Hard Times* for decades. Leavis had argued that *Hard Times* was a “complete success” as a response to industrial society: a thoroughgoing critique of utilitarianism that was also “a completely serious work of art.” On the contrary, wrote Holloway, the critique of utilitarianism had detracted from the aesthetic qualities of Dickens’ novel:

We assume, it may be, as we turn from the picturesqueness and picaresqueness of Dickens’s earlier work to a novel like *Hard Times*, that in organizing his work round a moral issue he will enjoy a deeper apprehension and produce a richer result. On second thought, this may prove the reverse of true. The “peculiarly insistent moral intention” (the words are again Dr. Leavis’s, and to me they seem wonderfully disquieting and unacceptable) is one thing; and a moral because simply a total apprehension on the writer’s part, a capacity in him to consume and register, in full, the buoyant abundance and endless variation of reality, is another.<sup>196</sup>

The idea around which Dickens organized *Hard Times*, Holloway suggests, obstructed the novelist’s perception and subsequent representation of “reality.”

Criticism of *Hard Times* today has moved past the debates over Leavis’ essay that dominated much twentieth-century discussion of *Hard Times*. But the identification, in utilitarianism, of a central idea that compromises *Hard Times*’ form persists. Jeff Nunokawa and Gage McWeeny write, for example: “As if in unspoken league with the philosophy that he famously or infamously caricatured in *Hard Times*, the individuals that he brings to our attention symbolize, rather than sublimate, the larger groups they inhabit.”<sup>197</sup> Here, an unholy alliance between the “philosophy” of utilitarianism and the literary form of *Hard Times* infects the latter, producing a novel in which individuals stand in for their larger social realities in the same way that

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<sup>196</sup> John Holloway, “Hard Times: A History and a Criticism,” in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 174.

<sup>197</sup> Jeff Nunokawa and Gage Mcweeny, “Introduction,” in *Charles Dickens’ Hard Times A Longman Cultural Edition* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), xiii-xiv.

ideas stand in for their referents. Rather than process and regurgitate the social environment in a fully literary form, *Hard Times* represents social reality in an analytic mode.

### ***The Novel of Ideas and the Problem of English Realism***

What I am calling the form problem in the context of critical receptions of *Hard Times* is an issue associated with categories such as the social problem novel, the novel of ideas, and the Tendenzroman. It is also an issue that comes up repeatedly in considerations of the industrial novel subgenre. For many twentieth-century critics, part of what implicitly organized the condition of England novels into a subgenre was a didactic intention for which the narrative is presumed to be a subordinate, sometimes even an improper, vehicle. The idea of the industrial novel is closely associated with the notion of a translation of “theory,” of critique, of social or political thought or a didactic message, into the form of a novel. There is some evidence that it is not just the setting of *Hard Times* in a Northern Industrial manufacturing town, but this impression about the priority of “theory” in *Hard Times*, that in the first place justified Raymond Williams’ inclusion of *Hard Times* in his list of the industrial novels. Dickens’ *Hard Times*, wrote Williams in *Culture and Society*, achieves a more “comprehensive understanding” of “the dominant philosophy of industrialism” than Gaskell’s novels. However, “his Stephen Blackpool, in relation to the people of *Mary Barton*, is little more than a diagrammatic figure. The gain in comprehension, that is to say, has been achieved by the rigours of generalization and abstraction; *Hard Times* is an analysis of Industrialism, rather than an experience of it.”<sup>198</sup> In his essay “Dickens and Social Ideas,” in which he lists “seven kinds of relation between fiction and ideas,” Williams identifies *Hard Times* as the closest of all Dickens’ novels to the industrial novelist (and prime minister) Benjamin Disraeli’s fiction with respect to its organization around ideas. In contrast, “*Dombey and Son* and

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<sup>198</sup> Williams, “The Industrial Novels,” 100.

*Great Expectations*, though essentially organized by ideas, have moved further into the substantial embodiment which the second type is at its most important.”<sup>199</sup>

The common attribution of didacticism to the industrial novels at large has contributed to a tendency to treat the latter almost as though they have no literary form, or as though their literary forms are inessential coverings over their true, non-literary forms. It has also tended to disqualify the industrial novels from meaningful participation in a realist tradition defined preeminently by formal evocations of social concreteness such as vividness and variety of detail. The overly “didactic” industrial novels do not seem to rise to the occasion of this realism—making the world over in the image of a didactic social or political idea rather than confronting and overturning ideas. A passage from the Leavis essay that provoked so much twentieth-century debate alludes to this common association in English criticism between realism and a formal concreteness that “sublimates” (in the words of McWeeney and Nunokawa above) or otherwise reroutes ideas into literature. Leavis sought to rescue Dickens’ industrial novel from the kind of charge often levied against *Hard Times* in company with the other industrial novels: that Dickens’ “idea” chronologically precedes and structures *Hard Times*, compromising the novel’s realism on a formal level. Leavis wrote:

To the question how the reconciling is done—there is much more diversity in *Hard Times* than these references to dialogue suggest—the answer can be given by pointing to the astonishing and irresistible richness of life that characterizes the book everywhere. It meets us everywhere, unstrained and natural, in the prose. Out of such prose a great variety of presentations can arise congenially with equal vividness. There they are, unquestionably “real”. It goes back to an extraordinary energy of perception and registration in Dickens. “When people say that Dickens exaggerates”, says Santayana, “it seems to me that they can have no eyes and no ears. They probably only have notions of what things and people are; they accept them conventionally, at their diplomatic value.” Settling down as we read to an implicit

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<sup>199</sup> Raymond Williams, “Dickens and Social Ideas,” in *Dickens 1970*, ed. Michael Slater (New York: Chapman & Hall, 1970), 85.

recognition of this truth, we don't readily and confidently apply any criterion we suppose ourselves to hold for distinguishing varieties of relation between what Dickens gives us and a normal "real."<sup>200</sup>

In *Hard Times*, Leavis suggests, Dickens displaces in advance the reader's pre-existing "notions" by confronting him with sensory evidence—through his "eyes" and "ears"—of "life." The sensuous abundance of *Hard Times* interrupts propositional cognition's normal order of operations, allowing the reader—at least, that reader who does not in any case stubbornly impose his "notions" on the text—to perceive Dickens' "great variety" of "unquestionably 'real'" "presentations" unclouded by (pre)conceptions.

The notion of a successful literary realism that Leavis seems to imply here, a style of "prose" that functions as a non-ideational medium for "vivid" sensory impressions, has for its predecessor an old conception of realism as a process of disillusionment by which the self encounters external reality as a force of resistance, and often an impetus to transformation, that structures narrative itineraries. George Levine remarks of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a novel often considered to be the apogee of English realism: "reality remains incommensurate with the desires of an aspiring self, a convention of narrative at least since Don Quixote."<sup>201</sup> "In George Eliot," as Brian Swann confirms, "the crumbling of the ideal is" taken to be "the construction of the real."<sup>202</sup>

György Lukács offered an account of realism as disillusionment tied not just to the vanquishment of the "self" or "the ideal" in a moral sense, but to the sphere of intellectual and

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<sup>200</sup> F.R. Leavis, "Hard Times: An Analytic Note," in *Hard Times*, by Charles Dickens (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1966), 347.

<sup>201</sup> George Levine, "George Eliot's Hypothesis of Reality," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35, no. 1 (June 1, 1980): 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2933477>.

<sup>202</sup> Brian Swann, "Middlemarch: Realism and Symbolic Form," *ELH* 39, no. 2 (June 1972): 284, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2872247>.

cultural production of which the novel itself is a component. Discussing Balzac's *Lost Illusions* as paradigmatic of nineteenth-century realism, for example, Lukács wrote:

The theme of the novel is the transformation of literature (and with it of every ideology) into a commodity and this complete "capitalization" of every sphere of intellectual, literary and artistic activity fits the general tragedy of the post-Napoleonic generation into a much more profoundly conceived social pattern than can be found in the writings even of Stendhal, Balzac's greatest contemporary.<sup>203</sup>

If disillusionment involves a loss of idealism, then part of what that means here is that ideas are revealed to be just another part of a reality structured by capitalist processes. *Lost Illusions* is paradigmatically realist because it narrates an encounter not just between subject and world, but between the whole space of culture, including literature, and the transformation of culture's material base.

If for Balzac's protagonist Lucien Chardon disillusionment is the revelation that ideas are just another part of commercial reality, the passage from Leavis above identifies not commercial reality but literary "prose" as what subsumes the idea. Literary form, rather than capitalism, incorporates and molds ideas in its own image. On the larger scale of twentieth-century English criticism, this kind of substitution of literary for historical form has sometimes lent itself to a theory of realism as formal achievement and to a slippage between the concepts of realism, form, and literary value. It has also raised problems for genealogies of British realism, especially those that seek to account for the industrial novel, because the very opposition between literary form and a literature of ideas postdates the mid-nineteenth century. As Michael Lemahieu remarks:

The concept of the novel of ideas emerges out of and against a modernist aesthetic ideology, l'art pour l'art, which in its most radical form excludes the possibility of a novel of ideas: an autonomous art insulated from outside influences or external sources of value is its own

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<sup>203</sup> György Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Gorki, and Others* (London: Merlin Press, 2014), 49.

“idea,” as it were; art, and the novel as art form, need not look elsewhere, whether to science, politics, religion, or philosophy.<sup>204</sup>

Whether as insistence on the self-enclosed literariness of formalist criticism’s objects of analysis, or as Critical Theories of autonomous art, strong theorizations of literature’s irreducibility to ideas or discursive acts have been tightly linked to the rise of Modernism in the twentieth century. Even while these theorizations accommodated social realism, many of them also implicitly or explicitly elevated artistic formalism above representational art. It is worth recalling how Adorno’s critiques of Lukacs and Brecht, for example, tip over into an indictment of realism’s very adequacy under the historical conditions of the twentieth century.

It’s not just that the linked ideas of modernist form and the novel of ideas postdate the mid-nineteenth century. It’s that specific historical conditions—especially a reified sphere of ‘culture,’ separate from the spheres of economic and political life—made intelligible late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of aesthetic form as autonomous from business and interests (even as the work of art functioned as a commodity) and clearly distinct from such forms of cultural production as analysis and discourse (even where artworks drew on analysis and/or discourse as so many raw materials). Defining realism in relation to late nineteenth-century novels by authors such as George Eliot, that “self-conscious producer of the novel as a particularly ‘literary’ genre,”<sup>205</sup> and then mapping earlier English novels onto a developmental trajectory culminating in *Middlemarch*, tends to project the formal features and assumptions of a period of high cultural reification backward. This creates a lacuna in our account of British social realism’s history: the mature, literary social realism of the late- nineteenth century seems counterintuitively to have had

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<sup>204</sup> Michael LeMahieu, “The Novel of Ideas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ian McEwan*, ed. Dominic Head (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 179, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108648516.005>.

<sup>205</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6.

a dubious parentage in the 1840s' and '50s' most concerted novelistic attempts to capture the realities of a newly industrialized society.

At stake in the notion that the industrial novels are works of didactic fiction and thus both insufficiently literary and insufficiently realist is the accurate observation that these novels imagine the novel itself not as mediating, but as intervening almost immediately in, economic or social life. The industrial novels of the 1840s and '50s emerged directly out of the Useful Knowledge and cheap literature movements of the 1830s. Immediate predecessors of Gaskell and Kingsley such as Harriet Martineau drew on statistical Blue Books for their material and sought to intervene directly in the social condition of the poor. Responding in real time to the political atmosphere of the 1830s and '40s, the condition of England novelists, too, sought to effect social change by the persuasive and pedagogical means available to the novel, dispelling "mutual ignorance between the divided classes" "both through the message of the plot and through the very process of writing."<sup>206</sup> Compared with novelistic forms whose full "development" was subtended by the developing sphere of cultural production itself, this attitude would read not just as politically naïve, but also as a sign of literary under-development. Adequately historicizing the industrial novels as works of social representation, however, may require re-examining the character of this sphere in the industrial era. As I will suggest below, far from a mere idea, the utilitarianism that is at stake in discussions of *Hard Times* encapsulates the transitional moment in which ideas, the novel, and cultural production broadly found themselves in the mid- nineteenth century.

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<sup>206</sup> Alan Shelston, "Introduction," in *Mary Barton*, by Elizabeth Gaskell, ed. Alan Shelston (London: Everyman, 1996), xx.

## *The Idea of Utilitarianism*

Although critiques of *Hard Times* tend to revolve around the status of utilitarianism in the novel, there has been, Raymond Williams notes, “a very confused idea of what utilitarianism was”<sup>207</sup> in the mid- nineteenth century. “At a certain point in the real history of England during the industrial revolution,” Williams writes, “contradictory ideas” were “combined...by the urgent and overriding interests of a class.”<sup>208</sup> Thus social and economic theories that contradicted utilitarianism’s original philosophical appeal to general utility—such as laissez-faire economics—went under the banner of utilitarianism in Dickens’ time. The lines between utilitarianism and its alternatives were often blurrier in the context of mid-nineteenth-century social programs, or the relatively unsystematic political thought of the Victorian intellectuals that influenced Dickens, than critics’ often-categorical delineation between utilitarianism and Dickens’ anti-utilitarianism might suggest. As Lauren Goodlad has shown, not only Victorian Liberalism in general, but Victorian institutions described by historians in retrospect as utilitarian, were characterized by tensions between the depersonalized economic tenets of self-governance and self-interest, and anti-bourgeois appeals to character and community that contested those tenets.<sup>209</sup> Even the final shape of such Benthamite interventions as the 1834 New Poor Law emerged from a crucible of conflict between Utilitarian principles proper, and anti-Utilitarian, morally inflected attempts to institute a system of personal contact and spiritual reliance between rich and poor. It is not impossible to trace Dickens’ own attacks on social abuses to Benthamite figures and thought,

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<sup>207</sup> Williams, “Dickens and Social Ideas,” 88

<sup>208</sup> Williams, “Dickens and Social Ideas,” 90.

<sup>209</sup> Lauren Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). See especially Chapter Two, “Making the Working Man Like Me: Charity, the Novel, and the New Poor Law,” 32–85.

despite Dickens' reputation as an anti-utilitarian.<sup>210</sup> As Kathleen Blake points out, for example, although in *Hard Times* Dickens satirizes William Ellis, founder of the Birkbeck Schools, Ellis "won some approval in Household Words."<sup>211</sup> Rather than a scene of competing actors and thinkers, conflict over Utilitarian thought and forms of social organization in the condition of England era and beyond is best grasped as a field of philosophical and social contradictions.

If complaints against *Hard Times* often converge on the "idea" of utilitarianism, it is worth remarking that mid-nineteenth-century utilitarianism was in fact both a system of thought and an effective instrument of reform. In a major sense, it functioned as both an ideology and something more fundamental: a mode of production or a political program. What began life in the eighteenth century as a set of philosophical propositions was at the same time a set of social proposals. In his "Essay on Bentham," John Stuart Mill registered the unprecedented intertwinement, in Benthamism, of a form of philosophy and forms of social organization. Mill suggested that the key to Bentham's social influence lay at the core of Bentham's philosophy. In contrast to his eighteenth-century predecessors, Bentham had regarded abstractions with skepticism "until they have been translated into realities."<sup>212</sup> He had thus shown "that speculative philosophy, which to the superficial appears a thing so remote from the business of life and the outward interests of men, is in reality the thing on earth which most influences them."<sup>213</sup> This close connection between "philosophy" and "outward interests" at the intellectual core of Bentham's work would soon be mirrored by the social world. By the 1830s or '40s, utilitarianism was concretized in a set of actual

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<sup>210</sup> Kathleen Blake, "'Bleak House,' Political Economy, Victorian Studies," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25, no. 1 (1997): 1–21.

<sup>211</sup> Blake, "'Bleak House,'" 2.

<sup>212</sup> John Stuart Mill, "Essay on Bentham," in *Utilitarianism And, On Liberty: Including Mill's 'Essay on Bentham' and Selections from the Writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin*, by Jeremy Bentham, John Austin, and John Stuart Mill, ed. Mary Warnock, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 52–87, 61.

<sup>213</sup> Mill, "Essay on Bentham," 52.

institutions (prisons; workhouses) and acts of legislation (the New Poor Law) that confronted (especially working) people less as a clearly articulated intellectual school than as the legislative wing of industrial capitalism. Amidst the flowering of institutions and legislative innovations that referred to Bentham as their progenitor after the death of the “father of utilitarianism” in 1832, no clear separation prevailed between utilitarianism as a philosophy (or rather, set of philosophies) and as a major structure of mid-nineteenth-century social life.

This aspect of utilitarianism mirrored some of the industrial novelists’ own conceptions of their work as forms of direct social intervention. It is not as though the premise of literature’s social effectivity generally worked in the condition of England novelists’ historical moment—not in the way that Parliamentary proposals for systems of poor relief worked. Social problem novelists’ insistence on the power of cultural or epistemological reform to bring about social reform often came into contradiction with other beliefs and investments. As Patrick Brantlinger has shown, for example, social novels in the mid-nineteenth century struggled to reconcile the notion of the criminal poor as victims of environmental circumstances—a notion that implied the possibility of the poor’s middle-class reclamation—with their unwillingness to imagine the working-class poor’s conversion into middle-class subjects.<sup>214</sup> If the environmental conditions of the working poor explained their character, it was unclear how sentimental reform could truly transform that character so long as those conditions remained unchanged. But the industrial novelists’ openness to the possibility of bringing about social stability directly by means of the novel’s resources emerged from a stew of reformism without clear demarcations between its social, economic, and cultural sectors. In this sense, utilitarianism is one piece of context for the industrial novelists’ conception of the novel as a form directly connected to social or political or economic life.

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<sup>214</sup> Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform*, 50–53.

It's also worth remarking, however, that utilitarianism and anti-utilitarianism generated and reproduced conceptual divisions between different sections or levels of society, including between social or economic reality and what would by George Eliot's time become the sphere of "culture" inhabited by the novel. Mill asserted that Bentham's utilitarianism:

will enable a society which has attained a certain state of spiritual development, and the maintenance of which in that state is otherwise provided for, to prescribe the rules by which it may protect its material interests. It will do nothing (except sometimes as an instrument in the hands of a higher doctrine) for the spiritual interests of society; nor does it suffice of itself even for the material interests.<sup>215</sup>

The aspirational notion of a counter-ideology to utilitarianism, one that would filter downwards from the economic elite to the working classes, was pervasive in the "Condition of England" moment among utilitarians and anti-utilitarians alike. Agreeing at minimum that utilitarianism had a limited function in society at large, even advocates of utilitarianism often did not pretend that utilitarian solutions adequately provided for the moral, religious, or cultural needs of the working-class population. It might go some way towards defining the condition of England or industrial novel subgenre to describe this set of mid-nineteenth-century social novels as a response to the demand utilitarianism's insufficiencies posed for a sector beyond the strictly material in which human needs ought—through values, inter-class reliance, or "self-culture"—to be managed. At their foundations, the industrial novels worked out symbolic compensation for utilitarian structures, even where—as in Harriett Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy*—this compensation came in the form of intellectual or spiritual resources that enabled resignation to those structures. Novelists, including overtly utilitarian novelists, sought imaginatively to coordinate utilitarianism with other social forces. *Mary Barton*, for example, unites into a single narrative system the contradictions between the world of economic necessity and the warm interior

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<sup>215</sup> Mill, "Essay on Bentham," 72.

space of an imagined working-class domesticity. Though Gaskell was an avowed utilitarian, *Mary Barton* expresses a perceived need for a cultural project to exist alongside utilitarian social and economic structures.

Even as novelists engaged in projects of anti-utilitarian sentimental and social reform imagined their acts of cultural production in a kind of direct contact with social, political, and economic life, in other words, contradictorily the project of responding critically to utilitarianism in the novel also precipitated boundary-drawing around economic and cultural, external and internal, masculine and feminine, spheres of life. To Martineau's pedagogy of resignation and Gaskell's cult of domesticity, as examples of this kind of attempt to counterbalance utilitarianism within the sphere of culture in which the novel participated, I would add "common sense," this dissertation's major theme and a leitmotif of lower-case anti-utilitarian discourse in the mid-nineteenth century despite its obvious alliance with upper-case Benthamism. The two models of "common sense" in *Hard Times*—a reforming "common sense" allied with reason and the factory, and a working-class "common sense," marked by the internal disposition toward the welfare of others, which is the object of reform—distills the division between the material and the spiritual that everywhere accompanied anti-utilitarian impulses into an opposition between head and heart. These compensatory structures within the condition of England novel opposed, yet operated in synch with, working-class labor organized along Benthamite principles. Though "culture" would not become a major term within discussions of English working-class labor and politics until the 1860s, these spheres—and the notion of self-improvement through education for which "common sense" stood—anticipated the concepts of culture and self-culture that would become central in the late nineteenth century. Glimmers of that later, relatively more reified notion of culture, and of

the equally reified notion of the novel that only became fully legible within it, appear in the industrial novelists' engagement with utilitarianism.

I will argue in the next section that the utilitarianism of *Hard Times* operates at this level, posing something like the problem of economic and political interests' encroachment on an ideally disinterested sphere of culture that Matthew Arnold would go on to try to resolve in a period of ideological reaction and reconsolidation after peak industrialization, writing that: "what distinguishes culture is, that...it is not so bent on acting and instituting, even with the great aim of diminishing human error and misery ever before its thoughts, but that it can remember that acting and instituting are of little use, unless we know how and what we ought to act and to institute."<sup>216</sup>

I will also outline an alternative to reading *Hard Times* as a social problem narrative that "begins"—with all this word's ambiguity—in an intent to discredit utilitarianism and "ends" in an incoherent and unsatisfying dichotomy between this utilitarianism and the irrepressible human spirit. As I will suggest, Dickens' formal reflection on art and culture's subsumption—translated in *Hard Times* into a "common sense" that attempts to foreclose representation itself—generates what subsequently may appear as a theoretically unsatisfying critique of this or that utilitarianism.

### ***Dickens' Critique of Utilitarianism***

If utilitarianism was at once a form of thought and a material force in the world, Dickens seems to land hard on the former aspect of what he sometimes calls utilitarianism and other times calls "strong common sense"<sup>217</sup> in *Hard Times*. As we have already seen, for an "industrial" novel, the factory makes scarce appearances in *Hard Times*. Dickens gives far more airtime to utilitarian educational tactics that he suggests impoverish the inner lives of the middle classes, imperiling

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<sup>216</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Jane Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>217</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 2.

the reproduction of the bourgeois family and rendering emotional relationships among and between social classes unnecessarily harsh and inhumane. “One begins to suspect,” as Kathleen Blake writes, “that Dickens’s critique is less far-reaching than supposed as it scores its most precise hits on relative fine points of pedagogical practice.”<sup>218</sup>

But it is just this stark distance between Dickens’ utilitarianism and the clamor of factory machinery that should prompt us to ask what utilitarianism, or “strong common sense,” may represent in *Hard Times* beyond the exploitation of labor in the Industrial North. We should ask if a philosophy that functions so mechanically as to be indifferent to considerations of utility—because it is indifferent to all considerations—is utilitarianism at all, even if it sometimes goes by that name. Underscoring the utterly automatic character of what Emily Steinlight calls “an industrial regime of quantitative reason...that aims to supplant all qualitative judgment concerning good and evil,”<sup>219</sup> Dickens describes a Member of Parliament as “one of the representatives of the multiplication table, one of the deaf honourable gentlemen, dumb honourable gentlemen, blind honourable gentlemen, lame honourable gentlemen, dead honourable gentlemen, to every other consideration.”<sup>220</sup> The principle of “Facts alone” that Dickens himself calls “strong common sense” culminates in such an extreme restriction of reason (to the facts) that the only relevant circumstance one of Gradgrind’s own children, Louisa Gradgrind, has to consider when she receives the much older Mr. Bounderby’s proposal of marriage is simply that he has asked her to marry him:

“Louisa,” returned her father, “it appears that nothing can be plainer. Confining yourself rigidly to Fact, the question of Fact you state to yourself is: Does Mr. Bounderby ask me to marry him? Yes, he does.

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<sup>218</sup> Blake, ““Bleak House,”” 2.

<sup>219</sup> Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 112.

<sup>220</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 73.

The sole remaining question then is: Shall I marry him? I think nothing can be plainer than that.”

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“Mr. Bounderby,”...“asks me to marry him. The question I have to ask myself is, shall I marry him? That is so father, is it not? You have told me so, father, have you not?”

“Certainly, my dear.”

“Let it be so. Since Mr. Bounderby likes to take me thus, I am satisfied to accept his proposal.”<sup>221</sup>

The reduction of Louisa’s decision to the “Fact” of the proposition itself would almost seem to preclude speech; that Bounderby likes to “take” Louisa “thus” (this “thus” recalling Johnson’s refutation of Berkeley) initiates and almost simultaneously actualizes the proposition. This encapsulates the logic of a “common sense” that attempts to reduce social acts to empirical givens. Mr. Gradgrind conveys Bounderby’s proposal to Louisa by stating that Bounderby has “long watched” Louisa’s “progress,”<sup>222</sup> yet “progress” in Gradgrind’s and Bounderby’s terms indicates no deviation from the educational ideal whose attainment is best expressed in adherence to an origin point. When Louisa asks Mr. Gradgrind whether Bounderby expects her to love him, Gradgrind replies that Bounderby “would have seen you grow up under his eyes, to very little purpose, if he could so far forget what is due to your good sense, not to say to his, as to address you from any such ground.”<sup>223</sup> The only “ground” from which Bounderby could suitably “address” Louisa is the “ground” of her rearing according to the discipline of “nothing but Facts”—the importance of Bounderby having seen Louisa “grow up under his eyes” is only that this act of witnessing enforces non-progress without questioning whether any may have occurred.

There is an imperfect overlap between utilitarianism understood as a philosophy of self-interest and this reduction to tautological givens. At times, “strong common sense” perpetuates

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<sup>221</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 77–78.

<sup>222</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 76.

<sup>223</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 76.

logics of self-interest and raw practicality. Seeking to apprehend the younger Tom Gradgrind's flight from criminal justice in a plot to gain a situation at the bank, for example, Tom's former schoolmate Bitzer finds the Gradgrinds evacuating Tom from the country. In a narrowing of motive to the specific parameters of gain, Bitzer provides them with the only rationale for preventing his escape, or for any action, which has been made available to him: the "catechism" of "self-interest" that constitutes his experience of "the whole social system."<sup>224</sup> In its extreme form, however, the reduction to "Facts alone" tends to eliminate even self-interested motive in its scourge of extraneous meaning from acts. While Bitzer pleads self-interest, Louisa's act of marriage is a more purely mechanical operation, as the moment of the marriage's dissolution suggests. Bursting in upon her father after an encounter with her would-be seducer, Louisa asks him: "'Would you have robbed me—for no one's enrichment—only for the greater desolation of this world—of the immaterial part of my life, the spring and summer of my belief?'"<sup>225</sup> The "only" in the extension of the phrase "for no one's enrichment" anticipates amelioration but results in a more precise purposelessness: "the greater desolation of the world." It is reasonable to take Louisa's description of her marriage's reasonlessness literally. Obviously lacking in human enrichment, Louisa's marriage does not seem to provide commercial enrichment to either family either, formalizing the constant traffic already underway between the two households rather than building a new alliance (the reader can interpret Louisa's marriage with Bounderby as signifying a bourgeois accumulation strategy in the conventional mode of the Victorian marriage plot, but this signification, of which the characters would gain nothing inside the narrative, would be peculiar in a narrative that also includes Bitzer's explicit appeal to the "catechism" of "self-interest").

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<sup>224</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 211.

<sup>225</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 161.

Nor does the “strong common sense” of *Hard Times* overlap perfectly with utilitarianism understood as an ethos hostile to the imagination and fancy. “Strong common sense” is the exclusion of all deliberation and reflection, even in a conversation of which the purpose is ostensibly for Louisa to make a decision. Dickens depicts the epistemological regime that the Gradgrind social type seeks to impose on the industrial landscape as hostile not only to sentiment and the imagination, but also to any truly epistemological process—it coordinates the reproduction of the existing social order without the intermediate intervention of reflection or judgment. At least part of what subtends the implausibility of characters’ speech in *Hard Times* is a “strong common sense” that excludes even *representation* in its reduction of all to “Facts alone,” and the non-reifying purposes which language serves.<sup>226</sup> The scene at the outset of the novel in which Gradgrind and a government officer lecture the Coketown schoolchildren on “Facts” underlines this hostility to representation:

“Now let me ask you, girls and boys, Would you paper a room with representations of horses?”

After a pause, one half of the children cried in chorus, “Yes, sir!”

Upon which the other half, seeing in the gentleman’s face that Yes was wrong, cried out in chorus, “No, sir!”—as the custom is, in these examinations....

“I’ll explain to you, then,” said the gentleman, after another and a dismal pause, “why you wouldn’t paper a room with representations of horses. Do you ever see horses walking up and down the sides of rooms in reality—in fact? Do you?”<sup>227</sup>

The ban on “representations” is quite literally that for the purposes of a reduction of all to “nothing but Facts.” Given the constraints that language places on a program which seeks to reduce everything to presumably self-evident facts, the moratorium on representation functions as an aspirational goal for which tautological denotation seems to be the next best substitute. At Louisa

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<sup>226</sup> Peter Brooks remarks that “what has often been read as a critique of utilitarianism...seems to me more importantly about the mendacities of systems of representation.” “Dickens and Nonrepresentation,” 41.

<sup>227</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 10.

and Bounderby's wedding, Bounderby declares: "you won't expect a speech from a man who, when he sees a Post, says 'that's a Post,' and when he sees a Pump, says 'that's a Pump,' and is not to be got to call a Post a Pump, or a Pump a Post, or either of them a Toothpick.'" <sup>228</sup> The paranoia that someone might be asked to replace a signifier with another signifier expresses resentment towards language's difference from things and culminates in a disavowal of "a speech." Even Coketown is only "suggestive of itself." <sup>229</sup>

Yet the disavowal of speech which a reduction to the facts seems to entail actually generates excessive speech: Bounderby makes a speech, even if its content is a disavowal of doing so. Similarly, in place of mute acquiescence, the reduction to fact in the dialogue between Louisa and her father about Bounderby's proposal is expressed as an *expansion* of speech—dialogue elongated beyond its purpose into painfully repetitive stanzas—which ironizes a system so minimalist that it eliminates all but the linguistic performance of reification. The discrepancy between speech and the purposes which that speech (wittingly or unwittingly) serves is fitting for a novel in which a putative social reduction to nothing but the facts fails fatally to stand for the social reality it manages. Consequences emerge in the plot of the novel of placing "common sense" at the foundation of Louisa's marriage and other social contracts which—Dickens implies—really required reflection before they took place in "fact." It emerges too late, for example, that Louisa's marriage with Bounderby does have reasons. If Louisa does not desire the marriage, Bounderby himself likes to "take" her "thus": this phrase veiling wishes Bounderby's own consciousness of which is dubious and couching in nominalism an arrangement which, from a reflective standpoint, might inspire mild scandal or disgust (when Gradgrind asserts "on reference to the figures, that a

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<sup>228</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 84.

<sup>229</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 85.

large proportion of...marriages are contracted between parties of very unequal ages,”<sup>230</sup> he performs a similar operation). There is also the ulterior reason which Louisa has for consenting to the marriage: that she “had a hope of being pleasant and useful to”<sup>231</sup> Louisa’s brother Tom. These reasons which “Facts” pushed to the margins at the time of the marriage contract assert themselves disastrously in the aftermath.

Utilitarianism thus seems to present itself in *Hard Times* in the form of a question: what does literature look like under conditions tending to the destruction or elimination of representations and of all discursive or poetic language? I want to suggest that this question initiates not so much an inapt attempt to situate industrial social processes in the scene of education as a literary interrogation of culture’s subsumption by industrial social processes.<sup>232</sup> At least as much as any mention of factories, cultural production is at the surface of the text. Dickens often explicitly presents the philosophy of “Facts” alone as hostile to literature in *Hard Times*, as when Mr. Gradgrind expresses horror at the idea of his children reading poetry: ““And, Mrs. Gradgrind,” said her husband in a lofty manner, ‘I should as soon have expected to find my children reading poetry.’”<sup>233</sup> What is at stake, once again, is not just self-interest or even the squashing of the imagination. It is a reduction of quality to quantity, culture to commodity. Dickens articulates “strong common sense” in the distinctly literary terms of a rejection of literature: of all descriptive and poetic speech and representation. It is not just the form of dialogue in Dicken’s novel that generates itself against this rejection. If a reduction of all to “Facts” figures the notional possibility

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<sup>230</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 77.

<sup>231</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 162.

<sup>232</sup> Catherine Gallagher reads *Hard Times* as “a transparent advertisement for the amusement business, the business to which it supposedly belongs.” “Hard Times and the Somaeconomics of the Early Victorians,” in *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 72.

<sup>233</sup> Dickens, *Hard Times*, 19.

of literary representation's foreclosure for Dickens, then, as much as the second half of the plot describes the various social trajectories of an ideology of pure practicality, the flowering of humane feelings and the reordering of social relations that takes place in the second half of *Hard Times* also allegorize literary representation itself.

In short, although critics reading *Hard Times* through the lens of realism have accused the novel of giving us all idea, no world, in fact *Hard Times* represents what it would look like to try (impossibly) to give us all world—no idea (or subjectivity, reflection, deliberation, culture, literature, or representation). The problem for which “strong common sense” stands is also the problem at the heart of Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, the novel that Lukács proposed as paradigmatic of nineteenth-century realism. Yet in the scene of utter tautology that Dickens offers in *Hard Times*, in which language mimics discourse but contains no sense or meaning, disillusionment is impossible.

## ***Conclusion***

In his 1964 essay “Origins of the Present Crisis,” the British Marxist historian Perry Anderson attributed the U.K.'s mid-twentieth-century “crisis” in part to the English bourgeoisie's historical failure to produce, and pass on to the working classes, any vital ideology other than utilitarianism. As Anderson summarized: “In England, a supine bourgeoisie produced a subordinate proletariat. It handed on no impulse of liberation, no revolutionary values, no universal language. Instead it transmitted the deadly germs of utilitarianism, from which the Labour Party has so manifestly sickened in the 20th century.”<sup>234</sup> Anderson's focus on the need for an ideological alternative to utilitarianism in England, one that could have been passed from the English bourgeoisie to the English working-classes, was an intact product of utilitarianism's own heyday

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<sup>234</sup> Anderson, “Origins,” 43.

in the nineteenth century. The Victorian bourgeoisie did not usually posit or desire an alternative to utilitarianism that would generate revolutionary possibilities in the hands of the working classes. However, like Anderson, many of them suspected at least a partial solution to social “crisis” in the form of utilitarianism’s ideological overthrow, according with him in their anxieties regarding utilitarianism’s social effects if not in their imagination of what social effects an alternative to utilitarianism would or should secure. Standing at the other end of the historical project of anti-utilitarianism, Anderson signaled this project’s failure.

Among many other aspects of Anderson’s analysis of the “origins” of twentieth-century British crisis, Anderson’s treatment of utilitarianism received prompt criticism from E.P. Thompson in an essay titled “The Peculiarities of the English.” Compared with the bourgeois democratic tradition and the economic Protestantism of Adam Smith, wrote Thompson, “utilitarianism does not appear as the ‘one authentic’ ideology of the bourgeoisie but simply as a subordinate tradition within it—a reminder (which the complexities of industrialism made more pressing) that the state had important functions.”<sup>235</sup> Just as seriously, Thompson claimed, Anderson’s story of a bourgeoisie failing to pass along to the working classes any counter-ideology to utilitarianism had conflated a mode of presentation with social reality, narrating the history of the English bourgeoisie and working classes as though these had “an unbroken ideal identity,” exhibiting either intellectual courage or failures of nerve at fateful junctures. “This is in part a matter of metaphor;” wrote Thompson, “and—as we see in the hands of Marx—it sometimes offers a superbly swift comprehension of some historical pattern. But one must never forget that it remains a metaphorical description of a more complex process, which happens *without* volition or

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<sup>235</sup> E.P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” *The Socialist Register* 2 (1965): 336.

identity.<sup>236</sup> Substituting personifications of historical processes for history itself, Anderson had committed the category error of treating history like literature.

If this debate between Thompson and Anderson about the status of utilitarianism in British history invoked literature, literary debates over the status of utilitarianism in *Hard Times* have often invoked historical questions. Many critiques of Dickensian sentimentality, of which the traditional critical antipathy towards *Hard Times* is a representative microcosm, express exasperation with the ineffectiveness of Dickensian sentiment as a solution to Victorian social maladies. For readers that label *Hard Times* a second-rate novel based on the centrality of utilitarianism to Dickens' diagnosis of industrial social life, the literary success or failure of *Hard Times* ultimately rests on the usefulness of Dickens' anti-utilitarianism as a social and historical diagnosis. In this context, Leavis' watershed intervention into critical discussions of *Hard Times* mirrors E.P Thompson's intervention into Anderson's argument, except that whereas Thompson accused Anderson of treating history like literature, Leavis implied that readers had mistaken a work of literature for a work of historical analysis. Skirting the question of whether Dickens' anti-utilitarianism was an adequate analytic response to industrialization, Leavis insisted mainly on the cooperation of Dickens' critique of utilitarianism in "a truly dramatic and profoundly poetic whole."<sup>237</sup>

If historical and literary analysis draw on each other's resources in these respective discussions about utilitarianism, this has to do with what Fredric Jameson calls "the close identity

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<sup>236</sup> Thompson, "Peculiarities," 342. This critique would have lasting traction in the debates on "Origins" that continued retrospectively into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In "The Figures of Descent," a retrospective essay on "Origins of the Present Crisis," Anderson conceded that the "Gramscian polarity" between the British ruling and working classes "was given too cultural a turn, at any rate by myself." *New Left Review* 1, no. 161 (February 1987): 57.

<sup>237</sup> Leavis, "Hard Times," 343.

between realism and historical thinking.”<sup>238</sup> Both confront utilitarianism as potentially socially representative—or at least laden with useful information about social reality—because, as a system of thought or an ideology, utilitarianism mediates reality. Even if in a distorted form, utilitarianism makes reality available to cognition and the workings of language, offering an entry point to critique. For Anderson, utilitarianism stands in for and explains revolution’s historical failure to take place in Britain. For readers of *Hard Times*, it is usually self-evident that Dickens’ utilitarianism stands in for a larger view of the industrial situation. At the same time, parties in both camps worry about the adequacy of this signifier to its signified. Thus, Thompson argues that Anderson’s working theory of the “English ideology” was an “extraordinarily intellectualized presentation of history,” and critics debate utilitarianism’s status as the essence or the (mere) “ethos”<sup>239</sup> of Dickens’ industrial moment.

If historical and literary analysis also seek to retrench their respective boundaries in these discussions, this has to do in turn with differences between historical analysis and literary representation that concepts of realism render particularly fraught. As well as posing questions about aesthetic insides and social outsides that historical analysis does not, literary realism seems to consist of an admixture of aesthetic and analytic procedures that non-mimetic literature does not. *Hard Times* has provoked especially problematic transgressions and rehearsals of these boundaries because it is read not just as *the* novel by Dickens that represents the Industrial North, but as a hyper-referential, and hyper-diagnostic, novel among his works. Commenting on the

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<sup>238</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, updated ed (London: Verso, 2008), 428.

<sup>239</sup> Dickens’ biographer, Edgar Johnson, suggested the flexibility and range of this debate when he wrote that *Hard Times* “deals with industrial power, but it is not so much a picture of its ramifications as a presentation of its underlying principles. It is an analysis and a condemnation of the ethos of industrialism.” *Charles Dickens His Tragedy and Triumph*, vol. 2 (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1953), 802. Aligning “ethos” with “underlying principles,” in a reversal of criticisms that *Hard Times* focused on a merely ideological feature of industrial life, Johnson suggests that Dickens represented the deeper reality of the industrial situation precisely by focusing on its ideology, utilitarianism.

historically polarizing character of *Hard Times* in his introduction to *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Hard Times*, Paul Edward Gray concluded that Dickens “chose...to make *Hard Times* dependent on assertions of literal correspondence with the outside world; the price he paid for this gesture was a surrendering of certain prerogatives that he and his novel could have enjoyed.”<sup>240</sup>

Lionel Stevenson fills in this picture of a “literal correspondence” between *Hard Times* and the “outside world” when he characterizes *Hard Times* as somehow chronologically structured by the idea of utilitarianism—a novel whose “characters are obviously invented to demonstrate the theory” of Dickens’ anti-utilitarianism. Two ideas are at stake here: the “idea” (or ideological character) of utilitarianism itself, whose representativeness of social reality poses what I described as the content problem, and the idea that Dickens’ text is taken to be at bottom, which poses what I described as the form problem. These two ideas are connected insofar as Dickens’ choice to focus his critique on the “idea” of utilitarianism, rather than some more concrete or sensuous feature of social life, seems to render his very text ideational in character for readers and to strip it of its literary form. I hope to have shown, however, that what in *Hard Times* goes by the name of utilitarianism is not this or that program of indoctrination or self-interest, but an experiment in literature and representation’s foreclosure. Far from the formally impoverished exercise in elaborating an “idea” that critics have often found *Hard Times* to be, *Hard Times* itself is the formal answer to this experiment. Literature in confrontation with its own impossibility looks, Dickens suggests, like tautology—an expansion of speech that excludes all but the very materiality of language.

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<sup>240</sup> Paul Edward Gray, “Introduction,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hard Times* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 14.

In this sense, I argue that *Hard Times* does not depend on “assertions of literal correspondence with the outside world.” Nor does *Hard Times* have a special referential relevance to the industrial situation. There is a distance between the procedures of mechanization that “strong common sense” performs in *Hard Times* and social issues related to factory machinery. I would suggest, in fact, that “strong common sense” only refers to the industrial situation at all after retroactive conceptual labor by Dickens and/or his readers. *Hard Times*, in other words, is not structured by a “theory” of industrial social life with chronological and hierarchical priority over other features of the text. Formal experimentation is one of the modes of production of Dickens’ critique of utilitarianism, even while varieties of utilitarianism and anti-utilitarianism inform and determine *Hard Times* formally and thematically.

If realism involves some kind of encounter between subject and world—whether the physical bumps and bruises that Don Quixote receives and misinterprets, the education of David Copperfield, or the disillusionment of Lucien Chardon—then a novel about what it would look like to try to fully mechanize and objectify social relations under the falsely rationalistic aegis of “common sense” seems to depart from the realm of realism. As a novel whose loops of recursively self-reproducing dialogue call Beckett to mind, *Hard Times* could perhaps be productively read as anticipating modernism. At the same time, by sorting *Hard Times* into either of these categories we risk prioritizing reified expectations regarding form, style, or “prose” over more fundamental questions of social representation at stake in the concept of realism and the distinction between realism and modernism. To get back to the literal machine I just asserted “strong common sense” was not, industrial England circa 1854 provides abundant suggestions as to why in this novel we don’t have characters with rich internal lives encountering a variegated and sensuous reality. In

this sense, if we have trouble recognizing *Hard Times* as a realist novel, counterintuitively this may be due to Dickens' successful formal mimesis of industrial social reality.

## “Power” Over “Brains”: The Meaning of Realism in *Felix Holt*

In what Simon Dentith counterintuitively remarks is Eliot’s “most insistently anti-political novel,”<sup>241</sup> *Felix Holt*, what Eliot underscores is the false external appearance of political activity is subject to ongoing revision by activity taking place invisibly within minds. To the “undiscerning eyes” of “several persons looking anxiously from their upper windows,” Felix looks “like a leading spirit of the mob” whose disorderly behavior on election day is the political fulcrum of the novel.<sup>242</sup> Once it becomes unruly, Felix joins in the crowd to redirect it and to curtail possible acts of theft and violence, since: “it was not unlikely that lives might be sacrificed; and it was intolerable to Felix to be witnessing the blind outrages of this mad crowd, and yet be doing nothing to counteract them.”<sup>243</sup> The onlookers to the riot and by extension the reader wonder if the truth lies entirely in intention, or if the day’s escalating events also call for some account of the intended or unintended consequences of Felix’s actions—particularly when Felix himself commits the gravest act of violence of all by accidentally killing a constable. Unpairing the truth from the appearance, that Felix is the leader of the mob, requires reading past much of the textual evidence of Felix’s effects on the crowd within Eliot’s novel, and the narrator’s own assertion of these effects: Felix, we learn, is a “man with a definite will and an energetic personality [who] acts as a sort of flag to draw and bind together the foolish units of a mob.”<sup>244</sup> Nonetheless, in the aftermath Eliot is unambivalent about how to resolve Felix’s participation in the election-day riot into a clear picture of “truth,” using Reverend Lyon as a mouthpiece to articulate her preferred solution in a

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<sup>241</sup> Quoted in Lynda Mugglestone, “Introduction,” in *Felix Holt, the Radical*, by George Eliot, ed. Lynda Mugglestone (London: Penguin Books, 1995), xi.

<sup>242</sup> George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. Lynda Mugglestone (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 315.

<sup>243</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 314.

<sup>244</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 317.

metaphorical comparison to medical ethics: the truth of Felix's actions, she underscores, lies not with his effects on the crowd but with "that invisible activity of the soul whereby the deeds which are the same in the outward appearance and effect, yet differ as the knife stroke of a surgeon, even though it kill, differs from the knife-stroke of a wanton mutilator."<sup>245</sup> Effectively equating "effect" with a false "outward appearance," Eliot aligns the reality of Felix's actions with the fact that (this time in the words of Mrs. Holt) he "never meant"<sup>246</sup> to murder anyone and not with the fact that he does murder someone.

Felix's participation in the mob stages a scenario that serially recurs in political and police literature. Echoing and re-writing previous moments in the industrial novel subgenre, such as Alton Locke's accidental incitement of the riot in the agricultural district, the riot episode in *Felix Holt* also anticipates a multifarious twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and visual media of surveillance, infiltration, counter-terrorism, entrapment, undercover identity and double agents, from Sam Greenlee's 1969 novel *The Spook who Sat by the Door*, about a black ex-CIA agent who trains black youth for militancy under the cover of defusing black militant energies; to *The Fast and the Furious*, the 2001 movie directed by Rob Cohen wherein LAPD officer Brian O'Connor changes sides from criminal investigator to street-racing criminal. The ambiguities these works depict often inhere in real prolongations of conflict or struggle that render undecidable, except in the final analysis, what in all the mess of alliances and strategies was insurgency and what counterinsurgency. Some interpretive dilemmas in the genre are ostensibly such because the truth is disguised, as in Seasons One and Two of the 2011-2020 TV show *Homeland*, whose Marine Corps Scout Sniper character Nicholas Brody, apparently an American war hero, actually "turned" during his captivity by Al-Qaeda. But the narrative possibilities even of this detective-story

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<sup>245</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 427.

<sup>246</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 414.

premise would be minimal without the necessity of working out the truth in a social and political field not just apparently but actually characterized by split loyalties and countervailing tendencies.

Swiftly and wholly identifying Felix's inner reality with the reality of his actions is not, in other words, an obvious solution to the stock political dilemma the riot in *Felix Holt* stages. The very political element of the riot scenario seems to attenuate and lose its color once Eliot encodes the ambiguity of Felix's actions as an ambiguity deriving from mere misrecognition—locating “his failings...not so much within himself as within his presentation”<sup>247</sup>—and it is within the part of the narrative that Eliot devotes to this encoding that critics have observed in the denouement of the novel that tendency, common to many of the industrial novels, to reroute narrative away from politics itself and into matters of marriage, personal transformation, and private morality. As Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone puts it: “After the portrayal of the election riot, the author retreats not only from the subject of her protagonist's aggression...but also from her political subject.”<sup>248</sup> For Ruth Yeazell, this retreat takes place through a change of focus from Felix to Esther Lyon which is also an escape into the nonpolitical arrangements of the domestic drama. Although Esther's courtroom attestation to Felix's true intentions and inner uprightness—that he “could never have had any intention that was not brave and good”—attributes virtue to him, what is really on display is Esther's own virtue, which redeems Felix from public scrutiny by proxy: “Eliot copes with her radical by turning away from his story to concentrate instead on the ‘inward revolution,’ as she calls it, of her heroine.”<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Mugglestone, “Introduction,” xvi.

<sup>248</sup> Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone, “Fear of the Mob in Felix Holt,” in *Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot's Fiction* (NYU Press, 1994), 110, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qgbpx.10>.

<sup>249</sup> Ruth Bernard Yeazell, “Why Political Novels Have Heroines: ‘Sybil, Mary Barton’, and ‘Felix Holt,’” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 18, no. 2 (1985): 140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345772>.

Eliot proleptically offered her own theorization of the “invisible activity” of Felix’s “soul” in her 1856 essay “The Natural History of German Life,” a review of a pair of books on the German peasantry by W.H. Riehl that she used in part as an occasion to critique idyllic, unrealistic artistic and literary representations of laboring and poor people. Reverend Lyon’s thoughts on Felix’s case echo what she articulated there in literary-theoretical terms: that realistic social representation requires attentiveness to the inner life. In both texts, Eliot seeks to illustrate the value of close observation as a preliminary step to accurate social representation. In both texts, likewise, Eliot depicts an apprehension of psychological reality as the ultimate yield of close observation.<sup>250</sup> Whereas the container for this psychological reality in *Felix Holt* is Felix, in “The Natural History of German Life” it is the German peasant, whose accurate social representation, Eliot suggests, must account for his concrete mental relationship to the world rather than impose idyllic conceptions of his sentimental life onto him.

Complicating Eliot’s account of social realism as a representational method attentive to empirical detail and “concrete knowledge,” however, her assertions in “The Natural History of German Life” about laboring people’s incapacity for abstract thought and thus for politics often appear to coordinate this method as much as any attentive approach to empirical detail yields these ideas. The scenes of misrecognition she stages in “The Natural History of German Life” ultimately convey the specific content of a political conviction regarding the concrete mental characteristics

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<sup>250</sup> If the true meaning of Felix’s participation in the riot lies with the “invisible activity of the soul,” it is worth noting that meaning for Felix’s characterological counterpart in Eliot’s last—and, to many critics, least realistic—novel, *Daniel Deronda*, conversely seems to work its way inward from without. Discovering his Jewishness long after it becomes the determining reality of his life, Deronda experiences his identity until then as an unconscious knowledge, a knowledge that he doesn’t truly know. The narrative form of the Jewish storyline mimics the function of this kind of unconscious knowledge, dictating relations and events before full understanding can clarify their character: the coincidence of Mirah’s relationship with Mordecai no less than Deronda’s Jewishness itself, which operates as a drive to thought and action before it is revealed.

of the lower classes, not a “concrete” method of representation. Politics being abstract for Eliot and political participation requiring a full comprehension of this abstraction, what Eliot calls the “subtle symbolism of language” in “The Natural History of German Life” unveils not false appearances in general but the specific false appearance of political participation by those incapable of grasping politics’ essential abstraction.

In this chapter I read Eliot’s critique of the false “appearance” of Felix’s actions on behalf of the “small and subtle characters which alone can tell the whole truth” as another critique of this specific false appearance of political participation by the uneducated working poor. I will suggest that Eliot has already “turn[ed] away” by concentrating on Felix’s inwardness—not, however, in a wholesale transition from her “political subject” to psychological, personal, inner, or moral registers. This “subject” emerges in the first place mainly as the denial and subordination of politics. Nonetheless, this denial and subordination is itself a political project from which I argue Eliot’s narrative never departs. She has turned away, however, from the other working-class participants in the riot. The interpretive drama that revolves around Felix’s inner life plays out Eliot’s commitment to the lack, in the lower classes, of a kind of inner life that alone would give the Sproxtton coalminers’ participation in the riot a political character. Felix’s intentions, in all their supposed psychological plenitude, stand in for this “truth” of working-class mental life, unrepresentable in itself because it is essentially an absence.

### ***The German Peasant as Realist Subject***

Riehl’s detailed sociological account of the German peasantry, Eliot suggests in “The Natural History of German Life,” should serve as a model for “some student of the English people” who would depict the inner lives of the poor with as much accuracy as their external lives. This

valorization of Riehl's type of close, empirical observation as the basis of realistic social representation precisely anticipates the terms of another of Rufus Lyon's assertions in *Felix Holt* that the mere image of Felix's participation in the riot, uninformed by the details of his consciousness, does not provide a truthful account of his actions:

"The Natural History of German Life"

*Felix Holt*

It is an interesting branch of psychological observation to note the images that are habitually associated with abstract or collective terms-what may be called **the picture-writing of the mind**, which it carries on concurrently with the more **subtle symbolism of language**.<sup>251</sup>

He [Mr. Lyon] cared intensely for his opinions, and would have liked events to speak for them in a sort of **picture-writing** that everybody could understand. The enthusiasms of the world are not to be stimulated by a commentary **in small and subtle characters which alone can tell the whole truth**; and the picture-writing in Felix Holt's troubles was of an entirely puzzling kind[.]<sup>252</sup>

In both texts, an annotation of the visible by invisible or sub-visible dimensions—the "subtle symbolism of language" in "The Natural History of German Life," or what in *Felix Holt* becomes a "commentary in small and subtle characters"—grants access to a truth that the abstract generality of "picture-writing" may fail to capture.

In "The Natural History of German Life," Eliot draws on the distinction between "picture-writing" and the "subtle symbolism of language" to critique idyllic representations of peasant and proletariat life. Rather than rely on the "picture-writing" of personal or class experience, she

<sup>251</sup> George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Westminster Review*, July 1856, 51, <https://georgeeliotarchive.org/items/show/100>.

<sup>252</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 354.

suggests that writers striving for accurate social representation should engage in direct observation of their subjects. For just as “abstract”<sup>253</sup> terms such as “‘the people,’ ‘the masses,’ ‘the proletariat,’ [and] ‘the peasantry’”<sup>254</sup> fail to capture the multitude of specific images for which these terms stand, idyllic tropes and sentimental projections fail to capture in art and literature what Riehl did in his sociological analysis: “concrete knowledge”<sup>255</sup> of the laboring classes. Bucolic depictions of peasants by English painters such as William Holman Hunt and Peter Macnab, or novels by Dickens that attribute “high morality and refined sentiment”<sup>256</sup> to the miserable poor, project onto their subjects a fantasy derived from literature or from the experience of their own class. If one regards the reality, it turns out to be less than idyllic:

Observe a company of haymakers. When you see them at a distance, tossing up the forkfuls of hay in the golden light, while the wagon creeps slowly with its increasing burthen over the meadow, and the bright green space which tells of work done gets larger and larger, you pronounce the scene “smiling,” and you think these companions in labour must be as bright and cheerful as the picture to which they give animation. Approach nearer, and you will certainly find that haymaking time is a time for joking, especially if there are women among the labourers; but the coarse laugh that bursts out every now and then, and expresses the triumphant taunt, is as far as possible from your conception of idyllic merriment. That delicious effervescence of the mind which we call fun, has no equivalent for the northern peasant, except tipsy revelry; the only realm of fancy and imagination for the English clown exists at the bottom of the third quart pot.<sup>257</sup>

Much like those “undiscerning” onlookers to Felix’s attempt to quell the riot, the second-person addressee who observes haymaking “at a distance” can grasp only the false appearance of the scene. Gradually correcting the false image gained from a distance by approaching closer to the haymakers, however, “you” begin to substitute true for false elements of the scene: what seemed

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<sup>253</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 51.

<sup>254</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 52.

<sup>255</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 51, 52.

<sup>256</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 55.

<sup>257</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 53.

to be “idyllic merriment” from afar proves a “course laugh” expressing a “triumphant taunt.” As though the psyche were at the closest possible visual range to the subject of observation, the observer’s approach culminates in the very “mind” of the “northern peasant, where a final substitution takes place: “fun” proving to be a projection by the observer with no real “equivalent” except “tipsy revelry.”

Read as a theoretical statement about social representation, the scenario affirms the famous assertion Eliot made three months earlier, in a review of Ruskin’s *Modern Painters III*, that “*realism*” is “the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality.”<sup>258</sup> However, Eliot here characterizes artistic truth as dependent more specifically on an accurate representation of internal as well as external reality, the former understood as the ultimate yield of non-cursory observation. This ultimate yield, in other words, is psychological. Eliot’s critique of Dickens confirms this account of artistic truth: he was, she wrote, “gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population,” but 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.”<sup>259</sup>

When Eliot indicts the “unreality” of Dickens’ representation of the inner life of the poor, or when she criticizes Dickens’ “miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance, and want,”<sup>260</sup> part of what she invokes is the dictum that depictions of psychological life should correspond to the social reality that produces subjects.

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<sup>258</sup> George Eliot, “Art and Belles Lettres,” *Westminster Review*, April 1856, 343, <https://georgeeliotarchive.org/items/show/128>.

<sup>259</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 55.

<sup>260</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 55.

Not only Eliot herself, but many of her readers, have connected this dictum to Eliot's (early) theory of social realism: the explicit priority, for her, of the "is" over the "ought" and her serial attempts to place the elements of a social whole into a finely wrought balance dictated by a responsible sense of proportion, cause and effect. Peter Brooks identifies as one of the "rules of modeling" invented by writers "such as Balzac, Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, [and] George Eliot" "characters who ought to be recognizable in terms of not only dress and appearance but also social function and, beyond that, motive, psychology."<sup>261</sup> However, Brooks also notes that these "rules of modeling" often tip over into preoccupations that have little to do with principles of representation per se: "The discovery of the ugly is part of the process of disillusioning in which realism deals, but then beyond the loss of illusions something else seems to loom:...the fascination of the banal and the ugly."<sup>262</sup> As Erich Auerbach earlier observed, this fascination, though typical of the realist impulse, "went far beyond the factually requisite, the typical and representative."<sup>263</sup> Eliot's insistence on "ignorance and want" as the content of any representation of the lower classes accompanies and subverts her notion of a realistic correspondence between social conditions and the mind. In the larger argument of "The Natural History of German Life," her specific fascination with what she characterizes as the peasant's incapacity for abstraction supplants, even while seeming to corroborate, Eliot's argument for "concrete knowledge" as a mode of realistic representation.

The factuality and concreteness of the second section of "The Natural History of German Life," the section devoted to Riehl's books and his account of the German peasantry, rebukes or

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<sup>261</sup> Peter Brooks, "Realism and Representation," in *Realist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>262</sup> Brooks, "Realism and Representation," 8.

<sup>263</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 50th anniversary ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 499.

counters the “abstraction” of idyllic representation by example rather than by a discursive elaboration that itself would presumably risk falling prey to abstraction. However, anecdotes and descriptions in this section echo elements from the first section: once again staging the opposition between “picture writing” and “subtle symbolism” in scenarios in which distant observers fail to take note of the reality of a scene. The appearance of political participation by working people becomes a particularly privileged false image requiring correction when Eliot insists that what picture-writing may depict as working people’s participation in political movements under the banner of abstract ideas like the “rights of man” really isn’t, since working people do not comprehend abstractions and—consequently—do not relate to the world abstractly. For example, Eliot argues that in 1848 the German peasant “did not know the meaning of the part he was playing”:

In 1848, it seemed as if the movements of the peasants had taken a new character; in the small western states of Germany, it seemed as if the whole class of peasantry was in insurrection. But in fact, *the peasant did not know the meaning of the part he was playing*. He had heard that everything was being set right in the towns, and that wonderful things were happening there, so he tied up his bundle and set off. Without any distinct object or resolution, the country people presented themselves on the scene of commotion, and were warmly received by the party leaders. But, seen from the windows of ducal palaces and ministerial hotels, these swarms of peasants had quite another aspect, and it was imagined that they had a common plan of co-operation. This, however, the peasants have never had. Systematic co-operation implies general conceptions (emphasis mine).<sup>264</sup>

Despite moving from a discussion of realistic artistic representation to the facts uncovered by Riehl’s sociological analysis, Eliot here retains the scenic setup on which she drew to elaborate the virtues of close observation by writers and artists. Just as “you” mistook haymaking for an idyllic scene until “you” approached closer—and again recalling Felix’s misapprehension as mob

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<sup>264</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 65-66.

leader by spectators looking “from their upper windows”—the vantage point of unnamed observers on the “swarms of peasants” is too distant to provide accurate information. Eliot recruits the kind of psychological yield of close observation that she earlier ascribed to the haymaking scene to correct a specifically political misperception. Contrary to the distant impression of observers, she asserts, the peasant lacks “general conceptions” and thus doesn’t truly participate in the events of 1848. The “small and subtle” commentary which alone can provide the whole truth is in this case the laboring classes’ incomprehension of abstraction. Although distant observers who observe peasants assembling through “the windows of ducal palaces and ministerial hotels” take their actions for political participation, they misunderstand the immediacy of the peasant’s self-interest, his incapacity for abstract political thought.

As Eliot further corrects this misperception, political and social theories that attribute a revolutionary practice or potential to the laboring classes begin to take over the function that “art” had in the first part of the essay as the source of misperception or misunderstanding of the peasant—misapprehending the “natural history” of peasant life just as idyllic literature did earlier.

In the earlier section, Eliot writes:

The dream that the uncultured classes are prepared for a condition which appeals principally to their moral sensibilities,—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, none of these diverging mistakes can co-exist with a real knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives.<sup>265</sup>

As though in a kind of early contribution to the critical tradition that drew lines between didactic literature and the social-realist tradition that Eliot herself would come to epitomize, Eliot aligns realistic social representation with an orientation to what actually exists rather than what should

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<sup>265</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 55.

be. Just as bucolic paintings of shepherds and cottage matrons project a false vitality and beauty onto the lives of laborers, the exhortative tendencies of social novels that sought to unite the classes in sentiment and understanding impose a false wish onto the realities of ignorance and poverty. This critique of the idyllic mode's prioritization of the "ought" finds an equivalent in the later section in the political "failures" of revolutionary theory:

After the notable failure of revolutionary attempts conducted from the point of view of abstract democratic and socialistic theories, after the practical demonstration of the evils resulting from a bureaucratic system which governs by an indiscriminating, dead mechanism, Riehl wishes to urge on the consideration of his countrymen, a social policy founded on the special study of the people as they are—on the natural history of the various social ranks. He thinks it wise to pause a little from theorizing, and see what is the material actually present for theory to work upon.<sup>266</sup>

Like the social-engineering fantasies of didactic social fiction, "revolutionary attempts" operate based on a false conception of reality. As near-equivalent modes of false "representation," art and political theories both inappropriately impose abstractions onto "the people as they are."

The political analogy begins not just to echo but to corroborate Eliot's argument for realistic literary representation. If Riehl's empirical analysis of the German peasantry should serve as a "model" for a "study" of the "English people" that avoids artistic abstraction, then—despite the difference between concreteness as a mode of representation and concreteness as mental quality of an object of representation—the lesson finds confirmation in Eliot's depiction of Riehl's German peasant as concretely embedded in the world. When Riehl's peasant encounters political abstractions, Eliot underscores, he understands them only through the lens of affairs "immediately connected with himself."<sup>267</sup> He cannot generalize beyond this sphere. For him, in all his

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<sup>266</sup> Eliot, "Natural History," 70.

<sup>267</sup> Eliot, "Natural History," 60.

“unreasoning persistency,” “experiments are practical, not theoretical.”<sup>268</sup> Unfortunately, Eliot writes, German novelists who seek to represent the German peasantry make the same mistake Dickens makes in his engagement with the urban poor: they “transfer their own feelings to ploughmen and woodcutters, and give them both joys and sorrows of which they know nothing.”<sup>269</sup> The peasant’s concrete relationship to the world, a relationship uncovered by the diligent research and observation of Riehl, points to the reality overlooked by literary or sentimental “abstractions.”

It is worth pausing on this logic, whereby Riehl’s sociological discoveries about the German peasantry seem to back up Eliot’s call for a realistic mode of literary representation. If the characteristics of Riehl’s peasantry, to whom “tender affection, as it exists amongst the refined part of mankind, is almost as foreign...as white hands and filbert-shaped nails,”<sup>270</sup> substantiate Eliot’s account of realistic representation, then the essay functions much like an experiment whose results somehow confirm not the hypothesis but the virtue of the method. At the same time, this covert structuring of a theory of representation by a theory of the object of representation complicates Eliot’s conception of realism as a *method* of gathering “concrete knowledge” in the first place. Eliot’s argument for “concreteness” as a method of realistic social representation turns out to be an insistence *that* the laboring classes are (both on a mental and a social level) concrete.

This is already apparent in Eliot’s description of the observer of haymaking. As Eliot’s fictional observer of haymaking time approaches physically closer and closer to the scene, hearing the “coarse laugh” of the peasant woman that disabuses her of her preconception of “idyllic

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<sup>268</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 59.

<sup>269</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 62. The demand that artistic representation acknowledge working people’s incapacity for abstraction by itself eschewing abstraction resembles the demand that aesthetic form model itself on its content. But the peasant’s incapacity for abstract thought and a “concrete” mode of representation are not actually form and content, but the much more meaningfully distinct categories of object of representation and empirical method.

<sup>270</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 62.

merriment,” she in fact gets further and further away from empirical observation. First inferring what the “coarse laugh” of the peasant woman “expresses,” she finally makes a leap away from direct observation entirely, into the very mind of the “northern peasant” which Eliot informs us is no “realm of fancy and imagination.” It is even more apparent in Eliot’s description of the assembly of peasants in 1848. Whereas the hypothetical direct observer of haymaking time gains some “concrete” perceptions from audible evidence—the “coarse laugh that bursts out every now and then”—few external signs indicate the fundamentally mental “reality” of the German peasant’s involvement in 1848. In that scene, one paradigmatic of Eliot’s political and literary realism alike, what is more crucial than distant vs. close observation is the contradiction between the image gained by observation in general and a reality defined by a subjectivity not only unobservable but defined in advance by lack.<sup>271</sup> In passages ostensibly about a method of gathering “concrete knowledge,” we end up with a claim about the non-identity of two social classes, one that, in its fictional conjuration of a hypothetical scene, is finally no more the product of direct observation than Hunt’s or Macnab’s paintings. What we get in “The Natural History,” in other words, is not method strictly speaking, but a cultural counter-narrative to the idyllic one according to which “cottage matrons are usually buxom, and village children necessarily rosy and merry.”<sup>272</sup>

The paradigmatic status of the concrete mental qualities of the German peasant within Eliot’s account of a realism of “concrete knowledge” problematizes not only Eliot’s account of realism as a method of social representation, but the status of the industrial working classes as a possible object of this representation. Even as the evils of generalization from one group to another receive Eliot’s opprobrium in “The Natural History of German Life,” she equates the political

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<sup>271</sup> It is telling in this connection that Eliot provides only negative examples of literary representation of “the people.” Realism on this model, where “meaning” tends to appear as a negation of the onlooker’s expectations, reverts to preconception or to an aversion from any act of representation.

<sup>272</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 53.

“abstractions” with which revolutionaries address the proletariat with idyllic literary “abstractions” whose only alternatives within her text address not the worker but the peasant. She writes:

It is the glory of the Socialists—in contrast with the democratic doctrinaires who have been too much occupied with the general idea of “the people” to inquire particularly into the actual life of the people—that they have thrown themselves with enthusiastic zeal into the study at least of one social group, namely, the factory operatives; and here lies the secret of their partial success. But unfortunately, they have made this special study of a single fragment of society the basis of a theory which quietly substitutes for the small group of Parisian proletaires or English factory-workers, the society of all Europe—nay, of the whole world. And in this way they have lost the best fruit of their investigations. For, says Riehl, the more deeply we penetrate into the knowledge of society in its details, the more thoroughly we shall be convinced *that a universal social policy has no validity except on paper*, and can never be carried into successful practice.<sup>273</sup>

Even while Eliot frames factory workers as *over*represented, her analogy between literary and political representation functionally expels the industrial working-classes from the field of realist representability she outlines. Making the German peasant’s resistance to political “abstractions” the terminus of her conception of social realism, she leaves the figure of the proletariat, the “fragment of society” to whom political abstractions can be addressed with “partial success,” without a correspondingly appropriate literary frame. Her realism addresses itself to “the people” in a near-prehistorical state, still carrying on an idyllically unmediated relationship to the natural and social worlds—ironic in an essay that begins with a critique of the idyllic mode and makes repeated appeals to history. True, Eliot acknowledges that “many disintegrating forces have been at work on the peasant character,”<sup>274</sup> but this gesture towards the deleterious intrusion of the capitalist market into the traditional reserves of the peasant only hints, by implication, at the haste the realist artist should make to preserve in depiction a vanishing subject-matter.

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<sup>273</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 70-71.

<sup>274</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 63.

### *From Saxony to Treby Magna*

Despite Eliot's repeated avowals of the difference between the Germans and the English, the peasantry and the industrial working classes, key features recur across these populations in the movement from "The Natural History of German Life" to *Felix Holt*. In the two passages below, for example, Eliot's references to potatoes and the French Revolution underscore the naïve conservatism of the German peasantry and the people of Treby Magna alike:

"The Natural History of German Life"

*Felix Holt*

When a few sparks from the first **French Revolution** fell among the German peasantry, and in certain villages of Saxony the country people assembled together to write down their demands, there was no glimpse in their petition of the "**universal rights of man,**" but simply of their own particular affairs as Saxon peasants.<sup>275</sup>

In the eighteenth century, in spite of the **philanthropic preachers of potatoes**, the peasant for years threw his potatoes to the pigs and the dogs, before he could be persuaded to put them on his own table.<sup>276</sup>

Treby Magna, which had lived quietly through the great earthquakes of the **French Revolution** and the Napoleonic Wars, which had remained unmoved by the '**Rights of Man**', and saw little in Mr Cobbett's 'Weekly Register' except that he held **eccentric views about potatoes**, began at last to know the higher pains of a dim political consciousness[.]<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Eliot, "Natural History," 65.

<sup>276</sup> Eliot, "Natural History," 59.

<sup>277</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 49.

It is a little surprising that certain themes transfer so easily across populations as well as the temporal boundaries separating the texts' historical settings and the texts themselves, despite Eliot's insistence on sociological specificity, empirical detail ("natural history"), and "concrete knowledge." After all, Eliot's critique that "the Socialists" treat the industrial proletariat as representative of all "the people," rather than the "fragment" that they are, warns against reasoning outward from observations about one sociological subset. Yet, rather than a social group as minutely differentiable from the German peasantry as the German peasantry are from "Parisian proletaires," the English people of *Felix Holt* are characterized by the same traditionalism, the same resistance to both reform and revolution, that defined the German peasantry in "Natural History." Of course, Eliot might in all consistency believe both that there are some differences in the "mental culture" of Riehl's peasants and the English people of 1832, and that a common characteristic of working people—proletariat or peasant, urban or rural, past or present—is the mental incapacity for abstraction. Eliot "uses" the German peasant, as Catherine Gallagher notes, "as a typical example of the lower-class political mentality."<sup>278</sup> But precisely the consistency of this conviction specifies the narrative task that Eliot took up in *Felix Holt*.

As in "The Natural History of German Life," this is not to gather and represent social and psychological information about the working classes in literature. If it were, then we might expect working-class subjects, however "realistically" or "unrealistically" depicted, to occupy significant narrative space in *Felix Holt*. Yet if we wanted to evaluate *Felix Holt* as an answer to the demand Eliot posed ten years earlier in "Natural History" for a psychological realism of "the people," then we would have to quickly confront how the absence in "Natural History" of any but negative examples of such representations anticipates a similar absence in *Felix Holt*. As has been widely

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<sup>278</sup> Catherine Gallagher, "The Politics of Culture and the Debate over Representation," *Representations* 5 (January 1, 1984): 117, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928576>.

recognized in the criticism, Felix is no more exemplary of the working classes than he is a “Radical” (and he is a “Radical,” as George Levine once wrote, “no more than Barry Goldwater”<sup>279</sup>). There to rebuke and seek to manage the forces of disorder, on one hand, and political opportunism, on the other hand, Felix’s thoughts and feelings contrast with rather than represent those of the Sproxtton coalminers, while the latter are given in no more detail than those of the “oxen and pigs congregated amidst hootings and pushings”<sup>280</sup> to which they are compared.

In a novel whose basic concerns would seem to render the proletariat unavoidable, this most historically and politically relevant part of the social field that Eliot offered up for realistic representation in “The Natural History of German Life”—“‘the people,’ ‘the masses,’ ‘the proletariat,’ [and] ‘the peasantry’”—in other words goes more or less unrepresented. But just as Eliot’s concern in “The Natural History of German Life” seemed at first to be the representation of “concrete knowledge” but turned out to be an assertion *that* the lower-class mentality is “concrete,” it is not a detailed recording of the inner and outer lives of coalminers, but this same assertion that structures *Felix Holt*. The political plotline of the novel essentially narrates another scene of political misrecognition—culminating in the spectacle of “several persons looking anxiously from their upper windows” at the election-day riot who make the same interpretive mistake as those who in “The Natural History” observed the German peasantry assemble “from the windows of ducal palaces and ministerial hotels.” What in “The Natural History of German Life” Eliot called the “meaning of the part” the German peasant played in 1848 is also at stake in the coalminers’ participation in the election-day riot. Though the mob does not know the meaning of their participation, and Felix does know the meaning of his, what is crucial in either case is

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<sup>279</sup> Quoted in: Linda Bamber, “Self-Defeating Politics in George Eliot’s ‘Felix Holt,’” *Victorian Studies* 18, no. 4 (June 1975): 432.

<sup>280</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 311.

aligning a conception of truth with (a lack of) subjective knowledge rather than with the external appearance or effects of an action. Once the mob riots, the reader learns that the crowd is “animated by no real political passion or fury against social distinctions”<sup>281</sup> and that the cause of the day’s events are “the multitudinous small wickednesses of small selfish ends, really undirected towards any larger result.”<sup>282</sup> The riot is encapsulated by the absence of discernible motives or intentions, as in the narrator’s description of Felix’s leadership of the mob, wherein “those behind followed him, with a growing belief that he had some design worth knowing, while those in front were urged along partly by the same notion, partly by the sense that there was a motive in those behind them, not knowing what the motive was.”<sup>283</sup>

Not only the parsimonious presence of the proletariat in *Felix Holt*, but Eliot’s representation of this proletariat as one of the “emerging or fading types”<sup>284</sup> that populate her fiction, registers a tension between this pre-existing narrative template and some of the historical contexts of Reform. Eliot’s staging of a novel responsive to the politics of the Second Reform Act in the 1860s in the transitional moment after the passage of the First Reform Act in 1832 indexes unresolved questions, left over from “The Natural History of German Life,” about the distinction between the peasant and the proletarian, and about Eliot’s analogy between political and literary representation. As I argued above, that analogy had in fact problematized any legitimate (“realistic”) representation of the working classes; even while seeming to offer a methodological treatise on close observation and empirical specificity as modes of inclusion of the lower classes within the horizon of artistic representation, Eliot had excluded the working classes, specifically,

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<sup>281</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 317.

<sup>282</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 320.

<sup>283</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 317.

<sup>284</sup> Rachel Bowlby, “Preface,” in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), xiv.

from this horizon. The “peculiar character” that made the German peasant unavailable for political representation in Eliot’s commentary on Riehl was also what made him available for realistic literary representation. By the same token, Eliot’s disparaging comparison between idyllic literary representation and the political aspirations of socialists on behalf of “Parisian proletaires or English factory-workers” had left an unresolved tension between realism as “method” of representation and the working classes as a realist subject. The resolution of the problem of working-class political representation in Eliot’s terms in “Natural History” opens up a new problem of working-class literary representation in *Felix Holt*, because any consideration of the history of Reform and Chartism had invoked the industrial working classes at least since 1840, the year Carlyle published *Chartism* and inaugurated a decade of discussion about the spiritual and material “Condition of England” [That Eliot had in mind Reform’s connection not just to working-class political representation, but to the conditions of working-class economic and material life, is evident from her reading choices during the first months of *Felix Holt*’s composition. On May 28, 1865, just under a month after her announcement that she had “*begun a novel*,”<sup>285</sup> she wrote in her diaries that she had “begun again Mill’s *Political Economy*, and Comte’s *Social Science* in Miss Martineau’s edition.”<sup>286</sup> In November of 1865 she was reading, among other selections, “Fawcett’s *Economic Condition of the Working Classes*.”<sup>287</sup> The Quarry notebook that Eliot began keeping in May 1865 confirms that Eliot was “endeavoring to familiarize herself with the eighteenth-century economic (rather than the political) backgrounds of the Reform movement.”<sup>288</sup>].

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<sup>285</sup> George Eliot, *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 124.

<sup>286</sup> Eliot, *Journals*, 124.

<sup>287</sup> Eliot, *Journals*, 126.

<sup>288</sup> Fred C. Thomson, “The Genesis of *Felix Holt*,” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 74, no. 5 (December 1959): 578, <https://doi.org/10.2307/460508>.

Eliot's decision, by setting her novel in 1832, to skip over the political struggles of the late 1830s and 1840s—a set of events that made Chartism's status as a movement connected to the exploitation of the industrial proletariat particularly difficult to avoid—partially resolves this problem. In this historical setup, she reproduces the at best marginal and incipient encroachment of industrial development that Riehl's peasants experienced.<sup>289</sup> Though she includes industrialization and the subjects it produced within her literary frame, she includes them as an emergent feature of the landscape, still subjectively outside the approaching landslide of industrial capitalism. Eliot's 1832 is not the beginning of (a gradual, organic kind of) historical change—the “elderly gentlemen in pony-chaises” whom Eliot's narrator nostalgically enumerates themselves “had not ceased to remark that times were finely changed since they used to see the pack-horses and hear the tinkling of their bells[.]”<sup>290</sup> But it is the beginning of political history. According to Eliot's narrator, the “old-fashioned, grazing, brewing, wool-packing, cheese-loading life of Treby Magna”<sup>291</sup> continues on in a round of local, daily activities until industrial capitalism penetrates in the form of canals and coal mines that bring it into contact with a wider national life. Only at that point, “greatly helped by the recent agitation about the Reform Bill,”<sup>292</sup> do politics penetrate Treby Magna. By locating her novel about Reform in a moment of emergent industrialism that appears to operate with only belated effects on the political consciousness, Eliot retains the working classes within a frame that they threaten to exit—recalling Terry Eagleton and Daniel Cottom's diagnoses that Eliot's social “web” displaces historical contradictions into a space in which they become resolvable.

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<sup>289</sup> Eliot remarks in “The Natural History” that the German peasantry are “about on a par, not, certainly, in material prosperity, but in mental culture and habits, with that of the English farmers who were beginning to be thought old-fashioned nearly fifty years ago.” (174)

<sup>290</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 3.

<sup>291</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 46.

<sup>292</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 49.

Within this frame, the traditional English lower classes encounter political phenomena without fundamentally transforming in the encounter, and Eliot dispatches the problem of political representation along the same lines she articulated in “The Natural History of German Life” when she wrote that the “idea of constitutional government lies quite beyond the range of the German peasant’s conceptions”:

His only notion of representation is that of a representation of ranks—of classes; his only notion of a deputy is of one who takes care, not of the national welfare, but of the interests of his own order. Herein lay the great mistake of the democratic party, in common with the bureaucratic governments, that they entirely omitted the peculiar character of the peasant from their political calculations. They talked of “the people” and forgot that the peasants were included in the term.<sup>293</sup>

The notion of representation comes to the German peasantry bearing only the meaning of concrete and immediate needs, interests, and desires. Similarly, when Johnson “treats” the Sproxtton miners—the act that ultimately brings about the election-day riot—this confirms to the miners “that Reform had at length reached the New Pits; and Reform, if it were good for anything, must at last resolve itself into spare money—meaning ‘sport’ and drink, and keeping away from work for several days in the week.”<sup>294</sup> Referring to the beer he buys the miners as a “good article” of the kind the working man could buy with “higher wages,”<sup>295</sup> Johnson himself frames the relationship between treating and the political ends of Reform as symbolic. The beer stands for the social yield of Radical politics, metonymizing in a straightforward way the “joint in the pot” for every man that Johnson argues will result from “mak[ing] Reform work.”<sup>296</sup> But through the vehicle of Felix, who confronts Johnson in anger when Johnson queries whether it will “do any good to honest

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<sup>293</sup> Eliot, “Natural History,” 67.

<sup>294</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 137.

<sup>295</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 135.

<sup>296</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 136.

Tom, who is hungry in Sproxton, to hear that Jack at Newcastle has his bellyful of beef and pudding,”<sup>297</sup> Eliot refutes Johnson’s metonymic political logic. Whereas Johnson criticizes fast-talking politicians who appeal to abstractions such as “the colliers,”<sup>298</sup> Eliot implies that politics inheres precisely in these kinds of abstractions. Associating something so concrete as “drink” with the Radical Party is thus an ersatz form of political knowledge. When one of the colliers reports that “I shouldn’t know which end I stood on if it wasn’t for the tickets and the treatin’,”<sup>299</sup> he forebodingly signals his failure to source abstract political knowledge, knowledge from outside Johnson’s set of concrete metonyms.

What is on trial in the last phase of the novel is the apolitical character of the “blind outrages” of a “mad crowd,”<sup>300</sup> the “mass of wild and chaotic desires and impulses,”<sup>301</sup> that necessarily ensues from this failure on the part of “unreasoning men.”<sup>302</sup> This is dramatized centrally by the Sproxton coalminer Mike Brindle’s bewildered testimony on Felix’s behalf, which presents above all the spectacle of incoherence: “on being cross-examined, he admitted that he ‘couldn’t give much account’; that Felix did talk again’ idle folks, whether poor or rich, and that most like he meant the rich, who had ‘a rights to be idle’, which was what he, Mike, liked himself sometimes, though for the most part he was ‘a hard-working butty.’”<sup>303</sup> Brindle’s speech illustrates the utter disconnection between the coalminers’ role in the riot and their comprehension of this role. Felix’s mind stands in for this absent political “meaning” of the part the working classes play. As a character whose true intentions contrast positively with any possible political interpretation—

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<sup>297</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 137.

<sup>298</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 137.

<sup>299</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 141.

<sup>300</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 314.

<sup>301</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 316.

<sup>302</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 314.

<sup>303</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 446.

after the riot the narrator declares Felix's case to have "never had the sort of significance that could rouse political partisanship"<sup>304</sup>—Felix represents the apolitical character of the coalminers' participation in the riot on their behalf. Although he has specifiable intentions, while the working classes have only "multitudinous small wickednesses," neither of them has intentions of a political character. The "meaning" of Felix's actions can represent the meaninglessness of the coalminers' actions and by extension the political senselessness of the riot.

### ***The Meaning of Realism***

By narrowing the historical and sociological horizon of Reform to 1832, then, a year that Eliot stages as the moment in which political consciousness and politics first dawn, Eliot resolves the problem of political representation just as she resolved it in "The Natural History of German Life." Insofar as the narrative structures that unveil the mental and political concreteness of the lower classes are for Eliot one and the same with social-realist procedures, she also follows the social-realist procedures she outlined there. The tropes of her political narrative—distant observers looking through windows, ignoring or not seeing the "small" or "subtle" aspects of a situation and mistaking appearance for reality—once again allegorize Eliot's theory of accurate social representation. But if Eliot's critique of distant observers looking through windows at the scene of the riot serves as a visual shorthand for literary realism, then it is worth pausing on the ambiguity of the "meaning" these observers (and thus, adhering to the allegory, the reader) should recognize. On one hand, Reverend Lyon's analysis of the trial as an epistemological problem depicts the contents of Felix's mind as a crucial lens of interpretation; this psychological material gives the scene its "meaning." The political theory that I have argued the trial stages—Felix's apolitical intentions standing in for the Sproxton coalminers' political incapacities just as Esther's "inward

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<sup>304</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 452.

revolution” stands in for Felix’s benevolence—likewise looks within minds for the “meaning” of the event. As though the mental capacity for generalization were the same as the actual generalizability of systems and interests, Eliot directs the question of political participation solely to the abstraction or concreteness of thought.

Yet the “meaning” to which the contents of Felix’s mind ultimately refer is not internal to minds. As the idea of the vote circulates among the working classes—who, as we have seen, cannot comprehend an abstraction such as “Reform” and inevitably “resolve it” into concrete expectations—it ceases to function as an idea. As Eliot’s epigraph to Chapter XVI puts it, this unenfranchised social group has a “power” over others’ “brains” that is not itself an intellectual power:

Trueblue. These men have no votes. Why should I court them?  
 Greyfox. No votes, but power.  
 Trueblue. What! Over charities?  
 Greyfox. No, over brains; which disturbs the canvass. In a natural state of things the average price of a vote at Paddlebrook is nine-and-sixpence, throwing the fifty-pound tenants, who cost nothing, into the divisor. But these talking men cause an artificial rise of prices.<sup>305</sup>

The phenomenon that “disturbs the canvass”—voteless men with the capacity to intimidate voters at the polls—is the phenomenon of a kind of “influence” that is neither intellectually nor politically mediated (since for Eliot intellectual mediation is a prerequisite of political mediation). The voteless are cut off not only from political representation but from a more fundamental capacity to represent political claims, even as they assemble at the scene of an election on behalf of a particular candidate. The meaning of the event of the riot—to the extent that there is one—issues not from these men but from opportunists who manipulate them, such as Transome and his agents or the fabular “Trueblue” and “Greyfox.” But even this meaning proves another false transmutation of

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<sup>305</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 174.

disinterested, abstract political ideas into “concrete” forms of self-interest. Eliot narrows the stakes of the dispute between Felix and Transome’s unscrupulous election agents over voter bribing to the scope of a petty tactical fight between parties whose political differences are beside the point—as Linda Bamber shows, the conflict between the two Radicals in the novel occurs “at a level of interest far below that of the ‘antagonism of valid claims’.”<sup>306</sup> The general picture Eliot gives of the election confirms the *Annual Register*’s assessment of 1832 (which Eliot read while writing the novel) as a time of “unprincipled knavery, which cared for nothing, and would pledge itself to everything.”<sup>307</sup>

In short, the abstract “meaning” whose internalization by participants in the riot could render the event political remains elusively outside the frame of the novel, incommensurate with any psychological process within its pages. This is notable since Eliot’s repeated suggestion that the working classes lack an understanding of political “meaning” recalls the standard Victorian solution to class conflict through working-class educational reform. In the space of the absent “meaning” that permeates *Felix Holt*, the working classes’ subjective incomprehension of the role they play, Eliot deploys existing political and narrative tropes of a “Romantic conservatism, where the working-class should never be allowed under the present conditions to get the vote.”<sup>308</sup> Narrativizing this “Romantic conservatism” was never an unproblematic matter of mapping out the “correct” destination for working-class politics. However, for earlier industrial novelists (who intervened in events that were for them more or less contemporary, unlike Eliot writing *Felix Holt*), this conservative diagnosis usually implied as a minimal starting-point some program of working-

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<sup>306</sup> Bamber, “Self-Defeating Politics,” 140.

<sup>307</sup> *The Annual Register, or a View of History, Politics, and Literature, of the Year 1832* (London, 1833), 299, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/princeton/reader.action?docID=3387028&ppg=1>.

<sup>308</sup> L. R. Leavis, “George Eliot’s Creative Mind: *Felix Holt* as the Turning-point of Her Art,” *English Studies* 67, no. 4 (August 1986): 320, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138388608598455>.

class education and acculturation whose actualization the novel promoted. The attempt to represent working-class education as a real alternative to politics, and the historical sequence of events that novelists such as Gaskell and Kingsley imagined following from a working-class reorientation toward social self-improvement through education, occupied significant space in their narratives.

Eliot, too, often seems to imagine resolving political conflict through a historical sequence in which educating the working classes in the “meaning” they currently misunderstand will either prepare the working-classes for eventual political power, or offer a socially salutary alternative to politics. Felix asserts that unless he can convince the Sproxtton coalminers to save their money to educate their sons, “extension of the suffrage can never mean anything for them but extension of boozing.”<sup>309</sup> Elsewhere he explains to a working-class crowd that the working classes are not fit to wield political power because they don’t know the meaning of the political structures that organize their lives: “‘For suppose there’s a poor voter named Jack...Jack can’t read—I don’t say whose fault that is—he never had the chance to learn; he knows so little that he perhaps thinks God made the poor laws, and if anybody said the pattern of the workhouse was laid down in the Testament, he wouldn’t be able to contradict them.’”<sup>310</sup> Whether because the responsible use of political power requires a bracketing of self-interest or because social life itself is abstract, the working classes cannot act politically because the meaning of politics eludes them. Suggesting that education can and should ameliorate this ignorance, in the same speech Felix says: “‘I should like to convince you that votes would never give you political power worth having while things are as they are now, and that if you go the right way to work you may get power sooner without votes.’”<sup>311</sup> The word “political” is dropped in the second half of the chiasmus, and, lest the distinction is lost

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<sup>309</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 130.

<sup>310</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 294.

<sup>311</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 292-3.

on his audience, Felix revises the word: telling his audience that by “power” he means a “power” “without votes.” A page later, he revises the word a second time: “‘I’ll tell you what’s the greatest power under heaven,’ said Felix, ‘and that is public opinion—the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honourable and what is shameful.’”<sup>312</sup> Seek something worth having, Felix is saying in a tautology that collapses means into ends, and even without political power you will have something worth having—the “power” of knowing right from wrong.

But Eliot constantly undermines Felix’s theory of the power of education, either to prepare the working classes for political power or to substitute for it as an alternative “worth having,” by casting doubt on the working classes’ capacity to absorb it. As Laura Wagner notes:

if we look to Felix’s, and by extension Eliot’s, explicit reformist teachings within the novel, we’d be hard-pressed to find a successful example of the education he outlines in the Address and whose importance he preaches throughout the novel. In the scenes devoted to Felix’s pedagogic efforts, the working men of the novel prove eminently unteachable, and the model of reform-through-education in which the text is so overtly interested, and which it would seem to champion in its emphasis on its title character, remains entirely unrealized in the novel’s diegetic world— at least in the sphere in which Felix advocates for it.<sup>313</sup>

The synthetic capacities that Brindle demonstrates during the trial, for example, are so flawed as to undermine not just his testimony’s power to work in Felix’s favor, but also Felix’s ostensible social and moral project. Meanwhile, in contrast to *Alton Locke*, where culture and acculturation take over the novel in a preemptive, and narratively hobbling, repression of the working-class politics Kingsley seeks to critique, the content of the culture that Felix signifies is not present in the novel (except, perhaps, when Felix chastises Esther for reading Byron). Ultimately, Felix—

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<sup>312</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 293.

<sup>313</sup> Laura Wagner, “Novel Reading: Pedagogies of Form in George Eliot and Thomas Mann” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2017), 31, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/novel-reading-pedagogies-form-george-eliot-thomas/docview/2001486797/se-2>.

whom the novel sends off to accomplish only some “very small things, such as will never be known beyond a few garrets and workshops,”<sup>314</sup> demonstrates within the text not the reformist dissemination of culture but a minimally specified commitment to working class identity.

Eliot’s “Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt,” written on Blackwood’s request after the passage of the Second Reform Act, hints at the greater abstraction of her conception of culture from working-class minds than Felix’s perorations within *Felix Holt* tend to suggest. Here she displaces what in *Felix Holt* can sound like a theory of working-class acculturation as working-class social reform in favor of a theory of culture as a collective—but not necessarily a collectively owned—good. The Felix of the “Address” warns workers against imperiling what he calls the “common estate of society”:

a wealth over and above buildings, machinery, produce, shipping, and so on, though closely connected with these; a wealth of a more delicate kind, that we may more unconsciously bring into danger, doing harm and not knowing that we do it. I mean that treasure of knowledge, science, poetry, refinement of thought, feeling, and manners, great memories, and the interpretation of great records, which is carried on from the minds of one generation to the minds of another.<sup>315</sup>

But the “common estate” is not a working-class education whose possession can prepare the working classes for political power. Felix confesses that his vision of culture’s role in political and economic reality is not of a historical process whereby the working classes self-improve in order one day to responsibly wield political power, but a symbolic order whose possession by the working classes is secondary to its sheer “exist[ence]”:

You may truly say that this which I call the common estate of society has been anything but common to you; but the same may be said, by many of us, of the sunlight and the air, of the sky and the fields, of parks and holiday games. Nonetheless, that these blessings exist makes life

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<sup>314</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 435.

<sup>315</sup> George Eliot, “Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt,” in *Felix Holt the Radical*, ed. Lynda Mugglestone (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 494.

worthier to us, and urges us the more to energetic, likely means of getting our share of them.<sup>316</sup>

Though Felix encourages workers to get their “share” of the “common estate,” the “worth[iness]” of “life” seems to depend on the “exist[ence]” of culture somewhere in the British class structure, not on the acquisition of this culture by workers themselves.

While Felix does not spell out this conception of culture as symbolic order in *Felix Holt*, near the end of the narrative the sense of a sincerely imagined historical relationship between social cause and effect gives way to the sense that Felix’s thesis regarding working-class education is itself historical, something Eliot includes in *Felix Holt* for texture but does not quite believe. A dialogue between Felix and Esther on the “tremendous uncertainty” of seeing any “result” from Felix’s work<sup>317</sup> echoes this erosion of the narrative’s belief in historical causality: “I put effects at their minimum,” Felix declares, but I’d rather have the minimum of effect, if it’s of the sort I care for, than the maximum of effect I don’t care for.” Recalling the narrator’s hint that the “effects” of Felix’s participation in the riot are false indicators of the reality of his actions, Felix’s act of putting “effects at their minimum” critiques and reorients a system of interpretation and value structured around a sequence of actions and reactions.

In the logic that links Eliot’s account of the impossibility of political “meaning” to her literary realism, this severing of education from social “effects” within the novel also distances literature itself from social “effects,” even as *Felix Holt* draws on the motifs and ideologies of the industrial novel tradition of socially improving literature. Literature retains its moral capacity to substitute for politics—Felix’s summation of culture as “a wealth over and above buildings, machinery, produce, shipping, and so on, though closely connected with these” defines the

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<sup>316</sup> George Eliot, “Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt,” 495.

<sup>317</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 434.

“common estate” as an alternative to the press of politics. However, the logic of this alternative derives not from social reform’s capacity to circumvent political processes, as it did in the earlier industrial novels, but from the power of substitution that metaphor offers to the otherwise disconnected terms of culture and economic life. Culture displaces, by serving the higher ends of, “buildings, machinery, produce, shipping, and so on,” because it functions as a metaphor for economic “wealth.” Catherine Gallagher’s observation that “the literary representation of the people, as Eliot envisioned it, takes the place of and forestalls their political representation,” is perhaps the best encapsulation of this conception of culture. Whereas the earlier industrial novels referred more or less directly to possible processes in the working-class mind when they proposed substituting culture for politics, culture for Eliot—and the novel as privileged purveyor of culture—stand in for politics without necessary reference either to the mind or the inner life.

### ***Conclusion***

The “case for the prosecution” during Felix’s trial is “nothing more than a reproduction, with irrelevancies added by witnesses, of the facts already known.”<sup>318</sup> When Felix’s “motives” revise and vindicate these “facts already known,” this resolves not just the specific question of Felix’s guilt, but the larger epistemological question of motive’s relationship to truth. The epistemological and representational stakes of Felix’s trial, as for example in Felix’s preamble to his self-defense, also seem to affirm the account of social realism that Eliot offered in “The Natural History of German Life”:

“My Lord, I am not going to occupy the time of the Court with unnecessary words. I believe the witnesses for the prosecution have spoken the truth as far as a superficial observation would enable them to do it; and I see nothing that can weigh with the jury in my favour, unless they believe my statement of my own motives, and the testimony

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<sup>318</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 440.

that certain witnesses will give to my character and purposes as being inconsistent with my willingly abetting disorder.”<sup>319</sup>

Like Reverend Lyon when he ruminates on the “deeds which are the same in the outward appearance and effect,” Felix proposes that a correct representation of reality would take into consideration the invisible truths that only knowledge of his inner life can provide. Close, rather than “superficial,” observation will apprehend Felix’s “character and purposes” and use these as a lens through which to interpret his actions. Echoing Eliot’s critique of Dickens in “The Natural History of German Life,” Reverend Lyon and Felix suggest that bringing the truth to light requires careful observation, rather than projections from a distance—“concrete knowledge” rather than abstractions. Like a proxy for Eliot’s literary-theoretical voice, these careful calibrations between outer appearance and the inner life seem to denote a reflective correspondence between subjectivity and the social world, imparting a duty to literary representation of militating against any embarrassing disjuncture between the two.<sup>320</sup>

As I have argued, however, what is fundamentally at stake for Eliot in the opposition between “superficial observation” and truth is not just any outer appearance, but the false outer

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<sup>319</sup> Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 441.

<sup>320</sup> Catherine Gallagher, on the other hand, has read Eliot’s designation of “the meaning of *Felix Holt*” as a meaning that “cannot be reached by multiplying appearances” as symptomatic of a strain on Eliot’s early inductive model of realism. By the 1860s, Eliot had according to Gallagher become “disenchanted with the principle of mere aggregation.” “The Failure of Realism: *Felix Holt*,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35, no. 3 (December 1, 1980): 377, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3044868>. Because the transcendental notion of “culture” that comes to the fore in *Felix Holt* “cannot be possessed, only pursued, and its relationship to daily life is uncertain,” facts detach definitively from values in *Felix Holt*. This detachment culminates in the destiny that takes Daniel Deronda away from the “aggregated facts” of the preceding narrative and of British national life. Ultimately, according to Gallagher, it culminates in modernism’s more total disaggregation of external facts from essence: “The rejection of inductive realism, moreover, was to be completed by later novelists. Writers such as Henry James, D.H Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf would declare it impossible to reach a character’s essence and value by concentrating on the outward facts of his or her ‘social being.’ *Felix Holt* should be seen as a significant step in the progress towards that understanding.” Gallagher, “The Failure of Realism,” 384. For Gallagher, Eliot’s disambiguation of appearance from reality initiates a process that in Eliot’s own later work leads away from inductive realism, and in the work of later English novelists leads away from realism per se.

appearance of working-class political participation—not just any inner life, but the absence of abstraction from minds ill-equipped for political representation. The story of misrecognition that Eliot tells so repeatedly in “The Natural History of German Life” and *Felix Holt* that it becomes a private narrative archetype is about what politics is not. Politics is not, we learn across all iterations of this archetype, the mobilization of people with little conception of the process of representative government. The “meaning” of politics inheres in people’s understanding of the “meaning of the role they play”; since this understanding is constitutively absent in the lower classes, politics is nowhere to be found within the pages of *Felix Holt*. A novel that Eliot treats as a cultural, rather than a social, resource—a contribution to “that treasure of knowledge, science, poetry,” etc., “which is carried on from the minds of one generation to the minds of another”—*Felix Holt* itself provides this “meaning.”

To conclude both this chapter and this dissertation, I want to characterize the absent “meaning” of *Felix Holt* as the ultimate expression of common sense in its trajectory from eighteenth-century polemic, where it served to conflate life with thought, into the ideological and formal toolbox of the nineteenth-century industrial novel, where it served attempts to intervene in life *at the level of* thought. In Chapter One I suggested that the Scottish School philosophers’ common-sense refusal of the difference between thought and social life counterintuitively registered this very difference at a time when literary criticism was distinguishing a new, specifically social sphere of intellectual and cultural production from other arenas of activity. The separation of this sphere from material life would receive its clearest articulation in the Arnoldian conception of culture that Eliot affirms in *Felix Holt* and “Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt.” As an identification of thought with thought’s absence; the contents of minds with objective social forces and events, the absent “meaning” of *Felix Holt* brings to fruition common sense’s

self-contradictory synthesis of “sense” with “life.” Meanwhile, launching common sense beyond its industrial-era function as a resource that novelists offered directly to minds, the “common estate” of culture that substitutes for this absent “meaning” fulfils the Scottish School’s suspicion that thought may in fact be incommensurate with life. In place of literature and culture as resources for improvement, Eliot offers literature and culture as forms of mediation whose “exist[ence],” independently of any working-class knowledge of their content, substitutes both for a “common estate” of culture that is “anything but common,” and for any working-class attempt to recuperate a political or material commons.

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